

Local Cultural Practices in Teacher Agentic Responses to English as a Foreign Language (EFL) Curriculum: A Lesson Learned from Indonesia

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Abstract— *The new 2013 curriculum has enforced English teachers in Indonesia to use the scientific approach teaching steps (i.e. observing, questioning, experimenting, associating, and communicating) to help students attain the national goals of English language learning. This prescribed teaching procedure has been dispatched by nationally trained national instructors who in turn trained local teachers. Despite the national and local trainings, individual teachers might use their own strategies possible, practical and appropriate to the nature of their students and local English Language Teaching (ELT) contexts. Based on data obtained from ethnographic classroom observations in a rural Indonesian school in Lombok Indonesia, the study found that the teachers enact their agency by using local cultural practices as teaching strategies in their ELT classrooms given the conditions of the students, school and the community. This article discusses the nature of local cultural practices used in the English lessons during the study. Local cultural practices used were examined within the dialectical concepts of localness (i.e. nationally-local, provincially-local and locally-local). It then continues by describing how the teachers have used them as strategic ways of responding to the national policy, either in the forms of dedication, accommodation, or resistance strategies. The study would hopefully provide important insights regarding local appropriation of the macro level policy.*

Keywords— *local cultural practices, teacher agency, dedication, accommodation and resistance strategies*

I. INTRODUCTION

Indonesian education policy has emphasized that English teachers in Indonesia should develop students' sense of cultural identity while developing their English proficiency. More specifically, teaching English should ensure the attainment of spiritual attitudes, moral attitudes, knowledge and skills as the learning outcomes necessary for global life (Ministry of Education and Culture, 2016). While the localisation policy suggests the use of local cultural practices in English language classrooms, the new 2013 curriculum has enforced English teachers to use the so-called *scientific approach to learning* in the teaching and learning process. The Ministerial Regulation Number 22/2016 about the minimum standard of teaching and learning process has identified that the spiritual, moral,

knowledge and skills dimensions are presented using the scientific approach in a fixed order from observing, questioning, experimenting, associating and communicating. As issued by the Ministry of Education and Culture comprising people with *power* and *expertise* in language and language teaching planning and policy (Baldauf, 2012:6), these fixed procedures, known for 5 *M* (i.e. *Mengamati, Menanya, Mengumpulkan data, Mengasosiasi dan Mengkomunikasikan*) are mandatory to all teachers in Indonesia, including teachers of English. The 2016 version of the 2013 curriculum, however, has allowed teachers to partially implement the policy if only the whole implementation cannot be conducted due to some factors such as inaccessibility of the nationally prescribed textbooks and unavailability of learning resources and facilities. This means that teachers are given rooms for autonomy for creative teaching appropriate for their local contexts. This autonomy, however, is relative (see Canagarajah, 1993). This is because despite the national and local trainings within the new curriculum framework, teachers are trained within the new curriculum framework in the national and local trainings, the individual teachers are given partial freedom to use their own strategies possible, practical and appropriate to their local teaching context as long as they can assist students to achieve the nationally expected learning outcomes. In so doing, they might adopt, accommodate or resist the prescribed teaching approach in the new curriculum and the textbooks by creating their own teaching using local cultural practices. This creativity shows teacher's agency as a response to the education policy and this might vary from contexts to contexts. It will be interesting, therefore, to investigate it in more details and this is the goal of the current study.

II. TEACHER AGENCY AND THE USE OF LOCAL CULTURAL PRACTICES

Agency is defined as a strategy that a Language Planning and Policy (LPP) actor employs to face challenges at hand (Ali&Hamid, 2016 ; Kaplan& Baldauf, 1997). At macro level agency can be in the form of policy, guidelines and training modules. At micro level, teachers' exercising their agency by

responding to macro level language policy in accordance with their teaching situation by means of initiating and implementing a locally-required language teaching practice (Zhao and Baldauf, 2012). This suggests that teachers as policy actors at micro levels (Baldauf, 2006) should enact their agency to accommodate the nationally expected learning goals based on the students' level and conditions. This is attainable, according to Holliday (2001), if the teaching practices consider the students' cultural and situational learning conditions. Tomlinson (2011) also suggests that learners' linguistic and cultural backgrounds are essential for consideration in developing learning tasks. This is because local culture constitutes 'funds of knowledge' (Moll, 2015, p. 114) providing students with schemata used as a foundation for them to learn a foreign language (Alptekin, 1993).

There are several relevant studies on teacher's exercising agency by using local culture at micro level of ELT classrooms. Nguyen and Bui's (2016), based on their ethnographic study in local Vietnamese ELT classrooms, have found that teachers use the students' native language instead of the recommended national language in teaching English. The study also found that learning English is more effective when the students' local language is used. The second study relevant with the use of local cultural practice in ELT classroom is Tin's (2014) ethnographic study of ELT in a Nepalese public college. The study shows the teachers have appropriated the communicative activities such as group work or pair work in the nationally recommended textbooks as they do not fit well with the Nepalese culture favoring oral tradition or lecture. The studies have shown teacher agency in facing local challenges and they can be the basis of further research.

In the context of English as a Foreign Language (EFL) in Indonesia, the use of local cultural practices by teachers would be seen as a teachers' strategic response to accommodate the nationally expected learning goals and students' situation. Prastiwi (2013) has reported that the teachers in an EFL primary language classroom in her study used local cultural practices such as folklores and traditional games to fulfill the national curriculum expectation of teaching the students with moral values while developing their English skills. However, as the study relied very much on interviews, how teachers are actually use local cultural practices to teach students English language as well as local cultural values in local ELT practices is not yet known. This is the contribution of the present study that investigates pedagogical practices on using local culture in Indonesian context.

In the present study, teacher agency is investigated within the context of EFL in a rural area in Lombok Indonesia where the goals of teaching English in Indonesia as highlighted in the

education policy is to develop students with English proficiency while educating them with national and local characters.

As the national curriculum comes with it the nationally-prescribed textbooks with the imposed teaching activities and procedures, English teachers as policy actors at micro level need to transform them to the students. They can adopt the activities and steps in the textbooks. But they can also modify them if they are not relevant with student's situational and cultural contexts. Cortazzi and Jin (1999) have argued, for cultural and ideological reasons, the teaching materials and activities should be open for adaptation.

The current study will contribute to the literature by investigating how teachers in a rural school in Lombok Indonesia used local cultural practices in ELT classrooms as strategic responses to nationally-imposed teaching procedures. The study used Ali and Hamid's (2016) framework on three categories of agentic strategies in ELT practices (i.e. *Dedication*, *Accommodation* and *Resistance*) is very useful to be used in investigating how teachers respond to ELT policy. *Dedication* is when teachers devotedly implement the policy. *Resistance* is rejecting policy. *Accommodation* is when the teachers partly implement the policy to suit students' situations and conditions at hand.

III. METHODOLOGY

A. Research Design

The study was conducted in a rural Indonesian school in Lombok Indonesia. The study was ethnography of language planning and policy (LPP) which is according to Johnson (2009) very useful to investigate how macro level of education policy is enacted by teachers at their micro classrooms level. A lot of observations of real classroom practices within a period of four months were conducted to provide a thick and rich description (Geertz, 1973) of how teachers use local cultural practices as their agency exercise.

B. Research Site and Participants

The study was conducted at a government junior high school located in a remote area in West Lombok Indonesia. It is located at the foot of Mount Punikan and within a Muslim community strongly promoting local (Sasak) cultural traditions and Islamic values. This makes the school have every reason to separate itself from and cosmopolitan life in the city center or culturally undesirable life in the nearest tourism objects such as Senggigi Beach and Gili island.

Two English teachers were involved as participants of the study. They were purposively selected due to the fact that they were the only English teachers teaching at the school. Born locally and being local persons, they were required to explain the reasons of choosing learning activities and teaching strategies over many others.

C. Data Collection

The data of the study was obtained from non-participant classroom observations, semi-structured and in-depth interviews, fieldnotes of real classroom teaching practice and the study of policy and teaching-related documents. Five sessions of classroom lesson at each class were observed and video-recorded. Policy documents were obtained by downloading from the Internet while teaching-related document were obtained by copying from the teachers. Fifteen teacher-made lesson plans were able to be collected.

D. Data Analysis

Bowen's (2009) document analysis was used to analyse policy documents, lesson plans, materials and activities. This involves identification of policy themes, sampling of learning materials and activities to analyse, reading the sample documents, coding relevant information, tabulating data, checking and rechecking validity and reliability, cross-tabulating the data, and reporting results.

Content analysis was also used to analyse the data from the transcribed video and interview recordings on how the teachers use local cultural practices. I analysed teacher agency by identifying in transcripts the evidence of teachers exercising agency, classifying the evidence based on Ali and Hamid's (2016) categories of teacher agentic strategies, describing the categories by providing examples for each category, and explaining by providing rationales for the use of particular strategies.

IV. FINDING AND DISCUSSION

A. The Nature of Local Cultural Practices

From the data I was able to identify the use of local cultural practices such as local cultural games, folklore, cultural ways of describing people, things and animals as well as ways of cultural food making process. Similar to Prastiwi's (2013) finding, the local cultural practices were used in ELT to fulfill the national expectation of developing students' sense of cultural values and identity while learning English language. Different from Prastiwi's (2013) study, however, my study which was based on ethnographic observation of real time teaching practices and interviews, could further identify three types of local cultural practices: nationally-local, provincially local and locally-local cultural practices.

The nationally-local practices can be found in the teachers' use of the national standard for teaching-learning processes: pre-activity, main activity and post-activity. The teachers, however, did not implement the recommended scientific 5M for teaching attitude, knowledge, and skills and they instead used the 3M, a procedure that they had been familiar. This decision of using 3M instead 5M was made by the teachers as the policy actor at micro level (Baldauf, 2006) in accordance with the students' socio-cultural condition. Based on their explanations, it is because of students' low learning motivation, disadvantaged economic background and unclear future orientations. The 3M procedure comprising Presentation (*Menyajikan*), Practice (*Melatih*) and Production

(*Memproduksi*). This procedure provided more time for the teachers to give more explanations, more examples, more personalizing students' context, and more time for the learners to learn.

The provincially-local practices used were associated with folklores, food, and festivities used for teaching different types of texts. Folklores such as *Princess Mandalika* and *the Legend of Batu Layar* were used for teaching narrative texts at Year 7 and Year 9 such as narrative, descriptive, recount and procedure texts. *Batu Nyale* Festival is another provincially-local practices used for teaching recount texts, while cultural food making such as *Sate Pusut* and *Plecing* were used for teaching procedure texts.

Meanwhile, there were a number of locally-local practices used in the ELT practices: the bedtime history of Tattoo and Nangklok Cave for teaching narrative texts, the process of making iced *cincau* fruit cocktail for teaching procedure texts, a description of a local Balinese village and of the students' village for teaching descriptive texts, local selling-buying activity for teaching language functions such as requesting and bargaining. The use of provincially and locally-local cultural practices to teach a range of texts in the local ELT classrooms has shown that the teachers exercised their agency by appropriating the teaching strategies in the nationally-textbooks in accordance with the students' culture. Thus this study is in line with Nguyen and Bui's (2016) and Tin's (2014) findings on the teachers' preference of using local culture to western culture in the nationally-prescribed textbooks which oftentimes does not fit with the students' local culture. While local culture in Nguyen and Bui's (2016) and Tin's (2014) means respectively Vietnamese and Nepalese culture, local culture in my study was identified as nationally, provincially and locally-local culture. This is relevant with the fact that Indonesia is a country with multiple cultures indicating that what is referred to as Indonesian culture is not necessarily parallel with local culture for Indonesian people. In the actual classroom teaching practice, locally-local practices were dominantly employed followed by the provincially-local practices while the nationally-local practices were the most rarely used.

B. Teacher Strategies in Integrating Local Cultural Practices

In this study, I observed how teachers used teaching strategies as an exercise of agency in using local cultural practices as a response to the Indonesian national education policy in the local ELT classroom. Drawing on Ali and Hamid's (2016) classification of teacher agentic strategies, I was able to identify three strategies used by the teacher to enact the national policy at micro ELT classroom level (i.e. dedication, accommodation, resistance).

• Dedication Strategies

Dedication strategies as devoted adoption of education policy could be found in the teaching procedures in the actual ELT practices. While the national teaching procedures can be either in three-phase procedure (i.e. Pre-activities, Main activities, and Post-activities) or five-phase

procedure (i.e. observing, questioning, experimenting, associating, and communicating), the teachers committed themselves with the former. This because they had been familiar with them and the procedure had been used in the previous curriculum. In the pre-activity activities, the teachers practiced the classroom greeting routine in English, checked students' attendance, briefly reviewed previously learned lessons, and explaining the lesson goals. In the main activities, the teachers did the three phases: presentation, practice, and production. The presentation stages were used for example for introducing the topic of the lesson, giving a model text, teaching text-related vocabulary and grammar, allowing the students to analyse the generic structure, language features and social functions of the model text. During the practice phases, the teachers allowed the students in pairs or in small groups to practice with vocabulary, grammar and text structure before asking them to do individual practices. The production phases contained activities where the learners were assigned to produce oral or written texts similar to the model text that the teachers had provided.

• Accommodation Strategies

As Kumaravadivelu (2003), Alhamdan et al (2014) had shown, teachers need to appropriate teaching strategies to the students, condition and classroom situations. They need to bridge the gap between the imposed policy and the situations at hand in such a way that learners can obtain their ultimate goals of learning. These strategies were employed in their actual teaching practices.

The most dominant accommodating strategies can be seen when the teachers used extended pre-activity to give extended explanation, examples and reviews of the previous materials. This was done given the students' low motivation and competency in English.

The other form of accommodating strategy was found in the teachers' attempt in motivating the students' learning. This is done by using their own materials, activities and teaching strategies considered relevant for the students' and school's situation and culture. In fact, the teachers used provincially-local and locally-local practices to motivate and facilitate the students' learning. As the teacher explained, the textbooks dominantly contain nationally-local practices unfamiliar to the students which made the students easily get bored and unmotivated to learn. In exercising their agency the teachers designed and developed materials, activities and strategies either individually or in collaboration with other English teachers in the local teachers' network [MGMP].

• Resistance Strategies

Teachers' resistance strategies was found when they used the 3M instead of the nationally-imposed 5M. The teachers explained that the 3M is the procedure suggested in the previous curriculum that the learners had been comfortable with. Accordingly, while the use of 3M instead of 5M means teachers' resistance to the new curriculum, this could also mean as dedication to the previous curriculum. However, the procedure had also been enriched with the acts of personalizing the students' contexts by using local cultural practices, reviewing the previously learned materials prior to learning new topics. Apparently, the teachers, to some extent, decided to resist the education policy with their view of the most appropriate way to teach their students in their local teaching context. While the use of more provincially and locally-local cultural practices indicates teachers' resistance to the nationally-imposed teaching practices, it is suitable with the students' need and condition which would facilitate students to achieve the nationally-expected English language learning outcomes (Holliday, 2001). This facilitating nature of local cultural practices was also because, as Moll (2015) and Alptekin (1993) had pointed out, local cultural practices provide students with previous content local knowledge which accommodate learning a new language content.

V. CONCLUSION

Various types of local cultural practices were found in the ELT practices in the study (i.e. nationally-local, provincially-local practices and locally-local practices). Although the use of more locally-local practices in the local ELT practices could be seen as teachers' resistance to the nationally-recommended teaching procedure, the teachers were dedicated to help the students achieve the nationally-expected learning outcomes. This is because their exercising agency by using 3M instead of 5M and by using the students' local cultural practices allowed effective English language learning in a context with low students motivation, English language competency and lacks of learning facilities possible. Due to the facilitating nature of the local cultural practices for the development of students' sense of cultural identity and of their English competency, the roles of local cultural practices in English education should be clearly stated and encouraged.

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