THE UTILIZATION OF CULTURALLY RELEVANT ENGLISH TEACHING MATERIAL TO HIGH SCHOOL STUDENTS IN PAPUA

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Abstract: *The paper presents research findings on research project exploring the effect of culturally familiar material on students' academic achievement. It provides some related findings to the study. The research questions are (1) Is there an effect of the culturally familiar material on students' reading comprehension; (2) Is there an effect of culturally familiar material on students' mastery of vocabulary? The study involved two experimental and two control groups of 80 West Papuan highlander students aged 13-14 from multi-ethnic backgrounds. They were fluent speakers of L1, were not very fluent in Indonesian, and were considered academically weak. Both cohorts were pre-tested using cultural versus conventional reading and vocabulary tests before treatment. 85 hours of classroom presentation was given using culturally familiar material versus conventional material, finally subjects were post-tested. Exploratory Data Analysis and Repeated Measure ANOVA were applied and revealed that subjects using culturally familiar material made a significant improvement in their academic achievement when contrasted with subjects who received conventional material.*

Key words: *cultural material (local material), conventional material (regular textbook), BI (Bahasa Indonesia), L1 (Mother tongue), L2 (language after L1)*

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INTRODUCTION

Teaching Culture has been an important aspect in English language teaching in EFL settings (Yembise 2005, Pattiwael 2005). The trend of the language teaching should be directed towards teaching about a country including its people as every language reflects the values, beliefs and assumptions of the culture it comes from (Stern 1983, Baker 2003). When contrasted to the old days, teaching literature was reflected in almost all the instructional materials such as poem, novels, drama which were aimed at valuing merely particular culture or society. In these days, culture is reflected through the instructional materials as English is increasingly employed as a global language or as an International Language which belongs to no one culture (McKay 2005).

There has been some crucial issues in Indonesian English text books. Yohana Susana Yembise (1994, 2007) in her studies indicated that a large number of teachers are textbook-oriented. It supports the idea that most EFL teachers centre their lessons on the textbooks. In other words, textbook dictates teachers to follow whatever instructions stated in the book which is based on students' environment. Unfortunately, most of the English textbooks in Papua reflect only the dominant cultural aspects in Indonesia. These types of texts are still being produced as commercial materials which are externally designed based on the author's cultural background. Marcellino (2008) affirms that most of the students' values, norms, and traditions are still directed towards the dominant cultures in Indonesia.

Moreover, EFL teachers up on the highlands of Papua reported their concerns on the existing curriculum and sought for a flexible curriculum and instructional materials, which would meet the needs and desires of the local people. Teaching reading comprehension is still a problem for students in remote areas. Yembise (1994:180) revealed through her study that "students are struggling to learn

phrases or words, such as by rote learning or sounding out words of Bahasa Indonesia", the language of instruction. Consequently, when learning English, students have even more difficulties learning the words, attempting to sound out the words without getting slightest knowledge of their meaning. Observations also indicated that students have problems understanding some words and phrases in textbooks due to abstract nouns: things that they've never seen and experienced in their daily reality. Those ongoing issues provide some insights into how materials can be best developed and exploited, based on contextually developed materials that could meet learners' needs. Based on the above problems, the researcher is interested in investigating the effect of the culturally relevant materials in increasing students' academic achievement in majoring English. There were two big questions raised in this study: 1) Is there an effect of the culturally familiar material on students' reading comprehension?; 2) Is there an effect of culturally familiar material on students' mastery of vocabulary? The purpose of the study is to explore the effect of culturally familiar material on students' academic achievement. This article presents the study; its supported research studies, findings with discussions and pedagogical implications to EFL classroom.

SUPPORTED RELATED RESEARCH

There has been great amounts of relevant research on the positive utilization of culturally relevant materials for EFL students. The study focuses on the content schemata, so the related research findings are obtained around the conceptual understanding of background knowledge on reading comprehension as a part of schematic theory. Firstly, Bosman (in Ramirez 1995) examined how prior knowledge and language proficiency of L1 and L2 affected comprehension of English text among Malaysian high school students. The study demonstrates language proficiency of L2 and

prior knowledge are powerful predictors of text comprehension. Other study from Edwads (cited in Yembise 2007) demonstrated that Black American children, who use Black self-instructional materials, perform significantly better on a standardized reading test, than control group children who used the conventional materials. The finding indicated that there was a statistically significant difference in reading achievement and reading attitudes in which he was in favor of children who had used culturally relevant materials. His contribution demonstrated that culturally familiar materials have a powerful impact on students' academic achievement.

The above finding is also supported by a study conducted by Lalas (1982 cited in Yembise 2007) who examined the effect of cultural schemata of the secondary and elementary school bilingual Filipinos in the United States in Pacific Northwest on ESL reading. Students were asked to read aloud a text which described an old man with his son and a donkey. The finding showed that there are differences in perceptions; a farmer (a man) and his life (home, animals, crops), according to secondary school students perception was based on Filipino cultural schemata (rice, nipa, huts, carabao), whereas elementary school students' perception was on the USA background knowledge (wheat, corn, cabin or barn, horses and cows). The finding was that secondary school students still reflected their cultural schemata of their own Filipino farming, while elementary students absorbed quickly with the new culture.

Moreover, research on cross-cultural and cross-linguistical factors by Pritchard in Perez (1998) explored the effect of cultural schemata on 11th-grade US and Palau students reading processing strategies, as they read culturally familiar and unfamiliar passages in their own language. The study found differences related to cultural familiarity in the rate and sequence of connections; students could recall more ideas with fewer distortions for the culturally familiar passages. Pritchard concluded that "cultural schemata appear to

influence readers' processing strategies and the level of comprehension and readers must be able to relate materials to their own knowledge" (Perez 1998:37). The finding supports the study that a cultural schemata is an essential element in reading comprehension. Yembise (1994) provides evidence that the utilization of the culturally appropriate material in teaching language is vital in EFL setting. Luciana also suggests that the use of the local culture should be on cultural basis in English language teaching (Luciana 2005). She maintains further that students' familiarity with the content has a significant impact on their reading comprehension.

RESEARCH SETTING AND SUBJECTS

The classroom experimentation was conducted at SLTP YPPGI. SLTP (Sekolah Lanjutan Tingkat Pertama) is Junior High School students aged 13-15. YPPGI (Yayasan Perhimpunan Persekutuan Gereja di Indonesia) is a private association of Indonesian churches sponsoring the school with local government subsidies. The school was selected as it had a representative sample of highlander students who come from 8 ethnic highlander backgrounds in Mimika district, Papua, Indonesia. The research was carried out in New Mimika District, about 5 km away from the town of Timika. The researcher focused her project in this town due to the following considerations that travelling around the highlands would be time consuming, lacking financial support, concerns for safety due to the political instability in Papua as a potential area of conflict in Indonesia. Thus, out of 134 six-ethnic highlander students aged 13-15, 80 were randomly selected as research subjects based on the Annual Potential Test for English administered by the Department of Education from Jakarta and the Final English Exam Scores. These students were making poor academic progress (scored below 50). Subjects selected were similar in terms of age, sex distribution, socio-economic and cultural background.

RESEARCH METHODS, PROCEDURES, VARIABLES AND MEANS TO CONTROL EXTRANEOUS VARIABLES

The researcher used a quantitative method in her study to answer two research questions. The design aims at investigating whether or not there is an effect of the use of the culturally familiar materials on students' academic achievement. Firstly, the subjects were selected based on their scores as mentioned above, then they randomly assigned to two experimental groups (N=40); each group comprising N= 20 subjects, and two control groups (N=40); each group comprising N= 20. The research subjects were students of junior high school aged 13-15. They were Papuan highlander students from 8 multi- ethnic/linguistic backgrounds, were all fluent speakers of L1, were not very fluent in BI, and were all considered academically weak.

Each group was pre-tested using integrated reading and vocabulary test prior to treatment. Then, 85 hours of classroom presentation was given, subjects in experimental group were taught using the culturally familiar material while subjects in control group were taught using the conventional material. Finally, the subjects in experimental and control groups were post-tested using the same reading and vocabulary test administered in pretest. With regard to variables, the research explores the relationship between one variable (the instructional material) as independent variable, and the effect it has on the other variable (the test score) as dependent variable. The researcher applied Exploratory Data Analysis (EDA) and Repeated Measures ANOVA to explore the significant difference between independent variable (the instructional materials) and dependent variables (the tests). Besides, the researcher needs to control variables to maintain internal validity, thus, a control for curriculum was imposed by providing both groups with the same objectives, materials, tasks, and learning activities including similar tests (pretest and post-test). Two local native teachers, with over 5 year-

teaching experiences who have similar university qualifications, were actively involved in the classroom experimentation. Both teachers had experiences exercising different teaching methods and techniques for more than five years. Both teachers were directed towards applying Johnson (1992) idea that teachers' effects can be controlled by having teachers alternate weekly between the experimental and the control groups for the one-hour session. Attendance list and lesson plan were used, weekly meeting was conducted to monitor the activity.

PRESENTATION OF RESULTS

There are two major findings to answer two research questions obtained from the first statistical analyses of the study. Firstly, EDA (Exploratory Data Analysis) shows evidence of the subjects using the cultural material scored significantly higher than the subjects using the conventional material. The test scores presented in this analysis were the Pre Test and Post Test scores obtained from the Integrated Reading Test (IR) and the Vocabulary Test (Voc) from the classroom experimentation. Firstly, the findings from EDA indicates that the experimental groups comprising classes 1 and 2 scored higher for IR than the control groups comprising classes 3 and 4. The median scores for IR Pre test for all classes (1, 2, 3, and 4) were roughly similar (32) which answered the question raised earlier. This means all the scores obtained from IR Pre test for all the classes were normally distributed prior to the treatment.

After treatment, the median scores for IR Post test seemed to vary among the classes, all of which show significant improvement (60,52). Classes 1 and 2 which received the cultural materials, the improvement was from median 32 to about 60, an increase of 28. On the other hand, classes 3 and 4 which received the conventional material, the improvement was from median 32 to about 52, an

increase of 20. Secondly, the finding from EDA again reveals that the experimental groups (classes 1 and 2) had made a significant improvement for Voc when contrasted with the control groups (classes 3 and 4). Similar to IR, all the scores of Pre test Voc for all the classes were normally distributed at median 32, prior to the treatment which was effective for the analysis. For Voc Post test, there was a significant increase varied among classes which was at median 69 (classes 1 and 2) and 53 (classes 3 and 4). For classes 1 and 2 which received cultural materials, the improvement was significantly higher, from median 32 to about 69, an increase of 37. In contrast, classes 3 and 4 which received the conventional material, the improvement was from median 32 to about 53, an increase of 21. Finally, after comparing the Integrated Reading (IR) improvement to Vocabulary (Voc) improvement, the vocabulary improved more significantly than the Integrated Reading. However, are all of these significant differences?

Secondly, Repeated Measures ANOVA helps to answer the above question. Correct test scores were submitted to Repeated Measure ANOVA. The ANOVA Within-subjects contrasts on the Test Scores revealed a significant main effect on Time (Pre versus Post), $F(1,78) = 936.1$, $p < .001$. The mean scores of Post were significantly higher than Pre, which was the expected teaching effect of classroom presentation. Between-subjects Effects on the Test Scores indicated a significant effect on Treatment (Conventional versus Cultural), $F(1,78) = 14.442$, $p < .001$. The mean test scores for cultural type of material were greater than the mean test scores for conventional type of material. Within-subjects contrasts, there was a small significant difference between two tests: IR versus Voc, $F(1,78) = 3.945$, $p = .051$ as the p value was very close to 0.05. This indicates that the mean scores for Voc were higher than the mean scores for IR.

ANOVA Within-subjects contrasts on the Test Scores revealed that there was a non-significant interaction between Test Type (IR versus Voc) and Treatment/Material Type (Conventional versus Cultural), $F(1.78) = 2.478$, $p = 0.12$ which showed all subjects improved their scores. This suggests that there was no difference between the average scores for the two test types with respect to the material type.

There was a significant 2 way interaction within subjects contrasts between Time (Pre versus Post) and Treatment or Material Type (Conventional versus Cultural), $F(1,78 = 45.95$, $p < .001$. Figure below revealed that the mean scores for Conventional and Cultural were about the same at Pre (32). However, at Post, the mean test scores for Cultural was higher (65) than Conventional (53) indicating an improvement of about 12 marks due to the use of the cultural material. There was also a significant two way-interaction between Test Type (IR versus Voc) and Time (Pre versus Post), $F(1,78) = 11.25$, $p = .008$ within subjects contrasts. It revealed that the mean scores for Voc and IR at Pre are at similar mean (32).

At Post, the mean test scores for IR is about 57 and Voc 62 indicating subjects improved their Voc scores by about 5 marks more than IR. Finally, there was a significant 3 way-interaction between Test Type (IR versus Voc), Time (Pre versus Post), and Treatment (Conventional versus Cultural), $F(1,78) = 7.4$, $p < .008$. See figure 1, which shows the mean scores of IR and Voc have similar means (32) at Pre for both conventional and cultural materials prior to classroom teaching.

After 85 hours of classroom teaching, subjects of the conventional material type responding at Post for IR was 52, an increase of 10 marks, and for Voc was 53, almost the same amount of improvement (11 marks). However, the mean scores for IR at Post for cultural type material increased by 28 marks and Voc showed an even

greater increase of 37 marks. Summarizing the improvement (Pre & Post) for Voc for cultural material (37) was greater than the improvement for IR for cultural material (28). The improvement for Voc & IR for the conventional materials were similar at 11, 10 respectively.
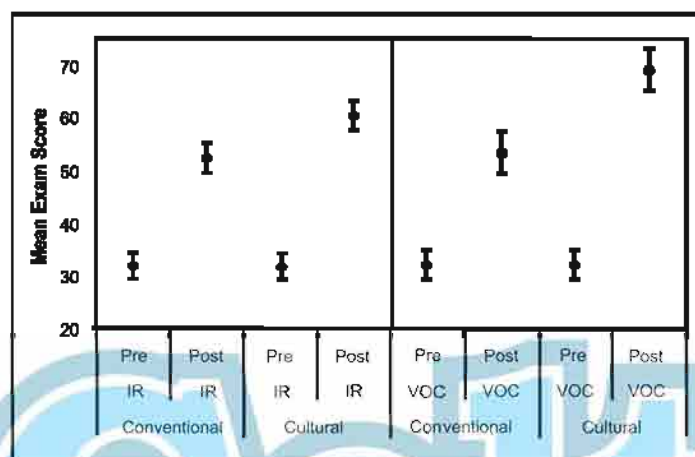

Figure 1:
Mean Test Scores for the Cult
*Note: IR: Integrated Reading Test; Voc: Vocabulary Test;
Pre: Pretest; Post: Posttestural and Conventional Materials

DISCUSSIONS AND PEDAGOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

The findings confirm a significant difference between subjects receiving the culturally familiar material when contrasted with subjects receiving the conventional material. In brief, there are two specific findings: 1) subjects with the culturally familiar materials performed better on their integrated reading comprehension tasks than subjects who received the non-culturally familiar material; 2) subjects with the culturally familiar material outperformed subjects who received the conventional materials in mastering the lexical items. The findings provide evidence towards the inappropriate use of dominant cultural material in the textbooks. It is exceedingly supporting vision that the majority of textbooks are still reflecting dominant cultures, values and norms (Marcellino 2008). Besides, the

findings show subjects employing the culturally familiar material performed better when they activated their previous knowledge/experiences with texts of tasks accompanied by pictures, names, daily living activities or things relevant to their life style or cultural background. The familiarization of the names of people and places in the short story or text may have contributed to schema activation of the readers (Razi 2004).   Ladson-Billings (1994) affirms the use of culturally relevant material can be employed as an approach to improve school success by empowering students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically using cultural referents to impart knowledge, skills, and attitudes.

This study also provides evidence that cultural specific schemata have an important role in reading comprehension and mastering lexical items. In fact, it has been exceptionally hard to find relevant literature which is similar to this study especially for six months training-study. This is the first controlled study particularly in Papua which examines the teaching of reading and its integrated tasks/skills with vocabulary within topic or theme-related activities/tasks. The results may also function as a bridge for learner to know the world outside their boundaries. The findings also indicate that, if the culturally familiar material is used as a bridge to make a difference, then the cultural aspects of learners can be integrated into the national curriculum. Moreover, subjects being involved in classroom experimentation for about one semester in length did make a difference. Normally, according to the English teachers that if students receive a full complement of a semester program in learning English, the students' results were academically low around 30–45 percent out of 100 percent. Accordingly, to achieve this average gained in a semester program with a group of at-risk students is stupendous. Moreover, the results support a possibility of involving local teachers who know the local cultures and languages/dialects of students. In fact, the teacher who taught culturally familiar material reported that during the classroom

presentation, subjects mostly conversed in their local highlander dialect of BI. While when compared with the regular teacher who teaches subjects using the conventional material, the language applied mostly was Bahasa Indonesia as a medium of instruction with an immense of complicatedness. It proves that the language employed in teaching English in Papua at the initial stages must be in students' local languages or dialects to build up comprehensive concept as a basis to explore other languages/cultures beyond their cultural boundaries.

Importantly, the study provides some valuable insights to the pedagogical implications to classrooms teaching. It is the teacher's responsibility to determine what is best for his or her students. The study recommends EFL teachers to build students' background knowledge through pre-reading materials. In addition, the instructional material used in the study provides dialog where students role play the dialog as one of the pre-reading activities. The activity deals with pronunciation practice, building vocabulary within theme-based texts. If students are able to identify the words, know the meaning, know how to pronounce the words, and role play the dialog, they could be able to understand the meaning of the dialog to increase vocabulary and comprehension. Besides, teaching reading to low proficient students who come from multicultural and linguistic backgrounds, "blended schemata" of content- cultural specific schemata and linguistic schemata should be in further investigation. The findings reveal clearly that content schemata are more powerful than linguistic schemata.

Looking at the nature of the instructional material, content schemata without linguistic schemata are useless particularly when dealing with at-risk readers from different linguistic background. Although an English sentence look straightforward, yet difficulty in understanding syntactical patterns and semantics are still blurred for at-risk students. In fact, students' content-cultural specific schemata

using culturally familiar material play an important role in comprehending the text.   For example, a picture of a man called, "Simon Magai", students know that the name is a familiar name; if they look at another picture of "Freeport Mc Moran Company", they recognize the name of the company because it is located on their village. Students know, "Simon Magai" and "Freeport Company" as their schemata tell them that Simon Magai must be somebody or a worker from that company, so students critically think of connected-key word between "name of the person" and "the company" to explore their schema-related cues to lead them to get the meaning. So, linguistic aspects of the language will be introduced later after students understand all the connected key words.

Hence, the findings suggest that there are several major stages to be implemented using culturally familiar material to answer the above issues as follows: 1) presenting materials from familiar to unfamiliar or from known to unknown within topic or theme related tasks; 2) practicing sounding out key words through dialogue within topic-theme related tasks; 3) clarifying major grammatical aspects within topic or theme related tasks; 4) presenting a simple topic or theme related reading text after students get sufficient knowledge of vocabulary and grammar.

In addition, with regard to EFL teachers, some observations through classroom experimentation suggest: 1) teachers should be familiar with local cultures; preferably local teachers or teachers who know the culture and speak students' local languages or dialects; 2) teachers should be critical of the learning situation, and to be ready to act as "agents of change"; 3) teachers should act as facilitators, and model the teaching and learning process; 4) teachers should create a friendly and informal atmosphere in classrooms; 5) teachers should provide rewards for students; 6) teachers should conduct action research or ethnographical research on their own teaching and learning situation.

CONCLUSION

This study explores the effect of the utilization of the culturally familiar material on learners' academic competence particularly in increasing EFL students' reading comprehension and its theme-related vocabulary. The findings demonstrate the superiority of the culturally familiar material over the conventional material. Firstly, students with the use of the culturally familiar material comprehend reading text better than student with the use of the conventional material. Secondly, students with the use of the culturally familiar material master lexical items better than students with the use of the conventional material. In sum, the study provides full evidence that the culturally relevant materials have positive effects on students' academic achievement.

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