Culture in Indonesian English Language Teaching (ELT): A Critical Literature Review

Karmila Mokoginta*

English Literature Study Program, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Hasanuddin
*Correspondence: karmila.mokoginta@unhas.ac.id

ABSTRACT

This article aims to analyze the current situation of Indonesian ELT concerning the recommendation to integrate more cultural elements in ELT practices. To achieve the objective, some studies were critically reviewed to gain insights into Indonesian ELT researchers' latest trends and perspectives. The writer collected some articles related to the topic written in the last ten years and reviewed them using some steps of critical literature review. The results show that many efforts have been made to integrate Indonesian cultures into Indonesian ELT practices, especially in learning materials. However, there is a discrepancy between the growing concerns regarding the negative impacts of Western values through ELT classrooms and the preference among Indonesian students towards target and international cultures of English. More studies are needed to gain better perspectives.

***Keywords**: Culture, Indonesia, English Language Teaching*

INTRODUCTION

The latest advancement in ELT worldwide has recommended integrating source and international cultural values more than focusing on the target cultures. This paper aims to review such a situation in the context of Indonesian ELT to answer two specific questions: (1) What subject matters are discussed in the studies related to Culture and Indonesian ELT? and (2) What significant issues can be identified in such studies?

This study was conducted as a critical literature review. The writer reviewed fifteen journal articles and book chapters in the last ten years (2014 to 2024). The critical literature review was conducted using steps, including reading the articles carefully, summarizing significant points made by the authors of the articles, evaluating the ideas, and making general conclusions and recommendations based on the identified issues. The writer determined these steps by considering the suggestions provided by the Harvard Department of Sociology (n.d.).

It is found that many studies focus on the analysis of cultural content in Indonesian ELT materials. Other topics of concern are the perception of culture-based ELT practices and

the impacts of such activities on developing English skills. The review provides a general impression that despite the concerns raised by educationalists regarding the negative impacts of Western values through ELT, it may appear that preference towards target cultures is still evident among Indonesian students.

CULTURE AND ELT MATERIALS

Some researchers conducted studies focusing on ELT materials such as textbooks. They either analyzed textbooks to find out cultural elements integrated into the materials or developed learning materials integrating cultural content.

Setyono and Widodo (2019) examined an English textbook published in 2015 by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture (MONEC) to answer two research questions. The first question was about multicultural values integrated into the textbook. In contrast, the second question concerns the changes provided in the textbook to improve perspectives about the connections between different cultures. Using the approach of Critical Discourse Analysis, the researchers examined both visual and verbal texts. They found four values related to multiculturalism, i.e. appreciating diverse life, respecting the rights of native communities, having a peaceful life with nature and all world creatures, and appreciating cultural artefacts. The explanation of the findings suggests that the textbook allows students to explore and improve their perspectives regarding connections between different cultures.

Ayu (2020) analyzed the representation of Indonesian, western, and other cultures in an English textbook for 10th-grade grade students. The researcher argues that it is essential to evaluate textbooks to ensure that they meet the requirements mentioned in the 2013 curriculum, saying that "EFL textbook should reflect appreciation and respect upon multi-cultures and community plurality, which include various cultural values and local, national, and global wisdom" (p. 185). The findings reveal that local cultural content dominates the English textbook. According to the author, this is advantageous because Indonesian culture can be internalized into the practices of English teaching in Indonesia. More importantly, it enables the fulfilment of the philosophy of the 2013 curriculum that "every development of curriculum should consider national culture, present and future of the nation" (p. 190).

Two scholars, Qodriani and Kardiansyah (2018), also analyzed an electronic English textbook published in 2014 by the Indonesian Ministry of Education and Culture. The study aimed to investigate the types of local culture and cultural contents presented in the textbook. The findings show that the textbook presents some local cultures of Indonesia, including school uniforms with headscarf for Moslem female students, the traditional house of the Minangkabau ethnic group, holding and kissing the hand of an older person, praying together before eating, cooperation, negative presentation of fast food, and positive

description of Indonesian food. These cultural aspects mostly represent Indonesian Muslim society. The researchers say, "The situation of communities in this textbook mostly shows the Moslem society as the major society in Indonesia" (p. 56). However, the author adds that the textbook also highlights differences within Indonesian society regarding ethnic backgrounds and religions. For example, one of the characters in the textbooks is Edo, a male student representing the Papuan people in Indonesia. The textbook also highlights other cultural content in presenting Indonesian heroes, including R. A Kartini, Ir. Soekarno, and Bung Tomo.

Qodriani and Kardiansyah (2018) made two interesting statements at the end of their article. First, the scholars remind teachers to make students aware of their beliefs and avoid being dominated by Western cultural values. Furthermore, they point out that integrating cultural content in English textbooks will equip students with knowledge about Indonesian cultures that can be promoted to people in other countries. Besides that, the culture-based textbook's positive contribution in shaping "better understanding of our multicultural society" (p. 57). These statements align with the voices of negative influences of Western cultures on Indonesian young people through the teaching of English (see more explanation in the next section).

Another analysis of cultural elements in learning materials was conducted by Faris

(2014). The book analyzed was *Look Ahead, Book Three* by Th. M. Sudarwati and Eudia Grace. The first objective of the analysis was to find out the types of culture (source, target, and international cultures) incorporated into the textbook; while the second objective was to identify the aesthetic, sociological, semantic, and pragmatic elements of culture. The findings reveal the dominance of target culture. According to the author, this can be reasonable, but it reduces the strength of the book as a locally made learning material. The dominance of target culture, the author continues, makes the material impractical, contradictive with the values held by learners, and less encouraging. In terms of the representation of the four senses of culture, the study revealed that ". . . the cultural contents in the aesthetic sense were not explained enough to the extent that it is related to culture as the way of life. . ." (pp. 22-23). What is more, the material appeared to be partly biased, providing an impression that "one culture is better than the other" (p. 23).

Haerazi et al. (2018) conducted an R&D study to develop culture-based materials for writing classes. They worked with students from English Language Education programs of some state universities in Indonesia. The learning objective in the program was to improve students writing ability in terms of both linguistic accuracy and cultural appropriateness. The materials contain topics related to cultures included in the inner, outer, and expanding circles of English speakers. The learning stages

included several steps: observation, comparison, reflection, temporary conclusion, construction, and presentation. The data show that the learning model provided advantages to the students, who later had a good perception of the learning process.

The importance of culture-based materials has been emphasized. This is summarized by Widodo et al. (2018) saying that "values embedded in textbooks cannot be ignored because teaching materials such as textbooks are part of a system enforcing a sense of responsibility, morality, and cultural coherence" (p. 4). Hence, critical pedagogy based on moral education is highly recommended, especially by integrating moral values in learning materials (Thongrin, 2018). The expert then provides some principles in the integration of moral values in learning materials. The principles include the addressing of language skills and students' morality and culture as part of learning objectives, the use of content-based and task-based teaching methods, the application of collaborative learning activities, and the use of alternative assessment methods. Another scholar argued that ". . . there is a need for the production of locally embedded materials, including those of the local cultures as well as the ASEAN and Asian cultures, in order to appropriately respond to the increasing role of English as a lingua franca" (Zein, 2018, p. 5).

Generally, the studies above suggest that there is a strong recommendation to integrate cultural content, especially Indonesian cultures in English textbooks used in Indonesian ELT. To reinforce the importance of such integration, the issue of multiculturalism has been discussed. Moreover, the writings of two prominent Indonesian scholars, Handoyo Puji Widodo and Subhan Zein, can be considered a validation of this trend.

PERCEPTION ABOUT CULTURE IN ELT

There appears to be a growing concern about the influence of Western values on the Indonesian young generation through the teaching of English. For example, Lauder (as cited in Yansyah, 2020) says that:

> . . . educationalists in Indonesia have long been concerned that the widespread knowledge of English would harm Indonesian culture, morals and behaviour. This threat has usually been depicted as a hazard of Western "liberal values", which is exciting because English condenses all of the values from the U.K. and the U.S.A. plus conventional and other values and not only the liberal ones (p. 20).

This is quite related to the issue of identity. English continues to be associated with supreme and respectful status among middle-class Indonesians living in cities (Lie, 2017). Lie provides evidence, including English conversations in public places between parents and their children, the strong attitude that English is the key to a successful future, and the emergence of English-speaking groups among young people who get access to English through

international schools and the internet. The expert emphasizes that there is now a kind of "cultural identity transformation" (p. 79), hence the dilemma of maintaining the Indonesian language and culture on one side, and mastering English for global contribution. It is concerning as, according to the author, bilingualism among the Indonesian young generation may lead to a decrease in the Indonesian language and culture, causing social division among Indonesian students.

An interesting perspective appears in another article entitled "English Language Teaching in Islamic Education in Indonesia: Challenges and Opportunities" (Hidayati, 2016). The concerning perception regarding the influence of Western cultures through ELT is echoed in the author's statement that ". . . ELT in Indonesia faces various constraints including, but is not limited, the anxiousness to threat the purity of Bahasa Indonesia, the national Language, and the worry about liberal western values embedded in English to corrupt the youngsters moral and attitudes". This concern can hinder the implementation of ELT in Islamic education. Still, Hidayati argues that English has been recognized as important in the Islamic educational system, so it is suggested that ELT in Indonesia incorporate the norms of Islamic belief. Hidayati's argument appears to align with a review of four other scholars (Zein et al., 2020). As part of a review, the four academicians examine four studies related to the connection between English and religions in Indonesia. The

review shows that while one study found a negative perception towards English among Moslem research participants, the other found reverse situations.

Despite the concerns about the possible negative cultural impact of Western values through ELT and the enthusiasm to incorporate Indonesian cultural values in ELT practices, preference towards the target culture is still evident. The following two studies show the evidence.

The first one is a study by Yansyah (2020). When asked what cultures must be included in English textbooks, 43% of respondents chose international target cultures, 40% chose target cultures, and 38% chose local cultures. This shows that the respondents have positive attitudes towards international target cultures. Yansyah emphasizes that his findings do not align with the negative attitude towards the influence of Western cultures through ELT practices.

Another piece of evidence appears in a study by Rodliyah et al. (2014) investigating how Indonesian university students perceive the integration of target and source cultures in the materials using reading comprehension and connection with English as an international language (EIL). The researchers worked with 20 university students of English Education at Universitas Pendidikan Indonesia using two teaching stages. The first stage was conducted by teaching students using topics from the target culture such as thanksgiving, while the second

stage was filled with teaching English with materials from local cultures, such as *becak*. After the two teaching stages, students were asked to fill in questionnaires regarding cultural elements, level of difficulty, and level of interest; they were also asked to attend interviews. The findings revealed that the students agreed to include the three kinds of cultures – target, source, and international cultures – in reading materials. According to the respondents, target culture is needed since language cannot be separated from its culture, and they also want to have more information about countries where English is used as the first language. As for the integration of local cultures, the students thought that they gained knowledge necessary for talking about their own cultures and that the inclusion of local cultures is needed to preserve culture and identity. According to the respondents, the third kind of culture, international culture, is necessary because English is an international language. Although the respondents agree to have the three kinds of culture in reading materials, half perceive the target culture interesting, and 40% that both local and target culture are interesting. The respondents argue that texts in the target culture have simple words and structures so that they are much more comprehensible; while texts about local cultures do not provide new information and are written with complex grammar and vocabularies.

As explained earlier, there are concerning perspectives regarding the negative impacts of Western values through ELT. As a solution, there are calls to integrate more Indonesian cultural values in ELT practices, especially in learning materials. However, the two studies above show a clear preference towards target and international cultures among Indonesian ELT students. The issues of harmful effects of target cultures in Indonesian ELT may occur mostly in the discourse of educational experts and authorities but not much of concern among Indonesian students.

IMPACTS OF CULTURE-BASED ELT ON ENGLISH PROFICIENCY

Finally, it is important to address studies conducted to examine the effects of culture-based ELT on the improvement of English skills. The following two studies can be the examples.

Seftikah et al. (2017) conducted a study to find out whether the integration of culture into ELT teaching materials can impact students' knowledge about culture and their speaking ability. A quasi-experimental research design was implemented using speaking tests, observations, and an open-ended questionnaire. The results show that students improved in both cultural knowledge and speaking performance.

Other authors looked at the impact of culture-based material on improving grammar knowledge among forty advanced EFL students learning in an English language institute in Indonesia (Mashudi et al., 2022). The students were divided into two groups, an experimental group and a control group. Both groups had a grammar pre-test, showing that their grammar

knowledge was similar. The experimental group was taught using materials based on English culture, while the control group used regular grammar materials. At the end, both groups had a post-test, showing that the experiment group's scores were significantly higher than those of the control group. As part of the author's conclusions, it is argued that culture-based materials can facilitate grammar acquisition.

The findings of the above studies seem promising in supporting the integration of cultures into ELT practices. They imply more demand for culture-based English materials and teaching methods.

However, a concern needs to be considered before further action is taken. The explanation provided in the articles is too short to confirm the correlation between the use of culture-based ELT practices and the improvement of language skills. This needs further statistical analysis and explanation to obtain clarifications. More importantly, qualitative studies are needed to validate the results of the quantitative findings.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Education experts' and authorities' concerns regarding the negative impacts of Western values through ELT practices, such as using learning materials, have called for integrating more local cultural values. This can be quite reasonable, especially in English as an international language. Indonesian researchers have responded well to this recommendation by analyzing various textbooks used in Indonesian

schools. The results seem promising as many Indonesian values have been used in the learning materials, especially those published by Indonesian authorities. However, there is room for further investigations, such as how Indonesian English teachers use the materials in their teaching activities and how the textbooks can stimulate fruitful discussions among students.

Interestingly, studies on students' perceptions show a contradiction. There is a clear preference towards the target culture. More efforts are then needed to gain more comprehensive explanation of the phenomena. This is quite important considering the status of students within the learning processes.

Another study pathway can be seen in the topics related to the impacts of culture-based ELT practices on improving English skills. Attention was needed regarding impacts on linguistic and communicative skill development and intercultural and critical thinking competence. More qualitative analysis is highly recommended to gain a comprehensive understanding.

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