

## Conference Paper

# Cultural Diversity: When Teachers are at a Loss

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### Abstract

Teaching is a rewarding activity, but it can be really frustrating when teachers fail to make their students learn. Teachers in the Department of English of our University stumble on a group of students from a particular region in Indonesia. Our observations on these students in our own classes, feedbacks from teachers in other classes, remarks from the chair of the students' association, and the results of an interview with them reveal problems in entry behaviour, academic achievement, initiative, motivation, class responses, and self-discipline. The teachers find it hard to deal with these students and think that these problems are rooted in the so-called cultural differences, but are they really cultural? This article describes these problems, addresses their reasons from the perspectives of culture and pedagogy, and explores possibilities to overcome them.

**Keywords:** cultural diversity, teachers, students, problems

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Received: 1 March 2017  
 Accepted: 27 March 2017  
 Published: 12 April 2017

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Selection and Peer-review  
 under the responsibility of  
 the LSCAC Conference  
 Committee.

## 1. Introduction

The Department of English of Universitas Negeri Malang is a well-established institution, offering pre-service training to (under) graduate students and in-service training to teachers from all over Indonesia. This article focuses on the problems the teachers have with the undergraduate students from a particular region in Indonesia. The teachers think that the problems are cultural because they are different from the problems they face with the local students. The question is whether the problems are truly cultural? Or are they pedagogical? First of all, we need to know how these students got into the Department.

These students get a sponsorship from their local government within the collaboration scheme between their local government and Universitas Negeri Malang. Therefore, they were exempted from the national selection test and got into the Department through a selection test held by the local government. The Department was not involved in the selection; therefore, it did not have any control over the results. This is a part of the government's program in enhancing education in remote places and the Department is expected to be nothing but supportive.

In most of the selection tests of this kind, all of the applicants had to be accepted even though their English competence was substandard because there were not many applicants to choose from and there is a minimum quota for the government to meet.

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This is why it was almost impossible to have a selective selection process. In the last collaboration program, twenty candidates attended the test and five passed. They were offered only two options concerning their places of study –a local university in their area and Universitas Negeri Malang. These students preferred the second option because they wanted to leave their home town to get better education. All of these candidates had to take English Language Teaching program, regardless of their major in high school and their fields of interest, because it was the only program available for them.

These students come from an area where people do not pay much attention to education. As stated by [4], traditionally people from their area are more interested in collecting china as a symbol of prestige than in pursuing education. Similarly, [14], while holding a community empowerment program to enhance the access to and standard of education in the same area, found that the participation of the local people in education was very low. Actually, the policies of the local government are already geared towards the equity of the quality of life and welfare with a focus on the fulfilment of, among others, the basic right for qualified education [8]. In the implementation, the local government has built model schools in some strategic districts and employed teachers from Java island as an attempt to improve education, but, again, very few students are enrolled [11]. All these show that, in general, the people in that area are not aware of the importance of education. Yet, it turns out that the students under discussion come from relatively education-conscious families. Their initial drive to join the program was to pursue better and higher education. This was supposed to be a good start yet, but then the teachers often complain about them. What is wrong? This simple research is meant to find the answer.

## 2. Method

This research is a simple descriptive research. It is meant to (1) identify the problems the teachers have with the students, (2) find the causes of the problems to determine whether the problems are cultural or merely pedagogical, (3) and explore what have been done about them. The data were collected through class observations, interviews, and documentation. The sources of data were the writers, other teachers who teach the same students, the chair of the students' association, the students, and the semestral transcripts. These data were, then, addressed from the perspectives of culture and pedagogy.

## 3. Findings and Discussion

The findings of the research and the discussion are presented following the problems identified, i.e. low entry behaviour, poor academic achievement, lack of initiative, lack of motivation, limited response, and lack of self-discipline.

### 3.1. Low Entry Behavior

Entry behavior is the current knowledge and skills the students bring at the start of the course. The entry behavior of these students was incredibly low. This problem can be traced back to the tendency of the people in their area to disregard education (Diaz, 2016). In spite of the fact that the five students had very low entry behavior, they could not have a separate class because, by the university rules, a class requires a minimum of ten students. Therefore, they had to share the same class with the regular students who had higher levels of English mastery. In such a heterogeneous class, these students could not keep up with the regular students. The difference between these two groups of students was so apparent that the small group was always left behind. The low entry behavior is exemplified by the following illustration.

Once, the class was learning to count in English. The teacher asked one of the students about her age. The student could not answer it. The teacher asked her to count it. The student did not know how. The teacher asked the other students the same question. They could not answer it. The teacher explained how to do it and asked them to count their age. They could not count it. This exemplifies that these students could not perform a skill that they should have mastered when they graduated from the elementary school.

In the first few weeks in the mixed class, they could not speak a word in English. They could not understand the teacher's questions. They could not partake of the class activities. It was only too obvious that their English competence is far below that of the rest of the class.

To prevent these students from hampering the progress of the regular class and to help them develop their skills at their own pace, the department decided to take them out of the mixed class and put them in a separate class of only five students. Later on, one of the students quit for no particular reason, leaving only four students behind. Of the remaining students, one is relatively better than the others, but in general, their competence is elementary. An interview with these students reveals that they learnt English only at school. They learnt from the course books at school. At home, they could only learn from their own notes because they were not allowed to take the course books home. Books were very few and far between, and had to be shared with students from other classes. They have learnt English for three years in junior high and another three years in senior high school—six years in all—but they do not show any signs of having learnt anything. Practically, everything should start from zero. Therefore, the course materials have to be selected and prepared accordingly. These materials are taken either from sources that are completely different from those for the regular classes or from the same sources but only the selected sections.

What the Department did was known as 'homogeneous grouping'—placing together students of similar levels and providing them with materials suited to their particular level. This sort of grouping is believed to contribute to improved academic climate,

Student	Credits Taken	Credits Earned	Cumulative GPA
1	108	95	2.31
2	108	102	2.80
3	108	79	1.78
4	108	97	2.85
5	44	17	.92

TABLE 1: The Credits Taken, the Credits Earned, and the Cumulative GPA.

hence, the students’ achievement [2]. It generally has a significant, positive effect on the students’ academic achievement [13]. This grouping also benefits the regular students as Burns and Mason also found that teachers in heterogeneous classes “often gear the instructional pace to the lower portion of the class”, putting the higher portion at a disadvantage. While this grouping does the students well, the materials do not. Even after the materials were simplified, the students still have to struggle to understand them. They also forget things very easily. What they learn today will be completely forgotten tomorrow and the teacher will have to review the same things over and over. This requires teachers to exercise extra patience. Still, very little remains in their memory and they have been progressing very slowly.

### 3.2. Poor Academic Achievement

These students are in the third year of their study now, yet their academic achievement is not much improving. This problem is closely related to the first problem of low entry behavior, so the reason is most likely be the same. Table 1 shows the results of their study at the end of the fifth semester according to their semestral transcripts.

Student 5 got very low GPA because she quit in the second semester. In general, the credits earned by the four remaining students ranged between 73.15-94.44% of the credits taken. Of the four students, three got a GPA under 3 and one got under 2, which is quite low. Table 2 shows the credits taken, the credits earned, and the GPA in each semester as stated in their semestral transcripts.

Even though the students’ cumulative GPAs do not reach 3, one of them got GPAs above 3 in the last two semesters, and another got GPAs above 3 in the last three semesters. Student 1 shows a constant increase in her GPAs (not necessarily significant, though), whilst students 2,3, and 4 show fluctuation in theirs. The students failed and missed credits in non-English subjects and in some advanced English subjects. Two of them got ‘A’s for some English subjects, but it should be noted that the evaluation is normative; thus, their scores and GPAs are not comparable to those of the regular students. To make sure that these students are on the right track, the head of the Department, who happens to be their academic advisors, keeps close supervision over them through fortnightly or monthly meetings, where they can share and discuss their problems.

Student	Semester	Credits Taken	Credits Granted	GPA
<b>1</b>	1	22	17	1.67
	2	22	16	1.75
	3	22	22	2.47
	4	22	20	2.87
	5	18	18	2.90
<b>2</b>	1	22	22	2.39
	2	22	16	2.37
	3	22	22	2.79
	4	22	22	<b>3.44</b>
	5	18	18	<b>3.14</b>
<b>3</b>	1	22	19	2.20
	2	22	16	1.45
	3	22	22	2.36
	4	22	20	2.55
	5	18	0	0
<b>4</b>	1	22	20	2.07
	2	22	16	2.40
	3	22	22	<b>3.07</b>
	4	22	22	<b>3.56</b>
	5	18	18	<b>3.29</b>
<b>5</b>	1	22	17	1.84
	2	22	0	0
	3	0	0	0
	4	0	0	0
	5	0	0	0

TABLE 2: The Credits Taken, the Credits Earned, and the Semestral GPA.

### 3.3. Lack of Initiative

Initiative is a new plan to achieve something or solve a problem (Online Cambridge English Dictionary). The problem of lack of initiative is well illustrated by the following incident. These students went to the main library of the university, looking for a particular book. They searched for the book in the racks (probably the wrong ones), and could not find it. They did not feel the need to check the catalog or ask the librarian for help; they just left empty handed. This indicates a remarkable absence of initiative.

Another illustration is related to the course materials. Regardless of the all the efforts made to simplify the materials to suit the students' ability, these students are not happy with the results. They know that the materials are the simplified version of those used in the regular classes. This makes them feel inferior around the regular students. They want the materials for the regular programs. This is something impossible to do. The difficulty level of the materials has to suit the level of the students

[5]; thus, returning to the regular materials is certainly out of question because they are too difficult for them (See Low Entry Behavior). To them, the course materials are also too theoretical. They prefer something more practical, something that gives them the chance to practice in real contexts. According to [6], students like these are 'experiential' rather than 'studial' and multimedia materials allow them to 'experience language use in many more ways than the textbook is capable of providing'. This means that to keep up with the regular students, these students can still use the simplified materials that are selected to fit their level and they can enrich them with multimedia materials from the English Self Access Center (ESAC) of the Department. Many kinds of materials are available in the center, but this initiative never comes to their minds. These students are recommended to make the best use of these materials, but when they go to this center, it is merely for fun- reading story books or singing songs and recording their own voice. When they see something wrong, they complain about it but do nothing to fix it. This problem has no link with anything that is culturally attributed to these people. Another thing that they are lacking is motivation.

### 3.4. Low Motivation

Motivation is 'the inner power that pushes you toward taking action and toward achievement' [9]. It is one of the factors that affect learning outcomes [1]. The students' initial motivation when they entered the Department was to get better education and finish their study on time to make their parents proud of them, but then this motivation is hardly apparent. Diaz (2016) states that one of the characteristics of these people is that they cannot motivate themselves. These students skip some classes of English subjects and all classes of non-English subjects. They do not feel bad about it and they have the following reasons to do it. First, they do not feel confident in mingling with students outside their circle. By nature, they are friendly but they cling to their own people ([3] & Diaz, 2016) and do not mix up easily with others. Second, they realize that they are not as good as the students from the other classes and skip classes for fear of ridicule. Third, they do not like teachers who are not emotionally close to them. To these students, their family is the most important part of their life [3]. When they are away from their parents, they need 'motherly' (or fatherly) figures to substitute them. This kind of teachers make these students feel motivated. One of the teachers provides practice inside the classroom and out. She took the students to a restaurant and let them practice choosing food and beverages and ordering them in English. She also took them to an amusement park in a nearby town, where they could practice their English with foreigners. The students like this teacher and the outing programs very much. To them, 'real practice' like this is all they need.

### 3.5. Limited Responses

The students' responses in the class are quite limited. They do not answer the teacher's questions voluntarily. When asked, they either keep silent or answer the questions unsatisfactorily. These students still find difficulties answering the teachers' questions. They rely too much on their classmates. They almost always ask their friends before answering questions.

The teachers need to give them a push to make them respond. These students have several reasons why they are unwilling to respond. First, they feel awkward at having to speak softly. In their society, dialogs are normally loud [3]. Besides, their culture is very deeply rooted in their mind (Diaz, 2016), making it difficult for them to adjust to a new culture. Second, they do not understand the teacher's questions, so they do not know what to do. As stated by [1], certain types of questions may discourage interactive learning. Third, their ability to speak English is quite limited; therefore, they often have to switch from English to Indonesian, which is embarrassing for them. Fourth, after listening to the teacher's explanation, they do not feel the need to ask questions on parts that they do not understand. Some of the teachers simplify their questions by paraphrasing them and, if this does not work, they use Indonesian alongside English as the languages of instruction. To a certain extent, this helps the students, but Indonesian should be used as a last resort because the students need much exposure to the language they are learning.

### 3.6. Lack of Self-discipline

Self-discipline is 'the ability to control one's feelings and overcome one's weaknesses; the ability to pursue what one thinks is right despite temptations to abandon it' [10]. It can help overcome laziness and procrastination. A self-disciplined person is punctual and invests more time and effort in what he or she does.

This is what is lacking in the students. They are not very punctual. They come late, at times very late, for class. They come late for all classes at the beginning of the semester because they go home, which is so far away, during the semester break. They go there by ship, which takes them some time to return. It is their emotional ties to their native land and culture [3] that dictate them to go home every vacation. These students are also late for morning classes because they cannot wake up early. Sometimes they do this because they are tempted to do something more entertaining or they want to stay idle at the boarding house. These are referred to as 'laziness' and 'restraint' by [10]. These students also skip classes. Often, they do not turn up for a class session or for consultation because they have not finished their assignments or they have not even started doing them yet. To make it worse, they never attempt to offer an excuse for that. To them, assigned work is too difficult and too demanding. They cannot finish them on time and they avoid seeing the teacher. To help the students, some of the teachers simplify tasks. Proposals, for example, are to be written

in Indonesian instead of English. Some other teachers offer individual consultation to cater to different problems faced by different students. They provide regular correction and feedback to improve the students' skills and give them a feeling of achievement. The teachers do the best they can, but with limited results. All of the teachers believe that many of the problems result from cultural differences, and one of them consulted a colleague who knows about their culture in the hope that she could treat the students accordingly. As a matter of fact, the lack of discipline is a cultural problem. According to these students, they actually learn some discipline back home, where it is enforced with physical punishment. The absence of physical punishment in the university gives them the false sign that discipline is unnecessary.

#### 4. Conclusions and Suggestions

There are several conclusions that can be drawn from the findings of the research. First, each of the problems may be caused by more than one reason. Second, problems that seem cultural may result from something that is not cultural. Third, it is not easy to tell whether or not a problem is truly cultural. Fourth, it is the causes of the problems that the solution should be focused on. Third, several things have been done to overcome the problems with various levels of success. Based on the conclusions, the writers propose that further studies be conducted to see how the four students finish their study and what they do after graduation. The findings of such researches can provide references for similar programs in the future.

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