

## LITERATURE: A MEDIUM FOR YOUNG LEARNERS TO UNDERSTAND OTHER CULTURES

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**Abstract:** Cultural understanding cannot be separated from language learning. It can improve the language skills of language learners. Language teachers are suggested to teach not only the linguistic knowledge but also the cultural knowledge and to provide the media which can help learners to have better competence in using the language, in this case is English. One of the media is literature. It will help students to have closer and better look on the cultures where English is used. This cultural understanding is important to be promoted at early age. Young learners are at their best time in learning process, including in learning a culture through literature. This paper highlights the importance of cross cultural understanding and literature as the medium in the process of teaching English to young learners.

**Keywords:** *Cross cultural understanding, literature, teaching English to young learners (EYL)*

In learning English as foreign language, there may be several obstacles faced by the learners. Mohammed (2018: 1384) found that negative transfer, cultural differences, accent, slang and colloquialism, arbitrary language, attitude, environment, grammar and vocabulary, and pronunciation becomes the difficulties faced by English learners. One thing that English teachers often forget is that they have to integrate culture in teaching English to the learners, instead of focusing only on communicative aspects. Peterson and Coltrane (2003) argue that language learners are not able to master language as its native speakers do if they do not have any cultural understanding. This can be one of the problems faced by English learners. Jingxia (2010: 221) supports this idea and mentions that most of English-as-a-Foreign-Language (EFL) teachers neglect the cultivation of students' intercultural communicative competence, or cultural awareness, which leads to the inappropriate speaking ability of students and young interpreters. Consequently, students still find themselves unable to communicate effectively with native English speakers.

Learning a language is not only learning about the linguistic knowledge of the language but also the cultural knowledge. Robinett (1980) as cited in Deneme, Ada, and Uzun (2011: 152) states culture and language cannot be separated. We

can learn about cultures of certain societies through their languages. This theory is supported by Rezaee and Farahian (2011: 1760) who state that "...language and culture are inseparable from each other and to learn a language well, one must try to learn the culture of that language as much as possible."

Shemshadsara (2012: 95) also states that "cultural awareness has become an important focus of modern language education, a shift that reflects a greater awareness of the inseparability of language and culture, and the need to prepare students for intercultural communication." In Dokumen Kurikulum 2013 from The Ministry of Education and Culture (2012), one of the principles in developing curriculum is considering the development of science, culture, technology, and art to increase the curiosity and skills of the learners so that they can use the products of these aspects appropriately. Consequently, in teaching a language, teachers have to consider the development of cultures, whether it is the learners' cultures or the target cultures, to help language learners to be able to use the language appropriately. In fact, most teachers do not pay attention to this important issue. They, unfortunately, pay more attention to other aspects of language. (Rezaee & Farahian, 2011: 1760).

Having cross-cultural understanding while learning English actually gives a lot of benefits. Wieto (2010) as cited in Shemshadsara (2012: 95) suggests that "multicultural education needs to be understood as "arrogance reduction", that is, as encompassing both individual and structural changes that squarely confront the individual biases, attitudes, and behaviors of educators, as well as the policies and practices in schools that emanate from them." In other words, by knowing about other cultures and realizing the differences among the learners' cultures and target cultures, learners will have more appreciation to their own cultures and also other cultures. Moreover, by learning the target cultures, they will be able to use the target language based on the context appropriately.

This cultural awareness is better to be taught to language learners at early age so that they can integrate their English language skills to their cultural understanding in order to improve their communicative competence. Unfortunately, teaching English to young learners (EYL) is not as easy as it looks

like. Young learners have special characteristics which make them different from young adults or adults. Halliwell (1992) states that young children have an already well-established set of instincts, skills, and characteristics which help them to learn another language. Language teachers should understand the characteristics of their young learners and take benefits from them. They have to use appropriate media which can make young learners excited in learning activities. Various activities should be provided so that learners can locate themselves in the language learning process and they can develop adequate and coherent understanding of their cultural experiences. (Pourkalhor & Esfandiari, 2017: 31).

There are several ways in teaching culture to young learners and one of them is by using literary works. As an example, according to Wright (2004: 4-5) as cited in Sudartini (2006: 6), children love stories since they spend most of their times and attention to listen or to read stories. In most literary works, cultures are introduced implicitly. But young learners frequently learn indirectly rather than directly. They have the ability in understanding the culture used in literary works they read despite their young age. Livingston and Kurkjian (2005: 696) state “An often overlooked but most effective and appropriate way to develop cultural awareness and multiethnic understanding is through literature.” Additionally, Cruz (2010: 1) states that by learning a culture through literature, learners can have a better and closer interaction with English speaking countries because through literature, habits, traditions, routines, social and economical context, among many other things, are transmitted through the language. In line with this, Ni Lee (2011: 48-49) concludes that the use of children’s literature can facilitate language and literacy development, promote intercultural understanding, and even encourage critical thinking skills.

Based on the study done by Rezaee and Farahian (2011: 1760) to 40 upper-intermediate English language students of Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran, it was proved that the students in experimental group who were taught culture through stories and folktales had better performance than the students in control group who were taught by using conventional techniques in answering cultural questions given to them in the post-test. We can assume that literature can

promote the cross cultural understanding of language learners. Thus, it is a good idea to use literary works in teaching English to promote cross cultural understanding to young learners.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Cross Cultural Understanding**

Learning about other cultures is very important in this modern era, especially when we learn a language. Robinson (1985) as cited in Sultana (2011: 114) believes in the importance of developing cultural versatility to help learners meet the demands of an increasingly multicultural world. Moreover, Cruz (2010: 5) states that by exploring the paths offered by the target culture, "...a universe of possibilities is opened for the study of a foreign language where students can weave their own experience and life with these disciplines (arts, politics, sports) accomplishing a close empathy between language and their way of life." It means that learning the target culture will help them understand how other people's way of life and they can relate it to their own way of life.

The goals of teaching culture according to Tomalin and Stempleski (1993: 7-8), as cited in Deneme, Ada, and Uzun (2011: 153), are as follows:

- 1.) To help students to develop an understanding of the fact that all people exhibit culturally-conditioned behaviors.
- 2.) 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.
- 3.) To help students to become more aware of conventional behavior in common situations in the target culture.
- 4.) To help students to increase their awareness of the cultural connotations of words and phrases in the target language.
- 5.) To help students to develop the ability to evaluate and refine generalizations about the target culture, in terms of supporting evidence.

- 6.) To help students to develop the necessary skills to locate and organize information about the target culture.
- 7.) To stimulate students' intellectual curiosity about the target culture, and to encourage empathy towards its people.

### **Teaching EYL**

Young learners are in their critical period. Sukarno (2008: 58) states that in this period, children can learn anything easily. Moreover, children are open to other languages and culture and these attitudes help them learn the languages.

For children, culture has an important role for them to make sense of the world (Cole, Hakkarainen, & Bredikyte, 2010: 1). Additionally, it is important to sheer exposure to the material to be learned that is afforded by different cultural practices (p. 4).

### **Literary Works**

In teaching English as Foreign language, reading influences learners a lot. Noor (2011: 1) states that learners learn new information and become able to synthesize, evaluate and interpret in order to learn more the subject matter through reading. It is supported by Cruz (2010: 4) who states that reading, whether through an efferent or aesthetic reading, can lead the readers to language enrichment. He further states that a reader can get variety of information regarding the cultural context of the geographical location from an efferent reading. In aesthetic reading, a reader can not only make reference to another literary text, but also to an entire cultural experience determined by the socio-historical context. These can help the learners to understand the way of life of the context the target language comes and also help them to visualize how the literary text overflows to other cultural disciplines, establishing a symbiotic, nourishing relationship.

According to Collie and Slater (1990: 3) as cited in Hişmanoğlu (2005: 54), there are four main reasons which lead a language teacher to use literature in the classroom. These are valuable authentic material, cultural enrichment, language enrichment and personal involvement. Literary works facilitate understanding

how communication takes place in that country. Though the world of novel, play, or short story is an imaginary one, it presents a full and colorful setting in which characters from many social / regional backgrounds can be described. Furthermore, she states that literature is perhaps best regarded as a complement to other materials used to develop the foreign learner's understanding into the country whose language is being learned. Moreover, according to Hanauer (2001: 403), reading literature in teaching a foreign culture is a task which "...can be used to help language learners to construct complex understandings of the target culture and to acquire an understanding of the designs of meaning that are present within the target culture."

### **Literature and Cross Cultural Understanding of Young Learners**

English as an international language is used in most countries whether it is as the first language, second language, or foreign language. To be competitive in this globalization era, it is important for language learners to be able to communicate in English well and appropriately. However, it is not impossible that language learners get obstacles in reaching this goal. One of the obstacles is the lack of understanding about the English culture. Since English people have their own cultures, we need to understand them well so that we will be able to communicate in English without having misunderstanding. It is supported by Shemshadsara (2012: 98) who explains that "The students, when using the learnt language, may use the language inappropriately or within the wrong cultural context, thus defeating the purpose of learning a language."

English teachers must not ignore the importance of teaching English cultures to their learners. There are many ways which they can use. Based on a study conducted by Jingxia (2010: 230), it was mentioned that the participants preferred extensive reading, visual aids, listening to music, pictures, stories, role-playing, and personal contact with native speakers. However, the best way to learn about English cultures is by experiencing the cultures directly in the English native speaking countries. As stated by Rezaee and Farahian (2011: 1760), "...learning culture in conditions in which there is an opportunity for language

learners to travel to the L2 countries is much more appropriate but not all learners have this opportunity.” Thus, language teachers can use materials or media which expose English cultures and one of them is literature or literary works.

## CONCLUSION

It is clear that learning the cultures of English speaking societies to improve communicative skills is important. Moreover, having good cross cultural understanding will reduce the culture arrogance which can be a big problem in this modern era where people have to live in various cultural backgrounds environment. Cross cultural understanding should be taught to young learners since it will be helpful for them in improving their communicative skills as foreign language learners. They are also in their golden period which is beneficial for them in learning something faster than adult learners. In promoting this cultural knowledge, young learners should be facilitated with appropriate materials and media which can make them excited in learning other cultures and which are effective in introducing other cultures to them.

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