

## BAKING AND BASEBALL IN INDONESIA: REALIA IN TEACHING AMERICAN CULTURE IN INTENSIVE ENGLISH PROGRAM FOR UNIVERSITY FACULTY/STAFF

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### Abstract

In this reflection, the author reports on his experience teaching English through American culture to Indonesian university educators during three week intensive programs in Indonesia. The author implemented culturally meaningful activities based upon the use of realia, or objects that connect language and on-the-ground reality of native speakers for the foreign language learner. Baseball, baking, the card game Uno, and poetry proved to be successful vehicles for learning. Additionally, emailing between the class and the author's contacts in North America provided participants with "case studies" of real Americans/native speakers of English. Such interactions with actual Americans may provide a useful contrast/compliment to the stereotypical images of Americans disseminated by mass media. Lastly, while the teaching of English and American culture overseas may be controversial to some, this reflection argues that the careful selection of pedagogies can facilitate mutually enriching exchanges. Insights into appropriate realia, subsequent activities, and teaching considerations in Indonesia may be gleaned from this reflection by pedagogues and practitioners alike.

**Keywords:** EFL, Indonesia, cultural exchange, realia

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### INTRODUCTION

Having had the privilege of twice teaching English in Indonesia to university faculty/staff, I reflect in this paper on the strategies I employed using objects brought from the U.S. to facilitate participants' engagement with culturally-meaningful lessons on American culture and American English. In this reflection, I overview the activities of our class's routine, but limit its focus to the practices and theories behind our use of transoceanic email, the use of cooking and baseball realia and simulation, and our playing of an American-style card game. Afterwards, I discuss various aspects of teaching to this specific population, predominantly Muslim Indonesian educators. My pedagogies were informed by my understanding of negative perceptions towards American culture and my attempts to disrupt them, on which I reflect in the conclusion. It is my hope that the present reflection provides insights for fellow practitioners engaged in EFL language teaching that is grounded in rich cultural learning.

### SETTING AND PARTICIPANTS

Through a partnership between my home university and a university in Indonesia, I traveled to Indonesia during the summer of 2014 and 2015 to teach a three week class. For the purposes of this reflection, the years are frequently elided, however teaching twice at the same university allowed me to dramatically improve my pedagogies. My course was one of two courses offered in this intensive English Camp. Participants were university staff,

faculty, administrators, and civil servants from a variety of departments spanning the English to Fisheries departments. The camp took place during their vacation time, which evinces the high value the participants placed on improving their English skills. Thirty-five participants were divided into two classes based on the results of a placement exam. My course, the lower of the two levels, focused on learning General English. I was informed that I was the first native speaker of English that many of the participants had ever met.

As for myself, a doctoral student of foreign language pedagogy, these experiences represented my first in teaching English abroad. During the year preceding this experience, I had taught courses in English grammar and composition within an Intensive English Program. My teaching approach is directly related to my learning of foreign language. That I had studied Arabic extensively intrigued my majority-Muslim class participants. My developing awareness that some Indonesians perceive American culture to be Islamophobic, xenophobic, and superficial, was central in my pedagogical choices and my desire to participate in this program generally.

The class was held in a classroom in the business school in 2014 and in a classroom in the yet-to-be opened hotel and conference center located on campus. Both classrooms were equipped with a projector to which I could hook up my laptop and project my screen on the blank wall. I made use of the internet connection in order to show pre-selected Youtube clips. I admit that I had

previously taken for granted the presence of reliable electricity throughout my education until the power went out during one of my class periods. The outage forced me to implement a lesson orally as blackboards were no longer visible. In hindsight, I am grateful for the experience because it taught me to be adaptable and calm in my teaching. Class took place for six and a quarter hours each day before and after lunch, and twice each day, a tasty dessert-snack and water/coffee was provided daily.

### **GENERAL DAILY PROCEDURES AND REALIA MATERIALS**

During my first summer, I relied heavily on an adapted textbook whose materials were developed for a similar intensive program operated by my university in China. Topics in the materials covered issues of education, food culture, the history of American music, American Indians and immigration, etc. These units were designed with vocabulary lessons, reading passages on cultural topics, listening activities with accompanying audio files, pronunciation lessons, and communicative activities and games. Including a wide variety of learning formats and activities aimed to accommodate the participants' various learning personalities and preferences, knowing that a participant's willingness to communicate can fluctuate lesson to lesson and task to task (Cao, 2014). That English-only methods of vocabulary instruction were used is supported in research by adults' strong preference for English only vocabulary instruction (Lee & Macaro, 2013). By the second summer, I had decided to focus on a few selected units rather than spanning the breadth. Furthermore, I incorporated music, particularly folk music, into the lesson on a daily basis given the participants' love of music and singing, which had become obvious during bus rides and coffee breaks. Additionally, I noticed a need for instruction of idioms from my conversation with participants outside of class.

Our daily class schedule would include one idiom video five minutes in length which I had prepared earlier in the year. Afterwards, we would study one song, watch a performance video clip, followed by reading and discussing the lyrics. I would replay the video while participants followed the scrolling lyrics and sang along. Listening discrimination exercises have proven useful in the development of pronunciation (Baker, 2014). On a near daily basis, we would use print outs of an article from the website News ELA ([newsela.com](http://newsela.com)), a news source designed for English language learners which allows for the user to set the text's difficulty level and complete corresponding quizzes based on an article's content.

These activities prefaced the main lessons of grammar and culture, the former relying on my prepared power-point explanations and activities, and the latter, using the various readings and materials from the textbook. Class would typically conclude by either writing a series of questions to one of my family members, or reading their responses from the previous day's questions that we had emailed to him/ her, which will be further discussed in what follows. After class, we would join the other class's participants for water, coffee/

tea, dessert and a snack (before prayer time) before departing for the evening.

These university-provided refreshments offered time for peers to mingle and for the participants to teach their American lecturers about Indonesian cuisine and culture. As articulated by Livermore (2010), the symbolic value of eating together may be crucial in cross-cultural interactions; it, "demonstrates a respect for ... a culture and its people and it helps in developing relationships with colleagues in another context" (p. 52). In hindsight, I sense that eating together helped to decrease foreign language learning anxiety. Research has been conducted on the direct negative relationship between anxiety and the effectiveness of an intensive English program, as well as its impact on students' academic engagement (Cheng, Fox, and Zumbo, 2014). Ironically, students may experience increased anxiety when speaking with one another (Baldauf, Moni, and Tran, 2013). As such, the regularized sharing of snack time contributed pedagogically, and functioned to develop the "cultural intelligence" of both the American instructors and Indonesian participants (Livermore, 2010), all of which I had not previously anticipated.

The use of realia, or culturally, linguistically saturated objects, is indispensable for helping the foreign language student connect their language learning to reality (Brown, 2007, p. 193). Nonetheless, it is not uncommon that social studies teachers of English Language Learners fail to include realia or hands on materials (Short, 2002). For these reasons, I sought to make realia a pillar of my pedagogy. In my understanding of what counts as realia, a tangible object like a ball or card game can be culturally saturated, as can a poem or email from/ for native speakers. Such artifacts can then be explored and unpacked for cultural significance and language acquisition

### **COLOR-VOWEL CHART AND "DUO" CARD GAME**

Having identified vowel pronunciation as one of the participants' biggest challenges to comprehensible speaking, my colleague and I sought to address this need through an innovative, effective card game. My colleague, well-experienced with English language teaching, had brought with her to Indonesia learning tools for this purpose: the color vowel chart and a related card game called "Duo". The color vowel chart (<http://americanenglish.state.gov/resources/color-vowel-chart>) pairs the major vowel sounds in American English with a color and object whose pronunciation incorporates that vowel sound (e.g. rose coat, blue moon). In order to reinforce the unity of these categories and to become familiar with the most common words in American English using these sounds, a card game called "Duo" has been developed and modeled off of the well-known American card game "Uno" (<http://elts.solutions/product/color-vowel-duo-card-game-plus/>). In "Duo", many participants can play at once, saying aloud the vowel category (rose coat), then read aloud the words printed on the cards. Ultimately, the game and color vowel chart was addictively fun for participants and

pedagogically useful. Vowel categories served throughout the program as a wonderful reference point when questions of pronunciation arose.

### **EMAILING WITH FAMILIAR AMERICANS**

Amongst the first lessons after diagnostics was a lesson on question formation. Relying on powerpoint, we learned the functions and forms of question words (Who, What, How, etc.), then practiced them with one another in short dialogues. Next, participants applied their knowledge to a real situation with a native speaker of English, facilitated through the use of the internet. I projected several images of an individual (who happened to be a family member/friend) onto the large screen and informed the class of his/her first name. Without my class's knowledge, I had previously asked my family's participation in this exercise, based upon its success and interest in the previous year. Thus, my family was aware of these activities and was on the lookout for the email, able to respond within twenty-four hours.

Upon introducing a family member, I shared nothing about the individual, but rather encouraged students to form inquiries about the individual's marital status, occupation, living arrangement, hobbies, etc. Collectively, we formulated questions as a class, which I typed out while projecting on the screen and reading orally. My simultaneous fielding of suggestions for questions and typing allowed me to display, monitor, and correct suggestions when needed for the purposes of the participants' learning. It also allowed me to actually prepare the questions to be emailed, of which I made the point to always email the list of class-generated questions to my family member's email address in class, on screen, in real time. I wanted to render concrete the reality of this exercise so as to eliminate any ambiguity whether these questions were sent to real native speakers of English. Questions ranged from the superficial (who is the man in the photo with you), to the very personal (what is the purpose of your life; describe your brother in five words). As instructor, I decided to censor nothing. As such, this exchange was a true learning experience for individuals of both Indonesian and American culture.

On the theoretical level, this exercise can be seen as "authentic discourse length language" contextualized application of the participant's newly acquired knowledge, which provided an enhanced opportunity to gain more insights into the culture (Omaggio, 2001, 161). The participants were able to see realistic uses of American English in emails, which do not necessarily use standard English grammar and vocabulary. It also allowed women students to gain insights into the lives of real American women, a demographic of American society I obviously fail to represent. This activity was informed by an approach in TESOL that advocates the teaching and learning of culture "from the bottom up". In other words, a postmodern concept of culture holds that culture should be taught in non-essentializing ways, and should be represented in the life perspective of the users/members of that culture (Atkinson and Sohn, 2013).

While I have no doubt that my Indonesian participants are inundated with American/ English cultural products and stereotypes, by presenting my participants with actual Americans, it can be theorized that I was presenting them with intrinsic case studies of communication from actual Americans (Stake, 2005), in which they learned from specific examples rather than abstractions. At the same time, intrinsic case studies, "can be seen as a small step toward grand generalization" (Stake, 2005, p. 448) which in this case would be developing an understanding of American culture and language. Such case studies, I hope, can be compared and contrasted with the mass media stereotypes of Americans.

This exercise depended entirely upon reliable access to email and on pre-planned cooperation from native speakers. Had the internet signal been strong enough to support a Skype signal, I would have initiated virtual chats with family members despite the twelve hour time difference. The internet can provide ample opportunities for communication with native speakers of English, while similar opportunities for classroom penpal communication exchange can be arranged through the Peace Corps (<http://www.peacecorps.gov/wws/classroom/correspondence/>).

### **BAKING IMAGINARY COOKIES**

Before departing North America, I coopted my mother's expertise in locating inexpensive, lightweight cookbook-booklets. I transported twenty copies in my suitcase to Indonesia. Each cost twenty-five to fifty cents and contained 20 or so recipes around a thematic dish, such as "cookies", "vegetables", or "potatoes". The cookbooks were light in text and heavy in graphics. They were used in a lesson within our food and gastronomic culture unit, in which participants identified and categorized American foods by meal. Next, we learned cooking verbs via the Total Physical Response (TPR) approach. We also discussed briefly the differences between the American and international systems of measurement (1 liter is equivalent to x gallons, etc.). Subsequently, I distributed the cookbooks and instructed the class to peruse them. Participants were to choose one appealing recipe and read it in order to become an expert chef in its preparation. Thanks to the internet, I was able to pull up images of unfamiliar ingredients. In pairs, one participant read aloud the directions to his/her partner, who then performed the gestures of the steps listed in the recipe.

Overall, baking imaginary cookies, etc. was an enjoyable activity, and the participants were thrilled to receive a copy of an American cookbook, even if some of the ingredients called for in the recipe remain unavailable in this corner of Indonesia. Women from the other, advanced class, heard about the cookbooks and approached me for extra copies of cookbooks, which I distributed until all were distributed. A similar exercise was designed with baseball cards, which will be discussed in detail.

**“THE GIVING TREE” (POEM)**

One example of a song or poem incorporated into the class was Shel Silverstein’s poem “The Giving Tree”. The poem uses the metaphor of a tree for one’s parents and the need to express one’s gratitude. That it is written for a native speaker child but contains adult themes, meaning that it was suitable for serving as a type of extensive reading and for incidental vocabulary acquisition, which can help increase learner motivation (Webb and Macalister, 2013). Before studying the text itself, we watched the original, grainy 1973 animated version, narrated by the poet himself. Previous viewing of a tree’s trunk, leaves, branches, etc. prior to being exposed to the orthographic form facilitated form-meaning mapping by reducing the processing tasks asked of the learner, which is consistent with the Type of Processing Resource Allocation Model (TOPRA) model of input based processing (Barcroft, 2014, p. 28). Pedagogically, my decision to incorporate this text was grounded in the semiotic approach of Kiss and Weninger (2013), who argued that EFL texts should ultimately be more than a vehicle of information; it should be a conduit for greater cross-cultural discussion and understanding.

**LEARNING THE RULES OF (AND PLAYING) BASEBALL**

Several readings focused on the importance of sports culture in American English and in the American imagination broadly. Baseball in particular was a theme that provided rich content in idioms, cultural history, and vocabulary. The sport also represented a particular lacuna in the participants’ knowledge set and a point of common curiosity. We studied the general features and rules of baseball, which were solidified through watching video clips that showcased the best feats of athleticism made by baseball players. Participants enjoyed the visuals even if the announcer’s words were beyond comprehension. Additionally, the baseball cards which I had brought with me provided participants the ability to read the few sentences on the back of the card that describes the player’s hometown and background. For the sake of simplicity, we ignored the players’ professional statistics.

One point of dialogic learning, or what could be viewed as my own culturally inappropriate teaching, was when I discussed my own strong dislike of a particular team, the New York Yankees. Explaining that disdain for the Yankees is ancient and spans the country, I displayed the handbill cover of a well-known American musical entitled, “Damn Yankees”. Within American culture, the word “damn” has evolved into a totally secular meaning and quotidian usages. The evidence of which can be found not only in the title of famous Broadway musicals, but also in national political discourse. Nonetheless, when explaining the term to an inquiring audience of English language learners and explaining its usages in religious contexts, the term was culturally translated by some of these Indonesian Muslims as strongly inappropriate. Unfortunately, my own deficit of Indonesian culture and language did not help to facilitate an accurate translation. This moment

proved to be one of cultural dissonances, or incongruences, to say the least.

Within our baseball unit came the highlight of the entire program, our playing of baseball on the beach during a field trip. The English Language Camp generously concluded with a field trip to a beautiful tourist island with white sand beaches surrounded by colorful coral and fish. Using materials both brought and found, we succeeded in organizing a game just as American children have done for over one hundred years. We used a tennis ball, which allowed for maximum ball travel, bits of palm fronds and coconut shells for bases, and no gloves. Baselines were drawn in the sand and no fences were used for demarcating home runs. Each team lacked an outfielder and an infielder (or two), which made participants chase the ball farther, thus rendering the game more fun. As for the bat, I had found on campus two yard (meter)-long pieces of lightweight bamboo that had fallen from the campus landscaping. I attribute to its light-weighted-ness both the participants’ success in swinging and hitting the ball with ease, as well as the two Americans’, both accustomed to a much heavier bat, twice striking out!

Despite the rudimentary equipment, the group of Indonesian educators played baseball for the first time in their lives, becoming acquainted with the joys (and disappointments) of the sport often referred to as, “America’s national past-time”. All in all, the game lasted two complete innings. Even merely reflecting on this event, playing baseball in paradise, brings a smile to my face.

**MISCELLANEOUS ASPECTS OF TEACHING INDONESIAN ACADEMICS/ EDUCATORS**

One issue to which I felt obligated to respond according to my cultural norms was requests for my attention beyond the dates of the program. A few participants politely requested my proofreading over participants’ academic work. I understood the need to publish academic work in English amongst non-native speakers of English, and the very specific writing conventions demanded by scientific writing (Buckingham, 2014). I felt that I had to be direct and honest, replying that as a student myself, I would not have sufficient time to review manuscripts during the year. Nonetheless, the requests can only be interpreted as a sign of our friendship and trust that had developed so rapidly. Whether or not my polite but direct response was culturally-appropriate eluded me, yet it was crucial for me to be forthright according to my cultural and personal standards.

**CRITICISM OF ENGLISH TEACHING IN INDONESIA AND CONCLUSIONS**

Some Indonesians would argue that the teaching of English threatens the Indonesian language (Onishi, 2010). Similarly, some theorists posit that “inner circle countries” advance their own interests to outer circle countries using English language teaching as a vehicle (Kachru, 1997). Other scholars have written that communicative approaches to teaching foreign language inherently serve the interests of neoliberal government policies and orientations simply because of their overlapping goals. A nation developing the English

competencies of its population furthers its own economic interests by simultaneously developing a workforce capable of competing on a global market (Motha and Lin, 2014, p. 348).

I find merit in such arguments and appreciate related Freirian exhortations to understand whose interests are being served through education (Freire, 1970). Nonetheless, I maintain that the intentions of this program and the selected pedagogies were not to train automatons in an English-speaking global economy. Moreover, the results evidence that more was delivered. The objects I brought and left in Indonesia, I would argue, represent some of the best aspects of American culture: sociality through fun, competition, and food. Through participants' authentic interactions with members of my actual family, I desired that my participants develop their English proficiencies alongside a realistic view of American culture grounded in their first-hand experience with Americans rather than formed on the basis of caricatures. Thus, in conclusion, despite the undeniable inequalities and problems of a neoliberal world, to reduce the pedagogical practices implemented within this program to mere economics would be highly contentious. Teaching in Indonesia was transformative and incredibly enjoyable for me and my family, and I hope for my participants as well. The experience was greatly enriched by realia and a willing network of native speaker emailers.

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