

Developing Cross-cultural Understanding through Sociolinguistic Dissemination: A Practice in Multicultural Education

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Abstract

The use of language cannot be separated from the culture of its speakers. Most experts agree that language is the cultural reflection of social community. Therefore, the language learning must involve the learning of related culture with the language being learnt. This paper describes my personal experience in teaching Sociolinguistics II for the students of the English Language and Literature Study Program, Yogyakarta State University through sociolinguistic dissemination to develop their cross-cultural understanding.

One of the main issues in the teaching of sociolinguistics is to see how cultural aspects are reflected in the use of language. Realizing the importance of this course toward the understanding of the relationship between language and culture, English Language and Literature Study Program, Yogyakarta State University provides its students with this course in two semesters, sociolinguistics I and II. Unlike the teaching of sociolinguistics I which is more theoretical, sociolinguistics II is more practical. The students are expected to have an overview and experience in conducting a mini research that will be beneficial for them in writing thesis. In my experiences in teaching this subject, the students were assigned to conduct mini research on the issue of cross-cultural understanding. In this case, they were proposed to observe multicultural films from different points of view; namely language and society, bilingualism, language variation, choosing code, language and sex, and politeness and solidarity. In the end, they had to disseminate their observation result. The teaching of this course prioritized the process approach. The students were given a chance to consult their observation, present the research report, and revise it.

In fact, the implementation of sociolinguistic dissemination not only shows the students on the significance of cross-cultural understanding in the process of communication but also gives them the experience of doing mini research, group work, writing a paper, consultation, and reporting the result..

Key words: developing, cross cultural understanding, sociolinguistic dissemination

A. Introduction

Nowadays, the significance of cultural awareness in language learning is undeniable. This is clearly shown by Kangguru Radio English in one of its columns, "Different Ponds Different Fish". This column gives us many examples

on the urgency of learning other cultures instead of the language. Learning on how to write or speak grammatical sentences does not help us much in learning English. For example, Adi, IALF teacher on Exchange to Goff's Harbour, NSW, was feeling upset when his host-mother offered him to have "tea time". He was almost angry by saying *What? Tea again? You know what? I drank a cuppa in the morning, then two at school, one more as I got home and now again? Please, I can't have anymore. Can I have water?* In fact, his host mother explained that tea time means having dinner. Adi was really embarrassed.

In addition, Mulyana (2005: 1) says that the failure of communication often arouse misunderstanding, financial loss, and even great disaster. He shows the disaster of Challenger space shuttle in 1986.

Realizing the urgency of cultural awareness in communication, English Education Department, Faculty of Languages and Arts, Yogyakarta State University, which has two study programs, they are 1) English Education and 2) English Language and Literature Study Program finds it necessary to equip its students with cross-cultural understanding. In English Education Study Program, students are provided with CCU (Cross-Cultural Understanding) course. Thus, when they become a teacher they can lead their students to be aware of not only grammatical aspects but also cultural aspects in their communication. Thus, their students can speak English appropriately. However, English Language and Literature Study Program does not provide the same subject for its students. The teaching of this issue is embedded in other subjects, e.g. sociolinguistics, pragmatics, American culture, British culture, or Australian Culture.

Sociolinguistics is taught in two semesters, that is sociolinguistics I and II. The former provides a basic understanding of the relationship between language and society while the latter is more practical. The students are expected to have an overview and experience in conducting a mini research that will be beneficial for them in writing thesis.

In this paper, I will share my personal experience in teaching sociolinguistics II. In this course I tried to apply the technique of sociolinguistic dissemination to develop the students' cross-cultural understanding. To begin my

description with, I will discuss some theoretical approaches used as the tools to reveal this phenomenon. Therefore, this description will be organized underheadings: 1) Related Literature: Sociolinguistics, Cross-cultural understanding, Intercultural Communication, and Dissemination, 2) Sociolinguistic dissemination, 3) Cultural awareness, 4) students' perception on sociolinguistic dissemination, and 5) Conclusion.

A. Related Literature

1. Sociolinguistics

A concern for the human communication implies attention to the way language is played out in societies in its full range of functions. Mesthrie (2001: 6) says that language is not just denotational, a term which refers to the process of conveying meaning, referring to ideas, events or entities that exist outside language. Using language in this function will make the speakers give off signals concerning his or her social and personal background. Language is said to be indexical of one's social class, status, region of origin, gender, age group, and so on. Gal (1989) in Mesthrie (2001: 6) argues that language is not only reflects societal patterns and divisions but also sustains and reproduces them. Chaika (1982) states "language and society are so intertwined that it is impossible to understand one without the other. There is no human society that does not depend upon, is not shaped by, and does not itself shape language.

The ways people use language in social interaction is studied in sociolinguistics. This subject covers various topics related to the study of language and society. Holmes (1995) in her book "An Introduction to Sociolinguistics" proposes three headings: 1) multilingual speech communities dealing with language choice in multilingual communities, language maintenance and shift, linguistics varieties and multilingual nations, national languages and language planning, 2) Language variation: reflecting its users dealing with regional and social dialects, sex and age, ethnicity and social networks, and social change, 3) Language variation: reflecting its uses covering style, context and register, speech function, politeness and

2) The role of sociolinguistics in foreign language classroom

Language learners are necessarily equipped not only with knowledge of language units but also that of other competence so that they can communicate effectively. Sociolinguistics can help them to improve their language ability because it trains them the relationship between language and the culture of the speakers of that language. The role of sociolinguistics in language teaching is shown by the failure of foreign language teaching, specifically English. Although learners have studied English for years, they still cannot use the language fluently. They lack of intercultural competence. They need to understand what native speakers mean when they use the language. In accordance with Hymes (1962), sociolinguists examine social and cultural influences on language behavior. Therefore, the ignorance of these aspects will contribute to the failure in language learning.

3) Language and Culture

Sociolinguistics can bridge the gap between language and culture in a way that facilitates truly effective communication, but perhaps more importantly, shows students that true understanding of a language goes beyond grammar and memorization. Just as the understanding of how one literary text is influenced by an earlier text offers additional, crucial insight into the context upon which we can more deeply analyze literature, cultural knowledge provides this same contextualization for everyday usage of language.

Language is related to culture in that language not only frames our thoughts but also reflects events that a particular culture experiences. Wardaugh (1988) shows that the phenomena of kinship systems, taxonomies, color terminology, prototype theory, and taboo and euphemism reflect the influence of culture of the language that we speak. Therefore, each language will show its own characteristics.

Cross-cultural Understanding

Nowadays, the significance of understanding cultural diversity increases. Cross-cultural understanding develops in situations which require negotiation of meaning and identity in the context of another culture. According to Jant (2004: 39), cross cultural generally refers to comparing phenomena across culture. Thus, a cross-cultural study of women's roles in society would compare what women actually do in diverse culture. The difficulties in communication with people from other culture are not only the problems in understanding their languages that we do not master but also those in understanding their cultural value. Our success in communication depends on how far we understand others' feedback (Mulyana, 2005). Therefore, the understanding toward other cultures will help someone communicate with people from those cultures. Conversely, the lack of this aspect will make us fail in any communication and even will arouse an intercultural conflict, something that is really a big problem in multicultural nations.

Intercultural communication

Intercultural communication refers to face-to-face interactions among people of diverse cultures. It can be imagined how difficult communication can be if the source and receiver are in different contexts and share few symbols ((Jant, (2001), Scolon (1995)). Although the challenges of an increasingly diverse world are great, the benefits are even greater. Communicating and establishing relationships with people from different cultures can lead to a whole host of benefits, including healthier communities; increased international, national, and local commerce; reduced conflict; and personal growth through increased tolerance (Neuliep, 2009). The success of intercultural communication will be influenced by the understanding of other cultures.

The goals of giving the task to observe the film related to intercultural communication is that the students learned the different ways people use in communicating with people from other cultures. Thus, it motivated them to find the information about each culture. This developed their cross-cultural understanding.

Dissemination

1. Definition

According to Harmswroth (2001), dissemination can be best described as the “delivering and receiving of a message”, “the engagement of an individual in a process, and “the transfer of a process or product”. It can be thought in three ways:

a. Dissemination for Awareness

It is done to make people to be aware of our project. Creating such an awareness of our project will help us build an identity and profile within our community.

b. Dissemination for Understanding

It will be important for the groups or audiences that we target directly with our dissemination have a deeper understanding of our project.

c. Dissemination for Action

Action refers to a change of practice resulting from the adoption of products, materials or approaches offered by our project. The audiences will be those people that are in a position to “influence” and “bring about change” within their organizations.

Meanwhile, Palestin (2006) comments that dissemination is an activity directed to the target groups or individuals in order to get information, to be aware of, receive and finally use it.

Based on the type or strategy that may be used, Donert (2002) and Harmswroth (2001) say that dissemination can be done by 1) electronic mailing list, 2) training, demonstration and exhibitions, 3) conference presentation and research publications, and 4) open source activities. In this class, I chose method of presentation. This method enables them to present their observation result, show the example of the analysis, and to get feedback directly.

The Implementation of Sociolinguistic Dissemination

In implementing Sociolinguistic dissemination, I incorporated some other activities:

1. Stories on intercultural conflict

In the beginning of semester, I told some stories on intercultural conflict from books related to how to communicate effectively and one column in the magazine of Kangguru Radio English “different pond different fish” focusing on the urgency of understanding other culture in communication

2. Group Division

There were 18 students joining to linguistic class, thus I divided them into six groups. Each group of 3 students chose one topic and did research. The grand topic included intercultural communication and then I selected some topics in sociolinguistics related to it. The six topics covered language and society, language variety, language choice, bilingualism and multilingualism, solidarity and politeness, and language and gender.

3. Reading assignments

To introduce them to the concept of intercultural communication and cross-cultural understanding, before doing the observation the students were assigned to read some articles related to this topic, find some examples, and then present them.

4. Explaining research format

Students were shown and explained the format of writing their research report by using an article related to intercultural communication. From this activity they learned how to write research report or scientific writing.

5. Mini Project

Each group of 3 students had an observation based on the topics that had been drawn. The film that they watched might be similar provided that they observed from different points of view. Finally, the class agreed to observe Spanglish (Spanish and American Culture), The Last Samurai (Japanese, British, and American Culture), Ana and the King (English and Siam Culture, now Thailand), and Borat (Kazakhstan and American Culture).

Having observed the issue of intercultural communication, the students should report it in the research report and disseminated in the group presentation. Each group presentation lasted about 20 minutes including question and answer.

6. Consultation

While the students were preparing the observation, they were suggested to consult their readings, format, analysis, and also their revision.

7. Feedback

In the end of the presentation session, I gave the students feedback on the strengths and weaknesses of their work. The other students might give suggestion or criticism.

8. Revision

Based on the feedback, the students should revise their research report and represent it in the second presentation. Then, revision was possibly done if there were still many weaknesses.

9. The submission of the revised report

Due to the limited time, the students should only present their research result twice with two revisions. Then, they submitted the revised report.

Cultural Awareness

Through this project, the students showed their cross-cultural understanding. It can be seen from the following quotations of their analysis.

1. From language and society

Situation 1:

In the interviewing act between Deborah and Flor before she is hired to be a housekeeper in the Classy family.

Deborah : “The job is six days a week. Seven, eight,...hours, it depends. All the housekeeping, driving the kids. How much a week do you want?”

Flor : “Whatever you say”

Deborah : “No! No. this is a very important question...”

The utterance “Whatever you say” makes Deborah surprised because she thinks that discussing wages is something common in America. It is also common for American people to say directly what their feelings are. American culture considers that all people are equal, so it is normal for them to ask how much wages they must receive for their works. On the other hand, it is inappropriate for Mexican to mention how much money he/she has to be paid for his/ her works.

Situation 2:

In the scene of Flor’s celebrating of her success in getting a new job;

Flor takes Cristina to a restaurant. There are two American men in the restaurant asking Flor to accompany them for drinking through a waitress. For their request, Flor says to the waitress, “*Who do you think you are? Can you see I’m with my daughter, for God’s sake?*”

Flor’s answer shows that she refuses the men’s request. From this answer, we know that there is a cultural problem. Both Flor and those two men have different background knowledge- different cultural background that raises the consequences of different values. In Hispanic culture, it is not common for a man who is not the woman’s husband to ask a woman for accompanying him such for drinking, hanging out, and so on, while the woman is with her kid(s). It is considered as a *taboo*.

2. Language Variations

Situation 1:

B : Borat

CD : Car Dealership Owner

B : “A man yesterday, tell me if I buy a car I must buy one with a **pussy** magnet.”

CD : “He means a car that women like.”

B : “Yes, but where do you keep this magnet?”

CD : [*interrupts*] “No. There's no magnet he just means the vehicle. Women love the Hummers.”
P : in the car dealer in America

In this conversation, Borat uses the *pussy* which refers to *a woman*. Actually, He himself who knows the meaning of that word. The American people try to understand what Borat says and he does it. In American language, the term *pussy* usually indicates the cutest animal, the cat.

Situation 2:

A: American people

B: Borat

It is common for American people to put some profanity in the middle of their speech. For example “**Shut your fuckin’ mouth!**” It also happens to Borat when he arrived in America.

B: ‘*What’s your name?*’

A: ‘*My name is ‘mind your own fuckin’ business!’*’

P: In the crowded city in New York.

B: ‘*Hi, my name a Borat, I a new in town’.*’

A: ‘*Do not touch me!*’

B: ‘*I a say hello!*’

A: ‘*Do not touch me! Make your fear out of my face!*’

B: ‘*I kiss you.*’

A: ‘*You kiss me; I will kick your fuckin’ ‘balls’!*’

This conversation shows that American people are the ones who praise their personal privacy. It is not common in America to greet someone he has just met by asking their personal life. This is very different from Kazakhstan culture and nature to greet everyone they just met, specifically when they greet the men they do cheek-kiss towards another which is considered as gay relations in America.

3. Language and Gender

Situation 1

In the palace, Anna was welcomed by the Prime Minister of Siam. Anna wishes to have a warming and nice welcome. Unfortunately, she gets lack of respect.

- Interpreter : **Mrs.** Leonowens
He's Excellency Chao Phya Kralahome, the Prime Minister of Siam.
- Anna : (Nodding her head)
- Interpreter : (Pay attention to the Prime Minister's words)
Have you any friends in Bangkok, **Sir**?
- Anna : No. I know no one here.
The Prime Minister says something in Siam language.
- Interpreter : **Sir** is married?
- Anna : A widower. Can you explain to me why you are calling me '**Sir**'?
- Interpreter : Women do not stand in the presence of His Excellency.
- Anna : (Silent momentarily)

First of all, the interpreter addresses Anna by saying 'Mrs.' when he introduces her to the Prime Minister. However, when the Prime Minister engages in the conversation, the interpreter addresses Anna by saying 'Sir'. This is quite awkward because in England (where Anna comes from) the term 'Sir' belongs to male. As a female, Anna feels embarrassed. She then asks the interpreter why he chooses the vocabulary 'Sir' in a high-rising tone. The interpreter says that in Siam, women get lack of respect in front of noblemen. To equalize, women then are called 'Sir'. This addressing system shows the differences between Siam and English culture towards gender. English culture regards 'Sir' or 'Mr.' for male. On the contrary, 'Mrs.' or 'Miss. /Ms.' stands for female. Those different addressing terms show that men and women are different but somewhat 'equal'. However, in Siam, women do not get respect in front of noblemen. Even, it seems that women are not considered respectable or worthy to talk to them (the noblemen). Therefore, the women are forced to be called 'Sir' instead of any other addressing term for female to make the women worthy to talk to the noblemen.

Situation 2:

Prince Chulalongkorn and Louis Leonowens fight during the class.

Prince Chulalongkorn : Son of teacher forgets that I am son of King.
Louis Leonowens : Son of teacher couldn't careless.
Anna Leonowens : Louis!
Louis Leonowens : **I'm sorry mother**, but he started it.
Prince Chulalongkorn : **In my country, man never tells a woman he is sorry.**
If you had a father, you would know this.

They continue fighting...

Louis apologizes to his mother. Then, the Prince who hears his apology feels shocked. He then says that a man never tells apology to a woman. This case shows the different behaviors towards gender problems in intercultural communication.

Louis, as an English man, thinks it is a must to apologize because he goes wrong to his mother. However, the Prince, the Siamese, thinks on the contrary. The different cultural backgrounds they have create a looming problem towards genders.

4. Solidarity and Politeness

Japanese apply politeness based on their social hierarchy or position. The effect is Japanese will not argue to someone who has a higher position on their society. Their custom appreciates those people even if they are younger.

Emperor : ... I need your voice in the Council

Katsumoto : It is your voice we need, Highness...

The conversation shows how Japanese respect a person who has in a higher position in their society. Katsumoto doesn't give advice to the Emperor even he asks for it.

From these examples of the analysis of their observation, it is known that the students tried to find the information related to each culture, why a certain culture has different behavior compared to the others. They also learned that the lack of understanding other culture will lead to the intercultural conflict.

The student perception about sociolinguistic dissemination

Having finished their second revised report, they students were invited to give comment toward the effectiveness of sociolinguistic dissemination in developing their cross-cultural understanding. The following quotations are authentic and unedited statements cited from the interview:

Statement 1 : Dulu ada laporannya tetapi tidak lapangan. Jadi kami membaca buku kemudian ditambah dengan sumber-sumber lainnya. Tidak kita teliti tapi menyampaikan apa yang kita abaca. Jadi tidak ada pengamatan.

Statement 2:berbeda sekali karena kita dituntut harus meneliti dan harus mencari banyak source dan harus merevisi, kalau dulu hanya mementingkan content. kalau sekarang gaya penulisan, tapi kita tahu dari revisi.

Statement 3: Iya, kita jadi tahu budaya dari budaya2 lain. Misalnya budaya kazakhtan, Jepang, America. Sehingga ketika kita ke negara lain tidak terjadi cultural shock.

Statement 4 :waktu kita amat sangat sedikit. Kita harus bekerja bagian yang berbeda-beda dan masalah2 teknis dan itu perlu waktu padahal waktu kita sedikit dan mau oper-opernya bermasalah. Mungkin itu yang membuat kita lack of preparation.

Statement 5 : kalau itu kasus saja. Itu karena saya terbiasa bekerja sendiri dan jarang mendapat kerja kelompok seperti ini. Ada sih kelebihanya bekerja dalam kelompok, kita jadi dapat teori-teori yang berbeda. Bisa sharing lah.

Statement 6 :lebih ke cross cultural understanding. Kebetulan per siswa dibagi menurut Negara dan membuat laporan 2/3 lembar tapi mungkin lebih kearah understandingnya.

Statement 7 : pemahaman ke cross-cultural understanding sedikit banyak bertambah. Kan kita bekerja dalam kelompok. Kan ketika harus presentasi kita kan harus mengerti dulu sebelum menjelaskan. Jadi kita mengerti dulu.

Statement 8 :dan sulitnya mencari film. Ini film yang ke-9.

Statement 9 : kalau konsultasi tersedia. Cuma itu tergantung partisipannya. Jujur kelompok kami tidak pernah konsultasi. Karena waktunya tidak bisa. Mau konsultasi sendiri, bagaimana menyampaikannya lagi. Jadi kelompok kami tidak. Kami lihat kelompok yang gencar konsultasi dan hasilnya bagus.

Statement 10 : mendingan kelompok. Banyak untungnya. Pertama tenaga. Kalau kelompok terorganisir dan ada tugas-tugas sendiri.

These comments show that sociolinguistic dissemination is beneficial not only for developing the students' cross-cultural understanding but also for giving them experience in group work, reading assignment, doing a mini research, and writing a research report.

Conclusion and Suggestion

The implementation of sociolinguistic dissemination in Sociolinguistics II not only shows the students on the significance of cross cultural understanding in the process of communication but also gives them the experience of doing mini research, group work, writing a paper, consultation, and reporting the result.. Therefore, it is necessary to equip them with cross-cultural understanding to face

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