RECONSIDERING SOME CULTURAL CONSTRAINTS IN THE IMPLEMENTATION OF COMMUNICATIVE ENGLISH LEARNING

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1. Introduction

English is perhaps the most important foreign language in Indonesia. It is used for communication in business with other countries and studied in schools from junior high school to university level. People in Indonesia study English for different reasons. Many of them study English because if they understand English well they will be able to improve their general knowledge. Others particularly university students and lecturers study English because English may help them develop their academic achievement. Other people who are active in tourism and hotel industries need to study English because they have to communicate regularly with people from other countries. Despite the fact that English has been extensively studied, many learners feel they cannot use it for daily communication. This brief essay attempts to explore the constraints, particularly from the cultural views, which may have reduced the success of learning English.

Approaches to language learning have undergone changes. Celce-Murcia (1991:5-8), for example, describes the stages of 20th-century approaches of language learning. In the sequence of approaches, communicative approach comes last. The origins of communicative language learning are to be found in the changes in the British language learning tradition dating from the late 1960's (Richards and Rogers, 1986:64) which focus on the functional and communicative potential of the language. Richards and Rogers write (p.64) that with the interdependence of European countries 'the need to articulate and develop alternative methods of language learning was considered a high priority'. It seemed that since then the terms 'communicative' and also 'communication' became more and more popular (Atkinson, 1992:6).

The implementation of communicative language learning in an EFL (English as a Foreign Language) context may cause problems. Paulston (1979:3-4) describes the problems of non-native English teacher's imperfect proficiency, socio-cultural values, class sizes, social behaviour, etc. which should all be taken into consideration. There may be constraints which reduce the effectiveness of its good values. This essay which views the possibility of implementing the communicative language learning and the likely cultural constraints in its implementation is divided into five main parts: firstly, the introduction; secondly, a glance at English learning in Indonesia; thirdly, communicative English learning; fourthly, some constraints and how to minimize them; and finally, the conclusion.

2. English learning in Indonesia

English in Indonesia may be observed from the viewpoints of position, function and learning practice. These three elements are interlinked. Any important decisions taken on one element may influence the others.

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The constitution states that the national language is Indonesian. It is clarified further in the law of national education system that the Indonesian language should be used as the medium of instruction in private and state schools of all levels. So Indonesian is the national language and English along with French, German, Japanese and Dutch are foreign languages. English is allowed to be used as the medium of instruction in international schools and English Departments at higher education. The use of the English language is related to the core subject in the departments. In the field of education, English may and should be used as long as it is for the sake of mastering that language.

In the academic circle, English also became very important. It drew the attention of students and teachers as it was one of the main requirements for further study. Indonesia, just like other developing countries, in particular needs people familiar with modern science and technology. This may require study abroad in an English speaking country (Ashworth, 1988:19). The government realized the backwardness of its technology and science. They are determined to send qualified university teachers to study abroad. They are expected to return and give the knowledge they have gained to others who do not have the privilege to study abroad, by providing seminars and/or upgrading courses. The teachers' tasks in the field of education have been made clear: 1) to educate people and 2) to produce manpower which will benefit the country and individual (Meow and Partoatmodjo, 1972:82). English has become everybody's concern and needs.

From the learning situation, English also receives special attention. English is the only foreign language which has been specially designed in the 1984 curriculum outline and given special treatment in the form of integrated material writing project in 1982 (Subyakto-Nabadan, 1993:87). No other foreign language is taught for eight consecutive years, from first year junior high school till second year university level. As a formal subject, it has been discussed from parliament level to teacher level. English is a compulsory subject in private and state schools, and is intensively studied at the English departments at Universities and Teacher Colleges.

3. Communicative English Learning

The learning of English in Indonesia focuses on form. It is mostly about the learning of English texts followed by grammar exercises, comprehension questions based on the text, and composition exercises. All activities are controlled by the teacher. The students sit attentively waiting for the information to be conveyed to them. This way of learning is not likely to provide enough time for the learners to use the language in real life. There might be some children, who afford to attend private English courses to improve their English, but the majority of the families will not be in a position to have this privilege. Considering the situation, there must be changes in the learning approaches.

Students graduating from high school still cannot communicate in English. The students leaving high-school in Indonesia after six years of English study are still unable to communicate in basic English (Tomlinson, 1990:26). It is said further that this is due to the fact that the structure of the lessons consists merely of activities learning about the language and not about using the language.

Nunan (1988:26-28) and Lightbown and Spada (1993:72) explain the differences between traditional approaches and communicative approaches. Richards and Rogers compare communicative language learning with the audio-visual approach (1986:67-68). The comparisons explain the characteristics of learner-centredness and communicative approach, which can be applied in Indonesian teacher's daily learning tasks. In Japan, where English is studied as a foreign language, teachers try to build communicative competence while providing learners with the understanding of new linguistic items (Sano, et. al., 1984:175). There some English teachers have formed an organisation of groups of teachers called Communicative Learning Society (p.171). The teachers in this organisation believe that grammar is still important but it is the friendly interaction

that is the most essential factor in successful language learning.

To implement communicative language learning does not necessarily mean to change everything. All elements related to English language learning, such as the classroom structure, the facilities, special requirements for students might be the same. The learning methodology may have to be changed. Similar materials could still possibly be used if there are no funds to produce new and more suitable materials, which should cover the skills of reading, speaking, listening and writing as well as grammar.

Apart from the four skills and grammar above, the notions of culture in learning a foreign language should also be observed carefully. Understanding the culture of the target language is essential. The teachers should find time to explain the culture of the English speaking communities which are common. These may include the way of life, the way of speaking, the use of language functions such as in thanking, expressing agreement, appreciation, criticism, starting and ending a conversation, etc. Morgan states (1994:4) that culture in the sense of the shared conventions and assumptions that operate unconsciously and unquestionably within a community is also seen as valid and desirable by those bodies who draw up and publish modern language syllabuses. In the Indonesian context, it is the responsibility of the central department of Education and Culture to include the cultural awareness in the design of curriculum and make it concrete in the learning materials.

4. Some cultural constraints and how to minimize them

Constraints related to lack of good learning facilities have been frequently discussed. However, constraints related to the learning culture, individual habits and the culture of the environment which affect the learning process seem to have been neglected. Thomas (1991) writes that just like in other developing countries "traditional instruction in Indonesian schools has consisted mainly of teachers giving lectures, of students copying material from the blackboard, and of students reciting what they have memorized." This type of learning culture added with some others may block the success of communicative English learning.

Cultural aspects behind the English use must also be observed because language and culture are inseparable. Learning the language and the culture of the people using the language is ideal. The culture of Indonesia students is different form that of the people in the country where English is the media of communication. Many Indonesian learners and teachers are not quite aware of this. Consequently they use English, for example in speaking and writing, under the shadow of Indonesian culture. It is urgent and pressing need to study and then use the English culture and conventions when they speak English, as the tendency to translate the ideas they have in mind into English may cause misunderstanding. Even this can be considered very rude to native speakers of English. Cultural differences related to the production of expression should also be taken into consideration.

They need additional skills to interact with others which include determining the right things to say, the right time to say those things, and making adjustments quickly whenever required. How they practice to put all the abstract arrangements of sentences into real interactional action is crucial. The grammar and vocabulary combined with the skill in interaction are the basis of the learners speaking competence. The learners must be aware of the interrelation aspects of grammar, vocabulary and interaction skill and develop strategies to master them. As long as their concept of studying English means studying the grammar, vocabulary and reading passages, it is unlikely that they will reach the level of how to use the language in real communication.

4.1. Some cultural constraints

The cultural constraints may come from different sources as follows:

Teachers' lack of knowledge of the target language's culture: Quoting from Morrow (1977), Canale and Swain (1980:

31) state that "the role of the teacher in the second language classroom must undergo a change if a communicative based approach is adopted". Classroom activities should no longer be teacher centred. In Indonesia this creates arguments among groups of teachers, and as it may happen anywhere else when teachers argue with teachers there seems to be no end unless one side is willing to back off.

The teachers' lack of proficiency has been under question. How can teachers who are not lack proficient teach their learners to be proficient? Paulston (1979:3) questions not only the teachers' proficiency which is far from perfect but also the kinds of social rules to teach. These social rules include what expressions should be used in certain situations, the appropriateness of certain forms of language when interacting with different people, and the ability to start, end and make comments during interaction. In short Paulston remarks (1979:2) that it is easier to be bilingual that bicultural.

The culture of learning policy makers: The policy makers in the field of education declare that developing reading is the primary objective stated in the official curriculum (Tomlinson, 1990:26). But after realizing that the students cannot express their ideas in English, a crash program on communicative learning for English teaches was hurriedly conducted. This program which aimed at preparing teachers to teach the students communicatively was started in December 1988 (p.25), but then discontinued because of some disagreement and objection by some officials and influential academics (p.33). It seems that there is a lack of decisiveness in the circle of decision makers concerning what really is to be achieved and what steps should be taken to reach that.

Policy makers lack awareness of the link between the language and culture. They do not seem to realize that knowing the language does not mean being able to use it. It is beyond their understanding that speaking is a very specific skill which attracts other requirements for its mastery. Bygate (1987:3) mentions that "in order to speak a foreign language, it is necessary to know a certain amount of grammar and vocabulary". But the ability to speak cannot be achieved through the ability of forming sentences using the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary in the abstract (Bygate, 1987:3). As language use is related to culture, to understand the culture of English native speakers will be crucial. This should be included in the textbooks used by the learners.

Reluctance to talk due to cultural influence: Many students are also ashamed of making mistakes. They suffer from what Dr. Stevick called "lathophobic aphasia" which means the unwillingness to speak for fear of making mistakes" (Rogers, 1976:24) . This cultural specific phenomenon may handicap the practice of communicative tasks. Fear of being laughed at when making errors also leads to the reluctance to ask any questions to the teachers. This is particularly visible among learners of Asian countries with established traditional cultures such as Japan, Thailand, China and Indonesia. In these countries, learners still rely too much on the teacher for problem solving. This is not wrong, but when each member of the group does not trust the other and expects the teacher to explain all problems, group activities will not be effective and might fail to reach their goal.

In these countries, and particularly in Japan, teachers have a very high status. In Indonesia, particularly in rural areas of Java, teachers are also regarded as people of high status in society. They are prominent members of the community and well respected. In the communicative approach teachers are expected to be close to students. This is not easy. The teachers' effort to approach them by interacting informally will not work, because of the high status they have in the local culture. This situation is unhelpful and needs to be firstly addressed before learning methodologies intended to increase their fluency are introduced.

The teachers can inform the students that showing respect to their teachers does not mean a wide gap of relationship should be maintained. This can be done step by step. Creating a program, for example English Evening, where many teachers and students get involved and have to practice their English together, if the students notice that teachers are just like them, that they

can make mistakes, that they are not always successful in performing things, then they may change their perception to the teachers. Closer and more informal relationship may occur.

The specific values of local culture: The local culture also plays important role in the success of communicative English learning. The example of this is the study of English at Gadjah Mada University, which is considered the oldest university in Indonesia. With more than twenty four thousand students coming from different islands, it makes the city of Yogyakarta a mini Indonesia. The city itself is considered the heart of the Javanese culture. Certain a aspects of the local culture are unfortunately to a certain extent unhelpful to foreign language oral mastery. It is the belief of the local people that silence is desirable; talking to others, especially the elder or teachers when not invited, is not good; challenging teachers' statements is unacceptable; showing off oneself is not proper; being too active is not recommended; laughing freely and speaking too fast are not common, criticising others is not acceptable. This socio-cultural background affects the students attitude in the classroom. The students tend to be passive and unproductive. The time during classroom instruction provided for question-answer activities seldom works.

The influence of the local cultural background should be minimized. The learners should be informed that there is nothing wrong with leaving the culture temporarily for the sake of their success in learning English. They should be convinced that active and productive participation in a foreign language learning is the main requirement for their success. Comparison of cultures between Indonesian and English communities may increase learners' awareness what attitudes should be taken to improve their English learning.

4.2. Minimizing the constraints :

Efforts should be taken to minimize the constraints. This might be difficult to tackle all the constraints at once. Key areas constraining the implementation of communicative language learning could be first broken through. These areas may cover as follows:

Better co-operation among teachers: Unity of opinion among teachers is vital. Ways should be found to integrate their opinions. The integration could be started from the local department. Ways should be found to accommodate the different ideas. Perhaps what Sano et al. (1984:170-171) have done could give some inspiration. They explain how Japanese teachers were united in their efforts to find a method of learning English which would be effective and appropriate in Japan and concluded their efforts in the use of Japanese Communicative Language Learning and defined their learning as Functional Approach to the Structure of English.

This unity and co-operation is essential. Powell (1992:3) states that it has been observed time and time again that the most positive learning experiences take place in schools where mutual support and encouragement are everyday occurrences, where every teacher has contributed to the working practices of the department and share a sense of mutual responsibility and ownership.

Improving study styles: Indonesian students should be taught how to manage their time wisely. They have to make use of any available time for their knowledge improvement. Utilizing any helpful conditions such as participating in speech contest, voluntary work to help tourists in main tourist areas, job training programs in hotels, arts centres and other places on interest where they can communicate with English speaking visitors might increase their speaking fluency. In fact as Haris and Frith say (1990:71) if pupils are to acquire general language skills, then they need to confront what they personally find difficult and develop their confidence by using available resources to overcome the problem.

Accepting the cultural differences: Alptekin (1993:136) mentions that culture, involves 'socially acquired knowledge'. Hymes (1974) as quoted by Marcus and Slansky (1994:306) states that "communicative competence encompasses many uses of language in social settings". As the way of expressing social related uses is

different between Indonesian and English, the Indonesian learners should be taught the English cultural values and use them when speaking in English. Marcus and Slansky (1994:313) suggest discussions, debates and the use of television program or film to increase learners' cultural awareness.

This implies the need for teachers to include and provide information about the different ways of life, events, of the target language to the learners. Teachers and learners need to comprehend and accept such values and make them part of their internalizing the target language. Teachers should be convinced that it is just impossible (p.139) to teach a foreign language without its culture base.

Intensifying informal classes and group-work: Atkinson (1992:6) question the appropriate balance between formality and informality in the modern language classroom should be and how best to achieve it. This is a challenge for every teacher wishing to employ the communicative approach.

Group work also does not have a long history in western education. Powell (1992:1) writes that "ten to fifteen years ago, it was relativity rare to find pair-work and group work in the language classroom in the United Kingdom". Perhaps the criteria of how group work should be managed from Harris and Frith (1990:73) below could be used as a guide by Indonesian teachers. Group work should:

a) decide which aspect of a given task they should work on;
b) decide the order in which a given task should be tackled;
c) prepare materials for other groups to learn from
d) write letters or short messages for other groups to read and act on;
e) choose a spokesperson to represent their views or pass on their results to the rest of the class;
f) act as an editorial board and select the best from the work of other group;

5. Conclusion

According to Tomlinson (1990:26) the learning of English in Indonesia has not been very successful. Few learners can actually use it. There seems to be discrepancy between the goals i.e. the ability to use English for written and spoken purposes and the learning approach to reach the goals.

Changes and adjustment in some sectors related to the learning of English are needed. Communicative language learning should be used to replace the traditional instruction. In this case several constraints have to be taken into consideration. Adaptation, changes and ways to minimize the constraints could be done step by step on the basis of importance and priority.

The cultural constraints to the implementation of communicative language learning may come from the teachers, the learners and the local culture. Indonesian teachers should learn that in communicative language learning their roles in classroom activities may undergo changes. Teachers should support each other and reach an agreement on how to implement communicative language learning. Cooperation is very important, less qualified teachers should not feel threatened by the introduction of communicative approach. They can teach and learn at the things new to them at the same time. Learners should leave behind any local cultural practices and habit which may block the progress of their English study. Silence, which the local culture considers appropriate, is not so suitable for foreign language learning. It would be just appropriate to talk a little bit more to improve oral English mastery. It is not at all a violation of the culture.

To conclude, the constraints from the local culture which are potential to block the implementation of communicative language learning should be seriously treated. The relationship between learners and teachers should be made less formal and less distant. The belief in the local culture which prefers learners' quietness can be gradually changed during English classes. The changes of teachers' roles, learning styles, learners roles are necessary. Those changes combined with better co-operation between teachers and learners, and

conscious willingness to adopt new learning culture seem to be the fundamental requirements for the success of communicative language learning.

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