

MULTICULTURAL-BASED ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING: ONE WAY OF MAINTAINING NATION IDENTITY¹

Siti Sudartini²

Abstract

This particular study proposes one alternative way of conducting English Language Teaching practices while maintaining the nation identity. It is commonly believed that learning a foreign language cannot be effectively carried out without learning its culture. This may lead to the internalization process of other culture. Foreign language learners may unintentionally learn other culture while learning the language not to mention English. This therefore will contribute to the elimination of our national cultural values and norms by our next generation. Educators need to be aware of this fact in order to actively take part in maintaining learners' awareness of their own culture. This particular study has a deep analysis on three main issues, namely, 1) identifying the common mainstream of English Language Teaching practice in Indonesia, particularly in the domain of accompanied culture, 2) identifying the notion of multicultural education, 3) and to what extent this multicultural education takes parts in maintaining the nation identity.

The main approach underlying this study is multicultural perspective. This perspective is used as the basis of analysis. This perspective commonly deals with ideals of social justice, education equity, and a dedication to facilitating educational experiences in which all students reach their full potential as learners and as socially aware and active beings, locally, nationally, and globally.

The results of this study have shown the following findings. Firstly, the practice of ELT in Indonesia has internalized the western cultural values and norms. Secondly, multicultural education is an idea in education that enables all learners regardless of their gender, ethnicity, race, culture, social class, religion, or exceptionality, have an equal opportunity to learn at school. Thirdly, by applying this multicultural perspective in the practice of English Language Teaching, the learners will acquire attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed to successfully function within their own micro-culture, mainstream culture, and the global community.

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² An Educational Staff of the English Education Department, Faculty of Languages and Arts, Yogyakarta State University. Email: seatea_nice1@yahoo.com.

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Introduction

In line with the demand of inter-nation communication, the need to have a common language widely spoken in all over the world is unavoidable. This has made English becoming the first international language, for it has the greatest number of speakers in all over the world. Tanaka mentions that although there is no exact statistics exist concerning the number of people using English worldwide, as a rough approximation, it is said that more than one billion people—according to some, nearly two billion people—use English in one way or another, of which four hundred millions use it as their native language, while the remaining six hundred millions or more use the language as a second or foreign language.³ Therefore, the need to have cultural awareness-cultural understanding among those involving the English language teaching is unavoidable.

The concept of ‘cultural awareness’—understanding of different cultures—has been emphasized as an essential part of English learning and teaching. In fact, the phrase ‘cross-cultural communication’ is on the lips of English teachers. Every teacher believes that learning a second language necessarily accompanies understanding a different culture⁴. It is generally agreed so far that language cannot be separated from culture. Following Linton (1945) via Rajend Mesthrie, Joan Swann, Ana Deumer and William L. Leap, culture can be defined as in the technical sociological anthropological sense the culture of a society refers to, ‘the way of life of its members; the collection of ideas and habits which they learn, share and transmit from generation to generation’. Culture in this sense is a ‘design for living’, which defines appropriate or acceptable ways and forms of behavior within particular societies.⁵ While language can be considered as a cultural activity and, at the same time, an instrument for organizing other cultural domains.⁶

The fact that teaching a foreign language cannot be effectively carried out without giving understanding of its culture has lead to a very hard job for those involving the practice of the English language teaching. Educators may unintentionally have been inserting western culture in their classrooms, while learners may have been learning western culture while learning the language. This

³ Shinegori Tanaka, in *RELC Journal* 2006; 37; 47© 2006 SAGE Publications (London, Thousand Oaks CA and New Delhi) <http://RELC.sagepub.com>, 48.

⁴ cf. Nieto 2002; Goldstein 2003.

⁵ Rajend Mesthrie, Joan Swann, Ana Deumer and William L. Leap, *Introducing Sociolinguistics* (Edinburgh: Edinburg University Press, 2009), 28.

⁶ Farzad Sharifian and Gary B. Palmer, *Applied Cultural Linguistics Implications for Second Language Learning and Intercultural Communication* (Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007), 1.

condition may lead to the decrease of the future generations' understanding towards their own culture. They may have been internalizing the foreign culture in their life, and becoming strangers of their own culture. This will not be beneficial for the sustainability of the country. This particular study, however, focuses on three main issues concerning the practice of English language teaching in relation to maintaining the nation identity. Those are; 1) identifying the common mainstream of English Language Teaching practice in Indonesia, particularly in the domain of accompanied culture, 2) identifying the notion of multicultural education, 3) and to what extent this multicultural education takes parts in maintaining the nation identity.

Discussion

1. The Practice of English Language Teaching in Indonesia

The current practice of English Language teaching has been focused on preparing the students to be able to communicate effectively by using the language. English teachers have done their job very well in motivating their students to learn and use the languages. They always try to use various interesting activities to present the context of the given language items being discussed. Some of them even give the explanation on certain language items accompanied by the context of culture in which those items used. This fact is very common in the practice of foreign language classrooms. What may be becoming the main concern is on whether the presentation of this foreign culture is accompanied by the explanation of our own culture. This remains an important question in the current practice of English Language teaching in this country.

What the teachers commonly do in their teaching is merely fulfilling the objectives of the teaching and learning goals as stated in the current curriculum. Most teachers are busy with finding suitable and relevant materials without having critical analysis on the cultural biases that may be covered within the source materials. What commonly come in their minds is finding the materials which are in line with the objectives of the teaching and learning activities as mentioned in the curriculum. It is generally agreed so far that the practice of English Language teaching of English will not be effective without discussing its culture. Most educators will agree that teaching the language will be impossible without teaching the culture. Every sentence, expression, word needs to be put in the context of culture of the language. In other words we may say that an English teacher could act as a cultural agent as well. Every English teacher needs to realize this, if not they will not only be the cultural agents but also be the agents of the new form of imperialism. Teachers need to consider the fact that their students come from different cultural background, have different levels of proficiency, speak their own first language, and also may have different social and economic background. Therefore, they need to have a critical analysis on the materials as well as the learning resources to be given to the students in terms of western cultural content.

Unfortunately, some or even most English teachers do not have such awareness and sensitivity regarding issues of cultural content in English language teaching practice. A brief study conducted prior to the writing of this paper, on some online English resources provided by scholars of English language teaching in this country has provided some examples of western cultural content even in textbooks written by Indonesian scholars either in the form of pictorial or textual image used by the writers. Firstly, some writers seem to be more convenient to use western image rather than the local or national image.⁷

Secondly, the western cultural content within the English textbook has also taken the form of using texts discussing the western topic. A brief observation on the English textbooks provided by the *Pusat Perbukuan Departemen Pendidikan Nasional* may become good examples. In one of the books, there is one chapter on topic descriptive texts. The writers use 8 texts describing interesting places in the world which are predominantly talking about the descriptions of some interesting places found in other countries rather than this country. There is only one text describing one of interesting places in Indonesia. The same thing happen on topic narrative texts, the writers prefer using short stories or western fairy tale rather than using those easily found in our culture.⁸

The current ELT practice may lead the students to have better understanding on foreign culture rather that their own culture or even in the extreme way could lead them to make the foreign culture as theirs own culture and make them internalize the norms as well as foreign cultural values in their daily lives. Some of our young students may have deep understanding on the foreign culture rather than mastering the language.

What may be the most important impact of the current ELT practice is the loss of our own culture since our young generations are no longer have clear understanding of it. Our own valuable cultural norms and values will be left behind by its descendents as they like to have and behave by using the foreign cultural norms and values. They may even forget their cultural identity. All individuals engaged in the foreign language teaching and learning process need to

⁷ The examples of using the western image in the English textbook could be easily found in some of the 'bse' (online textbooks provided by Pusat Perbukuan Department Pendidikan Nasional) books. Take for example an electronic English book written by Joko Priyana, Riandi and Anita Mumpuni entitled *SCAFFOLDING: English for Junior High School Students Grade VII*. This actually a good textbook completed with an explanation on every western cultural content presented in this book, but when we have a look at the cover of the book will find a very beautiful picture of one of the interesting places in Australia rather than one of our own country. Joko Priyana, Riandi and Anita Mumpuni. *SCAFFOLDING: English for Junior High School Students Grade VII and VII*. (Jakarta: Pusat Perbukuan, Departemen Pendidikan Nasional, 2008). The other example of western image using can be found also in a textbook written by Utami Widiati, et al. entitled *Contextual Teaching and Learning: Bahasa Inggris Sekolah Menengah Pertama/Madrasah Tsanawiyah Kelas VIII Edisi 4* in which we may find the image of two interesting places in western countries. Check for Utami Widiati, et al. *Contextual Teaching and Learning: Bahasa Inggris Sekolah Menengah Pertama/Madrasah Tsanawiyah Kelas VIII Edisi 4*. (Jakarta: Pusat Perbukuan, Departemen Pendidikan Nasional, 2008).

⁸ Widiati, et al, 58-69.

anticipate this by having the cultural awareness of the foreign culture and start having discussion on the national culture while explaining the foreign culture in their classrooms.

2. The Notion of Multicultural Education

Educators need to have awareness and sensitivity regarding issues of cultural diversity between English and the local languages as well as the national language, bahasa Indonesia. Teachers need to consider the fact that their students come from different cultural background, have different levels of proficiency, speak their own first language, and also may have different social and economic background.

One of the best solutions to overcome this may be by improving the educators' interest in incorporating multicultural approaches into educational settings. The multicultural education may be an alternative way of improving the cultural awareness⁹ in the practice of English language teaching. Sinagatullin defines multicultural education as an idea stating that all students, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, race, culture, social class, religion, or exceptionality, should have an equal opportunity to learn at school.¹⁰ He also states that one of the major goals of multicultural education is to help students acquire attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed to successfully function within their own microculture, mainstream culture, and the global community.¹¹

This definition provides clear understanding on the main concept of multicultural education that the need for multicultural education may not only conventionally associated with societies containing ethnic, racial, and linguistic diversity, but also with differences in ability, social class, gender, religion, or residence (rural versus urban). In fact, this basic principle is in line with the notion of education as well as the function of education mentioned in our Act on National Educational System. It is the diversity in term of culture that becoming the main consideration within this intercultural education. Grant and Lei provides three reasons why culture matters in education. They mention that in the theoretical conceptions of intercultural education, “culture” is mentioned as relevant at one or more of the following different levels¹²:

⁹ Shinegori Tanaka, “English and Multiculturalism—from the Language User’s Perspective “, in *RELC Journal* (2006; 37), 47. He mentions that the concept of ‘cultural awareness’—understanding of different cultures—has been emphasized as an essential part of English learning and teaching.

¹⁰Ilghiz M. Sinagatullin, *Constructing Multicultural Education in A Diverse Society* (Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN, England: The Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2003), 83.

¹¹ Sinagatullin, 114.

¹² Carl A. Grant and Joy L. Lei (eds), *Global Constructions Of Multicultural Education: Theories And Realities* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc, 2001), 10-11.

1. The cultural and social backgrounds of students, teachers, and parents should be taken into account in order to understand their attitudes, actions, and learning problems as well as personal and social needs.
2. The international and multicultural character of society as a consequence of migration and other phenomena related to globalization should be included as topics in order to change the cultural contents of the curricula.
3. The cultural contents of education should be revised altogether in the name of a universalist idea of education, free from any form of ethnocentrism, so the contents include different perspectives and educate for pluralism and relativism.

Concerning the notion of culture within the intercultural education, they suggest four main elements for an education respectful of sociocultural and linguistic diversity.¹³ Those are: 1) Subjective and objective support of the identity of socio-cultural and linguistic minority students; 2) Constructing curriculum contents implying and reflecting the positive value of the plurality of cultures and languages; 3) Building communicative, action-oriented skills; 4) Accepting socio-cultural diversity and the plurality of ideas as a challenge for democracy.

Having a clear understanding on the definition as well as the main concepts of the multicultural perspective on education will not be much beneficial without considering other individuals and institutions involved in the overall success of the national educational system. This perspective towards the practice of education requires much improvement on the overall components of education, including the curriculum, the educators, learners, and all aspects of education. This idea is in line with one of the definitions of multicultural education mentioned by Banks and Banks in the *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education* that:

Multicultural education is a field of study designed to increase educational equity for all students that incorporates, for this purpose, content, concepts, principles, theories, and paradigms from history, the social and behavioral sciences, and particularly from ethnic studies and women studies.¹⁴

The dimensions of multicultural education, developed by Banks and Banks described in the *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education*, provide the conceptual framework for the multicultural education involving variety of dimensions. They are: *content integration, the knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, an equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture and social structure*. To implement multicultural education effectively, teachers and administrators must attend to each of the five dimensions of multicultural education. They should use content from diverse groups when teaching concepts

¹³ Grant and Lei, 13.

¹⁴ J.A. Banks & C.A.M. Banks (Eds.) (2001). *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), xii.

and skills, help students to understand how knowledge in the various disciplines is constructed, help students to develop positive intergroup attitudes and behaviors, and modify their teaching strategies so that students from different racial, cultural, language, and social-class groups will experience equal educational opportunities.

The total environment and culture of the school must also be transformed so that students from diverse groups will experience equal status in the culture and life of the school. Although the five dimensions of multicultural education are highly interrelated, each requires deliberate attention and focus.

The national focus on basic skills and testing is diverting attention from the broad liberal education that students need to live and function effectively in a multicultural nation and world. It is essential that all students acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills. However, as Mary Dilg documents in this informative and needed book, students also need the knowledge, skills, and values that will enable them to live, interact, and make decisions with fellow citizens from different racial, ethnic, cultural, language, and religious groups. Students also need to acquire the knowledge and skills that will enable them to understand and to come to grips with their own ethnic and cultural identities.¹⁵ Dilg reveals how difficult this essential process can be for the adolescents she describes in this book with the eye of an insightful anthropologist and the heart of a compassionate teacher. She not only makes it clear that teachers need to facilitate the identity quests of adolescents, she also uses vivid examples to illustrate how she engages her students in powerful discussions to help them clarify their racial, ethnic, and cultural affiliations.

In terms of the individuals directly involved in the teaching and learning process, the multicultural education perspective also requires better quality of human resources to conduct the teaching and learning processes, namely the educators, particularly language teachers. This particular perspective on education requires teachers with multiculturally competent in the corresponding subject area.¹⁶ Multicultural competency includes, but is not limited to, competency in culture and related issues and socio-historical, socio-geographical, sociological, and technological competency. A teacher competent in culture studies is expected to know that cultural peculiarities of some minority students often prevent them from progressing equally with the mainstream part of the group, so that they are considered slow learners or even mentally retarded in this social system; whereas in other social systems—for example, in home and ethnic community environments—these children may be considered normal or even gifted. Sociohistorical competency requires that the social studies teacher know about different ethnic and cultural groups' historical developments and historical heritages, their indigenous customs and habits, folk pedagogy heritages, and modes of interethnic interaction. The teacher's multicultural competency may also include at least three components: attitudes, knowledge, and skills.

¹⁵ Mary Dilg, *Thriving in the Multicultural Classroom: Principles and Practices for Effective Teaching* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 2003), ix.

¹⁶ Sinagatullin, 145-150.

3. Multicultural Education and Maintaining Nation Identity

In line with the notion of multicultural education, the practice of foreign language teaching, particularly English language teaching in this country needs to have much attention in terms of the internalization other culture. Brown via Richards and Renandya (2002: 12) claims that *Whenever you teach a language, you also teach a complex system of cultural customs, values, and ways of thinking, feeling, and acting.*¹⁷ It is generally agreed so far that education plays the most significant roles in the development of a nation. Education may be regarded as an investment in human capital formation that lays the foundation for future economic growth and development of the country. This statement, is particularly, in line with the notion of education that has been defined as:

....conscious and well planned effort in creating a learning environment and learning process so that learners will be able to develop their full potential for acquiring spiritual and religious strengths, develop self-control, personality, intelligence, morals and noble character and skills that one needs for him/herself, for the community, for the nation, and for the State. National education means education based on *Pancasila* and the 1945 Constitution, and is rooted in the religious values, national cultures of Indonesia, and one that is responsive to the needs of the ever-changing era.¹⁸

This definition has been becoming the main guidance of conducting all of the teaching and learning processes in this country, not to mention the English language teaching in this country.

One thing needs to be borne in the minds of is the fact that interpersonal interaction in the context of multiculturalism requires one to abide by two practical lessons: ‘Don’t take anything for granted’ and ‘Accept the differences’. These two lessons are easy to agree with in theory and difficult to put into practice in this country. The lesson ‘Don’t take anything for granted’ implies that we need to follow our common sense in our daily life, as a result, it sounds comfortable to say, ‘People are different, and we have to accept them’. In practice, accepting differences may lead to the changing of our semantic world.

This will not be beneficial in terms of maintaining our nation identity. Students or learners may have a new perspective towards their own culture. Some of them may consider the “new culture” is better than the “previous one”.

Therefore, the multicultural approach in the practice of English language teaching will be crucial as one alternative way in maintaining our own culture. Teachers need to have a clear explanation on the proposition of “Accept the differences”. It must be clearly defined as understanding that there is other culture

¹⁷ Jack C. Richards and Willy Renandya (eds). in *Methodology in Language Teaching: An Anthology of Current Practice*. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 12.

¹⁸ Act of the Republic of Indonesia on National Education System, Chapter 1 Article 1.

having different norms and values from one's own culture. Teachers need to make sure that this lesson will not lead to the belief that the new culture is better than one's own culture. Teachers need to have an alternative way conducting the process of teaching and learning in their classrooms.

Therefore, the need to have a multicultural-based language teaching is unavoidable. The underlying reason of applying the approach towards language teaching, is the fact that teachers need to integrate the spirit of multicultural education for the sake of maintaining the nation identity. They must be aware of the internalization of foreign culture in the practice of foreign language teaching. They need to be more careful in explaining materials containing cultural content in order to not to make their students having a new semantic frame of their own culture. Teachers also need to wherever possible, promote the local content to the students by integrating the local cultural aspects or local wisdom during their teaching and learning process. This will be important in maintaining the students' understanding towards their own culture.

In terms of publishers as well as book writers, they may also need to take into consideration this multicultural-based approach towards language teaching whenever they arrange the materials. They need, wherever possible, to cover the local as well as the national cultural topics.

Finally by applying this multicultural perspective in the practice of English Language Teaching, the learners will hopefully acquire attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed to successfully function within their own micro-culture, mainstream culture, and the global community.

Conclusions

The main concern of this paper is on having a critical study on the practice of English Language Teaching (ELT), which unintentionally tends to have a great potential of creating questions in terms of culture. The main culturally defined question is the existence of western cultural internalization in the practice of ELT classroom without being accompanied by the educators' awareness on it. This has merely a negative impact on those involved in the teaching and learning activities in terms of their cultural awareness, particularly the students.

One of the best solutions to overcome this may be by improving the educators' interest in incorporating multicultural approaches into educational settings. The multicultural education may be an alternative way of improving the cultural awareness in the practice of English language teaching.

This multicultural-based language teaching is important in maintaining the students' understanding towards their own culture and in avoiding their having a new semantic frame towards their own culture. These two points will be crucial as an initiating step of maintaining the nation identity in the terms of awakening the people awareness of the national culture.

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CURRICULUM VITAE

Siti Sudartini, born in Yogyakarta on March 11th, 1976. Graduating the S1 degree at English Education from Yogyakarta State University. Teaching at English Education Department of Yogyakarta State University from January 2005. The following are some scientific programs participated. 1) Being a participant of A Short Course on Curriculum and Materials Development from SEAMEO Regional Language Centre hold on 9-27 February 2009 at the SEAMEO Regional Language Centre, Singapore; 2) Being a presenter of a paper entitled “Some Insights On The Development Of English Department Curriculum: A Striving Step Towards World Class University Level” at UNY on the *International Seminar towards World Class University of UNY* on July 17th, 2009; 3) Being a presenter of a paper entitle “Rethinking Multicultural Paradigm in English Language Teaching” at UNY on the *International Seminar on Multiculturalism and (Language and Arts) Education:Unity and Harmony in Diversity*, held by Faculty of Languages and Arts, Yogyakarta State University, on 21-22 October 2009; 4) Being a presenter of a paper entitled “Issues Of Cultural Content in English Language Teaching”, at *The First International Graduate Student Conference on Indonesia: (Re)considering Contemporary Indonesia: Striving for Democracy, Sustainability, and Prosperity, a Multidiciplinary Perspective*, held by Indonesian Professorship Academy and Sekolah Pascasarjana UGM Yogyakarta, in collaboration with Koninklijke Nederlandse Akademie van Wetenschappen, on December 1-4th, 2009. Master Degree of Linguistics Study Program of *UGM Yogyakarta*. Email address: seatea_nice1@yahoo.com. Contact Number: 08156877141.