

Involving Culture in English Language Learning

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Abstract

Nowdays, culture takes a significant role in language teaching and learning. It happens when the universal communication has become the reality that cannot be ignored. The border of countries, in terms of communication, is not relevant anymore. Surely, there will be cross cultural phenomenon when people from different background communicate each other. Hence, need of the learners is not only about their linguistic knowledge, but also the use of language involving cross cultural understanding in real life circumstances. In line with this situation, Indonesia's 2013 curriculum emphasizes cultural understanding in language teaching and learning. It is expected that the learners have no difficulties in communication which may consist of cultural aspects. Understanding the cultural aspects in communication make them achieve meaningful communication in which the knowledge and the use of language including culture are not separated. This paper discusses information about the relationship between culture and language teaching and learning, the principles of involving culture in language teaching and learning, and the involvement of culture in English subject of 2013 Curriculum as well.

Keywords: *culture, meaningful communication, language teaching and learning, 2013 curriculum*

Introduction

In this global era, the information access demands the worldwide communication. This kind of communication requires the utilization of international language as the main communication tool. English becomes the dominant medium of communication in many aspects of people's life these days, such as business, technology, education, entertainment and even sports (Phillipson, 1992:6). Because of its global power, English is considered the default language that must be mastered by people around the world for maximum ease for them to communicate. Consequently, the study of English gets much attention from many educational practitioners in Indonesia and it is becoming one of the important subjects taught in every level of education in

Indonesia, from primary to secondary education level.

Unfortunately, in traditional English teaching, much attention is only paid to language structures such as vocabulary, phrases, grammatical rules and so on, whereas the cultural background of the language is ignored. As a result, students who have learned English for many years have little sense of the differences between the two languages and the customs of the people who speak the language. The ignorance of English culture has caused lots of disagreements, misunderstandings, and even laughingstocks in their communication with the native speakers. This problem can disturb students' ability to communicate in both spoken or written form.

Communication in real situations is never out of context, and because culture is part of most contexts, communication is rarely free from cultural aspects. In other word, there will be different psychological response if used in different culture.

Jenny : Would you like a cup of coffee?

The author : Thank you, but I had two glasses of coffee this morning.

Jenny : You had two cups of coffee?

The author : Yes, two glasses of coffee.

Jenny : Oh, two cups of coffee.

(Kusumarasyati, 2006:2)

From the dialogue involving Indonesian author and Australian friend above, we can identify both speakers have different diction to point *a cup* and *a glass*. It is caused by different cultural background in their daily life. In Indonesia, people prefer to use word *a glass for coffe* but Australian use *a cup for coffee*. They may have misunderstanding to get the intended meaning each other. In addition, the sentence which is correct grammatically doesn't guarantee to engage a good understanding if used in anappropriate context (Lestari, 2010:2)

Another example is how people translate Indonesian expression '*disebarkan dari mulut ke mulut*' into English. Generally speaking, it expresses '*spread from mouth to mouth*'. From grammatical side, this phrase is considered correct but pragmatically it is inappropriate. It makes the expression out of English context and seem awkward. The intended one is '*spread through gossip*' (Kusumarasyati, 2006:2).

Lestari (2012: 4) gives more detail example about how rice can have many interpretation in Indonesia. Rice can be translated as *beras, nasi, padi, or gabah*. In this example '*We need some rice to feed the chickens*', rice has meanings as *beras* or

nasi. Contrastly, the meaning of rice is *padi* in the example '*Farmers grow rice in the rainy season*' and can be *nasi* in '*I had fried rice for breakfast this morning*'. However, rice has many kinds of meaning such as *pari, gabah, sega, beras, menir, upa*, and even *las* in Javaness. These differences happen because rice is not the main food for English but has been daily consumed in Java. Therefore rice product has various names depend on the context in Indonesia.

Because of such problems, it is important to include cultural aspect while teaching language, especially English. Kumaradivelu (2008) claims culture as the core of foreign language instruction and it is also further emphasized that culture lies at the heart of language curriculum. From those statements, it means that culture is a part of language learning.

Therefore, in line with the Indonesia's curriculum, English subject is designed to be more applicable in today's communication. Involving culture in language learning is very important. It is necessary to learn how to understand and create language that is in accordance with the cultural parameters of the specific situation in order to get meaningful communication. Meaningful communication engages sense and appreciation of cultural understanding because the main points of being communicated will be missed if fails to do so in discourse and messages may be misunderstood.

Based on those phenomena, this article provides information about the relationship between culture and language learning, the principles of involving culture in language learning, and the involvement of culture in English subject.

Culture and Language Learning

Culture involves a high complexity. It includes multiple aspects of the way people live (Chastain, 1988:302). Liddicoat et al. (2003) defines culture as a 'complex

system of concepts, attitudes, values, beliefs, conventions, behaviors, practices, rituals and lifestyles of the people who make up a cultural group, as well as the artefacts they produce and the institutions they create (p. 45)'. In addition, Cortazzi and Jin (1999) define culture as a framework of assumptions, ideas and beliefs that are used to interpret other people's actions, words, and pattern of thinking. Thus, it can be concluded that culture is a dominant part of human being that influences every aspect of their life, including language learning.

Moreover, Brown (1994) suggests the point that culture is language and language is culture. In order to speak a language well, one has to be able to think in that language, and thought is extremely powerful. Language and culture are connected and inseparable (p.170). It is supported by Kramersch (1998) states the fact that language expresses, embodies and symbolizes cultural reality clearly shows that language and culture are bounded together. Even, because of the great importance of involving culture in language learning, Bennett, et al (2003) point out that the person who learns language without learning its culture will be a fluent fool (p. 237).

According to Kramersch (1993), it is necessary for language learners to understand the culture of what language they are learning since a language cannot be learned without an understanding of the cultural context in which it is used. A language is part of a culture and culture is part of language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture (Brown, 1994:164). Because of this importance, when teaching language the teacher gives the knowledge about culture for the students. These two aspects cannot be isolated each other. Similarly with Brown, Mitchell and Myles (2004) argue that 'language and culture are not separate, but are acquired together, with

each providing support for the development of the other (p. 235)'.

In order to acquire a language and use it in a proper way, one has to understand the culture that lies beneath the language. Consequently, involving culture in language learning is necessary. By understanding the culture, the use of the language will have its sense and will achieve meaningful communication.

The Principles of Involving Culture in Language Learning

As stated in the previous section, teaching culture in language classes is establishing relations not only among the students but also among countries and people. Language teachers should not teach a foreign language without teaching culture. By learning the culture behind the language, students can have a better idea of many aspects of this language. In other words, teaching culture cannot be separated from teaching language itself. It must be taught in one unit. In this case, some principles in teaching must be considered in order to create effective language learning with good cultural influence.

Liddicoat, et al. (2003: 24) propose a core set of principles for learners' language and culture acquisition which involve acquisition about L1 cultures, comparing cultures, exploring cultures, and finding one's own 'third place' between cultures. In acquiring L1 culture stage, the students are involved in the process of discovering their own cultural dimensions and self-reflection on the influence of their own culture on their language use in interaction with people from other culture. It is aimed to develop students' cultural awareness. Hence, the students will be able to open the mind broader, increase tolerance and achieve cultural sensitivity and empathy.

After the students have acquired L1 culture stage, they will come to the stage of comparing their own cultures with others.

The students will be encouraged to find out the similarities and differences between L1 and L2 culture. Comparison with one's L1 culture and the L2 culture will enhance students' knowledge, beliefs and values. The students are expected to increase their knowledge about culture, understanding and acceptance that later on will help them to build successful intercultural communication.

In the stage of exploring cultures, the students are involved in the process of exploring L1 and L2 culture. They will explore the similarities and differences by discussing with friends and teacher. The activities of this stage will help students to develop intercultural communicative competence in language learning. This stage requires them to interpret and construct their own model of culture learning through cultural exploration.

When the students have successfully compared and explored the L1 and L2 cultures, they are hoped to 'stand' on their position between those cultures. The students should get themselves out of their L1 culture, observe the target culture

and occupy a third place where they can observe and reflect on both their own and the target culture (Kramsch, 1993). By doing so, the students are expected to be able to bridge the gap between cultural differences and achieve their personal and meaningful communicative goals.

The Involvement of Culture in English Subject

The strong awareness and consideration about the necessity of involving culture in language learning also influences the phenomenon of curriculum in Indonesia. Indonesia's curriculum has great attention of inserting culture in its English teaching learning activities. From the explanation of its main competencies and basic competencies, it is crucial for the English teachers to conduct a teaching learning activity which involves English culture in it.

The basic competencies of English can be developed into a great syllabus of teaching learning activity which includes the learning of English culture. The example of the syllabus can be presented as follows:

Basic Competence	Teaching Material	Teaching Learning Activities
1. Being grateful for the chance of learning English as a media of international communication which is shown in the spirit for studying. 2. Showing responsibility, care, cooperation and peaceful action in doing functional communication. 3. Analyzing social function, text	Oral and written narrative text (legends) <i>Social function</i> Understanding the norms and moral value. Appreciating other cultures <i>Structure</i> a. Orientation b. Complication c. Resolution <i>Linguistic features</i> (1) Vocabulary related to character and setting of	Observing <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students read or listen to a narrative text (legend) which is given by the teacher. • Students observe the social function, structure and language features of narrative text. • Students observe the culture of the story. • Students learn to find main idea and detailed information of the story. Questioning <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Under the teacher's guidance, students ask questions about the differences

<p>structure and language features of narrative text in the form of 'legends', based on its context.</p> <p>4. Understanding the meaning of narrative text in the form of legends both in written and oral forms.</p>	<p>the story.</p> <p>(2) Modal auxiliary verbs.</p> <p>(3) Pronunciation, word stress, intonation (oral form of narrative text).</p> <p>(4) Direct and indirect speech.</p> <p><i>Topic</i></p> <p>Understanding about behavior and culture.</p>	<p>between narrative texts</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students ask questions about main idea and detailed information of narrative text. <p>Exploring</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students read some narrative texts from different sources. • Students practice to find out main idea and detailed information of narrative text. • Students explore the culture of narrative text in Indonesia and narrative text in English. <p>Associating</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • By working in pair, students analyze some narrative texts (legend) by focusing on social function, structure, language features and cultural differences. • Students get feedback from teacher and other students about the analysis of social function, structure, language features and cultural differences. <p>Communicating/Presenting</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students deliver the information of social function, structure, language features and cultural differences of the text. • Students retell the story which they have discussed and state their opinion about the value and cultural differences of the story.
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From the example of syllabus above, it is obvious that culture becomes the part of language teaching learning activities. Firstly, the students are in the stage of acquiring L1 culture. L1 culture plays an important role in teaching L2 culture. There are three reasons why we should use L1 culture to teach L2: 1) students will be able to relate to it more directly; 2) the interlingua differences

(expressions, meanings); and 3) the fact that contrast between L1 and L2 will often come to light. This contrast will help to bridge the gap between the familiar and the foreign, and to make L2 more accessible (Coffey, 2001:55). The students are asked to read some legends both in Indonesia and English. By doing so, the students are guided to identify their own cultural dimension and reflect themselves on it.

Secondly, the students come to the

stage of comparing the Indonesian and English culture of the legends. Appreciating both cultures becomes important issue in this stage. The goal is not about deciding which culture is better but the way the students respect diversity of each culture. Here, the students will increase their knowledge about culture, and build successful intercultural communication.

Thirdly, the students explore both cultures of Indonesia and English through the legends that they are discussing. In this stage, they will be able to understand both language and culture. The last stage is done after the students have compared and explored the L1 and L2 cultures. Here the students are exposed to present their work about retelling the legends they have learned and state their opinion about the moral value and cultural differences of the story. By the end of their learning activities, the students will master not only the language but also the culture which lies within the language. The students will be able to bridge the gap between cultural

differences and communicate well without any obstacles of cultural understanding.

Conclusion

Teaching and learning culture is a basis for learning foreign language. The teaching of a culture should become part of foreign language classes. Teaching culture will lead the students to increase their knowledge of the target culture that later on will help them to be able to use the language not only to communicate in the country where it is spoken, but also to express their thoughts and avoid misunderstanding of cultural conventions. Meaningful communication is not too difficult to achieve. Therefore, involving culture in English subject of Indonesia's curriculum is a brilliant idea of increasing students' ability in global communication. English will not only be the study of language but also the study of implementing it for borderless universal communication.

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