

Raising the Students' Intercultural Competence in Literature Class: Toward the Asean Economic Community (AEC)

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Abstract

The agreement among leaders of South East Asia nations upon the official application of AEC has outlined the importance of every citizen in the region to encompass the capacity of cross-cultural communication and interaction with individuals from different nationalities because of the wider economic ranges, market, and alliances. Thus, the ability to act and communicate appropriately in multicultural contexts is such an absolute necessity for any students that teachers should accommodate it in the instructional activities. Literature class, which is considered as playing significant role in preparing the students' communicative and interpretative skill, should be directed beyond language and literature proficiency; it should be projected to further raise the students' intercultural literacy, i.e. understandings, competencies, attitudes, proficiencies, and identities necessary for successful cross-cultural engagement (Heyward, 2002). To be able to effectively participate in multicultural AEC, Indonesian students should be trained in Literature class which involves rich cultural diversity through meaning-negotiation method. The teaching literature should adopt eclectic pedagogical approaches as offered by the socio-constructivist theory rather than attempting to study the texts in isolation, so that the students' intercultural awareness is possible to rise and – in turn – their preparation for AEC is likely to foster.

Keywords: Intercultural Competence; Literature Class; meaning-negotiation method; Meaning-Negotiation Method.

1. Introduction

It is a common statement to make youths, the future stake holder of this state, ready to welcome AEC (Asean Economic Community) in terms of economy, education, and mentality. The rumor has been widely spread since a few years ago that some were afraid, some were highly motivated, and some were curious with what would happen. Today, it has already been on going right in front us, yet whether we are ready is still in a big question. There has always been doubt among us if we are already well-prepared to face the global community, the coming people from other countries with various intentions.

One of the biggest necessity society should be with is a competence to communicate appropriately with people from various cultural backgrounds as it is unavoidable to occur. Having communication and interaction with people from different cultural background occurs every second in either formal or informal circumstances. AEC with high technological advancement in communication systems which leads society interaction into not only real life but also virtual lets the society to have more and more community scope with borderless world. Samovar, Porter and McDaniel (2010) content that this world is in progress towards multicultural society in which people from different cultural backgrounds and ethnicities live together without border. Hence, intercultural competence becomes an absolute basic necessity for society to avoid any communication failure for different cultural perspectives, norms, customs, or exclusive attitudes which can lead to prejudice and humanly possible to end up with fatal cultural conflict.

As tertiary education stakeholders whose students are more projected to be professionals, lecturers need to accommodate that exclusive need for students' basic support to make them prepared to welcome and interact with the ASEAN community. Students not only need English speaking skill, but what is more important is their cultural awareness when working along with colleagues from different culture and perspective. How the students position themselves with their open-mindedness, respect, cooperativeness, and so forth is much more important than the ability to speak English. That's why, language learning is mostly integrated with intercultural competence by which they are able to explore cultural complexity and enhance cultural understanding. In Spain, for example, due to the fact that foreign language classrooms become more multicultural for the increasing immigration from Africa, South America, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, some educators suggest that new FL teaching practice should enhance intercultural awareness and promote cultural understanding (Rodrigues and Puyal, 2012). Indonesia pasca the agreement of ASEAN free market is highly potential to have similar condition to that of Spain for the broader community border set, AEC.

2. Culture and Intercultural Competence

Before proceeding further, it is necessary to see how scholars define and interpret culture. Brislin (2000) states that culture consists of ideals, values and assumptions about life that are widely shared amongst people and that guide specific behaviors. This notion sees culture as a communal perspective of life people share together including the way ones see values, norms, and customs. A certain way of life can be called 'culture' once it is shared by a large group of people in community (Jandt, 2004). People learn how to live the life according to the flow and customs of the surrounding norms, beliefs, and values. That is the reason why

Naido (2011: 41) states that “sharing a similar culture helps people define the group or society to which they belong”. The way Indian shakes the head to express an agreement is exclusively different from that of Indonesian to say “no”. That is how culture or tradition works in accordance with the flow of society.

However, along with the rapid growth of civilization and technological advancement, today’s social intercourse becomes borderless as society becomes one manifested in the global community. According to O’Shaughnessy & Stadler (2006: 436), globalization can lead to homogenization of world cultures, or to hybridization and multiculturalism. Thus, students badly necessitate intercultural competence to avoid any misunderstanding so that an effective cross-cultural communication is achieved.

To see what intercultural competence is and how it works, Zimmermann’s (2010: 17) system of building blocks is seen representative. The system is summarized into four building block areas; motivation, knowledge, skills, and attitudes. *Motivation* is the basis of the successful communication since its absence may lead the communication failed (Martin and Nakayama, 2004: 407-410). *Knowledge* includes knowing the conventions, customs, beliefs, and systems of meaning of the target culture. Naidoo, Rugbeer, and Rugbeer (2013) examining the intercultural communication in Japanese and African work place suggest that the utmost necessity workers should be completed with to have a successful and efficient communication in business is an acknowledgement towards the target culture. He even contents that intercultural competence should be more prioritized to the written and oral communication skill, since it determines how others see and perceive one’s character. *Skill* comprises organizational skill, tolerance, adaptation skill, and communication skills such as language, negotiation, conflict management (Jokikokko, 2005). *Attitude* is the way somebody enacts or behaves in the social encounters such as being open-minded in respect to the cultural diversity (Matveev, 2004: 106).

One who is completed with those four areas of cultural competence would inevitably be more accepted and welcome in cross-cultural interaction for his/her ability to position him/herself among the multicultural commune. In contrast, those who has no basic cultural competence is highly possible to find what is called *cognitive dissonance*. Cognitive dissonance begins with the concept that the communicator carries a variety of cognitive elements such as attitudes, perceptions, knowledge, and behaviors (Littlejohn and Foss (2008: 78). Thus, completing students with intercultural awareness during the courses is such an obligatory duty for the teachers. Literature class, which is considered as playing significant role in preparing the students’ communicative and interpretative skill, should be directed beyond language and literature proficiency; it should be projected to further raise the students’ intercultural literacy.

3. Literary Resource, Cultural Awareness and Its potential to integrate in Literature Class

The belief that literary texts can significantly construct sociocultural images and foster intercultural understanding has been widely acknowledged. The use of literary texts can promote reflection on cultural differences, develop understanding of the home culture, and consequently enhance more tolerant and open attitudes towards other cultures (Rodrigues and Puyal, 2012). Fictional text has power and it “lies in its unique ability to deeply involve the reader both at a cognitive, as well as emotional level” (Firlej, 2012). It can develop students’ affective skill to be manifested since it brings them into a realm or vicarious experience of other norms and values. Even, Hanauer (2001) includes cultural awareness boost up among the three functions of incorporating literary text into second language education, since she believes that adequately selected literary texts provide language learners with “access to cultural knowledge of the target language community”.

The adoption of multicultural pedagogy in literature class along with the appropriate literary book can help students understand different point of view upon their life experience that they have broader and more open insight. Firlej (2012), borrowing Kramsch’s (2000) term of *third space*, affirms that students will have their own interpretation upon the text “stimulating a range of questions, reflections, criticism, and confrontation with the otherness”. In those particular circumstances, their intercultural awareness rises. Being given a Japanese short story about single mother’s struggle for her daughter’s education, for example, might give them insight about Japanese perspective towards woman, the way women are treated, or at least daily customs and norms of Japanese. Furthermore, teacher can integrate the class with various innovative activities and brief explanation about the content of the story and additional Japanese culture.

4. Meaning-Negotiation Method and Its Role in Literature Class

Negotiation of meaning is very familiar concept of cognitive approaches to Second Language Acquisition (SLA). This concept is based on Krashen’s (1981, 1982, 1985 cited in Foster and Ohta, 2005: 405) notion that second language acquisition is obtained through exposure to comprehensible input which is called the ‘i+1’ level. This input means a condition in which the learners achieve beyond the common knowledge of L2 for additional comprehensible input embedded. It is obtained through personal attempts and the learner’s conversation partners “to overcome comprehension difficulties so that incomprehensible or partly comprehensible input becomes comprehensible through negotiating meaning (Foster and Ohta, 2005: 405). Learners are brought into the optimum i+1 level of comprehension through the process of meaning negotiation, such as questioning,

clarifying, interrupting, agreeing, etc. The process leads them to have a beyond-comprehension level usually achieved by common learners.

This ideal concept is seen significant if practiced in the literature class to foster students' cultural awareness since the moment in which students negotiate meaning with one another stimulate them to think deeply to find out the best interpretation of the literary text. Students will have their *third space* when reading and interpreting the literary text through deep thinking process (Firlej, 2012). During the deep thinking process while comparing what is read, what is experienced, and what happened in the real life, cultural awareness is possibly fostered.

Meaning-negotiation method may vary in accordance with the teacher's creativity and innovativeness. One of the successful literature classroom innovation which emphasizes students' negotiation of meaning is Hannaer's (2001) *Focus-on-Cultural-Understanding* method which is practiced and examined by Firlej (2012). He did several steps to examine the significance of the method: giving pre-questionnaire regarding with the cultural context of the literary text, opinion exchange, text reading and analysis, small group discussion, and finally, reading the expert's interpretations. Pre questionnaire is assigned to stimulate the students' sensitivity upon the discussed culture and to determine their attitudes towards their own culture and the target culture. Then, students are instructed to have an opinion exchange regarding with the questionnaire. In this moment, the students are accommodated to do the first meaning negotiation which is hoped to enrich their insight about cultural topic provided. After the opinion exchange, they are instructed to read and analyze the text so that they can compare what they already discuss and what they read. Group discussion is employed in the following step, which is aimed at leading them into more proactive in cooperative. In the end, they are instructed to read the expert's interpretations of the literary text as the comparative and leading tool to the right interpretation.

The study shows that the method can successfully inspire students' interest in intercultural matters and raised their awareness of their own and foreign culture. Students are not only projected to have a deeper understanding upon the contextual matter of the literary text provided, but they can directly experience the real intercultural communication. Similar or different cultural background is not a matter, but the way students cooperate, negotiate, and discuss one another plays significant role in fostering their intercultural competence. It lets them accustomed to negotiating particular issues with other persons by which a competence to respond difference with respect and appreciation is easily advanced. It portrays the future real life to which they are ahead pasca AEC agreement where foreigners are right around them for either business negotiation or other intentions. It is one of the creative ways on leading students into cultural awareness in the literature class, and there should be more various class innovations or ideas a teacher has upon

the teaching practice to accommodate the current students' exclusive necessity.

The following are another activities proposed as an example that lecturers and other practitioners can practice to rise the students' intercultural awareness.

A GROUP DISCUSSION ON "I HATE ENGLISH" by Levine (1989)

- a. T divides Ss into four or five groups with equal members.
- b. T provides S papers containing a contemporary realistic fiction entitled "I Hate English" by Levine, or T might only show it on the slide.
- c. Each group is assigned to read and discuss the content of the poetry.
To lead the Ss into cultural understanding, T might gives a short introduction about the content of the story and the activities to do during the class. (30 minutes)
- d. Ask one or two as the representative(s) of every group to do a five minute presentation. Every after the presentation, the other groups may ask, comment and share their ideas. (50 minutes)
- e. To end the class, T leads the students to have a self and cultural reflection through reflective questions (10 minutes).

The activities could be modified based on the level of the students' proficiency. A teacher might also change the text into another poem or other kinds of literary text. The activities are hoped to be an inspiration from which other creative and fun activities are created to boost up the students' cultural understanding and communication skill.

In addition, the benefits of such activities are offered not only by the instructional designs which make meaning-negotiation process among students possible but also by the selection upon the "multicultural literature" materials which potentially trigger the students to actively share their diverse experiences and respect others from different cultural background. "I Hate English" is selected due to its content which is closely related to the multicultural experience. It tells about Mei Mei who moves to New York from Hong Kong and finds difficulty learning to speak English. A teacher might choose other stories which are possible to trigger the students to have multicultural awareness.

5. Conclusion

The fact that Indonesia becomes one of ten members of ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) necessitates every citizen in the region to have the capacity of cross-cultural communication and interaction with

individuals from different nationalities. Intercultural competence is an absolute and exclusive need for students that teachers should accommodate. Literature class is seen ideal to project the students with not only the capability of interpretation or communication but also cultural competence, for students' capability to do their *third space* interpretation when reading the literary work. During the deep thinking process while comparing what is read, what is experienced, and what happened in the real life, cultural awareness is possibly fostered. Thus, meaning-negotiation method might be worth practicing for the effective instructional strategy to foster the students' intercultural awareness and cross-cultural communication.

The following are some recommendations to highlight for the successful intercultural literacy projection in the literature class:

1. It is vital to provide the students with the appropriate literary resources. 'Appropriate' means suitable to the students' comprehension level and the cultural values to transfer.
2. Students-centered method might be more applicable by which their cognitive skill can be developed.
3. Hannaer's (2001) *Focus-on-Cultural-Understanding* method which comprises giving pre-questionnaire regarding with the cultural context of the literary text, opinion exchange, text reading and analysis, small group discussion, and reading the expert's interpretations is worth practicing.

Some other designs might be practiced according to the teacher creativity to maximize the intercultural literacy transfer since the real instructional method obviously comes up from the teacher him/herself. It is not restricted to the three recommended considerations. Finally, it is hoped that this article can inspire literature teachers to lead students to go beyond the common notion of literature class projection so that they are well-prepared to face AEC.

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