SITUATING LOCAL CULTURE IN ELT MATERIAL DESIGN IN THE INDONESIAN EFL CONTEXT

Dana Yudha Kristiawan
Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Banyuwangi, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

The teaching of English using materials that adopts the target culture has been hotly debated in the last decades. Most ELT materials adopt the target culture without weighing how local cultures enrich the materials. This makes it difficult for students to understand the English materials as they encounter linguistic resources and social practices that are alien to the students. This article addresses how local cultures can be integrated into ELT materials in the Indonesian EFL context. It briefly discusses four critical issues in integrating local cultures into ELT materials, including: (1) topic selection, (2) the use of visual aids, (3) learning tasks, and (4) materials evaluation. The article also discusses the implementation of incorporating local cultures into classroom materials, and provides some step-by-step guidelines for local culture oriented ELT material design. The study argues that when learning a target language (e.g., English), students need to be aware of how their local cultures enrich their linguistic resources and social practices, thereby making their language learning more meaningful.

Keywords: ELT, local culture, material design, EFL, Indonesia

Introduction

EFL learning and teaching should ideally be allied to the context of real life through the presentation of culture in which students are immersed. Alpetekin (1993) argues that in learning a language, schematic knowledge is socially and culturally acquired and situated. He elaborates that schematic knowledge of foreign language learners, for instance, is affected by the culture of their mother tongue. For example, children in Middle East cannot say that a dog is a man's best friend, but they would prefer to say that a dog is a dirty and dangerous animal, and also they cannot touch this animal because of their cultural norms. Teaching EFL adopting the target culture makes it difficult for students to understand the material as they find unfamiliar lexical as well as cultural items which are alien to them. In line with this, Post and Rathet (1996) argue that

adopting a local culture in learning a foreign language such as English can enhance student motivation and allow for greater sensitivity to students' goal in learning the language. This local culture adoption enables students to express their ideas. For example, Indonesian students easily express traditional festivals with which they are familiar and have experienced using English.

From a cognitive perspective, integrating a target culture contradicts students' schema or prior knowledge or experience. They do not have any experience with the ELT materials that have different social and cultural contexts. However, students will be motivated to learn a foreign language if the materials relate to their prior knowledge. In line with this notion, Freeman and Freeman (1998) suggest that adopting a local culture in the target language teaching can lead to student positive attitude toward the target language learning and build their confidence. Many studies show that adopting a local culture than a target culture in ELT material has a positive impact on students' English language learning. For instance, Fredericks' finding (2007) shows that in her EFL class, the Tajik students are more likely to be interested in learning English if the pedagogical materials presented to them are closer to their culture. Adaskou, Britten and Fahsi (as cited in McKay, 2004) examine the Moroccan situation in learning English. They found that the inclusion of a target culture in teaching materials is not motivating or beneficial to students in that the materials do not fit in well with their lives, and they are unfamiliar with the context and culture of English-speaking country. Moreover, Jabeen and Shah (2011) investigated the attitude of Pakistani students towards target culture teaching. The finding revealed that the students have strong negative attitudes towards the teaching of the target language culture. Drawing from these findings, adopting local cultures in ELT materials is pedagogically encouraged.

Though many empirical studies on the adoption of local culture have been done in the ESL/EFL context, work, which addresses how local culture materials can be included in classroom materials alongside sample teaching tasks, remains rarely discussed. To fill in this void, this article discusses key issues of how to situate local culture in ELT material design. It also addresses the implementation of incorporating local cultures into instructional materials. The contribution of the article is to provide readers with a practical account of how local cultures can be incorporated into classroom materials.

Integrating Local Cultures into ELT Materials
A number of scholars suggest that local cultures need to be incorporated in ELT materials. There are four issues in integrating local cultures into ELT materials

that English teachers have to keep in mind. These issues are (1) topic selection, (2) the use of visual aids, (3) learning tasks, and (4) material evaluation.

Topic Selection

The easiest way to design culturally appropriate ELT materials is to compile a list of topics that are thought to be important for or of interest to students. Although a list of topics may be the easiest way to design the materials, it may lead to an unsystematic provision of information. Therefore, chosen topics can be grouped into areas or categories. Hasselgreen (2003) suggests a list of categories that include *the ability of coping with daily life activities*, *traditions and living conditions* (e.g., in home, in school, and at festivals), *the ability to deal with social conventions* (e.g., good manners, dressing, and meeting people); *confidence with the values, beliefs and attitudes of the foreign language users* (e.g., what they are proud of, worry about and find funny), *the ability to use verbal communication means* (e.g., greeting, apologizing, expressing gratitude, embarrassment and love), and *the ability to use non-verbal language* (e.g., body language and facial expressions). These cultural categories serve as the basis for selecting culturally appropriate topics. Detailed information on these categories can be seen in the Appendix. Thus, the selection of culturally appropriate topics is a starting point for English teachers to include local cultures in their teaching materials. They need to discuss these topics with students so that they deserve the right to opt for which local cultures they would prefer. After the teacher and students agree to pick culturally appropriate topics, they can proceed to find and select visual media which communicate any cultural content or messages. Such visuals help students elicit their cultural experience in such a way that they have no problem with ideas. Support that a teacher may provide is that he or she can help students with turning such ideas into English discourse using appropriate lexical and grammatical resources.

The Use of Visual Aids

Visuals play a vital part in learning (Kuen, 2010). The use of visual aids in ELT materials help the learners visualize a concept or a word that is difficult to be understood. Visuals can motivate students to talk about certain cultural topics. Moreover, Sa'diyah (2011) points out that when students observe pictures, they are able to speak more, interact with the pictures and their friends, and build new ideas. Visual aids include any objects used to allow for easy understanding and motivating media for language learning (Novawan, 2010). There are a large number of visual aids, including single and composite pictures, stick figures, color or black-white photographs, and graphs either in print or electronically presented.

As mentioned early in terms of schematic knowledge, target language learning involves socio-cultural aspects. Visual aids in ELT material enhance students' level of understanding the material presented, and they can be used to reinforce any cultural message, clarify points, and ignite students' interests. Using visual aids, students can recall any events or matters they already know.

In selecting visual aids, teachers should consider that visuals are only instructional media in ELT materials. For this reason, they are not advised to put too many visuals in ELT materials. Visuals should help students elicit their own lived experience, so the use of visuals for decorative purposes is pedagogically discouraged. It is also important to bear in mind that visual aids must be simple and contain only one main idea. Placing more than one idea in a single pictorial material makes it difficult for students to comprehend and thus decrease the impact of the visual aid. After visual aids are selected, English language teachers should consider some learning tasks in designing local culture oriented ELT materials. This issue is discussed in detail below.

Learning Tasks
Bygate, Shekan and Swain (2001) point out that a task is an activity which requires students to use language, with an emphasis on meaning in order to attain an objective. Elaborating on how to translate learning tasks into action, Widodo and Pusporini (2010) propose a set of eight principles for designing language learning tasks. Among them, four principles fit in well with the focus of the article.

Principle 1: Learning tasks should fulfill learners' schemata. It means that in designing ELT materials, teachers should connect the materials to students' prior knowledge or experience. This knowledge or experience facilitates the students in learning a foreign language. This knowledge or experience can take the form of activities and feelings. Thus, learning tasks in the materials should connect what students are learning to what they have experienced in real-life situations.

Principle 2: Learning tasks should trigger students to explore their needs and interests. These needs and interests can lead to self learning exploration. For example, when students are given specific learning tasks, they can do other work related to the tasks. When they are exposed to culturally appropriate visuals, they can explore such visuals to write a descriptive piece.

Principle 3: Learning tasks should emphasize integrated language skills. Integrated language skills help students do multiple tasks at the same time, and in turn achieve target language learning goals effectively. For instance, reading tasks can be explored for language oriented learning tasks and for writing tasks.

Principle 4: Learning tasks in the materials should be authentic. It means that learning tasks should provide students with sufficient language and content input in which the input is a prerequisite for communication.

Material Evaluation
After designing culturally laden ELT materials, teachers should evaluate the materials based on five basic principles adapted from Widodo and Pusporini (2010) as presented below.
1. Are topics in ELT materials suitable with students' social or cultural experience? (topical/ thematic approach)
2. Does the ELT material design consider a functional language which is a passport to real life communication? (functional approach)
3. Does ELT material content reflect social or cultural situations that students have experienced? (situational approach)
4. Are tasks in ELT materials based on student prior knowledge so that they can perform learning tasks which reflect real-life situations? (task approach)
5. Does ELT materials content emphasize integrated language skills? (integrated approach)

Implementation of Incorporating Local Culture into Instructional Materials
As earlier pointed out, designing ELT materials with the adoption of local cultures is badly needed. Teachers can base ELT materials on students' socio-cultural backgrounds. Here are sample materials for situating local cultures in ELT materials design. In this respect, I would like to focus on target language students at senior high school level, particularly the first year students. The selection of a text type and a topic is based on one of the competence standard that the students have to be able to share and understand text in the form of a descriptive genre in the local context. For this reason, the chosen topic is a ritual festival commonly celebrated in Banyuwangi. The festival chosen is *Ider Barong Bumi Ritual*.

In the following materials, I focus on reading, speaking, and writing tasks in which these skills lend themselves to other language skills, such as listening, grammar, and vocabulary because they support one another. For this reason, teachers need to consider on which language skills they focus. The sample local culture material begins with a reading task.

a. Reading Task: Warming-up Activity

The task is an input-based activity which aims to elicit students' prior knowledge or experience. By asking and answering those questions in pairs, students can recall their experience in joining in the traditional festival. In this way, they can exchange their own experience which is relevant to their cultural schemata. The learning task exploits what students have encountered in a socio-cultural interaction. It is important for teachers to bear in mind that when this task is implemented, they should encourage individual student participation. Thus, a schemata activation task aims to connect what students have experienced to what a teacher would like to teach to them. To complement this task, the teacher can proceed to provide students with a learning task which give them lexical input for further learning activities. This task helps students acquire some key lexical items to perform a particular communicative task. The choice of words is based on learner's prior knowledge (linguistic schemata). Alternatively, the choice can also be based on key words which appear in a reading text that learners are going to read.

Table 1: Student's prior knowledge activation

Task 1: Student's prior knowledge activation

A teacher asks these questions, or students take turn asking these questions in pairs.

1. Did you know the history of *Ider Barong Bumi Ritual* festival?
2. Have you ever joined or seen the *Ider Barong Bumi Ritual* festival?
3. With whom you have joined or seen the festival?
4. How did you feel when you joined or seen the *Ider Barong Bumi Ritual* festival?

In a lexical input task, teachers can use a word map as scaffolding or a mediating tool for encouraging student engagement. A word map is a creative process and a natural way to organize words into specific topics. It can trigger students to find related words, and it is an easy medium of remembering the words. The word map helps students see different relations between key topics. This is very useful when the students develop ideas in writing. To create an interactive learning atmosphere, a teacher can ask students to work in groups, and then share what they have done with the group members or with the whole class, and with the teacher. In this respect, the teacher can be a facilitator who encourages students to work actively on the task collaboratively. The sample of a word map is shown below.

Task 2: Lexical Input

Complete the word map below. Add two more words or phrases to each category. Compare your word map with your friends. Work in groups.

Activity
....
....
....
....

Things in a Parade
....
....
....

Ider Barong Bumi Ritual Parade

Special Food
....
....
....
....

Parade Participants
....
....
....

prayer	flowers	traditional cakes
lion dance	playing traditional music	
mats	teens	Barong coins
pecel pitik (chicken with grated coconut chili sauce)		
tumpeng (rice cone)		village officials

The two tasks above can be used for pre-reading or post reading. The tasks can serve as a warming-up activity for a lesson. Furthermore, the two tasks help students to be ready for speaking and writing tasks.

b.   **Speaking and writing tasks:** Reordering and describing the festival of Barong Ider Bumi through visual media

Task 3: Cooperative Speaking Task

Instruction: Reorder the pictures below in illogical order by giving a

number in the brackets and then describe Ider Barong Bumi Ritual festival with your partner.
Work in pairs.

(…….)   (…….)

(…….)   (…….)

Figure 2: Pictures as visual aids

As noted earlier in the use of visual aids, such visual aids can enhance students' level of understanding the material presented, and they can be used to reinforce the cultural message, clarify points and create interest. By using visual aids, students can re-memorize the events or things that students already know. Task 3 aims to ask students to reorder and describe Ider Barong Bumi festival. The students are asked to describe the festival to their partners. Working cooperatively allows students to help their peers who may experience difficulty in finding the right word or in constructing ideas. The nature of the task is similar to Task 1 and Task 2. Task 3 can be used for while- and post-reading tasks

Task 4: Descriptive Writing Task
Write a letter on the postcard below to your friend in another country. Tell a story about the Festival of Ider Barong Bumi Ritual you have experienced so that

your friend would be interested to see the festival. Your paragraph should be about 100-150 words in length.

Dear ……………………..
……………………………………………
…………………………………………….
…………………………………………….
…………………………………………….
………………………………………………..
……….. ………………………………
……………………………………………
……………………………… …………….
…………………………………………….

Sincerely yours,

……………………….

To: ………………
………………..
…………………

The purpose of task 4 is to encourage students to practice their writing skill in the form of descriptive paragraph writing. This task is useful if the focus of a writing genre is description. This task is part of an integrated learning task which complements the previous tasks. Most importantly, a teacher can provide students with a more communicative task. This task also makes students aware of their local culture as well as enhances their cultural ownership.

Situating local cultures in ELT materials is badly needed. This article has discussed some issues in the adoption of local cultures into ELT materials and has provided sample materials alongside the rationale. In situating local cultures in language material design, teachers should consider appropriate topic selection, visual media, learning tasks, and material evaluation. Some sample materials presented in this article can be adopted or adapted based on students' learning needs, and the sample materials can be the basis for further materials development. Certainly, factors such as student proficiency level, time allocation, teaching and learning goals, the nature of the curriculum need to be taken into account. Situating local cultures in ELT materials helps students become aware of how their local culture enriches their linguistic resources and social practices, thereby making their language learning more meaningful.

Acknowledgement

References

Alptekin, C. (1993). Target language culture in EFL material. *ELT Journal, 47* (2), 136-143.

Bygate, M., Shekan, P., & Swain, M. (2001). *Researching pedagogical tasks: Second language learning, teaching, and testing*. Harlow, UK: Pearson Education.

Fredrick, L. (2007). A rationale for critical pedagogy in EFL: The case of Tajikistan. *The Reading Matrix*, *7*(2), 22-28.

Freman, Y., & Freeman, D. (1998). *ESL/EFL teaching: Principles for success* (2nd Ed.). Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

Hasselgreen, A. (2003). Towards the assessment of intercultural competence. In A. Hasselgreen (Ed.), *Bergen 'can do' project* (Graz: Council of Europe Publishing) (pp. 45-55). Strasbourg Cedex: Council of Europe Publishing.

Jabeen, F., & Shah, S.K. (2011). The role of culture in ELT: Learners' attitude towards the teaching of target language culture. *European Journal of Social Sciences, 23*(4), 592-601.

Kuen, G. L. (2010). Using visuals to promote workplace literacy among Polytechnic students. *The English Teacher, XXXIX,* 121-141.

McKay, S.L (2004). Western culture and teaching of English as an international language. *English Teaching Forum*, *42*(2),10-15

Novawan, A. (2010). The use of visual aids in ELT materials. In H.P. Widodo, & L.Savova, *The Lincom guide to materials design in ELT* (pp.39-54). Munchen, Germany: Lincom.

Post, R., & Rathet, I. (1996). On their own terms: Using student native culture as content in the EFL Classroom. *English Teaching Forum Online,* July 1996. Retrieved April 1, 2012 from http://exchange.state.gov/ forum/vols/vol34/no3/p12.htm

Sa'diyah, H. (2011). Improving student's ability in writing descriptive text through a picture series-aided learning strategy. *The English Teacher, XL, 164-182,*

Widodo, H.P., & Pusporini, R. (2010). Material design: English for specific purposes (ESP). In H.P. Widodo, & L. Savova, *The Lincom guide to materials design in ELT* (pp.147-160). Munchen, Germany: Lincom.

APPENDIX
Categories of Cultural Topics by Hasselgreen (2003, 48-52)

1. Ability of coping with daily life activities, traditions and living conditions (e.g., home, school, festivals etc.)
    - Everyday family life: meals, variety of food, daily routine, housing, family size, housework, pets and other animals, TV, Internet.
    - School: system, class size, grades, routines, meals, breaks, uniform, social needs.
    - Leisure time: going out with friends, sport, keeping fit, holidays
    - Festivities (focus on food and rituals, occasionally costume): national festivals and feast days, other international feast days, youth festivals
    - Country generally-living conditions: locations, demography, occupations, farming activities, nature, geography, climate, language, urban-rural communities, regional differences, social classes

2. Ability to deal with social conventions (e.g., good manners, dressing and meeting people)
    - Roles and relationships: boys-girls, men-women, younger-older generation**,** family-society**,** family circle and cohesion**,** women's working situation**,** helping each other
    - Visiting and hospitality: punctuality, introductions, sharing, gifts, washing hands, taking off shoes, sitting down, leaving early
    - Social occasions: funerals, weddings, expressing emotions: degree of noise, excitability, flamboyance
    - Going out: smoking and drinking etiquette and habits, table manners,
    - Clothes: dress code-general-formal for going out

3. Confidence with the values, beliefs, and attitudes of the foreign language users (e.g., what they are proud of, worry about and find funny)
   - Concerned with family, life, friends, school success, economy, prices, unemployment, sport, keeping fit, diseases, pollution, housing problems, gossip
   - Characterization: friendly, simple, polite, sincere, caring, open-minded, tolerant, rude, bad-tempered, hypocritical, conservative
   - Religion: mosque/church-going etc.
   - Beliefs: superstitions, physical appearance, skin-hair colour
   - Cultural heritage: national history and independence, country, nature, population, national heroes, athletes, sportsmen, singers
   - National stereotypes and reality: ethnic identities and conflicts, war, terrorism, emigration
   - Sense of humor: direct humor, irony, telling jokes about other people and nations, own and others' misfortune

4. Ability to use verbal communication means (e.g., greeting, apologizing, expressing gratitude, embarrassment and love)
   - Addressing people: degrees of politeness and distance, greetings, apologizing
   - Striking up conversation: talking to friends and strangers, being noisy, quiet, turn-talking, interrupting, talking to small children-adults, using thank you, please
   - Saying proverbs: animal references (i.e. as stupid as)
   - Emotions-feelings: expressing love, impulsiveness, shyness, embarrassment, taboos

5. Ability to use non-verbal language (e.g., body language and facial expressions)
   - Body language: shaking hands, kissing, hugging, nodding, gesticulating-hand signals
   - Body contact: touching, standing too close, too far
   - Facial expression: eye contact, winking, smiling, crying, showing anger