CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN DEVELOPING BLENDED CULTURE ELT MATERIALS FOR VOCATIONAL HIGH SCHOOLS

Hesti Wijaya
Yogyakarta State University
hestiwijaya1402@yahoo.com

Abstract: vocational high school students must be provided with English language competency to viably take parts in the global workplace competition. Inasmuch as ELT materials often miss to promote students’ socio-cultural backgrounds to accommodate them in using language in contexts, these bridge students to have good command of grammar and lexical knowledge but make them have difficulty in comprehending message of the lesson. Teachers ought to bear in mind that teaching a language also means teaching a complex system of cultural customs, values, ways of thinking, feeling, and acting. Thus, language and culture are inseparable. Conversely, the insertion of foreign language cultural values in textbooks is occasionally different from Indonesian local cultures. Despite its challenges, developing ELT materials which integrate local and target cultures is highly desirable to (i) help students understand meaning of language in contexts, (ii) preserve local culture, and (iii) make students feel less inferior and less superior while interacting with people with different cultural values.

Keywords: Blended culture, vocational high schools, ELT materials, local culture, target culture

Introduction
Lots of scholars emphasize that education is the best way which leads a country to betterment. It is quoted from Nelson Mandela that ‘education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world’ thus it is also noteworthy for poverty eradication and employability improvement. Following this, Indonesia Ministry of Education and Culture from 2004 keeps increasing the number of vocational high schools (VHSs) in many provinces. Though in 2012 the ratio of vocational high schools to senior high schools was still 47:53, the government attempts VHSs could reach 55% in 2015. This decision is fairly reasonable after evaluating the rising number of the unemployment rate for senior high school graduates which rises up to 1,841,545 (BPS, 2013). For the unemployment rate always affects a nation’s economic sustainability, the graduates of VHSs are highly expected to be professional employees regionally, nationally, and not to mention globally.

Gonzales (1995) points out the significant of English use in international trade and business, diplomacy, and scientific discourse, and these majors are found in VHSs. To compete in international level, VHS students are provided with the specific English language skills necessary to compete in a global job market, which prepare them for their various intended employment. They need to master several linguistic and communicative competences to communicate with people from different countries. Communicative competence, nevertheless, includes not only the linguistic knowledge but also appropriateness. People sometimes speak grammatically correct but culturally inappropriate (Neff & Rucynski, 2013). It is the awareness of not only whether an utterance is formally possible in a language but also the awareness of whether it is feasible, appropriate, or done in a particular speech community.

 Appropriateness is all covered in socio-cultural studies, but things considered appropriate in western countries might become suggestive ill manners in Asian cultures, particularly in Indonesia. In this case, teachers’ awareness and carefulness of selecting materials are highly required. The current ELT practice unfortunately gives more proportion to foreign cultural values. This makes our young generations internalize the norms in their daily lives and sooner or later Indonesia will lose its cultural identity (Margana, 2009; Sudartini, 2012; Sukarno, 2012). Hence, the target and the local cultures should be inserted and blended in a well-balanced way.

According to Graves (2002), a majority of teachers do not have time or resources to prepare their own materials to suit the teaching context and the groups they are teaching, and so textbooks are demanded. Many of them use these as final products without enough material adaptation. This condition appears to be a considerable challenge faced by textbook writers, material developers and VHSs teachers to develop appropriate blended culture ELT materials which not only help learners understand the target culture but also be proud of their own culture. Such cultural awareness to some extent will benefit them in their global workplace. Correspondingly, material developers should not be misled by the delusion that including culture in their textbooks is a straightforward act, but should be alert to the fact that selection, adaptation and development of cultural materials require tremendous care to ensure numerous premises.
English Language Teaching-Learning and Culture

It is widely agreed that English serves as the world’s lingua franca, as the widely most spoken language after Mandarin, and as a subject for learning about the world’s people, countries, and problems. In order to keep up with the information age and to follow the stream of globalization, English as a foreign language is formally taught in Indonesian schools in 1967. However, language alone is merely a set of system about grammatical rules, patterns, and skills (Sukarno, 2012). To truly communicate effectively, learners of a foreign language need both language fluency and cultural literacy. In other words, the more they know about each interlocutor’s world, the more smoothly they can communicate.

Language and culture in our daily communication are intricately bounded together. A language is a product of culture. It cannot be studied without contents about the society that uses it. On the other hand, culture cannot be communicated without a language as a means of expressing facts, ideas, feeling, experiences, ways of thinking, beliefs, and so on. Some experts such as Vernier et al. (2008) consider the teaching of culture as a fifth skill in language learning but Kramsch (1993) does not call it just a fifth skill, but rather something that is always in the background, right from day one.

Other scholars state that learning a new language means learning a new culture. VHS students who learn EFL are required to understand the target culture, including the ways foreigners behave, think, talk, perform, and show gestures with an ultimate aim to satisfy these foreigners as their chiefs, colleagues, or clients. Nevertheless, Indonesia is culturally rich and each country has its own identity. It becomes teachers’ duty through education, particularly English language education, to educate the generations in the future who can maintain religious, national, and cultural values of this country and at the same time remain actively responsive to the needs of the ever changing era.

Wildford (2007:1) surprisingly reveals, “Of the estimated 7000 languages spoken in the world today, linguists say, nearly half are in danger extinction and likely to disappear in this century. In fact, one falls out of the use about every two weeks.” Besides, hundreds of articles on the Internet discussing the extinction of traditional arts, local languages, and ethnicities in Indonesia are very easy to get. Vahdany (2005:93) adds, “Culture has always been touch but not hugged dearly enough; its relevance and contribution to language teaching has grown blurred and mystic.” What is then the rationale not to integrate our local culture in ELT?

Intercultural Competence in English Language Learning

Communication either locally or globally does not occur at linguistic level only, but also involves the socio-cultural aspects as well. Communicating across national borders is only one way the VHS graduates’ communication skills will be challenged. Culture determines how people encode their messages. When two people of different language communicate, intercultural communication takes place as they may not have the same perception of the world around them, factual beliefs, values, norms, and emotional attitudes. These differences are manifested in the way they communicate and there is a great risk of neglecting the significant differences during the communication process. Allwood (1985) defines intercultural communication as the sharing of information on different levels of awareness and control between people with different cultural backgrounds. The ELT practice in VHSs needs to incorporate these values so that the graduates will be linguistically and culturally ready for the global workplace communication.

Risager (1998) and Saluver (2004) describe some approaches to the teaching of culture in different terms but basically the same ideas; those which focus on the target culture (mono-cultural approach) and those which try to compare learners’ own and the other culture (the comparative approach). Adapting Risager’s to suit Indonesian context, the ELT practice in VHSs is more feasible employing the intercultural approach, compared to the multicultural approach and the trans-cultural approach. With a number of possible differences between communication patterns included in the teaching-learning process, the intercultural approach eases teachers’ and material developers’ job to effectively incorporate the target cultures and the local cultures, and it helps students to intensively understand the materials in a period of learning. The multicultural approach covers broader cultures and has anti-racist view of cultures because it suggests that global citizens are not only those from western countries. It is actually a bit better than the intercultural approach but with limited time of English classes in VHSs, it is not obligated. Lastly, the foreign-cultural approach is shaped upon the concept of monocultural view, which emphasizes the target culture and sets aside the local culture. The fear of implementing it in EFL teaching practice in Indonesia is that it might become conscious linguistic imperialism.

As in all communication, a fundamental problem has to do with understanding. In intercultural communication as well, problems and consequences can occur. Allwood (1985) classifies the causes into: 1) Lack of understanding either consciously or unconsciously; 2) Misunderstanding; 3) Emotional reactions and actions that are built upon misunderstanding and hasty negative reactions; 4) Individual level causes such as interruption and breakdown, communication on the conditions of only one party, communication via a third party, and communication on the conditions of both parties; and 5) Collective level causes, namely expulsion and segregation, assimilation, dominance by a third party, as well as pluralism and integration.
Intercultural competence overall is about knowing and tolerating cultural differences; it acts as a shield against the problems of intercultural communication. It places students as ‘comparative ethnographers’. It further serves as a safeguard against potential negative attitudes students might encounter when they learn about a new set of norms that are different from the ones of their own. It also helps them recognize and appreciate the differences between the two cultures for the benefit of successfully combining the form and meaning as well as systemic and schematic knowledge in language learning (Turkan & Celik, 2011; Margana, 2009). To conclude, teachers must bear in mind that the ultimate goal of teaching culture is to promote intercultural competence to students, especially to students of VHSs which will directly interact with people from different cultural backgrounds in their workplace. It suggests that intercultural competence should be fostered at every stage of English language learning experience through various classroom activities and materials so that students fully comprehend the role of their own identity during the process of comparing two cultures.

The Current ELT Materials

Gonzales (1995) states that in relation to foreign language teaching-learning, in this case is English, it does not mean that the materials must always be authentic. On the contrary, these should be students’ real life situation in order that their learning process becomes contextual, meaningful and useful. Davis (1996) adds that learners’ daily lives, cultures, environments, beliefs, hopes and fears, and needs must be involved in what is happening around them in the class during the teaching-learning process. In other words, an English learning unit that integrates such indigenous cultural components will likely include greater chances for learners to share their experience and to participate in cooperative learning tasks.

Based on the current ELT practices, Saluver (2004) classifies foreign language textbooks used in language classrooms into two categories: international/global textbooks and local/locally produced textbooks. The first type is provided for international use and addresses issues from different cultural background; it is suitable for the multicultural teaching approach. The second type follows the national curriculum and usually includes learners’ local culture and the target culture. Some English textbooks for VHSs in Indonesia which are developed by all Indonesians seem giving too much focus on the linguistic competence, particularly grammar and on the local culture as well as are not specifically developed for specific majors (ESP), e.g.: too many conversations between two Indonesian people. The contents might make students have unbalanced awareness of the two cultures.

Blended Culture ELT Materials: What to Teach and How to Teach?

Related to the goal of teaching English – improving students’ English skills while making them aware of the importance of intercultural proficiency without neglecting their own identity – classroom activities and learning materials with an outward cultural focus that represent a balance between our local cultures and that of other English-speaking cultures are highly needed. So, a well-balanced percentage of both cultures is the main point in blended culture ELT materials. The other considerations are: 1) the context in which the language is being taught (EFL/ESL, EAP/ESP); 2) learners’ age, interests, and level of language proficiency; and 3) the teacher.

The first puzzlement in creating blended culture materials is probably about what to teach. Summarized from several opinions, a topic-based approach is the most selected way of developing the materials. Besides different linguistic components such as vocabulary, grammar, phraseology, the other necessary topics include everyday living (food and drink, holidays, hobbies, clubs, travels, jobs, etc), living conditions (housing, types of...

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**Figure 1. Contents in a certain English textbook for VHS**

There must be wide opportunities for textbooks writers to produce English textbooks which combine the first and the second type; those are textbooks for international use, developed collaboratively by Indonesian and western writers, address different majors specifically, and objectively incorporate the target culture and the local culture.
markets, etc), interpersonal relations (class structure, family, role and status), social values, beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (concept of time, concept of personal space, greetings, etc), gestures, social convention (eye contact, dressing, hand-shaking/bowing, decision-making customs, etc), and ritual behaviors (birth, marriage, death).

In addition, there are numerous supplementary resources for teaching culture such as textbooks, surveys, songs, interviews, biographies, photos, literature, adverts, TV programs, histories, music, films, maps, and the Internet. Sukarno (2012) suggests that the target cultures are better used for receptive skill learning, namely listening and reading, while the local cultures are better employed to improve students’ productive skills (speaking and writing) because the more students are accustomed to their surroundings, the more they will be able to express their ideas and thought.

Conclusion

Language, communication, and culture are closely connected. Learning a new language also means learning a new culture (the target culture). English communication skills are highly required to learn by VHS students in order for them to successfully compete in a global workplace. However, they have to realize that they live in Indonesia, a country with various local cultures. Therefore, it is necessary to learn the target culture and the local culture in a balanced way so that the students possess intercultural competence in their English language learning. By bridging cultural differences using intercultural competence, VHS students can successfully achieve intercultural communication – the process of sending and receiving messages between people of different cultures. The communication will be more effective when students learn to identify the differences between interlocutors (sender and receiver) and to accommodate those differences without expecting both cultures to give up their own identity.

Unluckily, the English textbooks and materials currently used in Indonesian VHSs do not accommodate a fair quantity of both cultures. This condition further becomes a challenge and gives spacious opportunities for textbooks writers, material developers, and VHS teachers to develop textbooks for international use with major specifications, which integrate the target culture and the local culture equally. Such materials helps students understand English in context, preserve Indonesia’s local cultures, and above all these create graduates who think globally and act locally.

References


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