FILTERING CULTURAL INFLUENCES IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING IN THE INDONESIAN CONTEXT: THE CONTROVERSY AND SUGGESTED ACTIONS

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Abstract

There has been a prolonging controversy on why teachers need to filter the cultural load in foreign language learning. Some educators guarantee that the best way of learning a new language is by presenting the target language situations in the classroom, which usually includes the values, culture, habits, or ways of behaving and thinking of the target language users; however, some others believe that, for the sake of nation's future and pride, they have to filter and block any influences that come from the value loads. Throughout the long history of foreign language learning approaches and methods, this issue has been one of their hot flavors. In fact, cultural contents are unavoidable in foreign language learning. Therefore, the type of culture to be included in the materials and the goal of study are two important aspects to consider (Kramsch, 2013). The paper aims to present ways that teachers can do to deal with the above issue. Involving culture in a selective manner may become a moderate compromise, and cautious actions in selecting the values to be loaded in the process of teaching and learning needs to be formulated and carefully listed. Some suggested items based on some intensive observations and teacher interviews are presented in the paper. It is expected that the culture issue in English language teaching settings develops into a good awareness of the importance of culture in language learning on the one hand, and of the preservation of own national identity and values on the other hand.

Keywords: cultural influences, foreign language learning, national identity

1. INTRODUCTION

The cultural context of foreign language learning is widely believed to be one of the most important determinants in the success of learning. A thorough understanding of the interrelation between culture and foreign language learning is regarded important for both learners and teachers or educators, as the views on how culture is related to learning will determine the plan, process, and results of learning. Many experts have shown evidence that language learning is closely related to culture; the cultural context helps learners to acquire the target language more easily, particularly because actually language learning cannot be separated from the culture of the users.

However, there is also a contrasting view on this area: some people do not want their students to be very much influenced by the values, ideas, thoughts, habits, ways of thinking, or principles of life transferred somewhere during the process of foreign language learning. This standpoint will then give flavor to the decision making process. The education authority will possibly become highly selective in determining the policy related to cultural influence; schools and language teachers may turn to become over-protective.

This paper begins by discussing the two poles in general, reviews some thoughts on which those views have developed, and illustrates how those thoughts have influenced the practice of language teaching especially in some Indonesian schools. After some pros and cons related to the cultural issue are presented, in the latter part of the paper some practical steps are proposed to accommodate those

who put the protection to the national identity as a major part in their teaching and learning situations without violating the basic principles of foreign language learning. It is expected that the learning process handled by those teachers will take place in a correct corridor, following the modern theories and trends in foreign language learning practiced worldwide.

2. TARGET CULTURE AND FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

In the past, the so-called structural approach to language teaching and learning was one of the most influential models of learning in many parts of the world. This view of learning flavored many educational policies, curricula, and programs of foreign language learning. This model has been famous for a variety of reasons, from its practicality and effectiveness aspects to the political considerations behind the decision. The practicality and ease of use attracted many educators or education institutions, and the approach accomplished its successful era and practiced worldwide. With a political reason, several educational institutions or areas even practiced this as the main way of learning in their language classes. It has been long known that this approach to language teaching is an effective filter from any global thoughts that may cause conflicts and become threats to their own values, identities, or beliefs.

To a number of countries with their unique, distinctive values, western culture is often regarded as a serious threat. They argue that the western values are not compatible with their own values, and they need to protect their values from any influence. One way that serves as an open gate to value transfer is the process of language learning. Through language learning, texts of every kind are exposed to the learners; ideas, thoughts, and beliefs are discussed and, probably, learnt. Later, learners may acquire several substances in one go: language skills, global thoughts, modern ideas, new ways of life, and novel beliefs which may contradict their national values, religious identity, or local wisdom.

Learning a language is usually done through texts which are read, listened, copied, modeled, and discussed, and therefore the topics or themes discussed in the texts become central. Ideas, thoughts, habits, or other forms of culture of the users of the target language will directly or indirectly meet, touch, or even influence the learners. In foreign language learning, cultural contents are obviously unavoidable. Therefore, the type of culture to be included in the materials and the goal of study are two important aspects to consider (Kramsch, 2013). This means that careful selection and precautions should become a standard procedure in determining the topics to be discussed in the learning process.

In fact, separating cultural contents in foreign language learning is a difficult task to do. It sounds even impossible to make a borderline between language and culture. Learning a language means learning all related aspects to the language, including the culture and values of the users. Any language serves as a vehicle of culture. Through language, ideas, beliefs, values, or customs are passed from one person to another. Those values, beliefs, or habits are also expressed through language. Therefore, culture and language is often viewed as two aspects that cannot be separated from each other.

The reasons for selecting the contents of the texts used for students' learning may vary, but one of the main points is that some 'global' values are regarded unsuitable or irrelevant to be discussed in classrooms, particularly because they contradict local values. Because authentic texts of every kind appear everywhere -- in papers, media, or the internet, blocking the appearance of a particular cultural

form in texts used for language learning is almost useless. Learners are still exposed to those texts from their environment. Becoming selective then looks rational and makes sense. Teachers should continue to become cautious when selecting materials for learning.

However, omitting any cultural content in the process of learning does not seem to be a proper choice. Language learners will have to pay a lot: in order to fully acquire the target language, understanding the culture on which the expressions are based is necessary. The absence of cultural knowledge may hinder the understanding and is a source of misunderstanding. The cultural aspect in language learning should be brought to the foreground of any discussion as it became a significant element of the English language teaching (ELT) curriculum (Mekheimer, 2011).

Modern theories on language learning have been emphasizing the brilliant role of target culture in the success of foreign language learning. Language cannot be separated from the culture. There have been evidences of learning success revealed in research studies conducted in different settings and situations (Young, 2009). As globalization issues recently become more prominent, the world of foreign language learning also responds to the issues. There is an increasing awareness of pluralism in language learning. Teachers then become more aware of the need for ways that enables to enhance intercultural communication. In relation to this issue, Ilic (2004) suggests a stage of learning in which there are comparisons of values, assumptions, attitudes, or modes of communication according to different cultural backgrounds. This important step can minimize cross-cultural miscommunication, prejudices, and stereotypes which often exist throughout the process of foreign language learning.

As language learning comes with cultural understanding, cultural loads are therefore an important determinant in the success of learning. Molony and Harbon (2010) propose several brilliant findings from their research on achieving intercultural learning. Students would discover and analyze cultural and linguistic differences between their L1 and the target language they are learning. Students also actively test and engage their prior knowledge or cultural expectations. When culture and cultural understanding are absent during the process of learning, language learning is in a serous burden. When language is used so that it allows culture to flourish in the student's classroom environment, according to Mekheimer (2011), it provides opportunities for learners to move beyond their immediate experiences.

Another crucial term that teachers need to consider is the negative cultural transfer. Generally, learners will subconsciously use their own values and cultural norms to guide their behaviors and thoughts and to make judgment on other people's behaviors and thoughts (Dai and Zhang, 2000). Negative transfer often causes problems in communication, misunderstanding, or even hatred. Understanding the cultural background of the speakers is therefore important, and this can start from the integration between language and culture in the learning process.

3. DEBATES OVER MATERIALS AND TEACHERS AS BEARERS OF TARGET CULTURE

There have been debates over the role of materials and teachers as the source of cultural conflicts. Reading materials, for example, often bear cultural loads that intercept the local values. Teachers can brilliantly serve as an effective filter, but

sometimes they also add another complexity to the problem: their creativity in giving the best service in the process of learning often neglects the role to instill local values and to protect them from foreign threats. A study by Shardakova and Pavlenko (2004) indicates that materials and teachers are bearers of the target culture of the language being learnt. Teachers would instinctively bring to class important features of the target culture and sociolinguistic aspects of the target language.

In general, foreign language learning has often been viewed as a door to global thoughts and ideas. In the context of English learning in some areas, this issue has been taken quite seriously by local educators and authority, particularly because of what they call nationalism: they have their own views of and definitions of what is said to be good and bad. Their own culture is regarded to be the best culture; foreign culture is a threat to their own values, and therefore they have to protect their values from any influences that may change their national identity. In several Arab countries, for example, some forms of foreign culture, i.e. western values and ways of life, is often filtered for some political, religious reasons. A text about free sex, unmarried couples living together, pork eating habit, or gender equality in all aspects of life, for example, would never be found in the list of their English learning materials.

The structural approach was then chosen to be the main core of instructional models, and has proven to be effective. Materials for learning found in written or spoken texts were regarded a rich source of cultural intervention which to some extent may threat their own national identity, values, and beliefs. With the structural approach, language is taught and learnt in a simplified model, following the views of behaviorists: learning a foreign language can be done by simply learning the patterns and structure of the language. The mastery of sentence patterns and structure becomes the main objective of the instructional activities. During the learning process, language patterns are learnt and vocabularies are selected on the basis of their usefulness and simplicity (Patel and Jain, 2008). Of course, this will give a wider opportunity to teachers or the authority to become selective in determining whether a word is listed in the wordlist for their students or not.

The structural approach or its variants which is used as the basis for instructional processes seems to be effective in filtering unwanted cultural influences. This is particularly because teachers can select and decide what materials and topics to be used in the learning process. Texts are selected so that topics and contents which may weaken nationalism, national identity, or local values can be omitted from the list. Global thoughts are not always 'global', in the sense that to some people with their own cultural values, other cultural ideas may not be acceptable, and to some extent may serve as a threat to the national identity or values.

However, it is a fact that the structural approach has now stopped from operating in many areas. There have been a number of demerits that prevent learners from fully acquiring the target language. In the structural approach, language is seen as a set of rules, and learners focus on the mastery of rules combined with a collection of necessary vocabulary. Learning takes place when learners can use the patterns to express their own ideas and when they can understand others' thoughts by using the knowledge of grammar and vocabulary. However, a full knowledge of grammatical rules cannot be obtained through this approach as it touches only the so-called functional grammar.

Students who are learning under this approach will obviously miss an important aspect of foreign language learning: the intercultural knowledge. Because learning a language is closely related to culture, what is learnt by those students is only the surface of the target language. This method is effective only in the beginner level, and not suitable for learners from higher classes. The feelings of identity threats and subjectivity should be carefully maintained, but at the same time teachers also need to consider the negative impacts of such feelings on learning. Zaid (2008) in Mekheimer (2011) warns teachers against the danger of ignoring cultural content of the target language. In Saudi Arabia, language teachers' ignorance of the target culture continues to serve as an impediment to language learning.

Many experts have pointed out the interrelation between language and culture. They intersect each other through experiences and interactions of the users. This is why both language and culture are concepts that cannot be separated. Theories developed in this area may vary, and sometimes contradicts each other, but as Brown (1988) states, no single discipline or theory will provide a magic formula that can solve all the mysteries in language acquisition or learning.

4. ON THE EFFORTS TO FILTER EXPOSURE TO CULTURE: SUGGESTED ACTIONS

Teachers or schools wishing to block negative influences of exposure to foreign culture on the development of national identity, local values, and nation's characters should be careful, because foreign language learning and culture cannot be separated from each other. To fully understand the target language, a learner needs to include the cultural background of the language users. The term intercultural understanding has been an integrated part of foreign language learning. However, there are ways that those teachers can take when negative influences of foreign values, thoughts, beliefs, traditions, morals, customs, behaviors, or patterns of living are an important concern.

Blocking any cultural values loaded in the texts learnt by students is nearly impossible and probably useless. Values spread globally, received not only from language learning but also from any other means. The internet makes everything possible, and people keep influencing each other. Assimilations, interventions, blends, and even conflicts across culture are easily found in every society. All that teachers can do is facilitating students' learning, playing an active role to support learning, supplying them with appropriate materials, and guiding them to foster the intercultural awareness. Instead of blocking the cultural contents in texts, teachers should develop a positive understanding on and attitude towards others' values, principles of life, and cultural ideas.

Selection of materials, of course, may still need to be done, particularly when teaching young learners. Young language learners are often unique, they can easily copy anything that appears around them. When a learning text discusses a particular topic that is not culturally acceptable to the local standards, the idea may influence children, similar to abuse and violence resulted from watching television. Therefore, teachers can start by looking at the content of the text. If the text discusses topics which are not appropriate, teachers can decide not to use it in the lessons and replace it with another text.

Reapplying the old structural approach in modern language learning contexts would create another problem, especially when the learners are in their advanced classes. The structural approach fails to cover all complicated aspects of language

learning; it works only on the surface level of learning. Of course it is important to learn or discuss the structure of the target language, but focusing the learning only on the structural aspect of the language is not enough according to any standard. Sensitive topics should be minimized. Negative behaviors, destructive ideas, and vicious ways of life should not be among the text topics for learning. A large number of reading texts are available out there, and teachers' alertness becomes an important key in the process of selection of learning materials.

There is another crucial point to consider by teachers when selecting appropriate materials. A text about culture or discussing values as the topic might be fine; what most teachers should be worried about is when the unwanted values come in a "silent" way: a text may discuss something else, but there is a hidden, unwanted value behind it. A thorough understanding on the text contents and adequate knowledge of cultural contents are two qualities that teachers need to possess in order to appropriately make decisions about the text selection. Teachers need to be highly knowledgeable about the national values they want to preserve and the possible threats from the selected materials.

However, it is also important to note that a quick, effective way of learning a foreign language is by integrating culture in the process, because language cannot be separated from the culture of its users. If teachers decide to include texts with values, careful guidance is desired. Teachers' supervision and help should be given when the learning process is taking place. Teachers' control may be given by exploring the values loaded in the text and comparing it to the local wisdom, including an extra activity in the language learning process: learning the cultural dimension of a textual discourse. Cross-cultural understanding constitutes a vital key to this process.

5. CONCLUSION

Cultural issues in foreign language learning have long been a hot topic for discussion among language teachers and policy makers. Many have attempted to 'do something' in relation to the protection of local values or national identity, including blocking foreign culture, values, or ideas loaded in the texts used in foreign language learning. Teachers argue that filtering the contents in texts is an effort to protect young generation from unwanted values or culture.

Using the timeworn structural approach in the modern instructional process would result in several shortcomings, as it is effective only in the beginning levels of foreign language learning. Blocking cultural contents in any learning materials is not always effective from the learning perspective, particularly because language learning cannot be separated from culture. Intercultural loads are inevitable in any global texts, and therefore teachers should cautiously include this hot topic in their list of learning materials. However, a careful control and supervision should be prepared so that learners will still learn in a 'normal' way without losing their own values and cultural beliefs.

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