

**THE IMPORTANCE OF CROSS-CULTURAL UNDERSTANDING  
IN ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNING**

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**ABSTRACT**

*Learning English as a foreign language is not only learning the four skills of language, reading, writing, speaking and listening, but also life skill to enable the learners to communicate .Language and culture are interrelated , hence, teaching and learning language will include the culture of its speakers. Language teachers must have knowledge of cultural understanding, Cross Cultural Understanding (CCU). It refers to basic ability to recognize, interpret and react to people and situations that are open to misunderstanding due to cultural difference. Different cultural background can create conflict, frustration, and even shock. Therefore, learners are expected to master about CCU, so that it would minimize or overcome such problems. They need to know properly the culture of the country and the people where the language is from. This is a review of literature research, based on the results from several previous study. This study reveals that there are some cultural knowledge that can be learned and taught to the students, while some others need to be practiced in the class room, or applied in the real classroom communication practice.*

**Keywords :** *CCU (Cross Cultural Understanding), Foreign Language Learning*

**INTRODUCTION**

According to Brita and Kurnia (2017:7), culture is a way of life and an understanding about life for a particular group of people. It is complex, complete, organized, learned and unconsciously controlled by beliefs and values. It consists of both visible and invisible things. The broader meaning of culture was stated by Hornby, Cowie & Lewis (1974). He said that culture includes :(1)advanced development of human powers; development of body, mind and spirit by training and experience.(2) evident of intellectual development (of art, science, etc) in human society. (3) aspect of human activities: personal or individual communication(self communication),collective or communication in social context, and expressive or society expresses. Those three activities require some certain rules and signs which are established by a certain group of people or community so that they will be understandable.

Meanwhile, according to Taga (1999), Culture may be defined as a “social heredity” transmitted from one generation with the accumulation in individual experiences, or a mode of activities differentiating people of one society from another society. Culture cannot be biological phenomenon but learned patterns of social behavior to be followed. It is wonderful and unique phenomenon of human society with colorful diversity, always changing its pattern which is the greatest beauty of human society. Culture forms beliefs, conveys ideas, and shares knowledge on customs and values. All of these characteristics are communicated through language which is an integral part of culture.

Culture is a social process deals with the use of language and communication experienced by people in given circumstances. They usually learn more than one language for satisfaction of communication needs in their academic and professional careers. The process of learning the foreign language not only requires an individual to practice linguistic forms but also the necessity to become familiar with the culture of target language in order to interpret intercultural communication.

People grow in their own cultural environment in which they form and create ways of behaving and thinking that is typical for its members. Their way of thinking and behaving is greatly influenced by long process of their education and teaching which is provided by generation to generation by their parents, teachers, and community around them. They often think that the way of their own behaving and their cultural system is appropriate even the best among other cultures.

When people communicate, make contact, or interact with people from different cultures, a problem can arise, because they find different patterns, expectations, needs, and choices based on their own cultural value. They find it strange with the people from different culture outside them. So the study of Cross Cultural Understanding (CCU) or the culture of other people is very important. Cross Cultural understanding covers an understanding of values, beliefs, attitudes, thinking patterns, customs, habits, language and the ways of communication.

The culture discussed in this paper is about English (western) culture and Indonesian (eastern) culture. Talking about English culture is not the same in the way we talk about Indonesian culture. Indonesian culture is culture of thousands of ethnic group of Indonesia within its geographical. It much shares with the culture found in other Asian countries, and western culture or the culture of English speakers mostly is a result of colonization which is found in many parts of world. It covers the native English speakers, consisting of Britain, The United States of America, Australia, Canada, and New Zealand. English (western) culture is about way of thinking, interacting, and living originated in the Mediterranean world

thousands years ago. It has been influenced by ancient Greek mythology, Roman law, Christianity, Modern humanism and science which has now spread beyond Western Europe to many parts of the world (Brita and Kurnia.2017).

Language and culture are inseparable, when people learn a language at the same time they will learn the culture of people from the country where the language is from. Cross Cultural Understanding refers to basic ability of people to recognize, interpret, and correctly react to people, incident situations that are open to misunderstanding due to cultural differences. There are some guidelines to use language effectively and sensitively to equip communication, namely to be aware and choose words carefully, avoid idioms, slang, jargon, acronyms, respect the basic rules of correct grammar and standard syntax, be polite and formal, avoid informality, avoid jokes and humor, listen, value silence.

Based on the guidelines from The Education Department of Indonesian Government gave guidelines, ( the 2003 act of the Republic Indonesia on National Education System), stated that Cross Cultural-Understanding (CCU) is a compulsory subject in all language and literature degrees in university in Indonesia, it ‘discusses the obstacles in communication between cultures and languages and how to overcome them’. ‘Cross Cultural understanding usually refers to recognizing the value and behavior of cultures which are different from one’s own’.

Sinagatullin (2003:114) states that the goal of training in cross cultural understanding is ‘to help students acquire attitudes, knowledge, and skill needed to successfully function within their own micro –culture, mainstream culture and the global community’. This way students will be able to obtain adequate knowledge, internalize attitudes, and develop skill needed to function appropriately in the culture at all levels: local, national, global. Sinagatullin (2003:83) suggests that this goal would be achieved on the condition that all students, regardless of their gender, ethnicity, race, culture, social class, religion, or exceptionally, have an equal opportunity to learn at school.’

Meanwhile, Miller, D.(2003) claims that “Cultural differences are the main issue in cross-cultural education.” Without recognizing differences in traditions and habits among people of different ethnic, religions, localities, regions, and countries or nations, confusion and misunderstanding will continually recur in communication with other communities. It is the ability to recognize these differences, and make correct interpretation and react properly to people or situations in the communication with these communities that constitutes the essence of cross-cultural understanding. Therefore, CCU is needed in communication not only by people of different nationalities, but also between different ethnic.

Realizing the close relationship between culture and language, it is essential that the

learners need to learn Cross Cultural Understanding for social information using new language being learnt. This is due to the cultural difference between the first language of the learner and the language being learnt. River (1981) said that besides linguistic aspects, foreign language learners had also to learn a culture because it could not be separated from language. It can be concluded that Cross Cultural Understanding is study about multi-cultures which are coming from different countries, aiming to give knowledge to the learners about the cultures in order to avoid prejudice and misunderstanding due to the cultures' differences by integrating the culture into EFL instructional course design. Cross Culture understanding plays a significant role in communicating with people from different culture.

### **Elements of Culture.**

Brown (1995) summarized the elements or visible attributes of culture as follow:

- a. Artifacts: the physical things that are found that have particular symbolism for culture.
- b. Stories, histories, myths, legends, jokes,
- c. Ritual, rites, ceremonies, celebrations.
- d. Heroes or named people who act as prototypes, or idealized.
- e. Symbol and symbolic action.
- f. Beliefs, assumptions and mental models.
- g. Attitude, external displays of underlying beliefs.
- h. Rules, norms, ethical codes, and values.

### **FINDINGS & DISCUSSION**

Honingman (in Koentjaraningrat, 1986) categorizes culture elements into three aspects: cultural knowledge, patterns of behavior, and artifact. Thus learners of English must understand the differences of cultural elements viewed from the point of knowledge (the do's and don't be in the line with the norm adhered by intended community), patterns of behavior (e.g. giving something with right hand), and object of culture owned, recognized and respected or valued by community(e.g. clothing, furniture, ornaments, etc).

In teaching process the curriculum should be designed in such a way, by integrating the intercultural aspect into teaching design and activities. Teachers have to include at least teaching the do's and don'ts which generally adhered by the speakers of English, particularly the English and the Americans. The following is examples of the do's and the don'ts with generally apply to both English and the Americans.

The Do's ( What should do ):

1	Great people properly. Use proper greeting such as “good morning”, “afternoon”, “how are you”, Do not use slang or other friendly expression. The common English are more formal than the common American in their language use. For the Japanese a greeting may also be accompanied by slight bowing of the body
2	The American generally do not like formality, but in personal introduction the use of “how do you do”. However, don’t expect that they will always say “how do you do?”, the English as response.
3	Say “please” when asking to do something. “Please” is a form of politeness very often used in both British and the American cultures. In a shop, for example, a shop assistant will say “please have a look” or “have a look, please” when asking customer to explore the products displayed in the shop.
4	Say “excuse me” to anticipate a possible misconducts before asking a question or to get attention before starting a speech.
5	Say “sorry” if something wrong has happened. Example, if someone asks you while you do not understand, you can say “I’m sorry”, I don’t know
6	say “thank you” as often as necessary. The expression “thank you” or “thank” is heard very often in the market, store, in public transport, in the hotel and school. Even when you do not get what you have expected from someone else you say “thank you”. For instance, the teacher says, “Tom, do you have an extra pencil that I can borrow?” Tom says: “I’m sorry, Mom, I have only one and I’m using it now”, the teacher will say: “never mind. Thank you.” or “all right. Thank you.”
7	Wear proper outfits to suit the situation. You do not have to wear outfits like the foreigners to socialize with them. Wear the outfits to suit the context of situation. Tourists wear T-shirt most of the time, but you can also see that professional guides are not influenced; they always wear (batik) shirt most of the time. If you usually wear a veil (Jilbab), you do not have to take it off to show respect to the foreigners.
8	Praise or complement guests (where appropriate). Western people appreciate compliments. For instance, a guest wearing batik dress will feel honored when you say something like: “you look great on your batik dress.” She will say “oh, thank you.” Continuing with question such as “where did you get it?” will give you an impression that you are sincere about the compliment and your curiosity about where she bought the dress, not a mere formality to impress the guest.
9	Be honest. The proverb “honesty is the best policy” applies to everyone in every culture. Western people highly regard honesty.
10	Be yourself. Be proud of what God has blessed you with. You have been blessed with black hair; you do not have to make it pink, green, blue, etc. You have been brought up in a religious family; you must not degrade the quality or worships just for the sake of socializing with a foreign friend. You need to understand them, but also make them understand you.

#### The Don’ts (What you should avoid)

1	Do not ask questions, such as: “how much money do you earn?”, “why aren’t you married?” or “how old are you?” (except for identification purposes). They are considered violating privacy.
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2	Do not spit in the street or public places. Public places are no longer appropriate for spitting, smoking, and littering. People fell disgusted with such behavior.
3	Do not blow your nose in public or cover your nose with a tissue or a handkerchief. It has become a trend in most civilized community.
4	Do not stare anyone in public. It is impolite. Privacy is highly regarded. Sitting around at the crossroad and watching and harassing passers-by are primitive behavior. These should be eradicated as it is against both religion and local wisdom.
5	Do not discuss politics and religion with strangers. These are personal business.
6	Do not be offended when they call you by first name. Due to the strong adherences to democracy, the Americans are often democratic when they socialize with non-Americans. They often call people by their first names. They address Bill Clinton, George Bush, Hillary Clinton, and Elizabeth Taylor, as Bill, George, Hillar' and Elizabeth/Elis/Beth/Betty. Within the family they do similar custom. Husband and wife call each other "love, dear, darling".

### **Explicit & Implicit Mode**

According to the guidelines provided by the Board for National Education Standard (BSNP,2007), there are two modes EFL that can be used by teachers. They can integrate culture in teaching English for Foreign Language (EFL), by using the explicit mode and implicit mode.

**Explicit mode:** Teachers can use the material which has been prepared, patterns of behavior, and artifacts or elements of culture mentioned above as part of instructional materials to introduce culture which can also be used simultaneously to develop the language skill.

The first thing to consider is to select suitable text for instructional purposes. Teachers may start with a topic on tradition that may be known in both the learners' and the target language culture, such as news celebration. It will enable comparison and contrastive analysis, which make the topic meaningful to their learners. Secondly, teachers go on other elements of cultures, which may extend the learner's understanding of the target language culture as well as those of other countries whose people communicate in English with people from other countries. The material can include thank-giving day, wedding parties, Independence Day, etc. The text may include the dates, formal ceremonies, carnivals, the clothes worn, the food served, etc. It would be more interesting if the discussion tasks for the students include comparison to reveal similarities and differences to deepen their understanding and international of various cultures.

**Implicit Mode:** The teachers can use any possible means to insert cultural aspects in

the instruction (serving as hidden syllabus). They can include cross-cultural understanding in their instruction..

Providing time references for morning, afternoon, evening and night, for example, as these words are used in greeting, will raise the learners' awareness on the different uses of the words from their equivalents in the learners' native language. Night is equivalent to malam in Indonesian, but 'good night' is not the same as 'selamat malam' in Indonesian. The expression 'good night' is used when the interlocutors are parting and will not meet again until morning.

The equivalent of 'good night' is 'selamat tidur' in Indonesian. Another example, a compliment given by a native speaker of English, 'you look great in this dress!', expects a response 'thank you.'. However, an EFL learner will answer 'oh, no', or 'come on, are you kidding?', a response that suggests a form of modesty in local culture, but can be violating a native speaker's expectation. These are the only small sample of cultural aspects teachers can include in their language instruction. There are myriads of cultural items that can be dealt with in the EFL classroom beyond the programmed activities or prepared materials. Resources on the do's and the don'ts in the western and eastern cultures can be accessed from the websites on culture grams, culture capsules, and other related topics.

## **CONCLUSION**

The relationship between language and culture is deeply rooted. Language is used to maintain and convey culture ties. Different ideas stem from different languages used within one's culture and the whole intertwining of these relationships start at one's birth. Cross Cultural Understanding or knowledge of cross cultures is important for facilitating communication with people. Therefore it is necessary for foreign language learners to have enough knowledge about Cross Cultural understanding.

Some researches in the field of intercultural communication indicate the importance of cultural awareness in English language teaching programs. The teachers should include intercultural aspects through language teaching process in order to get enough intercultural communication competence. It is necessary to include cognitive, effective, and behavioral pattern of learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL) because English has widely been used as a means of intercultural communication by integrating the cultural aspects into learning program or course design.

However integrating cultural aspects in the teaching and learning process can be difficult because there is not enough knowledge of the target culture and they don't know how to integrate it in the language instruction. Therefore EFL teachers are demanded to

understand the basic concept of cross culture understanding (CCU), aspects of cultures involved, and ways of integrating them in the EFL instruction so that the EFL learners are exposed to the situation of cross-cultural communication. It is expected that later the learners will be able to function properly when they communicate with people from different cultures. They will learn the importance of knowing cross cultural value, understand the difference among one culture and others and hopefully it will avoid misunderstanding, prejudice and conflict among people from different cultures.

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