

RETHINKING MULTICULTURAL PARADIGM IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING¹

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Abstract

This study aims at having a critical analysis on the practice of English Language Teaching (ELT), which unintentionally tends to have a great potential of creating questions in terms of culture. The main culturally defined question is the existence of western cultural internalization in the practice of ELT classroom without being accompanied by the educators' awareness on it. This has merely a negative impact on those involved in the teaching and learning activities in terms of their cultural awareness. Considering these facts, this particular study focuses on three main issues concerning the practice of ELT, namely, 1) identifying the common mainstream of ELT practice in Indonesia, particularly in the domain of accompanying culture; 2) the impacts of the current ELT practice; and 3) identifying alternative ways of ELT model.

The main approach underlying this study is multicultural perspective. This perspective is used as the basis of analysis. This perspective commonly deals with ideals of social justice, education equity, and a dedication to facilitating educational experiences in which all students reach their full potential as learners and as socially aware and active beings, locally, nationally, and globally.

The results of this study have shown the following findings. Firstly, the practice of ELT in Indonesia has internalized the Western cultural values and ideology. Secondly, this model of ELT practice has a great potential of becoming a new form of Western imperialism in the postcolonial era when there is no comprehensive awareness of the importance of having multicultural perspectives towards education. Thirdly, the ELT practices need to consider the multicultural perspective as the underlying principle in order to maintain the local cultural values and ideology. In conclusion, the multicultural education could be the most suitable model of ELT practice in this country.

Key words: *multicultural paradigm, English language teaching, cultural values*

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Introduction

It is generally agreed so far that education plays the most significant roles in the development of a nation. Education may be regarded as an investment in human capital formation that lays the foundation for future economic growth and development of the country. This statement, is particularly, in line with the notion of education that has been defined as:

....conscious and well planned effort in creating a learning environment and learning process so that learners will be able to develop their full potential for acquiring spiritual and religious strengths, develop self-control, personality, intelligence, morals and noble character and skills that one needs for him/herself, for the community, for the nation, and for the State. National education means education based on *Pancasila* and the 1945 Constitution, and is rooted in the religious values, national cultures of Indonesia, and one that is responsive to the needs of the ever-changing era.²

This definition has been becoming the main guidance of conducting all of the teaching and learning processes in this country, not to mention the English language teaching in this country. Educators and all of scholars concerning the practice of English Language teaching need to consider this definition as their starting point in conducting the teaching and learning processes. The fact that teaching a foreign language cannot be effectively carried out without giving understanding of its culture has lead to a very hard job for those individuals involving the practice of the English language teaching. Educators may unintentionally have been inserting western culture in their classrooms, while learners may have been learning western culture while learning the language.

² Act of the Republic of Indonesia on National Education System, Chapter 1 Article 1.

This condition may lead to the decrease of the future generations' understanding towards their own culture. They may have been internalizing the foreign culture in their life, and becoming strangers of their own culture. This will not be beneficial for the sustainability of the country. Therefore, the need to have cultural awareness among those involving the English language teaching is unavoidable. Considering these facts, this particular study focuses on three main issues concerning the practice of ELT, namely, 1) identifying the common mainstream of ELT practice in Indonesia, particularly in the domain of accompanying culture; 2) the impacts of the current ELT practice; and 3) identifying alternative ways of ELT model.

The Practice of English Language Teaching

The current practice of English Language teaching has been focused on preparing the students to be able to communicate effectively by using the language. English teachers have done their job very well in motivating their students to learn and use the languages. They always try to use various interesting activities to present the context of the given language items being discussed. Some of them even give the explanation on certain language items accompanied by the context of culture in which those items used. This fact is very common in the practice of foreign language classrooms. What may be becoming the main concern is on whether the presentation of this foreign culture is accompanied by the explanation of our own culture. This remains an important question in the current practice of English Language teaching in this country.

What the teachers commonly do in their teaching is merely attempts to fulfill the objectives of the teaching and learning goals as stated in the current curriculum. Most teachers are busy with finding suitable and relevant materials without having critical analysis on the cultural biases that may be covered within the source materials. What commonly come in their minds is finding the materials which are in line with the objectives of the teaching and learning activities as mentioned in the curriculum.

It is generally agreed so far that the practice of English Language teaching of English will not be effective without discussing its culture. Most educators will agree that teaching the language will be impossible without teaching the culture. Every sentence, expression, word needs to be put in the context of culture of the language. In other words we may say that an English teacher could act as a cultural agent as well. Every English teacher needs to realize this, if not they will not only be the cultural agents but also be the agents of the new form of imperialism.

The Impacts of the Current ELT Model

The current ELT practice may lead the students to have better understanding on foreign culture rather than their own culture or even in the extreme way could lead them to make the foreign culture as their own culture and make them internalize the norms as well as foreign cultural values in their

daily lives. Some of our young students may have deep understanding on the foreign culture rather than mastering the language.

What may be the most important impact of the current ELT practice is the loss of our own culture since our young generations are no longer have clear understanding of it. Our own valuable cultural norms and values will be left behind by its descendents as they like to have and behave by using the foreign cultural norms and values. They may even forget their cultural identity. All individuals engaged in the foreign language teaching and learning process need to anticipate this by having the cultural awareness of the foreign culture and start having discussion on the national culture while explaining the foreign culture in their classrooms.

An alternative Ways of ELT Model

Educators need to have awareness and sensitivity regarding issues of cultural diversity between English and the local languages as well as the national language, bahasa Indonesia. Teachers need to consider the fact that their students come from different cultural background, have different levels of proficiency, speak their own first language, and also may have different social and economic background.

One of the best solutions to overcome this may be by improving the educators' interest in incorporating multicultural approaches into educational

settings. The multicultural education may be an alternative way of improving the cultural awareness³ in the practice of English language teaching.

Sinagatullin defines multicultural education as an idea stating that all students, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, race, culture, social class, religion, or exceptionality, should have an equal opportunity to learn at school.⁴ He also states that one of the major goals of multicultural education is to help students acquire attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed to successfully function within their own microculture, mainstream culture, and the global community.⁵

This definition provides clear understanding on the main concept of multicultural education that the need for multicultural education may not only conventionally associated with societies containing ethnic, racial, and linguistic diversity, but also with differences in ability, social class, gender, religion, or residence (rural versus urban). In fact, this basic principle is in line with the notion of education as well as the function of education mentioned in our Act on National Educational System. It is the diversity in term of culture that becoming the main consideration within this intercultural education. Grant and Lei provides three reasons why culture matters in education. They mention that in the

³ Shinegori Tanaka, “English and Multiculturalism—from the Language User’s Perspective “, in *RELC Journal* (2006; 37), 47. He mentions that the concept of ‘cultural awareness’—understanding of different cultures—has been emphasized as an essential part of English learning and teaching.

⁴ Ilghiz M. Sinagatullin, *Constructing Multicultural Education in A Diverse Society* (Folkestone, Kent CT20 2DN, England: The Scarecrow Press, Inc, 2003), 83.

⁵ Sinagatullin, 114.

theoretical conceptions of intercultural education, the factor “culture” is mentioned as relevant at one or more of the following different levels⁶:

1. The cultural and social backgrounds of students, teachers, and parents should be taken into account in order to understand their attitudes, actions, and learning problems as well as personal and social needs.
2. The international and multicultural character of society as a consequence of migration and other phenomena related to globalization should be included as topics in order to change the cultural contents of the curricula.
3. The cultural contents of education should be revised altogether in the name of a universalist idea of education, free from any form of ethnocentrism, so the contents include different perspectives and educate for pluralism and relativism.

Concerning the notion of culture within the intercultural education, they suggest four main elements for an education respectful of sociocultural and linguistic diversity.⁷ Those are: 1) Subjective and objective support of the identity of socio-cultural and linguistic minority students; 2) Constructing curriculum contents implying and reflecting the positive value of the plurality of cultures and languages; 3) Building communicative, action-oriented skills; 4) Accepting socio-cultural diversity and the plurality of ideas as a challenge for democracy.

Having a clear understanding on the definition as well as the main concepts of the multicultural perspective on education will not be much beneficial without considering other individuals and institutions involved in the overall success of the national educational system. This perspective towards the practice of education requires much improvement on the overall components of education, including the curriculum, the educators, learners, and all aspects of education. This idea is in line with one of the definitions of multicultural education

⁶ Carl A. Grant and Joy L. Lei (eds), *Global Constructions Of Multicultural Education: Theories And Realities* (New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc, 2001), 10-11.

⁷ Grant and Lei, 13.

mentioned by Banks and Banks in the *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education* that:

Multicultural education is a field of study designed to increase educational equity for all students that incorporates, for this purpose, content, concepts, principles, theories, and paradigms from history, the social and behavioral sciences, and particularly from ethnic studies and women studies.⁸

The dimensions of multicultural education, developed by Banks and Banks described in the *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education*, provide the conceptual framework for the multicultural education involving variety of dimensions. They are: *content integration, the knowledge construction process, prejudice reduction, an equity pedagogy, and an empowering school culture and social structure*. To implement multicultural education effectively, teachers and administrators must attend to each of the five dimensions of multicultural education. They should use content from diverse groups when teaching concepts and skills, help students to understand how knowledge in the various disciplines is constructed, help students to develop positive intergroup attitudes and behaviors, and modify their teaching strategies so that students from different racial, cultural, language, and social-class groups will experience equal educational opportunities.

The total environment and culture of the school must also be transformed so that students from diverse groups will experience equal status in the culture and life of the school. Although the five dimensions of multicultural education are highly interrelated, each requires deliberate attention and focus.

⁸J.A. Banks & C.A.M. Banks (Eds.) (2001). *Handbook of Research on Multicultural Education* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2001), xii.

The national focus on basic skills and testing is diverting attention from the broad liberal education that students need to live and function effectively in a multicultural nation and world. It is essential that all students acquire basic literacy and numeracy skills. However, as Mary Dilg documents in this informative and needed book, students also need the knowledge, skills, and values that will enable them to live, interact, and make decisions with fellow citizens from different racial, ethnic, cultural, language, and religious groups. Students also need to acquire the knowledge and skills that will enable them to understand and to come to grips with their own ethnic and cultural identities.⁹ Dilg reveals how difficult this essential process can be for the adolescents she describes in this book with the eye of an insightful anthropologist and the heart of a compassionate teacher. She not only makes it clear that teachers need to facilitate the identity quests of adolescents, she also uses vivid examples to illustrate how she engages her students in powerful discussions to help them clarify their racial, ethnic, and cultural affiliations.

In terms of the individuals directly involved in the teaching and learning process, the multicultural education perspective also requires better quality of human resources to conduct the teaching and learning processes, namely the educators, particularly language teachers. This particular perspective on education requires teachers with multiculturally competent in the corresponding subject area.¹⁰ Multicultural competency includes, but is not limited to, competency in

⁹ Mary Dilg, *Thriving in the Multicultural Classroom: Principles and Practices for Effective Teaching* (New York: Teachers College, Columbia University, 2003), ix.

¹⁰ Sinagatullin, 145-150.

culture and related issues and socio-historical, socio-geographical, sociological, and technological competency. A teacher competent in culture studies is expected to know that cultural peculiarities of some minority students often prevent them from progressing equally with the mainstream part of the group, so that they are considered slow learners or even mentally retarded in this social system; whereas in other social systems-for example, in home and ethnic community environments-these children may be considered normal or even gifted. Sociohistorical competency requires that the social studies teacher know about different ethnic and cultural groups' historical developments and historical heritages, their indigenous customs and habits, folk pedagogy heritages, and modes of interethnic interaction. The teacher's multicultural competency may also include at least three components: attitudes, knowledge, and skills.

Conclusion

The main concern of this paper is on having a critical study on the practice of English Language Teaching (ELT), which unintentionally tends to have a great potential of creating questions in terms of culture. The main culturally defined question is the existence of western cultural internalization in the practice of ELT classroom without being accompanied by the educators' awareness on it. This has merely a negative impact on those involved in the teaching and learning activities in terms of their cultural awareness, particularly the students.

One of the best solutions to overcome this may be by improving the educators' interest in incorporating multicultural approaches into educational

settings. The multicultural education may be an alternative way of improving the cultural awareness in the practice of English language teaching.

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