

INTEGRATING TARGET LANGUAGE CULTURE INTO TEACHING-LEARNING EFL

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ABSTRACT

An important aspect of learning a language is to learn the culture of the language. The actual relationship between the two cannot be separated, because a language serves a particular culture and through the language the cultural values of a people are reflected. Therefore, the role of English teachers is very important in the teaching of language and culture that should always be linked together in the teaching-learning of language. The purpose of this study was to discover the perceptions of EFL teachers on integrating teaching-learning about English culture into EFL classrooms and to investigate whether or not the EFL teachers supported acquisition of cross-cultural understanding by their students. To get their results, the researchers collected data from observations in three English classrooms to look at the integration of teaching-learning about culture into the EFL teaching-learning processes. After the observations, the researchers interviewed the three teachers about the integration of culture into the EFL classroom. Then the researchers analyzed, condensed and displayed the data and drew conclusions. The results of this study showed that the EFL teachers were aware of the importance of studying the English culture but one of them did not yet focus on integrating English culture into teaching-learning EFL. This was due to several factors such as the lack of English language knowledge of the teacher and insufficient time for teaching theory and language structures.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Awareness, Teaching Culture, Culture and Language.

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INTRODUCTION

The current approach to the teaching of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) or English as a Second Language (ESL) does not only involve linguistic competence just like the grammar based approach, but also includes intercultural competence (Cakir, 2006; Yeganeh and Raeesi, 2015; Cheng, 2012). Mastering a language well is not only done by knowing or by understanding how to use the structure and vocabulary of the language, but it also needs understanding of the culture that uses that language itself. In this way students will know how linguistic knowledge they learn can be used appropriately. Actually, becoming aware of other cultures is a difficult task because culture is not easily conscious to us. In other words, understanding the culture of a language is very important in communication. If students neglect it, there can be misunderstanding during communication. Hence, a teacher should know how to promote students' understanding of the main cultures that use English as their mother tongue.

In order to teach English culture to students, teachers are required to be aware of the importance of cross-cultural aspects in teaching a foreign language. Thus, a teacher needs to know how to transfer culture in teaching language. Then, she can apply it in her teaching and help her students to have intercultural competence (Reid, 2015; Abbaspour, Nia & Zare, 2012; Yue, 2014). However, there are some problems that English teachers face when integrating English culture into teaching. These problems are concerned with how to provide the cultural information needed or what to teach as students often do not realize that their teacher is attempting to teach aspects of the target language culture (Leigh, 2001).

Moreover, the reason for someone to take a language class is not just to get a degree or to obtain a good job easily, because the most important goal in learning a language is to be able to communicate effectively whether for interpersonal or transactional communication. So, Zhou (2011) agrees with Seelye's (1993) suggestion that when we consider the language as a communication tool, it cannot be kept out of the cultural framework of that language. Without cultural knowledge, it is difficult to understand the meaning of the language. This is because language and culture are closely connected. In this regard, Agar (1994, p. 28) has asserted that "culture is in language and language is loaded with culture", because it should be automatically integrated when

teachers teach a language, the teaching of the culture of that language must not be neglected.

A study about integrating the target culture into an EFL classroom was conducted by Atay, Kurt, Çamlıbel, Ersin and Kaslioglu (2009) in Valdes (1986) in Turkey. They studied Turkish teachers of English - a group of 503 EFL teachers were surveyed and asked questions about their intercultural competence reflected in their classroom applications. They found that although the Turkish teachers did not often integrate culture into their teaching, they were aware of the role of culture in foreign language education. A similar study was conducted by Zhou (2011), in China, who investigated the teachers' existing beliefs about and practices of culture in teaching. He surveyed 201 Chinese university EFL lecturers to collect quantitative data and interviewed eight teachers in depth to get a similar result to that which was found in the study by Atay et al. above. Although most teachers realize the importance of teaching culture in an EFL classroom, it usually still does not become the focus of their teaching.

Based on the findings of previous research and the reasons mentioned above, the researchers were motivated to observe EFL teachers who were expected to promote the acquisition of cross-cultural understanding to their learners. The aim of this study was to discover EFL teachers' perceptions and to investigate their teaching activities and inter-relationship of language and culture in the process of teaching-learning of EFL.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Culture and Language

The word culture is difficult to define; it has been conceptualized in different ways. When someone listens to the term 'culture', automatically she imagines it as customs, rituals, norms, beliefs and values. If she has time to think more, she begins to mention attitudes, arts, fashions, foods, and even specialities such as traditional foods. The word 'culture' has a very broad concept, embracing all aspects of human life.

Culture involves a big concept. Samovar, Porter, and McDaniel (2010) have stated that culture has five main components which can distinguish one culture from another. They are history, religion, values, social organizations and language. A history of an area can build the identity and behavior of the history's owners. Similarly, the influence

of religion and values can be seen in every aspect of the culture that makes the owners of that culture have rules to follow; social organizations such as families and communities, and government also reflect our culture and language is an essential element in order to help in culture transmission. Culture can be learned, shared and passed down from generation to generation, based on symbols and dynamic integrated systems.

According to Nault (2006, p. 314), “Language and culture, it could be said, represent two sides of the same coin”. Many researchers have found close relationships between language and culture whereby language and culture mutually reflect each other hence the language is a reflection of the culture and the culture is reflected in the language. Liddicoat, Papademetre, Scarino and Kohler (2003) have argued that language and culture are closely related to each other, a language is part of a culture, and culture is part of a language. The linkage between them cannot be separated, if so, the benefits of one of them will then be lost. Through the use of language we can understand the values, beliefs, and perspectives that exist in a culture. On the other hand, when we consider the language as communication, language cannot be separated from the cultural context in which the communication occurs. Without knowledge of the culture, it would be difficult to understand meanings in the language (Seelye, 1993).

Integrating Target Language Culture

Englebert (2004) asserts that teaching a foreign language also means teaching a foreign culture, and hence it is important for language teachers to teach the foreign culture and to be sensitive to the fact that our students, our colleges, our administrators, and, if we live abroad, our neighbors will not share all of the cultural paradigms. Therefore, in order to teach culture in the language classroom correctly, we need to know the way to present it. Involving culture in real language activities will be more realistic for students. When language is put into context, the knowledge that is gained by students will be long remembered. For example, in the contextual activities of learning about ‘time’, students have to find out about the time and use of time appropriately in the target country culture and compare it with the time in their own country or they can also compare it with other countries - e.g. the use of AM/PM, the time limits of morning, noon, afternoon, evening and night. Such activities train students in three important things at once;

they are communication skills, vocabulary and grammar as well as culture.

This shows the importance of adding culture to everyday foreign language learning. The interrelationship between language learning and learning about culture can be defined such that learning the language is learning a set of cultural norms and unconsciously that teaching of language is teaching culture (Gao, 2006). For instance, when teaching *Bahasa Indonesia* in Australia, the teaching of *Bahasa* itself cannot be separated from the norms of Indonesian culture that are applied by Indonesians themselves. Foreigners, non-indonesians, have to learn the division of time in Indonesia, Indonesian table manners, how to greet or show respect to old people in Indonesia and to youngsters too, how to ask for help, what are sensitive topics which should be avoided in a conversation, and the converse and so on. Learning a language is not only learning and mastering vocabulary, grammar and collocations. Likewise, Wang (2008) states that foreign language teaching is teaching-learning foreign culture and foreign language teachers are also teachers of foreign culture, they cannot be separated.

However, teachers have to keep in mind that they have to put the linguistic aspects of a language in context by doing activities such as focusing on the cultural context, or they have to expand the cultural activities and insert vocabulary and grammar into them. Teaching culture should not be isolated from everything else because it is part of a language and must be integrated in the classroom. As Brown (1994) has said, language is part of culture and culture is part of language; both are integrated complexly, and it is impossible that both of them can be separated without losing part of their crucial roles. Therefore, culture cannot be something that is learned on a particular day, it must be inserted and integrated into daily teaching-learning activities.

Seelye (1993) has formulated a super goal for teaching culture, where students will develop an understanding of cultural attitudes and performance skills that they need to apply in the society whose language they are learning, so that they can then communicate well. By learning English, an EFL student allows himself to become a part of the international language community. This target language can be used as a tool for interaction with people from all over the world, where communication in English takes place in areas such as commerce, government, science, technology, entertainment, tourism and many others (Samad & Fitriani, 2016). It is obvious that to function successfully in a culturally diverse environment, learners need to

develop intercultural communicative competence (Alptekin, 2002). Successful international communication is one of the reasons to introduce the intercultural approach into EFL classrooms.

While students can learn English while in the EFL classroom (Samad et al., 2017) they often have little opportunity to use English outside of the classroom. This limited access will reflect on their ability to be culturally competent. Hence, students need the help of the teacher to ensure that they understand the culture of the foreign language being learned.

The Influence of Culture on Foreign Language Teaching

To understand the importance of culture we need to know the extent to which cultural background influences language learning. To explain the role of culture in language learning, Choudhury (2014) has explained the function of culture in skills such as vocabulary, listening, speaking, reading and even in translation as set out below:

Cultural Influence on Vocabulary

Language demonstrates that culture and vocabulary are intertwined. Cultural differences will definitely show up in vocabulary, and the explanation and use of vocabulary will also reflect cultural differences. For example, my friend who interned in Japan said the Japanese workers would greet their office colleagues when leaving the office. Then he tried to follow that Japanese culture, when he left the office so he said *Mata ne* (See you later). He used correct vocabulary and the sentence was grammatically correct, but it was still not culturally appropriate. Then, he found out that the Japanese would say *Osaki ni Shitsurei shimasu* (Excuse me for leaving before you), which was a 'more polite' parting greeting in their opinion.

Another example is when translating into English, students often use the same words to indicate several different activities, whereas in the target language culture such activities are clearly referred to differently. Such examples cited below were found by the researchers when teaching English at a remote school in North Aceh. There they use the word 'cook' for several different cooking activities. As in cook the rice, *boil* the water, *stir fry* the vegetables, and *steam* the chocolate pudding. In addition, they would also use the word 'cut' for all sorts of cutting activities. Whereas if an English person wanted to cut some vegetables into small pieces they could use the words 'chop' or 'slice' (chop or slice the onion) or 'dice' or 'grate' (dice or grate the carrot, the

word ‘carve’ for cutting up roast meat, the word ‘crush’ to separate by force (eg., crush garlic), or the word ‘cut’ to separate using a sharp knife (eg., cut into strips a chicken breast), and so on.

Thus, learning a language does not only imply knowledge about the rules of grammar and the denotative meaning of words, but also involves many other important things such as cultural phenomenon, ways of life, habits and customs. Because culture is comprehensive with abundant relationships and implications, each factor will likely be shown using different vocabulary. So, learning foreign vocabulary needs care to note cultural factors, which are very important and crucial to understanding.

Cultural Influence on Listening

According to Choudhury (2014), after listening practice, students often complain that even though they have spent a lot of time in learning and practicing listening skills, their results are still unsatisfactory. The reasons for this are, of course, assorted, including lack of vocabulary, weak knowledge of grammar and poor grasp of pronunciation. Besides those, they do not have the cultural knowledge background of the language because comprehension is really related to the culture, politics and economics of the target language. In addition, a person’s ability to hear also depends on their background knowledge, including their level of mastery of English and its culture and their analytical and imaginative capabilities.

For instance, all students may have had an experience when they are listening to something with a topic that is already familiar to them; no matter what topic is discussed, e.g. stories, religion, art, science, sports, economics, or politics, which remains relatively easy for them to understand. Even if there are unfamiliar words, they can still guess the meaning. However, it will be difficult for them to understand, if the topic being delivered is not familiar with their background knowledge, experience and culture. The importance of the role culture plays in our listening ability cannot be emphasised too much: it can assist or it can obstruct, so we have to be sensitive to it.

Cultural Influences on Speaking

The ability to speak is not only related to pronunciation or intonation, but students need to read more to understand the background knowledge of the target language culture and the rhetorical pattern of speaking events, so that they can communicate smoothly and

competently (Samad & Fitriani, 2016). So in speaking practice, Choudhury (2014) argues that teachers should emphasize the use of language practically and use learning materials from everyday life. This can help students use the right words in the right context. Otherwise, although they may have been very well trained in the use of grammar, they will still have problems with collocations which can cause misunderstandings because of their lack of knowledge about the culture.

It will be useless if their foreign language grammar skills are perfect, but they do not have the cultural knowledge to speak well in that foreign language, as well as the non-verbal language knowledge commonly used by the foreign community, such as eye contact, appropriate separation distance during a conversation, appropriate hand gestures and so on.

Cultural Influences on Reading

According to Sindhu and Gandhi (2015), the process of reading is not just simply a repetition and reappearance of the language knowledge of students, but it is a complicated process to decode, recognize, analyze, judge and conclude the material through a cognitive system. So it is very important for us to know about non-verbal information, such as: background information on humanism, history, geography, and traditional local customs, etc. Linguistic knowledge can indeed affect a person's ability to read, but cultural factors also play an important role. Background information, words, sentences, and structure of the text create cultural differences between the target language and our mother tongue which can cause misunderstandings.

Students perhaps don't have enough experience to understand the meaning of every word in a text, but they can still understand the core meaning or the purpose of the written text. So we can see that cultural knowledge has an important influence on reading comprehension because the writing style and the work of someone is always influenced by their culture.

Cultural Influences on Translations

Regarding translations for the course we know that culture plays an important role. Choudhury (2014) explains that the difficulty in translation mainly lies in understanding the cultural background knowledge. The knowledge of cultural background includes many aspects, such as art, history, geography, philosophy, science, etc. In

translating, students need to have sufficient knowledge of both languages and both cultures– i.e. the target language and culture and the source language and culture.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

This research was done qualitatively. The subjects of this study were three EFL teachers from different high schools in Banda Aceh. Particularly, this research is a descriptive study where the subjects for this research were selected by using purposeful sampling. The researchers deliberately chose the participants and their schools to observe the central phenomenon. The object of this study was the teachers' perceptions of integrating the target language culture into their teaching of EFL. The researchers wanted to get the data about the teachers' perceptions of teaching the target culture and how their teaching-learning activities could help their students acquire the necessary cross-cultural understanding.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

Results

Generally, the teachers understand the meaning of culture, but two of the teachers (Teacher B and Teacher C) could not define the meaning of culture based on their profession as a language teacher. Nevertheless, Teacher C was aware of the importance of teaching about culture in the EFL classroom. According to her, teaching the English culture will make it easier for students to understand the teaching-learning materials used by the teacher because the students will know how to apply the theories they have learnt. This can also help prevent the students from misunderstanding the language they have learnt, because by learning about the language and the culture at the same time, the students will learn how to use it correctly (Brooks, 1986, in Valdes, 1986).

Each of the teachers has had their own experiences, so that they could feel the importance of teaching their students about the culture of the target language. The teachers' goals were to make their students have additional knowledge and experience of EFL learning, so that someday later this knowledge can be used. In other words, if the students have the opportunity to continue their education or career to a

country that uses the target language, then they will already have a little knowledge in order not to feel too much culture shock.

The way they taught the culture of the target language was not done directly; they usually integrated the cultural information into the material discussed. The material about culture was sometimes planned, but generally the teachers tended to share their cultural knowledge spontaneously. It all depended on the circumstances in the classroom. Much material about culture associated with the English language is already provided in the textbooks, and besides, it is also derived and adopted by the teachers from the Internet, from magazines and newspapers and even from their own experiences.

Thus, the students become more interested to learn English because they know clearly how to apply the skills they learn and they will have the sense of belonging to the language. The students' interest is seen in the teaching-learning processes; they are really enthusiastic in asking and responding to the teachers' questions. In this case the teachers are required to be able to sort out the cultural knowledge which they will teach to the students, because there are some target language cultural aspects with values contrary to the local cultural values. Typically the cultural aspects that will be taught are such expressions as the ways of giving thanks, how to introduce ourselves, how to offer something, how to respond to something, how to express something, and so on. In other words, they are more interested in studying the small-c culture because actually these kinds of culture are closely related to the daily lives of native speakers. So that communications with native speakers may be fluent, and learning these various expressions will help the students to communicate properly.

Although every teacher knows the importance of culture in language classes, there was one teacher who restricted cultural teaching-learning in her class. She argued that the students will forget their own culture if they learn a lot about a foreign culture. In fact, in the researchers' opinion this perception is wrong. By teaching the target language culture, the students will know more about their own culture as well. Because when the teacher gives an example of the target language culture, the teacher should also compare the example with the students' culture so that they are better able to understand the example of it easily. Thus this erroneous perception has led the teaching of culture conducted by that teacher to be cut.

In addition, the main reason behind this concerned some practical problems, including lack of time, issues of contradictions with the local

culture, even the inadequacy of the teachers' knowledge of the English cultural norms to share with their students. Thus, if the teachers know how to combine language and culture in the teaching of language in a flexible way, they can solve the problem easily and even make their lessons more interesting. Moreover, in this era, the teaching of language and culture will be greatly assisted by the impact of information technology and globalization so that the students can gain access to many cultural resources and can explore the target culture by themselves.

Discussion

Overall based on the data obtained it became clear that all the subject teachers believed and were aware of the importance of integrating the target culture into the target language class. However, some of the teachers not only recognized that integrating culture was really important, but they also applied it in their teaching-learning processes, and some of their activities were in accordance with the teaching of culture techniques provided by Stern (1992), who said that teachers should create an authentic classroom environment by using real life objects that they bring to the class such as photos of seasons from overseas countries. Then, the teachers can also provide a culture capsule; they can compare cultural information from the local culture with the target culture. In the activities in Teacher C's classes, she explained what is acceptable and what is unacceptable in interacting with native speakers or local people and in the activities in Teacher A's class, she explained the different ways for responding to a compliment.

However, Teacher B did not apply those techniques for teaching culture. In fact, although she brought some pictures; she did not actually link them to the English culture. For instance, when she showed a picture related to the seasons, she should not only tell the students about the differences in the number of seasons, but, she could have associated them with what native English speakers commonly do during those seasons, so the students could have had new points of view which could raise their curiosity.

At other times, teachers A and C also applied different behavioral aspects and effective techniques in the form of mini-dramas or role play performances. They sometimes also watched films, which are in the role of literature and humanities techniques in Stern's techniques for teaching culture. The last technique they also applied was real life

exposure to the targeted culture by inviting an English native speaker to talk to their classes.

The last finding, a touching one, is that one of the sample teachers got the spirit for teaching English culture because she herself had experienced culture shock when visiting several countries in order to continue her studies. Because of her experiences, this teacher did not want her students to face the same experience. Coming to another country without preparation about the country's culture is a mistake. She feels she has a moral responsibility to teach the English language correctly and appropriately, that is integrating culture with the target language so that her students know how to use the material they learn appropriately.

CONCLUSIONS AND SUGGESTIONS

Conclusions

Based on the results from the interviews, they showed that teachers A and C understood the meaning of culture and that they had the same perception of the importance of integrating the English culture into their EFL classroom. This was not without reason; each of them had had her own experiences related to the role of cultural knowledge. Thus they tried to ensure that their students would not experience culture shock. However, there was still one teacher (Teacher B) who had the perception that integrating her own culture was more important than integrating the English culture with EFL teaching. She argued that her students will forget their own culture if they have a lot of input about the English culture. The differences in the teachers' perceptions can thus give a different impact to the teaching-learning processes which will then also influence the mindset of the students.

Therefore, based on the results of the observations in Teacher B's class, it shows that the teaching-learning processes do not always support 'acquisition of cross cultural understanding by the students, as a result most of the students got bored during her teaching-learning activities which were more focused on teaching structure. Unlike Teacher B, teachers A and C supported the students' acquisition of cross cultural understanding during the teaching-learning processes, and thus the students in these classes were not only more excited about learning EFL and its culture but they also enhanced their own knowledge about their own culture.

Suggestions

Based on the result of this research, the researchers strongly suggest that English teachers integrate the target language culture into the EFL teaching-learning processes. English teachers cannot separate teaching language from the culture with which it is integrated because one is related to the other, so that students will be more highly interested and motivated in learning EFL, and they will get a better understanding of the language.

In addition, it is expected that teachers should be more aware of the importance of the English culture in learning the English language. So teachers can increase their students' cross-cultural understanding in order to improve their communication skills. Teachers should not have to worry that students will forget their own culture when teachers integrate the English culture into their language classes, because teachers can still insert the local culture in comparative examples with the English culture thus it will support the students' ability to master the English language and also will get them closer to their own culture.

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