Cultural Elements in English Learning: English Teachers' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated Indonesian English teachers' perspectives on cultural elements in English learning. 12 English teachers who had various teaching experiences were engaged as the participants of this study. They were selected to be the participants using purposive sampling technique. The data revealed that Indonesian English teachers rested upon a modernist paradigm that was anchored in the native-speakerism ideology. Philosophically and practically, they had not yet integrated the aspects of multiculturality and interculturality that are intrinsically the integral parts of English teaching and learning. The present study recommends that English teaching and learning in Indonesia be conceptualized on the basis of intercultural language teaching and learning which sets a goal leading student to manage to communicate using English with all people in the world with their diverse cultures. Further studies are expected to develop an intercultural English learning model that aligns with the anthropological nature of Indonesian students.

Keywords: Culture; English; English learning in Indonesia

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century marked the vast technological development which has spread throughout the globe, including Indonesia. Consequently, the people of Indonesia are demanded to possess the ability to be fluent in English, therefore making it easier for them to communicate with other people from different cultural backgrounds (Hua, 2013; Rauschert & Byram, 2017). Using only internet access, communication between people with various cultural differences across the world can be accomplished (Byram and Wenger, 2018). The circumstances demand the researchers studying English as a foreign language to create a concept of more effective, precise learning process, thus allowing the learners to be able to master the competence of intercultural communication (Byram and Parmenter, 2012).

Aside from the rapid technological development, the circumstances surrounding the English learners in Indonesia also revealed that the competence of intercultural communication is needed. Indonesia is a multicultural state (Sukyadi, 2015). Even when

communicating in Indonesian, the people are surrounded by contexts of intercultural communication, even more in communicating in English (Morganna, Sumardi, and Tarjana, 2018, 2020). Multiculturality among Indonesian people needs the competence of intercultural communication. Thereby, in English learning context it is ideal if the learners are taught to master the competence of intercultural communication so that they will be able to fluently communicate in English with native speakers as well as other non-native English speakers. The learners are also expected to be able to understand and accept the cultural differences among their peers, in order to be capable of handling various cultural stereotypes that exist in international communication environment.

In the context of English language learning, the cultural paradigm changes shifts if it is examined from trends before the 21st century with continuing trends. Based on the perspective of the literature summarized by Kramsch (2013), culture is seen from a modernist and postmodernist point of view. The modernist paradigm categorizes culture from a humanistic and pragmatic point of view. In a humanistic point of view, culture is associated with art and literature, whereas in a pragmatic point of view, culture is associated with the lifestyle of native speakers (for example, Americans and Britons). So, before the 21st century, culture in English, literature and Western lifestyle.

Upon entering the 21st to this day, the postmodernist paradigm has become popular and covered cultural elements in English learning. The paradigm views culture as a discourse and identity (C. Kramsch, 2009). As a discourse, culture is defined as social semiotic that is constantly developed by two people while communicating. The culture is not associated with western's culture and lifestyle, but as a discourse that accommodates a communication process that is taking place at the moment. Furthermore, as an identity, culture is associated with identity held by every individual who communicates in English, in which although they understand and are aware of their interlocutor's culture when communicating with each other, they still uphold themselves and their culture. The postmodernist paradigm is very suitable to be maintained in English learning in Indonesia.

Based on the above review, technological developments, the multicultural conditions of the Indonesian population, and the cultural paradigm shift in learning English as a foreign language demanded that English teachers in Indonesia implement intercultural English learning. Learning like this can be applied ideally if English teachers already understand and hold wise perspectives related to cultural elements in learning English so that the learning path of English does not position students as actors who replicate western culture, but rather as international language speakers who uphold identity nation and be ready and able to communicate with all the world's population who come from different cultures. The teacher's perspective on the elements of culture in this case is very important. Thus, this study was conducted to investigate the perspectives of English language teachers in Indonesia regarding cultural elements in learning English.

LITERATURE REVIEW

1. Definition of Culture

Culture is a patterned behavior that describes the way of life of a community group (Chastain, 1988; Peck, 1998). Culture is also associated with a person's social behavior that is embedded and develops from the family environment to the wider community environment (Trivonovitch, 1980). Culture always develops in line with the development of interaction between one individual and another (Kramsch, 1993, 2009). Beyond the behavioral aspects, the element of culture is also very thick in the context of communication where culture includes interactive abilities and social knowledge that embody a communication process (McCarthy & Carter, 1994). The role of culture in communication is as strong as the role of language, so the use of language will never be separated from culture. If language has a pattern or often known as grammar, culture also has patterns such as social and political structures and the structure of one's social behavior (Holliday, 2013). Furthermore, a broader definition of culture is described by Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) that culture is a lifestyle, communication framework, and interaction framework within which there are several elements such as attitudes, values, beliefs, behavior, lifestyle, habits, history and social knowledge.

2. The relationship between culture and language

In order to more easily understand the relationship between culture and language, it helps us examine the definition of language first. The most comprehensive definition of language explains that language is a social semiotic that functions as a mode to express, construct, and interpret meaning (Halliday, 1978, 2009; Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino, and Kohler, 2003; Liddicoat and Scarino, 2013). In communication, the process of expressing, constructing, and interpreting definite meaning runs under the umbrella of culture with all elements of culture such as perspectives, lifestyles, social knowledge, habits, and other cultural elements (Wardhaugh, 2006). The premise just now implicitly explains that culture influences the interaction process mediated by medium in the form of language (Assemi, Saleh, Asayeshh, and Janfaza, 2012; Elmes, 2013). Simply stated, culture is a communication framework.

3. Culture in English learning

Culture has been inseparable aspect in English learning ever since the emergence of communicative language teaching method. However, culture in the concept of this communicative method is oriented to western lifestyles, so the culture taught to students is western culture and students are required to absorb totally the lifestyles of western people in interacting (Kramsch, 2013). The communication competencies that are embedded in this communicative English learning method are western communication competencies (Hymes, 1972). Unfortunately, Western communication competencies are not suitable for application in learning English especially for students who are speakers of English as a foreign language. Fully absorbing western culture will negatively impact a

student's native culture. For example, Indonesian students, they will sacrifice the culture perspective of the Indonesian people when communicating in English by adopting western competencies because they have to portray themselves like westerners communicate.

Byram, in his research and books published in 1986, 1997, and 2002 proposed that English learning in context of English as a second language and foreign language conducted by training students to practice intercultural communication. Thus, the practice of English communication synchronize communication between two people who have different cultures. According to Crozet and Liddicoat (1997, 1999); FitzGerald (1999); and Kramsch (1993), for the most minimal level, at least the culture taught is the culture that students have and the culture that is behind English itself. Next Allen (2004) recommends that students be taught communication strategies that help them in the process of mutually investigating the culture of interlocutors in communication practices. Combining various cultures in learning English is very beneficial because both teachers and students can gain mutual learning experience in dealing with cultural differences in communication.

4. Ideal Time to Teach Culture in learning English

Considering that culture has always been a communication framework, culture is ideally taught from the outset of students learning English. The old perspective asserts that culture should be taught if students already have linguistic competencies such as mastery of vocabulary, grammar, and pronunciation, but Liddicoat et al. (2003) precisely stressed that culture was ideally taught from the beginning because even small elements of the culture contained culture. Many premises are scientifically supportive for culture to be taught from the very beginning of students learning English. These premises have several strong reasons that communication using foreign languages will always be in a circle of interculturality (Kramsch, 1993). Each internal and external component of language represents culture so English learning must be followed by culture learning from the start (Liddicoat and Scarino, 2013). Based on the developed paradigm that the target of learning English as a foreign language is emphasizing mastery of intercultural competencies, then culture must be taught from the start (Byram et al. 2002, 2012, 2014, 2018). Various premises or theories above support that culture is taught early on to students of English as a foreign language.

5. The way to teach culture in learning English

The teaching of culture language in learning English must be in line with the function of the English language. English is the world's lingua franca language which is used by all the world's population who come from various different cultures (Fang, 2017; Kusumaningputri and Widodo, 2018; Mauranen, 2018). The ideal image of communication brought into the English class is a portrait of communication that takes place between people who have different cultural backgrounds (Dervin, Gajardo, and Lavanchy, 2011). This condition is called interculturality.

The essence of interculturality is then developed in a learning situation where students are not only bribed with a variety of knowledge related to cultural differences, but also trained to master intercultural communication competencies so that they can carry out a process of investigating cultural differences during the communication process. Thus, students will be trained to deal with perspective conflicts whose appearance cannot be avoided in terms of intercultural communication. Related to the competence of intercultural communication, Byram et al. (2002) recommend that students be taught five things, namely attitudes to face cultural differences, knowledge related to the culture of the interlocutor, the ability to compare, interpret, and relate cultural differences, the ability to investigate the culture of the interlocutor during communication, and critical awareness of the culture that students have. The role of the English teacher is automatically shifted from the old perspective that associates the teacher as a source of knowledge into a teacher as a facilitator where the teacher is a cultural learner who also facilitates intercultural learning and is also involved as an intercultural learner in the English class. In implementing classroom learning, Liddicoat and Scarino (2013) recommend that teachers apply five principles, namely active construction, making connections, interaction, reflection, and responsibility. Detailed explanation can be seen in the book Liddicoat and Scarino with the title intercultural language teaching and learning, published in 2013.

This research was conducted using qualitative methods in order to provide detailed data that illustrates the perspectives of English language teachers in Indonesia on the elements of culture in learning English. 20 teachers from different schools with sufficient teaching experience were involved as participants. Purposive techniques are used to select participants who meet the criteria and are willing to be involved in research. Some teachers teach English in public schools on the island of Java, and some teach in public schools on the island of Sumatra.

Data collection techniques using interviews conducted using WhatsApp video calls and open questionnaires as a strategy to verify the credibility of the data. Interview data and questionnaires were then analyzed using an interactive analysis model recommended by Miles, Huberman, and Saldana (2014). This model has four interrelated components, namely data collection, data compaction, data presentation, and drawing conclusions. As reviewed, data collection was carried out using interview techniques and the distribution of open questionnaires. Compaction of data is done by theming data obtained from interviews and questionnaires, and linking each data to achieve credibility and data consistency. Presentation of the data is done by presenting interview transcript footage selected in accordance with the theme to represent the other raw data. The interview transcript is then interpreted and discussed scientifically. The data and discussion are then concluded.

FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Data obtained from interviews and open questionnaires indicate that the perspectives of all participants regarding the elements of culture in learning English are

based on the modernist paradigm. They view that ideally the cultural element that is integrated and taught is Western culture and the teaching of culture itself is not always the top priority because linguistic competence is a more important aspect. However, some participants agreed that western culture was taught from the beginning. The data presentation below illustrates the condition of the results of the interviews and open questionnaires which are then followed by researchers' interpretation and scientific discussion. To be effective, the presentation of interview data and open questionnaires was deliberately chosen to represent other similar data.

All participants gave a portrait that learning English should ideally be carried out using communicative language teaching methods that lead students to absorb fully Western communication competencies and Western culture. For example, based on interview data, participant 3 said:

When teaching, I expect my students to imitate American or British linguistic competencies. They must master the pronunciation like Westerners when speaking English (Participant 3).

Targeting students to master western competencies is a concept theorized by Hymes (1972). This concept is known as communicative competence. However, Byram et al. (2002) have criticized this concept because according to him there has never been scientific evidence that shows that western competencies can be totally mastered by speakers of English as a second language or as a foreign language. This concept is also incompatible with the fact that English speakers themselves are not only Americans, British or Australians, but the entire world population. They use English as an international language along with the social functions prevailing in their respective countries. The social function can be in the form of English as the first, second, and foreign language (Crystal, 2008; Kachru, 1990).

The concept of western communication competence is also embedded in the perspective of the English teacher in terms of learning evaluation. For example, based on open questionnaire data, participant 5 said:

When evaluating students' English abilities, I use several aspects of native speaker competencies which include linguistic, sociolinguistic competencies, discourse, and communication strategies. The competence of native speakers covering these four components is, in my opinion, the standard (Participant 5).

The above data statement clearly shows that the culture of native speakers is the main umbrella that covers English communication that students must master. Student's innate culture does not have the space to become a communication framework. Thus, if a student uses the mother tongue dialect in English, then the student is considered wrong. Meanwhile, dialect is a natural cultural element that is difficult to change. For Indonesians, with a very multicultural condition of the population, when speaking Indonesian, they use their own regional dialect, especially when they speak English (Morganna et al., 2020).

Furthermore, most participants agreed that Americans, British or Australians were the most ideal models in learning English. For example, based on interview data, participant 8 said:

Students must imitate style and even native dialects. For example, British, American, or maybe Australian. The type of model is an authentic model (Participant 8).

The alignment of one class of models, which are believed to be authentic, such as this will increasingly prove that the assumptions and perspectives that teachers hold are native-speakerism assumptions that fully absorb western culture. In his criticism, Byram et al. (2002) jokingly said that English teachers are not actually ambassadors of culture and ambassadors of foreign languages, but rather teachers who facilitate students to be able to communicate on an international level with anyone from different cultures.

The investigation continued on the issue of how the teaching of English was carried her in relation to the elements of culture. Some teachers point out that teaching culture is done when time conditions allow. For example, based on interview data, participant 12 said:

When teaching, I focus on teaching basic abilities, namely listening, speaking, and writing. If there are still time, then I continue to introduce the essence of the culture of native speakers related to the material (Participant 12).

The transcript above visualizes that culture is not the first priority and will be taught if there is a time gap that allows it. Furthermore, consistent with the modernist paradigm, the culture taught is western culture. There is no gap for the teaching of indigenous culture that students have. Several other participants also described that culture was taught from the beginning. This point is seen from one of the following sample questionnaire answers given by participant 11.

In my opinion, when I teach I have integrated culture. For example, when I teach the topic of buying and selling in English conversation, I will always introduce the names of objects that are bought and sold in the United States or in the United Kingdom, and introduce the currencies that applied there (Participant 11).

The questionnaire data above visualizes that culture was taught from the beginning, and the culture taught was western culture as identified from the names of objects that were sold and bought in America or in the United Kingdom and from the currencies that were introduced.

If it is examined more thoroughly, it is actually very unfortunate that all participants in this study uphold the modernist understanding. The modernist paradigm is a mono-cultural paradigm or in Indonesian it can be defined as a paradigm that upholds a culture in a system of interactions (Kramsch, 1993, 1995). Byram et al. (2002) call this paradigm as essentialist paradigm. This paradigm visualizes the form of communication between two people who are in the same culture community and come from the same culture community. For example, people who were born and come from the city of Solo who communicate with other Solo people, then the culture system that covers their communication is a modernist system.

However, if the communication context is clashed in using English communication the social function at the national level in Indonesia is as a foreign language (Lauder, 2008), and the social function at the international level is as the world lingua franca language (Fang, 2017; Jenkins , 2000, 2006; Kirkpatrick, 2018; Liu and Fang, 2017; Liu, 2019; Mauranen, 2018; Seidlhofer, 2001; and Sung, 2017a, 2017b), then the cultural status that covers the communication is no longer mono-cultural. A small example, when Indonesians communicate with Japanese people, the cultural framework that covers their communication is an encounter between Indonesian culture and Japanese culture. In more detail, a culture which includes perspective, manner of behavior, and way of thinking that represents Indonesians and Japanese will meet. Kramsch (2009) simplifies cultures encounter in this context of international communication as the third culture.

Considering the highly multicultural anthropological conditions of Indonesians (Hamied, 2012; Morganna et al., 2018, 2020; Sukyadi, 2015), the modernist paradigm is also not suitable for application. Thus, it can be synthesized that the status of English as a world lingua franca, the status of English as a foreign language, and the status of multicultural Indonesian students will not be suitable if English is taught with the modernist paradigm. Researchers recommend that English education in Indonesia start shifting old concepts to new concepts, namely teaching students to have intercultural communication competencies. With the aim of learning like this, the learning process will integrate various cultural differences among the international population including integrating the culture of the Indonesian population as a representation of national identity. Intercultural English learning can be applied with several learning principles as recommended by Liddicoat and Scarino (2013), namely active construction, making connection, interaction, reflection, and responsibility. It is time for English education in Indonesia to raise national identity and respect cultural differences. The essence of education like this can be felt when learning English has implemented intercultural learning.

CONCLUSION

This study revealed information that all participants held a modernist perspective that views culture element based on the culture of native speakers, namely westerners. In teaching practice, some of them teach western culture when time conditions allow, and some teach it from the beginning of learning. The modernist paradigm held by the participants is based on the opposite of the status of English as the world's lingua franca language and as a foreign language in the Indonesian context. The modernist paradigm also contradicts with the anthropological conditions of Indonesia, which population is multicultural. This study recommends that English education in Indonesia be carried out based on the principles of intercultural language learning so that students will be able to develop awareness of cultural differences and be able to communicate using English with all the world's population who are actually derived from different cultures.

This research is only limited by issues related to cultural elements in learning English. Future studies are expected to try to develop intercultural English learning models that are appropriate to the anthropological context of Indonesian students.

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