

INDONESIAN LEARNER CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS AND PERCEPTION TOWARD WESTERN CULTURE

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Abstract

This paper argues that to have a successful learning of English in Indonesian schools, the consideration of culture should be at the forefront. That is, it is acknowledged that to learn English as a second or foreign language cannot be separated from the target language culture or the western culture. On the other hand, the perspective of English as global or international language allows the integration or use of students' local cultural background into the teaching materials. To shed light on this critical issue, this study seeks to describe Indonesian learners' characteristic cultural backgrounds and their perception toward western culture. Relying on a literature study and the first author's experience and observation, the findings show that Indonesian learners share the culturally embedded characteristics of passivity, shyness, and lack of critical thinking, while perceiving western culture as negative, colonizing, dominating, and threatening. Therefore, it is concluded that English language teaching in Indonesia should integrate students' local cultures and be prepared and implemented by highly skilled Indonesian teachers and practitioners who are abreast with ELT theories and development at the world level including those from the western world.

Keywords: learner culture, western culture, perception, English language teaching

Abstrak

Makalah ini berpendapat bahwa untuk memiliki keberhasilan belajar bahasa Inggris di sekolah-sekolah Indonesia, pertimbangan budaya harus di garis depan. Artinya, diakui bahwa belajar bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa kedua atau bahasa asing tidak dapat dipisahkan dari budaya bahasa target atau budaya barat. Di sisi lain, perspektif bahasa Inggris sebagai bahasa global atau internasional memungkinkan integrasi atau penggunaan latar belakang budaya lokal siswa ke dalam bahan ajar. Untuk menjelaskan masalah kritis ini, penelitian ini berusaha untuk menggambarkan latar belakang budaya khas pelajar Indonesia dan persepsi mereka terhadap budaya barat. Mengandalkan studi literatur dan pengalaman penulis pertama dan pengamatan, temuan menunjukkan bahwa pelajar Indonesia berbagi karakteristik budaya yaitu pasif, rasa malu, dan kurangnya pemikiran kritis, sementara memandang budaya Barat sebagai negatif, menjajah, mendominasi, dan mengancam. Oleh karena itu, disimpulkan bahwa pengajaran bahasa Inggris di Indonesia harus mengintegrasikan budaya lokal siswa dan dipersiapkan dan diimplementasikan oleh guru dan praktisi Indonesia yang sangat terampil yang mengikuti teori dan pengembangan ELT di tingkat dunia termasuk dari dunia barat.

Kata kunci: budaya siswa, budaya barat, persepsi, pengajaran bahasa Inggris

INTRODUCTION

In Indonesia, English has been determined as an elective subject in elementary school and an obligatory subject to learn by the students from the junior high school up to the university. The determination has been made because of the strategic position of English as the global language. For most of the schools at the elementary level, English is introduced in grade four with the exception of some schools located in the city that allow their students to learn English starting from grade one. In the higher level, secondary school, English has been stipulated as one of the subjects to be examined in the national exam (year nine for junior high school and year twelve for senior high school). For the university students, English has been considered to be one of the compulsory subjects to teach in all faculties along with Indonesian language, religion, and civic education. Policies on ELT in Indonesia have experienced some significant changes as seen by the change of curriculum version from time to time (Yuyun, 2013). The rapid change made by the government in arranging ELT in Indonesia is due to the unsatisfactory result of English teaching so far. It is in line with Andy (2007) who contends that the English teaching in Indonesia can be seen as a failure for some last decades.

Moreover, it is hypothesized that the kind of culture integrated or used in the learning materials has a very strategic position in the success of learning process. Liu (1998) states that learning a second language cannot be separated from learning the target culture. He emphasizes that the influence of culture cannot be avoided especially in the process of language acquisition. Furthermore, Liu contends that the cultural background is not only necessary for the English teacher, but also for the students. He asserts that it is impossible to find any language without the influence of culture. He provides the example that the recent ELT materials spreading out around the globe are published by NABA (North America, British, and Australia). However, Liu (1998) argues that new methodologies of teaching supplied by NABA do not value or are even contradictory to the variety of cultural and moral backgrounds of local students. As a large country, Indonesia is one of the highly multicultural and multilingual nations around the globe. The colorful demographic and societal condition has highly affected the English Language Teaching (ELT) in Indonesia (Lauder, 2008). Therefore, it is not too exaggerated to assume that the cultural factor is one among the very influential determinants in the success of ELT in Indonesia (Suryanto, 2014).

On the other hand, English as international language (EIL) pedagogy accommodates the use of learner local cultural backgrounds in the ELT materials. Le (2008) asserts that the local cultural needs should be considered as part of the learning process to maintain the students' identity. Additionally, Cook (2006) argues that there is a need to recognize the learners' first language (L1) knowledge to meet their right. However, it is very crucial to keep in mind that using the local culture only to arrange ELT materials may lead the students to

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have a misleading concept in understanding the world around them. Their own cultural circle may trap the learners and, consequently, they may perceive their own cultural perspective as the only correct view to see the world (Liu, 1998).

Based on the background above, this paper seeks to respond to such questions as what Indonesian learners' characteristics representing their cultural backgrounds and what perception they have toward western culture which is assumed to be inseparable from the English language.

METHOD

The data presented in this paper was collected through a literature study and the first author's reflection on his own experiences and observations as a former student, teacher and lecturer in Indonesia, and a Master's student in an Australian university. Meanwhile, the discussion is presented in light of the theories of language, identity, culture and difference.

FINDINGS

Learners' Cultural Characteristics

It has been found that, as a whole, the Asian learners have a tendency to be passive and have less critical thinking (Nguyen, 2011). This condition still happens until recently irrespective of the massive improvement around the world. This phenomenon is no exception happening in Indonesia. More specifically, Suryanto (2014) proposes his study result about the Indonesian learners' characteristic claiming that their performance in the classroom shows more passiveness and silence. There are some potential causes of the passiveness and shyness showed by the learners as discussed below.

First of all, Suryanto (2014) contends that such a habit is the consequence of teacher centeredness in the learning process. To most extent, this fact cannot be denied although the educators have sounded the shift from teacher centeredness to student centeredness. We argue that the student-centeredness system may become a good solution and should be fully supported. Yet, it is not easy and may take a very long time to make the change. As an English teacher in a private secondary school in Indonesia, the first author had been teaching for about four years before taking master's degree at Monash University in Australia. During his three-year teaching, he used to emphasize that students be active learners and also encourage them to be critical thinkers. He always did it in every lesson hour, but it seemed that they remained silent and reluctant even to ask a question. Later on, he noticed that the students' learning style could not be changed without involving all parties around them (parents, friends, the other fellow teachers, etc.). For instance, he saw that most of his fellow teachers at school did not show serious struggle to guide the learners to be more active and become critical thinkers. Consequently, he did not see a much significant change in the students.

Secondly, the next factor that still has a close connection with the

mentioned one is what Suryanto (2014) calls the Indonesian existing norm on the young. This norm encourages the young to give more respect to the elderly and not to make them shameful in any condition. While this moral value is very good to maintain, it brings another effect on the learners. It is mentioned that the learners become shy to critically propose their argument to their teacher even though they know their teacher do a mistake (Suryanto, 2014). The researcher had ever experienced such a case several times when he was a student at secondary school. At the time, some of his friends knew that what the teacher delivered in front of the class was totally different from what they read in the textbook. Yet, they were very reluctant to critique the teacher. The situation became worse when the teacher felt shy to admit his mistake even though he knew he mistakenly provided misleading information to the learners. Another shameful experience was happening when the researcher was in the undergraduate study. One of his lecturers did a mistake when explaining a standard role of the grammar of English which some of his friends and he knew by heart. They tried to remind him politely by proposing arguments they had read from a reliable handbook. It was quite saddening that, instead of clarifying the truth and giving a logical answer, the lecturer showed a sense of a anger to them. As students, his friends and he did not feel brave to argue further with the lecturer. Perhaps, to some extent, it was the students' way of arguing the teacher in front of other students that led to his negative response. Thus, it is envisaged that the same case may also happen in many other parts of Indonesia.

The third factor is, as proposed by Suryanto (2014), the tendency to prioritize the harmony in the society by avoiding any conflict. In other words, Indonesian society is generally against liberalism and individualism as adopted in the English speaking countries (western world). Therefore, different from the western people, they show the high degree of tolerance and this often leads to overlooking the others' misbehavior. Similar to the second factor mentioned above, this also prevents the learners from being critical thinkers. Instead of arguing with their teacher or their friends, Indonesian learners prefer to keep silent with the reason to keep the harmony.

The last factor is the learners' motivation to study. Suryanto (2014) agrees with a notion contending that the motivation of Indonesian students is generally rooted from their short-term needs. The example can be examined in learning English. He argues that the fact that most jobs in Indonesia do not require the applicants to own a good mastery of English leads to low motivation showed by the English learners. They tend to spend more time to focus on preparing themselves for the skills needed by workplace in the future. This is in line with what the researcher found at his school where he was teaching some years ago. From some conversation with his students, he noticed that their main motivation is how to pass the national exam as well as the entry requirement for the university. Only a few of them seriously studied English to gain as much skill as

possible for higher intention such as to study abroad or to find a job at an international level.

Learners' Perception toward the Western Culture

As commonly known, the western culture refers to the English speaking countries. The perception of the world community toward western culture especially those in both outer and expanding circle (Kachru, 1992) is generally the same. Indonesians, in this case, also likely share the same perception toward the western culture. Some of them are explored below.

First of all, the culture of the west is seen to strictly connect with the colonialism. Because the English speaking countries mostly committed colonialism in the past (mainly the British Empire), the cultural belief of these countries is still judged negatively by many other countries. For example, Le (2008) reveals that the negative perception toward the western culture showed by many countries in many parts of the world nowadays is caused by the long history of the British Empire in exploring the world and their success to establish many colonies. Le adds that since culture cannot be separated from the language, English is also considered as the weapon of colonialism even until recently. This belief is still deeply adopted by many Indonesian people especially the elderly. For example, we often hear some parents prohibit their children to learn English by exclaiming "Why do you learn English? It is the language of invaders". Although the western countries have got their reputation as the promoter of peace in the world at present, the memory of the hostile history seems to be very hard to forget by the world community.

Secondly, the culture of the English speaking countries is generally regarded as a threat to the local culture. In Indonesia, particularly, the people live under the guidance of religion which is the opposite of liberal values as adopted by the western people. This notion is in line with the Lauder's (2008) claim stating that it is the liberal value brought by the speaking countries that is portrayed as the threat by many communities around the world. However, Lauder also raises the notion that the potential threat of western culture toward the local ones cannot be judged as the mistake of the west, but the blame should be addressed to the local people because they cannot stand from the influence of western culture. In other words, no matter whatever culture influences a society if the local culture is strong enough, the culture from outside will not give any significant effect.

Lastly, it is believed that the presence of the western culture can provide the gap between nations. It is because the western culture is portrayed as the culture of the powerful nations. It is illustrated by Le (2008) through the use of English as the language of those who have more power over the others. He claims that the world is like a game where the powerful always holds the control while the powerless is always under control. In this case, the use of English is seen as a weapon to impose the cultural value of the west along with the other powers (military and economy) on the countries of 'periphery'. This phenomenon refers to what Le calls 'linguistic imperialism'.

DISCUSSION

In this section, Indonesian learner cultural characteristics and perceptions toward western culture are discussed from the perspectives of language, culture, identity, and difference from students in the west.

Learners' Cultural Characteristics

As previously mentioned, the character of Asian learners, in general, tends to be passive, silent and shy in the classroom (Nguyen, 2011). This character is totally different from their counterparts from the west who tend to be active and more open. Viewed from the concept of language, it is very important to examine further the real reason of the learner's tendency to be silent in Asian countries in general and in Indonesia particularly. While it is very important for the western people to speak when they want to convey a message to their interlocutors, it is not the case with the learners in Indonesia. For Indonesian, keeping silent when the others are saying something in front of them means that they understand or agree. In the researcher's experience, this condition happened all the time during his secondary school period. Therefore, language, as a means of communication does not always mean to be in the form of verbal expression. In connection with this, Hall (2013) provides a more comprehensive meaning of language. He claims that all signs, irrespective of their form (word, sound, image, or any object), which are combined and arranged in such a way to bring meaning can be categorized as a language. So, language encompasses both verbal and non-verbal expressions.

What the Indonesian learners show through their behavior and how they communicate with their teacher mostly in non-verbal expression reflect the culture they have established for a very long time. In this case, the sign of communication or language can be used as a means to understand a community's culture. In connection with this, it is worth examining the link between language and culture. Kramsch (1998) illustrates that in communication between two or more people, the utterance they use is the reflection of their common and shared knowledge with others. In other words, communication in a particular community cannot take place unless they share the same understanding, knowledge, and interpretation of the world around them. Furthermore, Kramsch emphasizes that to examine people's behavior, viewpoint and belief can be done by evaluating their words that, of course, are also shareable to the others. Therefore, Kramsch refers this phenomenon to the notion that *language expresses cultural reality*. Another notion proposed by Kramsch is called *language embodies cultural reality*. This notion is rooted from the fact that there is a mutual understanding among the community members about how they communicate including their intonation, gestures, accent, facial expression, and style (Hall, 2013). So, both verbal and non-verbal elements are comprehensible to the other members of the group they belong to. The third

notion is what Kramersch calls as *language symbolizes cultural reality*. It means language always brings a unique value of culture with it in any certain community (Harzing & Maznevski, 2010). As a result, language use cannot be exactly similar between groups of people.

The case above reveals the position of language in the humans' culture. To gain more understanding of how language plays a crucial role in humans' culture, Hall (2013) elaborates the concept of representation in humans' communication. The process of communication among people who belong to the same culture will be meaningful when they share roughly the same interpretation or conceptual map in responding to the signs of the language being used. Furthermore, Hall emphasizes that culture is basically constructed by the common conceptual mind, shared language systems and codes within a society. Codes link concepts and signs. Codes also function to clarify the meaning between different languages and cultures. As a result, people are able to communicate even though they are from different cultural backgrounds through interpretation and translation. Hall claims that codes are constructed from the social convention and fixed in the local culture. For the issue at hand, the passiveness and silence showed by the Indonesian learners are codes of politeness and obedience that have become a social convention. On the other hand, people in English speaking countries bring different code in their social interaction by being mostly talkative.

From the illustration above, understanding the distinctive way of communication of both groups contributes to the comprehension of their culture and also leads us to know their respective identity. To clearly draw the relationship between culture and identity, Kramersch's (1998) work is worth examining. He states that culture is inseparable from the historical identity of a particular group of people. The role of culture in this respect is based on the view of how they historically establish their civilization such as the work of art and their technological advancement. Kramersch contends that culture always contains the dimension of power and control that leads to the process of excluding and including community members from the outsiders. In the other words, it can be claimed that identity results from the cultural effect (Lee, 2010 & Bucholtz & Hall, 2004).

From this analysis, it is revealed that the identity of Indonesian learners and those in the west is different. This is a proof that there is a strict connection between identity and difference. It is claimed that identity is determined by difference or without difference identity is not likely to come into existence (Bright, 2017). What Bright has claimed is also supported by Woodward (1997) who argues that difference is the marker of identity. Therefore, to identify their own group members is by knowing the difference from others. Woodward also emphasizes that both identity and difference are signified by what individuals use, wear, or consume. In this case, it will be difficult to differentiate between Indonesian culture and the west without providing their respective identity.

There are some potential factors that cause the passiveness and silence of the Indonesian learners. The factors are as follows: the teacher-centeredness, the norm on the young, the priority on harmony, and the learners' low motivation. All of these factors will be analyzed one by one viewed from the concept of language, culture, identity, or difference. In the analysis, not all concepts will be applied to analyze the issue.

First of all, teaching activity in Indonesia has been long dominated by a system of teacher-centeredness and this system is deemed to cause passiveness on the Indonesian learners (see Suryanto, 2014). Despite a lot of efforts to change the system, as explained in the prior section, it seems to be no significant change has been met. In our point of view, the difficulty to change this system of teaching lies in the fact that it has been a part of the Indonesian culture. Culture cannot be changed without any massive movement by involving all elements in the society. In this respect, Kramsch (1998) propounds that culture refers to "membership in a discourse community that shares a common social space and history, and common imaginings". Furthermore, as claimed by Kramsch (1998), to easily understand the concept of culture, it can be contrasted with nature. Nature is all things that grow organically without any intervention from outside. On the contrary, culture is a concept that refers to all things that have been grown and established. Therefore, as an established system, teacher-centeredness cannot be changed in a relatively short time.

The second factor is the norm adopted by the young which gradually forms their attitude to behave respectfully to those who are older than them. As stated in the previous section that this embedded value is the reflection of a great norm applied in the society and should be maintained. But this norm seems to be misinterpreted when they young learn at school. Because they have been set up by their culture to be respectful and avoid debating the older people, they choose to be more silent in the classroom. In terms of the concept of identity, this kind of behavior can be said to be the representative of the young people in Indonesia (see Hall, 2013). Since the concept of identity involves the process of excluding the others who do not belong to the group members (Kramsch, 1998), it is likely the young will not be accepted in the society without being in line with this habit. In the other words, this identity makes them considered as the young. The relationship between identity and difference is also seen in this case. Being passive and polite in front of the older people is what makes Indonesian learners different from the other groups around the globe.

The next factor to be analyzed is the learners' tendency to prioritize the harmony in the society by avoiding any conflict. Historically, Indonesia has long struggled to be independent of the Dutch. After gaining their independence, the need for harmonious life has been sounded to keep their unity and protect the people from any other colonialism. In terms of cultural perspective, the history is one basic element that forms the people's mindset (see Kramsch, 1998). This

mindset has been deeply adopted, so much so that influences their behavior at school. In terms of the concept of difference, the western people were in the opposite position since they were the ones who colonized. Consequently, they do not really feel the importance of harmony in their life. Individualism is still a value of life they perform in their daily life. It is also worth examining the link between the culture and language from this case. Harmonious value adopted by the Indonesian people is reflected from their language. In Indonesian language, there are some personal pronouns that represent the social status of the addressee. This language variation cannot be found in English. For examples, for the second person, there are some attributes to use such as; *kau* (for the young or peer), *anda* (for the older and respected person), and *engkau/dikau* (usually used in the artwork as well as for the loved ones). All of these attributes are represented only by one attribute in English, that is *you*. Another example is the third singular person. While in English the attribute to use is only *he/she* irrespective of his/her age or social status, in the Indonesian language there are *dia* (for *he/she* in general) and *beliau* (for *he/she* who are older or higher social status).

The last factor forming the learners' characteristic is their motivation in learning. In terms of the concept of culture, motivation is affected by the people cultural background. In this case, students' motivation in developing countries is different from those in the more advanced countries. As indicated in the previous section, Indonesian learners are mostly motivated to study because of a short-term need (see Bradford, 2007). How culture and difference are interconnected can be seen in this case. In developing country including Indonesia, it seems that the learners' motivation to study is generally to get a better job for their future life. On the contrary, those in the advanced countries have higher motivation to study at school. Mostly, through their education they want to provide a beneficial contribution to the world. This is fully supported by Liu (1998) claiming that in the West, teaching is considered as a discovery-oriented process. The characteristics of classroom interaction are mostly in form of group work and student-centeredness. Besides the class size is under 20 students, the schools have more resources compared to those in Asia. It is also often the case that the diligence of the learners at school is merely influenced by their environment. They are enthusiastic to study only because their milieu always provides them with the real example of enthusiasm.

Learners' Perception toward Western Culture

To begin with, the first common perception of the culture of the people in English speaking counties is that their culture has a strong connection with colonialism. Due to a long history involving the western people in colonizing the other nation, the identity of being the colonists still exists in the mind of many world communities. So, this reveals how history forms the culture and establishes identity in a particular society (see Kramsch, 1998). The world community especially the nations that have ever been colonized by the west

have experienced the consequence of the concept of difference. Perhaps they still feel the sense of being inferior and powerless in front of the western society. It is safe to say that they are victims of the concept of difference when a nation considers them-selves better than the others.

The second perception is that the culture from the west can be a threat to the local cultures. Probably, this is the effect of modernization that is often connected with the westernization (Yusny, 2013). In terms of the concept of difference, the worry showed by the world community including Indonesia is rooted from the contradictory value between the eastern and western culture. For example, as mentioned earlier, Indonesian community embed the value of togetherness in their social life. On the contrary, the western people tend to be more individualist.

The last assumption about the western culture is that its presence may lead to the bigger gap between nations. The gap here may root from the advanced and modern performance of the west. This advancement may create self-identity on the side of both the eastern and the western people. On the side of the east, they may feel inferior as they are still left behind and, on the contrary, the west may consider themselves as more powerful and superior to the other nations. For example, the superiority of the west can be seen from the use of English as the main global language. Due to its status as a global language, most of the people from non-English speaking countries learn the language.

CONCLUSION

The findings and discussion suggest that there are a lot of differences in cultural characteristics between Indonesian learners and their counterparts in the west. Therefore, by simply adopting materials and methods of English language teaching from the west, Indonesian learners are highly likely to continue to fail learning English. In addition, Indonesian learners and society at large still rather negative perception toward western people. Therefore, there are two potential solutions to deal with this complicated situation as offered by Siedhofer (1999) and Laufer (1998).

Siedhofer (1999) proposes that the Indonesian English teacher should function as a facilitator of the different language as well as the different culture. To be successful in this role, Siedhofer suggests three criteria that should be met. First, they should always familiarize themselves with the updated teaching methodology proposed by the experts around the world. Second, they should fully understand the need of the local learners as well as the local education policy. Lastly, they should have a sophisticated level of proficiency in English to ease the material transfer.

The second solution is proposed by Laufer (1998) who suggests that the local writer should be highly encouraged and supported to arrange English material that is relevant to the local learners' need and desire. He emphasized

that it will be a lot better if there is no native speaker's intervention during the material arrangement process.

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