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## 16. EXPLORING CULTURAL VALUES THROUGH REPRESENTATIONS OF AMERICAN POPULAR CULTURE PRODUCTS

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### INTRODUCTION

Most Indonesians would agree that someone is considered modern only if she has educated herself with a sound knowledge of English, either in reading, writing, listening and most importantly in speaking. Take for example radio announcers and television hosts who consider English as the top ranked communicative tool to attract audiences who thirst for educative and intelligent talk shows. In almost every interview with a well-known politician, film star or researcher, English vocabularies somehow springs out from their Indonesian based talks. It comes of no surprise, therefore, that an Indonesian is judged modern, educated and intelligent if she can speak in English fluently. It is for this reason then that English courses in Indonesia seem to have no end in flourishing in great numbers with the classical motive that it is for the betterment of education. In Yogyakarta alone – which is known as the city of education – there are more or less 30 English courses already listed in the local telephone book. The institutions, universities and teaching colleges or academies that also offer a faculty or program mastering on the English language, have not even added this number.

Although the English language has so many varieties, i.e. Hispanic, Irish, Scottish, Australian, British, and American English to mention a few – most Indonesians are only familiar with the British and American English. Indonesians regard that if someone can speak English with either a British or American accent or variety, then she is considered to already master the language. The programs such as the BBC and VOA radio programs as well as office box films may be products, which influenced the establishment of the phenomena.

It is interesting to note, however, that Indonesian speakers of English have purposively or accidentally acquired some cultural values of the origin of the English language. For example, those frequently using the English language tend to be more open to discussing things such as pre-marital sex, which to most Indonesians used to be considered as a taboo. Another example is in the kind of futuristic fashion as

though from outer space, which someone suddenly chooses to wear for music performances to symbolize that she is ready to tackle any frontier with her unique music.

Why do these happen? What is the explanation behind this with regards to the relationship between language and culture? This article discusses how Indonesians can appropriately apply the cultural values while actively speaking the English language. I believe it is important to give an attention to this, since it will become very irritating to know that an Indonesian having a minimum knowledge about the English language's cultural values may be misusing too many English vocabularies or expressions that are used in the wrong context of culture – just for the reason of trying to become a modern and educated-like person.

#### LANGUAGE AND CULTURE IN TEFL

The word culture comes from the Latin word *cultivare* from which the English 'cultivate' is also derived. Based on this concept, McOmie (1990:178) defines culture as "the result of the mass cultivation of a certain way of seeing, thinking, assuming, believing, and behaving in the members of a society". According to Wilson (1995:4), Gordon (1984:39) and Geertz (2003) culture is "all of the customs and practices" handed down from generation to generation such as the "churches, the state and the media,... standards of behavior, laws and conventional practices and customs. Understood also as the "texts and practices of everyday life" (Storey, 1996:2), according to Moran (cited in Zacharias, 2003:262) culture interrelates 5 (five) elements, i.e. products, practices, communities, perspectives and persons that cannot be separated with the dimensions of language. This is because language is used as a mediator in describing the five elements.

In TEFL, the teaching of the English language is seen as being intertwined with the teaching of the native speaker's culture. There is a recollection that "language as code reflects cultural preoccupations" (Kramsch, 2001: 4). In other words, language in itself is a culture because "culture is a vehicle by which cultural customs and ways of life are expressed in language (Bahri, 2003:155). Thus, it becomes a common knowledge to have the discussion of culture as a "feature entrenched in language teaching around the world" (Zacharias, 2003:261) in addition to the understanding that culture has become the "background" to the teaching of any language program that offers "speaking, listening, reading and writing" in English (Plastina, 2003:1).

#### RECOGNIZING POPULAR CULTURE

As implied in the introduction, learning and using the English language necessarily means knowing the culture behind the English words used so that it will cohere with the context conferred. Kramsch (2001:3) supports this when she illustrates

that language as a system of signs transmits state that, the way in which people use the s created meanings that are understandable o further explains that only the group can unde voice, accent, conversational style, gestures :

Because most Indonesians who do n learn English through the popular phrases he its popular culture's products, thus having mo carries; it is best to know firstly about the mea according to Wilson (1995:5) culture is divid classes) and the *common* (the culture of every Ages, the caste system have separated the carnivals, tavern drinking and folk tales.

Because of political democracy in the and the Industrial Revolution have ushered i replaced the term folk culture. Because mo produced – the term, *mass culture*, has develo that are mass-produced and/or shared throu everywhere. Petracca and Sorapure explain tl

absorbed at home watching tel or reading a magazine or new listening to the radio on the : work; going out to ... fast-fo and sports arenas; even noticin you on buildings and highway

Products such as popular music CDs, v their individual personality (Frith, 1992:175) and movies, which serve the ideally beautiful and adventurous hero, and a myriad of adv jeans that symbolizes the individual expressio McDonald's deliciously practical hamburger modern technology have make up the icons (Wilson, 1995:6). Although products of popul famous, they are transitory by nature, i.e. new replacing the images of years or seasons b favorites, for example the phrase 'guy' has recently 'funky'; and unknown entertainers what happened to Indonesia's *dangdut* sing



Ferry AFI. If these icons or symbols survive they can become high or elite culture, like what happened with Shakespeare's drama works and Elvis Presley's songs.

#### AMERICAN ENGLISH LANGUAGE AND POPULAR CULTURE

The English language can be understood as a product of symbols arranged in a culturally systematic way. Symbols are words, pictures or objects that may be manifested in the products of popular culture have become the sources used to elicit meaning into the receiver of the message. Selecting the appropriate symbols for an idea or object is a very important step in the communication process because poorly selected symbols will result in a confusing and misunderstanding message. Consequently, it is crucial that care must be taken to choose the symbols that will elicit responses in the mind of the message receiver because they should be similar to those intended by the source.

A common finding about Indonesian people is the quick engulfment of anything, which suggests American for the sake of modernity. In order to become 'funky' most teenagers tend to dress, speak and act like their American idols that are 'carefree', 'easygoing' and 'open-minded' or 'independent' by not realizing the fact that there is a cultural background to why those values exist. The girls would come to school wearing Calvin Klein jeans that Brooke Shields have once promoted to infer "I'll be the object of fascination" (Petraeca and Sorapure, 1998:70), combined with midi blouses which let others see their belly buttons and even wear make up to school that has 'whitening' lotions on them to support the idea that the user is western-like. Borrowing Chopkins' words,

There just seems to be a great desire to aspire to Western culture... Often an ad will be written in English because that is one way of flattering the audience: "You are smart, sophisticated and educated." I suppose that is also why the models tend to be white... (1998:111)

Whereas, the boys would dress themselves by applying gel to have 'spiky' hairstyle, or wear rolled up shirt sleeves, and smoke Marlboro cigarettes in order to show that they have an autonomous way of life. This independency and integrity of the individual is also in the minds of the teenagers when consuming Kit-Kat chocolate bars whose chiming advertisement says "Have a break - have a Kit Kat today" which is similar to McDonalds' products, "You deserve a break today... Set yourself free" and the American Express Visa's "You can have it the way you want it" (Fowles, 1998:70-71).

Another example is how four-'lovely'-letter English words; taught by Eddie Murphy in his comical movies, would often come out without shame to elders. Some

argue that it has influenced the quickly deteriorating culture that ought to speak with others within the generation detaches themselves from the culture of the older or those having a higher rank and status because both of their parents no longer have time nowadays, too busy with their work that they never had the chance to be learnt by the teenagers because they are, the teenagers think there is because it is like what they see on TV shows and Media Conference in Nashville, Tennessee the less time parents have with their children time with someone else or something else, so it exploded in its ramifications into more of our children's time (for 40) years ago if all these occurred when the family and place (1998:172).

In other words, popular culture can be (1998:4) through TV advertisements that are consumptive with these American products highly the concept of friendship, they eagerly have "a Coke and a Smile", or the import Johnson's baby Powder and Hallmark cards: grandparents, Dad, Mom and baby (Fowles, what is seen on TV and motion pictures are ...creating elements of shared convergence is facilitating the brand characters. The worldwide brand would have not been possible without picture education about the American West and the cowboy increasing color TV (Chopkins

Interestingly enough, the way these are welcome by the people who originally create fashion. One reason is that the American film are, mostly a portrayal of the 1980s culture, speech and fashion have superseded them 'copy-cat' teenagers strike out or even better

2000s. Another reason is that the teenagers do the 'American' things without really knowing the background values of why Americans have such a culture. Because of this, it is therefore worthwhile for us to know what values are actually behind the American culture that is expressed in the English language heard on the radio, behaviors seen on television, drama performances or read through novels.

#### VALUES REPRESENTED IN AMERICAN CULTURE

In analyzing America's cultural values and patterns Stewart and Bennet (1991:61) claim that the components: form of activity, form of relations to others, and perception of the self, usually represent the stereotype of Americans who are judged as 'carefree', 'easygoing' and 'open-minded' or 'independent' people. The following background of the values can be a stepping-stone for Indonesians who want to better understand the reason for why an American culture stands out as they are today.

##### Form of Activity

###### 1) Orientation to Action in Achieving a Goal:

The orientation to action is frequently conceived as the act of *decision-making*. For Americans casual conversations about goals, summer jobs, and extended travel may be justified as deciding on a career. In a more formal sense, defining a goal of what to do in the future with its clarifications serve as a guide to effective actions for Americans to have the responsibility for setting their own directions. For them, clarity is more preferable than ambiguity and contemplation should lead to action. It is for this reason that American children are encouraged early on to believe that they are the judges of what they want and should do. Even if they are shown unable to decide on something, they prize the illusion that they can.

A scene from the play *Death of a Salesman* shows this concept when the main character, out of his impossible outreach for a job promotion decides to plant a seed at night on his limited apartment's land. This shows the act of still having the hope that there is a future for his unsuccessful career. Other examples are how the classic character of *Huckleberry Finn* sees that it is far more important to pursue his decision of going "west" rather than living comfortably yet disciplined by his aunt, and how in every episode, Captain Kirk of *Star Trek* decides that there is always another "western" area or frontier waiting for him and his crews in outer space to help find a better living space for mankind's future.

In making decisions, Americans are shown as people who do not hesitate to consult a teacher or expert of any kind, because they perceive it as seeking for an advice to help them make up their minds. The decision-making for the American culture is, however, localized in the individual. As a comparison, a typical formal or semiformal group decision made by Indonesians who are groping for a voice,

preferably that of a chairperson, who will ex perceived by Americans as lacking leadersh

This most likely explains why in a c show their reluctance to express their indiv American open mind would compete for a ch for Americans is one sure way to motivate fruitful because "where there's a will, there's Unfortunately, for Indonesians the opposite: for winning a basketball game, for example, r the individual sacrificed his unique skills f whose concept of togetherness is thicker – they fail to be the winner.

The action of "getting things done" ( upon the value of goal orientation, too. Hen such as "How're you doing?" "I'm doing fine the American life that is affected by the p reason why heroes in American culture are al The adventure-film actor, Clint Eastwood, Stallone is a proven example of why they be Americans.

###### 2) Work, Play and Friendship:

With the important concept of "doir discussed above, Americans therefore, hig company during their retirement or old age, separating work from play, because work is to do though not necessarily enjoying it. Pl: drudgery of the regularity of work" (Stewar for enjoyment in its own right even thou seriousness of purpose that they spend on

The American's various compartm separate have also influenced the value of friendship that is centered on the office i relations with friends who participate in Americans can perform their work activitie

'Work and no play' or similarly 'play is greatly valued by the people. Seldom do activity during an outdoor family gatherin Murphy is never out of telling jokes. It se



culture as it is, because traditionally they feel that talking about work during their playtime and vice versa is a regular activity. Some even regard that working without giving out jokes will decrease their work creativity.

### 3) 'Time is Money' Management and Obligation:

Contemporary American values of time can be traced back to colonial days in Virginia where an early change in attitude toward time and labor occurred. The discovery of tobacco's profitable production in colonial Jamestown impelled agents of the Virginia Company to manipulate land and labor so they can maximize their production. By the 1620s, the concept of 'time thrift' and Benjamin Franklin's admonition, "remember that time is money" have, in particular, boosted the necessity of having clocks in every American households (Brown, 1976:43-44). Time thrift is the basis for measuring productivity by output per unit of time rather than by the quality of the product. As a consequence, Americans see the necessity of making sure they can always meet their own deadlines.

The orientation toward time is not culturally the same among different cultures. For example, Latin Americans orient themselves to the present time. Indonesians, by comparison usually orient themselves to the past and turn to tradition for guidance. The dominant Americans, often value the future more. In this case, Stewart and Bennet explain that the future for Americans is not measured in decades like the Brazilians but in a reachable projection (1991:74-75). Thus, it becomes customary for American employees to write out his own work objectives for the next year or so as a criterion to evaluate his performance. Americans are known to hold their obligations highly, which is why they usually set deadlines that are feasible.

The Indonesian's Javanese in this situation, in contrast, may be uncomfortable with this concept, since it is in opposite with the saying *alon-alon waton kelakon* – it's better to do things one at time at a slow but certain pace in order to achieve a more qualified or satisfactory result. It is no wonder that American guests are often bewildered to know that Indonesians would come to gatherings later than the appointed time. Consequently, Indonesians who already know the value of time would make their best effort to come to meetings earlier.

### Form of Relations to Others

#### 1) Social Status and Equality:

Although sociologists speak of class structure and status obligation in American society, most Americans see themselves as members of an egalitarian middle class (Stewart and Bennet, 1991:89). There are variations in parts of New England and in the Southeast, where the status and position occupied in the social structure carry influence, but generally in the American society – social background, money or power bestow fewer advantages than any other major society.

The concept of all middle class str motivation of bringing equality in their princ horizontal and conducted between presume is required between two persons of different tendency to establish an atmosphere of equa example, a commanding officer in the film: "pull his rank" nor "use his authority as a n officer is seated in an eye-to-eye level with

By contrast, the Indonesian majority would not dare look in the eyes of their Unfortunately, some Indonesians who want overdo the idea of equality. For example, a s with his teacher that respect towards the tea to achieve equality, some Indonesians may e corruption and nepotism to obtain individu see how the loyalty of members in an organi for unintelligible actions and promotions. T has equal talent and ability, hence, the emer the right opportunity instead of making adv

Lacking obligations to class and se move easily from one group to another as t and Bennet, 1991:93). For Americans, the n every five-year period to obtain a higher posi is highly valued by the community. In comp permanent job until it is time for them to re American strategy of 'always on the mov elsewhere, it is not a readily welcome action

#### 2) Informality, Directness and Friends

Based on the concept of equality ab directly into each other's eyes they are at spontaneity and friendship. The Americans eyes shift to avoid meeting those of the ot direct eye contact for an Indonesian means i to those of a higher social rank. So, if an In behavior when talking to their elders, it is c

In conversation, American expres perfunctory, points in conversation are pre communication representing social relations

1991:99). When this method of directness or informality is used in Indonesia, the American can be considered as insulting or confusing. An example of this directness is in the early use of first names in a relationship. On the other hand, the flowery language, complex method of address or ritualistic manners that reflect the social structure of the Indonesian culture is considered too pompous or arrogant by the American.

The casual style of the Americans for example, the habit of chatting casually with waitresses or strangers in public places is at the same time irritating yet also a behavior envied by other cultures. The British playwright, Tom Stoppard, have captured this in his *Dirty linen and New-Found-Land* as follows:

Americans are very modern people... They are open people too. They wear their hearts on their sleeves. They don't stand on ceremony. They take people as they are. They make no distinction about a man's background, parentage, [and] education. They say what they mean and there is a vivid muscularity about the way they say it. They admire everything about them without reserve or pretence or scholarship. They are always the first to put their hands in their pockets. They press you to visit them in their own home the moment they meet you, and are irrepressible, good humored, ambitious, and brimming self-confidence in any company... (1976, 59-60).

### 3) Competition, Cooperation and Fair Play:

In the event of obtaining a better future, Americans gear themselves into a competition that occurs within the context of cooperation. This is because competition requires considerable amount of coordination among individuals and groups. Stewart and Bennet elaborate that "the typical American ability to cooperate is one of the most important assets of advisors and managers" in foreign countries, where they often "act as catalysts in inducing others to work together" (1991:106). They are well known for this characteristic because they do not commit wholeheartedly to a group or organization. Instead they pursue their individual goals while cooperating with others who are willing to pursue their group's needs. This quality is possibly why, to the Indonesian mind, Americans are perceived to be strongly individualistic in reaching for their goals.

The separation between membership in a group and personal objectives allow the American to adjust his goal for a joint action with members of the group. The sense of urgency and the value of getting things done in meeting a deadline allow the American to show his ability in organizing complicated events. Each person in the group is not asked to throw their individual goals, but instead, each person is

asked to accommodate themselves to a joint treat'.

Americans believe that the competence of everyone has fairly used their sure that whatever was started would be finished by laying clear rules or job descriptions: "including the other person's weaknesses into any person in the organization may become a liability is openly given to them. In America's music industry, it gives an opportunity for individual instruments.

### Perception of the Self

#### 1) Dimensions of the Self:

As mentioned above, Americans value individualism. In fact, "the form of individualism that is dominant in America pervades action and intrudes into each detail of life" (1991:129). The film series of *Home Alone*, where a young boy outwits his enemies or house thieves to finally have his parents' help, is an admirable example of what is often called 'self-reliance' (Deese, 1965:205) in American culture.

According to Stewart and Bennet (1991), the concept of self on the assumption of doing. For instance, in a study by two Germans, twenty Americans and ten Europeans, they found that on the meaning of American individualism, it is often defined as 'self-reliant' or 'own thing'.

With regards to the individual as the basic unit, Americans are usually bewildered when confronted with decisions about their own career in international contexts. Americans cannot understand the concept of 'self-reliance' as members are themselves.

#### 2) Individualism and Individuality:

The word 'individuality' and 'individualism' are often used interchangeably. Individuality implies the acceptance of obligations in narrow boundaries. Individualism reflects a continuous frontier between the self and others. With individualism, the self is the basic unit



society are ill defined, but pervasive and uniform in all spheres of activity. The individualism of American culture does not prescribe specific obligations for the individual, but at the same time, it affords much less freedom of self-expression (Stewart and Bennet, 1991:136).

The American concept of an individual self is rooted in the seventeenth century English philosophical tradition represented by John Locke, who asserted that the biological individual is the basic unit of nature and is therefore appropriate if the individual be given the opportunity to develop his self-interests (Bellah et al, 1985:143). The term 'individualism' was firstly coined by Alexis de Tocqueville, in his study *Democracy in America* (1835) and epitomized in the writings of Benjamin Franklin who suggested that "God helps those who help themselves" (Bellah et.al., 1985:32-33).

The episode of an American mother who in the morning would place a baby daughter of less than one year old in a highchair and asks it to choose which kind of baby cereal (that are boxed and wrapped in two distinctive colors to choose from) illustrates how the mother stress on the baby's individuality as a concrete point of reference. In other words, Americans are encouraged from an early age to make decisions for themselves, develop their own opinions, solve their own problems, have their own possessions, and in general, learn to view the world from the individual self (Stewart and Bennet, 1991:133).

In Indonesia this kind of family scene is not cultivated or even tolerated. Usually the mother would have her baby hunched up her back with a *selendang* or *kain* and give the baby the breakfast, which is considered best by her social norms. Indonesian children, therefore, at times suffer from culture shock when faced with the idea that they suddenly have to take care of their own meals, study habits, and other individual needs in a town far from their home to pursue for a respectably good tertiary education. For Americans, the culture shock is minimal because living in another town and overseas is just like their hometown.

### 3) Self-reliance, Mythic Individualism or Independence:

Of all the cultural norms associated with individualism, none is stronger than the idea of 'self-reliance'. Americans talk fondly of 'pulling themselves up by their bootstraps' to become 'self-made men'. This idea according to Stewart and Bennet (1991:136) is based on the myth of the Old west, where brave settlers carved out a new life without outside aid and lonely cowboys who shot straight imposed justice on equally lonely outlaws. This myth has lived on in the form of lonely detectives or irate citizens who are challenged personally by the system that imposes the law and order. Warner explains that heroes such as illustrated in the film *Rambo*, *Aliens* and *Robocop* almost

always entirely cut off from forms of manipulation and p levels of the self, and emerge to fight the system to the poin

The fierce, utilitarian self-reliance Emerson has, to an extent, given way to more the search of autonomy, self-actualization i mythic desire to save frontier towns single-rugged self-reliance is only prevalently see it as the 'independent' way of living.

### CONCLUSION

Americans' way of life that is seen on TV, films, advertisement and colloquial exp to be a culture that cannot be blindly copi American values of work, play, obligation, t cooperation, and fair play are supported obligation to achieve self-reliance and the m committed to arrive their own qualities ba

The open-minded and frank expres result of achieving a powerful self that has t is consequently, understandable now for an English language, there is at the same time going west for better living opportunity, rug advertisements, the search for self-identity a adventure genre novels or films, as well a expressions in its conversations.

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