

ISSUES IN TEACHING ENGLISH IN A CULTURAL CONTEXT: A CASE OF INDONESIA

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Abstract: The significant role of English in the global era triggers many countries to make policies to include English as compulsory subjects for their citizen. However, the existing culture in every country is not necessarily in tandem with the culture that is embedded in English language. This condition may raise many issues that can hamper the teaching-learning process. Through literary studies, this paper explores how English language teaching-learning takes place in Indonesian cultural context and find the issues hampering students to learn English. Among the hampering issues are students' characteristics, teacher factor, norm and belief, and some language aspects of English.

Key words: *Culture, norms, belief, English language teaching, language aspects*

Among approximately 6800 languages in the world (Brown & Ogilvie, 2009), especially in the world of science, English is one of the most widely-used language. It is evident that more than 90 percent of scientific journals are published in English (Lovgren, 2004).

The significant role of English is increased by the expanding circle of the English users in some countries where English is used as a foreign language like China, Indonesia and Thailand (Kachru, 2009). The total English users are about 1132.9 million comprising of 408 million inner circle users (UK, US, Australia, New Zealand), 418 million outer circle (India, Philippines, Pakistan, Malaysia, Bangladesh, Hong Kong, Singapore, Sri Lanka), and 306.9 million expanding circle users (China, Japan, Indonesia, Thailand, South Korea, Vietnam , Myanmar, Taiwan, Cambodia, Laos) (Kachru, 2009).

The outer circle users commonly lived in countries where, in addition to their first language, English has been

extendedly used both in literature and in social lives. In this context, English, even, gains formal recognition as an institutionalised language of the state like in Singapore, Nigeria, and India (Kachru, 2009).

Differently, the expanding circle users of English mostly live in countries where English is used as a foreign language. In these countries, people have already made sense of their lives through interaction process for meaning and representation with their first language that are bound with cultural contexts. These people need certain efforts to master English that mostly take place through teaching and learning processes. This paper aims to explore the cultural issues that may hamper the expanding circle users in the processes of learning and teaching English.

CULTURAL CONTEXT FOR TEACHING ENGLISH

The word 'culture' derives from the Latin word 'colere' and 'cultura'

that means ‘a process of harnessing or growing, of refinement’ (Wadham, Pudsey, & Boyd, 2007). In more elaborative ways, Wadham, et al. (2007) describe that culture possesses some components: symbols and signs, language, values and meanings, beliefs, norms, rituals, and material objects. Humans deploy any symbols and signs and interpret them. These symbols and signs are deployed in a systemic way that then is called language.

By using the language, people set some values which become criteria and standards to determine which one is good or bad in the world. In addition, the ideas and statements to be true about the world formulate humans’ beliefs that may shape humans’ behaviour toward the world. Then, whether human behaviours are correct or incorrect can be justified using implicit or explicit rules known as norms. In their daily lives, humans perform repeated activities that turn to be their rituals. At last, humans also create material objects to express their values, beliefs, and interpretation.

Brown (2007, p. 132) argued that culture is a way of life within which people exist, think, feel and relate with others that binds them together. Because of this cultural binding, people tend to see the world with their own cultural perspectives and possess a tendency to perceive their own cultural reality as the correct perception. Consequently, when they deal with other cultures, they may suffer from misunderstandings. Such misunderstandings are likely to occur in teaching and learning English in the context of English as a foreign language because teaching English language cannot be separated from the English culture as ‘a language is a part of a culture and culture is a part of language’ (Brown, 2007, p. 133). What types of issues emerges in this context is interestingly studied.

TEACHING ENGLISH IN INDONESIAN CONTEXT

Realizing the roles of English as International language and language of science, the Indonesian government has decreed that English is one of the compulsory subjects from Junior high school to University.

As a foreign language, English is rarely used outside the classroom context. Beyond the classroom, the Indonesian students speak Indonesia language or their local language instead. This condition affects the Indonesia students’ English mastery. The Indonesian students’ mastery of English tends to be unsatisfactory. After they are graduated from university, most of them do not acquire good command of English (Lie, 2004; Thalal, 2010). Poor performance was also indicated by PISA (Program for International Student Assessment) research mentioning that in reading test, Indonesia ranked 48 of 57 countries surveyed (Jalal et al., 2009). Such poor performances may be caused by some factors like students’ characteristics, teacher factors, norms and beliefs, and English language aspects.

INDONESIAN STUDENTS’ CHARACTERISTICS

Studies revealed some characteristics of Indonesian learners. Indonesian students are culturally passive, silent and shy in the class (Exley, 2005). They do not participate in the class activities although they are asked by the teacher to participate. In this respect, a question may be raised whether these behaviours are culturally-embedded characteristics or only the impacts of lack of English language proficiency.

Another prototype mentions that the students are unreflective in their learning (Pikkert & Foster, 1996).

Such conditions are among other caused by the learning strategies of the students who still adopt memorisation strategies where the students tend to copy what teachers note down on the blackboard (Lengkanawati, 2004). This is the consequence of a teaching and learning process that still takes teacher-centred approach.

Students' motivation in learning English in Indonesia seems to be practical in the sense that their motivation is based on their immediate needs (Bradford, 2007). Students' future employments that do not directly require them to possess good English language mastery put them in a weak drive to learn English. This circumstance seems in line with the constructivists views on motivation who argue that motivation is emerged from interaction with others in social contexts (Brown, 2007; William & Burden, 1997).

TEACHER ISSUES

Teachers are among the underpaid profession in Indonesia (Jalal, et al., 2009). As their earnings are not sufficient to support their family lives, they have to look for other sources of livings like becoming street vendors, drivers or other low status occupation (Supriadi & Hoogenboom, 2004). For English teachers, they commonly offer a private lesson to students outside school. This socio-economic factor may force teachers to follow a kind of life cycles that have impacts on the quality of their teachings, specifically in terms of their attendance at school. A study indicated that the degree of absenteeism of Indonesia teachers was reaching 19 percent (Jalal, et al., 2009).

The teachers' qualification also becomes an issue. Indonesian teachers did not undertake sufficient educational degree that is supposed to be their cultural capital – 'knowledge and qualification within specific field'

(Wadham, et al., 2007). The data from the Ministry of National Education (MONE, 2008) specify that Indonesian teachers hold relatively low educational degree (Firman & Tola, 2008). More than 60 percent of the total 2.78 million teachers did not hold undergraduate degree in education (Jalal, et al., 2009).

The Indonesian government has realised the existing problem and has accomplished a teacher certification program to increase the teacher qualification and income since 2007. Student's achievement in the national examination may become the parameter of the success of the teacher certification program. From 3 subjects tested in National Examination: Math, English, and Indonesia Language, more than 99 percent of total 122.139 students in Jakarta passed their national examination (Harahap, 2011).

Besides the low educational qualification, Indonesian teachers are also still lack of English language mastery. A study indicated that many of Indonesian teachers have many grammatical errors when they want to express their ideas in English (Dardjowidjojo, 2003; Marcellino, 2008). Due to their insufficient level of English language proficiency, teachers may create a monotonous teaching that does not encourage students to practice interactively their English with the teachers as well as their friends.

NORMS AND BELIEF

Dardjowidjojo (2003) mentioned that social and ethical values and belief that teachers are knowledgeable person cause student to obey whatever the teachers ask to do in the class. Besides, the existing norm in Indonesia demands that young generation should respect the elderly by not putting them in a shameful condition. Consequently, students rarely respond to the teachers by critically arguing what the teachers deliver in front of the class.

Commonly, students believe and accept respectfully what subject the teachers give in the class (Marcellino, 2008). Besides, Indonesians tend to avoid conflicts since they prefer a harmonious condition as part of Indonesian cultures that tend to uphold collectivism instead of holding liberalism and individualism as what happened in English speaking countries. In collectivism culture, people tend to emphasise on communal life, harmony, sharing and face supporting (Poedjiastuti, 2009; Triandis, Brislin, & Hui, 1988).

Students' belief may also have impacts on their learning. Richard and Lockhart (2007, pp. 52-57) mentioned that learners' belief systems cover a wide range of issues: belief with the nature of English, beliefs about speakers of English, belief about the four language skills, beliefs about teaching, beliefs about language learning, beliefs about appropriate classroom behaviours, beliefs about self, and beliefs about goal. A study conducted by Erlenawati (2002) revealed that Indonesian students strongly believe that environment in which language is learnt and taught was very instrumental for second language learning. The students believed that the best way to learn English was by studying English in the English speaking countries. To some degree such a belief was owned by Indonesian learners, yet the number of the sample on the research of Erlenawati (2002) was only three and the study was conducted in Australia. With such reasons, it might not represent what happened in the Indonesian environmental learning context.

Based on the writer' observation on 17 years teaching English in Indonesian context, the students have a belief that English is a difficult subject to learn. It is similar to what Richards and Lockhart (2007), who studied on the beliefs of Japanese students, found.

They found that Japanese students considered English was difficult subjects. As the students said, "English is much more difficult to learn than other languages. The most difficult part of learning English is learning grammar. English is the world's most important language" (Richards & Lockhart, 2007, p. 52)

LANGUAGE ASPECTS

Vocabulary, pronunciation, and grammatical structures are among the barriers for students to understand in their study. Since mostly Indonesian students start studying English at Junior high schools or around 13 year old of age, they have already possessed in their mind, their first language mastery. Brown (2000) stated that first language mastery may form one source of difficulty in learning second language. Moedjito and Harumi (2008) attempted to investigate the mispronunciation of English sounds by Indonesian English language learners. They distributed a paper-form questionnaire consisting of 32 target mispronunciations to Indonesian secondary school teachers of English and also to native English speakers. The findings indicated that Indonesian learners made 14 out of the 32 target mispronunciations, and these mispronunciations have significant impacts in pronunciation. This study indicated that the Indonesian learners who have already had their first language pronunciation systems found confused when they learn English pronunciation system.

Grammatical structures are part of English language aspects that students should master in order to able to express their ideas sufficiently. However, Indonesian students still fail to show that they have already mastered it well (Handoyo, 2010). The influence of the first language grammatical structure is still dominant among the Indonesian learners. Instead of using

appropriate English grammatical structure, they tend to use word to word translation that lead to more confusion when they use it to communicate their ideas (Sawir, 2005). The English word order that is totally different from the Indonesian language both in a phrase or sentence level generally interferes the student understanding. In the sentence level, Indonesia language can express one idea in various word orders. Handoyo (2010) gives a good example in this case when Indonesia students are asked to express the sentence “Why are you here?” into Indonesian language. It can have some variety like *Mengapa kamu di sini?*, *Kamu di sini ngapain?*, *Ngapain kamu di sini?* The words are in different order but they still express one idea (why are you here?). In the phrase level, the English words are ordered in an opposite way compared to the Indonesian one. For instance, the phrase *beautiful houses (rumah-rumah cantik)* can be a source of confusion for beginners of Indonesia learners. The first is the word order in Indonesian language regularly put the noun (*rumah*) at the beginning while in English is not. Secondly, to show the plurality, English put *-s* attached to the noun while Indonesian language needs to repeat the word to show plurality (*rumah-rumah*).

Tense is also the source of confusion for Indonesia learners. The complex system in English verb to show time is not similar to simple way of Indonesian language:

I ate rice;

I have eaten rice;

I had eaten rice;

These sentences are simply expressed with *Saya sudah makan nasi*

To instil a more complex system of knowledge in the simpler state of mind is not an easy job.

The two-word verb is not found in Indonesian language while in English it seems playing significant roles. How to

use it puts other bewilderment for Indonesian learners. In one time, it should be used united while at another time, it should be used seperately. Look at the following examples:

Those drunken men are just *looking for* trouble. (united)

Please *look* the documents *over* quickly. (seperable)

Beginner learners need time to understand this language system. In addition to the above matters, Indonesian learners also face difficulties when they have to use preposition and various types of verbs that never emerge when they learn and use Indonesian language. For instance, the word ‘do’ may be implemented in various ways that produced different meaning and such a thing does not exist in Indonesian language:

Martha does the dishes.

Martha does love his fiancé.

Does Martha study English?

Martha goes to the party and so do I.

The above complexities hamper Indonesian students to master English well. Therefore, no wonder that their learning achievement is not high (Sugiharto, 2005).

Vocabulary plays significant parts in every language skill: listening, speaking, reading and writing. However, it rarely got any significant attention in the curriculum processes (Cahyono & Widiati, 2008). A study done by Nurweni (1997) revealed secondary school graduate vocabulary knowledge. The findings of her study mentioned that 324 graduates who participated in her study knew 987 of 2000 most frequently-used words. When she provided a test on academic words, the participants of her study indicated that on average they knew 239 of 808 academic words. These findings may be one of the results of the low reading culture in ASEAN countries including Indonesia.

Sangkaeo (1999) mentioned that the culture of ASEAN countries were chatting society instead of reading society. The people prefer listening and speaking to reading.

Traditionally, the reading culture only belonged to certain groups of people like religious leaders, the elderly in the family, who passed the information orally from generation to generation and treated the written manuscripts as sacred things as they were rarely available. This condition may bring an impact at present time resulting that the new generation have an oral culture instead of reading. This is signified by some findings of research on reading indicating that Indonesian students have low level of reading ability.

CONCLUSION

Cultural context plays significant role in the success of teaching and learning English in Indonesia. English language learners who grow up in Indonesia will form a certain shared meaning that make up their characteristics, norms, and belief. Within the Indonesian cultural context, students are characterised as being shy, silent, passive and unreflective. These characteristics are the product of culture that hampers the English teaching and learning process.

Moreover, the teachers' educational qualification and their level of English proficiency become other issues that are very potential to impede the students' learning achievement. Other than these, teachers also face their domestic problem as they become underpaid parties. Though the Indonesian government had launched a certification program to solve this problem, a study of the impact of the program needs to be conducted.

Language aspects that cover grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary and the major language skills are

dominant factor for the students to be successful in their study. However, their first language acquisition that is far different from English constitutes significant barrier for Indonesian students to make a progress. The nature of Indonesian cultures that tend to embrace oral culture instead of reading culture should be taken into account to ensure the students' learning progress.

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