DETERMINING THE NATURAL CONTENT
IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN INDONESIA

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Abstract

As language and culture are two inseparable things, the teaching of language results in the implication of teaching the culture as well. However, due to the diversity of culture and the fact that in globalization English does not belong to any single nation or group, language teachers are required to know which culture to teach in language learning classroom. Ariffin (2006, p. 75) has suggested three choices of the cultural basis for teaching English: (1) home-language’s culture, (2) target-language culture and (3) both home-language and target-language cultures. Each of them has both advantages and disadvantages in its implications. Through the discussion, I find that using both home-language culture and target-language culture fits the context of language teaching in Indonesia. It will help students analyze the differences and find the commonalities between the two. This can also be supported by the application of intercultural approach in language teaching.

Key words: home-language culture, target-language culture, intercultural approach

INTRODUCTION

“Language and culture, it could be said, represent two sides of the same coin” (Nault, 2006, p. 314). These two are inseparable. One cannot exist without the other. Consequently, in the language teaching, culture becomes a crucial element that must be taught as well. How learners use and interpret the communication messages is heavily influenced by their

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cultural background. Culture becomes the guideline for them on how to use the language. Therefore, it has been argued that for learners to be proficient in their target language, they must have sociolinguistic competence, that is the knowledge of the target culture.

Unfortunately, the basic idea on the relationship between language and culture bears many consequences and triggers several issues in language teaching. The diversity of culture leads to the demands for the teachers to know which culture to teach in language learning classroom (Ariffin, 2006). Moreover, the globalization has made English as the international language in which English does not belong to any single nation or group (Nault, 2006) which triggers the question "which or whose culture should be taught to the students?"

This paper will look more deeply on several aspects in determining the cultural content in the teaching of English as an international language in Indonesia. I will start from the discussion on English as an international language, the presence of culture in language teaching, followed by the Indonesian context of the teaching of English to provide background for the readers and finally the cultural content that should be taught for Indonesian learners.

ENGLISH AS AN INTERNATIONAL LANGUAGE

English has become more dominant language than any other language. What makes English distinct nowadays "is not the number of native speakers, but the growing number of L2 speakers of English" (McKay, 2003, p. 1). This idea refers to what it is known as "macroacquisition", the term coined by Brutt-Griffler (2002) as cited in Phan Le Ha (2005). It explains the idea that many people learn English for specific purposes and they use English in multilingual contexts. In this case, the learners are aware of the importance of English and belief that they need to learn English for better future in career and education, easier access to any information as it is provided in English. This idea is supported by the facts that in developing countries, especially, English competency is a fixed requirement that one cannot bargain about any longer in finding good jobs. Parents make sure that their children learn and be good at English since early ages. Especially in globalization era, English is a must. Moreover, Graddol (1999) as cited in McKay (2003), asserts that in the near future, there will be more L2 speakers of English than native speakers. This idea fits in Brutt-Griffler's (2002) contention about features of international language that "it tends to establish itself alongside other local languages in a multilingual context,"
resulting in many bilingual speakers of the language” (McKay, 2003, p. 1). According to McKay (2003, p. 1), Smith (1976) has provided “the most significant features of an international language” by arguing that, in reference to an international language, (1) there is no necessity for L2 speakers to internalize the cultural norms of native speakers of that language, (2) an international language becomes de-nationalized, and (3) the purpose of teaching an international language is to facilitate the communication of learners’ ideas and culture in an English medium. Based on these features, it is clear that EIL (English as an international language) learners do not have to learn the culture of native speakers of English. In fact, the third point is clear that learners may learn English because they want to talk about their own culture using English as the medium, just like a tourist guide in Bali who speaks about Bali and his culture in English to the overseas tourists. However, in learning a language, the culture of that language is automatically contained, as language and culture are inseparable. Thus, it has been a challenge for English teachers on determining the cultural basis of EIL learning.

CULTURE IN LANGUAGE TEACHING

Culture and language are two interrelated things. Hall (1997) provides deep and engaging discussion on both culture and language. Culture, as “way of life of a people, community, nation or social group” (Hall, 1997, p. 2) contributes to an individual’s conceptual map that is expressed through language. Thus, language becomes the reflection of culture and culture itself can be seen from the language. Therefore, in language teaching, the teaching of culture cannot be neglected. Nault (2006, p. 315) maintains that “culture is present in the language classroom despite any attempts to remove it”. It happens because culture is somehow implicitly taught “when teachers correct students’ word choices or grammar” (Nault, 2005, p. 315), and also through the instructional methods and teaching materials. This strengthens the idea by Cakir (2006, p. 4) that language teachers will always convey “impressions of another culture whether they realize it or not”.

Another point is regarding the goal of language teaching to enable language learners to become communicatively competent in target language they are studying. As we know that communicative competence is made up of “grammatical competence, discourse competence, and sociolinguistic competence” (Cakir, 2006, p. 5). Thus for a language learner to achieve communicative competence, those components are necessary. Sociolinguistic competence is responsible for the social, pragmatic and cultural elements.
Learners are expected to know what to say and how to say in which circumstances. It is more than grammatically perfect sentences that they produce. So we can see that language teachers are also responsible for developing the sociolinguistic competence in order for the learners to achieve communicative competence.

Gend and Bada (2005, p. 73) argue that the teaching of second language (L2) is "inaccurate and incomplete" without the study of culture. From the learners' point of view, they feel that the study of language means nothing if they do not know about the people or the country in which the language is spoken. Clouston (1997, p. 3) emphasizes the relationship between language and culture in language teaching by mentioning that "language teaching is culture teaching". He provides two justifications by quoting Buttjes, (1990, pp. 55-56):

1. language codes cannot be taught in isolation because processes of sociocultural transmission are bound to be at work on many levels, e.g. the content of language exercises, the cultural discourse of textbooks, and the teacher's attitudes towards the target culture;
2. in their role of "secondary care givers" language teachers need to go beyond monitoring linguistic production in the classroom and become aware of the complex and numerous processes of intercultural mediation that any foreign language learners undergoes.

The role of culture in language teaching

According to McKay (2003, p. 1), culture plays two important roles in language teaching: (1) "culture is significant in the linguistic dimension of the language itself" and (2) culture plays roles in pedagogical sense in terms of the cultural content of the materials and teaching methodology.

The first role appears at the semantic level, pragmatic level, and discourse level of language. On a semantic level, culture is reflected in "many of the lexical phrases of English" (McKay, 2003, p.1). Examples of this are culturally-related phrases, such as "big stick diplomacy, yellow journalism, Uncle Tom" in American English (McKay, 2003, p. 1). In relation with the teaching of EIL as learners do not need to internalize the native speakers' culture, then the teaching of these phrases is challenged. On a pragmatic level, the dimension of culture is reflected through the appropriateness in language use, for example, a "thank you" response for a compliment. However, what is appropriate in one culture may not be appropriate in other culture. The third level is the discourse level, which refers to how different
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cultures produce particular genres, such as how they write advertisements, business letters, etc. Whether it is on semantic, pragmatic, or discourse level, the teaching of EIL has challenged the language teachers as to whether learners should conform to all the rules of semantic, pragmatic, or discourse of native speakers.

The second role of culture in language teaching is in teaching materials and methods (McKay, 2003). Cortazzi and Jin (1999) as cited in McKay (2003, p. 2) suggest “three types of cultural information that can be used in language textbooks and materials”: source culture materials (using learners’ own culture as the content), target culture materials (based on the culture of a country where English is the first language), and international target culture (including variety of cultures from both English and non-English speaking countries). Deeper discussion on these three kinds of cultural information will be presented later in this paper.

Benefits of teaching culture

The fact that language and culture are inseparable has led to the teaching of culture in language teaching in a sense that one cannot avoid teaching culture when he or she teaches language to the students. However, not only can we not separate language and culture, but there are also several advantages of teaching culture as presented by Kitao (2000), cited by Genc and Bada (2005):

1. Studying culture provides a reason to study the target language and make the process more meaningful.
2. Learning culture goes beyond grammar books by providing real situation and make learners able to “feel” the real people and places of what they are studying.
3. Studying culture increases students’ motivation by enhancing students’ interest in learning culturally-based activities, such as dancing, singing, doing research on countries and peoples, etc.
4. Studying culture also contributes positive inputs in general education, such as by providing knowledge on geography, history, etc.

Genc and Bada (2005) support their ideas on the benefits of teaching culture by conducting research to 38 students of third-year Turkish student-teachers of English studying at the English Language Teaching Department of Cukurova University. They were given five-item questionnaires to assess their language skills, cultural awareness, attitudes toward the target culture and contribution to the prospective teaching profession. Analyzed
using SPSS statistical package, the result showed significantly that the teaching of culture indeed provided the students with advantages.

**Factors involved in “cultural content”**

There are several things to consider in deciding the cultural content, before we decide whether we want to use source culture, target culture or international target culture materials. Kilickaya (2004, p. 2) mentions several factors involved in cultural content: socio-cultural factors, learners’ needs, teachers’ role, and materials. Regarding the socio-cultural factors, language teachers should first decide whether they want to include it in the teaching process or not, and if they do, they need to decide on how much socio-cultural information should be presented and what kind of techniques they use to present it. This first factor is closely related to the next one, learners’ needs. Teachers need to consider the students’ needs, by asking “what are they going to do with the target culture?”, students’ previous learning experiences, their characteristics, such as age, educational level, socioeconomic status, etc, and their attitudes toward learning the target language. Teachers play important role in giving understanding that cultures differ and no culture is better than the other. They also need to remember not to make students think or become like people in the cultures they are studying. For the teaching materials, teachers also deal with what is known as “hidden curriculum” meaning sets of cultural values that are communicated directly or indirectly through the course books (Kilickaya, 2004, p. 2). Sometimes the hidden curriculum can be more effective than the official curriculum, and teachers need to be aware of the cultural values they teach to the students.

**ENGLISH IN INDONESIAN CONTEXT**

**English development in Indonesia**

Dutch was the first European language to have a significant impact on the Indonesian people because of the colonialization (Lowenberg, 1991, p. 128). During the colonial era, Dutch was spoken at homes by Western-oriented elites and among professionals in the city. However, as soon as Japan occupied Indonesia, the use of Dutch was forbidden and there were less and less native speakers of Dutch remained in Indonesia.

By the end of World War II, English became the main medium in science and technology, diplomacy, business, and communications. The Dutch were aware of this importance of English and actually had taught
English to secondary-school students for the non-European elites prior to Indonesia’s independence. During the 1950s, Indonesia became more exposed to English through the propaganda and printed materials which arrived from the Soviet Union, Eastern Europe, and China (Douglas, 1970 as cited in Lowenberg, 1991).

The United States has had huge influence on Indonesia as soon as Indonesia’s independence. The US has major economic and political influence in Indonesia. Besides, the US provided fund through USAID and Ford Foundation programs to send hundreds of Indonesian scholars and government officials to study in American universities. In short, “this frequent interaction with Americans both in Indonesia and the United States gave many of Indonesia’s new elites considerable direct contact with English as a language of modernization” (Lowenberg, 1991, p. 128). However, English is not an official language in Indonesia, instead it is the “first foreign language” that is used for “international communication, for the acquisition of knowledge concerning science and technology, and as sources for the lexical development of Bahasa Indonesia as a “modern language”” (Diah, 1982, p. 26) as cited in Lowenberg (1991, p. 128).

In the past five to ten years, there has been a great demand of the English competency, mainly because the awareness of the importance of English for better education and career. Many private schools started to use English as the medium of teaching other subjects, what we know as immersion program. English courses taught by native speakers are offered in many language centers as the selling points. Pre-school started from toddlers taught in English has been a great business in the last five years. Student exchange programs and “study-overseas” expo have become a routine annually. Unfortunately, most of this can be enjoyed by middle and upper class only due to financial matters. Regarding the cultural content, most of the textbooks in Indonesia are still based on American culture. Students learn about the four seasons in America which they may never experience them if they are in Indonesia, they learn about American fast food, sun-bathing, Halloween party, etc.

THREE OPTIONS: TARGET CULTURE, NATIVE CULTURE, OR BOTH

At this point, we have come to the more complex issues on determining the cultural content of the EIL teaching itself. As we have learned that learning the language means learning the culture, and the fact that nowadays English has become an international language and does not belong to
certain group or nation, then a big question comes up, "whose culture, which culture will teachers teach to the students?" Ariffin (2006, p. 75) has suggested three choices of the cultural basis for teaching English: (1) home-language’s culture (meaning students’ first language’s culture), (2) target-language culture (i.e., the culture of the target language), and (3) both home-language and target-language cultures. The following discussion will provide a closer look at each of them.

**Home-language culture teaching**

Widdowson (1990) as cited in Ariffin (2006, p. 75) asserts that when non-native English speaking students learn how to speak in their native language (L1) for the first time, they also learn the syntax and vocabulary together with the culture of how the language is being spoken and used within their community. This idea is referred by Alptekin (1993) as “schematic knowledge”. Widdowson (1990) suggests that these students, when learning their second language (L2), in this case is English, they apply their L1 schematic knowledge. It means that these students are very likely to experience confusion because of the “lack of cultural parallelism between their L1 and L2” (Ariffin, 2006, p. 75). Meanwhile, the use of home-language culture can help students overcome the confusion by letting them apply their background knowledge in reading comprehension, express their feelings and ideas more freely in essay writings, and provide solutions when they have to write in a genre that does not exist in their home-culture. In this case, students would be able to bring out their schematic knowledge in their learning because they are already familiar with the content and contexts.

It is also hard for students to make sense of what the reading passage is about when it is strongly laced with American culture and values, for example, Middle Eastern students, especially the Muslims, would feel confused and find it hard to understand when they come up with American ideology of “a dog as ‘man’s’ best friend” (Alptekin, 1993 as cited by Ariffin, 2006, p. 75). This happens because the Muslim students do not have this idea and instead, their idea of a dog is an “unclean” animal that they should not touch. Therefore, this American culture-loaded material brings confusion and creates barrier for students to comprehend the passage due to the contrast context of culture which may not exist in their schematic knowledge. Marckwardt (1978) as cited by Ariffin (2006) also maintains the idea of avoiding using American literature in EFL teaching because it neglects learners’ backgrounds. Thus by not using home-language culture, students would have to struggle with the vocabulary or syntactic patterns, but also
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the meaning of the passage itself since it is written about an unfamiliar culture (Alptekin, 1993 as cited by Ariffin, 2006).

Another advantage of using home-culture is it makes it easier for students to generate ideas and express their feelings freely in writings. In fact, students may come up with better quality writings as well. This idea is supported by Ball (1999) as cited in Ariffin (2006) when he evaluates the writing of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) speakers. He discovered that AAVE students write more easily when they are asked to write about general African-American culture such as R&B, rap, etc because students can apply their cultural background to generate ideas to produce better writings. What often happens in the classroom is that teachers let students write about the topic they are familiar with and teachers will help students organize their ideas into the target language pattern.

The fact that "certain cultures lack the genre that is present in the target-culture's language" (Ariffin, 2006, p. 76) supports the use of home-culture content. Kachru (1999) as cited by Ariffin (2006) states that some essay writing genres are not predominant in certain cultures. He provides an example of Indian students who have difficulties in producing argumentative ideas since they are not commonly found in Hindi. What teachers can do here is to introduce students with argumentative essays by building on the type of writing that they are culturally familiar with, such as explanatory essays.

Mckay (2004) provides examples on Moroccan, Chilean and Japanese situation in choosing to use home-language culture. They all believe that having target-language culture content invites cultural comparison and contribute to students' discontent with their own culture. Moreover, materials with home culture content motivated students more by presenting something they are already familiar with. In Chile, the government has designed a series of textbooks for the public schools entitled "Go for Chile" (McKay, 2004, p. 11) that deal with Chilean places and concerns. Whereas in Japan, Suzuki Takao in his bestseller book "Why the Japanese people are no good at English" presents reasons "why he believes the teaching of English should be separated from information about Western cultural values" (McKay, 2004, p. 12).

Using home-culture content also has its problems in implementation. Alptekin (1993) as cited in Ariffin (2006) points out that it is not easy to get the teaching materials that focus on home-language culture. This is because publishers do not want to spend much money on production of such where the market is restricted to one country. They prefer to produce materials that are based on the target-language’s culture because they can
market them in many countries where English is taught as ESL (English as a second language) or EFL (English as a foreign language), regardless of students’ L1. Another reason is that many authors who are the native speakers of the target language live in the target language’s country, such as the United States. Therefore, they are not familiar with students’ home-language culture and they tend to write something they are familiar with, that is their native culture or the students’ target culture.

Another weakness is by using home-language culture content, students are not well prepared to travel and live in the target-language’s country. When they go to the target-language’s country, they may experience greater culture shock and experience difficult adjustment because they are not prepared with the cultural differences they may encounter. Moreover, it is often that students have built their opinions about the target-language’s culture that are inaccurate. Thus, teachers are responsible for giving understanding to broaden students’ minds about accepting cultural differences.

**Target-language culture teaching**

In order to overcome the problems of using home-language culture, several researchers believe that target-language culture should be applied. According to Robinson (1985) as cited in Ariffin (2006), exposing students to target-language culture helps students view cultural differences. It is expected that students will become more familiar with terms of target-language culture and be prepared for the differences they may encounter. Another reason for using target-language culture is to “create a sense of awareness” when they write their papers (Ariffin, 2006, p. 77). The most visible example is about plagiarism in writing. Many EFL learners will easily commit plagiarism in American style of writing whereas they do not feel that they do it in purpose. In fact, it is encouraged in their writings to quote famous writers’ words without citing. Therefore, by introducing the target-language culture, students will be aware of how to cite their references properly to avoid committing plagiarism in American academic writing. The same thing happens to the diverse styles of writing. By referring to the target-language culture, students will become familiar with the target-language’s style of writing and learn how to write in that style (Kachru, 1999 as cited in Ariffin, 2006). However, using only target-language culture also has weaknesses. Therefore, it is suggested that using both cultures is more effective.
Using both cultures

There are two opposing views among ESL/EFL learners. In one hand, students learn English because they feel the advantages of it, such as gaining access to worldwide knowledge and they realize how English can help them have better future. On the other hand, there are students who hate the target language and its culture due to political agenda associated with the target-language, for example, in the U.S. At this point, students feel that they have to study English as the imperialists’ language and its culture to keep up with the rest of the world. Therefore, teachers need to be able to bridge this gap. One solution is by using both home-language and target-language culture in teaching. It is expected by using both cultures, students can recognize the differences between native and non-native writing styles and cultures, and simply either one is not better than the other. Baumgratz-Gangl assert that using both cultures help students “to analyze the differences and find some common thread between the two cultures” (Ariffin, 2006, p. 78). In this case students do not feel that they are being compared and the differences are being spotted, instead they are encouraged to build understanding and tolerance upon the differences.

SUGGESTION ON CULTURAL CONTENT FOR ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING IN INDONESIA

Based on the background knowledge of Indonesia and my experience as an English teacher, I would suggest that the teaching of English in Indonesia should adopt both Indonesian and target-language’s cultures, for several reasons, such as:

1. Indonesia itself is a multi-cultural country. There are hundreds of different cultures within Indonesia that are worth learning and introducing to people from outside Indonesia. English is crucial as the medium to share this diversity to the people from outside Indonesia.

2. The fact that most of Indonesian who learn English tend to stay in Indonesia makes it more make sense for them to learn their own culture. This is mainly because of the financial matters that only few people in developing country, like Indonesia, can afford going, living or even studying abroad.

3. There are more and more international companies operate in Indonesia. Many international companies set up their business in Indonesia because of lower operational and living costs, such as the
labor cost, cost of the land or properties, and rich natural resources in Indonesia. These companies require local people who understand the local culture and can communicate with them in English.

4. In order to accommodate the national education curriculum, using both cultures as the cultural content is more suitable. As in the last three years, since 2004-2007, the Indonesian educational system has undergone three curriculum changes as part of the process to shift from grammar-translation method into communicative language teaching, which is very much needed in English education in Indonesia. In order to deal with this situation, the materials produced by Indonesian writers are more flexible to adjust to the changes according to the demands of English education in Indonesia.

Another suggestion that supports the process of applying both Indonesian and target-language’s cultures in English language teaching in Indonesia is to adopt an intercultural approach. Corbett (2003, p. 2) points out that “the ultimate goal of intercultural approach to language education is not so much “native speaker” competence but rather an “intercultural communicative competence” which includes the ability to understand the language and behavior of the target community, and explain it to members of the “home” community – and vice versa”. However, Corbett (2003, p. 2) reminds us that “language development and improvement” is as important as “intercultural understanding and mediation”. Based on this objective, the intercultural approach teaches students to see cultural differences not as barriers in intercultural communication. Through its materials, the intercultural approach also has its flexibility to move between the home and target cultures while maintaining attention and respect to both parties (Corbett, 2003). Moreover, intercultural approach puts emphasis on more explicit and explanatory teaching. Thus, teachers will provide explicit explanations on cultural differences, for example, in teaching greetings to students, teachers will provide different ways of greetings and explain to the students when and how to use them.

CONCLUSION

Three options have been given to answer the big question on which cultural content that teachers should adopt in teaching English due to the fact that English is no longer an exclusive property of a nation or certain group of people. Regarding the Indonesian context, the use of both home-culture and target-language’s culture as the cultural basis is seen as the best solu-
tion that fits Indonesia’s situation and educational system. The intercultural approach is also suggested as a tool to raise students’ awareness and respect toward cultural differences.

REFERENCES


