



The Influence of Mastering Target-Language Culture on the Students' Language Skills

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ARTICLE INFO

ISSN: 2502-6909
Vol. 2, No. 1, June 2017
URL: <http://usnsj.com/index.php/JEE/article/view/2.1.89-96>

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Abstract

Mastering language in English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context requires many aspects related to the language itself. This paper aimed to explore one of the aspects which influenced the students' language skills which were the target-language culture. The current paper utilized qualitative research in the form of case study. Besides, the participants were the fourth-semester students of English department in Universitas Mataram. The method of collecting the data employed interview and observation. To validate the data, the triangulations of the data source and data collection method were utilized. At the end, to analyze the data, the interactive model was employed. The result revealed that 1). The students get the influences on their reading and speaking skills by learning target-language culture in Cross Culture Understanding (CCU) class, 2). The influence in reading can be seen when the students' gaining new vocabulary from the texts they read and produced it when they spoke, and 3). In speaking, the students' accent still affected greatly by the interference of their native accent and culture. The paper also suggests that employing the mixed method (quantitative and qualitative methods) might be useful and more preferable to see the influence on the students' language skills as the effect of attending the CCU class and learning the target-language culture.

Keywords: target-language culture, language skills, cross-cultural understanding

A. Introduction

Mastering language skills cannot be separated from mastering the context of the language since someone who is only mastering the language without mastering the context and philosophy of the language is “a fluent fool” (Choudhury (2013). The context is created from the habits in the culture where the language exists. It is widely known that there are many branches of language such as sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, pragmatics, and many others. The mentioned branches have its own focus on how to dig the linguistics fields deeply; some fields might be related to the social contexts, while some others might be related to the personal contexts. The whole branches lead to one purpose which is facilitating the smooth and the clear communication since language is what the members of a particular society speak (Wardhaugh, 2006:1). Therefore, one of the ways to master the language in practical context is mastering its culture about how and when to use language contextually.

Language and culture is a unit that needs to be mastered in one set of knowledge. Brown (2000:177) states that “A language is a part of culture, and a culture is a part of language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture”. The unity between culture and language is an important point to be considered since the lose one of the two remains incomplete. In addition, Jiang (2000:328) mentions three metaphors about the inseparability of language and culture based on a philosophical view, a communicative view, and a pragmatic view. In philosophical view, language and culture are seen as a living organism, language is seen flesh while culture is seen blood. In a communicative view, language is seen as swimming skill while culture is seen as the water. In pragmatic view, language is seen as the vehicle while culture is seen as the traffic light. In short, the three mentioned metaphors about the relation between language and culture proves how inseparability they are. Therefore, this paper is aimed to explore the influence of mastering the target-language culture on the students’ language skills (reading and speaking) in an EFL context, especially in cross-cultural understanding class.

B. Literature Review

Under this part, there are some sub topics provided, among others; the definition of target-language culture, the elements of target-language culture in EFL context, and the influence of target-language culture on the language skills.

1. *The Definition of Target-Language Culture*

The term “target-language culture” is closely similar to the term “target culture”. It is constructed from the words; target, language, and culture. Target is the goal, language is known globally as a means of communication. Besides, the definition of culture based on UNESCO (2013:10) is

“that set of distinctive spiritual, material, intellectual and emotional features of a society or social group, encompassing all the ways of being in that society; at a minimum, including art and literature, lifestyles, ways of living together, value systems, traditions, and beliefs. Each culture is the sum of assumptions and practices shared by members of a group distinguishing them from other groups, and so one culture comes into clearest focus when compared to another culture maintaining different practices. However, cultures are themselves multiple, so that to insiders, every group reveals itself not as homogeneous but rather a nested series of progressively smaller groups whose members are all too aware of distinctions between themselves. Cultures themselves are seldom the focus of attention in the discussion of intercultural competences, for cultures have no existence apart from the people who construct and animate them. Thus, members of cultural groups more adequately serve as the focus of attention.”

The definition of each term, target, language and culture are complex; therefore, to make it simple, below are the definition of target-language culture drawn from some experts, among others; Stewart (1982) cited in Alptekin (1992) defines the target-language culture as an essential feature of every stage of foreign language learning, and asserts that teaching the formal aspects of the foreign language while referring to the native culture of the learner is virtually useless. The insertion of target-language culture in language class will be very beneficial for students’ understanding since target culture brings essential feature of the target language.

In addition, Cakir (2006:155) states that “target-language culture is an analytic look into the native culture.” It is considered important since language is learned and used with its context. Learning foreign language means learning the cultural, distinctive meanings and functions

which students must assimilate if they are to control the language as native speakers control it (Cakir, 2006:156).

Moreover, Hesar et al. (2012) state that target-language culture is the cultural elements of the targeted language that language classroom must both implicitly and explicitly address. Teachers' role should facilitate students in language classrooms to concern to target-language culture since target-language culture entails the language they learn.

Furthermore, Choudhury (2013:20) states that target language culture is the deeper look into the native values. Native values refer to the native speakers' way of life. Language use must be in harmony with the culturally appropriate behavior in order to create successful communication.

In 2015, Mahmoud states that target-language culture is the culture entails in language learning which reflects and transfers deeply embedded knowledge from one generation to the next through language. Learning language means learning the target-culture because culture is delivered by language. It causes the significant possibilities of target-culture to entails in language learning.

In conclusion, target-language culture is an analytic look into the essential elements of the foreign cultures which entail the foreign language learning.

2. *The Elements of Target-Language Culture in EFL Context*

There are four elements of target-language culture according to Adaskou, et al. (1990), those are; capital C culture or aesthetic sense, small C or sociological sense, semantic sense, and the last pragmatic or sociolinguistic sense.

a. Capital C culture or aesthetic sense

According to Adaskou, et al. (1990), the aesthetic sense or capital C culture refers to the media, the cinema, music, and literature of foreign culture that teachers bring to the foreign classroom in the process of teaching the foreign language. The kinds of capital C culture are derived into the classroom to be used as a teaching material. It may not only appear in the textbook but also in the everyday process of teaching the foreign language.

Besides, Gao (2006) states that "in capital C culture, taking into account in drama playing, language is used both verbal and non-verbal language to entertain or to deliver the message of the drama scene by using foreign culture. The scenes in the drama not only represent the foreign culture but also lead students to know the expression of the foreign artist when using language. It is such kind of authentic material which is covered by the art.

In addition, Alptekin (1993) argues that the culture in EFL textbook usually represents the writer views, values, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings of their own English-speaking society consciously or unconsciously. If the writers of the textbook used in a given classroom coming from the native country of the language learned, the textbooks may totally represent views, values, beliefs, attitudes, and feelings of the native writer and vice versa. The media, the cinema, music, and literature in the textbook may represent the foreign culture. In summary, both in the textbook and in the process of everyday teaching, the capital C cultures take the role in the process of language teaching.

b. Small c Culture or Sociological Sense

Small c culture or sociological sense refers to the form and nature of family within all the interactions such as the sense of interpersonal relations among family members, material conditions, work and leisure, customs and institutions (Adaskou, et al.: 1990). In addition, Gao (2006) states that in small c culture, the languages used for every member of the family are different to older and to younger. The uniqueness of the language between older and younger may be the focus of this section because this area is too huge. Teachers need to eliminate some important points by considering the lesson plan or the appropriate topic before choosing this kind of culture in the teaching process.

Not all small c cultures relate to the topic in EFL context, some can be taken while some others are not. Take into consideration, the culture between local and foreign language are different in the family relationship. The closeness between children and parents are different between in Indonesia and in the foreign country. This section can be a unique topic to be learned in small c culture.

c. The Semantic Sense

Adaskou, et al. (1990) states that semantic sense refers to the different meaning that we give to such kind of things in our community such as; foods, clothes, and institutions. In addition, Gao (2006) states that in the semantic sense, the language use is modified in order to maintain harmony and avoid the bad effect of the language used. When an Indonesian goes to England,

they may find bread as the main food. It clearly contrasts the main menu in Indonesia where she/he consumes rice as the main food. Although Indonesian has eaten other menus but before eating rice, it is considered as snacking, not eating. It also happens when an England comes to Indonesia, they will find rice as the main menu. This illustrates how different semantic sense takes part in people mind.

d. The Pragmatic or Sociolinguistic Sense

Adaskou, et al.(1990) defines pragmatic or sociolinguistic sense involves the background knowledge, social skills, and paralinguistic skills in order to be used as the way of making successful communication. The conditions in Indonesia and in the foreign country are different. It makes the background knowledge, social skills, and paralinguistic skills of native and local people different. The understanding of each differentiation can be reduced by inserting target-language culture in teaching process of foreign language.

In conclusion, the elements of target-language culture to be taught in EFL classroom are capital C culture, small c culture, semantic sense, and the pragmatic or sociolinguistics sense. Each kind has its own characteristics. Meanwhile, (Cakir, 2006:159) mentions the kind of target-language culture that students often learn in EFL context “may be drawn to geographical factors and their influence on daily living, major historical periods, how the society is organized, production, transport, buying and selling, aspects of city and country life, the history of art, music, dance and film and so on”.

3. *The Influence of Target-Language Culture on the Language Skills*

The influence of mastering target-language culture on students' language skills can be drawn from the emergence of mastering target culture in the practical use of language. Since the material and resources of the receptive skills (listening and reading) usually written and arranged by the foreign writer, thus the productive skills (speaking and writing) also need to agree with the foreign form accepted widely. This is in line with Alptekin, (2005) who states that language and culture cannot be separated; language could only be fully understood if it is connected to its culture. The full understanding of language is not only focusing on the language itself but the others components including its culture.

Furthermore, Hesar, et al. (2012) also supports that “in language learning, culture is significantly important. It is an item that cannot be disregarded because culture acts as if the flesh and language as the skeleton of a society”. This statement supports directly that language and culture are inseparable. They also use a metaphorical statement in which culture is the flesh and language as the skeleton. Both language and culture have their own role in supporting their roles one another.

In addition, learning culture in language class will add students' knowledge and open to new things which are different from theirs and lead them to be more tolerance (Abdollahi-Guilani, et al.:2012, Papa: 2015). When students are exposed to foreign culture, they do not only think about the target-language culture but they may also think about their own culture. This will add students' awareness of both foreign culture and their own culture.

There are some previous studies might be related to this present research, among others; Mekheimer (2011)who investigate the impact of the target culture foreign language teaching in Saudi Arabia by using semi-structured interview and the Communicative English Proficiency Assessment (CEPA) test. The result revealed that the students who were exposed to target-culture get the high score in CEPA test. Moreover, they revealed high-performance level, as well as a rigid grammatical competence, showed in their good reading and writing skills. Furthermore, target-culture can affect foreign language learning because when students learn the foreign language, they also learn the foreign culture. This related study can be considered closely related to the current study except the idea to make legitimacy towards the involvement.

The next relevant study might be the work of Deneme, et al. (2011) who investigated teaching a foreign language and foreign culture to young learners in Turkey. The study aimed at finding out 1. How do the students learn about foreign cultures in and out of classrooms? 2. Do the course books which primary schools use include adequate cultural elements? The result of the study revealed that: 1) Family, computer, and television take the important part in engaging children knowledge of foreign culture in and out of the classroom. 2) The course books include cultural element mostly about the children song and festivals. In conclusion, this previous study is linked to this current study as the supportive evident that culture can be taught for students since they are young through family, television, and computer.

The next relevant study conducted by Afrin (2013) in Bangladesh aiming to scrutinize how to connect culture and language in order to create a good combination between them. By using

questionnaire, the result shows that 56% strongly agreed to include the target language's culture in their teaching and learning process while 23% agreed and 21% strongly disagreed. It is clearly related to this current study since the purpose of this current study is to investigate the same question in different fields. On the other hand, the method of data collection and data analysis are different ones another.

The next relevant study conducted by Herawati (2014) in Indonesia aiming to show the evidence that teaching sociolinguistics can contribute to teaching students not only the language itself but also the culture of the language they learn. By utilizing experimental research, the result of achievement indicates that the achievement of both classes is almost the same. On the other hand, in the appropriate use of language; the sociolinguistics class indicates the higher score. Additionally, 79% students say that they know more about foreign cultural and can apply the language use materials suitable to the condition of the foreign culture after learning sociolinguistics. The similarity of this previous research with the current research is the purpose of the research but using the different method.

After revealing the theories and the relevant studies above, below is the research methodology utilized in this research.

C. Methodology

There are some elements in this section, those are: research design, setting and participant, technique of data collection, instruments, triangulation, and technique of data analysis.

1. Research Design

Since the phenomenon under the study was the influence of mastering target-language culture on students' language skills, this study employed the qualitative study to scrutinize the case. The qualitative method in the form of the case study is utilized in this present study. It is a study of an issue explored by one or more cases by using a bounded system (Creswell: 2007).

2. Setting and Participant

The participants of this study were fourth-semester students majoring English education in Universitas Mataram, Lombok Island, who take the Cross-Cultural Understanding subject. Class A was chosen based on the gap seen between the students' skill in speaking which is less fluent and their good ability in analysing the target-language culture in the textbook. The judgment was based on the preliminary observation which showed the interesting fact between the ability in mastering the target-culture and the ability in mastering the language skill.

3. Technique of Data Collection

There are some techniques used in this research; among others; interview, observation, field note, and recording. The events in teaching and learning process were observed and the field note was used to jot down the important information related to the research. Besides, the interview and recording were used to confirm what happened in the observation result gained.

4. Instrument

The researcher is the main instrument of this research. However, there were some others instrument that also used in this research to collect the data, among others; interview manual, field note, observation sheets.

5. Triangulation

To validate the data, the data source and the data collection techniques were used as the triangulation. The triangulations of data source were the students and the lecturer; meanwhile, the triangulations of data collection techniques were observation, note taking, and interview.

6. Technique of Data Analysis

In analyzing the data, the current research employed the interactive model from Miles and Huberman (1984). It consists of data reduction, data display, and drawing conclusion or verifying conclusion. Data reduction is the stage when the data gathered is selected and classified useful and non-useful one. The useful data were selected to answer the research question while the non-useful one was ignored. The following stage is data display, in this stage, the selected data were displayed in the finding and discussion section. The last stage is drawing the conclusion or verifying conclusion, in this stage, the gathered data displayed in the finding and discussion led into the conclusion.

D. Findings and Discussion

This part presents the findings and discussion based on the data gathered from some data collection techniques.

1. Findings

Based on the interview, students mention some influences they got on their language skills by studying target-language culture, especially in reading and speaking. When the students asked about what influences they get in reading, below are some representative interview transcripts of the students:

“advantages about vocabulary....” (student 1)

“...how to find like main ideas, supporting ideas,....”(student 2)

“in reading, I can improve and expand my vocabulary....” (student 4)

“I got a lot of new words”. (student 5)

The repeated answers that students mention about the influence they get in reading by learning target-language culture is the new vocabulary. It is generally known that the text refers to the various vocabulary used, then it is not surprising when the students mention about the vocabulary. Besides, when the students asked about what influences they got in speaking, below are some representative interview transcripts of the students:

“about pronunciation....” (student 1)

“I know several idiomatic expressions and then find how to use it in daily conversation.” (student 2)

“because we had a lot of presentation, and then we have to speak a lot and then obviously my English better.” (student 3)

“...and in speaking, I can speak fluently”. (student 4)

“it built myself, mm, self-esteem, confidence”. (student 5).

The answer of the students refers to the pronunciation, expression, and become better in speaking. This is due to the context they got on how to use language in certain context in CCU class they attend. Furthermore, the lecturer also confirms that the students get the influence on their speaking and reading skills by learning the target-language culture. Below are the interview transcripts:

“sure, they will have, you know, the culture and the language cannot be separated. We do know, the culture of the target culture is very hard to identify the ideas in written”. (the lecturer)

“as I explained you, it is very hard, you know, when something you read is the result of somebody's writing, somebody's writing is very much influenced by how he thinks, in this case, the culture”. (the lecturer)

“ok, mm, ok in speaking, in order to make communication successful, we don't only focus on the language use, but, mm, like, mm, nonverbal; how we look, at their eyes, the distance between the speaker, how to make post, etc.” (the lecturer)

Based on the confirmation from the lecturer, the students get the influence from the target-language culture; however, the native culture of the students also influences them when they perform the speaking skills especially seen in their pronunciation and in the nonverbal language.

On the other hand, different from the result of the interview, the result of observation shows that the students are enough diligent to read in the classroom, they are enough active in the discussion but they have limited vocabulary and has great influence of their native culture. When they call their lecturer, the students still addressing him by using: “*sir*” “*excuse me sir*”, *can I answer, sir*” etc. Besides, the accents are still enough far from the native English. Their accent seems to be tied by their native language. The influence of the student's native culture cannot be erased since they born and grow far from English-speaking countries.

2. Discussion

The study has shown that in reading, the students get the new vocabulary and in speaking, it trains them to be fluent and experts. In addition, talking about the influence of mastering target-language culture, it requires us to look back into the important roles of target-language culture. In reading, Alptekin (1993) gives an example of the conflict where the target-language dialect is unmatched with the native culture. If the writers of the books or journals which students read are foreign authors, the students will be confused because of the different background

knowledge between the writers and the readers. The target-language culture is very hard to identify in writing. This is happening in CCU class where students need to clarify their reading text to understand the meaning. It leads them to be bored to read and choose alternatives solution, watching movies or listening songs.

Moreover, in speaking, as the lecturer said that in order to make communication successful, students need to focus not only on the language use but also nonverbal one. How they look when speaking, how they interrupt by raising hand first to get the permission, to whom their eyes looking at, the distance between the speakers and how to make pose are such ways of speaking that need to be concerned too. Besides, in speaking, the students insist on having good influences by practicing to speak using English in every class. However, the great influences of their local culture in speaking cannot be erased. They still interrupt without raising their hand, they still unfocused and see people around when speaking to other people, they still call their lecturer "sir" without mentioning his name.

By looking at these two skills, it can be concluded that mastering culture does not mean mastering language skills. Although students know the cultural context, in theory, it may difficult to apply in practice because there is still great influence embedded from their own culture. In short, students get influences on their language skills especially in reading and speaking although they still bring their own culture with those two skills.

E. Conclusion

Based on the discussion, some points can be drawn, namely; 1) The target-language culture that students learn in CCU class can influence the students' skills especially in reading and speaking. 2) The influence in reading can be drawn when students' gaining new vocabulary from the texts they read and produce it when they speak, and 3) In speaking, students' accent still bring great influence from their native accent and culture. On the other hand, it is also suggested that measuring the influence of target-language culture on students' language skills by using mixed method (quantitative and qualitative methods) might be more preferable since quantitatively, the score result can show the clear distinction between the low and the high achievement followed by the description by utilizing qualitative ways.

Acknowledgment

Ocean thank is given to my sponsorship, Indonesia Endowment Fund for Education/LPDP which funds my master study and Universitas Sebelas Maret as my home for my master degree. Besides, thank is also given to Universitas Mataram for allowing me to conduct the research.

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