

The Influence of Balinese Culture on EFL University Students Speaking Ability

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Abstract

The study aimed at finding out the influence of the Balinese culture to the speaking ability of Diploma 3 English Department students. The study was also to find out the efforts of the teachers in overcoming the influence of the culture. The research was conducted at Diploma 3 English Department of Undiksha and the subjects of the research were the students of semester III, year of enrolment 2006/2007. The result of the study shows that the Balinese culture influenced the speaking abilities of the students. The influences are as follows: a) being silent was a way to control situation and an effort to maintain harmony, b) saving face, c) children's opinion was not 'important', d) asking personal questions were the way to do small talk, and e) smiling is a positive way to express oneself. While the teachers try to overcome the influence of the culture through conducting good classroom management, choosing interesting topics, which are also familiar to the students, giving motivation, giving assignments to improve their knowledge, and promoting good relationships between teachers and students.

Key words: Balinese Culture, Speaking

1. INTRODUCTION

In this globalization era, the ability to speak foreign languages, especially English, is very important. Harmer (2001) states that, "Although English is not the language with the largest number of native or 'first' language speakers; it has become a *lingua franca*." English is needed not only in fulfilling criteria to get a job, but nowadays, it is also used in many aspects of life; politics, social, economy, and information technology, just to mention a few. Additionally, globalization allows people from different countries having different cultures to interact. In this case, English is the main language used in communication.

To be able to communicate, good English skill is needed. This skill includes the skill of listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Davies and Pearse (2000) state that, “Developing the ability to really communicate in English is the main goal of an English language course.” In other words, the aim of English language learning is to develop the ability to communicate in that language. The Diploma 3 English Department, is one of the departments in Ganesha University of Education (UNDIKSHA) that includes English language skill as a basic skill course the students have to master. One of the courses that offers the above referred language skill is speaking course, which instructs speaking skill in particular.

In a speaking class, students are expected to participate actively. The more students participate, the better their speaking ability will be. However, many educators regretted the fact that speaking classes are very quiet. Students do only speak when they are asked by the lecturers. Besides, only few of them are willing to answer the questions voluntarily without being asked to. More students have to speak when they are finally pointed by the lecturers to answer. Being forced in that way, students answer the questions doubtfully and in a muffled voice, almost inaudible by other students. There is only one interaction pattern, i. e. from the lecturers to the students. If the students are invited to draw questions and express their ideas, most of them will bow their heads and say nothing.

Study entitled *Strategy Preferences among Balinese High School Students in Learning to Speak English* regarding the way learners learn to speak in English, having students of Senior High School as subjects, has been conducted by Artini (2005). From the observation in that study, it is revealed that in English learning, the chance to speak is reigned by achieving students, of who are of a small proportion in that class. Other learners do not have enough confidence to speak and this is related to the learning experience which does not emphasize on the speaking ability. Instead of motivating other learners to speak, teachers point only to students who already have ability to speak. Thus, other learners are neglected. The above study is a very valuable source of information for this study as learners of Senior High School students are future inputs of universities in Bali, one of which is Undiksha Singaraja.

Language is commonly used as a media of speaking. Yet, if English language learners do not have the courage to speak, they will not be able to communicate well in that language. Bygate (1987) stated that one of the main problems in teaching foreign languages is to prepare

learners to be able to use those languages. Additionally, he claimed that, in fact, learners are less able to express their thoughts and ideas.

Kim (2007) in his paper “*Teaching International Students across the Curriculum: Supporting Academic Listening/Speaking*” states that several factors influencing learners’ ability of speaking English as a foreign language are linguistic ability, cultural influence, and educational background. Kim further explains that culture affects learners’ speaking participation in class.

Balinese community is a group of people who have Balinese cultural background. Dayaksini and Yuniardi (2004) claimed that culture is often related with race, nation, and ethnic. Balinese people behaviour is always said as the effect of Balinese culture. Every culture has character, behaviour, and values, which are notably different from those of other cultures. Jensen and Suryani (1996) stated that the character of Balinese people is a group or constellation of characters represented by most of Balinese people. They also identified characters of Balinese people from emotional viewpoint, that is Balinese people express their emotion non-verbally. Emotion is controlled and is expressed passively. Verbal emotional expression is not the way that Balinese people prefer. A firm control upon emotion is assumed to be a wise attitude for Balinese. This includes, involving control upon emotions and giving perspective of tolerance in daily life. Other character of Balinese people is the tendency to accept any command from their leaders, teachers, or authorities, without questions (Jensen and Suryani, 1996).

The authors view several reasons underlying to why learners of foreign languages, especially English, are less able or do not have any self-esteem to talk in English. The first reason is that there is culture influencing the way learners learn a language. Learners who are totally Balinese, brought up in Balinese cultural atmosphere, are actually taught to respect their parents, teachers, and their elders who have higher social status. This triggers the situation that does not give juniors chance to speak and communicate things in their mind freely. Secondly, learners are taught to listen, obey what their parents or elders say to them and do what they are suggested and are asked to. As the result, learners are afraid of taking any initiative. In relation to the above note, learners do not have enough self-esteem and courage to show their ability in expressing themselves in foreign language learning, especially English. It is, thus, understandable that they do feel hesitant and unsure that they can speak English well. Therefore,

English teachers find it difficult to get rid of that hesitation. This is the reason why speaking class becomes so silent.

Several years ago, there were so many studies discussing learners' (students of all levels of education) ability to speak in English as well as their participation in speaking class. Those studies are mostly classroom-based action research which aims at implementing techniques of teaching as solutions towards the problems. Yet, there has been no research that scrutinizes cultural influence on learners' speaking ability in learning English. Regarding this situation, the authors believe that this research is worth conducting. The influence of Balinese culture on the students' ability in speaking English is a very interesting topic to investigate. This study examines the influence of Balinese culture on the ability in speaking English of the students of Diploma 3 English Department and teachers' attempts to overcome problems arising from that cultural influence. This study is hoped to be of a useful guidance for the lecturers as well as the learners about the influence of Balinese culture on speaking ability in speaking class. The lecturers, in particular, are expected to pore over the cultural influence so that they can contribute ideas in speaking class management.

2. METHOD

This study used a framework of descriptive qualitative research. This study was intended to figure out aspects of Balinese culture that influence learners' speaking ability in speaking class, how that culture influences, and what attempts can be made to overcome that cultural influence in learners' ability in speaking.

The research was conducted in Diploma 3 English Department, UNDIKSHA, Singaraja, in speaking class. The subjects of this research were students of semester 3 (three) year of enrollment 2006/2007 and lecturers handling speaking class. Students who became the informers in this study were those Balinese, living in Bali, and living with Balinese families.

Based on the types of the data gathered, the techniques of collecting data were participative observation, interview, and document writing. While, the observed aspects were 1) the location in which the class took place, 2) the students involved in that class (expressions, interaction, attitudes in class), and 3) the lecturers (the way how they managed speaking class, interaction among the lecturers and the students). The used interview technique was in-depth

interview. The authors made guidance for what were going to be asked during the interview, which covers points of questions. Those points of questions were developed overtly according to the informers' characteristics, so that the interview could be conducted flexibly. The result of the interview were, then, recorded and written manually. Documentation technique was carried out through collecting data from the existing documents, i. e. syllabus of speaking course of Diploma 3 English Department, UNDIKSHA, Singaraja, and *DPNA* (transcripts) of speaking course.

The data were analyzed qualitatively. Stages in data analysis were as follows: data presentation, data reduction, and conclusion drawing. Data validity was examined with triangulation technique—that is comparing data obtained from observation through interview and comparing the result of the interview with the related documents (Moleong, 1998).

3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 CULTURAL INFLUENCE ON SPEAKING ABILITY/ VERBAL COMMUNICATION

Every community has its own distinct ways to communicate either verbally or nonverbally. Every community also has its own cultural values. Balinese people, for instance, are a part of community having eastern culture (collectivistic). This study scrutinized and examined speaking ability in speaking class of Diploma 3 English Department. The findings of this study are as follows:

a. Being silent as a way to control situation and an effort to maintain harmony

In class, students prefer to be silent, for by being silent they can control the undergoing situation. When they are in class and the lecturer has not entered the class, the students feel free to talk and they tend to be 'noisy'. Nevertheless, as the lecturer enters the class, the class turns out to be very quiet and that almost all students murmur 'Ssstttt.....' When the lecturer arrives in class, the students will keep quiet, waiting for what their lecturer is going to do. When the lecturer greets them, "Good Morning", for example; they will respond that greeting. In case that the students feel they are to say something—for there are too many other students in the class—they prefer not to utter a word, they will not ask, they will just keep silent, or will just listen to the lecturer's explanation. Giles, Coupland, and Wiemann (in Dayaksini and Yuniardi, 2004) claim that in a collectivistic society, being silent is a way to control situation.

A student said that when she put up her hand and speak, her friends would say ‘*sok aeng*’ – a Balinese term for ‘being conceited’. Rather than being acknowledged as being conceited, or rather than having bad relation with her friends, she preferred not to speak at all. She confessed that it would be better if she learnt at home, and relied fully on written test of that course. In relation to her statement, Choi and Choi (in Dayaksini and Yuniardi, 2004) state that in a collectivistic society, that kind of preference of action is understood as an attempt to avoid conflict.

Being silent can also be seen in the way how students respond compliments. When they are praised, “*Your answer is just impressive!*” the commonly found respond is smile. They are happy to hear compliments, for sure. Yet, smiling and saying nothing in response to the compliments indicate that the one who praise can conclude the meaning of that smile. Hence, no further utterance is thought to be worth expressing.

Another situation where the students do not usually response the lecturer’s questions is when the lectures are about to end. Before leaving the class, it is often that the lecturer gives questions to the students like:

“Do you have any questions?”

“Is there anything you would like to know before we leave the class?”

“Do you understand what I have just explained?”

Those questions are expressed by the lecturers to give the students chance to ask things they do not understand before they dismiss the class. However, answer drawn from those questions is silence, more than half of the class bows their heads and/or look at other students. To the lecturer, ‘silence’ means that the class has understood the lecture. Moreover, the expression ‘silence is golden’ is still widely believed.

b. Saving face

From the information given by the students, it is said that it had been better to speak carefully so that it would not be faulty. When it is wrong, the speaker will be blushed in shame. Rather than being embarrassed, it is better not to speak at all, as is expressed by the following student:

‘Honestly, I often want to question things I don’t understand, or to express my understanding upon the topic discussed. I want to raise my hand and speak. But to my heart, I say, no...Not now. What if I am wrong? ’

One interesting thing is that face saving action or attempts to avoid getting embarrassed is committed by students who are active in class and by those who are already good at English. Those who are active are commonly students who voluntarily are willing to speak in a class discussion or presentation.

Students are afraid to be wrong for if they are so their friends would make fun of it. They feel ashamed when they become the centre of attention with wrong answers. In short, there are partly students who prefer to speak only when they are asked to and there are students who willingly speak (only if they think they have adequate English proficiency and they believe what they say is true).

c. Children’s opinion is not ‘important’

In Balinese families, patriarchalism rules the kinship system. In a patrilineal society there arises a stereotype that men are the heads of families and that men have the right to make decisions. So, father occupies a superior position when ideas are needed and decisions must be made. It influences the position of the children and the way they express themselves. The following testimonies (1), (2), (3), (4), (5), and (6) are extracted from interview with semester 3 (three) students.

(1) I’m rarely asked for an idea in my family. When there is a problem worth solving, I will not be asked for an opinion. I have to speak least in order not to speak wrongly. I am asked for an opinion only when there are things to buy; shoes or books, for instance.

One day, I gave an opinion to my family. At the time, I was not asked to give any, though. I just wanted to say what I thought. Then, I was blamed. Father felt insulted. Finally, I shut my mouth and went to my room to play guitar, instead.

(SA, semester 3, class B)

(2) When there come times for sort of ‘family meetings’, these occasions are related to religious ceremonies at most. I have neither given nor have I been

- asked for opinions. That's parents' business. When there are things to talk about, it is usually between father and uncles. We play no part.
(SR, semester 3, class C)
- (3) In my family, decisions are taken by my father. My parents have never asked me for an opinion. Opinions are from my father. I once gave an opinion about smoking, but then my father responded cynically. I prefer talking to my mother to talking to my father.
(AS, semester 3, class A)
- (4) When my parents ask me for ideas, it is usually related to things to buy, motorbikes, clothes, or shoes, to mention a few.
(AG, semester 3, class C)
- (5) I am free to say anything, but decisions are made by parents dominantly.
(AV, semester 3, class B)
- (6) At home, when I talk to my father, I shall think before saying something. I don't feel free to talk to him. I'd rather talk to mother. If I want to talk to my father, I usually consult my mother beforehand. In a family meeting, those who speak are old people; we, children aren't involved.
(AN, semester 3, class C)

In a speaking class, students admit they are reluctant to ask and offer questions. The following are statements (7), (8) and (9) made by the students:

- (7) To me, lecturers are just like my parents. Guess I have got to be humble to them for they are older than I am. I don't give any opinions at class very often, because the lecturers do not ask for students' opinion very often, either.
(SR, semester 3, class C)

(8) At class, I answer questions only if I am asked to by the lecturer. I have never given any ideas at class. I am rarely involved in a class discussion. I will be involved only if I am asked to. I feel afraid of the lecturer; I mean I feel humble to them. Lecturers are students' advisors.

(SA, semester 3, class B)

(9) I have never questioned any lecturer. I have ever answered their questions, though. I have never given any opinions even if I have ideas. I am just too afraid to speak them out.

(AR, semester 3, class A)

d. Asking personal questions are the way to do small talk

In a class that expects students' optimum speaking skill, students need to know ways to do small talk. In English as a foreign language, small talk plays an important role. The ability to do small talk often determines one's success in communication. When the students were asked about how to do small talk, all respondents claimed that when they were acquainted to somebody or when they were in a situation where small talk was a must, such common expressions they uttered as:

“What's your name?”

“What's your address?” or “Where are you from?”

“Where do you go to school?”

“Where are you going?”

“What are you doing here?”

“How many brothers and sisters do you have?”

“Where does your father work?”

When the researcher further questioned the informant students about what they talked next, they admitted that those questions above are all what they made use of. They said, “Yeah,

that's all!" or "Let me think of it" while trying to think of what other different things they said and were looking perplexed.

On the other hand, in English as a foreign language, the ability to do small talk is very important. Levine and Adelman (1982) in their book *Beyond Language: Intercultural Communication for English as a Second Language*, state that right after an acquaintance takes place, there comes a moment where only non-personal things can be talked about. Whereas questions directing to addressee's familiar data are considered to be impolite for they loom too personal data.

e. Smile is a positive way to express one's self

Another thing that the researchers investigate is that 'smile' is a positive way to express one's self. They smile when they are praised. That smile does indeed replace saying of thanks towards the compliment. Smile is also given when they pass by other people, especially older people. Smile is a kind of 'greeting'. When they pass by a lecturer, they smile while nodding their head or bowing. Nevertheless, in English language learning, those nonverbal expressions are supposed to be expressed verbally.

3.2. ATTEMPTS TO OVERCOME THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURE ON SPEAKING ABILITY IN SPEAKING CLASS

Davies and Pearse (2000; 2) state that the success of a lecturer and an institution where he or she teaches is different from one to another. Several influencing factors like lecturer's experience, training, and English proficiency level. Besides, other factors that count are the number of students in a class, number of learning hours per week, the method employed at class, and the learning materials. However, according to Davies and Pearse, a successful lecturer has the following criteria:

1. Have a practical command of English
2. Use English most of the time in every class, including beginners' class
3. Think mostly in terms of learners' practice, not teacher's explanation.
4. Find time for really communicative activities, not just practice of language forms
5. Focus their teaching on learners' needs, not just on 'finishing' the syllabus or course book.

Davies and Pearse further state that the ability to communicate is the main goal of learning English. English should be used in any real nuance of communication in class as much and often as possible.

Based on observations conducted in several speaking classes and interviews conducted with several speaking course lecturers, it is found out that attempts to overcome the influence of culture on speaking ability in speaking class are as follows:

a. Topic Choice

Topics chosen in class discussions are familiar topics, in that those topics are on the verge of students' lives or those which are of their taste. These kinds of topics will not burden them. Students are also given chances to choose their own topics for class discussions. At the beginning of the semester, at the first meeting of speaking course, speaking course lecturers ask students with the following questions;

“What would you like to do this semester?”

“Is there any topics or issue that you would like to discuss for the coming weeks?”

“Would such topics interest you?”

For students who want to discuss certain topics, they can let the class know at the beginning of the semester so that the lecturer can include them in the syllabus.

b. Classroom Management

One way of managing classroom—among other classroom management techniques—is by changing the class seating and by giving variation on learning techniques. Generally, when the students entered the class, seats are arranged in such a way that the seats are in parallel position. This will, unfortunately, create a strict atmosphere and will subsequently show that the lecturer is superior; while the students are inferior. In addition to that, in speaking class, that seating arrangement limits the contact among students. Levine and Adelman (1980) state that eye contact is very important for communication to be successful. Eye contact shows interest in other partners in that communication. Looking back at the seating arrangement matter, parallel patterning will only allow students from the second row up to the last row of seats to see the backs of their classmates. Consequently, they cannot face each other.

Based on the above considerations, the lecturers of speaking class have attempted to alter the students' parallel seating arrangement into such patterns as round, half a circle (forming a horseshoe), face-to-face, and in groups. Additionally, the lecturers of speaking class also vary teaching-learning techniques in order not to make the class boring. The class is allowed to be noisy. Even, one of the speaking class lecturers, having ST by name initial, every time ST handles speaking class, students are allowed to and even suggested to be 'noisy' in class to furnish the students' speaking skill in English. The 'noisier' the class, the better the students' speaking skill will be.

c. Everybody Learns from Mistakes

Up to now; when the students are asked to speak, most of them feel shy or reluctant. They are afraid what they say go wrong. In fact, one art worth noticing in learning to speak foreign languages is to learn from mistakes: either other people's mistakes or ours. If the students do not try, they will not know what their strengths and their weaknesses are. To overcome the problem above, the lecturers explain to the students that 'we all learn from mistakes' and that there is no punishment when any of them make a mistake during speaking. In case that the students still keep silent, they will be allured to respond to simple, understandable, and hooking questions.

d. Widen the Horizon through Reading

The fourth attempt made by the lecturers of speaking course is to add the students' knowledge. This is unquestionably important for knowing many topics enables students to keep carrying any conversations. Furthermore, reading many resources means that students widen their horizon—which subsequently means they improve their speaking skill. In Balinese culture, children are not yet accustomed to speaking. Traditionally, they know something because they were once told verbally. Moreover, books are still very limited in number. The situation gets worse for the prices of the books are often too expensive to afford by rural people.

Nowadays, by the rapid advancement of internet, the students can also see or search for many reading materials and articles available there. Only in several minutes, the students can get information from many different parts of the world. Therefore, the best way developed by the lecturer to improve the students' speaking ability is by asking them to find out information or articles via internet, of which they further discuss or present at class.

e. Lecturers' Affinity with the Students During Teaching

Based on the result drawn from the interview with the students, the authors find out that the students feel comfortable with lectures who understand their world. They expect the lecturers not to be very tense in teaching. The students disclosed that an edgy class atmosphere sweep away all their ideas that they do not know what to speak. Stepping from this fact, the lecturers of speaking class have been trying to create friendly ambience between the students and the lecturers. In the sense that the lecturers do not place themselves as superiors, rather they are more as motivators and facilitators.

4. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

From the finding and discussion of this research, it can be concluded that the implications of Balinese culture on speaking ability in speaking class of Diploma 3 English Department students are the following: a) being silent is an attempt to control and an effort to maintain harmony, b) face saving, c) children's opinion is not 'important', d) asking personal questions as a way to do small talk, e) smile is a positive expression of one's self. While what the lecturers have attempted to overcome those cultural implications are as follow: creating good and diverse classroom management which includes alluring and familiar topic choices, motivating students to speak, giving students assignments that enrich their knowledge as well as sustaining affinity between the students and the lecturers. In accordance to the findings of this research, the authors suggest that it is worth setting in the students' mind that there is no culture over other culture, but learning languages (especially English) needs knowledge about the culture where the target language is used. On the other hand, teachers and lecturers had better not easily get frustrated in handling a quiet speaking class. Students need time to accustom themselves to English learning and the lecturers are to be creative to improve their students' communicative ability both in and outside the class.

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