

AN INVESTIGATION OF EFL LEARNER'S CULTURAL AWARENESS THROUGH LITERARY TEXT ENCOUNTERS

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Abstract

This study discusses how EFL students' cultural awareness was reinforced through their encounters with diverse literary texts. It covers the understanding of the relationship between culture and literary text and how literary text plays a role in strengthening cultural awareness in students. It is qualitative descriptive research examining EFL students. Observation and interviews were used in the study. The result shows how students perceive the value and meaning of literary works. This study shows that when students were assigned into groups, it reinforced them to speak and discuss more and build their critical thinking through the cultural knowledge combined with their reading of the literature. It is found that cultural awareness can be conveyed by analyzing the text and characters of literary text through meaning construction, interpretation of the text, and discussion about identity and culture. However, it also revealed that cultural awareness in the target and international cultural representation was still lacking.

Keywords: cultural awareness; EFL learners; literary text

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INTRODUCTION

Literature is the primary tool for teaching and learning languages. Literature enriches language, and language helps to understand literature. Literary works provide additional material for grammar exercises, vocabulary learning, and translation. Hence, it is the reason why language is studied through literature.

Language teaching is a process whose goals change not only from country to country and culture to culture but from individual to individual. If so, the teacher must then decide which text to include, for what purpose it will be used, and what activities should be undertaken to explore the text and encourage language development. If literary works are selected according to the needs, levels of learners, and ages of learners, then literature will be effective in the language teaching and learning (Shazu, 2014)

The teaching of English in EFL classes is more often focused on teaching language skills and tends to ignore the use of English literature. Using literary works in English classes has excellent potential to make learning activities more exciting and interactive. Literary works generally offer cultural exposure in the form of the cultural context in the storyline. In addition, studying literature also trains an understanding of culture. Thus students will be more sensitive to cultural differences presented in various forms of story contexts. The involvement and interaction between teachers and students in the learning process in the classroom can be an excellent supporting force for deeper cultural exploration in the study of literary texts. Literature can also provide insight to students about various cultures, characters in stories, and their customs. This allows students to examine their own culture and reinterpret work based on this new information (Armstrong, 2015).

According to Bennett learning a language without studying culture makes people stupid who speak the language well but need help understanding the social or philosophical context of the language. It does not matter how proficient one is at any foreign language skill or how perfectly one speaks that language; it will still be difficult to communicate or negotiate with a native speaker of the language

because he or she does not know the culture of the language he is speaking. In other words, the goal of complete language acquisition is not only mastery of language skills, patterns, and rules but also the target culture (Belli, 2018)

Strengthening cultural awareness is one of the essential roles of using literature in teaching English. This is because literature can help students understand the conditions of the world around them. They will explore human social conditions through literary works and analyze how and why humans think (Chandran & Raj, 2016).

The above description is also reinforced by McKay (1982) statement, which explains that literary works have several benefits for students studying English as a second language. The first benefit is that literary works can help develop linguistic knowledge. Another benefit is that as long as students enjoy reading literary works, it is likely that their motivation to continue interacting with literary works will increase it has an impact on students' reading abilities. The last benefit is that literature can increase students' understanding of foreign cultures and stimulate their imaginative abilities.

From the anthropologist's point of view, culture is defined as how people live. In addition to anthropologists, linguists also define cultural meaning. Kuo & Lai (2006) defines culture as ideas, habits, skills, arts, and a tool or symbol of a particular group of people over a certain period. Language and culture both have complex relationships with each other. This can be seen from the explanation of Rabiah (2018), who states that culture exists in language, and vice versa language exists, even full of culture. Similarly, Yeganeh & Raesi (2015) considers language the most advanced element of culture.

In addition to the relationship between culture and language, they have a complex fabric so that the two can only be separated without losing the importance of both language and culture. Thus, language and culture cannot be separated (Belli, 2018). The four language skills, which are reading, writing, listening, and speaking, are the main essence of language classes. However, students must master other familiar elements, such as peer backgrounds and values. Mastering all of that requires pragmatic skills to be in cultural interaction.

According to Yurtsever & Özel (2021), culture can be considered the fifth skill of the language class that reminds itself through interactions that can be distracting even for proficient speakers. Therefore, teaching culture in language classes can be very beneficial for learners. Cultural teaching introduces a lifestyle in places where students use the target language. Knowledge of the target language culture can help students feel comfortable in authentic situations where students plunge directly into the world of the target language. Integrating cultural knowledge with language skills can help learners have better interactions. So, adapting the culture to the target language is very important for students. If the students experience culture shock, it should be considered a positive aspect of increasing cultural awareness (Yurtsever & Özel, 2021).

Language and literature have quite strong similarities. If the purpose of studying language is for communication, and so is literature, which is for communication, the two cannot be separated. The use of literature in teaching English has several purposes (Keshavarzi, 2012); they are:

1. to broaden students' horizons by providing them with knowledge of classical literature.
2. to increase students' general cultural awareness.
3. to stimulate students' creative and literary imagination and to develop their literary appreciation.
4. to introduce students to British and American literature as an educational experience; and
5. to increase students' knowledge of the world at large.

Many studies were conducted regarding the importance of literary text in building and raising the cultural awareness (Belli, 2018; Kuo & Lai, 2006; Moecharam & KartikaSari, 2014; Wąsikiewicz-Firlej, 2012a; Yurtsever & Özel, 2021).

The inclusion of literary texts in language learning and intercultural education relates to the fact that literary works can provide readers with opportunities to observe the world from various perspectives and appreciate the diversity of individual perceptions. The strength of a literary work lies in its ability to engage the reader on both a profound cognitive and emotional level. The role and influence of the protagonist in a literary work may not only amaze and captivate the reader but may also transfer them to a different reality, regardless of their own differences or limitations (Wąsikiewicz-Firlej, 2012a)

Literature is a valuable source of cultural knowledge because it provides a personal interpretation of life and values as experienced by the author (Hanauer, 2001). In doing so, the language teacher will play a role in providing selected texts that show multiple individual perspectives and make the learner aware that each voice is only one. (Rabiah, 2018). This approach will lead students to understand culture's actual meaning more deeply. In addition, it will help learners understand certain aspects of the target culture and, on the other hand, prevent them from oversimplifying meanings and stereotyping. So, it can be concluded that literary texts used for cultural education should not be considered cultural meanings in the outline. They are better-considered springboards for critical discussion leading to an in-depth understanding of selected aspects of culture from an individual's perspective (Wąsikiewicz-Firlej, 2012b).

Hanauer (2001) has developed a systematic method of reading literary texts focusing on cultural understanding for cultural education, which aims to increase awareness of the native and target cultures of students. The primary role in this method is still played by readers who will interpret the text subjectively from the perspective of their own culture and personal experience. He proposes that teachers deal with such interpretations by preparing interpretations of experts who are native speakers of the target language and culture (Wąsikiewicz-Firlej, 2012a)

Unfortunately, of the many functions and roles of literature in learning English, only some teachers are aware of these, so the application of literature in learning English contains few of the fundamental functions and roles of the literature itself. This study investigates students' cultural awareness through reading English literary texts.

METHODS

This study tries to describe one of the roles or functions of using literary works in learning English, namely as a strengthening of cultural awareness in students. To achieve this goal, this study uses a qualitative descriptive research approach by collecting information about the urgency of cultural awareness in students and the role of literature in realizing one of these functions. Data were collected from various literature with the same object and research topic.

The context of this research is focused on something other than any particular level of education or on teaching English as a foreign or second language. This research is general and serves as a global picture of the use of literature in English language learning to strengthen cultural awareness in students.

This study also includes the results of observations made by the author to one of the English subject teachers at a junior high school in Malang regarding the learning system using literary works that the teacher applied in class. Data were also collected from interviews with 10 secondary school students in Malang. The interview was also conducted with English teachers related to teachers' methods in promoting cultural awareness when teaching English in their class.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Students' cultural awareness

In this research, students and teachers agreed that culture is essential in English Language Teaching. One of the teachers said that culture needs to be taught in learning English so that language is not misused. She expressed that if the students fail to understand the story aspect of the culture of the text, they will be worried that students will misuse the language since they do not know other cultures. It is supported by Bates & Bates (2015), claiming that it is only possible to present culture in an academic setting with its cultural background and features.

Based on the observation in the English subject class and interview conducted by the researcher, it is revealed that in building cultural awareness through the literature, the teacher asked the students who were divided into groups to read an English short story prepared by themselves from home.

They were asked to discuss and interpret the text according to their own groups. One by one, each group had to present their interpretation of the discussed literary text. Then, they were instructed to respond to other groups' presentations by writing notes. It helps students to record their understanding of the text. The students write their own perspective of the text and then combine it with the group

member's points of view. Since the text is based on their own choice, it helps them understand better because they can relate to the story, they are interested in. The interview answers from the students show that students especially could relate to the story plot and characters.

The discussion of the group encourages the students to express their views of the story topic, particularly with the theme of local culture. The students were enthusiastic when they got to relate the story to their background culture or where they come from. This enables students to connect with their cultural background and experience and better discover the literary text's meaning. It is in line with Frank (2013) that claims group discussion in the classroom can foster an atmosphere that encourages EFL students to compare their own culture by using their cultural expectations and making connections across cultures while studying English. Related to the discussion of the group, most of the students said that the group discussion pushed them to speak more actively, especially when the literary text was of their own choice. Thus, they could relate to it better and make it easier for them to share their view of the story. Hence, making it a good English environment.

The observation and interview result shows that the group discussion and the sharing among other groups gave students a new perspective on the distinguished cultures and values. They said that they could understand the different cultures through the different traits of the characters. Besides, through the identity of characters and plot of the story, students described that they obtained knowledge on how society works. Students show their cultural awareness when they come across a culture similar to their own background culture (where they come from). Thus, making the students know the differences around their society.

The strategy of teachers in building the cultural awareness

To gain cultural awareness among the students, the teacher used some strategies. It is revealed that the strategy used has similarities with the strategy proposed by Hanauer (2001) to strengthen cultural awareness in students through the literary text. The teacher at the school first asked the students to read English books they brought from home. Afterward, the teacher will ask students to explain their interpretation of the work they read in front of the class.

However, it is unfortunate that the teacher only focuses on discussing local culture rather than the target or inter-cultures. The teacher and the students also did the interpretation process without using other means. So, if it is related to the strategy proposed by (Hanauer (2001), there is a follow-up strategy that was not implemented, such as presenting the original interpretation from the expert from the native language.

Raising the issue of intercultural awareness

In the previous discussion, it is stated that cultural awareness exists in the EFL classroom. Students could especially understand the story related to their own culture. However, based on the interview with teachers and students, there were some challenges in understanding the stories containing intercultural backgrounds/ the target culture (other country's culture). The teacher admitted that it is more difficult for students with different backgrounds to relate to or apply the practice from different cultures.

From the practice in the class, teachers showed that they mostly used the literary text provided already in the English textbook and conducted the group discussion to talk about the issue in the text. However, it was rarely shown that teachers taught or provided the target culture knowledge. Thus, the students needed an understanding of English culture. Therefore they do not understand English-speaking culture and therefore do not have good flexibility to use the English language skills they learn from the texts they read.

Students often need clarification and turn to local culture to overcome non-Indonesian culture, which often creates obstacles or even failures in intercultural communication. The teacher admits that there still needs to be more representation of the target and international cultures.

Teachers primarily relied on textbooks. The discussion about cultural goals and material models still needs to be included. Overall, the results show that teachers were already aware of cultural language issues but needed help to plan and construct good lesson plans, especially in intercultural awareness.

CONCLUSION

From all the explanations described, it can be concluded that language is closely related to culture. In addition, knowledge of the culture contained in the target language can help students feel more comfortable when they are faced with authentic situations where students will interact directly and be in the target language environment. Then, the use of literature as a tool to strengthen students' cultural awareness has been listed as one of the roles of literature in language learning.

This paper reveals that cultural awareness can be conveyed by analyzing the text and characters of literary text through meaning construction, interpretation, and discussion about identity and culture.

However, it also revealed that cultural awareness in the target and international culture representation still needed to be improved. Therefore, teachers are suggested to improve the teaching quality in culture using various sources of literary text materials and more exposure and discussion on intercultural topics.

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