

FUNCTIONING LOCAL CULTURE IN EFL READINGS

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Abstract

Curriculum has mandated that communicative competence is the main objective of teaching English in Indonesia. Therefore, target culture is embedded with language in classroom. Globalization, in other hand, has imposed teachers to reconsider the inclusion of local culture. Reading material is one of the medium to promote local culture. This paper elaborates schemata theory and cultural aspects included in reading materials utilized by students.

Keywords: local culture, reading materials, schemata

1. Introduction

The objective of teaching English as stated in national curriculum is achieving communicative competence. This competence is defined as the ability to communicate appropriately. Several models of communicate competence are proposed, and one of the popular model is described by Celce-Murcia, Dornyei, and Thurrell (1995) in which communicative language ability is composed by five competences, namely discourse, linguistic, actional, strategic, and sociocultural competence. It further explains that in order to communicate accurately, students have to concern with the knowledge of arrangement and structure of words, phrases, and sentences, ability to harmonize actional intent with linguistic form, knowledge of communication strategy, and awareness to appropriately convey message in the context of sociocultural.

To achieve communicative competence, in addition, implies that language and culture is interconnected. Culture is the basis of communication since the meaning conveyed in language used depends on society where they live, and the

communication is delivered through language (Rajabi & Ketabi, 2012; Shahed, 2013). Culture rules, promotes, or even obstructs the communication. The knowledge of culture will later determine language forms in different conditions and circumstances. It is not surprising that Zu and Kong (2009) declare the unfeasibility of foreign language acquisition with the absence of cultural understanding. In other words, teaching language is never been done without the elements of culture.

Before the trend of communicative competence is spread over, cultural knowledge has been introduced implicitly in language classroom. It is reported that the teaching of culture was started in early 1950s when the grammar translation method was applied in classroom. It aimed to facilitate students' comprehension toward literature readings. The trend of teaching culture shifted in the era of audio-lingual method. Cultural elements were introduced by exposing students with phrases used for daily conversation. Thus, students were expected to be able to communicate appropriately (Xiao, 2010). Since people from different culture are contacted each other in the era of globalization, the nature teaching English and culture is affected. The function of English as lingua franca is not associated to particular culture of those who speak it as a first language (Clouet, 2006; Rajabi & Ketabi, 2006). Moreover, cultural context is always attached with the region in which English is taught and used (Rattanaphumma, 2006). Andarab (2014) further explains *English for Specific Culture* that shifts common paradigm in language pedagogy which he mentions as *English of Specific Culture*. It implicates the culture brought in classroom that is not longer the domain of either British or American culture as target culture. Local culture is highlighted. The need of local culture in EFL learning setting is in the basis of developing students' awareness toward their own culture to socialize with global citizen. In other words, the terminal aim of local culture involvement is students are able to communicate effectively through their own culture and beliefs (Clouet, 2006).

The culturally localized reading material is beneficial for students, mostly for beginner students. Local culture is preferred by students, and it directs to employment of local culture as the theme of reading materials (Rattanaphumma,

2006; Liu & Laohawiriyanon, 2013; Thinley & Maxwell, 2013; Ningtyas, 2016). Moreover, a study by Erten and Razi (2009) revealed that local culture which is familiar to students is more comprehensible. In short, the familiarity of the content of reading materials leads to enjoyment and comprehension due to schemata theory.

This paper attempts to describe the inclusion of local culture in EFL context and its benefits in grasping students' affective and cognitive domain.

2. Theoretical Background

The Aspects of Culture in Language Pedagogy

Culture depends on society who lives in particular area. Rajabi and Kertabi (2012) identify culture as systems of knowledge, such as values, beliefs, and attitudes, notions of appropriate behaviour, statuses, role expectations, and worldview, shared by a group of people. In addition, Adaskou, Britten & Fahsi (1990) defines culture in four levels based on senses, namely aesthetic, sociological, semantic, and sociolinguistics. Aesthetic sense relates to beauty, consequently, it includes cinema, literature, music, and media. Sociological one refers to the organization and relation covering the nature of family, interpersonal relations, customs, material conditions, and so on. Conceptualization system which conditions perceptions and thought processes is the domain of semantic sense, while sociolinguistic sense refers to linguistic ability needed to convey communication.

Defining culture is challenging so that there is no single definition of culture since the concept culture itself is too broad and dynamic (Liu & Laohawiriyanon, 2013; Xiao, 2010; Clouet, 2006). Therefore, the concept of culture is classified into two terms, namely big "C" culture and little "c" culture (Xiao, 2010). Big "C" culture refers to depiction of a set of facts and statistics and achievement or products of certain society (Lee, 2009; Xiao, 2010). The themes under the Big "C" culture are arts, history, geography, economy and business, education, festivals and customs. Little "c" culture, on the other hand, focuses on minor themes of culture covering every aspect of human life, such as living style, customs, rules, opinions, viewpoints, preferences or tastes, gestures, body posture, use of space, clothing

styles, food, hobbies, popular music, and popular issues, and certain knowledge (Peterson, 2004; Xiao, 2010).

Relating the culture to language pedagogy, question appearing is which C employed (Clandfield, 2008). Neither Big “C” nor little “c” is an option to previous question. Both have to appear in language pedagogy to contribute appropriate communication among speakers from different nationalities (Liu & Laohawiriyanon, 2013). However, some studies indicated that the interest toward which elements of culture is somewhat different. In his study, although Xiao (2010) found out students preferred more big “C” elements, i.e history, education, and politics, the most popular element chosen was lifestyle which is under little ‘c’ culture. In another study, big ‘C’ was also slightly preferred over small ‘c’ culture. However, the most favored elements of big ‘C’ culture were geography, science, and holiday. Students’ preference seems individual, and it cannot be generalized. Thus, Clandfield (2008) suggests teachers to do survey aiming to recognize elements of culture that are interesting for students.

Familiarity of Local Culture Reading Materials and Learning Domain

McKay (2000) categorizes three types of cultural materials: target culture materials, local culture materials, and international target culture materials. Target culture materials belong to cultural aspects of intended language being learnt. It can be British or American culture. On the other hand, local culture is students’ native culture, either regional or national culture. Lastly, international target culture materials involve culture other than target and local culture. Culture in language teaching has been always linked with culture of target language, international and local culture are somewhat less favoured and neglected (Xiao, 2010; Kirkgoz & Agcam, 2011; Shahed, 2013). The paradigm of language pedagogy has transformed from formal aspects of language into students as language users (James, 2000). As a result, local culture gains more attention. Regarding to learning domain, local culture is alleged advantageous to affective and cognitive domain due to its familiarity to students.

Affective domain relates to attitude, motivation, or anxiety in learning foreign language (Henter, 2014). Language teaching with local culture influences attitude and motivation (Clouet, 2006). In a study done by Shahed (2013), teachers revealed that students are reluctant to read any materials which are culturally alien. The culturally alien reading materials are contextually irrelevant, uninteresting, or confusing, even for undergraduate students. In contrast, culturally familiar materials provide a comfort zone for students (Sinhaneti, 2015). A study by Thinley & Maxwell (2013) strengthens the previous statement. Since students emotionally felt safe, their interest to learn English through folklore reading increased. Therefore, culturally familiar reading material made students actively participated in discussion and learning.

Comprehension is the ongoing cognitive process of extracting meaning from the written passage. Students comprehend local culture texts better because they are familiar with the content of texts. The theory of schemata explains this phenomenon. Ajideh (2003) defines schemata as hypothetical mental structure for representing generic concepts stored in memory. Past experiences associated with community, entity, or event take role in generating schemata. The schemata are distinguished in three different dimensions, namely linguistic, formal, and content schemata. Linguistic schemata are the knowledge of language, while formal schemata deal with knowledge of the rhetorical structures of different types of texts. The knowledge or familiarity of text is the part of content schemata (Gilakjani & Ahmadi, 2011; Brantmeier, 2004; Chou, 2011).

Familiarity takes role in comprehending the text. Constructing meaning of the text is not done just by decoding word-by-word meaning or relying on the text. Content schemata stored in memory assisting to build contextual clues which are beyond the text, and meaning construction entails thinking process with reasoning beyond the text derived from schemata (Chou, 2011).

Comparing local and target culture reading material, Erten and Razi (2009) found out that the local one was more beneficial for students' comprehension. Four groups of students compared read the same short story, however two groups had the story nativized into Turkish. The nativization process included the changes of

some cultural elements, such as characters' names, local places, and conceptual cues. Groups of students who read localized culture material gained significantly higher score. Having sufficient background knowledge of the text, students' cognitive load on memory was slighter to focus on linguistic and organizational feature of the text. This finding is in line with Li & Lai (2012) who found out culturally familiar text facilitated comprehension. It was also found out that students spent less time to read local culture-based text. Regarding to comprehension, familiarity of local culture relates to top-down processing that enables readers to make inferences from implicit statements. As the result, students participating in the study read faster the text related to their own culture.

Local Culture Reading Materials

Reading materials appear in commercially sold textbook seem limited when it comes to familiarity of the topic chosen (Kanoksilapatham, 2015). It can be said that the number of local culture materials are still inadequate. Analyzing three different textbooks, Dehbozorgi, Amalsaleh, and Kafipour (2014) uncovered the emphasis on target than source or local culture. Cultural content is another concern because the mismatch occurred between the content and students' interest. In relation to these phenomena, teacher can either adapt or develop local culture reading materials to assist students' comprehension. The concerns of either adapting oot developing reading materials rely on the topics and format.

That culture is categorized into big 'C' or small 'c' culture affects wide range of theme selection. Exposure to of local culture can be referred by cities, geography, cuisine, or drink in a story description (Erten & Razi, 2009). Thinley and Maxwell (2013) employed folklore as reading material in Bhutanese context. Culture can also be represented by performance art, historical site, or traditional fabrics (Utami, Nitiasih, & Artini, 2014; Kanoksilapatham, 2015; Ningtyas, 2016). Thus, teacher can survey students' interest by listing the elements of both big 'C' and small 'c' culture.

There are various possibilities of the format of reading materials. Rajabi and Ketabi (2006) suggest that local culture reading materials can be in form of

informative or descriptive text, attitudes and opinions texts, human-interest texts which are authentic or fictitious with details of everyday life. To sum up, the format chosen is varied depending on the objective of language teaching.

3. Conclusion

Communicative competence mandated by national curriculum obligates the attendance of local culture. The emphasis of local culture in global era, furthermore, aims to get EFL students ready to mingle with other native or non-native speakers of English. Different linguistic and cultural norms help students understand how language works with culture and provide students chance to use English in different cultural context (Andarab, 2014). Elements of culture appearing have to represent both big ‘C’ and small ‘c’ culture.

Local culture reading material is valuable in the context of learning English as foreign language. Familiarity of the reading material boosts students’ interest and motivates them to read. Moreover, active participation during learning is achieved due to the use of local culture reading material. It is also proven that culturally familiar reading materials are beneficial to assist students’ comprehension. As students have background knowledge of the content, they can focus more on linguistics and generic structure of the text or passage being read. Considering the advantages, finally, it is suggested to teachers to either adapt or develop local culture reading materials that match students’ interest and fulfil pedagogical goal.

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