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DAFTAR ISI

Metode Pembelajaran Materi Civic Education: Upaya Transformasi Kesadaran Berkonstitusi, Berdemokrasi, dan Hukum	101—111	Anshori
Transformasi Fungsi Cerita dalam Shalawat Maulid Ad-Dziba'iy	112—117	Mustofa
Pembandingan Cara Penyajian Fungsi di Tingkat SD, SMP, dan SMA	118—124	Junarti
Pengadaan Tanah bagi Pelaksanaan Pembangunan untuk Kepentingan Umum	125—131	Muwahid
Filsafat Ilmu Sebagai Dasar dan Strategi Pengembangan Ilmu Pengetahuan dan Seni	132—146	Ida Sukowati
Nilai-Nilai Sosial Budaya dalam Lagu-Lagu Campursari yang Disiarkan Radio Pendidikan (Rapendik) Kantor Wilayah Pendidikan Nasional Provinsi Jawa Timur	147—158	Tubiyono
Potret Masyarakat Indonesia Masa Reformasi: Studi Stilistika Novel <i>Asmaraloka</i> Karya Danarto	159—170	Sariban
✓ A Preliminary View of The Relation between Language and Culture	171—177	Hairus Salikin
Fenomena Reduplikasi: Sebuah Analisis Kritis	178—187	Rahayu Pujiastuti
Penerapan Model Pembelajaran Kooperatif Tipe TGT pada Mata Pelajaran Matematika	188—195	Sujiran

A PRELIMINARY VIEW OF THE RELATION BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

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Abstrak: Artikel singkat ini terinspirasi oleh hipotesa Sapir-Whorf yaitu bahwa cara pandang seseorang terhadap sesuatu dipengaruhi oleh Bahasa Ibu yang mereka gunakan. Lebih eksplisit hipotesa tersebut dapat dipahami bahwa bahasa yang dipakai oleh sekelompok masyarakat sangat terkait erat dengan budaya masyarakat itu sendiri. Oleh karena itu budaya dan bahasa tidak dapat dipisahkan karena kedua hal tersebut selalu saling terkait. Pembelajar sebuah bahasa tidak akan berhasil dengan baik kalau mereka tidak bisa memahami budaya masyarakat yang bahasanya sedang dipelajari. Pembelajar Bahasa Inggris, misalnya, harus mau mengenal budaya orang-orang yang berbahasa Inggris. Kalau ini tidak dilakukan mereka akan mengalami hambatan ketika mereka menggunakan bahasa yang sedang dipelajari. Belajar Bahasa Inggris (atau bahasa asing yang lain) tanpa berusaha mengenal budaya masyarakat yang bahasanya kita pelajari, bagaikan belajar menjalankan mobil dengan hanya belajar teorinya tanpa mempraktikkan menjalankan mobil yang sebenarnya. Dengan cara ini, dapat dipastikan orang tersebut tidak akan mampu membawa mobil dengan aman dan nyaman. Sangat sering dalam berkomunikasi bahwa kesalahpahaman bukan hanya disebabkan oleh masalah gramatikal, tetapi lebih disebabkan oleh hambatan-hambatan budaya karena perbedaan asumsi terhadap sesuatu. Karena itu menyadari dan mempelajari perbedaan budaya dapat membantu para pembelajar bahasa asing untuk lebih memperlancar proses belajar mereka.

Kata-kata kunci: bahasa, budaya, pembelajaran bahasa asing, kesalahpahaman lintas budaya

INTRODUCTION

This concise paper looks at the relation between language and culture. When people talk about language and culture, we have to look at American linguists Edward Sapir (1884-1939) and one of his students, Benjamin Lee Whorf (1897-1941). They argue that different thoughts are brought about by the use of different forms of language. This means that one is limited by the language used to interpret his or her expressions. Their general idea when talking about language and culture is part of what has become known as Sapir-Whorf hypothesis,

which has two versions: strong and moderate (Sampson, 1980). They believe that the way people perceive the world is completely determined by their native language (strong version) and the moderate version is the way people view the world is determined partly by the structure of their native language. The first version suggests that people's ways of life are completely influenced by their native language. This suggests that their native language is the only thing that can influence the perception of people towards the world. This strong version is generally rejected for lack of empirical support (Kadarisman, paper

the paper focuses on the importance of understanding some aspects of culture when learning a foreign language. This idea is based on the assumption that foreign language learning and teaching (in Indonesia especially) today is suspected not to include cultural aspects of the language being learnt. The foreign language leaning and teaching focuses more on linguistic aspect rather than cultural one. Nevertheless, in a real communication, it is very often misunderstanding exists not because of linguistic problems but non-linguistics ones, that is cultural aspect. It goes without saying, language learners are encouraged to be familiar with the culture of the TL to make their language learning more beneficial.

Language learners cannot learn a foreign language successfully if they are not familiar with some aspects of the culture whose language they are learning since language is not merely the external things, it is also the internal ones (Dukrheim, 1976). This means that language is related not only to the rule of the language but with beliefs and norms of the society where the language is used. For example, for Indonesian it is quite acceptable to say *You are chubby (anda gemuk)* to women but not for Australian or American and European people since this sentence, though syntactically correct, is culturally rejected in those areas. The following expressions are other examples which are grammatically correct but culturally not acceptable. They are “how much money do you have”, “should there be any mistakes I apologize”, (at he end of a speech in Indonesia). These expressions are grammatically well-formed but culturally inappropriate; meaning that they are not normally expressed by the English native speakers in their society. If the language learners utter these expressions to the English native speakers, they would be surprised or even shocked due to the fact that the society where they live does not use those expressions. In other words, those expressions are not used in their culture.

Based on the above idea, this concise paper tries to look at the importance of understanding some aspects of the culture of people whose language we are learning. More

specific, it is going to give some insights to us, as language learners and teachers, that when teaching a foreign language it is worth considering the cultural aspects of the TL.

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

For our purpose in this discussion, culture will cover everything that is learnt, which shapes *a way of life*. It influences the way people think and how they express that thought through a language (Rizfi, 1990). According to Wardhaugh (1987), culture is whatever a person must know or believe in order to function in a particular society. And one of the aspects of culture which is always used as a means of communication is language. That is why language and culture cannot be separated. A language is an outcome or a result of the culture as whole and also as vehicle by which the other aspects of the culture are shaped and communicated. The language we learn as a child gives us not only a system of communication but it also dictates the type and the form of the communication we make (Tomasouw, P. 1986). When the learners learn a language without reference to a culture, they just learn words/expression in isolation. As the consequence, misunderstanding might happen due to different concepts of looking at a certain thing. The following paragraphs only discuss several parts of human cultural aspects related to the language they use.

Talking about culture, it has become clear that different groups of people not only have different languages, they have different world views which are reflected in their languages. In other words the language of a certain society reflects the culture of the people of their own group (Yule, 1999). To illustrate, Kadarisman (2004) in his paper elaborates the word “rice” in English which may occur as the same word in the following sentences. 1). The farmers plant *rice*. 2). After the harvest, they dry the *rice*. 3). We buy *rice* at the supermarket. 4). He had *rice* and fish for breakfast. In contrast, the word *rice* in the previous sentences has different terms in Indonesian context. 1). *Para petani menanam padi di sawah*. 2). *Setelah panen mereka mengeringkan gabah*. 3). *Kita membeli beras di pasar swalayan*. 4). *Dia*

makan nasi dan ikan untuk sarapan. Possible explanation of this illustration is that Indonesian uses different terms for the word "rice" due to the fact that the object is intimate to Indonesian culture but not to English people,

As a part of culture, language cannot be learnt in isolation from culture, meaning that language and culture to some extent are inseparable. When people learn a language they also have to look at the culture of the people whose language they are learning (Tomassouw, 1986). Even as simple as colors, different cultures have different views. Madurese, for example, does not have "green". Instead, they use "blue" for both green and blue. For them the color of the leaves of a tree is not green but blue.. So it not uncommon among Madurese when they say in Indonesian *Tolong ambilkan daun biru itu*. According to Wardhaug (1987) people sometimes cannot directly translate color terms from one language to another. This is because every culture has its own way in describing colors.

The following story could be another illustration of the importance of understanding the relation between language and culture. There was a car accident between Kobayashi, a Japanese woman visiting United States, and Keller an American in a busy intersection. Kobayashi was understandably surprised when Keller turned left without signaling and Keller bumped in her car. A police officer who did not see the real accident overheard Kobayashi saying to Keller *Oh I am very sorry*. In this accident, the police gave Kobayashi a \$40 ticket but Keller was not cited (Irving, 1984). Why did the police give Kobayashi not Keller a ticket? This is because of cultural differences in the perceived meaning and contextual appropriateness of *I am very sorry*. In this case, the police interpreted her response (*Oh I am very sorry*) as admitting blame for the accident because in the United States when one says *I am sorry* this means that the person is accepting responsibility. Conversely, in Japan, *I am sorry* means I am sorry this happens without admitting any blame. In this accident Kobayashi transfer her Japanese of saying apology into English

which results in misunderstanding. This could also happen when Indonesian people undergo the same accident. They would also say the same thing like Kobayashi due to the fact that in Indonesia, the utterance *saya mohon maaf* could be uttered without accepting responsibilities.

Despite the best efforts of Kobayashi's English teachers, she (like some English learners in Indonesia) might be more familiar with the structure, pronunciation, stress, and intonation of the English language than with the more abstract things that are very important in a particular cultural context. It is not exaggerated to say that English teachers must be trained to make the learners able to successfully communicate inter culturally.

Related to apology, Kadarisman (2004), in his paper *Linguistic Relativity Revisited* states that to end a speech, Indonesian usually says *Kurang lebihnya saya mohon maaf ...* that can be translated verbally to English *Should there be any mistakes, I apologize...* However, he further says, the convention in English never allows an apology to end a public speech and hence it is rejected culturally. Kobasyahis's apology and Kadarisman's examples above reflect that different cultures have different ways of showing apology.

Still related to apology, Gail L. (1985) says that the act of looking down by a student while being spoken to a Mexican teacher might be considered a positive response or polite way. In this case, looking down might show respect to someone. Similarly, Javanese believes that looking down when talking to the older is considered to be polite. Consequently, for them, looking at the face when talking to someone (especially to more respected person) might have negative sense. Conversely, the native speakers of English will consider looking down when talking impolite. People have to look at the face of a person (eye contact) whom they are talking with.

A language obviously reflects the culture of which it is a part and the way the people in that culture think and behave relates to the world around them. This is because language is a system of sign that is seen as

having itself a cultural value. It is not simply a formal systems of sounds, words, and syntactical structure, it also reaches into the domain of human interaction, which for its own part follow certain rules. That is why language cannot be learnt in isolation from the cultural context which naturally belongs to. A Japanese female student once said *Oh, that's bad* to her male black American friend about his attitude that she did not like. On one hand, the black American was very happy with this expression since among his societies *That's bad*, means just the opposite *That's great I like it*. On the other hand, Japanese student was very angry because of his attitude. There was misunderstanding between them. This could happen because of the different views of *That's bad*. (Irving, 1984).

Since language and culture to some extent cannot be separated, it is not wise if language teachers just teach their students the rules of language without touching the cultural aspects. Most of the cultural attitudes when a native speaker has built are reflected in his speech patterns. The native speakers of a certain language also bring with them background of knowledge that is culturally based when talking (Tomassouw, 1986). This indicates that when people learn a foreign language, there will be some cultural problems should be considered. That is why, when two people from different cultures communicate, cross-cultural misunderstanding might happen. The next sub-chapter will be about the potential problems of foreign language learning.

PROBLEMS OF FOREIGN LANGUAGE LEARNING

It is common knowledge that everyone (normal person) learns his first language with a fair degree of success. The reason being that everyone is born with the ability to learn a language and then grows up in the community (Rubin, 1975). Chomsky's Language Acquisition Devices (LAD) plays an important role in the process of first language acquisition. He says that every normal child will speak the language of the society where they grow up. Nevertheless, learning a foreign language is different from

that of the first one. Foreign language learning is not an easy step that can be programmed in a quick do-it-yourself kit. No one can tell you how to learn a foreign language without really trying (Brown, 1981). In other words, the only way to learn an FL is put the TL into practice. Without applying the TL in a real communication it is difficult, if not impossible, for the FL learners to be successful in the FL learning. The process of learning foreign language is very complicated since learners should be familiar with not only words, pronunciation of the TL, but also with non linguistics aspects; feeling, values and acting. In other words, learners will face two sets of problems when learning foreign language; linguistics phenomena and non-linguistic ones.

Interference from their first language and intralingual transfer (Corder 1981) are examples of the problems of foreign language learning. The former refers to the deviant that are influenced by their mother tongue while the latter refers to items produced by the learners which reflect not the structure of the mother tongue: generalization based on partial exposure to the TL. The most apparent influence of the mother tongue when learning the TL is their pronunciation. It is very difficult for the FL learners to have native like pronunciation and accent, especially if they started learning the FL beyond their critical period hypothesis; that is the golden time for people who want to learn a FL. He also believes that context of learning which refers to classroom with its teacher, facilities and environment might also be the potential problems of foreign learning. In countries where the English is taught as a FL most of the FL teachers are not native speakers of the TL. This situation could create problems since they might not be able to understand all aspects of the TL both linguistically and culturally.

The lack of general success is another problem of foreign language learning (M. Gass and Jacquelin Schoether 1989). In countries (like Indonesia, China, Thailand, and Vietnam) where English is taught as a foreign language it is very rare the learners reach complete success especially on "accent" and cross-cultural understanding. In

this case, their accent will remain the accent to their native language. This could happen may be due to the fact that in those countries English is learnt after they have acquired their mother tongue. I am much convinced that there are still many other problems of foreign language learning, however, this paper focuses only on cross cultural understanding,

It is interesting to discuss because very often communication breakdown occurs because the learners might be more familiar with the structure, pronunciation of the foreign language rather than the more abstract and less accessible, that is culture. In intercultural interaction for example, meaning is often transferred through non-verbal communication. Birdwhistell in Irving, (1984) estimates that in normal, two-person conversation the verbal bands (that is, the actual words spoken) carries less than 35 % of the social meaning of the situation. This means that there are 65% of the meaning that is transmitted via non-verbal bands. These non-verbal bands relate to "culture".

We often hear our students say expressions that are grammatically accepted but not culturally. Once I heard one of my students greeted me warmly *Good afternoon Pak, Where are you going to go?* I did not feel shock with this expression due to the fact that my student and I come from the same cultural background which allow that expression to happen naturally in our society. Nevertheless I wonder if the English native speakers who do not know Indonesian culture heard that expression. They might answer *That's none of your business*. What is wrong with this expression? The expression is syntactically well-formed but culturally ill-formed. The convention of English speaking society will not accept the above utterance because it does not normally exist in their society.

Other examples of the cross-cultural misunderstanding can be seen from the following events. Once Indonesian studying in Australia asked by his Australian friend when they were reading in the University Library *What are you doing?* said Australian. *I am reading* the Indonesian student answered. His answer is not appropriate for that question because the Australian student

did not ask what he is doing at that time. It seems that the Indonesian student translate that question verbally not culturally. What Australian means is what field of study are you doing. The other event happened when one of Indonesian students are standing in line in the bus stop. The old lady came and asked *Are you going to University?* The Indonesian student answered *No, I am going home*. The old lady was confused because in that context she did not ask him where he is going to go, she asked whether or not he studies at University.

The incidents happened to Kobayashi and one student of mine proved that foreign language learners need to know the culture of the people whose language they are learning. Kobayashi used *I am sorry* not appropriately, Black American misunderstood his Japanese female friend, and one of my students greeting are not a linguistic problems, they are cultural problems. Those examples indicate that language and culture to some extent cannot be separated. There are still hundreds of other cultural problems that happen to foreign language learners when they have to communicate with the native speakers of the TL. Unfortunately they cannot be elaborated in this concise paper due to the inadequate knowledge of the writer.

All cultural problems in this paper tell us that foreign language learners (also teachers) often neglect the inclusion of socio-cultural aspects when they are communicating with the native speakers of the TL. This might be because the FL program did not include socio-cultural knowledge. In Indonesian context for example, the FL learners are encouraged to learn how the TL works not how it is used in society. As the consequence, the learners often make the expressions that can give rise to misunderstanding because they might use expressions that are not appropriate for a certain context in the TL.

Based on the above problems, the writer believes that learning a foreign language must involves the linguistics and cultural aspects. That is why, foreign language teachers should be aware of the influence of the social cultural aspects of the language. Foreign language teachers and

learners are encouraged to include the social cultural aspects in foreign language learning and teaching if it is expected to be fruitful.

CONCLUSION

As final reflection, this paper has shown that despite the complexities of learning a foreign language, it is still possible to offer some insights that might benefit the learners and teachers. The writer believes that this paper might raise more questions than providing answers of the complexities of the relation between language and culture. For example, should Cross Cultural Understanding be taught? And if it is so, what culture that should be given to the students. This is based on the fact that, at the moment, there are more non-native speakers of English compared to English native speakers.

Realizing that non-verbal aspects play a very important role in cross-cultural communication, the foreign language teachers should be trained to make the link between the communication and culture. Meaning that when they are teaching a foreign language, cultural aspects must be introduced to the learners. It seems, from some incidents above, teaching English programs encourage the learners to deal more with linguistic aspect than with cultural phenomena. They focus more on how the language works rather than on how the language is spoken in a real language community. Unfortunately, it is often the cultural differences rather than linguistic ones which often cause a breakdown in communication or lead to cross-cultural misunderstanding.

As English teachers, we should be aware of the different cultures when teaching that language. However, knowing the different cultures does not assure one's ability to increase cross-cultural understanding (Irving, 1984). The teachers must be aware of their own cultural values before helping the learners become aware of different cultures. The socio-cultural aspects should be included in the foreign language program. By this, it is expected that cross-cultural misunderstanding might be minimized.

It is suggested that FL teachers should be more tolerant to the learners making grammatical errors if they do not break the

communication. The results of some studies (for example Sheorey 1986) show that native speakers are more tolerant than non native speakers when they are faced with the grammatical errors. Hendrickson (1978) believes that when teachers are more tolerant to the learner grammatical errors (not culturally) students often feel more confident about using the TL and that is the ultimate goal of learning a foreign language.

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