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Hofstede's Individualism-Collectivism Cultural Dimension: Its Relevance to Foreign Language Teaching

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Abstract:

This paper looks at the relevance of Hofstede's individualism-collectivism cultural dimension to foreign language teaching. Examples are used to illustrate how the values of individualism-collectivism have a huge impact on the style of communication adopted by a culture; typically, individualistic cultures adopt a more direct and informal style whereas collectivistic cultures use a style that is indirect and formal. The importance of creating awareness of such differences in the foreign language teaching context is then discussed; if foreign language learners are unaware of these differences, they may transfer inappropriate strategies from their first language to the target language which may lead to confusion or even communicative breakdown. Some practical ways of creating awareness in a classroom setting are suggested. It is believed that the individualism-collectivism dimension provides a useful framework that can aid foreign language teachers in enhancing their students' communicative competency.

Key words: individualism-collectivism, cultural communication, foreign language teaching

1. Introduction

Traditionally, foreign language teaching concentrated on developing the linguistic skills of the learners; cultural aspects effecting communication were generally neglected. Over the years, the demand for the explicit integration of the two grew. Much is now written on the importance of incorporating cultural awareness in foreign language teaching.

There are many ways in which culture has an impact on communication. Whether a culture is individualistic or collectivistic is one way in which a culture's style of communication is determined. Direct and informal styles of communication are used by most of the individualistic cultures. In collectivistic cultures, indirect form of communication is the norm where meaning is not conveyed by words alone; non verbal aspects such as the use of gestures and a greater use of paralanguage features play an integral role in conveying a particular meaning. In addition, a formal style of communication is employed where status and age play a prominent role determining the type of language to be used. Since foreign languages are taught with the intention of developing the learners' communicative competency, understanding such differences in styles of communication can greatly contribute towards minimizing misunderstandings in intercultural settings.

This paper looks at the above mentioned issues and is organized as follows:

- Language, Culture and Communication
- Individualism – Collectivism
- Communication in Individualistic – Collectivistic Cultures
- Creating Awareness in a Foreign Language Classroom
- Conclusion

2. Language, Culture and Communication

The fact that there exists an inextricable link between culture and language cannot be denied. Language, as defined by Edward Sapir (1921, p.8), "is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols." Since our ideas, emotions and desires are influenced by the values we hold, there is an inevitable connection between the two as

The essence of a culture is not its artifacts, tools, or other tangible cultural elements but how the members of the group interpret, use, and perceive them. It is the values, symbols, interpretations, and perspectives that distinguish one people from another in modernized societies." (Banks, 2009, p.8).

Moreover, *how* people communicate is also influenced by the values of a given culture. As mentioned in many works, communication is a complex phenomenon as it embodies verbal and non verbal features. In face to face interactions, the person sending the message has to find the most suitable words and/or actions to convey his thoughts and feelings. This is done so that

the receiver of the message is able to grasp the meaning that the sender intended. Since the receiver of the message is unable to read the sender's mind, he has to construct meaning from what he sees and hears. During this communicative process, many things can go wrong. For instance, if the receiver is not familiar with the form of the language and the gestures used by the speaker, he may misunderstand the intended meaning of the message. This is because the forms of language used along with the extent to which non-verbal features are employed during face to face interactions are affected by the values of a given culture; if the interlocutors belong to different value systems, the likelihood of misunderstanding increases.

One form of categorization of values is Hofstede's dimensions of national cultures. These values are shown to influence different aspects of life, and are specifically relevant to cross cultural communication. By 'values' what is meant is "broad preferences for one state of affairs over others" ("Dimensions of national cultures," n.d., para.1) that are mostly unconscious. One of Hofstede's cultural value dimensions is the individualism-collectivism dimension. How people communicate can generally be explained by the use of this concept.

3. Individualism – Collectivism

Between 1967 and 1973, while working for IBM as a psychologist, Geert Hofstede gathered and analyzed data from more than 100,000 individuals from countries all over the world to find out employee values. The findings of these studies became the basis of Hofstede's cultural dimensions model that allowed international comparison between cultures. The most popular dimension used in explaining cross cultural differences is the individualism-collectivism dimension (Schimmack, Oishi and Diener, 2005). Individualism is defined "as a preference for a loosely-knit social framework in which individuals are expected to take care of themselves and their immediate families only" ("Dimensions," n.d.). Individualistic cultures specify that individuality and independence are a priority in a given society. These cultures are dominant in North America, Northern and Western Europe, and Australia. Its opposite, collectivism, represents "a preference for a tightly-knit framework in society in which individuals can expect their relatives or members of a particular in-group to look after them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty" ("Dimensions," n.d.). Collectivistic cultures indicate that social ties are paramount within the group; rather than the individual as being the most important unit, in a collectivistic society, group is the most important unit. These cultures tend to dominate in South America, Asia, and Africa. The word collectivism in this context has no political implications: it refers to the group and not to the state ("Dimensions of national cultures," n.d.)

It is noted that there are significant differences in the way people communicate depending on which aspect of the individualism-collectivism dimension their culture mainly adheres to. To successfully communicate across cultures requires being aware of such cultural differences. As Burgess states, "Since different cultures have very different worldviews, cross-cultural communication is especially likely to change meaning between sender and receiver, as the sender may have a very different worldview from the receiver." (2013, para.10).

4. Communication in Individualistic – Collectivistic Cultures

4.1. Direct and Indirect Styles of Communication: Verbal Communication

Individualist cultures are heterogeneous cultures; since the "Members of individualistic cultures focus on the idiosyncratic needs, desires, and goals of individuals" (Rodríguez, 1996, p.113), there is less focus on group or interpersonal relationships. In such an environment, the need for more explicit and direct communication increases; less interpersonal relationship within the society makes it difficult to comprehend subtle contextual clues. This explicit communication is used in order to prevent any form of misunderstanding. Communication in individualistic cultures is therefore known to be direct where speakers tend to say what they think, and the words are taken at their face value. The speaker is the one who is responsible for clear communication, and therefore, the ability to articulate one's thoughts and opinions and to be able to express them eloquently are encouraged ("Individualistic Culture," 2013). Similarly, "Categorical words, such as "absolutely" and "certainly", are often employed as well as "no" in order to answer in the negative" (Neuling, 1999, p.7). As people expect honesty and frankness, they do not view saying "no" as being offensive or impolite.

Speakers belonging to collectivistic cultures, on the other hand, often use imprecise and even ambiguous words to communicate their message. Since "... the primary value stressed by many collectivistic cultures is harmony" ("The Cultural Context," p.50), collectivistic cultures seek to avoid conflict, tension and uncomfortable situations. In general, Asian people tend to reply to a question by saying "yes" even though they mean "no" as saying "no" would disturb the harmonious environment. The following example illustrates this point well:

For example, say you are in a new office and you asked an indirect communicator, "Can you make photocopies of all these documents and divide by subject into different files? I need them right away." An indirect communicator will simply answer "Yes" and may even be enthusiastic about helping you. Then you might notice several hours have gone by and you ask again if this can be done, and you receive the same enthusiastic "yes". The true answer is most likely no. The indirect speaker did not want to hurt the person's feelings by saying "no" so they gave the answer the speaker wanted, even though it wasn't true. (Griffith, para.7)

In collectivistic cultures, seemingly ambiguous messages are understood correctly because of the interpersonal relationship within a group. There is more of a shared understanding of the context that enables indirect language to be comprehended as desired. As a Japanese manager (who belongs to a collectivistic culture) explained his culture's communication style to an American (from an individualistic culture): "We are a homogeneous people and don't have to speak as much as you do here. When we say one word, we understand ten, but here you have to say ten to understand one." ("High Context and Low Context Culture Styles," para.2)

4.2. Direct and Indirect Styles of Communication: Non-Verbal Communication

Since individualistic cultures are not so closely connected, they tend to display less non-verbal communication. In contrast, collectivistic cultures spend more time in close proximity which gives rise to communication that is more context-sensitive; words are not enough to convey meaning. According to Triandis and Gelfand (2012, p.509), “ the more collectivistic the culture, the more people are likely to communicate indirectly (paying attention to gestures, body position, tone of voice and loudness of voice [paralanguage]).” (Holtgraves:1997, Triantis: 1994).” Given below are selected examples to show these aspects of non verbal communication.

4.2.1. Gestures

For a collectivistic culture like the Japanese,

... where silence is golden and spoken words can be vague or meaningless, body language is very important.

...The TV news in Japan spends a great deal of time analyzing facial expressions and eye movements rather than focusing on a person’s words. For this reason, mastering Japanese body language is just as important as the actual spoken language. (Scott, 2013, para.1).

For the Arabs, it is said “To tie an Arab’s hands while he is speaking is tantamount to tying his tongue.” (“Saudi Arabia: Saudis and Non Verbal Communications,” (2010), para,1).

The most commonly quoted examples of nonverbal communication happen to be the use of gestures. Japan, along with other collectivistic cultures such as the Arab countries, make great use of gestures “that have widely understood meanings within a particular culture.” (Coon and Mitterer, 2007, p. 417). Typical Japanese gestures include the following:

Sucking air through the teeth, often accompanied by tilting the head and sometimes scratching behind the ear)	indicates confusion, hesitation, or reluctance
Arm extended to the front, palm downward, and a scooping motion with the hand	"Come here"
A slight fanning motion with a flattened palm (thumb side toward the face)	"No, thank you"
Arm extended forward, slight up-and-down chopping motion with a vertical, flattened palm	"Excuse me"
Index finger pointing at one's own nose	"Me"

Table 1

(“Japan: Gestures and Body Language,” n.d.)

The following are some forms of body language and gestures that are common among the Arabs:

Hand on Heart	The Arab place their hands on their heart to show genuine respect and humility. Sometimes, this is used in combination with a small bow, meaning thank you.
The Chin Scratch	Scratching or holding of a chin or beard is an indication that someone is thinking. It might be wise to wait until the person has finished thinking this before continuing talking, if it takes place during a moment of silence.
Kissing	Friends kissing each other on the cheek is a normal practice (even among male friends)
The hand hold	Holding hands even for a long period after shaking hands is common place and a sign of friendship
The hug	If a hug is initiated by an Arab, then it is a sign that you are considered a trustworthy friend.
The finger on the Nose	This means that it is the intention of the person to undertake what you are talking about. Sometimes, this takes the form of the finger on beard, nose or head also, all meaning the same.
The Head Snap	Snapping of the head upwards while tutting means No or an indication that you are wrong or that what you are saying is untrue.

Table 2

(“Arabian Body Language,” n.d.)

Since the collectivistic cultures strive for harmony and are group dependent, indirect communication via body language helps to preserve harmony between people, especially at times where a more direct approach to communication may lead to confrontation. However, these forms of body language may not be understood, and even be misunderstood, by those belonging to individualistic cultures.

4.2.2. Paralanguage

Paralanguage (also known as paralinguistics or paraverbal features) is a more implicit form of non-verbal behavior that deals with vocalization. It addresses how something is said and not what is said. For example, in Japanese, there exists a significant divergence between male and female pitch range in contrast to Standard English speakers. Pennycook (1985) cites the example of Loveday’s work (1981) which showed the differences in pitch range of Standard English speakers of both sexes and the pitch range used by Japanese males and females. It was found that while Standard English speakers of both sexes employed a relatively high pitch to show politeness, there was a clear difference between male and female pitch range in Japanese. Japanese men used low, gruff voices, whereas women used high pitched dainty voices. If this distinction was carried over into English, Japanese men would sound bored, monotonous and rude. If English males carried their customary pitch range over to Japanese, they would sound awkwardly feminine. Similarly, female English speakers would sound harsh and overtly masculine to a Japanese ear. Other research show that the native Arabic speakers speak faster and louder than the native speakers of English. This would be highly offensive to most of the native English speakers and would arouse disapproval. However, for the Arabs, loudness is a symbol of strength and sincerity whereas a softer tone would give the impression of weakness or even deviousness (Gudykunst & Kim, 1984). In addition, when speaking in a foreign language, the Arabs generally use the Arabic intonation patterns. As stated by Thomas-Ruzic and Thomas-Panos, the transference of the stress pattern of accenting every word, for example, would likely to carry unintentional negative meanings in English (cited in Feghali, 1997). Their tone might either sound accusing when asking information-seeking questions or it may be interpreted as a sign of disinterestedness when making declarative statements. Also, their use of higher pitch range could be evaluated by native English speakers “as more emotional, aggressive, or threatening.” (Feghali, 1997, p.368).

It can be seen that paralanguage is often more important in communication than what is actually being said. Due to its subtle nature, it provides ample opportunities for misinterpretation across cultures.

4.3. Formal and Informal Styles of Communication

In every society, people have different levels of power. However, how a society handles such differences in equality is what distinguishes one culture from another. In individualistic cultures, people strive to somehow equalize the distribution of power and demand justification for inequalities of power. They believe there is inequality of roles in society only for the sake of convenience and not because the superiors are inherently better or superior. This sense of egalitarianism is also illustrated in their informal use of language:

North Americans for example prefer a first-name basis and direct address. Using titles, honorifics etc are avoided. They are conscious about equalising their language and their interpersonal relations. Differences of age, status and sex are no reasons to use different language styles. Therefore they use in their speech the personal style which reflects an egalitarian social order where both, speaker and listener, have the same rights and both use the same language patterns. A person-oriented language stresses informality and symmetrical power relationships. (Neuling, 1999, p.11-12).

In mainly collectivistic countries such as India, Malaysia, China, Singapore and most of the Arab countries, people who have less power accept and expect a higher degree of unequally distributed power. This is also depicted in their use of language.

If you are a student, unskilled worker, or average citizen in a high power-distance culture,...When talking with more powerful people, you would address them formally by using their title as a sign of respect. Formal terms of address like Mr. or Mrs., proper and polite forms of language, as well as non-verbal signals of your status differences would be evident in the exchange. (Verderber, Verderber and Sellnow, 2010, p.121).

For instance, Korean and Japanese have a wide range of honorifics indicating the age and social status of the speaker; people who are older along with those who have higher status in society are automatically granted more respect. The following are examples of honorifics used in Korean:

Si (씨 pronounced <i>shee</i>)	When attached to a full name or personal name, it indicates that the speaker considers the hearer to be of the same or a higher social level as him, and is most commonly used to refer to strangers or acquaintances. When appended to a surname, it indicates that the speaker considers himself to be of a higher status than the hearer, and has a "distant" connotation that is considered rude if applied to elders.
Gun (군)	Used in the same context as <i>Si</i> but applied to unmarried men/male minors only.
Yang (양)	Used in the same context as <i>Si</i> but applied to unmarried women/female minors only.
Seonbae (선배)	Used in a company for senior employees, or in schools for those in higher classes. May be used as both an honorific and a title.

Table 3
 (“Korean honorifics,” (n.d.)

The formal and informal styles of communication have a huge impact on how people communicate. A Korean learner of English, for example, can be left confused and bewildered if not informed about the style of communication of the native speakers of English.

5. Creating Awareness in a Foreign Language Classroom

The impact of the individualism – collectivism dimension on communication is immense. Lack of awareness of the differences between the direct and indirect styles of communication along with the formal and informal use of language may lead foreign language learners to transfer inappropriate strategies from their native language to the target language. This is especially the case if the interlocutors belong to the opposite spectrums of the individualism-collectivism dimension. For this reason, it is of utmost importance that foreign language teachers create awareness of such differences in their classrooms.

Wylie (1985) states that humans communicate with every means at their disposal. Hence, the whole body has to be trained to communicate in a foreign culture. Antes (1996) concurs that to be a native-like speaker of a language means to be fluent in that language and to have command of the gestures which accompany that language. Along with gestures, foreign language learners need to be able to grasp other aspects of communication such as those discussed above. The following are some ways this can be achieved in a classroom setting.

Much research has been done on how teachers can make the learners aware of the importance of gestures by incorporating them with the language items they are learning. One way is by directly speaking to them about a gesture and at the same time acting out that gesture. Students can also be called up to the front of the class in order to guess the meaning of a gesture and then be asked to give an equivalent gesture in their own culture. According to Antes (1996), this style serves three purposes:

- It sharpens the appetite to solve a puzzle.
- It shows the systematic structure with which gestures are used in a language.
- It demonstrates that gestures are as culture-specific as language itself and cannot be readily transferred.

It is also important that learners be taught how and when to use gestures. This could be done through role-plays. Once students gain familiarity with certain gestures, they can be told to act out the gestures along with using appropriate language items. Students can work together to figure out the context in which these gestures are applied. It is also recommended that television and feature films be used whenever possible (Antes (1996). While this requires viewing time on the part of the teacher, it nevertheless provides a real to life context in which gestures are used.

Gestures, however, are only one aspect of communication. Baker (2010) in his article discusses a number of broad ways in which intercultural awareness can be created in ELT classrooms. The following is an adapted version of his six points that can be blended in any foreign language teaching classroom to create awareness of differences in communication styles.

Exploring local culture	This can be done in the form of discussions in class where students are made aware of the style of communication in their own language. This would help them to appreciate the point that real life communication is not solely based on knowing and understanding the words in a language.
Exploring [spoken] language- learning materials:	These materials, especially if produced by native speakers of the target language, can be used to critically evaluate the paralanguage features of the target language.
Exploring the traditional media and arts through the target language:	This can include film, television and radio and can be used to create awareness of different styles of communication.
Exploring IT/ electronic media through the target language:	The internet, email, chat rooms, instant messaging, and tandem learning can be used in a similar manner to the previous two strands to explore different communicative styles. Furthermore, these resources can be used to engage in actual instances of intercultural communication.
Cultural informants:	Non-local English-speaking teachers and local English teachers with experience of intercultural communication can be used to provide information about their experiences. Teachers can present their experiences of other cultures through, for example, discussion topics.
Face-to-face intercultural communication (often with non-local English teachers):	This can further aid in developing awareness of different styles of communication. Even where such opportunities do not exist, students and teachers can bring their own experiences of intercultural communication to the class for discussion and reflection; for example, they can consider what was successful or not successful or how they felt about the experience.

Table 4

6. Conclusion

Hofstede's individualism-collectivism dimension provides a useful framework to understand how communication takes place in various cultures. The styles of communication vary greatly between individualistic and collectivistic cultures. However, the dimension has its limitation: not all countries fit nicely into this framework. France, for example, is a highly individualistic nation, and at the same time, its style of communication is highly formal – a characteristic associated with collectivist cultures. Status differences are, for example, signified by selective use of formal versus informal pronouns (*tous* and *vu*). Another example is that of Britain. Although Britain is a highly individualistic nation, the British are known for their indirect style of communication that is more in line with collectivistic cultures. "They will not usually "tell you just the way it is to get things in the open." You will have to read between the lines to understand what they really mean." ("Humour and Understatement," (2013). Despite such examples (which tend to be exceptions to the rule), the impact of individualism-collectivism cultural dimension on

communication across cultures is far reaching. Integrating such knowledge into foreign language teaching can greatly enhance the learners' ability to use verbal and non verbal aspects of communication correctly and appropriately.

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