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INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE FOR INDONESIAN STUDENTS OF ENGLISH: A CRUCIAL FACTOR TO CONSIDER

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1. INTRODUCTION

Teachers of English in Indonesia probably find this argument acceptable today: globalization is now creating the world to become a global 'village' and English, the primary lingua franca, plays an important role in this global village. As for Indonesians the ability to communicate in English is a crucial need to survive, compete, and succeed in the village. The teachers may also find communicative teaching methodology not a new concept in their teaching. They believe that Indonesian students of English should be taught in such a way that they achieve communicative competence. The students, especially the advanced ones, are expected to be able to employ communicative strategies correctly and appropriately when they interact with native and other non-native speakers of English. However, it is argued that, in addition to communicative competence, Indonesian students of English also have to achieve intercultural competence.

This paper will first provide three descriptive snapshots showing intercultural problems. Second, it will propose that the practice of communicative language teaching in Indonesia should purposefully consider cultural content for Indonesian students of English. Next, it will define what intercultural competence means and how the concept is related to describe some possible intercultural encounters that they may experience in the global village. Finally, it will suggest various strategies to turn intercultural conflicts into mutual understanding.

2. INTERCULTURAL ASPECTS IN LEARNING ENGLISH

We would like to begin our discussion with the following three events.

Snapshot 1. "Mike Burgess, a Texan-born program manager recently came to Indonesia to manage a multicultural venture. When Mike arranged his first Friday meeting with team members of various nationalities, he expected everyone to appear at 9 a. m. But three of the six Indonesian members did not arrive until 9:20 a. m. Worse, the three Indonesians brought along three uninvited members from their own staffs. Meanwhile, the four Japanese members of the team reorganized their seats so that they could sit together. When the meeting finally got underway at 9:45 a. m., Mike moved from discussing the agenda and

objectives to inviting his guests to pose questions. No one volunteered a question - until Mike remembered that, as the senior Indonesian, Mr. Budi had to be invited to present his comments before everyone else could pose questions.

During the discussion that followed, Mike became annoyed by the tendency of Indonesian members to lead their conversations down side tracts - rather than discussions of results and objectives. Then, Mike and Robert, the American technical director, became enraged in a heated, open disagreement that surprised both the Indonesian and Japanese teams. During the break that followed, the Indonesians were offended that Mike had ordered coffee - but no snacks. When the meeting reconvened, and Mike tried to call the participants to a democratic vote on a key decision, Mr. Yamaguchi, the Japanese team leader, asked for a delay of a week so that he could consult with his headquarters in Tokyo. Mike openly expressed his frustration at his further delay, and Yamaguchi seized the opportunity to criticize Mike for an annoying workplace habit: Why, Yamaguchi asked, did Mike send so many e-mail messages to Yamaguchi, even though he worked only twenty-five feet away? (Elashmawi, 1997).

Snapshot 2. "An American woman visiting England was repeatedly offended - even on bad days enraged - when two Britons ignored her in settings in which she thought they should pay attention. For example, she was sitting at a booth on a railroad-station cafeteria. A couple began to settle into the opposite seat in the same booth. They unloaded their luggage; they laid their coats on the seat; he asked what she would like to eat and went off to get it; she slid into the booth facing the American. And throughout all this, they showed no sign of having noticed that someone was already sitting in the booth.

When the British woman lit up a cigarette, the American had a concrete object for her anger. She began ostentatiously looking around for another table to move to. Of course there was none; that's why the British couple had sat in her booth in the first place. The smoker immediately crushed out her cigarette and apologized. This showed that she had noticed that someone else was sitting in the booth, and that she was not inclined to disturb her. But then she went back pretending the American wasn't there, a ruse in which her husband collaborated when he returned with their food and they ate it. To the American, politeness requires talk between strangers forced to share a booth in a cafeteria, if only a fleeting "Do you mind if I sit down?" or a conventional "Is anyone sitting here?" even if it's obvious no one is. The omission of such-talk seemed to her like dreadful rudeness. The American couldn't see that another system of politeness was at work. (She could see nothing but red). By not acknowledging her presence, the British couple freed of involvement; they were being polite by not imposing" (Tannen, 1986).

Snapshot 3. "Thirty six years ago, the Russian premier, Kruschev, visited the United States on a good will trip and at one public gathering thrust his amid up into the air, clasping his hands above his head. Many Americans were enraged

at his behavior. [Problem: what was intended as a symbol of international goodwill was interpreted by some as an imitation of a boxer having just knocked out his opponent]" (Gardner, 1987).

Snapshot 1 tells us that some Americans, Indonesians and Japanese got together to discuss their business joint venture, and they spoke the same language, that is English. The Indonesian team members came late to the meeting with three uninvited partners. The Japanese ones needed consultation with higher authority before making an important decision. Their American partners expected punctuality, directness and an immediate decision. A clash began to surface and the reason was simple. Even though they spoke the same language, they came from different cultures. They had different values, expectations and interpretations of an event. In other words, they did not share the same objectivity in their minds.

Snapshot 2 shows how the concept of 'politeness' was interpreted differently even though the American lady and the British couple speak the same language, that is, English. She expected talk and they avoided it. Snapshot 3 demonstrates how a gesture of goodwill was interpreted as rude behavior. The three snapshots covering a span of approximately six decades point to the importance of intercultural issues in English language learning. Indonesian ELT teachers, supposedly knowledgeable of these aspects, should help their students understand them. The students need to understand that they do not only deal with the English language but also the culture that goes along with it. They need to be aware of the fact that linguistic codes they are learning also carry cultural messages. Unfortunately, language learners are often unaware of the cultural norms of the language they are learning (Nussenbaum, 1983). It is the responsibility of their teachers to explain such norms. In other words, the students also need to understand cultural information carried in the English language.

3. COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING AND INTERCULTURAL ISSUES

To our knowledge, Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is a teaching methodology which attempts to help learners of English to achieve communicative competence. "The development of communicative competence has to be related to their needs; they need to be prepared to use English for communication. In addition, they are provided with the information, practice and experience to meet their communication needs" (Canale, 1986; Sheila, 1988). In the Indonesian context, hopefully, our students of English can achieve communicative competence, too. Thus, they are able to use English for communication. However, CLT "does not explicitly mention cultural objectives to enable them to be aware of cultural differences; they can be found by implication" (Murphy, 1988). We believe that once Indonesian students of English become fluent speakers of English, called English users, they need to be purposefully

equipped with cultural information of English speaking people. The need for cultural content arises when they regularly interact with native speakers and other non-speakers of English. They should be aware of cultural iceberg influencing themselves and others when communicating in English. In other words, these Indonesian students of English, especially the fluent and advanced ones, need to learn cultural rules of English-speaking people. The more fluent and advanced they become, the more receptive they are to interesting content and a richer cultural input. "Knowledge of the target culture remains an important part of language learning, especially at higher levels" (Prodromou, 1992). Saville (1996) argues for the importance of learning the cultural rules when learning a foreign language and this is also addressed by Byram (1980 in Safniil 1996) saying that in engaging in language, speakers are enacting socio-cultural phenomena. It is a fact that the world is becoming smaller like a global 'village' and English is gaining more eminence as the lingua franca of the world. Due to rapid mobility of the world's population and increased contact between people caused by modern communications, electronic media, international business activities and international organizations, Indonesian English users not only have to gain communicative competence but also intercultural competence

4. INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

Intercultural competence has something to do with the ability to understand cultural aspects of a society and function appropriately in that society. For example, when we had lunch at a food stall in East Java and were asked what kind of drink we would like to have we had to state clearly that we wanted *teh tawar* or *teh tidak pakai gula* which is common in South Sumatra. If we simply had said *teh* we would have got *teh manis* which we found strange to go with lunch. Foreign learners of Bahasa Indonesia should be made aware of this (the same word '*teh*' with different meanings '*teh tawar*' and '*teh manis*' due to its regional context). A similar example can be cited here. Indonesian British-university alumni sometimes talk about 'dissertation' which is a requirement for a master's degree program in England. In contrast, Indonesian American-university graduates may be surprised to hear that. To them, a dissertation is a requirement for a Ph. D. degree program. Knowledge about this difference is necessary to develop among Indonesian students of English because it can cause misunderstanding when they communicate in English (also in Indonesian). We could not perform well because we misunderstood the term *teh*. We also had different interpretation of the same word because we had a different educational background. The illustration shows how people of different ethnic and educational background misunderstood each other even though they were all Indonesians.

Fantini (2000) defines intercultural competence as 'the abilities to perform effectively and appropriately with members of another language-culture background on their terms. In the context of TEFL, Indonesian users of English

should be able to communicate well with other native and non-native speakers of English. The users attempt to create mutual understanding through the use of English because they understand cultural aspects contained in the language.

Saville-Troike (1982) defines intercultural competence as "the ability to interpret cultural meaning through linguistic behavior." When offered 'What would you like to drink?' Indonesian students of English should make a clear choice which is not customary for them. In this situation, they are asked to decide what kind of drink they prefer. They cannot simply say "It's up to you" or "Anything you have is OK." In Indonesian culture, if it really exists, they are given no choice. Usually, a hostess does not ask; she simply serves '*teh manis*' or '*kopi manis*' which we sometimes do not want to drink.

An Indonesian friend of mine visiting England was asked by his British counterpart to have dinner together. The British was hungry and so was the Indonesian. The British asked 'Would you like to have dinner?'. The Indonesian answered 'No,' because he expected that the offer would be repeated two or three times before he accepted it. He regretted that he did not get a free dinner and had to buy one before he went to bed.

In this globalization era, there is a need to equip Indonesian students of English with intercultural knowledge and skills especially when they regularly have direct contact with English speaking people. The goal of inclusion of cultural aspects of English must be specified. Specific needs of the Indonesian students of English must be identified because the culture of English speakers is diverse and it is difficult to generalize about its aspects.

Byram (2000) discusses the five elements of intercultural competence:

- a. attitudes: curiosity and openness, readiness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own
- b. knowledge: of social groups and their products and practices in one's own and in one's interlocutor's country, and of the general processes of societal and individual interaction.
- c. skills of interpreting and relating: ability to interpret a document or event from another culture, to explain it and relate it to documents from one's own
- d. skills of discovery and interaction: ability to acquire new knowledge or a culture and cultural practices and the ability to operate knowledge, attitudes and skills under the constraints of real-time communication and interaction
- e. critical cultural awareness/political education: ability to evaluate critically and on the basis of explicit criteria perspectives, practices and products in one's own and other cultures and countries.

Lafayette and Schultz (in Morrain, 1983) state that there are probably three culturally oriented goals which can be tested:

- a. knowledge. The ability to recognize cultural information or pattern;
- b. understanding. The ability to explain cultural information or pattern. The students need to understand a cultural pattern in terms of its meaning, origin, interrelationship with the larger cultural context; and
- c. behavior. The ability to use cultural information or pattern. The objective refers to behavior skills such as the ability to act meaningfully, unobtrusively and unoffensively in real or simulated cultural situations.

In this globalization era, there is a need to enable Indonesian students of English to understand and use their intercultural knowledge and skills especially when they regularly have direct contact with English speaking people. The goal of inclusion of cultural aspects of English must be specified. Specific needs of the Indonesian students of English must be identified because the culture of English speakers is diverse and it is difficult to generalize about its aspects. Indonesian teachers of English should make their learners to be 'interculturally competent ... capture and understand, in interaction with people from foreign cultures, their specific concepts in perception, thinking, feeling and acting (Wikipedia, accessed on June 12, 2008).

5. POTENTIAL INTERCULTURAL ENCOUNTERS

Worldview, language and non-verbal communication (particularly the use of space and/ or time) are often identified as important elements of intercultural communication (Mulvany, 2008). Young (1997), an Australian teacher of Indonesian spending some years in Indonesia gives some ideas on Australian culture and how to survive it. She lists and explains some Australian cultural aspects for Indonesian students of English to be aware of when studying in Australia. The list includes greetings (shaking hands, verbal greetings), topics of conversation (marital status, family, origin, age, religion, jobs), time, queuing, noise, and business transactions.

Our observations and professional experience show that there are some cultural aspects of English speaking people for Indonesian students of English to learn if they want to increase their intercultural competence, particularly when they regularly need to communicate with the native speakers. The aspects are time, directness, honesty, saying no which really means no, discipline, work and play, compliments, apology, decision-making process, informality, frankness, initiatives, negotiations, citizenship, status, age, telephone talk, media of communication, silence and noise, smoking, politeness, equality/egalitarianism, red-tapes/ bureaucracy, jokes/humor, taboos, rhetoric, euphemisms, superstition, and stereotyping.

6. STRATEGIES TO DEVELOP INTERCULTURAL COMPETENCE

Various techniques used in English language teaching methodology can be utilized to teach cultural content: lectures, readings, personal observations, interviews, films and videotapes, role-plays, discussions, simulation games, values clarifications exercises.

Lectures can be an efficient means of conveying cultural information or offering new perspectives on what Indonesian students of English already know. If experts in a particular field, especially anthropology, sociology, cross-cultural communication or other related social sciences, are available, they can be invited to give guest lectures to explain deep culture of English. Textbooks on cross-cultural communication can help Indonesian students of English to increase awareness of English culture, for example, *Beyond Language Intercultural Communication for English as a Second Language* and *Journeys to Cultural Understanding, Intercultural Communication*, and *Cultures in Conversation*. By reading these materials they have access to detailed treatment of issues related to specific intercultural aspects that they need to understand.

Indonesian students of English can be asked to observe certain events where English speakers and non-native speakers regularly interact. They may take notes on differences and similarities of the ways both groups communicate and report to the class.

Films and video tapes can provide vivid illustration of cultural patterns in action. They may pick up certain rules from these media. In addition, they can be asked to find out what it means to act like members of English culture. It does not mean, however, that they must change their identity or personality. At least, they can see how native speakers feel in a certain situation. This will hopefully increase their intercultural awareness.

The students can also be asked to discuss some cultural information with their classmates or native speakers, for example, why Americans tend to pay for themselves when they have lunch even though they ask you to go to a restaurant together. The discussion will at first yield different interpretations. When the issue is clarified, they will recognize how their own culture has shaped them and why they do it that way. For a certain period of time, they can be asked to live according to the English cultural rules, for example, how as far as they know Americans have dinner, what kinds of meals they eat, how they set the table, etc. This simulation game can show that the habit which is culturally ingrained affects our behavior. Then they will realize why their British, American or Australian friends act the way they do. They will also understand that their communication actions are influenced by their Indonesian culture. Such awareness tells Indonesian students of English that when two people (Indonesian and Briton or American or Australian) speaking in the same language (English) they still tend

to think in their own cultures. They have to negotiate the same cultural meaning in order to achieve mutual understanding.

7. CONCLUSION

There is a need to intentionally equip Indonesian students of English with intercultural information of English speaking world. When communicating with English speaking people and other non-native speakers of English, Indonesian English users must understand cultural differences they are facing and recognize openly that everyone in the world isn't just like us. Simultaneously, they can introduce Indonesian culture that may enable "us" and "them" to appreciate the differences, avoid conflicts and increase intercultural understanding and create harmony.

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