

## **CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING: What Every EFL Teacher Should Know**

Sugirin, Ph. D.  
Fakultas Bahasa dan Seni – Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta  
<sugirin@uny.ac.id>

### **Abstract**

Language and culture are intertwined and, hence, teaching a language will include the culture(s) of its speakers. The EFL teachers must facilitate the mastery of both the linguistic and cultural aspects to enable the students to function appropriately in English. The facilitation may succeed if the teachers possess adequate knowledge and set an example of how to behave in the culture of the target language. The intention to integrate cultural aspects in the teaching and learning process often fall short due to the inadequate knowledge of the target culture itself and how to integrate it in the language instruction. This paper provides an overview on some basic concepts of CCU and offers practical ways of integrating culture into the EFL instruction.

### **INTRODUCTION**

Dobrovol'skij & Piirainen (2006), Colson (2008) and Williams (2010) claim that language is inseparable from its culture. Therefore, teaching any language will inevitably involve teaching its culture. Only through understanding the culture of the target language will a language learner be able to function properly in the language s/he is learning. Paradoxically, English as a Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in Indonesia have to maintain the development of the students' understanding and mastery of the local culture, the local values, and the national identity (the 2003 Act of the Republic of Indonesia on the National Education System). Indonesia, which consists of over 13.000 islands, with hundreds of ethnic groups and hundreds of different cultures, poses a special challenge for an EFL teacher to learn the cultures of all the students coming from different parts of the country. All these parts of the country practice and share varied cultures. The implication is that, for the success of the EFL teaching, on the one hand, the teachers need to have a good understanding of the varied cultures shared by the community, the Indonesian community. On the other hand, they should be competent in English as well as the cultures of the speakers of English coming from different cultural backgrounds.

For the current presentation, this paper will focus on the general concepts of culture and cross-cultural understanding every EFL teacher should know. Tips are also provided on how to integrate cultural elements in the teaching and learning process or in the instructional materials s/he develops.

## **WHAT IS CULTURE?**

Linton (in Mesthrie, et al., 2009: 28) defines culture as “the way of life of its members; the collection of ideas and habits which they learn, share and transmit from generation to generation.” This means that culture also functions as “design for living,” which gives meaning to the way and the form of habits considered appropriate and acceptable within a certain community group, while language is treated as “a cultural activity and, at the same time, an instrument for organizing other cultural domains” (Sharifian & Palmer, 2007: 1). In this context, Taylor (in Peoples & Bailey, 2009: 22) define culture as “complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society.” In other words, knowledge, beliefs, arts, morals, laws, traditions and other practices obtained by human beings as part of the community, constitute cultural components. Peoples and Bailey (2009) conclude that culture is learned, shared and owned together.

## **CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING: WHAT AND WHY?**

Grant dan Lei (2001: 10-11) claim that “*Cultural differences are the main issues in cross-cultural education.*” Without recognizing differences in traditions and habits among people of different ethnics, religions, localities, regions, and countries or nations, confusion and misunderstanding will continually recur in communication with other communities. It is *the ability to recognize these differences, make correct interpretation and react properly to people or situations in the communication with these communities* that constitutes the essence of cross-cultural understanding. Hence, cross-cultural understanding is needed in communication not only by people of different nationalities

such as the Indonesians and the English or Americans, but also between the Indonesians coming from different localities and cultures (e.g., the Sundanese and the Balinese).

In this regard, Sinagatullin (2003: 114) states that the goal of training in cross-cultural understanding is ‘to help students acquire attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed to successfully function within their own micro-culture, mainstream culture, and the global community.’ This way students will be able to obtain adequate knowledge, internalize attitudes, and develop skills needed to function appropriately in the culture at all levels: local, national, and global. Sinagatullin (2003: 83) suggests that this goal would be achieved on the condition that all the students, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, race, culture, social class, religion, or exceptionality, have an equal opportunity to learn at school.’

This required condition shows a resemblance to the concept of the national education, i.e. education based on *Pancasila* (the Five Principles) and the 1945 Constitution of the Republic of Indonesia, rooted on the values of religion, Indonesian national culture, and in response to the demand of the current era (Article 1 Verse 2 of the 2003 Act on the National Education System). The Indonesian national culture covers all the local geniuses that have been accepted as the national heritage shared by the Indonesians. In Anderson’s words (2002: 6), local genius is ‘cultural artifacts of a particular kind’. It is the manifestation of the community’s personality reflected on the orientation showing the way of life, the value system and the system of behaviors in respond to the outside world. In addition, in a plural community, traditions and practices shared and adhered by the local communities are respected and continue to flourish. Such a condition is made possible in a plural country with plural cultures, in which all religious belief systems and philosophies are respected and of equal validity (Miller, D. 2003).

This plural culture-based education is a means to improve cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity in the practice of teaching and learning a foreign language, especially English. Tanaka (2006: 37) claims that the concept of ‘cultural awareness’—

understanding of different cultures—has been emphasized as an essential part of English learning and teaching.

It takes time and adequate exposures for the learners to develop this competence Tanaka (2006: 37). The following are the stages learners must go through to achieve this competence: c-c knowledge, c-c awareness, c-c sensitivity, c-c competence.

1. Cross-Cultural Knowledge (CCK) is a prerequisite for cross-cultural understanding. The inability to appreciate other cultures often stem from the absence of knowledge about them. Respect and appreciation of a culture will happen and grow if people are familiar with the respected characteristics, values, beliefs and behaviors in the culture.
2. With adequate CCK, people will develop Cross-Cultural Awareness (CCA), i.e. they will show understanding and appreciation, which may be accompanied by changes in behavior and attitudes towards the culture.
3. Proper CCA will naturally produce Cross-Cultural Sensitivity (CCS), i.e. the ability to read into situations, contexts and behaviors that are culturally rooted and be able to react to them appropriately. A suitable response necessitates that people no longer carry their own culturally determined interpretations of the situation or behavior (i.e. good/bad, right/wrong) which can only be nurtured through both cross cultural knowledge and awareness.
4. Only through the possession of adequate CCK, CCA, and CCS will people achieve Cross-Cultural Competence (CCC). CCC is the final stage of cross cultural understanding and signifies the actor's ability to work effectively across cultures. In Ross and Thornson's words, it is the development of knowledge and skills through experience in cultural differences to create cultural synergy that leads to the development of cross-cultural competence (Ross & Thornson, 2008).

## **ELEMENTS OF CULTURE**

Brown (1995) summarized the elements or visible attributes of culture as follows:

1. Artifacts: the physical things that are found that have particular symbolism for a culture, or they can also be more everyday objects, such as the bunch of flowers in reception. The main thing is that they have special meaning, at the very least for the people in the culture.
2. Stories, histories, myths, legends, jokes, with a typical story to include a bad guy and a good guy (often the founder or a prototypical cultural member). There may also be an innocent and a guilty figure, etc. Sometimes the stories are true, at other times nobody knows.
3. Rituals, rites, ceremonies, celebrations (processes or sets of actions which are repeated in specific circumstances and with specific meaning). They may be associated with company events such as the release of a new event.
4. Heroes or named people who act as prototypes, or idealized examples, by which cultural members learn of the correct or 'perfect' behavior.
5. Symbols and symbolic action. Symbols, like artifacts, are things which act as triggers to remind people in the culture of its rules, beliefs, etc. They can also be used to indicate status within a culture. This includes clothing, office decor and so on.
6. Beliefs, assumptions and mental models. An organization and culture will often share beliefs and ways of understanding the world. This helps smooth communications and agreement, but can also become fatal blinkers that blind everyone to impending dangers. [Note: In the Indonesian context, this is particularly true in regard to the distinction between religion and culture. There are cultural practices all members of the communities participate (e.g., *syawalan*), but there are religious rituals exclusively for the adherers (e.g., *Ied* prayers)].
7. Attitudes (the external displays of underlying beliefs that people use to signal to other people of their membership).
8. Rules, norms, ethical codes, values. The norms and values of a culture are effectively the rules by which its members must abide, or risk rejection from the culture (which is one of the most feared sanctions known).

Brown's categories of culture may be comprehensive, but there may also be some overlapping. For the purpose of practicality, Honingmann's (in Koentjaraningrat, 1990:186-187) and Koentjaraningrat's (2005 in Bhaswara, 2008) categorization of culture may suffice. Cultural elements can be classified into three aspects: *cultural knowledge, patterns of behavior, and artifacts*. Thus learners of English have to understand the differences of cultural elements viewed from the point of knowledge (the do's and the don'ts in line with the norms adhered by the intended community), patterns of behavior (e.g. how a person gives something to another, should be with the right hand, should be with the left hand, or either one is equally acceptable), and objects of culture owned, recognized and respected or valued by the community (building design or architecture, clothing, furniture, household utensils, ornaments, souvenirs, etc.).

While there are varied elements of culture to explore, EFL teachers should, at least, teach the do's and the don'ts generally adhered by the speakers of English, particularly the English and the Americans. Some of the examples of the do's and the don'ts which generally apply to both the English and the Americans are as follows.

**The DO's (what you should do):**

1. Greet people or your guests properly. Use a proper greeting such as "Good morning," "Good afternoon," etc., and "How are you?" The use of slang or other friendly expressions are allowed when you are sure that there will be no confusion or misunderstanding. The common English are more formal than the common Americans in their language use. For the Japanese a greeting may also be accompanied by a slight bowing of the body.
2. The Americans generally do not like formality, but in personal introduction the use of "How do you do?" is also accepted. However, don't expect that they will always say "How do you do?" like the English do as the response.
3. Say "please" when asking to do something. "Please" is a form of politeness very often used in both the British and the American cultures. In a shop, for example,

a shop assistant will say “Please have a look” or “Have a look, please” when asking a customer to explore the products displayed in the shop to help her/him make a decision about what to buy.

4. Say "Excuse me" to anticipate a possible misconduct. The expression “Excuse me” is used to anticipate possible misconducts before asking a question or to get attention before starting a speech. For example, a hotel guest may say: “Excuse me. Where is the toilet?” or “Excuse me. Where is the washroom?”
5. Say “sorry” if something wrong has happened. For example, if someone asks you about the time while you do not have a watch or a mobile phone, you can say: “I’m sorry, I don’t have a watch with me”
6. Say "thank you" as often as necessary. The expression “thank you” or “thanks” is heard very often in the market, in the store, in the public transport, in the hotel, and also in the classroom. Even when you do not get what you have expected from someone else you say “thank you.” For instance, the teacher says: “Budi, do you have an extra pencil that I can borrow?” Budi says: “I’m sorry, Mum, I have only one and I’m using it now.” The teacher will say: “Never mind. Thank you.” or “All right. Thank you.”
7. Wear proper outfits to suit the situation. You do not have to wear outfits like the foreigners to socialize with them. Wear the outfits to suit the context of situation. Tourists wear T-shirts most of the time, but you can also see that professional guides are not influenced; they always wear (batik) shirts most of the time. If you usually wear a veil (*jilbab*), you do not have to take it off to show respect to the foreigners.
8. Praise or compliment guests (where appropriate). Western people appreciate compliments. For instance, a guest wearing *batik* dress will feel honored when you say something like: “You look great in your batik dress.” She will say “Oh, thank you.” Continuing with a question such as “Where did you get it?” will give an impression that you are sincere about the compliment and your curiosity about where she bought the dress, not a mere formality to impress the guest.

9. Be honest. The proverb “Honesty is the best policy” applies to everyone in every culture. Western people highly regard honesty.
10. Be yourself. Be proud of what God has blessed you with. You have been blessed with black hair; you do not have to make it pink, green, blue, etc. You have been brought up in a religious family; you must not degrade the quality of worships just for the sake of socializing with a foreign friend. You need to understand them, but you must also make them understand you.

**The DON'Ts (What you should avoid):**

1. Don't ask questions, such as: "how much money do you earn?" "why aren't you married?" or "how old are you?" (except for identification purposes). These questions are not common in the English or American culture. Despite the good intention they may carry, they are considered violating privacy.
2. Don't spit in the street or in public places. In western countries and some Asian countries such as Japan, Singapore, and South Korea, public places are no longer appropriate for spitting, smoking and littering. Western people feel disgusted with such a behavior.
3. Don't blow your nose in public or cover your nose with a tissue or handkerchief. This has become a trend in most civilized communities, not only in the west.
4. Don't stare at anyone in public. It's impolite. Privacy is highly regarded. The Indonesian young generation should be a productive and polite generation. Sitting around at the crossroads and watching and harassing passers-by are primitive behaviors. These should be eradicated as it is against both religion and local wisdom.
5. Don't discuss politics or religion with strangers. These are personal business. Most foreign cultures disrespect such a discussion. The Thais do not like people ill talking about their country, especially about their King and the royal family.
6. Don't be offended when they call you by first name. Due to the strong adherence to democracy, the Americans are often so democratic when they



socialize with non-Americans. They often call people they know well by their first name. They address Bill Clinton, George Bush, Hillary Clinton, dan Elizabeth Taylor, as Bill, George, Hillary, and Elizabeth/Elis/Beth/Betty. Within the family they do similar custom. Husband and wife call each other “Love, Dear, Darling” or the first name. Be prepared to hear an American calling “Kliwon!” to “Haji Kliwon Purwa Carita” when the local people usually call him “Pak Haji Purwa.”

## **INTEGRATING CULTURE INTO THE EFL INSTRUCTION**

While the materials for the EFL instruction should follow the guidelines provided by the Board for National Education Standard (BSNP, 2007), there are two modes EFL teachers can use to integrate culture in the EFL instruction, the explicit mode and the implicit mode.

### **Integrating Culture using Explicit Mode**

In the Explicit Mode, teachers can make use prepared materials on knowledge, pattern of behavior, and artifacts or elements of culture mentioned above as parts of the instructional materials to introduce culture but which can also be used simultaneously to develop the language skills.

The first thing to consider is to select suitable texts for instructional purposes. Teachers may start with a topic on a tradition that may be known in both the learners’ and the target language cultures, such as New Year’s Celebration. This will enable comparison and contrastive analysis, which make the topic meaningful to the learners. Then they can go on to other elements of culture, which may extend the learners’ understanding of the target language culture as well as those of other countries whose people communicate in English with people from other countries. Such materials may include thanks-giving day (in USA, in Java, etc.), wedding parties, independence day, etc. The texts may include the dates, the formal ceremonies, the celebrations, the carnivals, the clothes worn, the foods served, etc. It would be more interesting if

the discussion tasks for the students include comparison to reveal similarities and differences to deepen their understanding and internalization of the varied cultures.

### **Integrating Culture using Implicit Mode**

In the Implicit Mode, teachers can make use of any possible means to insert cultural aspects in the instruction (serving as a hidden syllabus). As a matter of fact, almost on any occasion, from the very beginning of an elementary course, a teacher can include cross-cultural understanding in his/her instruction. Providing time reference for *morning*, *afternoon*, *evening*, and *night*, for example, as these words are used in greetings, will raise learners' awareness on the different uses of these words from their equivalents in the learners' native language. *Night* is equivalent to *malam* in Indonesian, but *Good night* is not the same as *Selamat malam* in Indonesian. The expression *Good night* is used when the interlocutors are parting and will not meet again until morning. The equivalent of *Good night* is *Selamat tidur* in Indonesian. Another example, a compliment given by a native speaker of English "You look great in this dress!" expects a response "Thank you." However, an EFL learner with Indonesian or Javanese cultural background might answer "Oh, no!" or "Come on, are you kidding?" – a response that suggests a form of modesty in the local culture, but can be violating a native speaker's expectation. These are only a small sample of cultural aspects teachers can include in their language instruction. There are myriads of cultural items that can be dealt with in the EFL classroom beyond the programmed activities or prepared materials. Resources on the do's and the don'ts in the American, English, Australian, Asian, or the world's culture can be accessed from the websites on *culture grams*, *culture capsules*, and other related topics.

### **CONCLUSION**

The intention to integrate cultural aspects in the teaching and learning process often fall short due to the inadequate knowledge of the target culture itself and how to integrate it in the language instruction. It is therefore the task of the EFL teachers to

understand the basic concepts of cross-cultural understanding, aspects of cultures involved, and ways of integrating them in the EFL instruction so that the EFL learners in Indonesia are exposed to the situations of real cross-cultural communication. This way, it is expected that later they will be able to function properly when they communicate with native speakers and non-native speakers of English.

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