

The Representation of Culture in English Reading Passages of Senior High School National Examination in Indonesia

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Abstract

Culture has become one of the concerned issues in the field of language testing and evaluation. Therefore, this paper attempts to identify different cultures contained on test items, particularly whether the Indonesian culture is sufficiently represented. Qualitative method using a content analysis design is employed in the paper and the materials of the English national exam of the past three academic years are used as the data source. The rubrics of cultural types (source culture, target culture, and international culture) developed by Cortazzi and Jin (1999) are used to analyze the data. The findings reveal that the Indonesian cultures as the source culture are far less exposed compared to the target cultures, at 17 % and 46% respectively. Quite similar to the representation of the source cultures, the international cultures stand as the second highest percentage, at 20%. Thus, an imbalanced proportion of cultural representation in the test items is clearly observed, which implies the urgent need to establish a policy requiring the development of proportional cultural representation.

Keywords: *cultural content, target culture, source culture, international culture, cultural criteria, cultural element, reading passage, national examination*

1 INTRODUCTION

In line with standards-based education which strongly supports accountability system, examinations at the national level have been widely used to measure student achievement. This assessment has been extensively argued by experts across the world to serve a lot of purposes such as monitoring educational progress of school children and school system (Fulcher & Davidson, 2007; Muskin, 2015), enhancing teaching and learning process (Arifin, 2012), and improving intelligibility, efficiency and effectiveness in making decisions about people and students (Adow, Alio, & Thinguri, 2015). In other words, assessment can provide crucial feedbacks for

government, schools, teachers as well as students in order to improve the quality of student outcome as the ultimate goal of education.

In Indonesia, as the context of the study, not all subjects are tested at the national level due to the argument that schools should be granted freedom to evaluate their students (Nelson, 2010). The national exam is conducted in the end year of each school level and the subjects tested vary slightly across different level of school. English, which is the focus of this study, is one of the subjects tested in both junior and senior high schools. Many considerations should, of course, be taken into

account in the design and construction of this standardized test because this test will influence students' success in their studies, one of which is culture. This is crucial because culture is an inseparable part of second/foreign language teaching and learning which remains to be a hotly debated issue (Faris, 2015; Howatt & Widdowson, 2004; Kramsch, 2013). The importance of culture to a lot of extents refers to the components of second/foreign language teaching including communicative and cultural competences (Dema & Moeller, 2012).

Therefore, cultural materials have been inserted in both teaching and testing materials, which elements include products, practices, persons, and perspectives (Yuen, 2011). The question is what culture should be taught and at the same time assessed. Prior to the emergence of communicative competence, the concept of native speaker competence has been widely used in the teaching and learning process (Chinh, 2013). However, in line with the development of English as an international language (EIL), the native speaker norm is considered inappropriate with the English use in multilingual and multicultural context (Kramsch, 1999). In this case, the integration of other cultures in English texts is possible because one of the criteria indicating English to be an international language is that it enables other cultures to be conveyed in this language (McKay, 2003). Current ELT is therefore expected to train learners to use the language as a means of communication or interaction among many other languages and cultures (Soler & Jorda, 2007).

In this context, it is therefore essential to examine the cultural content to avoid cultural bias, which has been a frequent problem in ELT. Some studies have been conducted especially dealing with cultural bias in ELT

textbooks (e.g. Kruse, 2016; Rashidi & Meihami, 2016), which findings reveal that inclusion of the target culture in textbooks is prominent. However, with respect to assessment, which is the focus of this study, not many studies have been conducted in spite of the importance of examination as a method to evaluate the effectiveness of a school system and as a way to show school accountability. Thus, it is crucial to analyse various cultures portrayed in the national examination because an unbalanced proportion of cultural contents can lead to serious problems due to unfamiliarity issues.

According to Cortazzi and Jin (1999), there are four types of cultural materials in English teaching, namely Source Culture, Target Culture, International Culture and Cultural Free or Culture Neutral. The source culture refers to the culture of teachers and learners, which in the paper is the Indonesian culture. The target culture concerns the cultures belonging to English speaking countries. International culture is related to cultures that do not belong to the source culture nor the target culture. Culture neutral contents are those that do not refer to any cultures such as a scientific explanation. In this study, the above mentioned four categories of cultures will be used as the framework in analyzing various cultures portrayed in the materials of the national exam.

In the context of assessment in Indonesia, especially with regards to English in senior high school (aged 15/16 – 17/18 years old), as stipulated in the Regulation of the Ministry of National Education No. 23/2006, the standard of competencies of senior-high-school students are divided into 4, following the four language skills. Due to the constraints in resources and geographical consideration, however, the English test for the national examination mainly

focuses on listening and reading skills, while the other two skills are assessed at school level. The focus of this paper is on reading since there are a lot more items on reading compared to listening.

In short, referring to the importance of the national examination and culture in language testing and assessment, this paper is intended to investigate the cultural content of the English passages of the national examination for senior high school level. The findings of this study are expected to provide fundamental guidance for policy makers to take better decisions concerning the inclusion of various cultures, especially the source culture in the test

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is a descriptive qualitative research attempting to investigate materials (Fraenkel, Wallen, & Hyun, 2012) contained in the English national examination in senior high school level. The documents from English National Examination in 2014/2015, 2015/2016, and 2016/2017 were used as the sample. The English test consists of 50 multiple-choice items: 15 listening comprehension items (understanding dialogues, giving responses, and understanding monologues) and 35 reading comprehension items (understanding written dialogues, advertisement, and reading passages) (Standar Nasional Pendidikan, 2016).

As has been mentioned, the study focuses on reading materials items since there are more reading items compared to listening, which are the only two skills assessed. This study involves selecting text, determining the unit to be coded, developing content categories, and analysing data. Hence, the method used is categorized into content analysis. The data will

be categorized based on the types of culture in language materials using the framework of Cortazzi & Jin (1999), in which a checklist worksheet is employed to collect the data regarding the cultural content included in the reading passages of the tests. The findings of this research are then analysed and discussed qualitatively.

3 FINDING AND DISCUSSION

Figure 1 describes the four types of cultural materials developed by Cortazzi and Jin (1999), which clearly shows an unbalanced spreading of materials. Compared to other types of cultures, the target culture is still dominating the item, accounted to 46% or 19 of 41 times. In other words, American, British, Australian and New Zealand cultures are prominent. Most of the cultural elements are in the form of advertisement, movie description, and stories/tales.

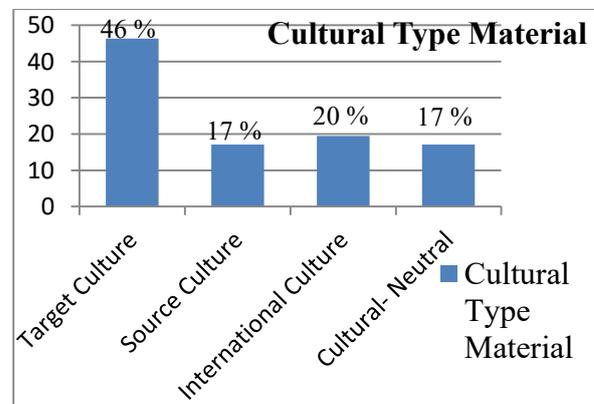


Figure 1. Cultural Type Material in English National Examination in the latest 3 Academic Years

From Figure 1, it also known that the Indonesian culture as the source culture, together with cultural neutral materials are the lowest and have exactly the same percentage,

only 17% or seven out of 41 reading passages. Indonesian culture is frequently portrayed through products and practices for example texts about Arts and Crafts (Batik, Rattan, and Bamboo in passage 5 of academic year 2014/2015). Quite similar to these figures, international culture has 1 more appearance than both Indonesian culture and cultural neutral materials at 20% (eight reading texts).

In today's applied linguist point of view, where the ultimate goal of language teaching is the student's intelligibility in using the language (Pollitt, Marriott, & Ahmed, 2000), this dominant exposure of the target culture may bring no benefit to language learning. Moreover, for Indonesian students, the purpose of English teaching, as mentioned in the decree of ministry of education (*Keputusan Menteri Pendidikan Dan Kebudayaan, No. 096/1967*), is to equip students with English proficiency to master the skills of reading, listening, writing, and speaking with the orientation of character building. This means that English teaching, including its assessment, should support the learner's own culture to establish their identity as Indonesian.

Furthermore, excessive exposure to the target culture in language testing will affect students' outcomes in doing the exam. For instance, Sabatin (2012) states that the domination of target culture will probably not only affect test validity, but also students' performance in a test due to the lack of familiarity. In addition, Sosa (2012) also mentions that a test with many cultural explanations is not fair because such test may throw off certain students. The problem is because readers do not passively receive texts; they read them based on their own class, race, gender, and cultural experiences (Tomlinson, 2010).

However, the findings of this study are different from a study conducted on the representation of Indonesian cultures in English textbooks. While this study reveals the limited percentage of Indonesian culture (17%) in the passages of the national examination, another research shows that in Indonesian English textbook (Grow with English 1, 2 and 3; Erlangga published English materials book), the source culture has been found to be dominant (54,83% from 93 passages in three textbooks analysed) (Hermawan & Noerkhasanah., 2012). If the exposure of the source culture in the English textbook used for English teaching is prominent, the test items should also contain the same thing to achieve appropriate assessment.

Moreover, the source culture is crucial because its purpose is to gain the knowledge of how to know/introduce learners' identity through English. It is important to remember that the teaching of English, including its evaluation, should encourage the learners to express their own identity/culture (Matsuda, 2003). The methodology suggested by Byram (1989, p. 6) is also in line with the definition of language learning, where source culture is important. It is anchored in three fundamental learning processes: "(1) the learners' exploration of their own culture; 2) the discovery of the relationship between language and culture, and 3) the learning of the heuristics for analysing and comparing cultures". This implies that providing opportunities for interaction is necessary so that members of the host culture can impart their own epistemology and their own way of seeing things.

Furthermore, the findings of the research also inform that international culture and cultural neutral materials in reading passages are also not frequently covered (20% and 17%

respectively). Materials for international culture are needed to improve and promote the learners' cultural awareness of other countries. As English is internationally used, materials in the English passage should vary in range of the themes and the topics; it also should touch the countries in international world. Tomlinson (2005) argues that standard native-varieties of English can no longer be considered as the only correct varieties and should no longer be upheld as models for learners to emulate.

4. CONCLUSION

This paper is intended to analyse four different types of cultures in the reading passages of the English test of the national examination, in which the materials used in the year 2014/2015, 2015/2016, and 2016/2017 were used as the sample. Using content analysis, the findings reveal the dominance of the target culture, accounted for 46%. The international culture stands in the second position, yet far behind the target culture, at 20%. Sadly, the Indonesian culture as the source of culture is represented the least, at 17%. Thus, an imbalanced proportion of cultural representation in the test items is clearly observed. These findings imply the urgent need to establish a policy requiring the development of proportional cultural representation.

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