

## Cross-cultural Understanding: A Dilemma for TEFL

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**Abstract:** Language is inseparable from culture, consequently when we teach a foreign language we should also teach its culture, it is an axiom. However, as English now belongs to the world as its *lingua franca*, used as a native language by several different nationalities, the nagging question is 'Whose culture do we have to learn?' In a TEFL country such as Indonesia, teaching cross-cultural understanding is extremely difficult for various reasons and whether it is actually necessary to teach it considering the objectives of TEFL in Indonesia, the limited time allotment for teaching the language itself, the immense amount of materials to be covered, the lack of resources and the teachers' questionable competence in handling the subject. This paper will discuss the background of CCU, the problems involved in teaching CCU and offer tentative solutions

**Key words:** culture, cross-culture, critical incident, cultural relativism, cultural awareness.

Susan, an American woman, was staying overnight for the first time with a Japanese family in Japan (Tomalin and Stempleski, 1993: 84). After dinner, she had a long chat with her hosts. As the night wore on, her hosts invited her to take a bath, but she said she was not in a hurry to do so and would do it later. However, her hosts politely and repeatedly insisted that she did.

In Japanese culture, a guest staying with a family is honoured and in this case even in taking a bath. The guest would be invited to take a bath first and members of the family would then follow and they would never do it first. Taking a bath in Japan means that one has to wash one's body

clean first and only then can s/he dip into the bathtub (it is usually a small one). Afterwards s/he can wash again. When s/he is finished, the other members of the family would take turns to take a bath using the same water in the bathtub.

Susan could speak Japanese fluently, but she committed a critical accident, that is a cultural blunder, or "...a situation where there is a communication problem between people of different cultures." (Tomalin and Stempleski, 1993:84). She failed to realize that her hosts actually hinted that it was bedtime, and in Japanese culture one should take a bath before bedtime. Being a guest, she should take it first so that members of the host family could take a bath after her; but she was ignorant of this custom. Susan was linguistically proficient, but culturally poor.

The incident above illustrates the fact that if one wants to learn a foreign language 'perfectly', s/he has also to learn its culture, so one of the major aims of teaching cross-cultural understanding (CCU) in teaching a foreign language is to make the students culturally proficient as well. This paper will discuss culture and cross-cultural understanding, the main reasons we need to study CCU, aims of CCU, assumptions underlying the teaching of CCU, problems for learners of EFL, the ideal CCU teacher, culture-free English, suggested solutions and conclusion.

Before we address the issues in CCU, we had better review some of the technical terms frequently used in the field.

### CULTURE

'The total set of beliefs, attitudes, customs, behaviour, social habits, etc. of the members of a particular society.' (Longman Dictionary of LT and AL, p.94).

'All those historically created designs for living, explicit or implicit, rational, irrational, and non-rational, which exist at any given time as potential guides for the behaviour of men.' (Kluckhohn and Kelly in Valdes, 1996:53)

#### *Big C Culture (Achievement Culture)*

Big C culture covers geography, history and achievements in science and arts.(Tomalin & Stempleski, 1993: p.6-7)

**Little c Culture (Behaviour Culture)**

Little c culture includes culturally-influenced beliefs and perceptions, especially as expressed through language as well as through cultural behaviors that affect acceptability in the host community. (ibid.)

**Intercultural Communication**

'Communication between people from different cultures; communication which is influenced by cultural values, attitudes, and behaviour.' (Levine & Adelman, 1982: xvi). In this paper the writer uses the term 'cross-cultural understanding' interchangeably with 'intercultural understanding'

**Cross-culture Analysis:**

'Analysis of data from two or more different cultural groups, in order to determine if generalizations made about members of one culture are also true of the members of other cultures. Cross-cultural research is an important part of sociolinguistics, since it is often important to know if generalizations made about one language group reflect the culture of or are universal.' (Longman Dictionary of LT and AL. p. 92)

**Cross-cultural Communication** (ibid.) is 'an exchange of ideas, information, etc. between persons from different cultural backgrounds. There are often more problems in cross-cultural communication than in communication between people of the same cultural background. Each participant may interpret the other's speech according to his or her own cultural conventions and expectations. If the cultural conventions of the speakers are widely different, misinterpretations and misunderstandings can easily arise, even resulting in a total breakdown communication.'

**Critical Incident** is 'a situation where there is a communication problem between people of different cultures' (Tomalin & Stempleski, 1993: 84). Archer calls it 'Culture bump' - 'a culture bump occurs when an individual from one culture finds himself or herself in a different, strange or uncomfortable situation when interacting with persons of a different culture' (Archer, in Valdes, 1996: 170-171).

**Cultural Relativism:**

'The theory that a culture can only be understood on its own terms. This means that standards, attitudes, and beliefs from one culture should not be used in the study or description of another culture. According to this theory there are not universal cultural beliefs or values, or these are not regarded as important' (Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, p.94) (cf. Giuarca below).

**CULTURE AND CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING**

As culture encompasses all human activities, it defies simple definition, particularly as scholars see it from different viewpoints, no wonder then that Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1954) found over 300 definitions of culture and George P. Murdock, an anthropologist, listed 637 major subdivisions of culture (Bodley, Microsoft®Encarta® Reference Library 2003: 20). In writing this paper, the writer thinks of culture as patterns. For example, Commager (1970: 161) defines culture as 'a bundle of patterns of behaviour, habits of conduct, customs, laws, beliefs, and instinctive responses that are displayed by a society.' The important feature in this definition is the word 'patterns', so human activities and their products, tangible or intangible, which are patterned are culture; thus a human behaviour that is idiosyncratic is not culture.

Culture is complicated as can be seen from its categorization. The simple category of culture comprises material culture (products of human manufacture), social culture (people's forms of social organization), and ideological culture (what people think, value, believe and hold as ideals) (Bodley, ibid. p.5). More complex categorization is propounded by Shauls and Abe (1997) who classify it into hidden culture, deep culture, time-oriented culture, gender-oriented culture, involvement culture and context culture. Hidden culture is 'Cultural elements that we don't notice consciously, but rather we feel intuitively.' (p.10). 'Deep culture is the most fundamental beliefs and values of a group of people' and 'beliefs are the things which a person or a culture accept as true' as religious beliefs; whereas 'values are based on beliefs, and represent what is thought to be right or wrong.' (pp.80-81) Time, social status, beliefs about human nature, and the purpose of human existence are some examples of deep cul-

ture.

Gender-oriented culture 'categorizes different cultures by degrees of masculinity and femininity. Masculine culture values traits such as assertiveness, competition and material success. Cultures considered feminine value traits such as quality of life, interpersonal relationships and concern for the weak. Male cultures emphasize differences between men and women, whereas feminine cultures allow for more overlapping between male and female roles.' (p.60). Japan, Italy, Great Britain, and Swiss are some countries quoted as highly male-oriented cultures, whereas Sweden, the Netherlands, Chile and Thailand are some of the highly female-oriented cultures. It is difficult to characterize Indonesia as it consists of so many ethnic groups, tribes and bands, each having its own culture. Batak and Bali would be highly male-oriented culture whereas Minangkabau highly female-dominated culture.

Time-oriented culture is divided into monochronic and polychronic cultures. In monochronic culture people do things one at a time, whereas in polychronic culture it is the opposite, that is simultaneously. Watch, for example, shop assistants serving customers. In a monochronic culture, shop assistants attend to customers one by one, whereas in a polychronic culture like Indonesia, they serve customers simultaneously. Not infrequently, Indonesians going overseas visiting a monochronic culture commit critical incidents due to their polychronic cultural behaviour; for example waiting in line when buying something in a shop, many Indonesians violate the custom by jumping the queue, resulting in an embarrassment as the cashier tells him or her to line up.

Context culture is divided into high context culture and low context culture. High context culture is a culture that 'emphasizes an appreciation of context and the ability to understand without relying on words', an example of this is Japan and Java. Low context culture is the opposite, that is it 'emphasizes the use of words themselves to carry the bulk of meaning,' an example of this is the US, where 'messages tend to be more concrete and detailed' (pp.65-66).

Involvement culture is also divided into two: high involvement culture and low involvement culture. Outward expressiveness when interacting with others is the measure of involvement. In the high involvement culture, people tend to be 'highly emotional and expressive, using more

body language and having a highly interactive style of communication', like many cultures in the Middle East and Latin America' (p. 66); whereas low involvement culture is the opposite, such as Japan and Java where people tend to be less emotional, less expressive, and employ less gestures.

#### WHY DO WE NEED TO STUDY CCU?

It is a fact that language is a part of culture, in other words, it is inseparable. Tomalin and Stempleski (ibid. p.105) argue that 'communication, language, and culture cannot be separated'. They further assert that in order to communicate successfully, we have to be fluent culturally and linguistically. It is only logical then that if we learn a foreign language, we also need to learn its culture. The most obvious example is when we learn the vocabulary of a foreign language, there are quite a number of lexical items which could be understood only if we know the cultural background of the foreign language. In relation to this, Brown (in Valdes, 1996: p.45) suggests that 'culture is really an integral part of the interaction between language and thought. Cultural patterns, customs, and ways of life are expressed in language; culture-specific world views are reflected in language.' If that is the case, when we read a text in a foreign language actually we also try to understand the thought of foreign people which is very much influenced by their culture.

If we do not understand the culture, consequently we will not be able to comprehend the text more or less fully. For example, "My Brother's Keeper" is a title of a film. Those who do not know the cultural background of the title would think that it is an ordinary title and would not be able to enjoy the film as much as those who do. The title is taken from the Bible (Genesis 4:9) in which God asks Cain, who has murdered his brother, Abel, where his brother is, and Cain replies, "I am not my brother's keeper." Another similar example is the title of a novel "*Absalom! Absalom!*" (Faulkner, 1995) which is also based on the Bible (II Samuel: 13-19). If we do not know the background story of David as a father who is very disappointed with his rebellious son, Absalom, we would not be able to enjoy the novel as much as if we did. As we know, the Bible has a significant influence on English and has become part of its language and culture.

Shaules and Abe (1997:24) suggest that 'learning to speak another language is also learning how to change our way of looking at the world, and our way of thinking and interacting.' Another positive remark is by (Valdes, 1996: p.51) who asserts that 'a knowledge of many cultures ... is essential to the acceptance of those who have grown up in different environments. The transition from monoculturalism to be or even multiculturalism is a marvelous experience, and observing it is almost as marvelous'. However, she also reminds us that in intercultural communication, understanding and acceptance are enough to achieve, approval is not essential (ibid. p.50).

That 'approval is not essential' is worthy of consideration here, particularly when we deal with 'cultural relativism', which is 'the theory that a culture can only be understood on its own terms. This means that standards, attitudes, and beliefs from one culture should not be used in the study or description of another culture. It suggests that there are not universal cultural beliefs or values, or these are not regarded as important.' (Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics, 1997, p.94). For example, lying is a cultural institution in Mexican culture (Condon, 1980), thus seen from the Mexican viewpoint, it is all right and we can understand it and accept it as a fact, but we do not have to approve of it. Another example is the culture of 'honor killing' as practiced in Jordan (*Time*, January 18, 1999). To protect the honour of family, a woman can be killed by a member of her own family. In the *Time* article written by Lisa Beyer, a sixteen year old girl who had been raped was killed by her own brother because according to the culture there she had ruined the honour of her family even if it was not her mistake. Do we condone it?

#### AIMS OF CCU

In Indonesia, if the main aim of TEFL is reading, our main concern with CCU should mostly deal with an attempt to increase students' awareness of the cultural connotation of words and phrases (Tomalin and Stempleski, 1993: p.8). In this respect, Maley (in Tomalin and Stempleski, 1993:3) was doubtful if culture could be taught, he would rather use the term 'cultural awareness' for teaching, meaning that we could only raise awareness of cultural factors, as cultural-awareness raising is an aspect of values education. In relation to this, Seelye (1966) is 'more specific; he

suggested seven goals of CCU instruction:

- To help students to develop an understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally-conditioned behaviours
- To help students to develop an understanding that social variables such as age, sex, social class, and place of residence influence the ways in which people speak and behave
- To help students to become more aware of conventional behaviour in common situations in the target culture
- To help students to increase their awareness of the cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language. (This is a very important for TEFL in Indonesia).
- To help students to develop the ability to evaluate and refine generalizations about the target culture.
- To help students to develop the necessary skills to locate and organize information about the target culture
- To stimulate students' intellectual curiosity about the target culture, and to encourage empathy towards its people.

Whereas Valette (in Valdes, 1996:181) has the following aims:

- developing a greater awareness of and a broader knowledge about the target culture
- acquiring a command of the etiquette of the target culture.
- understanding differences between the target culture and the student's culture
- understanding the values of the target culture.

In this case, we in Indonesia should have different aims for different groups of learners as suggested below:

- a. For those who are going to become teachers of English
- b. For those going overseas to live or study for a lengthy period of time
- c. For those going overseas to live or study for a brief period
- d. For those who will never go overseas but they will mainly read English materials or work in a company where they have to deal with foreigners.

The aims of these different groups will be discussed later.

## ASSUMPTIONS

There are two assumptions presented here, one is seen from the viewpoint of textbook writers, the other from the learner's. Firstly, seen from the author's viewpoint, most of the English textbooks on cross-cultural understanding are written under the assumption that the learners will visit an English-speaking country, and so they deal with the culture of an English speaking country. Each book understandably only deals with one particular English speaking country (such as the US, Great Britain, or Australia) and is usually intended for people who will be living in that country for a considerable period of time.

By culture here is meant culture in the widest sense of the term. The problems in this case are the meaning of 'culture' itself and how to select cultural aspects the learners have to know given limited time allotment in formal schooling. Different scholars, mostly anthropologists, have different definitions of culture and consequently they also have different categorizations of culture. For example Murdock (Murdock, et al. 1971) has 7 facets of culture and 888 categories, Hall (1959) has 10 Primary Message Systems and 100 categories, Nostrand (1974) has 12 themes, Brooks (1975) has 62 aspects, Maslow (1954) has 5 basic needs, Kraemer (1973) has 21 elements, Taylor and Sorensen (1961) has 7 categories. Which categorization should we follow?

Secondly, the assumption is seen from the learner's viewpoint. Now supposing we have to learn American English and its cultural background, according to Kraemer (Valdes, 1996:154), we have to learn the following aspects: Individualism, egalitarianism, action orientation, perception of interpersonal encounters, universalism, definition of persons, collective wisdom, process of decision making, competition, a best way of doing something, knowledge gained through observation, unnecessary qualification, utilitarian aspects of experience, problem orientation, thought, reasoning, impatience, comparative judgments, offering one's services, self-help, and using absurd suppositions.

In relation to the American culture, Brewster and Brewster (Brewster and Brewster, 1976) suggest the following themes: the physical world, disease, life style, economics, private property, motivation, visible

achievement, change and progress, action, work and play, reasoning patterns, decision making, authority, social interaction, friendship, kinship, gift giving, individuality, uniformity, competition, being sick, crises, emotion, religion and the supernatural.

Another set of topics for a syllabus on CCU from *American Language Institute Manual 1979* (Valdes, *ibid.* p.152) is as follows:

- (1) The United States – The Melting Pot Society
  - diagram of American ethnicity emphasize the melting pot idea – has it succeeded?
  - discuss "mainstream America"
- (2) Mexican Culture
  - attitudes of and toward Mexican-American
  - Spanish and Mexican influences in many parts of the United States
- (3) Blacks in America
  - attitudes of and toward
  - Martin Luther King and the Civil Rights movement
  - Uncle Tom's cabin excerpt / short stories written by Black Americans
- (4) Native Americans
  - contributions of
  - Indian folk stories
  - American Indians as depicted by films
- (5) Religion in America
  - attitude toward
  - different kinds
  - effects on culture
  - cults and organized religion
- (6) Women in America
  - contributions of
  - attitudes of and toward
  - ERA and anti-abortionists
  - Antiabortionists
- (7) The American Family
  - structure

- values
- level of closeness
- dependence / independence
- (8) American customs
  - multiplicity of
- (9) The American Character
  - stereotypes
  - myths
  - various types
- (10) Big Cities vs. Small Towns
  - ways and attitudes
- (11) American Business
  - how does it affect relations and attitudes
  - commercialization: Christmas and Easter
- (12) Pop Culture
  - abstract painting / Andy Warhol's "Campbell Soup Can"
  - rock music
  - disco music
- (13) American Attitudes
  - toward themselves
  - toward the world
- (14) A View from the Outside
  - from abroad, how are Americans viewed in other countries? - looking at the arts and literature.

From the list of features above, we can see that learning a foreign culture is not only difficult, but also overwhelming. To learn all of them would be next to impossible and perhaps only an American native speaker teacher can handle those topics suggested in the syllabus above. For example, a non-native speaker teacher would find it difficult to discuss ERA and the anti-abortionist movement, or about abstract painting and Andy Warhol's "Campbell Soup Can". A number of questions would certainly arise if we have to learn those items in a non-English speaking setting such as in Indonesia: Do we have to learn all of those items? Can our teachers (non-native speakers) teach them? Can we cover the whole items in the allotted time? How do we select the relevant ones for our purposes? (Valdes 1996: p.157) adds: To what degree can culture learning be successfully inte-

grated?

#### PROBLEMS FOR LEARNERS OF EFL

In relation to the above, generally speaking the biggest problem now is that English, being a *lingua franca*, spoken and written by different nationalities, cannot be claimed by people from just one English-speaking country with 'one homogeneous culture' (eventhough such a country perhaps does not exist). There are now 36 nations claiming English as their first language (Crystal, 1997). Thus the crucial question in terms of culture when we learn English as a foreign language is "Whose culture do we have to learn?" If we know exactly which English speaking country we are planning to visit, then the answer is relatively simple; but most of the learners of English in Indonesia do not know whether they will even ever go overseas in an English speaking country to study or just to make a brief visit. In addition, many of them perhaps would go overseas not to an English speaking country, but they have to use English anyway, for example to go to Holland, Thailand, Singapore, the Philippines or India whose cultures are different from the US, the UK or Australia. Still much larger number of English learners would need English to be used domestically, that is to read textbooks or to work in a company employing foreigners. The foreigners in such a company can be of any nationality from any country, be it English-speaking or non-English speaking, whose cultures vary widely.

In this case then, we have to question the assumption that those who learn English would visit an English speaking country and consequently have to learn its culture. Even if they do not go overseas, the dilemma still remains: language learning is inseparable from culture learning, but we still encounter the perplexing question: whose culture? Is there any culture-free English? (see discussion on this issue elsewhere). In dealing with teaching CCU, more specifically we will encounter the following problems:

1. Given that language is inseparable from culture, how do we teach our students who will most probably *not* go to an English speaking country?
2. As English is now spoken by many nationalities, which culture do they have to learn if they do not know which country they plan to go

to?

3. The English speaking people (expatriates) who they might meet here in Indonesia are not necessarily native speakers of English, but various nationalities whose English proficiency will be affected by their own respective culture. What and which culture do we have to teach?
4. As culture is such a behemoth, which parts or aspects do we have to teach minimally?
5. If they do have to learn CCU and have to do some comparison between L1 culture and L2 culture, Lado points out the following problems (Valdes, 1996: 55-60)
  - Trouble spot 1: When the same form has different classification or meaning in two cultures. When any element of the form of a complex pattern has different classification or meaning across culture, e.g. bullfighting seen by Spaniards and by Americans. In Indonesia, a foreigner learning Indonesian would be baffled by the word 'kita'. In standard Indonesian, 'kita' is 'inclusive we.' But if the foreigner goes to East Kalimantan, he would be surprised that 'kita' means 'you' (honorific), and 'kita' in Makassar can also mean 'you' (whereas 'kami' – exclusive 'we' in standard Indonesian - means 'inclusive we' there). 'Leg' in Javanese can be rendered into 'sampeyan', 'suku', 'siki', and 'ceker' (for animal); and 'head' into 'mestaka', 'sirah', 'endhas', 'pathak'. Learners of Javanese as a foreign language perhaps would be perplexed why a Javanese being angry with someone would shout, "(E)ndhasmu!" when literally translated it only means "Your head!" The understanding of this phrase requires CCU, that is that in Javanese certain lexical items are used to refer to the same form but with different connotation. In this case the addressor condescends the addressee by equalizing him with animals as 'endhas' ('head') is only used to refer to the head of an animal.
  - Trouble spot 2: A form in culture B, identified by an observer from culture A as the same form as one in his own culture, actually has a different meaning. Hissing is disapproval in the US, but call for silence in Spanish speaking audience. Shaking one's head in many cultures indicates disapproval, but in India it is the

other way around. (The head movement, however, is slightly different)

- Trouble spot 3: When the same meaning in two cultures is associated with different forms. In Japan, when a teacher points to a student to answer a question and the student is doubtful whether the question is directed to him or to his neighbours, he would point his index finger to his nose and ask "Me?"; whereas in Indonesia the student would touch his chest with his hand.
- Trouble spot 4: The members of one culture usually assume that their way of doing things, of understanding the world around them, their forms and their meanings, are the correct ones. Hence, when another culture uses other forms or other meanings it is wrong. For example, using the left hand vs. the right hand for giving something; for the Javanese, the 'only right way' of giving something to someone and receiving something from someone is by using the right hand, so doing otherwise is 'totally unacceptable'.
- Trouble spot 5: When a pattern that has the same form and the same meaning shows different distributions. For example, in the villages of East Java people serve guests coffee at any time during the day, whereas in Central Java, it is only in the morning, otherwise tea with sugar. Perhaps the cultural implication in East Java is that because the host wants to honour the guest, so he serves coffee, not tea which is cheaper.
- Trouble spot 6: When members of one culture, who normally recognize many subgroups in the population of their own culture, assume that another culture with which they come in contact is uniform. This assumption is called overgeneralization or stereotyping.

These trouble spots can cause cultural bumps for foreign language learners.

In terms of reading in EFL, one of the major problems is understanding partial embedding of a saying or proverb. Learners who are not familiar with the full citation of a saying or proverb would definitely get baffled reading such an embedding.

The following is a good example taken from a corpus linguistics

(Charteris-Black, 2002: 1):

- Leicester meet Rosslyn Park. The new broom that swept in with the new season.
- Avenue are back again. But the new broom seems to have swept
- he recalls. "It needed a new broom, innovation and marketing. Instead,
- in the desert. Under Monty's new broom, and working closely with RAF
- John Robins, the new broom at Guardian, the UK composite, has
- 1m rights issue this week, as new-broom chairman Ron Trenter seeks to beef
- Sir: In your editorial "New Broom for Ulster Unionism"
- is therefore on hold until a new broom arrives at the Vatican. Given John
- reap the rewards of Dieter Bock's new broom. Latest word in the City is to

The learners would find it difficult to understand the underlined phrases using 'new broom' unless we explain that it is taken from the citation form "*A new broom sweeps clean*" (an English proverb). A new broom here means 'somebody new' and it occurs with much higher frequency than the full proverb (only twice as against 110 occurrences in a 330 million word corpus). Such a tendency of using a proverb partially in written English is common and this 'constitute part of a minimum of cultural knowledge for an educated speaker of a language' (ibid.). The teacher's job is to explain such a thing, pointing out the importance of cultural understanding in comprehending a text.

Another feature in CCU is the differences in communicative style. In the US on Monday mornings, usually people ask about how we spend our week-ends, for example "Did you enjoy your week-end?" In Indonesia we hardly ask such a question. In Java when someone is passing in front of our house, we usually ask "Where are you going?" which in the US such a question would be considered impolite and the speaker inquisitive. If the addressee is unwilling to tell the truth, s/he would just answer "I'm going south/north/east/west" as the case may be, an answer which a native speaker of English would never use. Thus what a native speaker asks sometimes sounds strange to a non-native speaker, this is an instance of different communicative style.

Another important feature in cross-cultural communication is the verbal pattern.

Levine and Adelman (1982: 19-41) present the following patterns:

- rules of style and speaking (formal, semi-formal and formal)

- directness in American English
- invitations (definite and indefinite invitations)
- speaking and refraining from speaking
- different ways of expressing common needs
- complimenting
- criticizing
- evading a question
- refusing (food)
- requesting (formal informal)
- interrupting
- giving opinions, asking advice, praising, boasting, expressing modesty, complaining, etc.
- ending a conversation, farewell.

So far as the writer knows, these are lacking in TEFL lessons in Indonesia. Two features which require CCU and are sometimes extremely difficult to understand are jokes and cartoons. The following is an example of a joke:

Golfer Vs. Skydiver

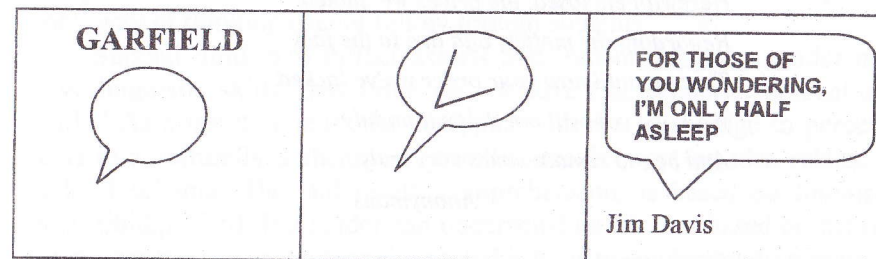
What's the difference between a crappy golfer and a crappy skydiver?

A crappy golfer goes "WHACK, dammit!"

A crappy skydiver goes "Dammit, WHACK!"

(The FunnyMailer- Golfer Vs. Skydiver (for September 13, 2002))

#### Cartoon



Unless we know how English cartoonists describe sleep in their cartoons, that is a Z, we would not be able to laugh at the above cartoon.

Figurative extensions of meaning also constitute problems as Nida (1964) points out in the following

- "When we deal with the referential meaning of a lexical item, let us



say 'dog' (canis familiaris), there does not seem to be any serious misunderstanding between cultures. However, when we deal with the figurative extension of meanings of 'dog', it is extremely difficult and we are at a loss, e.g. 'a dog' is a despicable fellow ('he's a dirty dog'); star constellations the Great Dog and the Little Dog (situated near Orion), mechanical devices for gripping or holding something, an andiron, pretension ('he put on the dog') and ruin ('he went to the dogs')" (Nida, 1964: 93).

The example above exemplifies how difficult it is for learners to understand culturally loaded lexical items.

In terms of reading and writing with respect to CCU, Nida suggests that 'There are always cultural differences between societies widely separated in time, and there are radically different degrees of cultural diversity in contemporary societies (Nida, 1964: 147). Therefore when we read literature or documents, we should be mindful of the era in which the book or the document was written as lexical items change, so do the meaning of words and phrases. The following example is an old business letter in the form of a poem (Lesikar, Petit, and Flatley, 1999: 59)

A Poem: The Old Language of Business

*We beg to advise and wish to state*

*That yours has arrived of recent date,*

*We have before us, its contents noted.*

*Herewith enclosed, the prices we quoted.*

*Regarding the matter, and due to the fact*

*That up until now your order we've lacked.*

*We hope you will not delay it unduly*

*And beg to remain yours very truly.*

*Anonymous*

It seems that different nationalities also have different degrees of success in reading comprehension and recall. Carrell's study (1984) suggests that 'Arabs remembered best from expository text with comparison structures, next best from problem-solution and collections of descriptions, and least well from causation structures', whereas Asians 'recalled best from texts with either problem-solution or causation structures, and

least well from either comparison structures or collections of descriptions.' In other words, apparently different cultures have different organizational structures which affect recall, and it sounds like an extension of Whorfian hypothesis which claims that language shapes mind. A study on this topic of Indonesians is probably in order, and if the study arrives at the same conclusion, we can then prepare our materials and teach our students accordingly.

In terms of writing (thus resulting in reading materials), Mauranen (1992) suggests that native speakers of English 'used plenty of devices for orienting the reader in terms of what is to follow in the text and how the reader should understand the different sections of the text.' Compared to English writers, Finnish writers 'used less demonstrative references.' More interesting is the Japanese style of writing which does not follow English way of writing. Their philosophy is it is the reader's responsibility to understand a text, not the writer's, whereas the Western philosophy is it is the writer's responsibility to make his/her writing clear and readable (Kano, 2001:25). If a piece of writing is very clear, to the Japanese it is poor writing as there is no art in it. In relation to this, American students view French writing as lacking details and rhetorical patterns, Chinese writing verbose, ornamental and lacking in coherence (Singhal, 1998: 4). Such different styles of writing would cause some comprehension problems for non-native readers. No wonder therefore that foreign students' essays sometimes do not receive good marks simply because the professors' way of thinking cannot follow foreign students'.

Singhal (ibid. p.5) further asserts that 'second language reader may have linguistic skills, they often do not have finely honed sociocultural skills.' As a result, s/he is 'not equipped with the knowledge to perceive texts in a culturally authentic, culturally specific way, an idea related to lack of schema. The end result, comprehension, is based on linguistic data.'(ibid.pp.5-6). If a reader can understand an FL text based on his linguistic proficiency only, then the probability of misunderstanding must be high.

Differences in language structure are less severe than differences in culture. In this case Nida (ibid. p.160) points out 'In fact differences between cultures cause many more severe complications for the translator (read 'reader', ES) than do differences in language structure.' We can al-

ways consult a grammar book if we find difficulties in language structure, but if they deal with cultural problems, it would be more difficult as references such as dictionary would not be of much help, though some provide limited information.

Further Nida, (ibid. p.79) also warns us of the difference between 'perception' and 'conceptualization' in dealing with CCU '...when the distinctions are based primarily on perception, there are fewer differences than when the differentiations are based on conceptualization'. He gives an example of Guaica language in southern Venezuela vs English:

Murder, stealing, lying, incest have equivalents in Guaica, but Bad, good, ugly, and beautiful cover a very different area of meaning, English dichotomy 'good' and 'bad' are trichotomy in Guaica: 'good', 'bad', and 'violating taboo'.

- Good: desirable food, killing enemies, chewing dope in moderation, putting fire on one's wife to teach her to obey, and stealing from any person not belonging to the same band.
- Bad: rotten fruit, any object with a blemish, murdering a person of the same band, stealing from a member of the extended family, and lying (to anyone)
- Violating taboo: incest, being too close to one's mother-in-law, a married woman's eating tapir before the birth of the first child, and a child's eating rodents.

Supposing that we are reading a novel in Guaica written by a Guaican novelist and it mentions something about a husband putting fire on his wife, we would certainly think that it is very cruel indeed, when in fact in Guaica it is considered good. We might then misinterpret the message the novelist is trying to convey to us.

Appreciation of time is an example of different conceptualization between English and Indonesian. To English people, time is really a commodity and small wonder if they have the saying 'Time is money', 'to buy time', etc. Even though nowadays Indonesians begin to appreciate time, but the conceptualization of time is different. Indonesians still waste time without feeling guilty such as unpunctuality in attending meetings and keeping appointments, whereas Americans, for example, would sincerely apologize when they are late, the longer the lateness, the longer the apology as it is a serious matter.

There is still another set of CCU problems which are crucial but not dealt with thoroughly in this paper, they are the problems of non-verbal communication, such as gestures, facial expressions, eye contact, space (see Levine and Adelman, pp. 43-46). Cartoons and advertisements, many of them are culturally bound, are not discussed thoroughly here either.

Thus the problems in learning another culture are immense and can be extremely complicated. The ideal teacher for a course in CCU is actually one who has been exposed to the two cultures for a lengthy period and who are knowledgeable about the points mentioned above, but such teachers are not easily available in Indonesia.

#### THE IDEAL CCU TEACHER.

Teaching CCU is an onerous task and not every English teacher can do it well. The ideal CCU teacher should definitely be a super scholar and most probably a native speaker of English if we look at the aspects to be covered suggested above (*American Language Institute Manual 1979*), particularly if we interpret culture as both big C as well as small c cultures. If that is the case, a CCU teacher should be a linguist, anthropologist, literary critic, geographer, psychologist, social scientist, etc. However, a more mundane ideal teacher is suggested by Dunnet, Dubin, Lezberg (in Valdes, 1996:159-160) who propose the following characteristics:

- 'Have a strong background in comparative analysis and/or comparative cultures and/or training in intercultural communications.'
- *Comments: Training in intercultural communication is hardly provided by the English Department of the teacher training colleges (FKIP, IKIP or Faculty of Letters). History of Western Civilization might be given, but it does not deal much with c culture. Cross-cultural understanding as a subject is not one of the major subjects in the English Department.*
- 'Have overseas training experience.'
- *Comments: The majority of teachers at the English Department of state FKIPs, IKIPs and Faculties of Letters have overseas training experience. Even quite a few of public senior high school teachers have some overseas training experience.*

- 'Can select materials which encourage intercultural point of view in the English program.'
- *Comment: This is not a difficult thing to do, most teachers should be able to identify intercultural viewpoints. The only problem is the paucity of such materials in Indonesia.*
- 'Can integrate intercultural education with language instruction through carefully designed syllabi.'
- *Comments: This is not easy to do as high school teachers do not have much freedom to do as they have to follow a prescribed syllabus. Teachers at college level may have more freedom to design their own syllabus.*
- 'Can develop specific strategies for teaching culture in the English program.'
- *Comments: Unless teachers have training on teaching culture, this is rather difficult, especially as materials for teaching CCU are scarce in Indonesia.*
- *However, if they want to they can always find materials from the internet.*
- 'Can examine each new textbook carefully to determine whether it takes an intercultural point of view.'
- *Comments: It depends on the pre-service training of the teachers, if they have such a training, it should not be too difficult for them.*
- 'Can identify the cultural aspects inherent in a textbook.'
- *Comment: The more exposed to authentic materials and the more observant a teacher is, the better s/he could identify them.*
- 'Can see if the vocabulary items, examples, grammar structures, drills, etc. are placed in some meaningful cultural context?'
- *Comment: Again it depends on the proficiency and training of the teachers, be it pre-service or in-service.*
- 'Can examine if photographs and illustrations in a textbook are culturally related.'
- *Comment: This should not be difficult for the teachers.*
- 'Can examine dialogues for their cultural content.'
- *Comment: This also depends on the degree of cultural awareness of the teacher.*

- *In this case the best materials would be audio-visual aids such as video tape, CD, CD-Rom and DVD because the learners can see the kinetics of the actors and actresses and the whole context, resulting in better understanding of the dialogue in question.*
- 'Can see if the textbooks which take a strong intercultural point of view for possible cultural bias, i.e. whether they are objective, and whether they stereotype or overgeneralize about a foreign culture.'
- *Comment: It also depends on the degree of intercultural sophistication on the part of the teacher.*
- In comparison with the aspects of culture espoused by different scholars mentioned earlier, the above-mentioned aspects are reasonable, more manageable and not too demanding.

#### CULTURE-FREE ENGLISH?

If there were culture-free English, our task as non-native teachers of English would be much easier. Is there any culture-free English? Kaplan (1986) thinks so; he argues that ESP texts in science and technology are virtually culture free. The language in science and technology is closer to the culture of science than it is to the culture of any English speaking society. Other comments (Peterson, 1986: 35) are as follows:

- "The language of science is neutral with respect to culture."
- "Among scientists all over the world there exists a universal language of science."
- "The laws and theorems of science are based in the scientific method, which is a way of investigating, thinking, and working, shared by all scientists." This can be termed the 'culture of science'.

According to Bronowski (1956 in Peterson, 1986: 38) the cultural values of Western science is summarized as follows:

- (1) Dependence of the scientist on empirical observation and belief in the scientific method as proof of the truth of new ideas.
- (2) Independence from existing belief systems, willingness to challenge the belief systems of past generations of scientists.
- (3) A positive value placed on originality, novelty, and new ways of seeing. A willingness to change.

(4) In society, an insistence on freedom of thought, tolerance for the opinions of others, and respect the work of one's colleagues.

The idea that science is independent of the existing belief systems and dependent on empirical observation may be at variance with some of the principles of culture, for example with religious beliefs where human beings are dependent on a super being.

However, it can be argued that if by the term 'culture' is meant all human activities, then science and technology are also human activities which in turn 'must be' culturally influenced. In order not to be embroiled in an endless argument about culture, probably it would be safe to say that culture in the widest sense of the term includes the culture of science and in the narrow sense it excludes the culture of science. Maybe we have to add one more component to Vallette's two components of culture (1977, in Valdes, p.179) by adding 'culture of science', thus there are anthropological or social culture, history of civilization and culture of science.

If that is the case, then it is justifiable for us not to teach CCU in the narrow sense, especially in ESP, and the assumption that language is inseparable from culture remains valid. If the main objective of the learners is only reading science and technology texts, then there is no need to learn CCU. For example, reading a manual on assembling a motor-cycle would not need any understanding of culture. In some science texts there may be some culturally loaded vocabulary items, but most probably they can be dispensed with, a risk we have to bear when we learn a foreign language.

In international business, culture-free English is more prevalent. The new term for culture-free English is 'International English' or 'Offshore English' which is spoken between Europeans (Dudley-Evans and Jo St John, 1998. pp.53-54). It is also claimed that today most English-medium communications in business is conducted between nonnative speaker to non-native speaker (NNS to NNS) using International English. In addition, it is suggested that native speakers of Standard English need to learn to use International English.

#### SUGGESTED SOLUTIONS

On one hand, we should realize that the teaching of CCU is eminently fitting, knowing that language is inseparable from culture and that to a large extent culture is reflected in language. On the other hand, we

recall in L2 is enhanced if the readers are knowledgeable about L2 culture as well as L2 rhetoric (*ibid.* p. 4).

Those who might be going overseas but do not know which country they are likely to visit or study are equipped with the following principles:

- A. The fact that mutual intelligibility is possible between two languages for the following reasons (Nida, 1964: 53-54):
- The similarity of mental processes of all peoples
  - Similarity of somatic (physical) reactions
  - Range of cultural experience (material, social, religious, linguistic, and esthetic)
  - Capacity for adjustment to the behavioural patterns of others
- B. Culture universals:
- All cultural behaviour is patterned (Mandelbaum, 1949)
  - All people exhibit culturally conditioned behaviours (Seelye, 1988 in Valdes, 1996: 7)
  - Social variables such as age, sex, social class, and place of residence influence the ways in which people speak and behave (*ibid.*)
  - Quite a significant number of words and phrases have cultural connotations (Tomalin and Stempleski, p.45)
  - Dunnet, Dubin, Lezberg in Valdes, 1996: 148-149:
    1. Languages cannot be translated word-for-word
    2. The tone of a speaker's voice (the intonation pattern) carries meaning. All languages have different "tunes" or patterns of intonation
    3. Each language-culture employs gestures and body movements which convey meaning
    4. Languages use different grammatical elements for describing all parts of the physical world
    5. All cultures have taboo topics
    6. The terms of addressing people vary considerably among languages.
- C. If the learner wants to study oral language, s/he should take Nelson

Brooks' hors d'oeuvres' (in Valdes, 1996: 124-125) into consideration:

- Greetings, friendly exchange, farewells
- The morphology of personal exchange
- Levels of speech
- Patterns of politeness
- Respect
- Intonation patterns
- Contractions and omissions
- Types of error in speech and their importance
- Verbal taboos
- Written and spoken language
- Numbers

## CONCLUSION

To summarize, this paper has discussed the reasons learners of English in a TEFL country need to learn CCU, the aims of CCU, the assumptions of writers of CCU textbooks and the learner's assumptions, the problems for learners, the discussion on culture and cross cultural understanding, the ideal CCU teachers, the question of the existence of culture-free English, and suggested solutions to the problems.

The main problems for learners of EFL in terms of CCU are (a) identifying the target culture as English now belongs to many nationalities, native speakers as well as non-native speakers. In other words: Whose culture do they have to learn? (b) the technical problems comprising verbal, non-verbal, and pictorial-verbal aspects. To solve the problems, we should analyze the needs of the learners who can be divided into: English teachers-to-be, those who plan to live in an English speaking country for a lengthy period of time, those who will only make a short visit, and those who will need English for reading purposes and will not go overseas to live. Suggestions to solve the problems have been provided.

What is presently needed is a book on CCU for learners of English who do not plan to go overseas to live or to study, as the majority of English learners in Indonesia are of this type.

A word of caution is in order here. Even if we learn a foreign lan-

guage and culture thoroughly so that we can communicate with native speakers with sophistication, we will still encounter a host of subtle dimensions of culture that we will never truly be able to understand. We will remain in the "permanent immigrant state" where we will be able to understand the words but will never be able to completely comprehend all of their connotations. (Acton and Walker de Felix in Valdes, 1996: 21)

Another warning is as follows:

- If intercultural training is transformative as Paige and Martin suggested (1983 as quoted by Shibata), the learner could be 'overtransformed' becoming a 'pseudoforeigner' in his or her own country (in Indonesian it is 'kebarat-baratan'). To illustrate, there is a playgroup in Surabaya that teaches English culture in such a way that may 'endanger' the children's identity so that they will become 'anomie' in their own country. Anomie is a feeling of homelessness, where one feels neither bound firmly to his native culture nor fully adapted to the second culture (Brown in Valdes, 37)
- Another danger is psychological. If the target culture is more 'prestigious', the learner might adopt it and look down upon his or her own culture such as what happened during the Dutch colonial period when quite a few of Indonesians became pseudo-Dutch in their behaviour and thinking, condescending those who could not speak Dutch.

Human communication is not perfect for the following reasons (Nida, *ibid.* p.53): (1) 'No two people have exactly the same background and hence all differ in their use of even the same language code, and (2) no two people employ the same symbols in exactly the same ways.' However, human beings can communicate with one another as there is "The similarity of mental processes of all peoples; the similarity of somatic reactions, range of cultural experience, capacity for adjustment to the behavioral patterns of others." (*ibid.* p.53-54). In other words, on one hand we can communicate with other peoples as we share similarities in certain aspects, but on the other hand we should not expect perfect communication among us as we have different schemata.

Finally in dealing with CCU, we should always remind ourselves that 'People do miscommunicate linguistically and culturally.' "We should never assume that we are talking about the same reality." (Bennet, 1990). Thus in teaching CCU we can only reduce misunderstanding, and we

should never take things for granted.

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