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## CULTURAL BOUND BEHAVIORS AND ATTITUDES IN ENGLISH CLASS

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### Abstrak

*Language and culture constitute a unity. Language cannot be taught completely separated from the habits and culture of the native speakers. For a teacher teaching a foreign language which is not his own would often encounter lots of problems. Different cultures between languages including different forms and uses of gestures invite many common obstacles in communication. Teachers should assume a neutral attitude when teaching a language. To teach a foreign language he should watch a lot behaviours and attitudes of the native speakers while they are communicating verbally.*

**Key Word:** Cultural, Behaviors and Attitudes

### Introduction

When facing students in class many teachers do not realize that students have individual differences that the teachers should be aware of, particularly if they expect their work to be successful and worthwhile for the students. It is a bit promising when the teachers realize the students' differences in intelligence, characters, interests and the like. Many teachers, however do not pay much attention on the students' in-

dividual differences in attitudes, upbringing, and what we ordinary call culture in general. Indonesian people consist of approximately thousands of ethnic groups each with different way of life, mother tongue, and how to view the world in general.

These differences are trivial things that every individual in multi cultural society or in any group consisting of smaller groups with each different traits may think

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that these individuals after a certain time in the group will automatically adapt themselves to each group's traits. Many people used to believe that. This is true but not every individual.

As a matter of fact, only some of them, particularly those who are keen at observing any differences and are willing to adapt to these differences can take them as their own traits. These individuals ordinarily are people who will be accepted by people from different groups and who do not have any difficulties in getting along in almost any community. Individuals who are easy to get along with other people may have these good virtues innately, from upbringing, especially when these good virtues have been inculcated since childhood.

These good traits may also be the results of education and influences from the surroundings including members of the same society, or the same ethnicity (Brislin, 1981). American children, for instance, get used to not easily talking to strangers. This habit has been the result of education both at home and at school, which has been practiced for a very long time. All of these mean that good traits may be learned. Parents and teachers, by using appropriate methods, can teach their children and students respectively, good behaviors, proper manners, and good virtues in general.

That's why, teachers then should also pay attention to the differences individual students possess as the result of long period of inculcation both at home as well as at their previous formal education insti-

tutions. The effect of home training must also be understood as the experiences obtained in their surroundings where the students used to be and to do their activities when they were younger. In this case it may mean the playgrounds, their friends and companions, the kinds of games they used to play, the places of interests they used to frequent, certain people they used to see in relation to their interest for future life and many other things

Some behaviors and attitudes, which are suspected to be cultural-bound and which might hinder the individual students in learning new things at a higher education, particularly English, are described and some efforts of eliminating these hindrances are presented below.

#### **Common Obstacles in Communication**

In communicating with other people in class, Indonesian students in general have common difficulties, especially when there is somebody to be respected, like the teacher, the rector or a distinguished guest in it. This, to be sure, is the result of inculcation since childhood not to express verbally and often non-verbally as well, in front of the elders and the respected people. Not expressing ideas especially ideas which are different from the one expressed by the elders is considered appropriate and therefore is quite appreciated. Children in particular, are restricted from talking when older people are present. This restriction includes the case when their-own parents

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are present. Children are supposed to communicate with children, and young people with their equals.

Although at the early years of elementary education children are encouraged to put forward their opinions, many of them become reticent when they are older. Most of them are afraid of making mistakes when they put forward their ideas, so many of them prefer to keep silent. This attitude makes teachers, especially the younger ones, frustrated. When the teacher asks the class about the lesson just discussed to check the understanding of the students there is hardly any student who raises his hand. This does not mean that every body understands the lesson but more because of the habit above. At home they are supposed to talk to their equals only and at school they are mocked by their classmates when they make a mistake, while some teachers do not encourage them to put forward their ideas, to give any response to the problem discussed.

To eliminate such a problem the teacher should persuade them and think him as if he is just their older friend who is willing to help them and talk to them to solve the problem(s) together. People in general like to be treated as their equals, that is, as human beings. They should put aside the idea that the teacher is much superior in many ways than themselves. He should make them aware that he is just another human being who is subject to making any mistake just as they are. Make them feel that the teacher is like any member of the

family who they like to talk to and discuss their problems with. It also has to be understood that to be too close to one's students turns out to be uncomfortable especially for the teacher. The best thing to do for the teacher is that there must be still a slight distance between the teacher in one side and the students in the other. Another way of showing this close relationship is among other things by talking openly to a group of students who have good standing in class who in turn will be well accepted by their classmates. If the class is not too big, say about fifteen students in all, the teacher can invite them to have a long chat at a school cafeteria over some drinks and cookies. In this way, both the teacher and the students can discuss the problems that might cause any gap, misunderstandings, or even a certain barrier that occurs between them. The students may regard that the teacher is a good person who is very much like one of the much-loved member of their relative.

Another source of problem is the different way of language use even though the interlocutors use Indonesian in their communication. Javanese teachers, or Javanese people in general, very often use an indirect speech when talking to other people, sometimes without their awareness. When a Javanese teacher uses this speech act his non-Javanese students may not understand or may misunderstand him. This kind of misunderstanding may cause some kind of tension. A similar consequence may also happen when a Javanese student and a non-Javanese teacher communicate. The

source of the problem is that among Javanese it has been inculcated since childhood that telling things openly to anybody, especially to elders and persons of higher status is considered impolite or at least improper.

The Javanese teaching says that the higher a person is educated the more he must understand indirectness which is known as *tanggap ing sasmita*. Therefore a person who uses indirectness in his speech is very much valued in Javanese society. To ask a favor of a student in class to have a clean white/blackboard the Javanese teacher is enough to say I need to write something on the white/blackboard without mentioning explicitly who has to do that. Javanese students in class will understand what the intended meaning of the teacher is and one of them will immediately do the job. Such an intended meaning that is different from the literal meaning is frequently repeated by the teacher and will be understood by the Javanese students. Later, the non-Javanese students in class will learn such an intended meaning probably by asking one of his Javanese classmates or if he is brave enough would possibly ask directly to the teacher. This simple speech act frequently practised by the Javanese is surely rather hard to understand for the non-Javanese. However, after many similar examples followed by explanations, the hard to understand indirections will finally be understood.

Most Javanese have been commonly used those indirections in many situ-

ations, both in speech and behaviors. Those have been a part of Javanese lives. Consequently there is a tendency of transferring it to any language and culture in almost any situation. A young mother who is talking to a guest and does not want to be bothered by anybody including her children will automatically tell her eldest daughter by saying something, such as 'ssst, main di luar sana' (ssst, go out to play). She just has to say it once. If the daughter seems to be in doubt, she will encourage her by giving a suggestive look and a certain gesture. Later when the guest is gone she will tell her eldest daughter that her intended meaning is something like 'When mommy is talking to somebody and doesn't want to be bothered, you'd better take your little brother and sister out to play some where else'.

Usually, a Javanese student who wants to have the teacher's permission to join the students' meeting will say

(1) May I join the students' meeting 15 minutes before the class is over, Sir?

A Javanese teacher will understand immediately that the student is asking a permission to attend the students' meeting before the class is over. To a non-Javanese teacher he may ask an opener request such as

(2) May I leave the class 15 minutes earlier, Sir? I have been appointed to represent our class to attend a student's meeting.

This particular student must have learned the appropriate way of using one of the Javanese aspects of culture in relation to

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language use. This does not mean that all Javanese can understand these two different cultures. Many of them still think that English culture is identical with Javanese/Indonesian culture and their relation to the respective languages. Many of them, therefore, say something in English but using the Indonesia or Javanese way such as

(3) It's still early in the morning. Where are you going?

Instead of

'Hi. Good morning. How are you?'

In a role playing a female Javanese student is assigned to ask a favor of her male friend to replace a dead electric bulb with a good one. She says

(4) The electric bulb over the dining table is dead. The new and good one is now lying on the desk.

As it is said in the example, she did not ask the male student to replace the dead bulb. In this case she was using the Javanese indirection. She should have said

(5) Please replace that dead bulb with this new one.

To overcome such problems the teacher should tell many times that in English indirections are not frequently used. In most cases people prefer to use more open utterances, especially in commands or requests. In responding a yes-no questions or a tag question the responder should use 'yes' only when the whole response is a positive one, and 'no' when the response is a negative one. So in response to 'Are you com-

ing?' is either 'Yes, I am' or 'No, I am not'. And in answering to 'He is coming, isn't he?' Is either 'Yes, he is' or 'No, he isn't.'

In certain situations, however, open questions are never asked in English. In English people never ask personal matters while in Indonesian many older people still often ask where one works; how much his approximate salary; whether one is married; how many children one has and the like. Due to modern education nowadays more and more people avoid those kinds of questions. In greetings, however, people, when they know one another personally, still use personal or real questions, instead of impersonal ones such as asking about the weather, commenting on the temperature, the heat, the rain, the wind and the like.

An assignment given to the sixth semester English class taking a Cross Cultural Understanding Course concerning how friends and acquaintances greet one another, compile the results as follows.

A dialogue between two old friends after several years of separation. They still recognize one another. The translation is almost a literal one.

(12) Hey, you must be Tuti from IKIP Malang, the year 1992?

Yes, and you?

I am Tono, remember me?

Two friends who always tease one another

(13) Hey, you look smart but too stuck up.

You're courting somebody?

Don't tease me. This time I must succeed, you know.

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Good luck, then.

Two villagers, one is carrying a wooden plough on his shoulder.

(13) You haven't finished tilling the land?

Almost. Today is the last day, I hope.

Between two vegetable vendors.

(14) You got fresh chilli pepper?

Not much. I got lots of fresh and good garlic though.

Between two drivers of public transports.

(15) How many trips did you make Hasan?

Just one. This bad weather must have prevented people from going out.

There is no impersonal greeting found in the data. All the greetings consist of real questions which are always connected with the people's activities. The usual greetings in offices such as Good morning; Good afternoon and the like then must be learned from Western cultures.

#### **Different Forms and Uses of Gestures**

Many people use gestures while talking to clarify or emphasize what they mean. This body language known as gestures may be universal in character. Certain gestures, however, are known and used by certain ethnic groups and not known outside those groups. Some of the limited use of gestures by a certain group may evoke uncomfortable feeling for a certain other group. Indonesian people feel uncomfortable when talking to people who put their arms in akimbo. It seems that one who does so while speak-

ing assumes an air of superiority and does not respect other people. This gesture is very much avoided by Indonesians. Many of them, especially old people, say that that kind of gesture used to be done by a bossy Dutch superior when talking to Indonesian subordinates.

One particular gesture that might be hard to practice for most Indonesians and for Javanese in particular is looking at the eyes of the person one is talking to. Such a gesture is considered rude and impolite, especially when directed to an older or a respected person. The most polite way is looking down when a person of higher status is talking to you. This is contradicting to the way Western people should face his interlocutor when he does not have any guilty feelings. So the phrase 'Look at me' only happens among few Indonesians who have been educated abroad.

Proximity, or the nearness of a person towards another person might be a problem for many Westerners. Indonesians are used to be very close to the person they are talking to, while Americans for example, need a space of approximately 1.8 m when they are talking face to face. In a class the chairs are arranged closely to one another, so when people are sitting next to one another their elbows may touch, and the persons involved do not have to feel uncomfortable. However, they may excuse one another when accidentally they nudge their closest neighbour. It is often difficult to explain why people avoid the first two rows of chairs in a meeting. To fill these empty

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chairs people have to be persuaded to occupy them.

When walking side by side certain people may feel uncomfortable, because only equals can do so. Fortunately, owing to modern education this feeling of discomfort is less and less felt nowadays.

Sitting side by side is also only done by equals. It is, therefore, people often feel awkward when one has to sit in a car where the owner is driving. The younger and educated people in that situation will automatically sit in front, especially when the owner of the car is a friend of his, while the older generation will sit at the back unless they are persuaded and encouraged to sit on the front seat.

Most Indonesians are Moslems. It is their habit to shake hands, using both hands, when they meet friends, acquaintances or others the first time they meet in one day. Foreigners often imitate this habit any time they meet a person, sometimes more than once in one day and do the ritual every time they meet. In formal situations shaking hands using the right hand only are also common. When the older people use their both hands, however, the younger ones should comply and use both hands also. This habit is also practiced by female Indonesians. Some female Moslems, however, do not shake hands with men. They usually put their two hands close together in front of their chins.

Showing a direction nowadays is commonly showed by using an open right hand. Using a pointing finger is considered

improper. Many Javanese in this case still use the thumb of the right hand while the left hand may help raise a bit the right elbow. Certain ethnic groups in north Sumatera use two protruded lips to show direction to their friends, acquaintances and subordinates. Some foremen in many places use their right foot to show two dimensional building plan to their construction workers.

Two boys who are friends may walk hand in hand. This may also happen with two girls who are friends. Acquaintances and friends may tap a shoulder or touch an arm to get an attention, especially when they are equals. A wink of the eye is not considered a good gesture. Staring at people or things is not advisable. However, many people especially children, look constantly at new people in town.

Sitting on the mat on the floor is very common in Indonesia. During a meeting or a feast in a small community people usually sit on the floor with two legs crossed. In some places people are allowed to sit with one leg flat on the floor while the other leg is folded with the sole touching the floor (*jegang* in Javanese). In many places women sit on their two folded legs, when they sit on the floor. When tired of doing this the two folded legs can be released from being sat on. Only in very limited places women dressed in a sarong may sit on the floor with the two legs crossed like men.

Using a fork and a spoon when having a meal is a common phenomenon nowadays. At home or in a restaurant one can

prefer using the bare right hand when eating fish or chicken. In munching the food it is preferable not to make any sound while the mouth is closed. Making an audible sound may make other people lose their appetite. *adrasupos abresit virdi of notrenih*  
*2004* In a feast where dinner is served and people have their individual plate a good combination of dishes must be selected. A soupy dish for instance, cannot be put on top of gado-gado a kind of vegetable salad. Not too much rice and side dishes are advisable for a serving, because if you are lucky you can have a second serving. People in certain places are used to have a small mountain of food at a serving. In a wedding party held in a special building delicious foods and side dishes are served, however, these delicacies are parts of the wedding ritual. They are not served for hungry stomachs. Many guests, therefore take these delicacies just for a taste. *nowmoo yisy zi*  
*yitau* When sitting on a chair the two feet, bare or with shoes must be put on the floor. Putting the feet on a coffee table is considered improper except when one of the feet may have a sprained ankle. Sitting with two legs crossed is not advisable even though nowadays many youngsters do it, especially girls wearing mini *W* *rooft ni no tie yidi*  
*moni* Skirts. People in Indonesia are supposed to wear proper dresses anywhere they are. These dresses must cover the important parts of the body. Bathing suits are only good for swimming and not for shopping, even though a kind of lose cloth may cover the hips down. A certain ethnic group al-

lows their women to wear a short blouse so that their bellybuttons show, but this is not very much appreciated in general public.

*yiao seu* A certain ethnic group gets used to speaking with a loud voice while other groups prefer a softer voice. People with loud voice may not hear clearly when the softer voice people are talking and on the other hand the softer voice people may be startled and feel a bit reluctant and even afraid to talk to people with louder voice. *zawo arli*

*itanc* The examples above are only some of the widely known differences that characterize the many ethnics in Indonesia. Many individuals are good at adapting with the situations so that their differences are not clearly seen by the majority people in a group. Some individuals, however, have difficulty in adapting with the situation they are facing. This difficulty become more embarrassing when other people around them are laughing at the differences. It is the job of the teacher then, to make every body understands these differences and assure the class that they might one day be in the unfortunate guy's place and will not like to become the laughing stock of the situation.

*2000 71* It is well understood that the accent of the first language is usually hard to erase. Some groups of people have really a hard time to eliminate this accent. People from Western part of Central Java for instance, pronounce a final /k/ as the English final /k/ minus the aspiration and a final /g/ as the English final /g/ only sometimes with a little aspiration. So it is easier to teach them the English /pik/ and /dog/, but it is hard



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to teach them the Indonesian /bati?/. A certain ethnic group use a lot of rising intonation at the end of a sentence while another group use a very typical intonation.

Certain people have the habit, when talking to other people including strangers, of assuming an air of indifference. Many Indonesians do not appreciate this kind of attitude, but they do not like either people who smile too much while talking, as if they are hiding something in their smiles.

Teachers should assume a neutral attitude when teaching a language. To teach a foreign language he should watch a lot the behaviors and attitudes of the native speakers while they are communicating verbally. When no live performances are available teachers can turn to performances on televisions as long as they can distinguish natural performances from the bad and unnatural ones.

### Conclusion

Language and culture constitute a unity. Language cannot be taught completely separated from the habits and culture of the native speakers. For a teacher teaching a foreign language which is not his own would often encounter lots of problems. These problems mainly come from situations where he has never experienced, heard of, read somewhere, or saw in a movie somewhere. For such a teacher therefore reading lots of materials on Cross Cultural Understanding, anthropological sketches about certain people's ways of life and cultures may help a lot. Also watching movies on

televisions depicting ordinary life of real people, such as the life of a group of students on campus or in a dormitory, how a family solve its problems, how a new student should adapt with his new environments after the family move to a completely different city, and the like.

In this modern technology era we can get any information we want easily. With the presence of e-mails and internet nowadays we can access every new information as soon as possible. In short, if we want to increase our knowledge about English teaching methodology and the like we just press some buttons, and enormous information will come in front of us. Just be creative!

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Conclusion  
Language and culture constitute a unity. Language cannot be taught only simply separated from the habits and customs of the native speakers. For a teacher to teach a foreign language without the own words and customs is to teach a dead language. These problems mainly come from the fact that when the learner is introduced to a new language, he is not aware of the cultural context in which the language is used. This is the reason why a teacher should be aware of the cultural context of the language he is teaching. This is the reason why a teacher should be aware of the cultural context of the language he is teaching. This is the reason why a teacher should be aware of the cultural context of the language he is teaching.