Focus on Indonesia: Reconstructing Cultural Contents in English Language Teaching Materials

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Abstract

It is undeniable that language and culture are formed and shaped in the way they influence each other. This fact is really important to understand how cultural contents play their roles in English Language Teaching and Learning. Currently, there have been more diverse contested cultural contents in language learning, especially in Indonesian contexts as cultural understanding of English-speaking countries, local norms, and other countries can be opposite each other. However, to optimize learning outcome, those cultures above should be equally understood to enable language learners can fully understand how the language is used in particular contexts. This complex discussion about the cultural contents is presented in this article along with prominent arguments of reconstructing the learning contents by considering three main aspects in which English is constructed in English-speaking countries, taught in Indonesia, and used as medium of communication in South East Asia.

Key words: cultural contents, language, and Indonesia.

Introduction

It cannot be denied that language and culture are constructed in an interconnected relationship in which both shape and influence each other. Therefore, we learn a language, at the same time we learn the culture of that language. To apply the language as a meaningful medium of exchanging meanings, one must understand how people within the cultural community use it in particular contexts (Dijk, 1991; Risager, 2006; Holmes, 2008). This notion leads to the importance of including cultural contents in language learning classrooms. Due to its relevance to the language use in real social settings, Faris (2016) believes that cultural contents are necessarily inserted into learning materials. In the context of language teaching and learning, cultural contents can be widely various like wisdoms, folktales, norms, fashions, and so on. This notion seems simple because it only discusses the cultural contents of language learning in general contexts. However, if it turns into specific context of English language teaching in Indonesia, it will be more complicated.

This is still contested that the kinds of culture should be inserted in English language teaching (ELT) materials. In the common sense, English is regarded as the native language of Anglophone countries or another term 'inner circle' countries like the USA, the UK, Australia, Canada, etc. (Kachru, 1985 as cited in Harmer, 2015, p.1) where English is

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constructed and spoken according to cultures of those countries. Consequently, the cultural contents are supposed to refer to the cultures of those countries. In other words, it is believed that English teachers have to teach these "target" language cultures for the sake of real social contexts (Faris, 2016). Therefore, there is no wonder that the "native" English cultures dominate ELT materials in non-native-English-speaking countries. However, in the local context, the incorporation of native cultures of English in ELT of Indonesia has becomes the worry of the threat to national and cultural identities of English teachers and students during the classroom activities. The objective of Indonesian education is determined according to the shared values and ideology of cultures within the nation (Faris, 2016). Most English learning materials in Indonesia are dominated by the cultures of English native-speaking countries. The target language cultures are mostly filled up in English textbooks (Hermawan & Lia, 2012). Faris (2016) does an investigation on comparing cultural contents in English textbooks used in Indonesia where the almost the cultural contents of the English textbooks refer to the target language cultures 77.05% and 13.11% of those refer to the local cultures. This unequal proportion of both local and target cultures leads the local teachers into a trap of dilemma. Some values in those cultures may be contradicting with the values they and their students hold. Hence, Faris (2016) warns that there is a possible tendency of cultures presented in the textbooks 'inappropriate' to the norms of cultures where English is learned.

Moreover, the cultural contents tend to show the superiority of the target language cultures upon the local cultures. Hermawan and Lia (2012) collect some studies indicating that the cultures of native-English speaking countries promote stereotypes of differences between their and local cultures. Given the fact of the cultural dominance above, the threat seems more tangible and needs to be urgently anticipated unless it may influence the way students perceive their cultural and national identities. "This kind of education can result in the making of a group of learners indoctrinated in the discourse of the native speaker who, in turn, reflexively contribute to the consolidation of the same discourse" (Chowdhury & Le Ha, 2008, p.307). Thus, it can be argued that the role of local cultures in ELT cannot be peripheralized. As Dewi (2014) reports that English language learners in Indonesia have a great ambition to disseminate their cultural backgrounds as their identities using English. Therefore, teachers are encouraged to have critical selections of cultural contents which can be adapted and adjusted based on the local and national standards of norms, beliefs, ideology, and ethnicities.

Meanwhile if we take a look from the global context as the wider scope of viewing what the English language is, we can come up with another predominant status of English as International or global language which is used for sharing and exchanging information about one's country, living places, special traditions, or local wisdoms to worldwide. The communication in this context does not only occur between native speakers and non-native speakers, but also happens between people who speak English as their second or foreign language (Alptekin, 2002). For example, the communication among non-native-English speaking countries joining in the same regional association is facilitated through English as it has been recognized as a lingua franca, like in Asia or South Est Asia (Kirkpatrick, 2007). Moreover, apparently the number of non-native speakers of English is excessively larger than that of people speaking English as their native language (Hermawan & Lia, 2012). This means that the demand of cultural contents in ELT can change in order to fit the fluid needs of English as the global English.

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Given the facts above, as a TESOL scholar, I am challenged to explore this issue deeper. It is because I will deal with cultural contents in the English curriculum development of Indonesia. As mentioned earlier, cultural contents are important in ELT classroom. Therefore, this essay will explore one main research question of whose cultures should be integrated in ELT materials of Indonesian contexts in general. To respond to this question, this article will discuss the issue of cultural contents from three different dimensions. The first is English as part of 'inner circle' countries' cultures. Then, it will consider the fact that English is learned in Indonesian contexts with its multi-cultures spreading from Sabang to Marauke. The last is English as the lingua franca used by the ASEAN and Asian countries for various communication purposes like business, knowledge or culture exchange, diplomacy etc.

Analysis

1. English as the Native Language

The growing recognition of English as an international language cannot neglect the fact that English as a culture of native English-speaking countries like the USA, the UK, Canada, Australia, etc. As mentioned earlier, English is constructed and circulated within those countries where the native speakers of English make sense and interpret the world through it (Gilmore, 2007). This fact leads to the desire of learning English based on the native models in terms of values and norms (Alptekin, 1984). Then, these native models of communicating through English in particular cultural contexts are classified as the target "English" culture (Peacock, 1997). This notion encourages ELT materials should involve the "original" culture of English from the countries of 'the inner circle'. As it is believed that an English teacher cannot teach English without incorporating the cultures of its native speakers (Gilmore, 2007; Kilickaya, 2004; Peacock, 1997). Therefore, the inclusion of target language cultures is essential even though English language learning may take place in non-native-English speaking countries due to its advantages for pedagogical practice and cultural awareness.

In pedagogical practices, teaching English along with the native cultures is to provide students with authentic learning materials. "what this means by materials which involve language naturally occurring as communication in native-speaker contexts of use, or rather those selected contexts where standard English and the norm: real newspaper reports, for example, real magazine articles, real advertisements, cooking recipes, horoscopes, etc." (Kilickaya, 2004, p.1). The authentic learning materials, in this case, can ease the language learners to understand the language use like specific dictions, grammatical functions, or functional expressions which are required for certain people and contexts. In the other words, the authentic materials are collected from real social and cultural situations for communicative purposes in either written or oral forms (Gilmore, 2007). For example, the vocabulary or diction in the occasion of birthday party can be different from the occasion of dinning. Thus, students will have a sense of purpose in attending every English classroom activity.

Beside the comprehension of the target language function, the authentic learning materials can improve students' learning motivations. Peacock (1997) reports that students' learning motivations increase significantly when they are being exposed to the authentic learning materials as the authentic-text leads them to have a closer exposure to target language cultures. Similarly, this notion of authentic materials encourages the English language learners to go beyond syntactical and semantical knowledge by acquiring the

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understanding what cultures are embedded with the target language (Kilickaya, 2004). For instance, a text about asking and giving information of address, students can learn how English-speaking countries have various terms to refer to 'street' like road, avenue, highway, etc. Hence, the cultural contents of the target language are useful means to make the students have reasons to communicate using the target language (Kilickaya, 2004). In short, it can be concluded that learning a foreign or second language should involve its culture as the clarity of the real context for language functions.

Despite its benefits above, teaching the target language culture may result in some problems for students. The first problem can be learning difficulty as they never experience the foreign cultures like the "English" cultures. Students may have problems of operating English systematic data when dealing with unfamiliar contexts (Peacock, 1997). This is because students may not have prior knowledge of what culture is presented in the learning materials. Similarly, Alptekin (1993) finds that the language learning often forces its students to express the contexts which they barely ever experience. For example, a text about Thanksgiving or Halloween which is never celebrated in Indonesia, then how students are expected to engage in such cultural contents while they lack knowledge of the shared meanings within those celebrations. "Non-native speakers of English are often unable to express their thoughts as precisely in the L2 as they can in their mother tongue" (Gilmore, 2007, p.106). Hence, instead of facilitating the learning process, such cultural contents can constraints students from engaging in the learning activities. Another problem which can appear due to the use of authentic materials is a learning burden. Authentic materials often incorporate complex language and unnecessary vocabulary in which students with low proficiency may experience a learning difficulty of digesting the information (Kilickaya, 2004). If this case is not anticipated well, it can decrease students' learning motivation because the learning materials are too hard to digest (Peacock, 1997). In conclusion, selection of appropriate authentic materials containing the target language culture needs to consider how familiar the content is to students.

In relation to cultural awareness, the cultural contents of the target language can develop students' cultural awareness towards differences as it expands the cultural knowledge among students. Gilmore (2007) the goal of promoting the target language culture is to develop the intercultural competence of students. Encouraging them to confront the difference can help them learn to accept and to respect when dealing with people holding different values or norms of cultures. However, the cultural content of the target language may also create a resistance from teachers and students, instead of acceptance. This can happen when the contents bother the cultural values or norms they hold. Gray (2000) reveals that English teachers and learners often feel uncomfortable when finding reading exercises containing stereotypical presentations and sexist contents. Furthermore, introducing the "native" English culture tend to generate unpleasure comparisons between students' own culture and the "native" culture (Hermawan & Lia, 2012). Take Valentine's Day as an example, confessing love, in some schools, especially Islamic schools, is extremely forbidden. Thus, although some cultural contents may clash with cultural norms where English is taught, the teachers and students can also look at a positive view of the cultural awareness.

To sum up, incorporating the target language culture can result in authentic learning materials which escalate students' motivation. However, the unfamiliarity of the cultural context can cause the opposite outcomes in which students may experience a learning

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difficulty. Besides, the cultural awareness can be achieved through learning cultural differences from "native" cultures even though they may contradict with cultural values of the local communities. Thus, a critical consideration is extremely needed to ensure that the selected cultural content can really make learning happen.

2. The Local Culture in the Indonesian Context

To respond the cultural dominance from the native-English speaking countries, some Indonesian scholars in ELT promotes the use of local culture in ELT classrooms (Faris, 2016; Hermawan & Lia, 2012; Ilma, 2016). However, the question for this idea will be what the local culture means. It is difficult to define what the local culture is in the Indonesian context. Indonesia has 669 different regional or local language spreading in more than 3000 inhabited islands (Lie, 2007). Each language represents one cultural community with its own traditions, values, custom, fashions, norms, artifacts etc. which require being appreciated equally. Hence, this fact leads to a complex negotiation of which cultures of these should be selected to fit the specific language development expected by the national curriculum.

In order to have a clear frame of this discussion, it needs to revisit the definition of the local culture in a language teaching and learning context. Shrestha (2015, p.55) postulates that "local culture refers to the culture of local people who have lived in a particular place for a period of time". From this view, it can be said that the notion of the local culture is limited by the participants within specific time and place. For example, Manene ritual (an annual ritual of having mummies get dressed) only belongs to Tana Toraja but not to Indonesia. This is because only people in Tana Toraja conduct such ritual while the vast majority of Indonesians do not. While another definition is provided by Faris (2016) who simply define the local culture in ELT contexts as the native culture of the learners. This means that every student in the class brings their own cultural identities which may be different from one another. These differences are essentially or non-essentially attached on students who deserve to be respected and treated equally. Then, the way of accommodating the diversity of these cultural backgrounds is still questioned.

Even though what is meant by the term local culture remains unclear, there are several reasons why Faris (2016), Hermawan and Lia (2012), and Ilma (2016) stand with this idea, which are pedagogical practice, cultural preservation and understanding of the own identity. In relation to English pedagogy, the inclusion of local culture can stimulate students to apply their knowledge of the target language. The goal of local cultural contents is to accommodate of the language learners' need when they have to talk about their own cultures with foreign visitors (Faris, 2016; Yahya et al., 2017). Given a familiar context of culture, students can find it easy to engage in classroom activities especially due to their prior knowledge of the local cultures. Another benefit for the English teaching and learning is that the learning materials can be seen more relevant to students' own contexts (Shrestha, 2015). The English learning can become more realistic by which context students can portray the language functions appropriate for particular purposes. For example, instead of giving students a picture of the market in America, Australia or the UK, English teachers can provide students a picture of local market when teaching "How to Buy and Sell". Furthermore, this way can give students the more gradual process of learning. According to Cummins (2014), the language learning should start from context-embedded (familiar context) to context-reduced (unfamiliar context) to avoid overload of cognitive process. For instance, when teaching "How to Buy and Sell", instead of giving students Indonesian Rupiah as the currency for practice, the teachers provides money in forms of US Dollars or British Pound Sterling. It can

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be imagined that there will be doubled burdens students may suffer—understanding new vocabulary and language systems of the target language and grasping the concept of foreign currencies which are different from Indonesian Rupiah like their nominal and the concept of "cents".

Regarding the cultural preservation, the use of local cultures in ELT materials can be a means of empowering both the local cultures and cultural identities of students. "In the process of learning a second language, students will also gain awareness of the richness of their own heritage, thus strengthening their cultural identity" (Yahya et al., 2017, p.42). This idea can lead students to not only learn their own cultures within their community but also to reflect who they are in relation to the culture. By doing this, Prastiwi (2013) believes that students will take good pride to express who they are; where they are from; and what culture they belong to. This is because culture can play its role as marking systems to differentiate its members as insiders from other groups as the outsiders (Hall, 2003; Joseph, 2004). In other words, the use of local culture can maintain or even increase students' sense of ownership upon their own culture. Moreover, the pride, in this case, is very important as they are the ones who possibly signify and construct their cultures through English as their medium of representation. As mentioned above, Dewi (2014) and Faris (2016) reveal that English learners are eager to introduce and explain their own cultures using English to foreigners from other nations. Thus, the inclusion of the local culture is essential for sustaining the culture as the shared meanings among Indonesian students even though it is taught through a foreign language teaching like English.

In brief, the attempt of determining which local cultures can be appropriately included in ELT materials is an ongoing process. Although there needs a complicated negotiation about the selection of local cultural contents, it does not mean that English teachers, policymakers, and curriculum developer can give up on the process of searching the appropriate selection of local cultural contents from the diverse cultures in Indonesia. Thus, this attempt should continuously be done due to its benefits presented above.

3. English in the Global Context

English has played an important role as a lingua franca for people around world to communicate and exchange information in various forms, contexts, and purposes. This lingua franca can be understood as the same language used among interlocutors who do not have the same first language or mother tongue (Kirkpatrick, 2010; Dewi, 2014). This phenomenon has shifted the use of English in which English is no longer employed merely for talking with the native speakers of English (Kirkpatrick, 2007). Instead, non-native speakers of English apparently now tend to speak or communicate with other non-native speakers from different nations. This can be demonstrated by the fact that English has been used and recognized as business language across Asia (Kirkpatrick, 2007). Another proof is that English has been accepted as the official language among the countries of ASEAN (Association of South East Asia) (Baker, 2015). This leads to the excessive use of English for enormous situations and objectives like business, politics, diplomacy, educations, bilateral or regional cooperation, or culture transmitting. To respond this issue, Baker (2012) suggests that it is necessary to re-evaluate the concept of English communicative practice through the lens of non-essentialist. At this point, English can be seen as a fluid entity which has a high possibility to change depending on the space and time. It is proven by the fact that there are many varieties of English around the world like Indian English, Malaysian English, Singaporean English, etc.

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Therefore, now English can be viewed as a culture-free language in which any culture can be integrated into English learning depending on the intended objectives.

The fact above suggests ELT stakeholders broaden their views to consider the inclusion of other cultures out of local and target cultures mentioned above. These kinds of cultures can be classified as international cultures (Faris, 2016; Alptekin, 2002; Kilickaya, 2004). In other words, international cultures refer to any cultures that belong to any nations or countries not categorized as native-English speaking countries and native countries of the language learners. For example, Indonesian students may learn English through Malaysian or Vietnamese cultures—their arts, people, traditions, entertainments, or tourism. The objectives of integrating such cultures are to lead students to move from cultural awareness to intercultural awareness (Baker, 2012), and to prepare them as global citizens or society. These two objectives are considered as an appropriate response to the current and future global demands on the use of English as the globally shared system of representations.

In relation to cultural and intercultural awareness, the international culture provides students with more opportunities to broaden their understandings about the world. This is beyond what they may only know from the local and target cultures as explained earlier. The cultural awareness of this context can refer to understanding and set of skills which can be used to grasp the cultural knowledge of specific contexts and to express it across cultures (Baker, 2008). From this definition, thus, the intercultural awareness can be defined as the understanding which can be utilized to communicate or respond through more various combinations of cultural differences. The inclusion of the international culture can allow students to portray the world through a wider lens. Learning more foreign cultural contents enables the language learners to make comparisons between their own local cultures and others' (Hermawan & Lia, 2012). These comparisons may result in a new paradigm by which students perceive other nations especially neighboring countries. Some nations or countries may have something in common like Rendang in Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei. Stereotypes or prejudice among students of those countries can be decreased or even possibly eliminated due to their cultural understandings of why people from different cultures act differently. Likewise, Baker (2012) states that intercultural understandings encourage students to move beyond the generalization of common sense of certain cultural communities. For instance, Thailand may be stigmatized negatively due to a large number of the existence of its ladyboys without understanding the reasons behind this phenomenon. Another example, Indonesians often perceive Malaysia as "a thief" of cultures without investigating if they both have something in common. Thus, the intercultural awareness can prevent students from looking down people of different cultural backgrounds and make the learning English more meaningful as it expands their horizons.

Regarding being global citizens, if the intercultural awareness is achieved, students will be able to avoid any possible miscommunications due to the differences. Regardless our identity backgrounds with regards to distinct nationalities, ethnic groups, professions, interests, cultures, abilities, or physical appearance, we are one people who live in and share the same planet—Earth and even we may share the same cultures such as social media, smartphone, any digital apps, fashions, music, or anything globally consumed. Hence, this encourages a new notion about citizenship which moves from the limited nation-state border to global society (Moon, 2010). Although the concept of global citizenship is still a metaphor to describe the complexity of world population (Davies, 2006), educators including English teachers still need to address this concept due to the current trend of the transnational world

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(Moon, 2010). There is an undeniable fact that the border between nations is getting less visible due to the international cooperation and agreement in trading, business, health, education, labor force, and so on. There is a growing number of multinational corporations, migrant labors, migrant students, and culture exchanges (Moon, 2010). Therefore, education including English education should incorporate 'cultural rights' from diverse groups of global society in terms of culture, race, ethnic, and language (Banks, 2008, p.129). This is because the intercultural awareness is very important for students as a communication "weapon" to avoid misinterpretation or misunderstanding when they communicate with their future business partners, colleagues, managers, or boss from different cultural backgrounds.

In conclusion, the reconceptualization of English as a fluid entity is very important to adapt or respond to the new demand of English use in wider contexts. The international cultures can be taken in account to complete the needs of the intercultural awareness among students as they will face more complex global communities in the near future. Then, the use of English as the chosen lingua franca will serve as the means of communication for exchanging shared meanings of different cultural communities across the regions or the world.

Reflective Conclusion

After exploring the cultural contents in ELT materials from three different angles, I acknowledge that reconstructing the cultural contents of the English subject is a complicated task, especially in Indonesian contexts. The discussion of this essay shows that all three kinds of cultural contents—target, local, and international cultures are equally important to accommodate the current needs of English use. Therefore, I would like to highlight some insights as my reflective conclusion and implications for the future stage of reconstructing the cultural contents of the English learning materials and the English curriculum developments of any education levels.

To begin with, the first view of cultural contents focuses on the importance the target language cultures which are adopted from the native-English-speaking countries. This perspective believes that learning English cannot be separated from its "original" cultures as it is used by the people within "its" culture to interpret the world. This notion emphasizes that the inclusion of the target culture can enable students to apply their English knowledge in more meaningful ways as they can gain "authentic" exposures of the English language use. However, this "authentic" exposure may create some issues like the resistance of learning due to "inappropriate" norms or values promoted; and cognitive loads due to unfamiliar cultural contexts which students hardly ever experience. This view can be taken into account with some adjustments to fit the learning contexts and conditions of students. Teachers can choose the target language cultures proper to students' cultural backgrounds, and cognitive and language developments. Open-minded adult learners can have cultural contents which may challenge their cultural identities as they can observe the difference as learning source instead of the threat. However, if English teachers teach young learners of educational institutions with strict cultural values, they can avoid or censor the "improper" contents accordingly. In other words, this culture of the target language is very flexible depending on the students and contexts of English learning.

The second view believes that the inclusion of the target culture in ELT classroom is not enough, therefore, the local cultures should be embraced as well. This view tries to accommodate students' demands of English use to disseminate their local cultures to foreigners—the outsiders of their cultural community. However, the determining which local culture in Indonesia can be selected is very complex as Indonesia has enormous diverse cultures. Furthermore, the typical classrooms in Indonesian mainstream schools consist of students from heterogeneous backgrounds due to frequent transmigrations. Even if the

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process of deciding which local cultures should be chosen is still ongoing, there are some benefits of integrating local cultures in ELT classrooms—more relevant contexts and preserving local cultures and students' cultural identities. Therefore, ELT stakeholders in Indonesia are suggested to do more research on the local cultures that may roughly fit to ELT contexts, generally in Indonesia and particularly in specific regions (cities, districts, or villages). By doing so, the benefits of using the local cultures can be more clearly tangible, otherwise, the outcomes can be similar to the challenges of the target cultures as explained earlier.

The last view encourages additional types of cultural contents out of the local and target cultures due to the shift of English use in the global contexts. This is because English has been accepted as an International language by which people from different nationalities express and share meanings through it. The cultural contents driven from the local and the target cultures are considered insufficient enough to fit the global needs of English use. Hence, the international cultures are promoted in ELT materials to prepare students as the global citizen by enhancing their intercultural awareness. To respond these additional types of cultural contents, the English teachers or ELT stakeholders can start from the neighboring countries like Malaysia, Brunei, Singapore, and then expand to every country in ASEAN, Asia, or any countries around the world. The selection of the cultural contents will be more complicated because there are enormous options. The suggestion for this condition can be choosing the international cultures which are appropriate for students' future needs of communications like business, education, working overseas, diplomacy, or international conferences. By understanding these specific needs of students, English teachers can choose and adapt the contents appropriate for the learning process. If Indonesian governments want to insert this content in the national curriculum, they must have careful investigations of which countries and cultures are necessarily informed to students.

In conclusion, the three types of cultural contents above are highly needed to fit the demand of English use in the local and global contexts. The research question of this issue has been answered by that all types of cultures are equally significant for ELT classrooms. The proportions of each type are flexible due to the learning needs of students. However, further studies on cultural contents are extremely needed especially how to fit the cultures with diverse students' backgrounds and needs in the present moment and in the future. Thus, the integration of the cultural contents can result in many benefits as clarified earlier by of course considering all related aspects.

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