

A Study of Cultural Factors in Elementary School English Textbooks in Indonesia

Rissa Rizkia Amelia and Hiroko Arao

1. Introduction

Cultural instruction and learning have been growing interests in issues concerning the teaching and learning of English for intercultural communication. In this era of globalization, English learners, as global citizens, are expected to deepen intercultural understanding in English communication. Practical English proficiency required for a global citizen is apparently not only based on language skills, but also on intercultural communicative competence, along with a high level of cultural awareness for successful communication across diverse cultures.

Indonesia is no exception as an EFL country that believes education can cultivate human resources capable of responding to globalization with much emphasis on English education starting early in the 1st grade of elementary school curriculum. In Indonesian English education, however, there is no clear goal published by the Ministry of Education. English teaching in elementary school in Indonesia mainly focuses on the four skills: listening, speaking, reading, and writing. The unwritten agreement, among English teachers, is that English education is solely for teaching the English language in order for the students to be able to use grammatically correct English when communicating with others. Realistically speaking, cultural instruction is excluded from English teaching and hardly surfaces to the conscious minds of the English teachers.

Communicative language pedagogy and communicative competence study clarify that language learning go beyond the limits of learning vocabulary and grammar

(Canale, 1983). Pursuing only grammatical correction in English use without any consideration to cultural factors does not guarantee successful communication in English in intercultural context. Baker (2012) uses the word, intercultural awareness (ICA) as an important concept in TEFL and suggests exploring TEFL teaching materials as one of the ways of applying ICA in teaching.

Cultural descriptions in English textbooks for school education are well-reflected resources of the level of ICA expected to be raised through English education. The selection and the coverage of cultural factors in English textbooks are carefully considered and designed for appropriateness and effectiveness in publication.

This study explores the cultural factors and their coverage in elementary school English textbooks in Indonesia. These finding are also compared with the English textbooks approved in Japan with the aim to suggest a cultural instruction for the future TEFL in Indonesia.

2. Cultural analysis on elementary school English textbook in Indonesia

Unlike many other countries, there are no approved English textbooks for elementary schools in Indonesia. So in this study, one of the most popular textbook series used in many Indonesian elementary schools, “Grow with English” series will be analyzed to study the cultural factors reflecting ICA in Indonesian TEFL and the orientations toward globalization.

Although cultural instruction is beyond the scope of English teaching in Indonesia, the textbooks used there still carry cultural features.

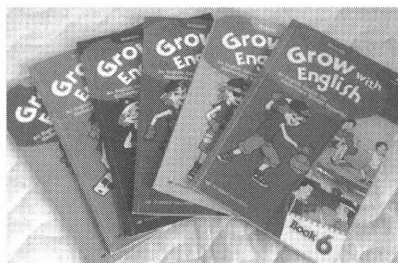


Figure1. Grow with English 1-6.

A Study of Cultural Factors in Elementary School English Textbooks in Indonesia

According to the culture categorization by the National Standards (1999), culture is categorized into three parts: cultural perspectives, cultural products, and cultural practices.

The cultural information and representations appearing in the textbooks such as in the texts, photos, and illustrations are analyzed and grouped into the three categories. The result of this study shows that cultural products mostly occupy the whole textbooks by more than 80%, followed by cultural perspectives and cultural practices. Cultural products are recognizable for learners and easy to use in textbooks. In particular, if it is the case of young learners, that is all the more reason to be true.

According to Morain (1997), language teachers and learners have little difficulty in grasping the concepts of cultural product. Every culture has its own unique products, so they easily recognize their own ones and the counterparts in other cultures. On the other hand, cultural practices and perspective are regarded to be rather difficult to understand, let alone teaching it, especially in the case of young students in elementary schools.

Their cultural practices are often an automatic behavioral pattern and perspectives are split off from consciousness. When it comes to the ones of other cultures, some of the concepts would more than likely go over their heads. Although understanding the cultural perspectives is of more significance than cultural products and practices to go far beyond a superficial understanding in intercultural settings (Arao, 2007), cultural products are good starters for young children to be receptive to other cultures. It is, however, revealed that in English textbooks for Indonesian elementary schools, the cultural factors are, regardless of the category, mostly the native one, Indonesian culture. On the other hand, foreign cultures are hardly dealt with.

3. Native Culture

The question to be asked here is why English textbooks in Indonesia hardly deal with foreign cultures despite high awareness of globalization. One of the reasons might be due to the ambiguous goal-setting in English education as was mentioned previously, and also the low awareness against the intercultural context of English use by the narrow view to English proficiency necessary in globalization: the importance of understanding other cultures is underestimated in English teaching.

Another possible reason is attributed to the common belief that elementary school students should have a good understanding of their own native culture prior to other cultures. Having a sufficient knowledge and respect for their own native culture can be a strong foundation to learn and understand other cultures. Therefore, it is widely believed that the pupils should be encouraged to deepen their understandings of their own native culture and develop a deep affection to them.

3.1 Examples of Native Culture shown in Indonesia

By the analysis, it is clearly seen that elementary school English textbooks in Indonesia attempt to raise the students' awareness of their native culture. Here are some examples of native culture shown in English textbooks for elementary school in Indonesia based on the three categories.

3.1.1 Cultural Products

National flags are one of the easiest ways to show and recognize the symbols among all products in English textbooks. The one and only flag shown in the Indonesian textbooks is Indonesian. Many pictures in the textbooks show Indonesian flags in many different situations, for example, at a school building or at the gate of

school. Flags of any other countries are never shown. This typically illustrates how much emphasis is put on the native culture in English textbooks.

Many descriptions of Islamic features in the textbooks are worth remark. Some female characters wear a veil as a symbol that they are Muslim, and a male character also wears a cap called "*kopiah*" which culturally shows that he is also Muslim. The likely reason underlying these features is that the majority of Indonesian people are Moslem and the religion is introduced to them at an early age. There is also a part which shows other religious symbols such as a church, a shrine, and a Buddhist monastery acknowledging the other three main religions in Indonesia: Christianity, Hinduism and Buddhism. The Indonesian is so religious that these religious symbols are important cultural parts in their lives and are highly encouraged to be shown to children.

Some parts show everyday life of Indonesian culture without people realizing. There are Indonesian typical means of public transportation illustrated in the textbooks such as pedicabs, carts, and motorcycle taxis. Pedicabs and carts are common sights in small roads that are not on the tracks of usual transportation such as train, taxi, or bus. Motorcycle taxi is usually used to go through small roads or paths with small rocks or trees in small villages in Indonesia. Although these transportations are taken for granted by Indonesia people, the frequent use of them is a unique part of Indonesia culture. Since walking is not a normal Indonesian tradition, people habitually choose to use these transportations even when the destination is in walking distance.

To describe the items of the native culture, the native language term is often used instead of English. For example, instead of using the word "yellow curry", *soto* is used in the textbook and "salad" is shown as *gado-gado*. By using these native language words, the uniqueness is emphasized and the students are encouraged to respect their own culture and language even in English learning.

In a lesson explaining about animals, the Komodo Dragon, a large species of lizard found only in Indonesia is mentioned. The wild inhabitants have been protected from human activities, being listed as ‘vulnerable’ in the IUCN (International Union for Conservation of Nature) Red List of Threatened Species and protected under Indonesian law. Therefore, the awareness of the endangered native animals is regarded to be important for the pupils.

One interesting finding is that there is a male character in the textbooks, who appears most often, showing that he is from Bali, one of the most popular tourist



destinations in Indonesia. A male character named Made, which is definitely a Balinese name, always wears a special headwear by which all Indonesian people can recognize his hometown. This is due to the fact that Bali is the most famous island which Indonesian people are proud of, since it is an internationally acknowledged tourist spot.

Figure 2. Balinese character, Made appeared in the textbooks series

As for characters, there is a female character named Meilin who is a typical Chinese ethnic student. She appears often in the textbooks. This might be because the Chinese ethnic population is quite high in Indonesia. In fact, based on national census conducted in 2010, the population of Chinese ethnic in Indonesia reaches 3.7% or about 8.8 million inhabitants, which makes Indonesia the country with the second highest Chinese ethnic population after Thailand (Sulistyo, 2013). It can be said that the textbooks deliver the message to the pupils to respect different ethnicities living in Indonesia.

3.1.2 Cultural Perspectives

Islamic features also appear in the category of cultural perspectives. In the textbooks, there is a part of a lesson carrying a message to do prayer on time. There is also a scene in which a student is looking for a mosque in a recreational place to do prayer. This shows that the Islamic mentality is forged in childhood, needless to say, giving the message of the importance of praying.

There is a scene in which a student does not bring her stationery (pencil) to school and wants to borrow it from another student. The message is to show the moral fiber of being a helpful friend: to lend something to a friend in need is good behavior. The implication here is that it is a matter of no importance of failing to bring something to school, which is an indication of indiscipline at school. This demonstrates the reality of the elementary school culture which is often not too strict about forgetting things.

3.1.3 Cultural practices

Islamic features are also reflected in cultural practices. There is a lesson with a message to do prayer on time to be a good Moslem. Doing prayer is an inevitable practice shown in the textbooks.

In Indonesia, before leaving home, taking a shower is taken for granted as a part of daily practice. In a lesson teaching about time, there is a part conveying a message about a healthy daily life. The importance of living a regular lifestyle is highlighted by showing daily activities for example, taking a shower at 5 a.m. which shows this Indonesian cultural tradition of taking a morning shower.

These cultural practices have disciplinary meanings for elementary school students instead of cultural learning. Not compared with other cultural customs, it is hard to raise their awareness of their own culture.

4. Example of Foreign Culture in Indonesian Textbooks

English textbooks for elementary school in Indonesia indeed do show foreign cultures, though it is much fewer than the native culture. End even if they do, all of them belong to cultural products.

One example of the foreign culture illustrated in the textbooks is Halloween party in a lesson to teach the words of many different kinds of costumes. Actually, Halloween has its roots in Catholic religion and has taken root in the U.S as popular event, but nowadays, prevails around the world, including Indonesia, as one of the pleasures for children.

Many kinds of foreign cartoons are shown in the textbooks, such as *Teletubbies*, *Doraemon*, *Ninja Hattori*, *Crayon Shin-chan*, *Flinstone*, and *Popeye*. Due to the global popularity, there is no conscious appreciation of these as foreign products anymore. They are all child-friendly products shown to appeal to the elementary school student in learning. Therefore, these foreign cultural factors in the textbooks are designed and intended not for cultural instruction.

5. Positive influences on Indonesian Pupils by Learning Foreign Culture

A past study of Kimura and Arao (2010) claims that English textbooks for EFL students should strike a balance between the native culture and the foreign culture in description and topic if they are expected to develop a cosmopolitan view. In this sense, Indonesian textbooks are completely devoid of this balance. English textbooks in Indonesia put more emphasis on the native culture than that of foreign culture. Given the importance of many positive influences and benefits, applying foreign cultural factors to the English textbooks should come under consideration.

EFL learners with any cultural background should develop the understanding of foreign cultures in order to become competent in English communication (Arao and Kimura, 2012). Mastery of English linguistic elements alone does not equip learners

with communicative competence in English; cultural knowledge and understanding of a communication partner is vital for successful communication. It is reinforced by Peterson and Coltrane (2003) that students will master a language only when they learn both its linguistic and cultural elements. In EFL contexts, this notion refers to English and English-speaking cultures, however, in global society; needless to say, the culture of one's communication partner does not always belong to English-speaking countries.

Cultural learning is very effective to increase learners' motivation. As Purba (2011) claims that culture classes do have a great role in achieving high motivation because most learners like culturally based activities such as singing, dancing, role playing, or doing research on other countries and peoples. These kinds of culture-based activities are very effective and applicable in EFL classes especially in elementary level.

Barna (1998) suggests the next six stumbling blocks in intercultural communication that people have to be ready to meet: assumption of similarities, language differences, nonverbal misinterpretations, preconceptions, stereotypes, and high anxiety. Except for language differences and high anxiety, all the rests derive from cultural factors.

For the sake of effective learning, Indonesian elementary school students should be exposed to foreign cultural factors through the English textbooks designed to facilitate cultural learning. It is true to say that in order to understand other cultures, one should understand one's own native culture. The other way around is true. Having no basis for comparison, it is impossible to really understand one's own culture. Both native culture and foreign culture should be compared and internalized, giving a new insight to students' perspective.

6. Global Issues

As globalization advances, EFL learners are also required to have globally accepted common senses and values. In a global society, many people with any

cultural backgrounds share concerns about common global issues to address based on their global citizenship: environment, gender, peace and war and human rights, etc.

Not many topics in Indonesian textbooks deal with global issues. One of few topics introduced in the textbooks is gender equality. In a lesson dialogue, one night when a father comes home early from work, he and his son tells the mother to rest because he wants to cook dinner for family that night. The attempt made by the dialogue is to diminish a stereotype that cooking is for women.

Another example is shown in the following conversation among three male students.

Made : What does your mother do, Seta?

Seta : She is a dentist.

Tigor : A dentist? It's a job for men.

Made : I don't think so, Tigor. Women can be dentists, too.

Seta : Yes, I agree with you, Made.

(Grow with English 5, p.38).

The message here is that one perpetrates stereotyped carrier images and a view of gender equality can overcome them.

Interestingly, these types of reverse-stereotype commonly appear in English textbooks in other countries. For example, one of the Korean approved junior-high textbooks also has a very similar lesson which describes a father cooking in the kitchen and then a mother coming home late from work (Arao and Kimura, 2012). Even in some Japanese junior-high textbooks, illustrations showing a father working in the kitchen are very common.

7. Comparison with Japanese English sub-materials

In Japan, English has not been taught as an official subject in the elementary school, but a class called Foreign Language Activities (FLA) started as a part of the

curriculum in 2011, which is to teach the 5th and 6th graders foreign languages mainly English. The overall objective is “to form the foundation of pupil’s communication abilities through foreign language while developing the understanding of language and culture through various experiences, fostering a positive attitude toward communication, and familiarizing pupils with the sound and basic expression of foreign language.” (MEXT, 2008).

In contrast to English class in Indonesia, FLA aims at communication abilities, but not the language skills. The statement also clarifies the idea that the goal is fulfilled by parallel understanding of language and culture.

Reflecting the orientation in the goal, “Hi, friends” series, sub-materials officially provided by the government for FLA (there is no approved textbook), carry a variety of cultural factors of both Japanese and foreign ones such as national flags, food, and buildings. Most of them are cultural products as in Indonesia. While Indonesian textbooks show only Indonesian flag as was mentioned before, “Hi, friends” have ten different national flags as images with notable sights of the countries including Japan. There are four kinds of images of school lunch of different countries. People’s skin and hair colors vary through the whole books, hinting at a multiethnic context where English communication takes place.

Native cultural factors are not especially emphasized, since few distinctive Japanese features are shown, except for some foods shown along with other food of different cultures, as one of many kinds of food. The only parts including distinctive Japanese one are a lesson to answer “What’s this?” showing Chinese characters, *KANJIs*, one of the three character systems the Japanese use to read and write and a lesson to listen to an old Japanese story. Other than them, some products can be recognized as Japanese ones, but not outstandingly emphasized because they are embedded with other cultures. It is also true that a large part of Japanese daily life is heavily influenced by western cultures, so most things shown as daily goods and

products are culturally universal and hard to distinguish which culture they belong to. Except for the character in an old Japanese story, people of any colors dress in western style clothing. Unlike Indonesian English textbooks, religious factors are not seen in Japanese English textbooks such as temples or shrines.

As for cultural practices, they provide different ways of greeting in ten languages and of counting in six languages. In addition, there is a part in which students connect English expressions and the gestures in image. These gestures are from completely English-speaking cultures. Cultural perspectives of any specific cultures are not shown in the material. Global issues are scarcely dealt with as expected, but if they are, they usually give universal perspectives, not specific cultural, to students. The reason seems to be the same with the case of Indonesian textbooks: the limits of English words and expressions at the level of elementary school. Even in the restriction, some lessons strengthen students' consciousness of global issues by design.

The implicit message of gender equality is communicated through pictures. In a lesson in which students talk about their dreams in English, with the page showing reverse-stereotypes through some images of a female dentist, a female firefighter, a female soccer player and a female bus driver. This is designed to change fixed stereotypes students have as in Indonesian textbooks. It also helps female students raise their vocational consciousness.

Elementary school students are able to make a difference in society regardless of young age. By the practice of sentence using the words "I can...", students are encouraged to think what they can do to make the world a better place to live. One of the sample sentences is "I can help people" with the picture of a boy helping an elderly woman with a stick and a man in a wheel chair. Another sample sentence is "I can save the Earth" showing a boy separating trash, a boy turning off a faucet and a boy turning off a light. These raise students' environmental awareness and facilitate their contribution to the world they live in.

About ninety percent of the factors are cultural products easy to understand and be intellectually adjusted to elementary school students. However it remains questionable how far the students understand other cultures to the satisfactory level to respond to globalization by the exposure to those cultural products.

Superficial knowledge of cultural products of these kinds can be said to be just an introductory stage of real cultural understanding, given the real intercultural communication they will face in the future. On the other hand, although they are only minor parts of the whole materials and apart from so called “cultural leaning”, global issues carried in the material successfully broaden students’ point of view and are well designed to deepen their understanding of others and expand their self-concepts.

Conclusion

The cultural products observed in the English textbooks for elementary schools in Indonesia mostly give a priority to the native culture and raise the students’ awareness of their native culture. The importance of native culture cannot be denied in intercultural understanding. With global education in mind, TEFL should not underestimate learners’ own native culture, since valuing and preserving one’s own culture raise the awareness and respect toward different ones and creates generous attitudes towards them. Kramasch (1993) argues the importance of reflection on one’s own culture in cultural learning by regarding cultural learning as not mere transfer of information between different cultures. However, too much emphasis on native culture in TEFL could possibly limit their perspectives on the world, risking ethnocentrism.

It is suggested that Indonesian English books provide foreign cultural factors in order to widen students’ view to the world. TEFL in global age encourages learners to gain an identity as a global citizen. It should not be an identity transformation to threaten the original cultural identity to the degree that one loses respect for one’s own

culture. Rather an additional identity leads to strengthen one's own original identity by the consciousness of different context of speaking different languages. In this sense, Indonesian elementary school students fail to improve a sense of global citizenship in a limited cultural context. Therefore, through English textbooks, they may want to be provided with many more chances to have quasi-experiences of different cultures they will meet and different contexts in which they may speak English in the future. A balance of both native culture and foreign culture in textbooks is an idea worth considering. TEFL should play a vital role to prepare young learners to take their place in global society through the use of English and a good understanding of different culture. All the more reason, textbooks have to be designed to make it possible.

References

- American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL). (1999). *Standards for foreign language learning in the 21st century. (The National Standards)*. Lawrence, KS: Allen Press.
- Arao, H. (2007). Cultural instruction in TEFL. *Philologia* 38, pp.109-123. Mie University.
- Arao, H and Kimura, M. (2012). A study of topics in English textbooks for mutual understanding. Paper presented at the 3rd English for business and Technology International Conference, Connecting Communities, Darussalam, Burunei.
- Baker, W. (2012). From cultural awareness to intercultural awareness: culture in ELT. *ELT Journal* 66, (1), 62-71.
- Berna, L, M. (1998). Stumbling blocks in intercultural communication. In M.J.Bennett (Ed.), *Basic concept of intercultural communication* (pp.173-189). Boston: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

A Study of Cultural Factors in Elementary School English Textbooks in Indonesia

- Kimura, M and Hiroko A. (2010). A study of cultural factors in junior-high school English textbooks approved in Korea and Japan. *Proceedings of PAC 2010 KOTESOL International*. 125-132.
- Kramsch, C. (1993). *Context and culture in language teaching*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Meier, A (2003). Posting the banns: a marriage of pragmatics and culture in foreign and second language pedagogy and beyond in A.Martínez Flor, E.Usó Juan, and A. Fernández Guerra(eds.). *Pragmatic Competence and Foreign Language Teaching*. Catellon: Universitat Jaume I.
- MEXT(2008). Chapter 4 Foreign Language Activities. Retrieved on January 14, 2014, from http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/new-cs/youryou/eiyaku/gai.pdf
- MEXT(2012). *Hi, friends. 1*. Tokyo: Tokyo-shoseki
- MEXT(2012). *Hi, friends. 2*. Tokyo: Tokyo-shoseki
- Morain, G. (1997). A perspective on cultural perspectives. In M.H. Rosenbusch (Ed.), *Bringing the Standards into the classroom: A teacher's guide* (2nd ed., pp.35-37). Ames: Iowa State University.
- Mukarto. (2007). *Grow with English Book 1*. Jakarta: Erlangga.
- Mukarto. (2007). *Grow with English Book 2*. Jakarta: Erlangga.
- Mukarto. (2007). *Grow with English Book 3*. Jakarta: Erlangga.
- Mukarto. (2007). *Grow with English Book 4*. Jakarta: Erlangga.
- Mukarto. (2007). *Grow with English Book 5*. Jakarta: Erlangga.
- Mukarto. (2007). *Grow with English Book 6*. Jakarta: Erlangga.
- Peterson, E and Coltrane, B. (2003). "Culture in second language teaching". *Digests*. Retrieved on February 12, 2014, from <http://www.cal.org/resources/digest/0309peterson.html>
- Purba, H. (2011). "The importance of including culture in EFL teaching". *Journal of English Teaching Volume 1 Number 1*. 44-56.