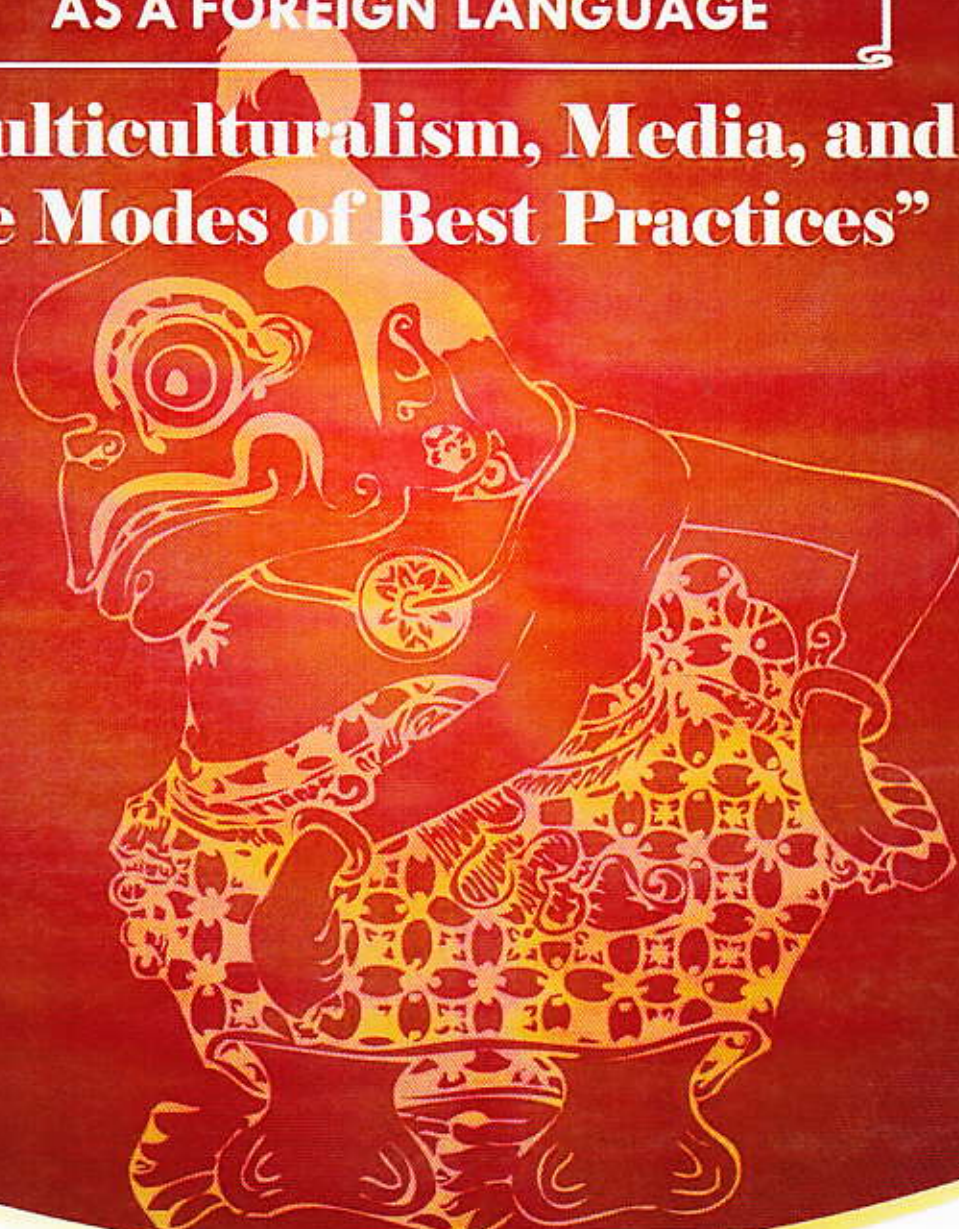


Proceeding

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE
ON TEACHING ENGLISH
AS A FOREIGN LANGUAGE

**“Multiculturalism, Media, and
the Modes of Best Practices”**



The 3rd COTEFL International Conference
Fakultas Sastra
Muhammadiyah University of Purwokerto
May 2 - 3, 2011



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Multiculturalism, Media, and the Modes of Best Practices:
Proceeding of the 3rd
Intrnational Conference on Teaching English as a Foreign
Language (COTEFL)

Editor

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Understanding Multiculturalism through Classroom Writing Activities

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Abstract

Class activities in a classroom are a kind of social interactions in miniature. The students taking part in the class activities are from various socio-economic cultural backgrounds: first language, personality, feeling, behavior, learning style, religion, ethnicity, custom, value, age, and habit. They interact with one another during the activities in a small multicultural context. As a result, it probably occurs that the members of the class misunderstand with one another due to the difference of socio-economic cultural backgrounds they have. Therefore, it is suggested that teachers and or lecturers promote multicultural awareness and make the students understand that multiculturalism exists in their class. This paper discusses how to make the students aware and understand multiculturalism through classroom writing activities. The steps are as follows: 1) generating ideas through input texts related to cultures; 2) organizing ideas; 3) identifying and using suitable language features; and 4) presenting writings and doing peer corrections. It seems that these steps are very common in writing but the steps emphasize both writing skills and contents to understand through the process of classroom writing activities. In writing class, language is nothing without expressing specific contents.

Keywords: multiculturalism, students, socio-economic backgrounds, and classroom writing activities

A. Multiculturalism in a Class

Class activities in a classroom are a kind of social interactions in miniature. During the teaching-learning process, the students taking part in the class activities are from various socio-economic cultural backgrounds: first language, personality, feeling, behaviour, learning style, religion, ethnicity, custom, value, age, and habit. They interact with one another during the class activities in a small multicultural context because they have individual differences, uniqueness.

As other teaching-learning processes, teaching-learning writing in an English language class occurs in multicultural interactions. It is probably more multicultural because in Indonesian context English is still a foreign language and each of the students has his/her own first language. Learning a language –English means learning its native speakers' culture because language itself is also a cultural product. In writing class, it is more complicated because the students have to express their ideas in English and they are affected by their own first language, cultures, and their classmates' ones.

Based on the fact, teachers or lecturers teaching writing in English as a foreign language are faced with the difficult challenge of developing teaching strategies that will not just help assimilate multilingual students, but will also forge a connection between the diverse racial and cultural groups that are represented in an individual classroom (McKennon, 2005: 2) and they are faced with language and behavioral barriers of multicultural populations, and already crowded academic schedules. They must be able to adapt, learn and teach about cultures through the target language, writing in English (Lacombe: 2).

Therefore, writing must be properly taught by persons understanding their students' strengths, varying backgrounds, potential for learning, and who take into account historical, socioeconomic, psychological, and linguistic barriers (Hollie in McKennon, 2005: 2). The teachers and lecturers teaching writing have to be able to make the students aware and understand that multiculturalism exists in their class. Writing class activities must promote multiculturalism understanding –getting ideas, drafting compositions, discussing the result, etc.

B. Promoting Multicultural awareness and Understanding Multiculturalism in a Writing Class

Providing the students coming from various socioeconomic cultural backgrounds with suitable subject matter contents and classroom writing activities in writing class is a challenge for the teachers and lecturers and it is a very difficult job. It is a challenge because recently some urban schools and universities have got students from various tribes, races, regions, and even countries. Therefore, the teachers and lecturers should know who their students are. It is in accordance with McNeil and Wiles (1990: 79) and Hutchinson and Waters (1987: 53-63) who state that a good beginning for teachers is to find out some general information about their students: age, sex, nationality, English background, social background, economic background, interest, the number of students, ethnic and family background, family status, parents' level of schooling, and religious orientations.

To do so, in the first meeting the students are given chances to culturally introduce themselves in turns in front of the class and it is done as orientation to the course related to adopting, adapting, selecting, or creating materials culturally relevant to the students. For the students, this activity lets them aware and understands that they are culturally different. Through this orientation, the teachers and lecturers get information about who their students are and emphasize that they come from different cultures, or at least they have individual differences. The teachers and lecturers can also prepare culturally appropriate topics for classroom writing activities.

What the teachers and lecturers get from the first meeting will only be surface characteristics that the students have. Therefore, their tasks scrutinizing who their students are have to be done continuously. If the teachers and lecturers are able to do so, they take a part in restructuring the system of education in such a way as to provide educational opportunities to match the characteristics and needs of all groups within the populations related to the subject matters. It is in line with Bae (2004) who states that it may take a considerable amount of time to change teachers' teaching behaviors and students' learning behaviors. However, it may take even more time and effort to make the current education system completely culturally inclusive.

In writing class, college English departments could better stimulate critical thinking about cultural awareness through composition/literary response classes which use a more authentic representation of culturally diverse literary texts. Literature reflects the cultural values and conflicts of a society in flux (McKennon, 2005: 4). In fact, cultural awareness should be

introduced to children since they are in elementary school because they need multicultural education to be prepared to participate in the projected diverse world in which they will eventually become adult citizens (Nieto, 2002). Therefore, writing assignments in elementary school until higher education should address issues which exist within the diverse communities in which the students live (McKennon, 2005: 2).

In addition, pedagogical results aiming at recreating a productive learning atmosphere within the classroom can be further implemented by the good practice of inserting language classes –writing within interdisciplinary teaching/learning modules centred on topics relating to multiculturalism (Gendusa, 2009: 3). To promote and understand multiculturalism among the students, besides knowing and scrutinizing who the students are, the teachers and lecturers can also create such lesson/course plans inserting multicultural aspects in each topic. The teaching materials in each topic can be thematic related to the students' socioeconomic cultural backgrounds, cultural pluralism. It can be done because language does not have a set 'content', other than structures and skills, which cannot be studied in a vacuum. Its content can and should be the pupils or students' world. Their daily lives, cultures, environments, hopes and fears, and needs must be involved in what is happening around them in the class during the teaching-learning process (Davis, 1996: 233-234). Therefore, writing class and its classroom activities are more suitable for creating the negotiation of cultural ideas among the students during the teaching-learning process (Mee, 1996: 201-202).

The objectives of promoting and understanding multicultural awareness in the classroom are that the students are able to 1) recognize and prize diversity; 2) develop greater understanding of cultural patterns; 3) respect individuals of all cultures in the class; 4) develop positive and productive interaction among students and among experiences of diverse cultural groups; and 5) understand the historical, political, and economic basis of current inequalities (Fantini, 1995: 42). It does not mean that every cultural contribution that the students contribute in the class are equal and to be accepted. The idea is that the students understand that, culturally, individual differences exist among them and they should respect with one another and minimize misunderstanding during classroom activities.

C. Steps in Promoting and Understanding Multicultural Awareness in a Class through Classroom Writing Activities

In teaching writing, different experts have different terms and different steps in writing. Johnson (2008: 297), for instance, states that writing processes include drafting, focusing, evaluating, generating, structuring, and reviewing. Similarly, Spratt et al. (2005:27) presents 7 steps of writing which include (1) brainstorming, (2) making notes, (3) planning, (4) writing a draft, (5) editing, (6) producing another draft, and (7) proof-reading. Suharto (... , v) states that writing steps are shortened into WRITE: writing, reinforcing, inferring, tuning, and effecting. However, this paper does not discuss the steps in writing process. It discusses steps how to promote and understand multicultural awareness in a class through classroom writing activities. The steps are generating ideas through input texts related to cultures; organizing ideas; identifying and using suitable language features; and presenting writings and doing peer corrections. The important steps in promoting and understanding multiculturalism are step 1 and step 4, while step 2 and 3 are normative in writing, very common.

- 1) Generating ideas through input texts related to cultures

Most students attending writing class find a number of difficulties. One of them is getting started to write. They do not have enough ideas to write down, especially the topic to write. Therefore, it is worth considering that the teachers and lecturers teaching writing give input texts to generate other new other texts, students' writings. To promote and understand multiculturalism, the teachers and lecturers teaching writing will be better if they give input texts about multiculturalism or about any cultures to the students, written or spoken texts.

It is expected that having got the input texts about multiculturalism or any cultures, the students have their own ideas about cultures to write down. Each student has his/her own idea to write down. Therefore, in a writing class there will be a number of different topics to write and different compositions with their own unique contents about cultures, products. In this step, the teachers or lecturers not only present the organization of writing and writing skills but also emphasize the contents of the input texts, about cultures.

2) Organizing ideas

Organizing ideas in writing is not related to promoting and understanding multiculturalism. The students can follow *Johnson (2008)*, *Spratt (2005)*, or other experts in writing. The point is that the students develop their ideas into cohesive and coherent writings/compositions. However, in organizing ideas, the students think about cultures to be organized into a good writing product.

3) Identifying and using suitable language features

Identifying and using suitable language features are related to writing skills, mechanics. Language features are closely related to types of texts the students write down.

4) Presenting writings and doing peer corrections

This step is quite important in promoting and understanding multiculturalism in writing class. Having finished writing down their own texts, the students present their writing in front of the class. In this step the students also do peer correction related to vocabulary or terms, cohesive devices, organizations, and contents. While a student is presenting his/her writing, the others pay attention to the presenter and the writing text to be corrected. While listening to the presenters, the students automatically pay attention the content of writing, about cultures. In this part, knowing multicultural existence among the students can be achieved. After that, besides checking students' writing mistakes/errors, it is suggested that the teacher or lecturer emphasizes the contents of the students' writings about cultures in order that the students get more understanding that multiculturalism exist in their class. As a result the students at least know and respect with one another related to cultural pluralisms. However, it does not mean that each of the students should accept and tolerate all cultural contributions that each student has.

In relation to the steps above, to promote and understand multiculturalism through classroom writing activities, it is also worth taking into account that the teacher or lecturer conducts cooperative learning in writing class. In cooperative learning, the students will more frequently interact with one another. *Slavin (1995: 2)* states that in cooperative classrooms, students are expected to help each other, to discuss and argue with other, to access each other's current knowledge and fill in gaps in each other understands. While they are working together, they will get closer with one another and they will recognize and know their friends' individual characteristics. As a result, they will realize that individual differences, including cultures, exist among them and they will keep diversity in unity, one writing class.

It is in accordance with *Gendusa (2009: 4)* who states that the adoption of specific strategies such as pair work, group work and in-plenum work is apt to promote forms of cooperative learning (which further enhance the valorization of cultural diversity) helps develop

the inclination to cooperation and solve potential socio-cognitive conflicts which may arise in any multicultural environment – be it the class or the social arena at large. Similarly Reither and Vipond; Holzman in Gleason (2001) state that second major shift in thinking about “the writing process” occurs when writing comes to be viewed as a social act and as a practice that is embedded in social contexts. The term collaborative learning will best suit this newly emerging view of writing and writing instruction.

As collaborative learning pedagogies becomes more firmly ensconced in writing classrooms, students’ learning experiences, communication styles, and political leanings becomes more apparent to their teachers. Therefore, writing teachers or lecturers are suggested that they listen and interact with the students either in small or big groups and less talk to whole classes from the front of the classroom. As teachers or lecturers are listening more, they are also learning and scrutinizing who their students are (Gleason, 2001). In this model of learning, the tasks teachers or lecturers teaching writing are to facilitate more rather than explain materials in front of the class. Besides, the teachers or lecturers also have to emphasize the content and message of the input texts about cultures they present and the content of the students’ writing about cultures to promote and understand multiculturalism in writing class.

D. Conclusion

In teaching writing, the teachers or lecturers are faced with complicated language problems their students have and cultural barriers and behaviors their students contribute. In writing class, however, language is nothing without expressing specific contents, and contents can be students’ cultural pluralisms existing among the students. To synchronize their teaching between language problems and cultural barriers and behaviors, and minimize cultural barriers, the contents of writings can be cultural aspects.

Whenever the writing teachers or lecturers are able to do so, they promote multiculturalism and make the students understand that multiculturalism exists among them. The steps to promote and understand multiculturalism through classroom writing activities can be done by generating ideas through input texts related to cultures; organizing ideas; identifying and using suitable language features; and presenting writings and doing peer corrections. Besides, they are also suggested that they conduct cooperative learning in writing class.

Promoting and understanding multiculturalism through classroom writing class can be viewed from both writing as a process and writing as a product. Writing as a process occurs when the students generate their ideas from input texts about cultures their teachers or lecturers present and when the students present their own writings and there is an interaction among the students about cultures. On the other hand, the content of the students’ final writings about cultures shows writing as a product.

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