

Local Culture in English Language Teaching: Learners' Perspectives

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Abstract:

Integrating local culture in English Language Teaching (ELT) poses a challenge because of the huge diversity of learners' contexts. Some Studies on local culture in ELT really have been carried out, however the learners' perspectives is rarely researched. The current research study therefore explored learners' perspectives on culture integration in English program at a Pharmacology Institute in Indonesia. The research study used qualitative method. The interview data revealed that most students find it easier to speak English using the local cultural input. Since the learners brought their own knowledge and experience of their culture, the local culture reduced cognitive loads, enabled them to personalize learning. Furthermore, the integration of local culture provided fun and positive learning atmosphere. The learners therefore gained great confidence in using local terms from their native language to express meanings in English. The local knowledge also got its validity to be used in creating meanings in English language use.

Key words: Local Culture, cognitive load, personalization of learning, validity of local terms.

Introduction

Cultural content is crucial issue in foreign language teaching in multicultural contexts. Vygotsky (1978) stated that each culture provides tools of intellectual adaptation that permits learners to use their basic mental functions more adaptively. In addition, culture also provides input for language acquisition (Krashen, 1987). In a socio-cultural perspective, learners engage in the construction of learning using the input that they have. As Holliday (2013) states a foreign language learning can be conducted in any socio-cultural context since language has the flexibility to any particular context of culture. In addition learners' cultures function as tools for acquisition. Generally cultural aspects are designed in language teaching programs to promote mutual understanding and respect in various contexts. Given that, language teaching materials generally contain cultural values, beliefs and social practices related to a specific culture. The variety of learners' cultures and their level of language proficiency are the basic considerations of integrating cultural aspects in ELT. The top down selection of learning input generally results in irrelevant input provided in foreign language learning. The choice of cultural aspects to be included in ELT is based on learners' characteristic and their current language ability. Second language acquisition is the main concern not the cultural values to be internalized. Therefore this current study focuses on cultural facts and practices for beginners since their cultures and

surroundings are the zone of language development (Vygotsky, 1978). Culture therefore functions as both cognitive tool and input in foreign language learning.

Culture is a complex and multidimensional concept. Liddicoat and Scarino (2013; 17) define culture as national attributes and social norms, symbolic system and as practices. Holliday (2013) offers a grammar of culture containing particular social and political structures, personal trajectories, underlying universal cultural processes, and particular cultural products. Based on the two definitions provided, culture in ELT can be classified in three layers; values, practices and facts. Cultural values are the basic norms that govern the social life of the society. Cultural practices refer to behaviors, actions to implement the values, while cultural facts represent the output or product of values and practices.

Since learners' needs become the main concern in foreign language teaching, the integration of culture is various. Richards (2002) and Smith (1987) state that learning a foreign language is not necessarily related to cultural norms of native speakers. Mackay (2002) states that as international language, a language cannot be linked to anyone country or culture. Language acquisition and development generally occurs in a socio-cultural context (Byram, et al, 1994; Holliday, 2013; Kramersch, 2006) since individuals bring their own languages and culture to interact. Therefore, learners' familiarity with their culture assists them to carry out social interaction including for second language acquisition. In this respect, Vygotsky (1978) states that learners' culture and surroundings provide sufficient learning input for learners to use in their social interaction. Krashen (1987) states language acquisition requires optimal input which is comprehensible and relevant. In addition Li Wei (2011) states that the amount of input the learners receive outside of the school has positive correlation with their learning result. Given these ideas, foreign language learning requires a socio cultural context in which learners bring their existing culture and experience in the classroom to construct in the new language, meanings and learning. Gánem-Gutiérrez (2013) stated that a foreign language is seen as a meditational tool both socially and cognitively in learners' context. Therefore teaching English as foreign language is not necessarily related to target culture; it is however related to learners' local culture that play important role in second language acquisition.

'Local culture' is still a very broad term. Having various elements, the selection of local culture in ELT requires careful design choices to meet what learners need to know and be able to do in foreign language development (Byram, et al 2002; 8). Turnbull (2009) states that variety of content should be provided, yet teachers have to be selective otherwise learners may be demotivated. Turnbull further states that the use of local culture or first language in foreign language teaching does not hinder learners and instead helps them to be more productive in learning and using target language. Risager (2007) states that as target language, English is not isolated but always exists in a local interplay with other languages and cultures. Holliday (2013; 36) states that a foreign language can be integrated with speakers' own cultures as they stamp their cultural identities on it. In view of this, local culture requires appropriate implementation in

order to build target language acquisition without the risk of loss of learners' local identities. Local culture in foreign language teaching is not simply associated with nonnative culture. In addition foreign language policy generally includes a single national culture in the national curriculum for foreign language teaching. Therefore many text books contain the national culture or dominant culture that exists in a country. The new paradigm however leads the foreign language teachers to focus on learners' socio cultural context and learners' current ability to integrate cultural aspects such as cultural facts, practices and values.

The significance of this study is to explore learners' perspectives on integrating their local culture in ELT. Generally most language curricula and learning activities are selected primarily on the basis of what society believes students need to learn (Brophy, 2013). The students are expected to learn what is designed in the curricula. This traditional approach however creates problems in teaching practice since learners and what they bring tend to be neglected. At present, there is an increasing practice of local culture integration into programs however these are designed based on teachers' personal beliefs about content. There are small number studies of learners' perspectives on culture in foreign language teaching. On studying learners' perspectives in the multicultural context of Vietnam, Chinch (2013) found that adult learners generally had positive attitudes towards multicultural aspects in ELT, yet they prefer to start with their own culture first. Sung (2014) found that in communication through English as a lingua franca, learners in China preferred expressing their local identities in English. Ke, et al (2014) found that intermediate students in Taiwan and Indonesia preferred studying target-native culture as they had integrative motivation. In addition, Rodliyah et al (2014) found that most of English Students at higher education prefer studying reading materials which contain aspects of the target culture. Despite these studies, none specifically focus on learners' perspective on local culture integration in ELT at the beginner level, particularly in oral language acquisition. Therefore, this study focused on the beginners' level to gain insights into learners' perspectives that may inform teaching approaches and program and materials design.

Design of the Study

This study investigated the learners, particularly beginners' perspectives towards the integration of local culture to develop speaking skill in ELT. This research study was conducted at an Indonesian Pharmacology Institute. This institute has English program for building students skills in general English and English specific purposes in pharmacology. I intended to gain the learners' insights and needs in order to design the appropriate English materials in English program to develop English speaking skill as one of the goals of institute to expand globally.

Data Collection

The familiar topics of cultural facts and practices were presented in the classroom based on their frequency of their use in daily life. The familiar topics were the local food and the drink, the

public places, their hobbies, daily activities, the parties, the school activities, shopping, public transportation, my home, and my identities. The learners were introduced to new language forms such as tenses with examples of expressions related to local culture. Learners were provided opportunities to create dialogues in pairs and small groups. They were also assigned to carry out conversations out of the class rooms. Semi structured interviews were conducted with fifteen students. The interview was recorded and analyzed using thematic analysis.

Findings and Discussion

Based on the analysis of the interview data, the learners' perspectives were classified into three themes. The themes reflect how local culture can influence learners to speak English in and outside of the classroom. The themes are presented and discussed as follows:

Local culture reduces cognitive load

According to the learners interviewed, integrating the local culture terms in English class can aid the learners by enabling them to focus on new language forms in speaking. Most of interviewees expressed how local culture facilitated them to learn English more easily.

One of the participants said, ' In fact, to speak English using some local terms from our culture is easier. For example...I like Coto Makassar (typical food made from beef mixed with local ingredients). I think it is very easy because I know Coto Makassar, it is my favorite food". Similarly another said," If I mix with some words from our culture, I think It is easier than using all new words from west. Sometimes I do not know how to pronounce the words such as hamburger. But If I say I eat Papeda (typical food from Moluccas), it is easy. Papeda is local food in my village. Everyday people eat it."

In the context of ELT for beginners, the integration of local culture in ELT is a way to help students to speak quickly. Local culture significantly functions as a cognitive tool to recall learners' existing knowledge to be used (Vygotsky, 1978). The learners tend to speak about the existing objects and practices in their environment. The local culture provides comprehensible and relevant input to be used in their daily context (Krashen, 1987). Items that are easily mentioned by the students are commonly related to facts found in their environment and local habits practiced in daily life. Garcia (2011) stated that the use of local terms in target language is appropriate in developing students fluency particularly learners in low levels. She further states that local culture is one of the controlling domains to endorse bilingual teaching by which learners can learn a new language easily. In addition Wang (2017) states that students' critical language awareness towards both in target language and their native language is developed. In this respect, terms from the local culture used in their expression play a significant role in generating their utterances in English. In this view, local terms have a capacity to control and help generate desire for expression. The new words from local culture have capacity to break the 'foreignness' of the new language. Further to that, Local culture reduces the cognitive load since

part of the content is drawn from learners' own culture. Learners also develop self-confidence to express themselves in English freely.

The use of local terms in English leads the learners focus on the new forms in English. Some vocabulary is picked from their local terms. The facts show that there are many words that are unnecessary to be translated in speaking English. The local terms that integrated in ELT mean that the learners are familiar with their pronunciation so they help learners to be more fluently. As vocabulary is the main input for any language skills, the contribution of local terms aids the learners to develop their fluency in English. One of the he main problems in speaking English is lack of vocabulary. Due to this, the learners can use their local terms to express their experience in their own context. In this sense cultural contents encourage learners to use English not only in the classroom but also outside the classroom.

Local culture enables personalization of learning

During the interview most of the students stated that they found it easier to learn to speak English since they talked about themselves, their experiences and their environment. A participant who comes from Toraja, said, " If I am asked to talk about Toraja or Jakarta I choose Toraja because I never go to Jakarta. Toraja is my home town. I grew up in my Village, My parents live there too...Oh my god..I remember my family, Toraja has beautiful view and many traditions, especially funeral ceremony." While a student who comes from Wakatobi, Southeast Sulawesi said," I love my village ...there is a beautiful beach there. Now we have harvesting season there and many parties. At party every family brings food and we share food. It is very unforgettable moments in village..."

From the learners' perspectives, personalizing the learning motivates them to speak in English. Dörnyei (2001; 76) states that a personal element is necessarily employed in learning content. There is something inherently about learning everyday life of the learners. Garcia (2003:22) states that the learners' environment is rich of culture and languages that needed to be integrated in foreign language teaching to connect their identity and heritage. In this view learners can learn a new language with all things that they are familiar with which can help them to construct their ability to use and share their personal experience to others in a new language. The familiarity of content has power to lead emotional engagement in learning. The data shows that having limited knowledge and experience on the culture resulted in limited expressions. Garcia (2011) stated that local culture and language encourage learners to express what they undergo. The learning topics that closely connect to learners' world life bring enthusiasm for learners to learn a new language in classroom. Their spontaneity and self-expressions appear as they listen to the familiar topics. The topics such as home town, traditional parties and family reveals learners' own personal and emotional experiences. As Cowie (2011:11) describes that communication activity in any language take place because of the involvement of personal emotions. In addition, Baider et al (2014; 4) state that emotion is experienced that function as a tool to structure

language. In this respects, learning input in language class requires the reflection of the reality of learners' life world. Learners also feel enthusiastic to share their culture to others. The familiar contents of their local culture lead their motivation to learn to speak English. In this sense, learners' knowledge and experience significantly influence students to speak.

Learners' cultural context as they do social interaction begins with their native culture. This is the first cultural experience and zone they are familiar with. Learners then move to a broader zone as called regional culture and third zone is national culture that belongs to all Indonesian learners. In second language acquisition perspective, cultural input that integrated in ELT can be selected based on learners' familiarity. The individual differences in language learning are the challenges that can be overcome by foreign language teachers through the integration of learners' local culture.

Local culture has an affective and political impact.

The learners stated that the integration of the local culture resulting cheerful and fun learning atmosphere. The local culture used as materials in English speaking class unconsciously enabled sense of humor and relaxed the learners. All learners had fun and laughed. When they had to say something in English and they used some local terms that they picked from their local language they felt sense of fun. The learners' opinions are presented as follow;

One of the participants said," (Smiling)..I like (laughing)...(pause)...Barongko (typical cake made from banana) ...(laughing)...I feel very funny." Similarly a student also said," Sinunggi (typical food made from cassava)... (laughing)...is my favourite food...(still smiling)..is it possible to say that in English ?" Another student said," (laughing)...Kapurung (typical food made from sago flour)...(laughing) kapurung is delicious ...I like it. I think we must translate it (kapurung). I feel shy to say it. A student said," I like gado-gado (a mixed food from rice, vegetable and beef)...(laughing). I think if we speak English we must use English words we don't use local words. It sounds strange. Can I mix with local words?"

At the beginning most of learners felt reluctant to use their local terms picked from their own culture. They questioned if using the local terms is allowed in speaking English or not. They thought that English as foreign language cannot be mixed with local terms which refers to the traditional items. They regarded it strange since they have never heard people use it. They had an assumption that a foreign language cannot be blended with local terms. It is an expectation that English learning is a monolingual act. That is the reason why some learners feel guilty of using their local terms. As a result learners tended to translate all the local terms into English. It however put them in complicated situations since there is no direct translation of every single term of local culture into English. The learners often paused when they came across the local

words in their speaking since they were unsure whether it was allowed to be used or not. After having said it several times in their meeting, they had no doubt to use the local terms directly.

The local culture integration in ELT has a positive impact in validating of the local terms (Garcia, 2011). The local terms are ready for language use. In this view, the classroom as a formal setting necessarily presents all the content found in an informal setting to get the learners familiar in using them. As Vygotsky (1978) states learners have a capacity to associate with everyday cultural experiences. It confirms that English is not the only sole carrier of meaning. It does not 'privilege' English as the only valid form of making meaning; however learners are expected to use their local words to create their own meaning in English in their context of communication. In some respects, local culture in ELT reveals that the local culture contributes new linguistic terms in English and at the same time English functions to globalize those terms. Consequently, 'blending' culture in a foreign language teaching brings impact of natural use of the local terms in a foreign language use (Garcia, 2011). In addition, the current phenomenon of multilingual society enables the mixed terms in verbal interaction.

The key function of the local culture integration by which it can reveal various responses of learners is its emotional power impact. The local culture is closely related to personal experiences that play a central role to build interpersonal communication. Generally people communicate to express their feelings and thoughts. Cowie (2011:11) describes that communication activities hardly any act of communication takes place without the involvement of emotions. In addition, Jenkin (2009) and Matsuda (2013) explain communication takes place if the learners are emotionally able to adjust their own linguistic resources and negotiate meaning according to the context of situation and its purpose. It is inevitable that learning English in expanding circle are highly affected by the local context. The setting and the context provide specific input to be used in communication even in foreign language. In addition, foreign language teaching therefore is recommended to accommodate local cultural content that helps learners to connect and thus lead towards more effective language learning and communication.

Conclusion

In this study the learners' perspectives demonstrate that the local culture has significant influence on a classroom atmosphere in learning English as foreign language. The classroom becomes a cheerful situation for them. They also have great desire and motivation to speak in English. They found it easier learning to speak English based on what they have in their surroundings. Li Wei (2011) stated that the learners become more creative and productive in target language by involving their existing knowledge and modality that they have in their first language and culture. In addition this study revealed that integrating local culture reduces learners' cognitive load in ELT since some linguistic input has been already known. In this case the complexity is reduced. Due to this, learning becomes a personal experience by exploring cultural facts and practices that act as a bridge to less familiar cultural content associated with the target language

and cultures of English. In addition, learners learn to construct their personal meaning using the familiar contents and new language forms. In addition, Local culture can act as the ice breaker by creating humor, fun and stimuli for learners to engage in language learning activities. Language teachers normally think over how to create cheerful classroom to make learners feel comfortable in the classroom and motivate them to persist with the class. In this point, learners' local culture assists English teachers as they share some sense of interest and humor. In addition local culture functions to stimulate learners to be more productive in speaking since they feel comfortable to speak.

Suggestions and Recommendation

Local culture has great affects in foreign language learning that needs more studies in various perspectives. Learners as source of culture challenge the future researchers to do specific studies on learners' active and participative involvement in creating language input for learning. Bottom up input is necessary to help language instructors to design and create the appropriate materials and ways how to develop English language skills effectively. Local cultural studies in foreign language learning are highly recommended to be searched since it has potency to assist learners to acquire a foreign language.

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