CULTURE, ITS DIMENSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS TO THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

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Abstract

Culture is an important aspect in learning a foreign language. This paper discusses three main conceptual issues: the concept of culture, its dimensions, and its implication to the teaching of English. In a broader sense, culture umbrellas arts, music, literary works, scientific findings, and other human beings' creations. In a narrower sense, culture covers habits, customs, and social behaviours of a society. Four cultural dimensions: individualism, collectivism, high-context, and low-context are discussed. Deductive and inductive methods of reasoning are also discussed. In context of the teaching of English, culture is classified into local culture, foreign culture, and academic culture. Local culture refers to values and norms shared by the students who learn English as a foreign language. Foreign culture is the beliefs, norms, and values of the target language. Academic culture is the norms and values practiced in academic life. This paper strongly argues that the teaching of English as a foreign language should be based on local cultural values and norms. Language functions to express thoughts and culture. Therefore, English is used as an instrument to express thoughts and culture of learners who learn English.

Keyword: culture, English language teaching, academic culture.

A. INTRODUCTION

Culture has been understood and defined differently. Some consider culture covers all human's creation. Others specify it to customs, beliefs, and arts. Others, however, extremely relate culture to any specific patterns of action ranging from asking a cup of coffee to making a request. To begin with, it is worthwhile to present a number of basic principles very briefly which have been generally accepted. The three basic principles are: the concept of culture, the main functions of language, and English as an international language.

Culture has been understood differently. In a broad sense, culture can be seen to encompass art, music, literature, scientific discoveries, and philosophy (Herskovits 1955; Allen and Vallete 1977). McCarthy and Carter (1994) define culture in three different ways. First, culture with a capital *C* refers to the most prestigious artistic achievements of a society and includes art, music, theater and literature. Second,

culture with a small *c* refers to habits, customs, and social behavior. Third, culture as social discourse refers to knowing how to interact. Brislin defines culture as consisting of "ideas, values, and assumptions about life that are widely shared among people and that guide specific behavior" (1993, p.4). the definition of culture that is considered most relevant to the present discussion comes from Shen (1995) who defines it in terms of behavior patterns, how people act in different situations, and how they use language to express their ideas. People from different cultural background, according to Wierzbicka (1994), have different speech styles and communication patterns reflecting their cultural norms and values. People from different cultural backgrounds have their own communication patterns. Zhu (2014) also stated that different cultures have different values and beliefs which influence the way people behave and communicate. The patterns of communication from different ethnic groups need to be described (Hymes, 1974: 446).

Another basic principle to be bear in mind is the function of language. The main function of language is as a tool to express thoughts and culture in communication. Cameron (1997) stated that the 'language reflects society account' suggests that social structures exist before language. Therefore, language should be treated as part of the social phenomena. Further, Cameron (1997) believed that speakers use language to express their social identity in term of group norms at both macro and micro levels.

The third basic principle is the meaning of English as an international language. English as an international language means variations. Speakers who come from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds use English differently reflecting their unique speech styles and cultural norms. It cannot be denied English will be used differently by different people from different cultural backgrounds both in speech styles and cultural values attached to it. Such differences make English become an international language. It is, therefore, argued that English will not be regarded as an international language when all people speak like native speakers of English and use Anglo Saxon cultural norms. English is used to express thoughts and cultures of speakers who come from different ethnic groups. Therefore, Speakers from Indonesia, for example, when communicating in English will bring their Indonesia speech styles and cultural norms. They do not speak English, in term of speech styles, like native speakers. They will use Indonesian cultural norms and values when communicating in English.

The fact shows that the number of non-native speakers of English exceeds the number of English native speakers. Honna (1998) reported that in Asia, more than 350 million people speak English for various purposes, a number that is more than the combined population of United States, Britain, Canada, and Australia where English is a native tongue for many citizens. Most non-native speakers of English communicate in English with other non-native speakers. Indonesians might use English to communicate with Thais, Vietnamese, Koreans, Japanese, Cambodians, or Egyptians. Let non-native speakers reflect their cultural norms and values when communicating in English. It is agreeable what Honna (1998) has stated that the spread of English in Asia does not necessarily represent the transplantation of American English, British English, or any other native speaker English in the region. Honna further argued that English in Asia is being increasingly de-Anglo-Americanized, and that new varieties of English are being established to reflect Asian ways of life.

B. CULTURE AND ITS DIMENSIONS

The continuum of individualism-collectivism is a major dimension of cultural variability (Hofstede 1980; Hui and Triandis 1986; Gundykunst et al. 1988). Hui and

Triandis (1986) assert that when there is a majority of collectivism in a society, the society is labeled collectivist, and similarly, when a majority of people in a society are individualists, the society is labeled individualists.

Numerous definitions exist of these two cultural variables. Hofstede and Bond propose that, in collectivistic cultures, "people belong to ingroups which are supposed to look after them in exchange for loyalty", while in individualistic cultures, "people are supposed to look after themselves and their immediate family only" (1984:419). According to Gundykunst *et al* (1988) in individualistic cultures, emphasis is placed on individuals' goals, while in collectivistic cultures, emphasis is placed on groups' goals.

In comparing individualism and collectivism, Hui and Triandis (1986) identify five different extreme positions. First, people from individualistic cultures operate on the basis of personal gain, while in a collectivistic society, people consider the implications of their actions for the group. Collectivistic share both the successes or the failures of others. Second, in a collectivistic culture, giving and borrowing are common. Third, collectivists believe that a person's misbehavior is a disgrace to the family, relatives, or entire clan, while in individualistic cultures, a person's misbehavior is a disgrace to the person him/herself. Fourth, collectivists are concerned with gaining acceptance by the group. They feel ashamed if they are rejected from the group. People from individualistic cultures, on the other hand, do not care about group membership. Fifth, collectivists are actively involved in other peoples' lives. For example, parents are involved in their children's choice of friends, studies, jobs, places to live, and so on. In individualistic cultures, people are not much involved in other peoples' lives. They believe it is not their business.

Jin and Cortazzi (1998) draw three contrasts between individualism-collectivism: social distance, psychological distance, and academic distance as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1

Individualism and collectivism in a cultural synergy model

Aspects Compared	Individualism	Collectivism
Social Distance	- Asking for help - Respect for privacy	- Expecting offers of help - Offering help
Psychological Distance	- Aggression - Not afraid of losing face	- Tolerance - Caring for face
Academic Distance	- Active involvement - Alternative solution - Critical evaluation - independence - Speaker and Writer's Responsibility	- Passive participation - Single solution - Uncritical acceptance - Dependence - Listener and Reader's Responsibility

Jin and Cortazzi (1998:109)

Jin and Cortazzi provide an example of how Chinese students, as members of a collectivistic society, ask for help. In Western academic culture, students are expected to request clarification if they do not understand. Teachers often ask questions like "Does anyone need help?", or said "Do ask me if you have a problem." For most Chinese students, according to Jin and Cortazzi, this is embarrassing, because asking for help means being a burden to others. They expect teachers to offer help unasked. Therefore Western teachers should be sensitive in identifying Chinese students who

might need help. Jin and Cortazzi also compare students' questions in western and Chinese academic cultures. Most Western teachers believe that students should ask questions as an indication of being an active participant. In Chinese academic cultures, active participation is not verbally shown in class, for example, students participate by asking questions afterwards or by discussing with each other. Jin and Cortazzi explain the reasons why Chinese students do not ask questions in class:

> *Many students explained their lack of questions with reference to "face". They did not want to lose face by asking foolish questions, nor by asking smart questions which may be interpreted by peers as showing off. To stand out in this way is not in harmony with their collective beliefs (Jin and Cortazzi 1998:106-7).*

Although this argument is not supported by research evidence, a similar situation may also be found in Indonesian academic culture. At elementary and high school in Indonesia, in some situations, whenever anyone asked a question in class, they were regarded as *mengambil muka* (buttering up). Students who asked too many questions in the class were classified as *tong kosong nyaring bunyinya* (empty cans producing loud sounds). So in order not to be called *mengambil muka* or *tong kosong nyaring bunyinya*, students preferred not to ask questions in class. There is also a proverb in most cultures in Indonesia saying that silence is gold.

A second continuum of cultural variability classifies cultures within the extremes of low context and high context. In a high context culture, "most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit part of the message", while in a low context culture, "the mass of information is vested in the explicit code" (Hall 1976, p.79). Hall also points out that:

> *High context cultures make greater distinction between insiders and outsiders than low context cultures do. People raised in High context systems expect more of others than do the participants in low context systems. When talking about something that they have on their minds, a High context individual will expect his or her interlocutor to know what's bothering him or her, so that he or she does not have to be specific. The result is that he or she will talk around and around the point, in effect putting all the pieces in place except the crucial one (Hall 1976, p.98).*

Gundykunst and Kim (1984) identify three major differences between high and low context cultures. First, people from high context cultures see themselves as members of a group, while people from low context cultures see themselves as individuals. Second, people from high context cultures use an indirect method when communicating. They expect listeners to know what they actually mean. Members of low context cultures, on the other hand, communicate directly. They believe it is their responsibility to be direct and clear about what they actually mean. Following Hinds' (1987) typology of reader and writer responsible languages (this will be discussed again later), it can be argued that members of low context cultures are speaker responsible while members of high context cultures are listener responsible. The third difference is that members of high context cultures have a stronger interpersonal bond among them than those of low context cultures. It is also argued that power and status in high context cultures characterize interpersonal communication, while in low context cultures, power and status are subtle and indirect. Alwasilah compares the Javanese and American cultures in terms of power and status as follows:

> *...it is possible to assume that in Javanese culture, as a high context culture, status and power are real, substantive, direct, based on hierarchy. This is the opposite phenomenon observed in the U.S, where status and power are more subtle, indirect, based on an egalitarian democratic social structure. In such a social structure, individuals' rights are respected so that society would readily tolerate individual typical social behaviors. Here social conformity is less required. On the other hand, in Javanese culture such conformity is more required, because members of a hierarchy-based and family-oriented society tend to establish strong bonds, commonalities, and harmony (Alwasilah 1991:19).*

Hofstede (1980) labels countries such as America, Switzerland, Sweden, Great Britain, Australia, and other European countries as low context, while most Asian countries, including Indonesia are labelled as high context. Gundykunst *et al*. (1988) draw the individualism-collectivism and high and low context cultures together in arguing that a high context culture is mostly found in a collectivistic society, while a low context culture is mostly found in an individualistic society. Hall (1976) also equates low context with individualistic, and high context with collectivistic. As we shall see, within this classification, Indonesian cultures are regarded as collectivistic and high context cultures, while most English native speakers' cultures are individualistic and low context cultures. We would, therefore, expect Indonesian speakers' behaviour when engaging in communication will reflect collectivistic and high context cultures. By the same token we would expect English native speakers' behaviour when engaging in communication will reflect individualistic and low context cultures.

C. INDUCTIVE AND DEDUCTIVE METHODS OF REASONING

One classification of methods of reasoning is inductive or deductive. Kirkpatrick defines the deductive methods of argument as "a way of reasoning that moves from a general idea or set of facts to a particular idea or fact." In contrast, the inductive method is defined as "a way of reasoning in which known facts are used to present general laws." Kirkpatrick further labels the deductive method as "explicit, to the point, and direct", and the inductive methods as "implicit, intuitive, or indirect" (1995:272). It has also been generally accepted that the inductive method of argument is preferred by Asians while the deductive method is preferred by Westerners. For example, Kirkpatrick asserts that "there seemed to be consensus [among Western scholars] that Asian reasoning was somehow more indirect than 'Western' and that Asian reasoning preferred the use of inductive or analogical argument" (1995:291). Tyler and Davies (1990) analyzed interaction patterns between a Korean teaching assistant with his American students. They found that the Korean teacher developed his topic by explaining small pieces of information. This approach, according to Kirkpatrick (1995), is not expected by the American students because they would expect the teacher to develop the topic by providing a general statement first. Samovar and Porter (1991) also put forward a similar argument claiming that most Koreans use the inductive method of argument while most North Americans use the deductive method. Scollon and Scollon (1995) remind us that cultures and preferences change and point out Western speakers or writers once preferred to use inductive method of argument. They suggest that the preference for the deductive method or "CBS (Clarity, Brevity, Sincerity) style" began only in the seventeenth century.

However, Scollon and Scollon (1991:113) also use the term "inductive" and "deductive" to describe the ways 'Asian' and 'Westerners' develop conversations. In a study of small talk sequence structure, Scollon and Scollon (1991) identified that Asians tend to defer the topic until after a considerable period of talk and that they follow a *call-answer-facework-{topic}* pattern, while westerners introduce the topic early at the beginning of the talk and follow a *call-answer-topic* pattern.

In their study of Chinese conversation patterns in Taiwan, Scollon and Scollon (1995) identified a difference between the Taiwanese and the Western patterns as being in use of *facework*. They argue that they delay of the introduction of topic in Asian discourse is due to the cultural structuring of situations and participant roles. Hierarchy in relationships is more observable in Asia than it is the west. For example, in interaction people will bear in mind who is older and who is younger, who is in a higher position and who is in a lower position. The rule is, with regard to the introduction of the topic, the older person in the higher position has right to introduce the topic. This is in contrast to Western discourse where the person who speaks first (the caller), introduces the topic.

Gundykunts et al. (1988) made a similar point when suggesting that a direct communicative style characterizes an individualistic society and then an indirect communicative style characterizes a collectivistic society. It is therefore hypothesized that the method of argument used by Indonesians, as apart of an Asian and collectivistic community, will tend to use an inductive style, while English native speakers or 'westerners', will prefer to use a deductive method of reasoning.

The direct-indirect communicative style refers to the degree of speakers' explicitness in their verbal communication (Gundykunst et al. 1988). The direct style is defined as "verbal messages that embody and invoke speakers' true intentions in terms of their wants, needs, and desire in the discourse process", and the direct style, in contrast, is referred to "verbal messages that camouflage and conceal speakers' true intentions in terms of their wants, needs, and goals in the discourse situation" (Gundykunst *et al.* 1988:100). The following is an example of an indirect communication style used by an Indonesian in responding to a question regarding exit-permit approval procedures. This Indonesian is a student who is studying in Perth and plans to return to Indonesia during the semester break. He asked other Indonesian students what he should do to ensure that his exit-permit would be processed quickly by the Indonesian Foreign Affairs in Jakarta. One of the Indonesian Students, who works for the department of Religious Affairs, suggested:

> *karena kebetulan kantor saya berhadapan dengan Departemen Luar Negri. Mungkin kawan-kawan dari luar Jakarta tidak bisa mengurus exit-permit dalam satu hari. Ada beberapa staf di Departemen Agama yang bisa menolong. Tapi saya kira juga harus ada saling pengertian, karena menyangkut extra-hour. (Hppia mailing list 26 Nov. 1999).*

> *English translation:*

> *(Because) my office happens to be just opposite the Department of Foreign Affairs, those coming from outside Jakarta, probably cannot arrange for the exit-permit in one day. There are staff at the Department of Religious Affairs who can offer help but I think there should be mutual understanding because it is related to extra hours.*

What he wanted to say by "but I think there should be mutual understanding because it is related to extra hours" is that you will need to reward the person who helps you. Another example of an indirect communicative style in Indonesia is provided by Alwasilah (1991) who quotes an American journalist's comments about when he was waiting for an answer from Indonesia officials to his request to visit East Timor.

> *I made my request through both official and unofficial channels. Everyone I asked was most pleasant, and said, in effect "why, sure, there shouldn't be any problem, but it would have to be officially approved. " When will that approval come? "The minister in charge of the matter is out of town." Or "The people who can make the final decision will meet tomorrow." Or "Call on Friday, we should know then." Or "Call when you come back from your trip to Sumatra." For two months I was never told that I could not visit East Timor, that my request had been denied. It was just never granted. The closest to a "no" I never heard was "not yet", which is probably the most frequent answer to any question in Indonesia. (The New Yorker 6 June 1988, p.49)*

For most Indonesians to give a straight "no" to an offer or a request is considered impolite. Suseno (1996) points out that Javanese never say *mboten* (no) in refusing a request or an offer. When they want to refuse the request or the offer, they will choose to use a polite *inggih* (yes). So when speaking to a Javanese, one should be careful in translating the *inggih* as it could mean "yes" or "no" similar observations have also been identified in Korean-speaking communities, where Koreans rarely make negative responses such as "no", "I agree with you", or "I can't do it." They prefer to use expressions such as "I agree with you in principle…", or "sympathize with you…" (Park 1979:88). The indirect communicative style has also been identified in Japanese-speaking communities. Okabe identified that Americans used explicit words such as "absolutely", "certainly", and "positively", while Japanese used less explicit words such as "maybe", "perhaps", and "Probably" (1993:36). Kartriel (1986) examined the speech styles of Israelis and Arab speakers and found that Israelis used "straight talk" or "tough talk" style, but labelled the Arab speaker's speech style as "sweet talk". Katriel borrowed the terms tough talk, and sweet talk from Gibson (1996) who defined the terms as follows:

> *The Tough Talker is a man or woman dramatized as centrally concerned with himself or herself. His or her style is I-talk. The Sweet Talker goes out of his or her way to be nice to us. His or her style is you-talk. The Stuffy Talker expresses no concern either for himself or for herself. His or her style is it-talk. (p.x)*

Linked to the underlying concepts of inductive-deductive methods of reasoning or direct-indirect speech styles, Hinds (1987) distinguishes speakers from different language backgrounds as *writer or speaker* responsible, *or reader or hearer* responsible. In English culture, it is the responsibility of the speaker to be clear. This reflected in the following aphorism:

> *Tell'em what you're going to tell'em, tell'em, then tell'em what you told'em (Hinds 1987), p.144).*

A review of these studies strongly indicates that, firstly, cultures are classified into two major dimensions: individualism and collectivism, and low and high context

cultures. In this context, Indonesians are grouped into a collectivism and high context culture society. Next, Asians prefer inductive or indirect methods of reasoning while Westerners prefer deductive or direct methods.

D. LOCAL CULTURE, FOREIGN CULTURE, AND ACADEMIC CULTURE

In context of English language teaching, it is argued that culture is classified into local culture, foreign culture, and academic culture. Local culture means the cultural norms of the people who learn English. In context of students who are learning English in Indonesia, for example, the local culture is the students' cultural norms depending upon their ethnicity. If the students are from West Sumatra, their local cultural norms will be Minangkabau norms. If the students are from East and Central Java, their cultural norms will be Javanese norms. Similarly, when the students are from North Sumatra, their local cultural norms will be Batakese norms.

Foreign cultural norms are considered to be all other cultural norms which do not belong to local cultural values of the students. These can be target language cultures or other cultures of different ethnic groups across the globe. For students who are learning English in Indonesia, the target language cultures such as British, American, Canadian, New Zealand, or Australian cultural norms are all regarded as foreign cultures. Other cultural norms or values of people from different ethnicities are also considered to be foreign cultures. The cultures of people from Vietnam, Thailand, Japan, Poland, Russia, Peru, Egypt, or Uganda are also considered to be foreign cultures for students learning English in Indonesia.

The third type of culture is called academic culture. Academic culture has its own rules or conventions. In an academic culture, for example, students are urged to communicate clearly, efficiently, logically, and communicatively. When writing a good paragraph, for example, students are asked to write the topic sentence explicitly and clearly. It is preferable when the topic sentence is written as the first sentence of the paragraph. Other sentences in the paragraph should be related to the topic sentence. Such format of developing a good paragraph is an example of an academic culture. Another example of academic culture is that when students are asked to give a presentation, they are urged to introduce the topic of the presentation early. When the presentation is long, the speaker should mention early at the beginning how the presentation is going to be developed. People coming from different cultural backgrounds (individualistic or collectivistic, high context or low context) when they come to academic life, they should follow academic cultural norms.

E. CULTURE AND THE TEACHING OF ENGLISH

English should be taught using local cultural norms and values. English is only an instrument to express local cultural values. When students are communicating in English, they are expected to bring their cultural norms and identity. They do not have to bring English speakers' cultural norms. English as an international language means speakers from around the world speak English reflecting different cultural norms and values. Indonesians will speak English reflecting cultural norms and values practiced in Indonesia. Vietnamese will speak English using cultural norms and values practiced in Vietnam. Japanese people will speak English using Japanese cultural norms and values.

When people bring their cultural norms when speaking English, one should be aware of differences they might encounter when engaging in conversation with people from different cultural background. English teachers should explain to the students the

differences that might be identified of people from different cultural background communicate. When people have been aware of such differences, they will not complain or express unhappiness when facing with norms which are different from their cultural values. Questions such as: How old are you?, Where do you live?, Have you got married?, or How many children have you got?, are considered too personal by English native speakers, but for most Indonesians, the questions are commonly used in order to be close in social relation. When native speakers of English are aware of such differences, they will not get upset when Indonesians might ask them these questions.

Information on cultural patterns of Indonesians in communication needs to be identified and mapped. Research should be focused on this area. We need data, for example, the patterns of speech acts and other language functions of Indonesians communicating in different communicative settings. The data will be used for English teaching purposes. English teaching curriculum and contents should be based on cultural norms and values of Indonesia. The need for scientific data of Indonesian cultural norms and values for teaching purposes is also in line with the 2013 newly introduced curriculum which adopts scientific approach in its implementation.

F. CONCLUSIONS

It is concluded, firstly, each ethnic group has its own cultural norms and values. These norms and values are reflected in the way people from that ethnic group communicate because it is generally accepted that language is used as an instrument to express thoughts and culture. Using similar argument, non-native speakers of English should communicate in English using cultural norms and values of the non-native speakers. This claim is also in line with the status of English as an international language which is understood as variations. Non-native speakers of English throughout the world will not communicate in English using English native speakers' cultural norms. Therefore, the contents of English teaching in Indonesia should reflect Indonesian cultural norms and values. More studies need to be done in order to identify and map the cultural norms and values of different ethnics in Indonesia. Secondly, students throughout the world should be aware of the existence cultural differences when communicating with people from different ethnic groups. Awareness will result mutual understanding and end up with respecting each other's cultural norms and values.

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