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A Walk in the Garden of Diverse Cultures when Teaching English as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

It is virtually impossible to teach a foreign language without teaching the culture where this language is spoken as a mother tongue because the use of a language relies heavily on the culture observed by the speakers. This principle also applies to the teaching of English in Indonesia, where it is spoken as a foreign language. The present paper aims to describe how the native cultures and the target cultures are explored in a course offered by the English Department of Universitas Negeri Surabaya (State University of Surabaya) in an effort to build understanding across cultures through their similarities and differences. While this may be a tedious task to accomplish due to the multicultural backgrounds of the learners and their diverse experiences that shape their personal opinions, it does not necessarily mean that cross-cultural understanding is impossible to achieve. It should be approached with appropriate methods to ensure that the teaching-learning process can yield the desired results. In addition, learners are engaged in a variety of motivating activities that not only have them examine how their native and target cultures are alike or different, but also give them relevant experiences that can lead to understanding.

Keywords: TEFL, foreign language, culture, cross-cultural understanding

1. Introduction

Jenny : Would you like a cup of coffee?
Me : Thank you. I had two glasses of coffee this morning.
Jenny : You had two cups of coffee?
Me : Yes, two glasses of coffee.
Jenny : Oh, two cups of coffee.

Language and culture are inseparable because the use of a particular language relies heavily on the culture where it is spoken as a mother tongue. The above exchange that took place in Melbourne, Australia, illustrates the significant role of culture in determining the success of communication through the use of language. Jenny, a native speaker of English, offered a cup of coffee to me, a speaker of English as a foreign language. Politely refusing the offer, I mentioned the reason, namely, I had had two glasses of coffee earlier. While drinking coffee from a tumbler is a very common practice in

the Indonesian culture, in the Australian culture cups or mugs are usually used. The expression 'two glasses of coffee' was grammatical but it sounded awkward in English; therefore, Jenny made attempts to 'correct' it.

Such communication breakdown due to different cultures underlines the importance of cross-cultural understanding in using a foreign language. The important role of culture in language learning provides a strong ground for the English Department in Universitas Negeri Surabaya (State University of Surabaya) to offer Cross-Cultural Understanding (henceforth, CCU) as a compulsory subject to undergraduates who learn English as a foreign language. The activities in CCU classes included lectures and group discussions about the cultural issues in the textbook entitled Beyond Language: Intercultural Communication for English as a Second Language [4]. Although this book was very useful in helping the students learn the target culture observed in English-speaking countries, the learning activities in the classroom seemed to fail to develop tolerance, understanding, and other characters which became the learning objectives of this course, such as avoiding prejudice toward other cultures and eradicating ethnocentrism. During the oral end-of-term exams, I interviewed the students one by one to elicit how far they had developed the aforementioned characters after learning the materials in CCU classes for almost one term. Surprisingly, there were a number of students who had not demonstrated such characters. When asked about their personal opinions about the native and target cultures, they mentioned that Indonesian culture was better than the culture of English-speaking countries or vice versa. For example, some considered Indonesian culture superior to western culture due to the standards of the acceptable outfit worn in public places, whereas some others thought that western culture was better because of the way people in English-speaking countries highly respect privacy. They seemed to remember very well the statement in the book which asserts that all cultures are equal and there are no superior or inferior cultures; yet, their personal opinions still reveal their preference of certain cultures over the others.

Such a discrepancy caused concern because it indicated that some of the learning objectives had not been achieved: they knew and understood various concepts about cross-cultural understanding but they did not apply the concepts they had learned in their daily lives. To overcome this problem, I expanded efforts to make learning more effective and meaningful in CCU classes so that the undergraduates realized that knowledge about culture diversity was not merely a set of information to be memorized, but rather something to be applied in real life to promote better communication and relationships among people of different cultures. This paper attempts to describe how the native and target cultures were explored in the CCU classes to build understanding across cultures through not only the differences but also similarities.

2. Method

The research design deemed appropriate for the inquiry to seek solutions to the aforementioned problems was Action Research, in which an educator is reflective and examines how he or she teaches in the classroom in order to improve his or her own teaching and eventually makes learning more effective for the students [3]. The present study was approached qualitatively, using observations, interviews, tests and classroom artifacts [1] as the research instruments to collect the data. The participants were 105 undergraduates (25 students in Class A, 20 students in Class B, 33 students in Class C, and 28 students in Class D) who took the course on CCU at the English Department of State University of Surabaya in 2015. To collect the data, observations were constantly carried out during the lectures to capture their activities and motivation. Whenever required, interviews were conducted to elicit opinions from a sample of students or to validate the results of the observations. In addition to these two instruments, such classroom artifacts as the students' writings in a task and their creative works were also collected and analyzed. Finally, the exams in the middle and at the end of the term served as valuable tools to find out not only how far they gained knowledge about diversity and similarity in the native and target cultures but also whether they developed the desired characters to address these cultural issues.

3. Findings and Discussion

Teaching culture at undergraduate level could be made more effective by relying less on teacher-centered lectures. Although the students might have limited knowledge and experience related to the target culture, it did not necessarily mean that my task was simply transferring what I knew and experienced to them. Instead, I engaged them in various activities which encouraged them to be actively involved in the learning process and made it more meaningful, i.e. role plays, group discussions, projects and parties.

First, role plays could be very useful in accomplishing this task. While this type of activity is not new and has been frequently done in the classrooms the world over, it can increase the students' interest and create a positive learning atmosphere if it is used appropriately and purposefully. In my CCU classes, I often utilized role plays to begin a lesson for two reasons: (1) they gave an opportunity to the students to examine their native culture before learning the target culture, and (2) they made the students more engaged in learning. To illustrate, at the beginning of the session about 'Introducing Oneself', two students volunteered to perform a brief role play describing how a person made a small talk with a stranger in a bus in Indonesia. The conversation invariably began with the expression such as "*Mau kemana*?" or "Where are you going?" because that was what Indonesians usually say to a stranger,

and the stranger generally responds by telling the destination. Afterwards, a similar role play was done with a different setting, namely, an English-speaking country. The expressions used in the target culture were definitely different from those in the native culture because the former required the speakers to avoid asking about personal matters and invading others' privacy. Some students knew the differences between the native and the target culture, but some others thought that the rules and standards in their native culture were universal throughout the world. Regardless of their knowledge and view, student-student and teacher-student discussions followed up such role plays to distinguish the facts from the myths, the right from the wrong, and the appropriate from the inappropriate.

The above example demonstrates how the native culture was explored before comparing or contrasting it with the target culture, and this technique had at least two benefits. In [5, 6, 9] argue that the native culture was a useful means of examining the target culture and later building appropriate cultural experience. Rather than setting the native culture as a standard to evaluate the target culture, the students should acknowledge the similarities and differences between these two so that they could be more tolerant. Another benefit was that it was more pedagogical in nature as it related to the ease of learning on the part of the students. When learning the target culture, it was highly recommended that they began with a concept they had already known well, that is, their native culture. The theoretical foundation for this was schema theory [8], which states that schemata or units of knowledge are stored in human's mind and activating the relevant schema when perceiving a piece of information will enhance comprehension. In the context of CCU classes, the students reviewed their native culture first, then attempted to relate this familiar information to the new one, i.e., the target culture. When learning in this order (more to less familiar)—rather than vice versa—the students found it easier to understand the concepts about culture and learning became more effective and efficient.

The second type of activity that proved to be equally effective was group discussion, which could provide ample opportunities to the students to make their voices heard and to share their cultural experience that perhaps others had not undergone. In a teacher-centered lecture only a few students could express ideas orally because they had to take turns in speaking within a limited amount of time; however, group discussions could solve this problem as the students worked in small groups and sharing ideas or experiences could be done by many students at the same time. For instance, the material of a session was 'Values in Different Cultures' and I was aware of the possible contrasting views about them due to the students' multicultural background; therefore, group discussion was the most suitable activity to ensure that all of the different views were embraced. In this session, they examined the values observed by their ethnic groups and the values applied in Indonesia in general, then compared and contrasted both to the values in English-speaking countries. I adopted the role
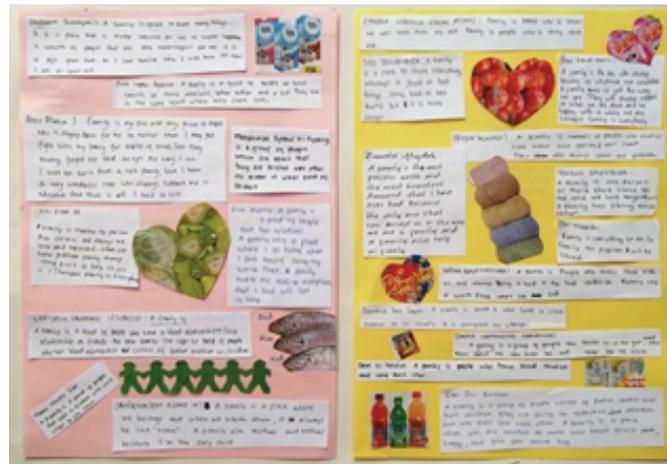
Figure 1: Poster as a product of PBL.

of a facilitator, so my task was assisting them to orchestrate the differing views to create a fruitful learning experience. As predicted, sometimes debates occurred due to the differences between students from one ethnic group and another in terms of values. However challenging it could be, there was always a room for tolerance in every individual's heart, so I attempted to raise their awareness of unity in cultural diversity and eventually they could accept it.

Third, project-based learning (PBL) activity was also useful as it was very learner-centered in nature. As the name suggests, PBL requires the students to cooperate with peers in performing a certain type of work in order to solve a problem or develop a product [2, 7]. In the CCU classes, PBL was adopted in several sessions to promote better understanding about certain materials, resulting in products rather than solutions to problems. A poster about the definition of the term 'family' (Figure 1) exemplified the product made by the students after conducting a small project in which each of them wrote the meaning of 'family' on a small piece of paper and later arranged the pieces on a larger piece of paper to create a poster.

Another project made a good use of sophisticated technology and required individual students to take a picture of himself or herself with the food they usually eat for breakfast, lunch or dinner. Even food could be cultural because one culture might consider certain types of food appropriate to begin a day whereas another deems them too 'heavy' for breakfast and better consumed as lunch. The pictures that the students submitted demonstrated that they were varied with respect to their taste, ranging from traditional Indonesian food to popular European one. These pictures were then compiled and edited using the application of Windows Movie Maker, generating a product in the form of a short video clip. The message I sent to the students through this video clip was a simple one: different people may have a different taste and different favorite food, but it does not mean the difference creates a distance between these people, and this should be made analogous to culture. A group of people observe

a particular culture and another group have quite distinct culture, but this difference should not draw them apart and maintaining good relationships between them could be done easily.

The last—and probably the most motivating—type of activity was mini festivals in the classroom. The idea of holding a festival in CCU classes came up after I observed a small group of students who seemed to show lack of interest in comparing the Indonesian culture and the American culture. They always sat in the back row, avoided eye contact and hardly participated in the communication in the classroom. Informal interview with them and their peers revealed the real reason for such behaviors: they read news about the political unrest between Indonesia and the U.S.A. in the newspapers, affecting the way they viewed American culture. To solve this problem, I offered them to hold a Halloween party in the session on the final week of October, recommending that they wear scary costumes, bring Jack O'Lantern and present slides containing information related to Halloween, such as its history, the myths, the food, and others. Although there was no obligation to attend the lecture in costumes, all of the students came wearing ones, including the aforementioned group of students. One of the students in this group even caught the attention of his peers due to the attractive costume he made, and later he and four other students were rewarded because the peers regarded their costumes as the best. From that session on, the students who previously appeared reluctant to examine American culture in the class became more enthusiastic and actively participated in the discussions. The change of heart on the part of the students was of course more than just about costumes, but it addressed the underlying problem in a subtle way. They came to the realization that it seemed unfair to despise a country, its people and its culture only due to political problems that temporarily disturbed the good relationships between their native country and another country; on the contrary, there were a lot of aspects in the life of people in that country that deserved to learn about to promote cross-cultural understanding.

4. Conclusion

To conclude, teaching cross-cultural understanding could be a challenging task and problems might arise, which makes it harder to achieve the learning objectives that have previously been set. While solving these problems may not be easy because it involved more than just memorizing and retelling information, building good characters to make the students more tolerant individuals could be done by designing and applying various activities that suit the nature of the materials. If this is done in an appropriate way, it will yield satisfactory outcomes that benefit both the educator and the learners. Despite the challenges, teaching culture to foreign language learners is like a walk in the garden, where many flowers of different types and colors could be

seen around and yet they still look beautiful. In the classroom, students have different characters and opinions due to their social and cultural backgrounds, but teaching them is still an interesting experience, especially if we can draw them closer to each other and make them realize the beauty of diversity.

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