

# TEACHING CULTURE TO ADULT INDONESIAN STUDENTS IN ENGLISH CLASSROOMS: A MUTUAL UNDERSTANDING APPROACH

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## **Abstract.**

*Culture is often neglected in FL classrooms while it is important to teach it to the students. In the EFL classrooms in Indonesia, teachers should equip their students not only with the English culture but also other ethnic cultures in Indonesia as Indonesia is a multicultural and multiethnic country. It is English that becomes the bridge for the national unity. This paper describes that students get mutual benefits through learning cultures and it is teachers of English who can play a role of an agent to promote a mutual understanding in the multicultural and multiethnic EFL classroom in Indonesia.*

**Keywords:** *culture, adult Indonesian students, English classroom, mutual understanding approach*

## **Introduction**

This 21<sup>st</sup> century marks the beginning of the globalization era in which all people around the world want to communicate with each other in one language, i.e. the global language. That one language, due to its long history to gain its political, educational, technological, economical and cultural powers, happens to be the English language. The English language is used in international forums as it is needed by the international communities to communicate with each other.

However, in some countries English is not communicatively taught. The teaching of English is focused on its grammatical aspect of the language as in China and Korea, and it is suited to what learners need with the language, either the linguistic or cultural aspect, as in Japan (Alptekin and Alptekin, 1984). It is even hard for English to be wholly accepted as in Kuwait where the English materials are modified in such a way that the situations in those materials are changed to reflect the Kuwaitis, and as in the European countries where the norms and values of the English native speakers are rejected (Alptekin and Alptekin, 1984).

In Indonesia the English culture is mostly taught in the Cross Cultural Understanding (CCU) class where the students can learn the English native speakers' way of life. In this class students are also to see the differences between the English culture and the Indonesian culture.

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However, the teaching of culture should not be done in the CCU class only and referred to the English culture only, but English can be used to bridge across cultures.

English in Indonesia plays an important role, not only to develop the country's technology and science but also to function as a bridge of the country's multicultural settings. This multicultural settings are really felt in big cities such as Jakarta and Surabaya. Classrooms in those big cities reflect diverse ethnocultural and multilingual students. Even some of the students come from other countries with different cultural and linguistic backgrounds.

Therefore, this paper discusses what benefits the EFL students get when they are also learning culture, and how EFL teachers play their role to bridge such multicultural settings in the Indonesian classrooms besides promoting the English culture.

### **Language Learning and Culture**

Learning a foreign language is a mental and cognitive process which requires practices in forming a correct usage and use of the language. These practices should be done on and on so that they become a habit. It is not sufficient when learners only learn the grammatical aspects of the language but they must know how to behave appropriately in a particular context and how to fill the gap when there is a stoppage of communication between them and those they are talking with. Therefore, they need to be equipped with a communicative competence.

Quoting Swain and Canale, Tseng (2002:12) states that there are categories of competences in the communicative competence: grammatical, sociolinguistic, discourse, and strategic. Grammatical competence or linguistic competence refers to the ability of learners to master the phonological, morphological, and syntactic systems of the language. By doing so, L2 learners with their capacity to use the system of the language are able to produce well-formed sentences. In other words, the learners' linguistic performance is 'well' accepted by the native speakers of the language.

Sociolinguistic competence refers to the ability of L2 learners to appropriately use the language in various contexts. L2 learners have to be able to behave accordingly to the norms, values, beliefs and behavior patterns of the speech community of the language, for example, an EFL learner should know how to ask an American to pass him/her salt, how to excuse himself/herself in the middle of conversation, and how to reject an invitation. In other words, it emphasizes the appropriate use of language in a specific cultural context. Alptekin (2002:58) states that sociolinguistic competence deals with "the social rules of language use, which involve an understanding of the social context in which language is used."

Discourse competence "involves the ability to combine ideas to achieve cohesion in form and coherence in thought." ( Alptekin, 2002:58

). It is the ability that L2 learners have to master, so that they can link their sentences into meaningful units. There must be cohesive devices to be used so that sentences are forming internally a complete and meaningful whole of discourse. When the sentences relate to the context, the discourse text is coherent.

Strategic competence refers to “the use of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies to compensate for gaps in communication.” (Tseng, 2002:12). Alptekin (2002:58) gives such examples as “what do you do when you cannot think of a word? Or what do you do when you realize that your message is misunderstood?” In short, L2 learners must be able to keep the communication going smoothly whenever there is a stoppage of expressing ideas. The learners should be able to maintain the conversation in such a way that the communication flows or does not get stuck.

Therefore, learning a foreign language is not only producing phrases, clauses and sentences grammatically, but it is more focused on using the language as a means of communication (Cortazzi and Jin, 1999). Learners of a second language must be able to appropriately link the form and the communicative functions of the language (Cummins, 1991). According to Cummins, drills and exercises are usually of linguistic forms, thus they will not unite the language with its functions. Communication in real situations cannot be separated from context, and culture is part of the context. Since culture is part of the context, communication is rarely culture-free. This gives the impact that language learning and learning about target culture cannot realistically be separated.

Dong (2004:9) quotes Sapir-Whorf hypothesis that “language and culture are closely interrelated, shaping and being shaped by one another”. Language culturally reflects the ways the speakers of the language look at the world, which is quite different from the way other speakers of another culture do. In English there is only one term for *rice*, either it is the cooked one or the raw material before it is cooked, while in the Indonesian language the first is *nasi* and the latter *beras*. In English there is only one term for *grandchildren* whosever line they come from, while in Chinese *grandchildren* are differentiated from the family line whether they are the grandchildren from the father’s line as the father is the son of the grandchildren’s grandparents or they are the descendants from the daughter of the grandchildren’s grandparents. The first ones are the grandchildren of the inner line (in the Indonesian language *cucu dalam*) while the latter are the grandchildren of the outer line (in the Indonesian language *cucu luar*). They are so called *cucu dalam* as they inherit and continue the clan while the other ones do not.

However, culture might refer to works of literature and works of art (Cortazzi and Jin, 1999). In fact, culture does not refer only to cultural physical products but also behavior, belief and attitudes and knowledge of the socionorms of the people of that culture. In short, Moerman as quoted

by Cortazzi and Jin states that “culture is a set – perhaps a system – of principles and of interpretation, together with the products of that system”.

In the language learning, the culture of learning also plays an important role. The culture of learning that teachers and students bring into the classroom is “a framework of expectations, attitudes, values, and beliefs about what constitutes a good learning.” (Cortazzi and Jin, 1999). A teacher may bring his or her beliefs in what makes learning successful and how s/he successfully teach in the classroom, what s/he expects from the students and how s/he behaves towards the students. All of what a teacher believes refers to the culture of the teacher. His/her beliefs are in fact the reflection of his/her life experience, especially when s/he was a student studying at the Faculty of Education and Teacher’s Training, or his/her own observation on other teachers while they were teaching, all of which are now unconsciously taken as his/her culture. Similarly, a student has his/her own culture as how s/he views a teacher’s way of teaching in accordance with his/her expectation, what s/he knows about teaching from other teachers, and all of these make up his/her culture of learning.

### **Why FL Students Learn Culture?**

Learning language cannot be separated from its culture since language and culture are inextricably related. When students learn a foreign language, they also have to understand how speakers of the target language behave, believe and value the world using the language. Otherwise, the students do not really acquire the target language. Alptekin and Alptekin (1984) state that students cannot be successful in learning a foreign language if they do not “integrate themselves with the native environment of the language” no matter where they are learning the language.

Language is an important dimension to identify a particular ethnic group that uses the language and the ethnicity of the group when the group interacts with another, and this is really becoming a sociocultural marker in multicultural settings (Hamers and Blanc, 2000). Language is one of the determinant factors for ethnic identity as language is an important component of culture. Brown (1986) states that one will acquire the second identity when s/he learns the second/foreign language. There will be a process of acculturation as s/he adapts himself/herself to the new culture; s/he will be influenced in the way s/he is thinking, feeling and communicating.

Foreign Language (FL) students often read texts laden with cultural insights so that the texts can be hardly understood if the reader does not have the cultural background of what is in the texts. Once the students understand the cultural background of the topic being discussed, they expand their horizon about the world ( Tseng, 2002:12 ). Thus, culture can change one’s perspective or way of seeing the world. Tseng states that there are two major goals why FL students should learn

culture: First, they may now be conscious that they do not always share with others the same norms, values, beliefs and behaviors. Other people have their own way of perceiving the world, Basically, one has his/her own “inner world” to make the outer world or reality have a sense to him/her. In order to get the meaning of the outer world in which he/she experiences, his/her “inner world” which is his/her pre-existing concept or understanding about the world is undergoing a sort of negotiation with the external world before he/she generates the meaning ( Tseng, 2002:13 ). When an Indonesian hears or sees the words ‘Rudy Hartono’, he/she might develop the concept of ‘Rudy Hartono’ from television, advertisement, or other media. He/she may think that ‘Rudy Hartono’ is an advertisement artist of a particular dairy product, or a badminton player, or the world’s great All England and Thomas Cup champion, or even he/she does not know at all who ‘Rudy Hartono’ is.

Second, since there are diversities of ideas and practices in the world, FL students can have a cross-cultural awareness and appreciation. They can recognize and compare how other societies behave over things or matters they encounter and how they socialize themselves with others and value them all in their view. For example, the Eskimo people recognize kinds of snows so that they have one special term for each kind of snow in their language while English people do not. The students will also have positive attitudes towards the culture of the natives of the target language as they have known that they do not universally share with other linguistic communities as they have their own way of viewing the world. This will bring the students to have such a meaningful interaction with the second culture. According to Cortazzi and Jin (1999:197) quoting Byram (1993) one of the aims at teaching a foreign language is “the development of insight into the foreign culture and positive attitudes toward foreign people.”

Third, students get the sociolinguistic and strategic competence that opens and improves their perspective of how other people cope with matters in the social situations of the target language (Alptekin, 2002:59). They know how to use the forms of the language, i.e. the linguistic forms of the target language, appropriately and even strategically. FL students acquire the culture of the target language and its speakers as they might “replicate the socialization process experienced by the natives of the culture” ( Lantolf, 1999:29 ).

### **Some Considerations To Teach Culture in EFL Teaching in Indonesia**

Dong (2004:4) quoting Krashen states that there are two second language acquisition principles: Input Principle and Affective Filter Principle. A learner will be successful in learning the second language when s/he is “exposed to comprehensible input, the input which is meaningful, sufficient, and relevant to the learner at the level a little above the learner’s current language and cognitive level.” An Affective

Filter refers to the degree of anxiety in the part of the learner when s/he is learning the target language. According to Dong ( 2004 ) the Affective Filter is influenced by the learner himself/herself and the environment. Motivation, attitudes, self-confidence, peer influence, classroom situation, and teacher inputs are examples of the influences. That is why, when a teacher teaches in the classroom, s/he should create a conducive teaching-learning situation. This conducive situation will suppress the learner's anxiety to a low level, meaning that the learner will be motivated to learn and be actively participating in the classroom by using the target language, i.e. English. On the other hand, the learner will not be active as s/he has less or even no motivation when s/he finds no conducive situation. Teachers must establish tolerance and avoid embarrassing the students by spotlighting or putting down them.

An EFL teacher should be aware that the EFL learners in Indonesia are of different ethnic backgrounds with their different cultures. English can be the bridge that can link one culture to another, including the English culture. Teachers should view English language learners' native language and culture as resources to make the learning in the new language and culture more relevant to the students. By doing this, an individual learner will feel that his/her ethnic culture is appreciated and respected. The learner should be encouraged to speak about his/her views of a particular topic based on what s/he has experienced then on what his/her culture says about the topic. Remember that even an individual learner has his/her own culture—his/her own way of seeing things. An EFL teacher, a native speaker of English, cannot bring his/her own culture to the Indonesian classrooms and the Indonesian students are supposed to appreciate the English culture. This way does not promote any cross-cultural understanding. No wonder that a native teacher might feel frustrated when teaching English to the Indonesian learners. Such a teacher cannot demand his/her students to understand him/her without his/her efforts to be bicultural or bilingual towards the learners' cultural setting. Alptekin and Alptekin (1984:16) state that “native speakers of English, when they come to teach in the host country, fail to have the students really acquire the language because those native speakers do not understand the host culture and to speak the local vernacular. Moreover, those native speakers expose their norms and value to the students' setting while they do not attempt to be bilingual and bicultural.” Teaching culture in EFL classrooms in Indonesia should accommodate the learners' ethnic cultures and the native teacher can also share with the learners the topic viewed from the English culture.

Therefore, in a multilingual and multicultural settings such as Indonesia, English can actively take part in promoting the unity of the ethnic groups in Indonesia as learners will have a wider view of the world around them. Besides, the learners will appreciate the culture of the English people whose language they are learning. Eventually, they have a positive attitude towards other cultures. This will open their mind that

culture is universal in the human life, meaning that each ethnic group has a culture; however, one culture is different from the others.

Exchanging or sharing cultural ideas with others will enrich the learners' views about cultures. They can filter which they consider is good and acceptable to them and which is not. What is right in one culture may not be right in another. For example, that it is a common practice in the United States that one makes love with another before they are legally married cannot be accepted in another culture. Thus, exchanging and sharing such ideas culturally in English does not only bring them to their cultural maturity but also improves their English. They know how to express things about their own culture in English. Thus, English is also becoming a communicative tool to 'promote' their own culture. . Hence, the criteria for a pedagogical model should refer to the educational, political and linguistic characteristics of each country. Learners should be given opportunities to use English both in relation to local situations and international circumstances in which they are interested.

One of the things when the learners are studying culture is that they should know that a part of the culture is expressed through metaphors ( Bonvillain, 2003:63 ). Since the learners are studying English, they should also be taught English metaphors. She further says that "analysis of recurring metaphors in a language reveals underlying concepts that help construct the reality or worldview of speakers." ( 2003:64). Metaphorical expressions are "the very heart of everyday mental and linguistic activity" ( Lantolf, 1999:44 ). Bonvillain also quotes Sapir and Whorf, and Lakoff and Johnson that "...all experience is cultural...we experience our 'world' in such a way that our culture is already present in the very experience itself." She gives such examples as 'Time is money' which belongs to the English culture means that time is so valuable that it is like a commodity that English people have to use efficiently, wisely and profitably; and 'He's *out of his mind*', 'They're *in love*' which use locative prepositions reflect an emotional state as if they were in relation to a physical state and a space. In additions, there is a type of metaphor, i.e. personification, which refers to "the process of attributing animate or human qualities to nonliving entities or events" ( Bonvillain, 2003:65 ), for examples, 'High prices are *eating up* my paycheck', 'Anxiety is *killing* him', and 'The window *looks out* over the mountain'. It would be an interesting and lively classroom talk when the learners are also given opportunities to talk about the metaphorical expressions in their own culture – whether there are such similar metaphors. By doing so, learners might understand from which point of view the metaphorical expressions of their culture are created, and how different theirs are from the others, even from the English ones.

In the class discussion, EFL teachers should give opportunities and enough time to the learners to think by giving guiding questions, and the questions might be varied in accordance to the learners' language proficiency level ( Dong, 2004:16 ). In addition, the culturally laden

materials brought into the class are supposed to suit the learners' needs and language proficiency. However, discussion on grammatical errors should not overlook the inappropriateness of interactional style and behavior in the English culture as well as in the students' cultures.

Quoting Wenham (1991) Cortazzi and Jin (1999:217) state that teachers must become "colearners, along with their students, in a cooperative approach to classroom interaction. This would mean the development of cultural awareness." Teachers should be aware of their students who come from different cultural groups. Their behavior, expectation, perspective and value on a particular topic are different from one to another. Understanding the reasons why the learners believe and act accordingly towards the topic being discussed is a characteristic which has to be possessed by the teachers.

## **Conclusion**

Language and culture cannot be separated from one another since language is a part of culture and it expresses the norms, belief, value, perspective, and behavior of its speakers. Language becomes the identity of the members of an ethnic group.

It is the fact that EFL classrooms in Indonesia consist of many diverse cultural groups. And English must be able to become the bridge for those multiethnic groups to promote the political education goal for a national unity. Besides, it arouses the students' appreciation and positive attitude towards the English culture and its speakers and eventually all other foreigners as this cultural awareness alters the students' thinking, feeling and communication towards the world. Therefore, EFL teachers, either local teachers or native speakers, must have the capability of mingling with their students as part of a small melting pot where mutual understanding is taking place, and at the same time of refining their students' language proficiency.

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