

## WHAT CHILDREN LEARN WHEN THEY LEARN FOREIGN CULTURE: THE PERKS OF HAVING CULTURAL KNOWLEDGE

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### Abstract

As claimed by many linguists, language learning is inseparable from learning the culture. This is due to the fact that we can barely learn a new language without learning the culture attached to the language being learned. There is no harm to learn the cultures of other than ours. For Indonesians, we commonly learn English to enable us in fulfilling our needs and in maintaining our relationships with global world. For foreign citizens, on the contrary, they begin learning Indonesian for a range of motives. Two main backgrounds emphasize these situations. Firstly, Indonesian government has been promoting scholarships which invite young people from countries in the world to have the opportunity to learn the language and cultures of Indonesia, namely “Kemitraan Negara Berkembang” and “Darmasiswa,” held at various universities in Indonesia. Additionally, the growth of Asean Economic Community demands global people from different cultures to communicate in many international scopes. The reasons above inspired the writer to carry out a community service in the form of inviting a foreigner to elementary schools to introduce children to different cultures. A nine-day visit was done by a foreign student of Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta to a Muhammadiyah elementary school in Klaten. The foreign guest was from Uganda, who came to introduce her own culture to the students. A survey was conducted through distributing a questionnaire to the students of class 5 and 6 to find out about their responses after having the foreigner in their classes. It is expected that the results can be a reference for students to raise their awareness and to cultivate an attitude of tolerance by learning about people with different cultures. Moreover, it is also expected that by doing so, we can create mutual and meaningful interactions between cultures. The results show that the majority of students were very enthusiastic to have a foreigner coming to their school so that they could learn new cultures. However, there is a quite surprising response when there were few of them felt displeased because of the color of her skin. It can be concluded that children at the very early stage have got a quite positive response toward people with different cultures; however, they should learn more about diversity among people from different origins.

**Key words:** children, community service, foreigner, learning foreign culture

### INTRODUCTION

Along with the increasing interactions and communications between people of different cultures from different parts of the world, the process of getting to know new languages and cultures attached to the language being learned becomes inseparable. Learning a language cannot be separated from the learning the culture of the language being studied. Thus, it is inevitable for us to learn cultures of people or community members outside the scope of our society.

In addition, at present, Indonesian government has been intensively promoting a program called BIPA (Bahasa Indonesia bagi

Penutur Asing) which invites young people from various countries in the world to have the opportunity to know and to learn the language and cultures of Indonesia. It is attended by foreign students who receive scholarships through “Kemitraan Negara Berkembang” (KNB) and “Darmasiswa,” held at various universities in Indonesia.

Additionally, with the advent of Asean Economic Community (AEC) which demands global people from different cultures to communicate in many international interactions, there is also a need to get to know each other’s cultures by

recognizing and introducing our society to a variety of cultures of other people.

Therefore, the reasons stated above have inspired the writer to conduct a community service in the form of cultural activities done in elementary schools to give children a chance to know and to learn other cultures than their own. This set of agendas was done by several lecturers who invited some foreign students who are currently studying in Universitas Muhammadiyah Surakarta (UMS). In this occasion, a nine-day visit was done by both *KNB* and *Darmasiswa* students to several Muhammadiyah elementary schools in Klaten. One of them was a *KNB* student from Uganda, who came to introduce her own culture to the students.

The main purpose of this community service is that the results can be a reference for students to raise their awareness and to cultivate an attitude of tolerance by learning about people with different cultures. Moreover, it is also expected that by doing so, people in general can create mutual and meaningful interactions between cultures.

### **Language and Culture**

As mentioned earlier, people who are learning a foreign language will be very likely to be exposed to the culture of the language being studied. This is confirmed by Kramsch (1998), that language not merely expresses the reality of the culture, but is also embedded in the cultural reality. Furthermore, language is also a symbol of the cultural reality itself. Therefore, culture cannot be separated from elements that are closely associated with it, which is the language. Likewise, learning a language would be unlikely to be disconnected from the culture attached to it.

Culture is a whole system of action, ideas, as well as the work of human beings for their survival attempt, as stated by Koentjaraningrat (1985). It is added by Liliweri (2002) who says that culture is a unit of memory, interpretation and meaning which belongs to a group of people in which there are norms, beliefs and value that can

affect the behavior of a group of humans. One definition of culture that is commonly acknowledged is claimed by Tylor (1871), that culture is a complex whole which is formed from a variety of knowledge, customs, arts, beliefs, laws, morals, abilities and other varied habits obtained from humans' participation as part of a community; from which the role of the community is very pivotal in the introduction as well as the effort to a cultural preservation.

Judging from its characteristics, culture can actually be studied, is interchangeable, grows and changes (Hebding and Glick; in Liliweri, 2002). Liliweri (2002) suggests dividing culture into two elements: material and nonmaterial. Material culture is any material object produced and used by humans; such as diversity in the diet intake, house architecture, fashion trend, and so forth. While the so-called non-material culture is the idea or ideas that follows a group of people with full consciousness; such as beliefs, values, norms, and languages.

### **The Perks of Knowing Different Cultures**

Changing times within the last few decades is what has led to the inevitability of interactions between cultures worldwide. A country, for example, will strive as much as possible to be able to survive from which one of them is by working together to cooperation in various fields such as economy, politics, and culture for the life of a country will not be able to take place smoothly without any interference from other parties. Similarly, the survival of a group of people in a country cannot survive if it does not attempt to cooperate with other groups.

To do so, people have to learn new language and its culture for the sake of creating a harmonious relationship that can accelerate the process of mutual exchanges between them. This is because human beings are social creatures who are interdependent to each other; therefore, their survival can be guaranteed only by interacting with other human beings. Interactions between a human to another is not limited to fulfilling their needs, indeed, people need to communicate

in other ways. For instance, they should also know and maintain each other's culture for the preservation of their cultures.

In addition, Liliweri (2002) adds there are several major reasons to learn new cultures of others; namely: to open up and expand relationships, to increase self-awareness, to raise our awareness of ethics in society, to promote peaceful environment and to try reducing conflicts that occur in the community, to get ready to face advancement in technology and communication, and to prepare to face the globalization era.

It can be concluded that either material or nonmaterial cultures as a result of humans' work and creativity which are introduced, studied and disseminated in a community and are passed down to the next generation can differentiate each group to another, which would become the characteristic and the identity of a particular community. It is very important to have a community that knows itself in a way to recognize and to preserve its own cultural identity in order to survive. However, as the era globalizes in which interactions between cultures are inevitable, it cannot be denied that one group of society should also learn the culture of others for the sake of survival and mutual relations. Therefore, it would be better if people are being open to a new or even foreign culture so that intercultural tolerance can be achieved for the sake of mutual relations, not to mention the children. This course will be indispensable for Indonesia and other Asian countries since they are preparing themselves for the era of AEC (ASEAN Economic Community), in which every layer of society will be in contact with other people of different languages and cultures in order to establish cooperation in many fields, which not only will revolve around the Asian region but also from around the world, including Uganda.

## RESEARCH METHOD

A survey was conducted to check children's responses after being explained by the foreigner through distributing a questionnaire to the students of class 5 and 6 to find out about their responses after having

the foreign student in their classes. The questionnaires that were filled and given back were 48. There were 25 from class 5 and 23 of them were from class 6. The questionnaire distributed to the children comprised several questions that needed to be responded by them. They are as follows:

- a. What have you learned from the foreigner's explanation about the culture of Uganda?
- b. What do you like about the foreigner's explanation regarding the culture of Uganda? Why?
- c. Do you like making friend with the foreigner?
- d. Is there anything you dislike about the foreigner? Why?

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

As noted previously, after the foreign guest from Uganda was visiting some of the classes that have been determined, both male and female students were distributed a questionnaire to determine their responses to what were described by the foreigner, their opinions about what were the preferred explanation taught by the foreign guest, and whether there was anything liked or disliked from the guest and why. Here are further results of the survey which have been collected and analyzed.

### What Children Learned and Liked about Uganda's Culture

As aforementioned, there were 48 children of elementary school who filled the questionnaire. There were 25 children from class 5, 17 of them were male students and 8 were female ones. Whereas class 6 comprised only 23 students, from which 11 were male and 12 were female.

First of all, when asked to grade 5 of elementary school students about what they liked regarding the explanation of foreign guest who had come to their classes, there are three male students and three female students who said that they liked the national language of the guest. Some of them added that the national language of the foreign guest was funny and interesting, while others liked it because besides being funny when

spoken, they could also learn a new language at the same time. In contrast to the response shown by the students of grade 5 of elementary school, there is only one female student in 6<sup>th</sup> grade who liked the national language of the foreign guest. No male students chose the language of the guest.

Second of all, of the 17 students in grade 5 who filled out a questionnaire, 7 male children liked the explanation of the national song of the foreign guest who visited their class, while of 8 female students; there were only 4 children who liked the same thing. Most of them preferred the national anthem that was introduced to them because the song was interesting, beautiful, nice, and fun. On the other hand, of the 11 students and 12 students in 6<sup>th</sup> grade who were visited by the foreign guest from Uganda, there were quite a lot of students who also loved the national anthem performed by the guest. From the data collected, there were 8 male students and 7 female students who said that the song was one of the interesting parts explained by the foreigner. Many of the male children mentioned that the national anthem sung by the foreign guest was nice, funny, loud, and had a nice tone; while the female ones called that song nice, fun, hard but funny, and one of them liked it because she also liked to sing.

Third of all, only very few of the children from grade 5 and grade 6 elementary school stated that they liked the explanation of the foreign guest about the national flag. Based on the data analysis, only 1 of the female 5<sup>th</sup> graders was impressed with the national flag of the foreign guest.

In the meantime, in addition to the things mentioned above, there are some other things that were also favored by students of both 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grades from the foreigner who visited their classes. Some of them commented on the personal traits of the guest, many of which were positively impressed with the characteristics of foreign guest. From the data that had been analyzed, there were 2 of the 5<sup>th</sup> grade students who mentioned that she was nice and polite.

There was also a mention that she was cute. There were also 4 female students of class 6 who commented on the characteristic of the foreigner, where 1 of them liked her because she could teach and explain it well, while 3 other female students stated that she was patient, kind, and that she could explain her cultures clearly and slowly.

Moreover, out of 17 of 5<sup>th</sup> grade students, 2 of whom loved the symbol of the country which was taught by the guest because according to them, it was nice and interesting. 3 male students of grade 6 said that they were interested when the guest explained about the symbol of the country because it was funny.

Other than that, the traditional game from Uganda introduced by the guest also attracted the attention of the children. Among the 5<sup>th</sup> graders, 4 male students revealed that the game exhibited by the foreigner was fun, while 3 female students also found the game fun and exciting. However, among the 6<sup>th</sup> graders, no one mentioned about the game. Moreover, students of both class 5 and 6 were also described about the state of Uganda in general, and there is only 1 response that emerged from a male 5<sup>th</sup> grader and 1 from a male 6<sup>th</sup> grader, who commented that he liked it because it increased his knowledge. Additionally, the foreign guest also taught children the location of her country by showing it on the map. Regarding this, there was 1 male student in grade 5 who was attracted to her explanation and 1 male student and 1 female student of grade 6 who also felt the same way, but without any further comment or reason. The latter, when the guest explained about her family in Uganda, there was 1 female student who liked her explanation but also without any reason added.

All in all, from the analysis of the survey mentioned above, most of the students of class 5 and 6 of the elementary school were happy and excited when visited by a foreign guest from another country with culture that is much different from theirs. They looked quite open, too, when receiving the foreigner in their classes which can be evidenced by the many things they liked

about what were taught by the guest about her country and its culture. The attitudes shown by those children indicated that they were quite enthusiastic when meeting and interacting with the stranger who was also quite different from them, judging from the origin and culture.

### **Students' Responses toward Foreign Guest Who Introduced Them with Uganda's Culture**

The results of the survey to the elementary school students of class 5 and 6 have accumulated that the majority of either male or female students from both classes responded positively to the foreign guest who came to their classes. Those positive responses are characterized by the diversity of things they liked from all the cultural knowledge explained by the foreign guests. Viewed from the majority of the answers revealed in their questionnaires that have been presented in the previous section, they felt excited and thrilled with the arrival of a foreigner. Of the 17 students in grade 5 of elementary school, almost all of them liked the foreign guest and 2 of them expressed their love for the guest who was very friendly and they were also pleased when taught the language of Uganda; while 8 female 5<sup>th</sup> graders also liked it because the language was funny. However, one thing is quite shocking when the students of grade 5 were asked whether there was anything disliked about the foreigner or the explanation she gave. Roughly, most of them said all their activities in the classroom were very pleasant, hence, there was no unwelcome reception of guest's arrival because of her being friendly, fun, willing to play together, and amusing. Furthermore, there was 1 student who was attracted by the typical food of Uganda.

Nevertheless, from the questionnaires collected in class 5, there were 2 male students who did not like the foreigner because she was black, 1 male student who was not interested in her explanation because they did not really understand the language she used and 1 more male student felt so because the foreign guest was considered not

cool. Both of the latter reasons can be considered quite a normal feeling especially when people first met a stranger. Some people would be highly subjective because they could not be forced to like other strangers or foreigners in an instant. The reason for their dislike because of the skin color, however, was quite surprising because such small children have been affected by the negative stereotypes which tend to be commonly disputed by adults. This shows the importance of learning and understanding the diversity between one human to another which also requires a sense of tolerance.

### **CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION**

By conducting this community service program, it can be concluded that the majority of elementary school students have a pretty good response toward the presence of a foreign guest who visited their school and shared knowledge about her origin and culture. Their positive responses to the activities of the guest's sharing of cultural knowledge were evidenced by liking the things described or taught as the foreign guest interacted with them in the classroom; such as when they mentioned that her language was funny and interesting, the national anthem sung by the guest was exciting, interesting, funny and had a nice tone, or about the nature or personality of the guest which was kind, courteous, and patient.

The most striking feature from the results of the analysis was the comments submitted by the students which implied that they were being quite open with other people who had very much different culture than their own culture. It can also be stated that they were eager to learn new cultures because they were interested in interacting with other people whom they do not commonly encounter in everyday life. Thus, it is generally understood that with children's attitude of openness against other people with different cultures, the nature of mutual and intercultural tolerance between people will be more easily developed.

It is also noticeable that the displeasure to the skin color of the foreign guest who visited their class, or rather absence of

multicultural awareness to diversity could cause significant estrangement between humans of different cultures if such a thing is not immediately addressed. Therefore, to overcome the problem of lack of tolerance like this, many parties involved in children education should carefully handle it by giving understanding and enough cultural knowledge that generally humans are different to one another when seen from color or shape, origin, or culture or even habits that vary themselves. Generally, all humans are the same, because they are all social beings who need each other, from which to be able to establish harmonious relationships they necessarily need to have a sense of awareness of differences and ought to have tolerance towards one and the other for the sake of peaceful life.

Among some of the obstacles encountered during this community service activity, the first and the most important one is the lack of coordination with the person in charge in the targeted schools. This is notably related to the small number of questionnaires returned to the executor of this activity so that the process of data analysis could not be fully achieved. Suggestions may be disclosed if other writers are interested in doing similar program, which is to improve and maintain good communication process between the two parties so that both can prevent unwanted things. The second obstacle was due to the low level of education of the students which is still at the level of primary education. The cultural knowledge could only be given at surface level, such as language, flag, symbol of the country, and national anthem. The suggestion for this is that the similar program can also be implemented in schools with higher education level, as in the junior and senior high schools, as well as at the college level. This is because the students with higher level of education are more likely to interact directly with the people of different cultures and even at the international level.

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