

Developing Intercultural Awareness through Poems in EFL Classrooms

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Abstract—The use of poems has not been practiced in Indonesian EFL classrooms especially in high school context. Literary materials are generally introduced to students who study English as a foreign language in university level. However, in the context of foreign language teaching, the use of English poems in high school level has potential to support learning and to introduce intercultural awareness to students so that they can situate themselves as learners of foreign language. The method of this research is qualitative design that the data is collected from interview and classroom observation. Meanwhile the whole processes are evaluated through teachers' lesson plan. From the research it is found out that the use of poems can be both valuable and challenging. Teachers need to have a good preparation and planning to perform the material and students can gain knowledge from guessing meanings of new words through poems and opening up intercultural understanding that would build up a mutual communication around certain poems in EFL settings.

Keywords—intercultural awareness, EFL classroom, teaching literature

I. INTRODUCTION

The use of poems in a language classroom has been a point of interest for many scholars and language teachers [1], [2], [3], [4], [5]. However, in the context of foreign language teaching, the use of English poems has not been considered much in terms of understanding their benefits to open up intercultural understanding. Particularly in this research, the use of English poems in Indonesian EFL classrooms has never been applied before by EFL teachers there, let alone for opening up intercultural understanding that would build up a mutual communication around certain poems in EFL settings. From that standpoint, the researcher would like to propose the use of English poems in the Indonesian EFL classroom and to see to it that the use of poetry can open up intercultural understanding for English teachers so that they can explain it to students in their classrooms. The way that English poems can be deployed in the classroom is facilitated through lesson study.

II. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

A. Lesson Study in Indonesia

Lesson study highlights collaborative teaching which focuses on refining a single lesson [6]. The collaborative teaching allows several teachers to work together in one

community to revise a lesson which is taught by another teacher who is a member of the community, to gain insight from each other's revisions [7]. The collaboration is set up to critically observe, analyze and revise every teacher's teaching plan to build an environment that enables its members to identify a particular problem faced by teachers in the classroom. The essence of lesson study is constructive because a group of teachers, maybe consisting of three to eight people, work together in one lesson plan or one theme to produce a design for teaching a specific topic, observe each other's teaching in turn and share the results of their observation as a basis for discussion in series of meetings [8].

In the field of teaching English as EFL language internationally if not in Indonesia, lesson study, has led to positive outcomes. Research conducted by Thein in 2012 on *Design-based Research for Studying Multicultural Instruction* came up with useful findings. The research suggested that language teachers should be considered as intellectuals who have the independence in organizing their class through sets of instructions obtained from working collaboratively with others. Working collaboratively with other teachers to discuss a specific theme, let's say teaching poetry, will create a conducive environment since the teachers can look closer at their own fixed ideas about poetry and teaching poetry through considering others' opinions. Teachers can examine critically their preconceptions about using poems in their classroom and at the same time develop a constructive awareness that language learning leads to accepting a cultural context in which language is taught in the classroom [9]. The acceptance of cultural context in language learning requires the learners, in this study Indonesian EFL learners, to make comparisons of two different cultures; one that is owned and another that is the cultural context from the poems being used [10]. The description of Indonesian students is described objectively by [11] that they are not comfortable to oppose teacher's opinion, and they tend to remain silent and accept what their teacher says. Consequently, it is not easy to build up a dynamic classroom discussion on a particular issue. Considering that Indonesian students will feel uncomfortable to challenge their teachers directly, poems can be an alternative material for teachers to start thinking on developing students' minimal engagement in cultural learning.

B. Reason for using poem in the classroom

Poems can be a valuable material for teaching English to EFL learners. They can gain knowledge from guessing

meanings of new words through poems, over word association. Guessing the meaning of new words will work better in a presentation of fewer words rather than in common arrangements of many words like those in narrative text. [12] affirms that poems will make a good choice to train learners in guessing words. This does not imply that other texts cannot make a good choice for word guessing practice, but poems have specific characteristics such as rhyming, meter, assonance, and so on which make it an interesting text to choose.

Poems can be a means as well for trying to make sense of words, comprehension. This is so because the words in literary works, and especially poems, are put in a certain order for an intended purpose. The events can be real or imaginary and shaped in such a way that their presentation is aesthetically enjoyable [13]. Not only being enjoyable, poems written in English can actually represent a cultural event for EFL learners [14]. This can be illustrated by Percy Bysshe Shelley's *Ozymandias*. It describes the inevitable rise and fall of civilizations, and the mortality of even the most powerful leaders.

I met a traveller from an antique land
Who said: Two vast and trunk less legs of stone
Stand in the desert... Near them, on the sand,
Half sunk, a shattered visage lies, whose frown,
And wrinkled lip, and sneer of cold command,
Tell that its sculptor well those passions read
Which yet survive, stamped on these lifeless things,
The hand that mocked them, and the heart that fed:
And on the pedestal these words appear:
‘My name is Ozymandias, king of kings:
Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair!’
Nothing beside remains. Round the decay
Of that colossal wreck, boundless and bare
The lone and level sands stretch far away.

[15]

This poem tells about a statue which was found on the sand. Readers can tell that it is a statue from a phrase and words like *two vast and trunk less legs of stone* and *lifeless things*. The person in the poem met a traveller who found the statue, and was told that it was a statue of a king whose name was Ozymandias. The traveller concluded that Ozymandias was a powerful king from the carved words on a platform which stated *My name is Ozymandias, king of kings: Look upon my works, ye Mighty, and despair!* However, since nothing besides the statue remained, the glorious and powerful supremacy was only expressed upon the statue's face. Understanding the poem requires deduction and inference, Shelley's poem is a good means to tell EFL learners about the ending of powerful domination by someone and mortality. It may end in hopelessness as it is described in phrases such as *a shattered visage lies*, and *stamped on these lifeless things*. This sentence expresses someone's domination

when he was alive. However, that domination is only kept upon the statue's face, and when the person who owned it passed away, so did all his domination.

Every ethnic minority must have experienced domination from a powerful leader or a group. That domination sometimes ends peacefully and sometimes ends tragically. From *Ozymandias*, learners can gain knowledge about domination; from the statue of a king who claimed that he was the king of all kings. At the end, the mighty king only lives within the traveller's story and from the carved words on the platform.

This potential is not exclusive to poetry written in English. Another example of a cultural event is found in Sapardi Djoko Damono's *Ayat Arloji*—watch verses. The event told in this poem tries to inform learners about Indonesian government policy at a certain time in handling protesters. This poem is taken from his anthology called *Ayat-ayat Api* (Fire Verses).

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Marsinah, kita tahu, tak bersenjata,
ia hanya suka merebus kata
sampai mendidih,
lalu meluap kemana-mana.
“Ia suka berpikir,” kata Siapa,
“itu sangat berbahaya.”
Marsinah tak ingin menyulut api,
ia hanya ingin memutar arloji
agar sesuai dengan matahari.
“Ia tau hakikat waktu,” kata Siapa,
“dan harus dikembalikan ke asalnya, debu.” [16]

This poem describes Marsinah, a female labour who worked in a watch factory in a small town about two hours drive from the main city of East Java. She was kidnapped and murdered when she was protesting a company sick-leave policy for female labour. She worked for that company, which motivated her to protest against the unfair policy for her and other fellow female labour. The poem can be a valuable resource to help the younger Indonesian generation to learn about government military policy in dealing with protesters and the demonstrations.

Through Damono's selected poems, learners can have an opportunity to view a particular case within one culture and to have compassion for others [17]. It means that Indonesian students as beginner readers of poetry can begin to know the culture that was practiced by the Indonesian government in handling protesters and demonstration in the period on Marsinah's case and to start initiating their sympathy and empathy toward female labour working in a factory. Students can also activate their response to demonstration and protests that they may encounter in their life.

Discussion and introduction to a culture can begin with cultural study and what comprises that culture. Through Damono's poem, the discussion of a culture even one's own

culture can be mediated through literary material. Students may have different starting points to see things when their teacher uses a literary material in the classroom. Different perspectives to begin understanding certain events will open up a generous dialog between students themselves and between students and their EFL teacher [18]. By doing this, students are able to appreciate an event through a description, either first hand via other experiences described in poems.

C. Problems in using poem in Indonesian EFL classroom

In the case of teaching poetry in Indonesia, not many EFL teachers have the confidence to use poems, in particular English poems, as teaching materials in the classroom. The anxiety around presenting poems in language classrooms is a common complaint among language teachers. Recent study conducted among secondary teachers in Australia corroborated that language teachers have nervousness around presenting poems in the classroom [19]. The nervousness reported in that study is also shared by Victoria Brown in her book *The Experience of Poetry* published in 1953 [20]. According to Brown, there seemed to be a consistent problem which is anxiety and nervousness for language teachers to use poems in their classrooms came from the teachers themselves. Teachers just did not have any favourite poems as basis. It makes it clear that the problem in using poems in the classroom basically originates from the teacher. Another problem that may prevent language teachers in using poems came from their peer teaching (Weaven & Clark, 2013). According to their study, EFL colleagues who do not use poems in their language classrooms looked down on learning outcomes after the students had been taught by using poems, and on the insufficient knowledge from both teachers and students to discuss the poems. The abovementioned may result from the sceptical way of thinking about poems for EFL students that originated from the teachers' discontented condition when they are using poems in their EFL classroom [21]. Moreover, less support in using poems in EFL classrooms can impede the learners' success of using the language outside the classroom [22]. The idea of using a language is for communication. It may well exist in a creatively written form such as poems. If learners of a foreign language are not able to experiment and speculate what they are going to communicate in English, it shows that they cannot use the language wittily.

In addition to that, EFL teachers (who also include Indonesian EFL teachers) are still teaching how to use correct grammar through different texts. Reading material is used to support the teaching of communication in English as a foreign language. According to [22] 'standard language' is not so unsuitable for EFL teachers that they should change the way the teach. However, people speak, argue and chat about many happenings that may acknowledge cultural context in the conversation. As foreign language learners, the emphasis of learning should be on negotiating the meaning and using it properly [23]. It all needs more than mastery of standard language which is at the forefront of EFL teaching [9].

Poems, on the other hand, are considered to be special texts which should be put into a specific section of language textbooks under the title of literary appreciation. The case in Ghana shows that poetry is considered as a special text that requires a special way of teaching it. Poetry teaching in Ghana was constructed in

a textbook specifically designed to teach poetry and supported by the Ghanaian government to be used for high school students [24]. The result of constructing poems in a particular textbook did not contribute positively to the success of poetry teaching for high school students. It shows that the idea of treating poems as special texts in EFL teaching is another way of saying that poems do not have distinctive characteristics that support language requirement such as reading, speaking, listening and writing. Unlike other teaching materials that are able to help language teachers with teaching presentation, poems may not be a good option for facilitating students to learn a foreign language.

In an EFL teaching context, it is even more difficult because Indonesian EFL teachers are still trying to improve their students' speaking ability instead of introducing the culture of a target language. The awareness of language is a carrier of culture, hence learning a language is also learning the culture is put aside [25]. The statement suggests that learning a foreign language is similar to see the world through the language. The naming of person, deciding time frame in a statement and selecting appropriate vocabulary are required in there. It also means that if EFL teachers are focusing to develop students' ability in one skill, the teachers are neglecting to introduce the other competence that is enclosed within the language. For example, the culture in giving the proper way in greetings is as important as saying or writing the greetings itself. Different language has different ways in greetings and why greetings varies from one language to other language is valuable for learners of foreign language to understand instead of remembering the expression in giving greetings. In short, putting aside the culture that embedded in a language will decrease intercultural understanding of EFL learners [26], [27].

III. PARADIGM OF THE STUDY

The study is to view the phenomena of developing intercultural understanding through poems in EFL classrooms in Indonesia. Other than that, it is also trying to situate the application of lesson study to help teachers to work on their lesson plans in presenting poems in their classroom. These phenomena of the application of lesson study and developing intercultural understanding through English poems cannot be reduced to a few factors or any partition into independent parts, it has to be viewed holistically [28] so that the origin of the research project is to describe the collaborative work of EFL teachers in preparing a lesson plan with poems and using it in the classroom. The lesson plan is to teach the cultural issues implied in the poems which accommodates intercultural understanding for EFL students to learn. Therefore, it will be a case study because the researchers will develop in-depth analysis of teachers' activity in presenting cultural issues through poems. Teaching activity which is conducted by one or more individuals that are bounded by a certain time frame is considered a particular or a case study [29]. The design of a case study will require collecting information from interviews, direct observation and supervising group interaction which are arranged for data collection [30].

The lesson plan will be designed through several meetings with teachers in group discussion to decide which teaching method is suitable to teach specific poems. The design of lesson

plans is to evaluate and reflect on their collaborative work with poems. The discussion before the lesson plan is implemented in the classroom and also involves the selection of poems to match students' interests so that students can sharing opinions about the poems and the teacher can moderate the discussion appropriately which at the end helps the students to become familiar with the cultural topic. Thus, the answers collected from EFL teachers will be useful to gather pertinent data on the teaching of English poems designed through lesson study and how the implementation of the collaborating lesson plan in the classroom can contribute positively to understand English poems. All together, the researcher is also collecting data from peer teacher's observation during the use of English poems in the classroom to see whether it can help Indonesian EFL students to be familiar with cultural topics implied in it. The EFL students' understanding about cultural topics embedded in the poems being discussed is arranged by classroom dialogue assisted by the teacher.

The discussion via lesson study in assisting the students to appreciate an English poem and later to understand that the poems implicitly incorporate cultural topics will be documented and analysed. The lesson plans from group discussion which is designed earlier before presenting a poem in the classroom will facilitate the researcher to locate teachers' comprehension about poems and their attentiveness to cultural topics implied in the poems. Teachers' awareness of cultural topics implied in the poems is expected to contribute positively for their EFL students when they come across issues on intercultural understanding around them.

How do Indonesian EFL teachers expose intercultural understanding through teaching and learning English poems in the classroom?

A. How do Indonesian EFL teachers expose intercultural understanding through teaching and learning English poems in the classroom?

We asked the teacher's participants to work together in deciding which poem each of them was going to use in the class and what teaching method they were going to perform with the poem. We requested a lesson plan for each of their teaching strategy. The female teacher chose *Sick Rose* for her class. The male teacher chose *A Poison Tree* for his class. However, the lesson plan was poorly constructed that they did not reflect any intercultural issue clearly. This was so because they have been constructing so many lesson plans previously which concerned more with their actual teaching materials. Another reason that teacher's participants constructed poor lesson plan because they have been teaching for more than five years so they absolutely had been aware what they were supposed to do in the classroom with selected new teaching material. During classroom observation, we noted that both teachers have tried to initiate a discussion about the poem with their students, but the discussion were not realized. However, we noted that both teachers have prepared some learning activities which did not mentioned properly in the lesson plan such motivating students before the poem's explanation through question and answer activity. After classroom observations, we did not discuss about the recording with both teacher participants but each of them was attended each other's teaching performance. We instead handed out an

observation sheet for them to comment on their peer's teaching. We skipped the group discussion between me and two teacher participants. To replace the early arrangement, we allowed each teacher participants to see their fellow to perform the selected poem during teaching and learning session. After the session was over, we asked them to write some comment for each other's performance with poem. we also circulated a questionnaire for students as well relating to their two teachers and their two different teaching materials with poem. This questionnaire was to find out students' interest with the use of poem in the classroom and to learn which teaching strategy suitable to deliver poem in the classroom. Introducing a cultural value was difficult although both teachers acknowledged that their teaching methods were challenged. They had to think about strategies to use poem as learning material as attractive as possible because the poem was created by famous poet William Blake which the teachers themselves were exposed to that poet during university time.

B. How does teaching poetry build up intercultural understanding for Indonesian teachers?

From teachers' participants, poems are applicable to introduce topics such as heart break and wrath to high school students which they called innovative in terms of teaching materials. Through discussing it with colleague, they found that two poems from William Blake could be used as a learning material to expose romance and emotional aspect of human which was anger. The teachers would never have expected to come out to the idea of exploiting heart break and wrath to students if they had not been talking the poem through during lesson planning. Although the lesson planning was conducted casually and the way teachers talking about the lesson design, the stages of activities and what they would expect their students to understand after learning English with poem were in casual and less formal, they found out that poem was actually able to become a learning material like other genre-based texts they have been using. Poem is actually recommended in the curriculum to be used as a learning material but under the section of *konsentrasi Bahasa* or language major for high school students, in fact the poem can be used for all majors like science class or social one.

In the interview, the teachers aware that teaching English to their students should contain cultural value than just merely explaining what features a narrative text or descriptive one. Male teachers admitted that through discussing *Poison Tree* he could give an example of how to manage anger and to show some consequences of losing anger to quickly to other. Even the worse, to keep the anger for a period of time for the same person or the same mistake. The poem made a sufficient metaphor for growing and nurturing anger for some time and escalating to wrath was good choice to discuss about empathy.

However, lesson study implementation has not been able to complete in a good manner. Several stages had to be modified because both teachers were loaded with teaching activities and school tasks from the principal so that teacher negotiation and exchanging ideas on planning stage could not well recorded.

IV. CONCLUSION

Finally, exposing intercultural understanding through poem in EFL classroom was not easy to do because the teachers had never used poem as a learning material before. The teachers were used to teach texts which were stated explicitly in the curriculum. Although poem as a learning material was also mentioned in the curriculum but they teachers would have not considered to use because they thought it would consume much time in preparation and planning. They acknowledged that poem has some value to introduce emotional aspect for the students which would provide by other texts. Discussing about emotion was rarely in the classroom and lesson study which was selected to facilitate the teaching and learning activity with poem was not a successful attempt since teachers were loaded with non-teaching activities which was impossible to leave school hours to make proper planning before the poem was used in the class. However, we managed to get brief impression from students regarding the poem. They would agree to have new material in the classroom as long as the teacher could present the material to be less challenging to them. To summarize our study, poems can be used in EFL classrooms if teachers have the ability to perform the material to be less challenging for students.

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