

INTERVIEWING FOREIGNERS TO BROADEN STUDENTS' UNDERSTANDING ACROSS CULTURE; A REFLECTION UPON A VIDEO PROJECT

Desri Maria Sumbayak, S.S.M.Hum. M.A.TESOL
Faculty of Teacher Training and Education
Riau University
Email: desrisumbayak@gmail.com
HP: 081384071337

Abstract

The group project to interview foreigners was given to students of Cross-Culture Understanding Class in English Department, FKIP, UR. After discussing the topic about cultural conflict and adjustment, as many 29 students were grouped into six. They were given time to design their questionnaire and to choose the foreigners who have been living in Pekanbaru for some times to be interviewed. They had two weeks to do the project. After finishing the project, they presented their video-recording of the interview in the class. Then, the students were asked to write reflection upon their project to see how it might help them to understand different culture. The result revealed that all the students thought that the project was significantly beneficial for them to understand the differences among cultures. They were also able to see the Indonesian culture from foreign people's perspectives. Furthermore, most of students said that they learn how people make adjustments in a new culture. This experience taught them how to understand their own culture and to appreciate other culture.

Keywords: *cross-culture understanding, differences, interview*

A. INTRODUCTION

Indonesia is a very rich country in terms of culture. Every day, we live and interact with people from different ethnics and cultures. Yet, it is undeniable that there are many social conflicts happened due to the differences. Recently, there are many fights occurred among students in high schools and universities that provoked by the differences. It seems that it is difficult for Indonesian people to understand and to appreciate the differences among us.

Students in English Department FKIP Riau University have opportunities to discuss many aspects of English and the Indonesian culture in the subject of Cross-Culture Understanding (CCU). Our students are the future English teachers who should be proud of Indonesian culture but at the same time should understand English culture as well. It is impossible to learn and to teach English without understanding the culture. As Sadtono (2009) mentioned "it is a fact the language is a part of culture, in other words, it is in-separable". However, based on my experiences teaching CCU class last year, my students had impressions that it was very difficult to learn culture. The reason was when they learnt about culture they could not have precise answers for questions. They thought it was very relative. Besides, they also pointed out that culture is very broad. There were many aspects to discuss and it made them confused.

Similarly, teaching cross-culture understanding is also very challenging. This is due to the definition of culture itself is often related to something intangible. Levine and Adelman (1993) argue that "culture refers to the informal and often hidden patterns of human interactions,

expressions and viewpoints that people in one culture share”. Thus, they use a simile to describe culture; “culture is like an iceberg”. There are many aspects of culture that we could not see obviously. This means that teaching culture is teaching many things that couldn’t viewed visibly.

To be more specific, Levine and Adelman (1993) define cross-cultural communication as “communication (verbal and non-verbal) between people from different cultures; communication that is influenced by cultural values, attitudes, and behavior; the influence of culture on people’s reactions and responses to each other”. Based on this complex definition, it seems that teaching CCU needs extra knowledge and strategies. Sadtono (2009) argues that “teaching CCU is an onerous task and not every English teacher can do it well”. Moreover, Dunnet, Dubin, Lezberg in Valdes (1996) points out one of the ideal CCU teacher is the teacher can develop specific strategies for teaching culture in the English Program. This means that it is very important to develop an appropriate strategy in teaching CCU in order to help students solving their obstacles learning about culture. This research attempts to help students to learn about living in different cultures by interviewing foreigners who had been living in Indonesia or Indonesian people who had experiences living in another culture. This group project gave opportunities for pupils to listen and to learn about the hidden patterns of human interactions directly from the people who experienced it.

B. DISCUSSION

Galloway in Shemshadsara (2012) argues that “a framework for building cultural understanding based primarily on process skills but incorporating both factual & socio-linguistic content”. This means, activities designed to develop cultural understanding should emphasize on a process rather than on a result. To be more specific, Murray and Bollinger (2001) propose some activities to develop cross-cultural awareness among students in Japan. In these activities, students could also encourage their autonomy by learning through the experiences of other people. One of the activities is video project, where the students could videotape an interview with a native English speaker living in Japan or with a non-native English speaker who has lived in another culture. They argue that by doing this project, students could “share the general goals of improving their oral English proficiency, increasing their knowledge of other cultures and learning to communicate more effectively with people from other cultures” (Murray and Bollinger, 2001). The subjects of the interview were native English speakers. However, in this research the participants could be foreigners from any country because the topic of the interview was ‘cross-cultural conflict and adjustment’ in which students could learn from the experiences of any foreigners who have been living in Indonesia.

The participants of the research were 29 students English Department of Riau University who were mixed in terms of gender. There were 26 participants who were female students and only three participants were male students. They were in the fourth semester, except there were some students who were re-taking the subject Cross Culture Understanding. They have been studying in English Department for two years and their English proficiency level was considered as at intermediate level. After discussing the topic about ‘cross-cultural conflict and adjustment’, students were grouped into six and were asked to make the list of questions for their interview. After that, they were given two weeks to carry out the interview project. Students were asked to find foreigners (from any country) who had been living in Pekanbaru for some time or Indonesian people who had experiences living in another culture. After finishing the project, they were also given opportunities to present their video-recording of the interview in the class. To

see how this project could broaden students' understanding across culture, time for reflection was given afterwards. They were guided by two open questions to write their self-reflection.

Out of six groups, five groups decided to interview foreigners and one group chose to have an interview with an Indonesian girl who had been living in Manchester, England. The foreigners were three Americans, one Australian and one Korean. All foreigners have been working and living in Pekanbaru, Riau Province for some time. They were asked list of questions regarding cross-cultural conflicts and adjustments that already prepared by my students. After finishing the interview, my students presented their videotaped-interview projects in the class. Then, students were given time to write their reflection.

My focus on this research was my students' reflections on the video project. Reflection was the last stage in which my students' understanding could be observed. Murray and Bollinger (2001) argue that "the videos provide the students with multiple perspectives, encouraging them to reflect, question, draw conclusions and formulate insights". It means that after doing this project, it is important to see how the students reflect on it.

There were two questions that led the participants to write their reflection on their videotaped interview project. The first question was, "*Do you like the project? Give your reasons*". All of the participants said that they like the project very much. Even though some of them mentioned that it was also very challenging at the beginning. Ho (1999) points out that there are some problems might be found in developing cultural awareness in English language classes. One of them is 'the availability of native English speakers'. My students also experienced similar case in doing this project. They reported that it was quite difficult for them to find foreigners who have been living for some time in Pekanbaru. Besides, it was also hard to get interview consent from the foreigners. They had to have long negotiations with the foreigners to get their oral consent. However, they found these efforts were considered as valuable experiences for them as part of doing a research.

Second part of the first question was giving reasons. By giving reasons why they like the project indicates the advantages of the project to the students personally. The participants wrote different and a wide range of opinions and impressions. Then, the writer categorized the reasons into three groups. The first reason was that the students thought that the project gave them opportunities to improve their speaking ability.

MIS: "I really like this project because I can practice my speaking with the native."

WK: "I can try my skill, speaking skill exactly".

DDC: "I can improve my speaking especially with native directly."

This reason shows that even though the group project was basically aimed to broaden students' understanding about cross-culture understanding, but the project also gave them opportunities to improve their speaking skill, particularly how to communicate with foreigners or native English speakers. It seems that this project was very beneficial for them, since it was not easy for my students to have interactions with foreigners in their daily lives in Pekanbaru. This also confirms one of the aims of the video project aforementioned that is to improve students' oral proficiency (Murray and Bollinger, 2001)

The second group of reasons was that they learnt about culture directly from the foreigners or native English speakers who experienced living in Indonesia. It seems that it was more effective for the students to learn about living in different culture directly from experiences of others. In my opinion the interviewee's experiences are the authentic material for them to learn about culture. This supports the positive side of the project claimed by Murray and Bollinger (2001) "the strength of the project lies in the power of video to enable the students in

the classroom to relate the course material to the anecdotes and experiences of the people being interviewed”.

OVK: “I can talk to the native speaker and imagine their experience while they’re talking”.

HA: “This is the first time I talking direct with the native. This is the important lesson and important experiences”.

WK: “Because of the fact that I ever want to go abroad after I graduate from this university. So I have some facts (including the situation, culture, life style there). It makes me quite brave and get more spirit to go there.

The third group of reasons was considered as very crucial. Some of the students mentioned that they learnt how Indonesian culture was viewed by foreigners. They did not merely learn about how other people struggle to live in our culture, but this experience could also enrich my students’ understanding about our own culture from foreigners’ perspectives. Knutson in Shemshadsara (2012) says that the “development of students’ awareness starts by encouraging them to recognize their cultural identity in relation to other culture”. From the quotation below, it can be seen indicated that students might see Indonesian culture in a new point of view. They could see the Indonesia culture more objective and broader.

BY: “I know the differences between our culture and the other culture. I also know the sight of a native about Indonesian people, culture and so on “.

ARP: Because it makes me not know about another culture, but it also makes me see my own culture in different way.

ASS: I can know how’s the feeling becoming a foreigner in other country.

FW: I also like it because I can know what the native speaker argued about my own country.

DRP: I can know more what they feel when they come to another country and leave their original country.

The second question that the writer used to guide the students reflection was “*what have you learnt about living in a different culture?*”. For the answers to this question, the writer also characterized them into three groups. The first one, my students pointed out that to be able to live in a new culture, people should be able to adjust in the new culture. According to Levine and Adelman (1993) there are five stages of adjustment process to living in a new culture. They are (1) honey moon period, (2) culture shock, (3) initial adjustment, (4) depression, (5) acceptance and integration. Adjustment is the stage in which people could adapt with the new situation in a new culture (Adelman, 1993). This means that it is impossible to reach acceptance and integration stage without experiencing the initial adjustment stage.

DSL: “ Everybody takes a lot of time to adapt and need another people to help them to socialize with the culture”.

BY: “Eventhough so hard for them to adjust its not become a reason to give up. They tried to survive and enjoyed their living and also that country’s culture”.

NAB: “Every country have different culture but we must can survive and must adapt with new environment”.

DPP: “ I learnt that we have to adapt to environment if we want to survive”.

DAM: “ I learnt that although we have different culture, we should accept that. If we don’t accept the different culture, we can’t survive in that new environment. And there’s only two choices, if you accept the culture and the people, you will stay but if you don’t accept the culture and the people, you will go home”.

Based on the quotation above, it can be seen that from the experiences of the foreigners, my students could see that adjustment was very significant for people to start living in a new culture. It is impossible to live in a new culture without accepting the differences. In other words, my students could link the theory of living in a new culture they learnt in the class with real experiences of the foreigners.

The second group of answers was that my students learnt the differences between two cultures and could see the positive and negative aspects of a culture. Valette on Valdres (1996) mentioned one aim in learning CCU is to “understanding differences between the target culture and the students’ culture”.

ARP: “Based on my interviewee experiences of living in two different cultural background, it somehow change his way of thinking. He found that not all of culture on where he came from is good, and he found that there is another think on another culture is much better, so he can choose and combine into different cultures for his goodness”.

ASS: “I learn that there maybe problems while we’re adjusting some culture. But I got a point from the interviewee, “There is no bad or good culture. We can’t say a culture is better than the other. I learnt that every culture is unique.”

NV: “Every culture has they own style of culture and have they positive and negative things”.

From my students’ reflection above, it can be seen that my students do not think that there is one culture that was inferior or superior to another culture. Yet they could see that every culture has its own unique aspects.

The last group of response was that some of my students could draw a conclusion that differences might make them to understand and to appreciate other culture. They also mentioned that it is very important not judge other culture and should be thankful for the differences among us.

RM: “I think that different culture make us to understand each other. We need to know and understand about another people and their culture and we need to make adjustment to them.”

SA: “We don’t make judge to each other culture, we say thanks because we live together in different culture we can share our idea, we can get knowledge be there. The different culture is not a trouble for us to make relation with the other”.

DDC: “So many countries in the world, also so many cultures in the world, so we must know a little bit about different culture. If we live in different culture, we have to do adjustment to survive in our new culture.

From my students’ reflections above, it can be assumed that my students tend to be more tolerant. Tolinson and Masuhara in Shemshadsara (2012) argue that “an increased cultural awareness helps learners broaden the mind, increase tolerance and achieve cultural empathy and sensitivity”. My students’ reflections reached an important point of this project in cross-culture understanding. We do not have to teach our students about tolerance but they will learn by themselves how to be tolerant through other people’ experiences.

C. CONCLUSION

The interview video project seems to be very effective to be applied in Cross-culture Understanding class. The project that emphasizes on process gives students opportunities to language exposure by talking to foreigners or native English speakers. Moreover, students could learn about culture from the real experiences of other people. In particular they learnt how

Indonesian culture was viewed by foreigners. Through their discussion in the interview, students also learnt how adaptation was very important if people want to live in a new culture. Besides, they also learnt about the differences between two cultures and how to understand each other. This project was very helpful to broaden students' understanding across cultures.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ho, S.T.K. (1999). Addressing culture in EFL Classroom; The Challenge of Shifting from a Traditional to an Intercultural Stance. *Electronic Journal of Foreign Language Teaching*, 6 (1), pp 63-76.
- Levine, D.R.& Adelman, M.B. 1993. *Beyond Language, Cross-Cultural Communication*. New Jersey: Prentice Hall Regents.
- Murray, G.L. & Bollinger,D.J. 2001. Developing Cross-Cultural Awareness: Learning Through the Experiences of Others. *TESL Canada Journal*, 19 (1), pp 62-72.
- Sadtono, E. 2009. Cross-Cultural Understanding: A Dilemma for TEFL. *Journal TEFLIN*.
- Shemshadsara. Z.G. 2012. Developing Cultural Awareness in Foreign Language Teaching. *ELT Journal*, 5 (3), pp 95-99.
- Valdes, J.M. 1996. *Culture Bound*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.