

THE IMPORTANCE OF CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TEACHING IN THE ASIAN CONTEXT

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Abstract: Foreign language learning is not only about grammar or vocabulary but also life skill to be able to communicate. Furthermore, mastering culture along with learning language is essential. Language learners must have knowledge of cultural understanding because every language reflects many kinds of cultures. The same thing can happen between Indonesian and German. If the communication is not good, it could lead to something negative, especially when the communications are related to business cooperation as well as other important partnerships. So, in foreign language learning, teachers must teach the cultures of both the native and foreign language too, so that learners can understand differences between German and Indonesian culture. This research is a kind of literature review research. The literatures were based on the result of previous studies on cultural differences in verbal communication between German and Indonesian culture. It is also supported by observing and studying reference system to generate appropriate learning strategies. The study reveals that there are various strategies that can be implemented to enable students to understand cultural differences. There is some cultural knowledge in communications which can be given by providing information, while some others need to be practiced in the classroom and also to be applied in the real communication practices. In learning and understanding cultural differences, we can focus on the empowerment of student centered learning, by asking students to explore these differences, select which should be practiced and applied, as well as decide which activities that should always be supervised by the teacher, so misunderstanding would not occur.

Keywords: cross-cultural understanding; teaching; foreign language; Asian context

Abstrak: Pembelajaran bahasa asing tidak hanya meliputi tentang tata bahasa atau kosakata, namun juga keterampilan hidup untuk berkomunikasi. Oleh karena itu, menguasai budaya bersamaan dengan mempelajari bahasa sangat penting dilakukan. Pembelajar bahasa harus memiliki pengetahuan mengenai pemahaman budaya, hal ini dikarenakan setiap bahasa mencerminkan banyak jenis budaya. Hal tersebut juga terjadi antara Indonesia dan Jerman. Jika komunikasi tidak baik, maka itu bisa mengarah pada sesuatu yang negatif, terutama ketika komunikasi yang terkait

dengan kerjasama bisnis serta kemitraan lainnya. Jadi dalam pembelajaran bahasa asing, guru harus mengajarkan budaya bahasa asli dan asing tersebut, sehingga siswa dapat memahami perbedaan antara budaya Indonesia dan Jerman. Ini merupakan penelitian studi pustaka. Literatur yang digunakan merupakan hasil penelitian sebelumnya mengenai perbedaan budaya dalam komunikasi verbal antara budaya Jerman dan Indonesia. Hal ini juga didukung melalui pengamatan dan mempelajari referensi yang berkaitan guna menghasilkan strategi pembelajaran yang tepat pada pembelajaran bahasa asing. Hasil studi pustaka yang dilakukan mengungkapkan bahwa terdapat berbagai strategi yang dapat diterapkan agar siswa dapat memahami perbedaan budaya. Terdapat beberapa pengetahuan budaya dalam komunikasi yang dapat diberikan melalui informasi, selain itu juga perlu dipraktekkan dalam pembelajaran dan dalam kehidupan nyata. Dalam belajar dan memahami perbedaan budaya, kita dapat berfokus pada pembelajaran yang berpusat pada siswa dengan cara meminta siswa untuk mengeksplorasi perbedaan-perbedaan yang terjadi, memilih mana yang harus dipraktekkan dan diterapkan, serta memutuskan kegiatan mana yang harus selalu diawasi oleh guru, sehingga kesalahpahaman tidak akan terjadi lagi.

Kata Kunci: pemahaman lintas budaya; pengajaran; bahasa asing; konteks Asia

INTRODUCTION

Humans are social creatures. It means that humans can't live the life without the other humans. Humans need to interact with others to fulfill their needs. Because of that humans need to communicate with each other. Communication is one of the most important things in humans' life.

Communication is a sender-receiver process of transferring information (message, idea, concepts) to influence each other (Wijayati, 2009). In communication there are at least two persons. One person is a communicator or sender and the other is a communicant or receiver. The communicator sends a message or stimulus and the receiver receives the stimulus. In order to make the communication effective, the receiver needs to give a feedback or response. The form of the message or stimulus and the response can be non verbal or verbal. In non verbal communication, both communicator or sender and communicant or receiver uses their body language or gesture to communicate with each other. Beside non-verbal communication, there is verbal communication and verbal communication which become the most common communication. In verbal communication, both communicator and communicant use words that can be understood by each other. From this explanation, it can be concluded that verbal communication has tight relationship with language, because words are part of the language.

A language is a system of conventional vocal signs by means of which human beings communicate (Algeo, 2005). This definition is described in some detailed terms. Those are system, signs, vocal conventional, human and communication. Based on the acquisition, there are two kinds of language namely first language and second language. First language or native language or mother language is a language that is acquired naturally in early childhood, usually because it is the primary language of the child's family (Saville-Troike, 2006). Meanwhile, second language is any language other than the first language learned (Lightbown & Spada, 1999). The other definition of second language is a language learned after the basics of the first have been acquired (Dulay, Burt & Krashen, 1982). The second language can be acquired through informal or formal process. Informal process means a

person does not attend class to learn the language. He or she can acquire the language through direct communication which is different from formal process. In formal process, a person acquires a second language in class with teacher.

Second language learning can be distinguished in three different forms. Those are second language, foreign language, and auxiliary language (Saville-Troike, 2006). A person learns second language when he or she learns that language direct in the country. For example a boy learns French in France, it means that he learns French as second language. When a person learns a foreign language in his or her country, he or she learns that language as foreign language. For example a girl learns German in Indonesia, it means that she learns German as foreign language. And people learn auxiliary language for some purposes. A Chinese learns English for business, it means that he or she learns English as auxiliary language. In learning foreign language there are some approaches.

Now, the language learning uses communicative approach (Indriwardhani, 2012). In this approach, the learning materials should be authentic. The authenticity of the learning materials is really important. The learning materials should represent the real situation of the country and society. Understanding the nature of the relationship between language and culture is central process of learning another language. In the language use, it's not only the forms of the language but also cultural context that make up meaning. That's why, there are some cultural aspects are included in the learning materials (Pennycook, 2001). There are some cultural differences. It can be a problem for the students. For example, an Indonesian student learns German. He learns the culture of Germany too. As we know, there is obviously cultural difference between Indonesia and Germany (eastern culture and western culture). It's not easy for the students to accept that cultural differences. The knowledge about culture is really important for the students.

Language learners need to be aware, for example, of culturally appropriate ways to address people, express gratitude, make requests, and agree or disagree with someone (Peterson & Coltrane, 2003). They should know that behavior and intonation may be received differently by the speakers of target language. They need to understand that, in order to get effective communication, language use should be appropriate culturally. That's why cross-cultural understanding in foreign language class is really important. But, sometimes, some teachers are hardly aware of the necessity of cultural orientation (Cakir, 2006). In the Asian context, this can be more complex because Asia is a big continent and it is characterized by a diversity that is multifaceted. This paper aims to describe the importance of cross-cultural understanding in foreign language teaching in the Asian context. The definition of cross-cultural understanding, the reasons why teachers should raise students' cross-cultural understanding and how teachers can raise students' cross-cultural understanding are discussed in this paper.

METHOD

This research is a kind of literature review research. A literature review discusses published information in a particular subject area, and sometimes information in a particular subject area within a certain time period. A literature review can be just a simple summary of the sources, but it usually has an organizational pattern and combines both summary and synthesis. A summary is a recap of the important information of the source, but a synthesis is a re-organization, or a reshuffling, of that information. It might give a new interpretation of old material or combine new with old interpretations. Or it might

trace the intellectual progression of the field, including major debates. And depending on the situation, the literature review may evaluate the sources and advise the reader on the most pertinent or relevant (Writing Center, 2012). In this research, the subject area is culture, especially cross-cultural understanding in foreign language class. The researchers collected some sources about cross-cultural understanding and brought this theme into foreign language learning process.

The sources are the articles and literature that discuss cross-cultural understanding in foreign language class. From the collected data, the researchers analyzed those findings and then tried to give some new insights about using these findings in the Asian context because mainly the theme of cross-cultural understanding is only applied in the western context. The data analysis used in this research in narrative analysis. Narratives can help construct individual or group identity, persuade, rationalize, make an argument, teach a lesson, remember mobilize, offer perspective, entertain cope with or make sense of events/misfortune (Manning & Cullum-Swan, 1994).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings and discussion consist of some topic related to culture, cross-cultural understanding, the importance of cross-cultural understanding in foreign language class, the reasons why teachers should raise students' cross-cultural understanding and how can teachers raise students' cross-cultural understanding.

Culture

It's difficult to give the exact definition of culture (Spencer-Oatey, 2012). It's because the term "culture" consists of a lot aspects. Some experts have stated their opinion about the definition of culture. Those definitions agree on the fact that culture consists of something that is shared and/or learned by a group of people, but the content of the culture varies in different definitions (Birukou, Blanzieri, Giorgini, & Giunchiglia, 2009). But it's too difficult to teach all those materials in a language class. The materials consist of seven aspects, namely social organization, customs and traditions, language, arts and literature, religion, forms of government, and economic system.

Thus regions such as Europe, the Middle East, Latin America have certain defining cultural characteristics that each share and that distinguish each from the other (Culturweise Limited, 2015). This statement is also applicable to Asia's situation. Asia is a huge continent that consists of a lot of nations, people, and cultures. So, in teaching foreign language especially in the Asian context, the knowledge about culture is really important. Further, the cross-cultural understanding is needed to achieve that communicative competence in foreign language learning and effective communication can occur.

Cross-cultural Understanding

Cross-cultural understanding is needed wherever there are cultural differences, it would seem most appropriate to focus on the development of a way of thinking about human behavior and its cultural determinants (Parsons, 1962). Cultural differences are the main issues in cross-cultural education (Grant & Lei, 2001). Recognizing the differences between people with different cultural background such as religion, ethnics, belief is a must. Cross-cultural understanding is the ability to recognize the (cultural) differences,

make correct interpretation and react properly to people or situations in the communication with these communities (Sugirin, 2009). Cross-cultural understanding is important not only in communication between people by different nationality or language but also people of the same nationality but have different culture.

Foreign language learning can be considered as cross-cultural education. In foreign language class, the students learn not only linguistic competence but also the society's culture that use the language that is learned. The cross-cultural understanding should be trained. The goal of training cross-cultural understanding is to help students acquire attitudes, knowledge, and skills needed to successful function within their own micro-culture, mainstream culture and the global community (Sinagatullin, 2003).

This process is a means to improve cultural awareness and cultural sensitivity in the practice and learning a foreign language. Tanaka (2006) claims that the concept of 'cultural awareness' – understanding of different cultures – has been emphasized as an essential part of English learning and teaching. This claim can be applied in the other foreign languages too, for example French, German, Chinese, and Korean etc. In the classroom context, cross-cultural understanding will support the students to achieve cross-cultural competence through cross-cultural sensitivity. Cross-cultural understanding should be taught in the classroom. This process can be done in several ways.

Cross-cultural Understanding in the Classroom

In the classroom context, teachers have an important role to help the students achieving the cross-cultural understanding. It becomes more important in a foreign language class, especially in the beginner class, because the students barely know the language. Teachers can "teach" the culture using different approaches.

Those approaches are cognitive, communicative and intercultural approach (Tomková, 2007). In the practice, it's difficult to differentiate those three approaches. That's because the people think that these approaches are all the same. There are some differences in those three approaches. The differences can be seen on the learning characteristic, content, goals and method (Deutsch Lehren Lernen, 2013).

Cognitive Approach

Cognitive approach in culture teaching has its own characteristics. Teaching culture with cognitive approach should be done in a proper class. It means that it's not a part of foreign language class. The teaching goal is to know or to get knowledge and facts. The teaching content relates to data and facts. The example of the data and facts are numbers, historical events, famous people, etc. The main activity in this approach is exchange. In this approach, the student and teacher should exchange information about facts, data, and numbers. The teaching materials consist of some different things for example: history, economy, geography, politic, and some cultural phenomenon like customs, norms and values. The students tend to learn objectively and systematically. In teaching culture, teacher can use texts. The texts often consist of tables, statistics and pictures. The photos or pictures are representations of the real situations.

Communicative Approach

Beside cognitive approach, teachers also can use communicative approach. Communicative approach has some differences with cognitive approach. The differences

appear in some aspects. Teaching culture with communicative approach is a part of foreign language class. The culture materials are taught together with foreign language materials. It's because the communicative approach concentrates on achieving the communicative competence. The teaching goal is fluency in communication. The communicative competence here means the ability of students in using the foreign language in daily life. The teaching contents in this approach are daily activities of the target language people. This knowledge is really helpful in supporting the language use, for example the way the people of target language live, spending their free time, etc. These contents are taught in different way in comparison with cognitive approach. In this approach the students learn the materials from some sources for example texts, videos or film. The most important thing is the authenticity of the teaching materials. The examples of the texts in this approach are tickets, map, menu list, etc. Authentic materials mean that these teaching materials show the real situation in the target language's country. There are some advantages of authentic materials. Authentic materials are informative and knowledge source about the real situation in a daily basis of a country. On the other hand, these kinds of materials are oriented in language attitude and giving examples about the communication forms.

Intercultural approach

Intercultural approach has similarity with communicative approach. In this approach, culture is also part of the language class. It means that the culture teaching and learning are integrated with language class. The teaching goal of this approach is that the students have the ability knowing something new or different in a foreign culture and the competence to communicate in a situation with different culture. The content of this approach is everything that represents the target culture (the culture of the society, whose language is being learned). The students should make systematically comparison of some things of target language's culture with things that are suitable with their own culture. A foreign-language learning is used as a discovering process of something in a foreign culture, without leaving our own culture behind. Besides, there is a strategy development, in order to use and get knowledge from a foreign language and culture. The purpose is that the people with different culture can communicate well.

It takes time and adequate exposures for the students to develop this competence. Sugirin (2009) states the stages the students must go through to achieve this competence. The stages are:

1. Cross-Cultural Knowledge (CCK) is a prerequisite for cross-cultural understanding. The inability to appreciate other cultures often stem from the absence of knowledge about them. Respect and appreciation of a culture will happen and grow if people are familiar with the respected characteristics, values, beliefs and behaviors in the culture.
2. With adequate CCK, people will develop Cross-Cultural Awareness (CCA), i.e. they will show understanding and appreciation, which may be accompanied by changes in behavior and attitudes towards the culture.
3. Proper CCA will naturally produce Cross-Cultural Sensitivity (CCS), i.e. the ability to read into situations, contexts and behaviors that are culturally rooted and be able to react to them appropriately. A suitable response necessitates that people no longer carry their own culturally determined interpretations of the situation or behavior (i.e. good/bad,

right/wrong) which can only be nurtured through both cross-cultural knowledge and awareness.

4. Only through the possession of adequate CCK, CCA, and CCS will people achieve Cross-Cultural Competence (CCC). CCC is the final stage of cross-cultural understanding and signifies the actor's ability to work effectively across cultures. In Ross and Thornson's words, it is the development of knowledge and skills through experience in cultural differences to create cultural synergy that leads to the development of cross-cultural competence (Ross & Thornson, 2008).

CONCLUSION

Acquiring a foreign language is not an easy thing. We need to learn some aspects of the language, not only the linguistic knowledge but also the culture of the society that uses the language. That is why cross-cultural understanding is needed in a teaching foreign language. This paper aims to describe the importance of cross-cultural understanding in foreign language teaching in the Asian context. Cross-cultural understanding is the ability to recognize the (cultural) differences, make correct interpretation and react properly to people or situations in the communication with these communities. Teachers can teach culture by using three different approaches in teaching culture. Those are cognitive, communicative and intercultural approach. Each approach has different characteristics. Teachers need to understand which approach they should use. The consideration they can take in determining the suitable approach is the learning or teaching goals. Although the teachers already know the learning or teaching goal, they still have difficulties in teaching culture. Some problems are the complexity of the term culture and the suitable approach. This problems need to be solved.

There are some suggestions that can be offered. Those are as followings:

1. The suitable approach, which based on the learning goals, should be chosen wisely.
2. The teaching or learning materials should be authentic. It means, the materials represent the real situation of target language's society.
3. When facing cultural differences, both teachers and students need to build cultural awareness.
4. Not only teachers, but also students should be active in class.

The use of learning media is very effective in teaching culture in class. It can increase the motivation of the students.

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