

The Importance of Incorporating the Target Culture in English Language Teaching

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It is a commonly held belief that language and culture is closely related. Language used in certain society reflects the values shared by the people in that society. Culture is therefore a key component in language teaching. When people learn a foreign language, they will inevitably learn the culture of the target language. Learning a language without its culture is said to be turning people into a “fluent fool”, or someone who speaks a foreign language well but does not understand the social or philosophical content of the language (Bennet, 1993). This makes it clear that teaching a foreign language means incorporating the target cultural knowledge as well.

The questions are, to what extent do English teachers know about the target culture, and do they consider incorporating target culture in ELT necessary?. A simple survey was conducted to get an initial picture of English teachers’ perception of culture in ELT. A questionnaire was distributed to Elementary English teachers and surprisingly the survey found that most of the English teacher do not have a clear picture of what culture is, and some even do not consider incorporating the target culture in ELT necessary.

Considering the result of the survey above, this paper recommends that English teachers should be made aware of the importance of integrating cultural aspects in their teaching as well as the strategies to implement it in the classroom. They will, however be reminded that despite integrating the target culture in ELT, the local-culture should not be neglected, so as to make students proud of their own culture yet aware of the cultural differences that exist between their home and target culture.

Key words: culture, target culture, home culture, English language teaching.

Introduction

In this current age of globalization, communication among people of different language and culture is becoming a common phenomenon. The shrinking world has forced people to interact with people from other part of the world if they are to survive. This has led to the increasing demand of an international language as a means of communication among those people. English has, due to its global spread, been one of the prominent international languages and has been taught as a foreign or second language all over the world.

When two people of different language communicate, intercultural communication occurs because they may not have the same perception of the world around them. They will bring with them their background values, expectations, and perception which are manifested in the way they communicate. This explains that communication does not occur at linguistic levels only, but involves the socio-cultural aspects as well, as stated in the following quotation:

Culture and communication are inseparable because culture not only dictates who talks to whom, about what, and how the communication proceeds, it also helps to determine how people encode messages, the meanings they have for messages, and the conditions and circumstances under which various messages may or may not be sent, noticed, or interpreted... Culture...is the foundation of communication. (Samovar, Porter, & Jain, 1981, cited in Abisamra, 2009)

From the statement above, it is undeniable that language, culture and communication are closely connected. Learning a foreign language means learning the culture as well. English language teaching should, therefore, include the teaching of the culture of English speaking people, if the communicative competence is to be achieved. Learning a language cannot be separated from its contextual use, as Seelye (1993:22) puts it “The study of language cannot be divorced from the study of culture, and vice versa”. Barrow

(2000) adds that while teaching English we inevitably transmit particular values and beliefs.

In line with that, Brown (1994) says that “a language is part of a culture and culture is part of language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture.” Fluency in a foreign language does not guarantee a successful communication in the language if the person lacks of the cultural knowledge. Thus, learning a foreign language without learning its culture is a perfect way of turning someone into “a fluent fool”, that is someone who speaks a foreign a foreign language well but does not understand the social or philosophical content of that language (Bennet, 1993). This explains why sometimes cross-cultural communication can create misunderstandings.

Although culture is a commonly used term, people often find it difficult to define. The first and most basic definition of culture frequently refers to a geographic location (Peterson, 2004). Others prefer to define culture simply as the way of life of a group of people. This oversimplification definition disregards language as one important component of culture. If we see Peterson’s (2004) definition, which is “the totality of socially transmitted behavior patterns, arts, beliefs, institutions and all other products of human work and thought”, it is obvious that culture incorporates multiple elements.

Very often what people see as culture is only the surface of the culture. Comparing culture with an iceberg, the part people can observe of others’ culture is usually the tip of the iceberg, which include the language, architecture, food, population, music, clothing, art and literature, peace of life, emotional display, gestures, leisure activities, eye contact and sports (Peterson, 2004). Below, there are still some hidden aspects like opinions, viewpoints, attitudes, philosophies, values, beliefs, assumptions, all of which cannot be perceived with our senses, but they are the foundation for what people see at the top.

A great deal of mainstream values of English speaking people, most of whom belong to western culture, contradict those of non English speaking people, especially

Asians. One example is the tendency of formality in Asian that is in contrast to the informality in western culture. Then, if in American boss can say “Just call me Bob!” to his employees, in Indonesia it is almost unlikely to happen between people of different age and status. Without this kind of knowledge, people might use the wrong addressing system when speaking in another language. Students will not understand this concept if they are taught linguistic elements only. That is why, language teaching should be accompanied with culture teaching, no matter how small the proportion is.

Incorporating Target Culture in English Language Teaching

Language teachers in this global age should realize that they are responsible for helping students to communicate cross-culturally. As cultural beings living in a multicultural world, we need education that helps students acquire intercultural communication skill which is now a necessity for everyone (Selyee, 1993).

Incorporating culture into language teaching is obviously important, however, this may not be acknowledged by everyone taking part in this field. The inclusion of culture in the foreign language curriculum has gained in popularity and respectability despite those who either ignore the concept or deny its validity (Valdes, 1990 in Harrison, 1990). According to Reid (1995, cited in Onalan, 2005), “only one third of [language teaching programs] offer a course in culture”. The reason has been that language teachers are more interested in practical aspects of communication. Even if they are aware of the importance, there is still problem regarding how to incorporate culture in the language classroom. As stated by Byram & Kramsch (2008) that while language teachers agree with the idea of teaching language as culture, they find it difficult, if not impossible, to implement.

There is also debate on which culture that should be used in ELT, whether it is the home culture, target culture, or both. Those in favor of this view consider the use of home culture can facilitate learners apply their background knowledge in reading comprehension, express their feelings and ideas when writing essays, and overcome the problem of students having to write in a genre that is absent from their culture (Ariffin,

2009). However, the use of students' home culture also presents problems, such as the unavailability of books featuring the home culture and that it does not help to prepare EFL students to travel and live in target language country.

On the other hand, the use of target culture is believed to be able to solve the problem teachers face when using home-language culture. Robinson(1985, cited in Ariffin, 2009) suggests the use of reading materials emphasizing the target language culture to help students view the cultural differences. Another reason is that doing this way can create a sense of awareness for students when they write their paper. For example. by knowing the English writing style they will not be accused of plagiarism, because students from certain culture might think that it is alright to quote others' opinion without citing the source. Besides, knowing the writing style will make them write as it is expected by English speaking people. As Kaplan points out, there is a tendency of difference in thinking style (linear v.s circular) which is reflected in the writing style of English people which tend to be direct compared to Asian style which tends to be indirect (beating around the bush).

One of the problems resulting from the use of the target culture in ELT is the fear that the students will be influenced by the target culture and lose their own identity since this may be categorized as linguistic imperialism. Some authors have suggested to use both home language and target language culture to deal with the limitations of exclusively using one of the cultures. This is, according to Ariffin (2009), excellent because students are encouraged to discover similarities between their culture and the target language culture, which could bring about common understanding and tolerance.

The importance of incorporating culture in language teaching has been addressed by international and national foreign language associations, such as TESOL that has stipulated the 3rd goal in ESL Standards for Pre-K-12 Students "to use English in socially and culturally appropriate ways. ACTFL (American Council of teachers of Foreign Languages also determines the standards based on "knowing how, when and why to say what to whom." (Onalan, 2005). In China's English Curriculum Standard, culture awareness is also one of the integrated language capabilities.

Indeed, implementing culture-based instruction is not as easy as it sounds. Seelye (1993:30) suggests that teachers help the students develop interest in *who* in the target

culture did *what*, *where* and *when*, and *why*. Further, students can be assisted to evaluate some aspects about the culture and to find out more about it.

Some other experts have proposed several ways of incorporating the target culture in English language teaching which can be summarized below:

1. Providing more authentic materials involving target cultural and social elements
2. Giving lectures or having discussion on culturally-related linguistic aspects
3. Using pictures, maps, realia, posters, etc. to help students develop a mental image
4. Comparing and contrasting home and target cultures
5. Role plays, where students can learn the difference of attitudes/values of different characters associated with the culture
6. Design a project where students can have an exchange with people from different culture

There are of course abundant sources of information on techniques for incorporating culture in ELT which teachers can modify depending on the context they are teaching.

English language Teaching in Indonesia

In Indonesia, English is formally taught since Elementary schools. This requires English teachers who are competent in teaching English to young learners. Considering the importance of incorporating the cultural aspects in English language teaching, the most important prerequisite is, therefore, for language teachers to make them familiar with the culture of the language they are teaching (Turkan, 2009).

One of the problems of English language teaching at Elementary School in Indonesia is that sometimes the English teachers are not those qualified to teach the subject. Some of them are not graduated from English department. Possibly there is a perception that English in Elementary Schools is still in the level of introduction covering simple materials so everyone who knows a little bit about English is considered capable of teaching English to Elementary School students. Besides, the lack of competent resources available may also be another reason. This can actually cause problem since

teaching English at lower level is not necessarily easier than teaching it at higher levels. For example, teachers' incorrect pronunciation might cause students to fossilize the error. In addition, teachers' lack of target cultural knowledge may result in inappropriate use of English and this will be transferred to the students who will bring the error to the later stage.

English teachers in Indonesia have more challenging and demanding tasks due to its position as a foreign language, which means that students have less chance of exposure to the use of the language in a real situation. Despite the important position of English in Indonesia, it is not the language used in daily communication. Students are not familiar with the way English is used appropriately by the users, except from books, movies, or from their teachers as the language models. Moreover, the uneven condition in Indonesian schools presents another problem. Some schools in big cities have been internationally standard schools with the inclusion of English as the language of instruction, meanwhile many others are left behind and isolated in villages and remote areas.

Even though the objectives of English language teaching is to enable students to communicate using English, in practice the teaching does not reflect this view. Teachers mostly focus on teaching the linguistic aspects only, such as the accuracy of grammar and structure. This is made worse with the grammar-oriented exercises and exams. As a result, students might have good score at English exam but are unable to speak a word.

When students are forced to communicate in English, sometimes they use inappropriate expressions. An example of students' incorrect use of language is when they say "If I'm not wrong..." which is intended to mean "If I'm not mistaken...". This problem doesn't result from the lack of vocabulary or grammatical knowledge, because this sentence is grammatically correct. However, the student does not know the correct expression used in the target culture. Teachers should be concerned with this case because there is a tendency that students transfer the expression used in their home culture into the target language, which is not always appropriate.

This condition needs changing since the trend has been achieving intercultural communicative competence as the objectives of a foreign language learning. Thus, the teaching of English in Indonesia should also consider this aspect, following Muir's

(2007) view that teaching and learning about target cultures cannot realistically be separated.

The Survey

1. Problems

This study is aimed at investigating English teachers' perception about culture, their perceptions on the role of target culture in ELT and their opinions on the importance of incorporating target culture in ELT. Specifically, it is directed to answer three research questions: (a) to what extent do English teachers know about the target culture, and (b) how do they perceive the role of target culture in ELT; and (c) do they consider incorporating target language culture in ELT necessary?

2. Participants

The participants of this study were 30 elementary English teachers who have taken Cross-Cultural Understanding subject in English Department UIN. They were selected purposively based on the assumptions that they have already had linguistic competence and awareness of the target culture (socio-cultural competence). By both competences, they were expected to be able to teach not only the language but also the target culture to their students. Here, English subjects have been introduced in the elementary level.

3. Data Collection and Analysis

In this study, simple survey was conducted to get the initial picture of teachers' knowledge, perceptions, and opinions about the target culture in response to ELT. Since the basic purposes of a survey are to describe, explain, and explore (McMilan & Schumacher 1989), specific information about teachers' knowledge, perceptions, and opinions about the target culture can be obtained. To elicit as accurate information as possible, questionnaires were considered the main survey instrument. They were designed mostly to take out three types of information: teachers' perception on culture, teachers' perception on the role of target culture in ELT, and whether they consider incorporating target language culture in ELT necessary. In this study, the questionnaires were constructed in respondents' first language, Indonesian, to make them more

comfortable in expressing their ideas or opinions towards the questions of the questionnaires.

Since the questionnaires were in forms of open-ended questions, analyses were carried out qualitatively (1st, 4th questions). However, in the items (2nd, 3rd, and 5th questions) that required the teachers to choose only one option, Yes/No, analyses were conducted by frequency counts of the items. By so doing, the rates of markings were simply counted. Since these items also required some more exploration with regard to Yes and/or No responses, the percentages of how many times each reason was marked were also counted.

Findings

1. Perception about culture

Perception about culture was the first problem that this research investigated. The results of the questionnaires particularly from the 1st item showed that there were various perceptions about culture. The most stated definition of culture was that it was related to customs and traditions (43,5%). Culture viewed as ideas, will, and work (30,5%) placed the second most stated definition. However, only 6,6% counted language and ethnic or national identity as parts of culture. The least stated definition was occupied by arts and ancestors' heritage, respectively 4,3%. Tabel 1 showed the teachers' definitions of culture.

Alternatives	N	%
Customs, traditions	20	43,5
Ethnic or national identity	3	6,6
Arts	2	4,3
Language	3	6,6
Ideas, will, work	14	30,4
Ancestors' heritage	2	4,3
Other	2	4,3

Total	46	100
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Tabel 1 Teachers' definitions of culture

2. Perception about the role of target culture in ELT

The perception of teachers about the role of target culture in ELT was uncovered from teachers' responses to the 2nd item: whether or not English teachers should be acquainted with the target culture. From 30 participants, 90% of them said "yes" which means that they agreed English teachers should know the target culture. Reasons why they said so were mostly because the English teaching-learning process could run more smoothly (48,2%) by teaching the target culture. Besides, the students can understand English better (29,6%). Other reasons were English language and culture could not be separated (14,8%) and it is complicated to incorporate other cultures in language teaching (7,4%)

However, only 10% of the participants said "no". Most of the teachers thought that English subject in elementary level did not focus on material about the target culture but vocabulary building (40%). Another reason was teachers' lacks of knowledge about the target culture (50%). In addition, the teachers considered differences between home and target culture are difficult to accept. Table 2 describes teachers' opinion on the role of target culture in language teaching and the reasons why they said so.

Responses	n	%	Reasons	n	%
Yes	27	90	English language and culture cannot be separated	4	14,8
			Students understand English better	8	29,6
			Language teaching-learning run more smoothly	13	48,2
			It is complicated to incorporate another culture	2	7,4
			Sub-total	27	100
No	3	10	English taught in elementary school does not focus on culture	4	40
			Teachers have lacks of knowledge	5	50

			Differences between target and home culture are difficult to accept	1	10
			Sub-total	10	100
Total	30	100			

Table 2 Teachers' responses to the role of target culture in ELT

3. The incorporation of target culture in language teaching

The data on whether or not incorporating target culture in language teaching necessary were found from teachers' responses to the 3rd and 5th items. To the 3rd item, 20 (67%) teachers chose "yes". They thought incorporating target culture in language teaching necessary. Reasons why they chose it were due to the fact that Indonesian and English culture were different. Activities of finding the similarity or differences from both cultures are necessary to broaden students' knowledge. Moreover, such activities could help students understand English better.

The rest of the teachers (33%) indicated that incorporating target culture in language teaching was not necessary. They thought that incorporating the home culture of the students in English language teaching was far more necessary than incorporating the target culture (40%). This was intended to preserve the local culture. Besides, they viewed that many values of the target culture considered not in accordance with the values of the home culture (20%). Another reason was they considered unnecessary to teach elementary students English (30%). Moreover, teaching the target culture difficult and sophisticated (10%). Table 3 showed teachers' responses to the incorporation of culture in language teaching.

Responses	n	%	Reasons	n	%
Yes	20	66,7	Home and target culture are different	6	30
			Teaching culture can broaden students' knowledge	5	25
			Students learn English easier	4	20

			Students can compare home to target culture	5	25
			Subtotal	20	100
No	10	33,3	Teachers should teach Ss home culture	4	40
			Values of target culture are not in accordance with those in local culture	2	20
			It is not necessary to teach elementary school Ss English	3	30
			Teaching the target culture is difficult and sophisticated	1	10
			Subtotal	10	100
Total	30	100			

Tabel 3 Teachers' responses to the incorporation of culture in language teaching

In the 5th item, when the teachers were asked whether they had applied the incorporation of the target culture in language teaching, most of the teachers (60%) said “no”. Again, the limited knowledge of the teachers about the target culture and their status as elementary English teachers became the most preferred reasons. The second preferred reason was that they did not know how to implement it. This was also supported by the teachers' responses to the 4th item which clarified whether or not the teachers had sufficient knowledge on the target culture. Most of the teachers said “no”, “not much”, and “not sufficient”. None of them said “yes”. Moreover, teachers, to a greater extent, got information about the target culture from the lecture session and to a lesser extent from media and other people's experiences.

When the teachers were asked how they incorporate the target culture to language teaching, they did not give any specific answers. It was indicated that they only compared the elements of L1 and L2 (58,3%) including the ways of life and ways of speaking people from the target culture and give little illustration about them (41,7%). Table 4 demonstrated whether the teachers had applied the incorporation of culture in language teaching.

Responses	n	%	Ways of incorporation	n	%
Yes	12	40	Teachers compare elements of L1 and L2	7	58,3
			Teachers give illustration of culture	5	41,7

			Subtotal	12	100
No	18	60	Teachers have limited knowledge of culture	9	50
			Teaching English in elementary school is focused on vocabulary	6	33.3
			Teachers do not know how to incorporate it	3	16,7
			Subtotal	18	100
Total	30	100			

Table 4 Application of incorporating target culture in language teaching

Discussion

Most of the participants perceive culture as the traditions, customs, ideas, will, and work. Although the subjects are language teachers, only a few of them associates culture with language and communication (only 6.6%). This indicates that generally teachers do not view culture as component related with language but mainly with the traditions, customs, ideas, will, and work. This may be due to the nature of the question that did not specifically ask the respondents about culture in English language teaching.

With regard to the second question, most of the respondents consider the role of the target culture important in English language teaching. They realize that language and culture cannot be separated. Moreover, they recognize English as a language for international communication. By integrating culture in ELT, the process of teaching-learning will be more effective because the students can learn and obtain both linguistic and cultural competence at one time. By so doing, students' communicative competence will blossom more rapidly.

Few respondents give negative responses to the question about the role of the target culture in language teaching. This is because they do not put the target culture in primary concern in comparison to other aspects of EFL such as reading and vocabulary building. They assume that it is not necessary for those teaching in elementary level to teach students the target culture. Vocabulary building is far more important for them. Moreover, the teachers consider integrating the target culture in language teaching

something complicated. This may be due to the teachers' lack of knowledge about the target culture.

Teachers' opinions on the incorporation of cultural information in ELT were also used to answer the last research question. Findings indicate that teachers gave positive responses to whether or not incorporating the target language in language teaching necessary. Having realized that target culture plays important role in language teaching, most of the teachers found it advantageous to inform the students about the target culture. As the home and target culture are different, they regarded giving cultural information to students can broaden the students' knowledge, foster language learning, create filters for the values that are not in accordance with the home culture.

However, some teachers concerned about the disadvantages of including the cultural information in the class particularly when the values of the target culture were not in accordance with the home culture. In fact, they suggested to keep giving information about the home culture although the teachers taught foreign languages in the classroom. They seemed to worry that the values of home culture may be lost due to the teaching of the foreign language culture. Losing the values of home culture may be interpreted as missing the identity as a nation. Furthermore, a few of teachers even considered unnecessary to incorporate the target language culture in elementary class. Vocabulary building is far more important than teaching the target culture. Having lacked of knowledge about the target culture became another reason for the teachers not to teach the target culture to the students.

Though, whatever the reason might be, it was obvious that English teachers' positive responses towards the incorporation of the target culture in ELT did not necessarily bring about its prioritization in their instruction. This was evidenced from the teachers' responses to the question of whether or not they had applied it in the classroom. There was a discrepancy between opinions and implementation. Most of the teachers said that they had not included cultural information in language teaching. They admitted that they had a lack of knowledge about it so they were not ready to realize their opinions. They seemed to greatly depend on the Cross-cultural Understanding lecturer to get information about the target culture and slightly from electronic media like television. Because of their lacks of knowledge, it was evident from the findings that they did not

know how to implement it. Whenever they include the target culture in language teaching, the teachers tend to do it simply by comparing the elements of the home and target culture like the ways of life and ways of speaking which are exactly associated with the sociological aspects of culture.

Conclusion and Recommendation

This study showed that most teachers view culture as something comprises of sociological facets, something separable from language. However, when they were asked about the role of the target culture in ELT, most of them believed that the target culture has a positive role to make ELT more effective. Unfortunately, only a few of them actually incorporated the target culture in ELT due to lack of knowledge and fear of instilling inappropriate values to the students.

This study revealed that only few English teachers in Indonesia have adequate understanding of the connection between language and culture and knowledge of the target culture. Not all of them are aware of the importance of incorporating the target culture in ELT, and even if they are, they do not have ideas on how to do it in the classroom. Those who think that it is not necessary to incorporate the target culture in language teaching say that because they teach English at the Elementary level, they focus more on vocabulary building than on other aspects. Others believed that the home culture is the most appropriate one to use in the classroom because they are afraid that students will learn something which is not in accordance with the values of their home culture.

In addition to the conclusion and interpretation from the result of the study, the following recommendations for foreign language teaching can be suggested:

1. English teachers should be made aware of the importance of incorporating target cultural information in their teaching. This can be done by giving them trainings or seminars related to this topic.
2. Teachers should be reminded that incorporating target culture does not mean to impose target cultural values or to change the students' value systems. Rather, it is aimed at developing awareness among students that they are part of a diverse community and thus cultural flexibility and tolerance are expected.

3. Despite the importance of incorporating the target culture in ELT, teachers should not neglect the role of students' home culture as an effort to preserve students' sense of identity. Both cultures can be used, taking into account the quantity and quality of both. Too much use of each may lead to boring atmosphere and negative attitude among the students.

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