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OBSERVING THE CULTURE BARRIERS IN THE ENGLISH CLASSES AT THE ROHINGYA REFUGEE CAMP IN ACEH: PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

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Abstract

Rohingya refugees who are being sheltered in Aceh Timur district, Indonesia, for the past year are taught English to prepare their future settlement in third countries determined by UNHCR (United Nation High Commission for Refugee). Therefore, to know how to use English in daily conversations is very important for them as their preparation to live abroad. At the moment, these refugees are taught by the local English teachers (Acehnese) or mentors at the camps. Consequently, some cultural barriers from both groups were observed in the learning and teaching process. Therefore, this study reports these cultural barriers faced by the mentors and the refugees in the class. The design of this research is qualitative; observations and note taking were done during the teaching and learning process at the camps to collect data. This research is expected to give knowledge to the obstacles and effects due to cultural diversity faced by refugees in learning English with their mentors at the camps. The results show that etiquette and social habit were the noticeable cultural barriers for both the mentors and the refugees during the teaching and learning processes. Meanwhile, the use of body language and religious belief became the similar culture disclosed by both groups. These similarity benefits the teaching and learning processes in the class because they assisted the mentors in explaining the topics being learnt and enabled the refugees to understand the instruction from the mentors.

Keywords: *Rohingya, refugees, observation, cultural barriers, communication.*

INTRODUCTION

The Indonesian province of Aceh has become a refuge of last resort for stateless Muslims Rohingya fleeing targeted violence and persecution in Myanmar's Western Rakhine state of Arakan (Lindblom, *et al.*, 2015) (see Figure 1). The Indonesian government has allowed them to stay for one year before they can find another country to host them. Based on the data from the office of Langsa Immigration in 2015, there are 290 Rohingya refugees who are staying at four camps in East Aceh, Langsa and North Aceh (Missbach, 2016). They undergo immigration collaborated with UNHCR (United Nation High Commission for Refugee) for legal protection, while the logistic, medical treatment and food supply are provided by IOM (International Organization Migration) and other partners and NGOs (Non-Government Organizations).



Figure 1. Myanmar's Western Rakhine state of Arakan (highlighted in red) (source: www.rfa.org).

One of the problems faced by the local government and other NGOs in helping them is language barrier that occurs between the government and the refugees, including the third author herself who works with the UNHCR as a Senior Protection Assistant. The difficulty lies in the fact that the refugees cannot speak both Indonesian and English. Although there are only a few people who have the ability to understand English, it does not help much in communicating with the majority of the Rohingya refugees who help them at the camps.

Besides, Rohingya refugees who are being sheltered in Aceh Timur district, Indonesia, for the past year are taught English to prepare their future settlement in third countries determined by UNHCR (United Nation High Commission for Refugee). Therefore, to know how to use English in daily conversations is very important for them not just for communication with the people who are helping them at the camps, but also for their preparation to live abroad. At the moment, these refugees are taught by the local English teachers (Acehnese) or mentors at the camps.

A publication on the teaching and learning process between the mentors and the refugees in Aceh Timur has been recently published. The book entitled *School for Refugees (SFR), the Shelter of Happiness* was written by Dompot Dhuafa (2016). However, the book explains on the teaching of English to the young refugees aged 5-10 years old. Simple methods are presented in the book. Thus, a study on the adult learners has not been investigated.

During our visit to the camp, cultural barriers are seen in the learning and teaching process between the Acehnese mentors and the Rohingya refugees. It occurs daily when they do not understand the intended message put forward by their interlocutors. The greater the differences between them, the greater are the chances for cross-cultural miscommunication to occur. According to Adler (2008), cross-cultural communication occurs when a person from one culture sends a message to a person from another culture. Although the NGOs and other partners have given English courses for the refugees, the cultural factors and their low ability to use English are assumed as the barriers for them in improving their English communication during the courses at the camps. Therefore, we intend to further observe the cultural barriers faced by the English mentors and the refugees in learning English. It is hoped that the outcome of this study can be input for mentors who are teaching the refugees (not just in Aceh but also in other places around the world) and be of assistance in improving communication with the Rohingyas in the English classroom.

METHODS

The design of this research was qualitative. With consent from the mentors and the refugees, the third author observed and took notes in four meetings of the English classes at the camp. The classes are held in a tent that was situated near their camp. We wanted to describe the naturally occurring phenomena (i.e. teaching and learning process) without any experimental manipulation (Seliger & Shohamy, 1989). Our focus was on the cultural barriers from both the refugees and mentors that can be observed during the teaching and learning process.

The English classes are held three times a week for about two hours (starts after the *Dzuhur* prayer and ends before the *Adzan* (call for prayer) for the *Ashar* prayer) in a tent for the males and in a room for the females. It is on every Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. The topics taught are simple daily conversations such as greetings, introduction, invitations, making requests, buying and

selling at the market, numbers (especially on money currency), etc.; these topics are to help them prepare for their future settlement in the countries determined by UNHCR later on.

The refugees taking the English classes were around 15 – 39 years old and there were thirty of them when the data was collected. Most of them can read and write in their mother tongue, but they barely understand English. None of them went formal schools while they were in Myanmar because there were severe restrictions imposed towards them by the Myanmar government (Islam, 2006). During this study, only six out of eight mentors were observed since the other two mentors were not at the camp during the data collection that was conducted that week. They were four males and two females who were approximately 26 – 30 of age. They were teachers of the state and Islamic schools in Langsa. All have obtained their Bachelor's degree from various universities in Aceh. All of the mentors are qualified enough to teach English to the refugees.

In collecting the data of this research, the writers used observations and note taking during three meetings of the English classes. The observation sheet used in this research was adapted from Farabi (2015) on the cultural barriers in English language learning, namely in the aspects of body language, religious beliefs, etiquette and social habits. The third writer closely watched and took notes of the classroom events, happenings or interactions, which were related to the aim of this research. She acted as a non-participant observer, an individual who is not directly involved with the administration or conduct of a particular program (Posavac, 1997). She primarily observed and took notes, and had no specific role as a participant in the process (Bernard, 1988). The results were interpreted in a narrative way, which means that they are reported in the form of explanation containing the real condition from the observation results.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Based on the results of direct observation at the camps and during the English class, all of the cultural barriers are not *barriers* in teaching and learning English for the refugees. The barriers are basically found in the aspects of etiquette and social habits. The refugees occasionally showed their activities which were deemed unpleasant by the mentors, such as spitting anywhere in front of the mentors, yelling at each other loudly, and touching others' heads. The Rohingyas have a habit of chewing betel leaves, they can chew these leaves all day long and this is done by the young and old. Chewing betel leaves requires the chewers to spit out excessive liquid that is produced by the leaves in the mouth. The habit of the Rohingyas in spitting these liquids anywhere on the floor was quite disturbing to the mentors while teaching. They have been warned and taught appropriately to spit them outdoors in certain places (such as the bathrooms or near the garbage disposal); since these refugees do have to face the fact that once they settle in another country, the place may not have betel leaves. However, it took time for this habit to change. Acehese people also chew betel leaves but this is done during certain hours, such as after meals and the excessive liquid are spit out in bowls in which later are thrown away and the bowls washed.

Another habit by the Rohingyas was to talk loudly. They would call and talk to each other in class in loud voices. This is their common conduct. Then there was head touching; it was ordinary for them to touch each other's' head to show affection and appreciation. Therefore it was quite astonishing for the mentors to receive occasional action from the Rohingyas while teaching since this was not the habit of the Acehese. According to one of the mentors, the habit of wearing the *sarung* in the class was considered inappropriate since some of the mentors are female. The Acehese today also wear *sarung*, but this attire is worn at home or for prayers, but not to formal meetings such as in schools, offices, etc. Therefore, it was questionable for the Rohingya men when the mentors required them to not wear *sarung* to class because this was their daily customary attire back home.

Because the refugees in the class are also Muslim such as the Acehese, the aspect of religious beliefs was not a barrier in the teaching and learning process. The mentors found it easy to tell them about what they should or should not do based on Islam. This was grasped more easily by the refugees since they were very eager to learn more about their religion. When reminding and teaching the refugees about manners that can be accepted globally, it was easier to teach them through religion. Both the mentors and refugees respected the *adzan* when it is called for them to pray. Both would immediately stop on what they were doing and proceed to the praying hall.

The use of body language was also helpful to the mentors when giving the refugees in class instructions on tasks or explaining concepts. It was clearly observed that both the mentors and the refugees faced difficulty in giving explanations to understand certain words or action since they do not speak the same language, the Acehnese with Acehnese, Indonesian and English, and the refugees with the Rohingya language. Therefore, the use of body language in signaling and modeling were quite useful for the mentors and the refugees to understand each other.

CONCLUSION

From the culture barriers mentioned by Farabi (2005), only two aspects were deemed as barriers in the teaching and learning process in the English class by the mentors to the Rohingya refugees, which were etiquette and social habits. These were the habits of the Rohingya that became the impediment in the classroom for the mentors, which were eating and spitting betel leaves, talking loudly and touching other people's heads. Meanwhile, the aspects of religious beliefs and body language brought benefit to the mentors and refugees in the teaching and learning process. The mentors could teach the refugees by incorporating values of Islam in their teaching; and this is something that both groups can relate to. Body language also helped them to understand each other when words were incomprehensible by both parts.

These refugees are taught some of the tolerated habits in the Acehnese culture. However, the customary habits that have been bonded to them since their ancestors would take time to change in a new place. Despite that they have been living temporarily in Aceh for a year now, their habits from back home that are not common to the Acehnese are still conducted in their daily lives until today.

This paper only reports the preliminary findings from the observations and note takings from three class meetings of the mentors and refugees. Therefore, more extensive research is expected to be conducted in the future. These include to study in more detail on the cultural barriers in the classroom by conducting in depth interviews with both the mentors and the refugees. To comprehensively examine the English teaching and learning process in the classrooms is also suggested so that effective solutions like the use of specific module can be constructed to provide more appropriate methods and materials that are suitable for refugees.

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