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*Teaching and Assessing L2 Learners
in the 21st Century*

**ENGLISH DEPARTMENT
FACULTY OF LETTERS AND CULTURE
IN COLLABORATION WITH
POST GRADUATE STUDY PROGRAM, UDAYANA UNIVERSITY**

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CULTURAL AND LINGUISTIC RELATIVITY:
THEIR IMPLICATIONS ON ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING

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Abstract

The main purpose of this paper is to discuss the importance of cultural contents in English Language Teaching (ELT) in Indonesian context. ELT in Indonesia aims at empowering students to develop competence in communication, to increase students' awareness about the importance of English in the globalization era, and to develop students' understanding related to the relevance between the target language and its culture. Based on the fact that every language is unique structurally and culturally, it is important to present cultural contents in ELT for some reasons. Furthermore, realizing the inseparable relationship between language and culture, it is crucial to present intercultural contents covering both local and target cultural contents in ELT activities to make students realize similarities and differences between L1 and L2 to raise their awareness that there are varied worlds around them to inculcate cross-cultural respect. The present paper also provides some tips which are helpful for developing cross cultural understanding (CCU).

Keywords: cultural and linguistic relativity, cultural contents, cross cultural understanding, English language teaching.

1. INTRODUCTION

Linguistic relativity or the Shapir –Whorf hypothesis is the idea that culture, through language, affects the way we think (Gumperz and Levinson, 1999:1). As a result, language, as a system of arbitrary vocal and visual symbol, has its own uniqueness in terms of structure and culture (Kadarisman, 2009:214). This concept implies that there are no languages which are alike. Meanwhile, English language teaching (ELT) in Indonesia aims at enabling students to develop competence in communication, to increase students' awareness about the importance of English in the globalization era, and to develop students' understanding related to the relevance between the target language and its culture (Irmawati, 2013:153). In addition, an emphasis on developing students' moral and ethical character is evident in the 2013 National Indonesian Curriculum (Welsh, 2014:233). The facts imply that ELT is not only a matter of acquiring English competencies in terms of its systems but also how the students behave accordingly when using English in a communication with others across different nations and cultures.

Based on the fact that every language is unique structurally and culturally, it is important to present cultural contents in ELT for at least three reasons. First, language is a part of culture, and culture is a part of language (Brown, 2001:133). Second, since language and culture are inseparable, ELT should be cultural content-oriented to make students able to use English correctly. Last but not least, understanding differences and similarities between two different cultures promotes students to be aware of cross-cultural understanding. As a result, the materials of English teaching-learning process should be able to facilitate students to understand the target language culture better, so they will be able to produce English utterances which are structurally and culturally accepted since according to Kadarisman (2009:205), in discussing the relationship between language and culture, most scholars in Teaching English as a Foreign

Language (TEFL) agree with the widely accepted view that language exists in culture and that cultural values express themselves, among other things, by means of language. Accordingly, a question to be answered is which cultural contents must be covered in ELT: local culture contents, target culture contents, or intercultural contents?

2. DIFFERENT LANGUAGES, DIFFERENT STRUCTURES AND CULTURES

The notion that each language has its own culture is probably best represented by the idea of Edwards (2003:176),who avows that the existence of different languages implies the existence of different cultures. In addition, the exact nature of the relationship between language and culture has fascinated, and continues to fascinate, people from a wide variety of backgrounds (Wardhaugh, 2006:221). It indicates that there are no two languages in the world which are the same. There may be some languages which are alike, but they are different. Furthermore, with regards to English Language Teaching (ELT) in Indonesia, the notion that every language is structurally and culturally different may be illustrated clearly by comparing and contrasting between English and Indonesian.

Structurally, Indonesian is different from English. Basically, there are many differences between English structure and Indonesian structure. One such difference deals with the forms of singular and plural nouns. For instance, Indonesian applies repetition or reduplication to show plural forms or without changing the form, but English has regular and irregular nouns to show singular and plural forms (see Table 1).

Table 1. A Comparison between Singular and Plural Forms in English andIndonesian

NO	Singular	Plural
1	I have a *pen*. Saya mempunyai sebuah *pena*.	I have two *pens*. Saya mempunyai dua buah *pena*.
2	She has a *box*. Dia mempunyai sebuah *kotak*.	She has three *boxes*. Dia mempunyai tiga *kotak*.
3	The *fish* is cute. *Ikan* itu menggemaskan.	The *fish* are cute. *Ikan – ikan* itu menggemaskan.
4	The *man* came. *Orang* itu datang.	The *men* came. *Orang-orang* itu datang.

Table 1 shows that English has regular and irregular plural nouns, and the plural of most English nouns is formed by adding final – s, such **pens** (No.1). In contrast, *Pena*(No 1)in Indonesian does not change from a singular form into a plural one. Also, final – esis added to plural nouns that end in –**sh**, - **ch**, - **s**, and **x**, such as **box – boxes** (No. 2), yet the word *kotak* does not change from a singular into a plural form. The addition of final –sand – es, or the plural of words that end consonant + **y** is spelled iesis called regular forms. Meanwhile, the same form of **fish** (No. 3) both for singular and plural noun and the change of **man** into **men** (No 4) are called irregular plural noun forms. On the contrary, the word **fish** (singular) is translated into *ikan*, and **fish** (plural) is translated into *ikan – ikan*, using reduplication in the Indonesian system.

The complexity of plural formation may result in grammatical errors made by Indonesian students. For instance, a sentence "My uncle has three childs" shows that there is an error of plural formation resulting from overgeneralization of adding– s for plural noun. The sentence should be "My uncle has three children" because the plural form of child is children. In this case, the error is caused by intralingual transfer since learners have just begun to acquire only insufficient parts of L2 system, and more intralingual transfer or overgeneralization within L2

commonly happens (Brown, 1987:178).

Regarding structural differences, Table 1 is a good thing to present to make students understand English structure better. In this respects Contrastive Analysis (CA) may take its important roles. CA basically is the analysis of L1 and L2 structures to find out their similarities and differences (Kadarisman, 2009:193), so learners will be able to master L2 much better. CA probably takes beneficial roles to overcome the problems as diagnostic and prognostic providers. Diagnostic deals with sources of errors, so teachers may be able to anticipate possible errors produced by learners. On the other hand, prognostic provides teachers' awareness to plan and construct materials and methods needed by students to achieve the target language rules. Somehow, errors are evidences that learning takes place (Darus, 2009).

On the other hand, culturally, English is also different from Indonesian. As language is a mirror of the culture (Duranti in Kadarisman, 2009:172), the way Americans behave towards an issue will be probably different from what Indonesians do. For example, when asking a question in a class, an American student probably raises his or her left hand or right hand. It implies that American people believe that there is no significant difference between using a left hand or a right hand in various situations. In contrast, Indonesian students always use their right hand when asking a question. It shows that Indonesian people believe that kanan (right) is the symbol of good (polite) things, and kiri (left) reflects bad (impolite) ones. So, in Indonesian culture there is an utterance (song lyric by Ari Wibowo -- an Indonesian singer) "Madu di tangan kananmu, racun di tangan kirimu" (Honey is in your right hand, and poison is in your left hand). Another example is that the term "golongan kanan and golongan kiri" to differentiate between a good party and a bad one is commonly used in some situation in Indonesian culture.

What is the implication? Indonesian people should use their right hand when offering something to another. In case they have to use their left hand, they have to say "Maaf – Permisi" (excuse me). Even an Indonesian left-handed child, for example, is considered a little bit odd and should be trained to use his/her right hand to write or hold something. In contrast, Americans or people of other English speaking countries do not differentiate between the importance of using left and right hands in community.

3.   INTERCULTURAL CONTENTS IN ELT

Providing similarities and differences between L1 and L2 related to culture is considered an important wisdom to be taken by English teachers. This activity assesses students how the two languages are culturally unique and different. In addition, related to cultural similarities and differences, basically, there are three different cultural contents in ELTactivities: local culture contents, target culture contents, and intercultural contents (Cahyono, 2013:xi). Furthermore, Welsh (2011:40) states that learning an L2 automatically results in intercultural understanding. In addition, Byran & Morgan (1994:39) mention that:

> *There exists today a widespread consensus concerning the justification of the demand that foreign language teaching should not just be limited to the mediation of competence in understanding and using other languages, but that, in addition or closely linked to this, foreign language teaching should include the mediation of knowledge about the culture, from which the language arises, and attitudes towards members of the culture.*

The following two examples figure out a failure in verbal communications between an Indonesian student with an English native speaker resulting a misunderstanding.

(2-1)   Example 1 (On a street somewhere in Indonesia).

Indonesian   : Hello, mister. Where are you going?

Native Speaker   : It's none of your business (annoying).

Indonesian   : ??? (confused)

The Indonesian basically tries to speak English, but he lacks of understanding the importance of applying an appropriate cultural content. As a result, there is a misunderstanding existing in the communication since he does not realize that asking 'where someone is going to' is considered very impolite in English speaking countries. In contrast, this kind of question commonly happens in Indonesian context.

(2-2)   Example 2 (At an airport somewhere in United States).

Native speaker   : What a beautiful necklace.

Indonesia   : Oh, it is very cheap.

Native speaker   : I don't care with the price (annoying).

Indonesian   : ??? (confused)

Example 2 describes the result of the failure in responding to an appreciation. In Indonesian context, an utterance "*Wah kalungmu sungguh indah*(What a beautiful necklace)" might be responded by saying "*wah ini murah kok* (It is very cheap)". Thus the Indonesian uses English with an Indonesia cultural convention which causes annoyance for the native speaker since the common acceptable response in English speaking countries might be 'thank you'.

Actually, a meaningful and successful communication can be carried out if there are mutual understandings between a speaker and a hearer by involving contexts of utterance (Chapman & Rutledge, 2009:86) even though they come from different nations or different cultures. It implies that it is of paramount importance to develop cross cultural understanding in a communication across nations or cultures.

To sum up, realizing the inseparable relationship between language and culture, it is crucial to present intercultural contents in which they cover both local and target cultural contents in ELT activitiesto make students realize similarities and differences between L1 and L2 to raise their awareness that there are varied worlds around them to inculcate cross-cultural respect (Edwards, 2003:188).In other words, intercultural contents are the substances of language learning in which similarities and differences between two different cultures should be presented in a balanced way.In addition, communicating across cultures is a difficult pursuit for many students because they need to apply the right values or norms of different cultures. Probably, a certain action is considered a normal convention in one particular culture, but it is possibly rejected in the other culture.

Meanwhile, regarding some differences and similarities between L1 and L2 cultural contents, the question arising is that how to familiarize intercultural contents to promote cross-cultural understanding (CCU) since CCU is a part of a successful interaction between a speaker and a listener coming from different countries or cultures. The following tips may be helpful for developing cross-cultural understandings as suggested by Welsh (2011:41-42):

3.1   Exploring Definitions of Culture

Culture is the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief, and behavior that depends upon man's capacity for learning and transmitting knowledge to succeeding generations (Webster, 1989:314). The definition simply refers to the notion that language has two functions: (a) integrating knowledge and belief as the basics of a culture and (b) transforming a specific

culture from one generation to the next ones (Kadarisman, 2009:23). However, according to Welsh (2014:239, if teachers promote a traditional notion of culture, then students are likely to view the world as a place with static cultural borders that reinforce a sense of 'us' and 'them' as being separate and constantly in opposition to each other. Thus providing the perspectives of culture in English Language Teaching activities, accordingly, will help students understand the existence and importance of culture in language teaching. Students will understand better that English language classroom should not only discuss utterances but also the dimension of culture – how culture influences language and how language conveys culture. This perspective will lead students to learn sociolinguistics. One such example is that students should understand why people living in a certain area speak faster than those living in other parts of the world or why they have different dialects and varieties, and such variation is a basic fact of linguistic style (Wardhaugh, 2006:25). Understanding this fact, students will be able to give an appropriate respect to others who have different ways of speaking in a communication across different cultures.

2.1 DiscussingHow Language Reflects Micro Culture

A discussion on how to use language in a particular situation will be beneficial to help students to realize that even though they use a particular language they need to use the language properly in a specific situation. They have to understand that the way they speak with their friends is quite different from the situation when they have to speak to their headmaster. In this respect, they need to have adequate sociolinguistic competence.

The following examples reflect how to use formal and non-formal communications in both English and Indonesian contexts. In English context, for instance, an utterance "Sorry, I've to leave ye. See ya…" is surely conducted by two close friends or two persons having a very close relationship. In this case they have a non-formal dialogue. In contrast, the utterance is considered very rude if it spoken by a student to his headmaster. In this respect, the student has to apply a formal communication by saying "I am sorry, Sir. I have to go now. See you again, Mr. Edwards."

In Indonesia context, an expression of "when did you come?" is translated into *"Kapan kamu datang?"* in an acceptable non-formal communication conducted by two close friends. Yet, the utterance is not appropriate if it is addressed to the headmaster, so the student will then say *"Maaf, kapan Bapak datang?"*. It shows that someone needs to understand to whom he or she is talking, and he or she adjusts the appropriate modes of communication in specific contexts. The two examples prove that in communities, a good speaker must be able to understand kinds of communication settings he or she is facing.

3.2 ExploringCross-Cultural Similarities and Differences

Students need to know that there must be some differences and similarities between their own culture and the target culture. Thus teachers should provide intercultural contents as the materials of language teaching. The teachers, for instance, may provide similar contents such as *"Sukuran"* which represents Indonesian cultural contents and "Thanks Giving Party" which is originally taken from English/American culture. The teachers guide the students to find differences and similarities between the two events. Also, it is important to discuss moral values in the events, so the students understand that even though the events are different, but in some cases they are similar – both convey some good messages. Here nonverbal languages/behaviors across cultures include kinesics (facial expressions, eye contact, gestures, touch and posture and movements) and proxemics (the use of space, such as the distance people sit or stand)

should be discussed (Gebhard, 2000:119). Videos or films are possibly appropriate sources to be discussed in a classroom to identify some specific features of a culture both for verbal and non-verbal language.

3.3   PromotingTolerance of Differences

After knowing similarities and differences between the two different cultures, the students should be motivated that they need to understand and tolerate differences between the two cultures. In this respect, the ability and willingness to tolerate differences will lead them to build their cross-cultural understanding. For example, after discussing similarities and differences between "*Sukuran*" and "Thanks Giving Party" and realizing that both are different in processions but convey similar messages, they never judge which one is much better. Instead, they are aware that they live in the world where similarities and differences are easily and normally found. Welsh (2014:241) suggests that if students are to truly become global citizens and agents of transformational change for a better world, they will require an understanding of other cultures but more importantly they will also need to be able to engage constructively in inter-cultural spaces. In other words, students need to understand how they behave accordingly in a heterogeneous society consisting of people having different cultures.

4.   CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS ON ELT

Since every language is structurally and culturally unique, it is logically significant to discuss similarities and differences between Indonesian and English in English Language Teaching (ELT) settings. Regarding the uniqueness of structure, Contrastive Analysis (CA) should be a part of ELT to make students aware of the similarities and differences between structures of L1 and L2 because structurally English is different from Indonesian. Applying CA helps teachers a lot to predict the difficulties students may encounter.

In addition, as language and culture are intertwined and inseparable, it is strongly suggested that teachers be aware of the importance of presenting intercultural contents in ELT activities. The intercultural- based activities might behopefully effective to make students understand how to use English better both for verbal and non-verbal communications. The positive attitudes of the students towards similarities and differences between two different cultures also promote them to have cross-cultural understanding. In this case, the competence to have cross-cultural awareness contributes to increase students' tolerance towards differences between the two cultures.

The most significant implication of this paper is that the needs to provide the students with sufficient opportunities to use English language well by having intercultural contents with them. The teachers are responsible for familiarizing intercultural contents in English teaching and learning process in order to promote cross-cultural understanding. On the other hand, the students should be more active to learn not only the English language but also the culture where the language is spoken and widely used by its native speakers. Finally, it is absolutely suggested that intercultural contents take greater exposures in ELT since language and culture are two inseparable substances.

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