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PLACING CULTURE IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: THE INDONESIAN EFL STUDENTS' PERCEPTION

AKSENDRO MAXIMILIAN

Ph.D. Scholar, University of Lucknow, India

aksendro@gmail.com

Abstract: This research article presents the study about the EFL students' perception on placing culture in ELT practice, especially in Indonesia context. The purpose of this survey study is to examine students' perception on the integration of culture into ELT practice. The participants were the third-semester students in Mathematics Education Study Program, *STKIP PGRI Bandar Lampung* (Institute of Teachers Training and Education of PGRI Bandar Lampung), Indonesia. The data was collected using a questionnaire which was posted for the students who were taking the compulsory English subject. It is found that tertiary level students in Indonesia have realized the necessity and importance of placing culture in learning English. One of the importance is that placing culture into English classes could encourage students' interest and motivation in learning English. The students also agree that their English language skills, speaking, writing, reading and listening, influenced by the existence of cultural content in their learning activities could be improved. Consequently, the culture-based materials are suggested to be developed.

Keywords: Culture, EFL, ELT, English language teaching, Indonesia.

INTRODUCTION

Culture is everything related to human life. Barker states that culture constitutes the meaning and representation generated by signifying

mechanisms in the human practices context (4). Culture is all about the commonly held traditions, values, and ways of behaving in a specific community (Ozuorcun 680). Bennet

argues that culture is the practices and systems which are inculcated in a population's particular values, beliefs, and routines of life and habitual forms of conduct (qtd. in Barker 4). Barker also writes Hall's definition of culture that is "the actual grounded terrain of practices, representations, languages, and customs of any society" (4). Therefore, it could be said that all things, including language, which is related to the daily routines and behaviour in human life in any society could be interpreted as a culture. Culture is always connected to human practices, and there must be the existence of language in every human practice interaction.

It is undoubted that there is a tight relation between language and culture. According to Stapleton (291), Nurlia and Arini (187), and Farooq et al. (177), language and culture are interrelated, interlinked and inseparable. Chinh (1) states that language and culture have intertwined relation among them. It has long been assumed that language and culture are strongly linked to each other (Gonen and Saglam 26). Ho also says that there is an inextricable and interdependent

relationship between language and culture (64). Furthermore, according to Farooq (177), the function of language is not only for communication, but it is also the carrier of culture. Therefore, it is very proper if Barker writes that the operations of language are central concerns for cultural studies (21).

Culture in English Language Teaching

Considering the relationship between language and culture, thereby, the cultural aspect also has to be associated with language teaching. Farooq et al. state culture is a key component in language teaching (177). In English language teaching (ELT), cultural content has been subsumed under language teaching so that the learners would use the English language competency and have in-depth understandings of cultures embedded in that language (Chinch 2). It means the cultural content has to be incorporated into language elements and skills learning. Thus, besides learning the language elements and skills (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation, listening, speaking,

reading, and writing), the students could also learn about the culture of the language. This is in line with the main aim of the English language teaching, that is to enable the students to have a good English communicative ability used in the appropriate context both in oral or written communication (Maximilian 69). While using the language, the students have to understand the social and cultural aspect of the language, so that they can use the language in the appropriate way and context. Hence, it is not for wonder if Ozuorcun argues that culture is the fifth foreign language skill (680). Learning a foreign language means learning the elements and skills of a foreign language which is incorporated with the knowledge of the culture of the foreign language.

Nowadays, the current term of English as an international language (EIL) has an important role to be used in conducting communication and interaction among the people in almost the entire world in many countries (Maximilian 191). However, the term of EIL has brought some changes, especially in the cultural perspective in ELT (Chinch 1). According to Chinch

(1), traditionally, the main point of the target culture in ELT was only about the culture of English-speaking country. The students were given only the knowledge and competency of geographical, life, and social system of English-speaking countries, especially about the USA and the UK. Whereas, because of the status of EIL, the practice of teaching and learning culture in ELT has been shifted into the intercultural concept. Today, an aim of the cultural teaching in ELT is not relying only on the paradigm of native speaker competence as the target culture, but it changes at the cultural diversity to develop the students to become intercultural speakers in an international context (Chinch 2). In addition, McKay (2) states that regarding the concept of EIL, since the students will not be living and interacting in the native English-speaking context only, it is not a must for the non-native speakers of English to acquire the culture of English native speakers. According to her opinion, there is no necessity for English users to internalize the cultural norms of English native speakers because the aim of EIL is facilitating the

communication of the students' ideas in an English language medium (2). Moreover, English is used by more non-native English speakers than native English speakers (Chinch 1) so the concept of EIL above could also be suitable to be used in a multilingual and multicultural context. Thus, based on the concept of native speaker and non-native speaker culture, it is better to bring both concepts as intercultural content in ELT practice.

For Indonesia context, bringing an intercultural concept is very needed. Since Indonesia is a multicultural country, McKay says "the variety of cultures need to be introduced to sensitize the students to the practices of a variety of other cultures in order to develop their intercultural communication skills" (qtd. in Lestari). Teaching intercultural concept, e.g., integrating local culture and target culture, could be considered to be the best choice of teaching culture to the Indonesian students. This can be done by inserting intercultural activities in the curriculum so that the students could reflect on their own culture and

consider alternate views from the other cultures.

According to Chinch (2), a small number of works related to culture teaching on ELT studied how the culture is integrated into language teaching by exploring teachers' perspective, attitude and practice of intercultural teaching. However, He also says that comparing to "the research on teachers' beliefs and practices in teaching culture, learners' beliefs of this issue seem to be unexplored" (2). Students are the center in the teaching and learning process, thus, it is urgent to explore students' beliefs and perception towards cultural integration into English teaching. Related to this case, this article presents the study about the EFL students' perception on placing culture in ELT practice, especially in Indonesia context.

RESEARCH METHOD

The following research questions are addressed as "How is Indonesian EFL students' perception about the importance of culture in ELT?", and "How is Indonesian EFL students'

perception of placing culture in classroom activities?”.

The purpose of this survey study is to examine students' perception on the integration of culture into ELT practice. The participants were the twenty-two of the third-semester students in Mathematics Education Study Program, *STKIP PGRI Bandar Lampung* (Institute of Teachers Training and Education of PGRI Bandar Lampung), Indonesia. The researcher conducted this study at the students who have learned English course. In Mathematics Education Study Program, *STKIP PGRI Bandar Lampung*, English becomes the compulsory course offered for the second and third-semester students.

In this study, the data was collected using a questionnaire which was posted for the students who were taking the compulsory English course. There are three aspects of perception existed in this questionnaire, they are necessity and importance of culture, classroom activities, and students' familiarity with the target culture. The first aspect is about students' perception of the importance of integrating culture in ELT. The second

aspect is about students' view on applying the knowledge of culture in classroom activities. The last one is about the students' familiarities and awareness with the target culture as the impact of placing culture in teaching and learning process in ELT classroom activities. The questionnaire was adopted from Farooq et al. (184-185) and redesigned based on the purpose and research question of this study. A pilot study was conducted to assure the validity and reliability of the questionnaire. Based on the result of pilot study, it is proved that the questionnaire is valid and reliable. In collecting the data, the researcher used an application named *google form* application.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The five-point Likert scale was used to collect information about the participants' perception of the importance of culture, and classroom activities with the category of the score: 1 is for Strongly Disagree; 2 is for Disagree; 3 is for Neutral; 4 is for Agree; and 5 is for Strongly Agree. In other words, the maximum score is 5 and the minimum score is 1. Whereas,

the information about students' familiarity with the target culture was collected using the statement response of not sufficient familiar, sufficient familiar, and very familiar.

Students Perception of the Importance of Culture in ELT

The students' view on the necessity and importance of integrating culture in ELT setting is analysed in this first part. The data of the students' responses proves that integrating culture into English language classes is very necessary (3.82). The students think that it is very needed to experience cultures in English language classes (3.91). They also agree that by learning English integrated with culture, they have more motivation in learning (3.86). It means that integrating cultures into English language classes could attract students' interests in learning English (3.82). From these responses, it could be concluded that students have a positive attitude about the importance and necessity of placing culture in ELT practice. They also realize that experiencing cultures while learning

English is very interesting, therefore, it motivates them to learn English.

By integrating language and culture, the students believe that their language skills, i.e. reading, writing, speaking and listening, may improve because of the existence of culture in their learning process (3.91). The students feel more interesting in reading the English texts which consist of various cultures (4.21). They have an interest in writing the content related to their own culture in English (4.17). Not only their own culture, but they also interest to the target culture. They like listening to their teacher's story related to the situation and condition of life in English speaking countries (4.04). They also like to practice speaking and talking with their friends about things regarding cultural content (3.91). It is proved that integrating culture in EFL practice is beneficial since it could encourage students' desire to practice their English language skills. Undoubtedly, by placing culture in English class, students' ability in reading, writing, speaking, and listening could be improved. Applying this, the students not only learn language skills, vice

versa, they also learn culture by practicing English language skills. It is in line with the opinion of Ho (63), and Nurlia and Arini (187) who say about the interdependent connection between language learning and learning the culture. These findings also prove the Barker's theory (41) that it is appropriate "to think through cross-cultural communication in terms of the learning of language skills, rather than holding cultural knowledge located in different places to be incommensurable".

Knowing the cultures while learning the English language, according to the participants, may guide the students to have positive attitudes and perspective towards cultural diversity. The students strongly agree that understanding target culture and local culture may help them to be more tolerant (4.26). They would be more tolerant when they are introduced to target language cultures (3.86). The participants are convinced about having more understanding of target culture may help them to create critical thinking related to target cultures and local cultures (4.00). In addition, as the

integration of culture and ELT, they also think about cultural identity. Their understanding of cultural identity could be enhanced by learning English (3.60). Learning language along with culture could develop students' ability in negotiating meaning across languages and culture. As a result, it may prepare them to be ready with a multicultural society. It is in accordance with Ho's arguments that addressing culture in EFL classrooms develops both of students' linguistics and intercultural competences (63). In this learning process, it could engage students cognitively, behaviorally and effectively.

Related to the issue of the importance of culture in ELT, the students propose to apply more focus on materials related to the culture in learning English. They think that there must be a strong focus on culture teaching in English language learning practice (3.17). They also do not favour that placing culture in their English language classroom may hinder their learning process (2.43). It shows the students' awareness of the importance of integrating culture in English

learning. They also need learning material regarding cultural content.

From the findings above, it could be summed up that the students realize the importance of the existence of culture in English language teaching and learning process. They have more understanding that learning a language could not be separated from learning the culture. This finding also supports Barker's statement (31) that people learn the language as an integral part of learning the culture, learning how to do things in our environment, and continue to improve language skills. Besides being aware of the importance of culture in ELT, the students also realize the importance of culture in developing their English language skills. Considering cross-cultural purpose, cultural knowledge should be integrated into the learning of the language skills (Barker 41). Furthermore, the students think that culture is important because culture also builds their positive attitudes to diverse cultures. It forces students' critical thinking to understand the target and local cultures. As a result, it may build their tolerance toward target cultures.

Students' Perception of Placing Culture in Classroom Activities

This part presents the responses of participants' perception related to culture in classroom activities. The students share their experiences in engaging English language classroom. It is about how the cultural content is explored by the students when they learn English. Generally, the students are aware of the existence of culture in their activities in the classroom. The finding provides information related to the existence of the target culture contents, cross-cultural differences, and the insertion of cultural materials in the English textbook.

According to the students, their teacher always talks about his/her own experiences with foreign culture (4.17), the cultural information about English speaking countries is also included in their classes (3.65), during learning activities, they are asked to explore the cultural aspects of English-speaking countries as target culture (3.60). Moreover, they are introduced about the real-life objects of the target culture in their class too (3.56). The students and their teacher still also discuss specific aspects and elements

of the target culture (3.13). It means the knowledge about target culture has been placed by the teacher in the activities of EFL class. The findings above show the students' awareness about the existence of culture, especially the culture of English-speaking countries as the target culture, in their EFL classroom activities. This fact of students' awareness of the target culture could bring them to the wider global insight of other different cultures. Having an understanding about target culture, the students may consult and compare their knowledge of the target culture with their experiences in their own culture. It may build their positive attitude towards other different culture. It could help them having global thinking particularly in using English as an international language in global communication.

As a result of inserting target culture in the activities of EFL class, the students could consult their knowledge of target culture with their knowledge of their own local culture, therefore, they could be aware of the cultural differences (4.08). The students know that their teacher facilitates them to

discuss in detail about various aspect of cultural differences in their class (3.43). Likewise, according to them, their teacher still considers their own local culture in teaching and learning activities (3.34). After knowing both of target and local culture, their teacher focuses on some specific elements and aspects which are different in target and local culture, in this case, the culture of Indonesia and English-speaking countries (3.65). They are involved in discussion while comparing different aspects and elements of the culture of English-speaking countries and Indonesian culture (3.65). Not only providing the difference between local and target culture, they realize that their teacher also describes some similar aspects of students' own culture and target culture in English (3.77). The students agree that the teacher gives them experiences to explore some similarities between the culture of Indonesia and English-speaking countries. According to Lestari, it is important to focus on the cross-cultural differences among cultures, thereby the students will become broad-minded persons who

understand that no culture is better than the others. Then, the students could accept the idea that cultural differences are the colourful and beautiful side of life. Besides that, by knowing the cultural similarities and differences between local and target culture, the students are introduced with the cultural shocks (3.86). These classroom activities could prepare them in facing the culture shocks when they have to face real global communication.

Furthermore, the students agree that material of culture has been well prepared in the EFL classroom. They support the idea that their teacher includes cultural content in their EFL lessons intentionally (3.60). According to them, the cultural content is presented and discussed in the textbook so it introduces them to the target culture (3.73). Then, their teacher comments and introduces the foreign culture which is represented in the textbook and classroom materials (3.34). The findings above confirm the presence of culture in textbook and classroom material during teaching and learning process. It is in accordance with Lestari who says the

English teacher has to choose the appropriate textbook concerned with cultural content because in any language teaching and learning situation success depends on the consideration to both of human elements (teacher and student) and non-human elements (textbook, syllabus, curriculum, and facility). Non-human elements which have cultural content will prepare the students to be ready in using the proper language patterns in various situation, time and place (Farooq et al. 181). It is important to consider the appropriate teaching material consisting culture in order to provide the students with the knowledge of both grammatical and sociolinguistics aspects (Lestari). In other words, to get the successful EFL teaching and learning process, in classroom activities, the teacher should pay attention to the textbook consisting of cultural contents.

As a result of placing culture in classroom activities, most of the students are familiar with both target and local culture. Every student is very familiar with their own Indonesian local culture since all of them are growing in their own culture.

Regarding the target language culture, in this case, English speaking countries culture, the participants' responses show that the students are familiar with daily life, routines, living conditions, food, and drinks. They are also familiar with the literature, other cultural expressions (art, drama, music) and traditions, folklore, tourist attractions. They can also recognize different ethnic and social groups along with values and beliefs of English-speaking society. The elements of youth culture, education system, professional life, history, geography, and political system are also known by them. However, they have a limitation in the international relations with students from other countries. Overall, the students have good knowledge of the target culture. This familiarity is beneficial for creating an intercultural learning environment. It will be a provision for the students when they communicate in global communication using English as an international language.

CONCLUSION

This study focuses on identifying Indonesian EFL students' perceptions

towards placing culture in learning activities in the EFL classroom. It is found that tertiary level students in Indonesia have realized the necessity and importance of placing culture in learning English. One of the importance is placing culture into English classes could encourage students' interest and motivation in learning English. It brings new learning atmosphere in a classroom. The students also agree that their English language skills, speaking, writing, reading and listening, influenced by the existence of cultural content in their learning activities could be improved. Moreover, understanding culture could also build a positive attitude towards cultural diversity. It may help them to be more tolerant. It could stimulate the students' critical thinking towards the target and local culture. As a result, students could strengthen their cultural identity. Realizing the importance of culture in ELT, the students support the idea to bring a stronger focus on culture in English learning activities.

The students also confirm that they are provided with an understanding of the target culture.

Having knowledge of both local and target culture, it makes the students aware of the cultural differences and similarities. They could have thought that there is no culture which is better than the others and cultural diversity makes life colorful and beautiful. It is also important to give them the knowledge of culture shock.

As a result, the students suggest that the material content in learning English should be included intentionally in ELT practice. It is beneficial to bring culture in learning activities since it could provide the students with the knowledge of both grammatical and sociolinguistics aspects. These findings support Hall's opinion that to avoid misunderstanding in communication, we must pay attention to the codes of social life that embedded in a set of meaning, practices, beliefs of the everyday knowledge in the culture (98-99). Consequently, the culture based materials are suggested to be developed. Not only the human elements, i.e. teacher and student, but also the non-human elements, such as textbook, syllabus, curriculum, and

facility related to culture must be maintained and developed.

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