

Cultural Differences and L₂ Pedagogy

Culture raises a miscellany of complex and often seemingly intractable issues whose management requires a greater degree of expertise than what an ESL or English instructor is generally equipped to cope with. The fact nonetheless is that the teachers who are aware of their students' needs at various stages of adjustment to the demands of language learning can help students to be more successful learners. Culture is often the most rudimentary component of this awareness.

Cultural differences generally affect the classroom environment most in terms of different value orientations that can be examined relative to such American values¹ as

- individualism,
- monochronic time,
- future and action orientation,
- man's supremacy over nature,
- youthfulness and informality,
- competitiveness and
- relative equality of genders.

Cross-cultural differences and intercultural communication has been a fertile field of research, particularly in the context of multinational business, the most influential work in this field having been that of Hofstede². Based on the responses to 116,000 surveys conducted in 40 countries, this study has identified the following four dimensions of cultural variability —

- uncertainty avoidance,
- power distance,
- masculinity/femininity and
- individualism-collectivism.

Two of these dimensions, power distance and individualism-collectivism, are most relevant in our context. Power distance here is the deference to authority while individualism-collectivism, the other dimension, was the confirmation of Hall's initial proposal. This is because, as shown in Figure 1, these dimensions display a rather tight correlation. Note that the greater the propensity for collectivism, the greater tends to be the acceptance of large power distance, whereas the greater the propensity for individualism the greater tends to be the diminution of power distance.

An immediate implication of Figure 1 for our English and ESL classes should be readily apparent. Note that most of our non-native speaking students come from the collectivist large-power distance cultures (e.g., Latin America, East and Southeast Asia, the Middle East) whereas the L₁ students belong to our individualistic small power-distance culture. Different pedagogic strategies are needed for the different culture-groups, therefore. Table 1, adapted from Nelson shows how the classroom practices are likely to differ between individualist versus collectivist cultures on one hand, and between the small versus large power distance cultures on the other.

Culture

- implies the meanings shared by members of a social group;
- comprises the distinguishing characteristics as perceptions of wealth, values and normative behavioral patterns;
- is transmitted through leaning and interactions within a given social environment; and
- influences the biological process by defining eating habits, preferences and tastes, aesthetics, concepts of pleasure and pain, physical ornaments etc.

Figure 1:

Hofstede’s cross-national surveys show a marked correlation between small power distance and individualism.

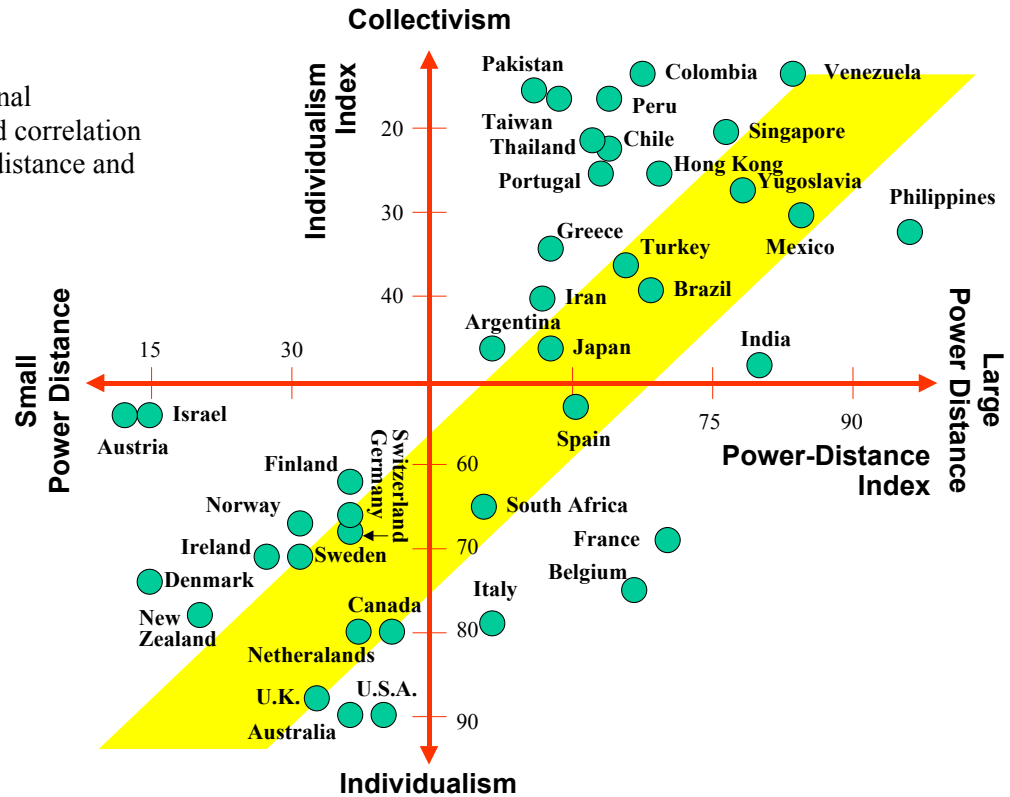


Table 1: The likely classroom differences between (a) individualist versus collectivist cultures (top panel) and (b) small power distance versus large power distance cultures (bottom panel). Adapted from Gayle Nelson’s work referenced below.

Individualist	Collectivist
<p>Students tend to be active learners Students often speak up in class without being specifically called on by the teacher. They frequently ask the teacher questions if they do not understand a point or need clarification.</p> <p>Dynamic groups Some teachers divide students into small groups to complete specific tasks. The membership in the groups often changes during the course of the class.</p> <p>Teacher should be impartial Teachers are expected to be impartial and to treat all the students equally, no matter what the status.</p> <p>No need to maintain face Maintaining face is not particularly important and is of no relevance.</p>	<p>Students tend to be passive learners Students speak up in the classroom when specifically called on by the teacher, and seldom volunteer. They seldom raise their hands to ask any questions of the teacher.</p> <p>Groups tend to be static Teachers seldom use small groups in class; and if they do, the students often prefer to stay the same group, so leaving the group membership intact.</p> <p>Preferential treatment is accepted Some students may receive preferential treatment based on their memberships in particular groups.</p> <p>Maintaining face is important No one should ever lose face or cause someone else to lose face.</p>

Small Power Distance

Learning requires students' participation

Students expected to participate in their own learning, to talk in class, and to ask questions.

Teachers need to earn respect

Teachers generally earn the respect of their students by their fairness in treating the students and by having classroom interaction on the course material.

Informal classroom culture

Classrooms may appear informal to the members of higher power distance cultures, as teachers and students may dress informally, chairs may be arranged in an "informal" configuration, and classroom norms of respect and behavior may be less rigorous.

Effective teaching is a learner-centered activity

An effective teacher is expected to know the subject matter but also enable student-teacher and student-student interaction.

Large Power Distance

Students' learning is the teacher's task

Teacher is the authority who presents the material and initiates communication.

Teachers expect respect

The position as teachers is enough for the teachers to expect the respect of their students. This respect is also expressed in the way students address their teachers.

Formal classroom culture

Classrooms may appear formal, especially to the members of lower power-distance cultures, as teachers and students may dress more formally, chairs and desks may be arranged in neat rows, and the classroom norms of respect and behavior may seem more rigorous.

Effective teaching is a teacher-centered activity

An effective teacher is expected to know the subject matter and to transmit that knowledge to the students.

Clearly, as this Table shows, mixing the students from diametrically opposite cultural groups can indeed be hazardous to the L_1 as well as L_2 students, unless and until the latter have acquired adequate cultural sophistication in L_2 reading. Suppose, for instance, that we have an English composition and reading class one-half of which hails from the collectivistic large power distance cultures of Latin America and the other half are the L_1 speakers from our individualistic small power distance culture. If the teacher focuses on our linguistically under-prepared L_1 students by trying learner centered activities then the effect will be one of discouraging our socio-linguistically disadvantaged L_2 learners, and vice versa. In other words, it will be hard to find an instructional strategy that will simultaneously satisfy the needs of both these learner groups.

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1. P.R. Harris and R.T. *Morgan, Managing Cultural Differences* (Gulf Publishing Co., 1993).
 2. Geert Hofstede, *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work Related Values* (Sage, 1980).
Geert Hofstede, Cultural Differences in Teaching and Learning. *International Journal of Intercultural Relations*, vol. 10, pp. 301-320 (1986).
 3. E.T. Hall, *The Silent Language* (Doubleday, 1959).
 4. Gayle Nelson. Individualism/Collectivism and Power Distance: Applications for the ESL classroom. *The CATESOL Journal*, vol. 12, pp.73-91 (2000).