

# **Theoretical dimensions of cultural variability and their applicability in language teaching**

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# In this workshop,



- Culture and values
  - unique and representative sets of values
- Value dimensions of cultural variability to differentiate cultures:
  - High-low context
  - Individualism vs collectivism
  - Masculinity vs femininity
  - Power distance
  - Uncertainty avoidance
  - Long-term vs short-term orientation

# What is culture?

- Culture is ‘a dynamic system of rules, explicit and implicit, established by groups in order to ensure their survival, involving attitudes, values, beliefs, norms, and behaviors, shared by a group but harbored differently by each specific unit within the group, communicated across generations, relatively stable but with the potential to change across time.’ (Matsumoto, 2000. p. 24, cited in Brown, 2007, p. 188).
- The influence of culture on our interaction is significant.
  - Yet, its influence is paradoxical.



‘Culture hides much more than it reveals, and  
strangely enough what it hides, it hides most  
effectively from its own participants.’

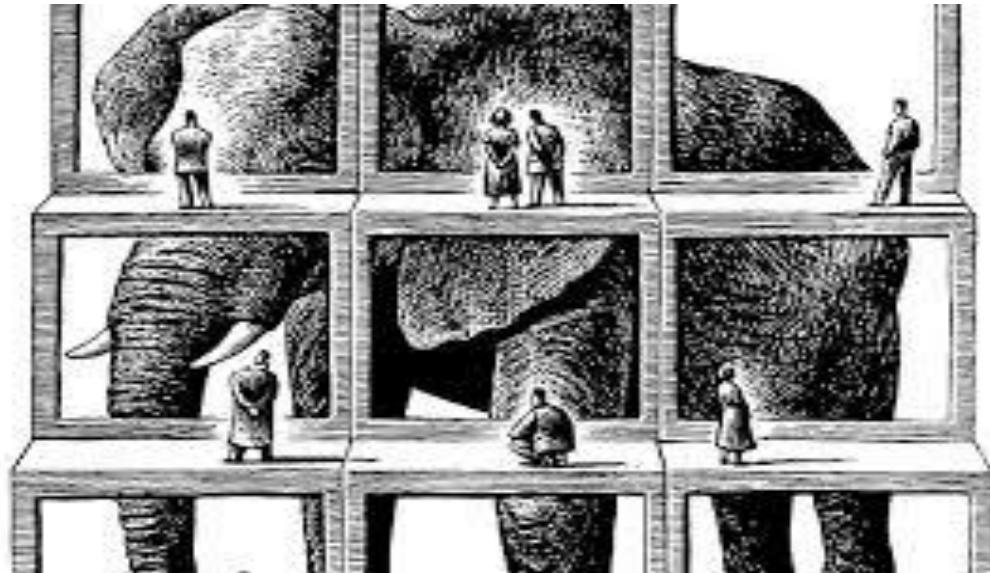
(Edward T Hall, *The Silent Language*, 1981, p. 39)



Photo courtesy of Kathryn Sorrells, 1998

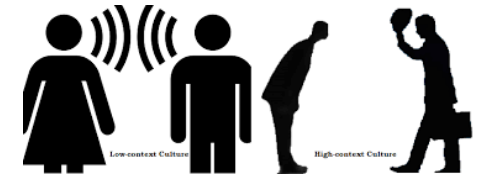
# Understanding cultural context

- The environment in which communication occurs
- Helps to define the communication
- Includes 'the cultural, physical, socio-relational, and perceptual environments' (Neuliep, 2012, pp. 61-62).
- The degree to which people focus on these contextual factors during communication varies considerably from culture to culture.



# Hall's high and low context orientations

*(Beyond culture, 1976)*



## Low context cultures

- Cultures in which little meaning is determined by context because the message is explicit in the verbal code.
- Verbal messages tend to be elaborate, highly specific and detailed.
- The ability to express oneself verbally is highly valued.

## High context cultures

- Cultures in which less is said/written because more meaning is in the environment or already shared by participants.
- Little is in the coded, explicit part of the message.
  - A greater sensitivity to non-verbal messages.
- Extensive use of inference and indirect communication.

# Hall's theory as a cultural continuum

## Low context

GB

France

USA

Scandinavia

Germany

Switzerland

## High context

China

Japan

North & South Korea

Vietnam

Arab & African countries

(from Neuliep, 2021, p. 63)

*Beware of false, static representations of cultures which categorise them as being either exclusively high context or exclusively low context in their orientation.*

# Task: Assessing high and low context communication

- Now try the self-assessment exercise

(from Neuliep, 2012, pp. 66-67 & adapted from Gudykunst et al, 1996)

- **You can access the questionnaire from either:**

- [Google Spreadsheet](#)
- [Padlet](#)

- Pay close attention to how you should score your answers

- Compare and discuss your results in small groups.





# Hofstede's *value* dimensions



- Five main value dimensions:
  - Individualism vs collectivism
  - Masculinity vs femininity
  - Power distance
  - Uncertainty avoidance
  - Long-term vs short-term orientation



- Related to how people define themselves and their relationships with others.
- An understanding of cultural value systems can help identify similarities and differences between people from different cultures and then help with intercultural communication.

# Individualism vs collectivism

## In individualistic cultures:

- Personal independence is valued.
  - Emphasis on personal responsibility, freedom of choice, personal autonomy.
- Individual goals over group goals ('I want to win.').
- Group membership exists but may be short-term.
- See themselves as unique from others ('I am distinct and unique').
- Strive to maintain distinctive personal attitudes & opinions.

## In collectivist cultures:

- Emphasis upon interdependent relationships.
  - Responsibility is shared and accountability is collective.
- The interests and goals of the group take precedence over the interests and goals of individuals ('I'm a team player to help the group win').
- See themselves as group members ('I am a member of a family, tribe, etc').
- Cooperation and harmony are paramount ('How will this act affect others?').
- Mutual obligations are based on rank and status.

# Individualism rankings

1 USA  
2 Australia  
3 GB  
4/5 Netherlands  
6/7 New Zealand

21 India  
22/23 Japan  
24 Iran  
26/27 Arab countries

30 Greece

37 Hong Kong

39/41 Singapore

44 Taiwan

52 Ecuador

53 Guatemala



(adapted from Hofstede, 2001)

# Individualism vs collectivism

## Discussion

- Do you feel that you belong to an individualistic or collectivistic culture? Why? What are the signs?
- How might the dimension of individualism and collectivism influence your teaching?



# Power distance

- ‘the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally.’  
(Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010, p. 61)
- Cultures possessing small or large power distance
  - **Low power vs high power distance** cultures



# Low and high power distance cultures

- People from **low power distance** cultures expect to be treated in the same manner as those who have more power than them.
- Equality and democracy are emphasised.
- Limited dependence of subordinates on superiors.
- People from **high power distance** cultures accept status inequalities as a part of society.
- The importance of rank, status and rigid hierarchies
  - People are expected to show respect for superiors.
- High dependence of subordinates on superiors.



# Some items to measure low-high power distance cultures

- *Within a classroom, students should be allowed to express their points of view toward a subject without being punished by the teacher/professor.*
- *Authority is essential for the efficient running of an organisation, classroom, or home.*
- *Generally, employees, students, and children should be seen and not heard.*
- *Obedience to managers, teachers, and parents is good.*
- *Managers, teachers, and parents should be considered equal to their workers, students, and children.*

# Power distance rankings

1 Malaysia  
4 Philippines  
5/6 Arab countries  
5/6 Mexico  
10/11 India

15/16 Hong Kong  
20 Belgium  
21/23 Thailand  
27/28 Greece  
29/30 Taiwan

38 USA  
42/44 GB  
51 Denmark  
52 Israel  
53 Austria



(adapted from Hofstede, 2001)



# High vs low power distance cultures

## Discussion

1. In the dialogue below, Jim Neuman is a USA high school exchange student in Guatemala.

Read the dialogue and discuss what the issue is here and why it occurred.

**Mr Gutierrez:** This morning I will be discussing some points about Guatemala's geography. Guatemala is the northernmost country of Central America. [*Jim Neuman raises his hand*]. To the north, it borders the countries of El Salvador and Honduras. To the west, its natural border is the Pacific Ocean.

**Jim Neuman:** [*raising his hand and waving it slightly*] Mr Gutierrez?

**Mr Gutierrez:** Guatemala is called the 'Land of the Eternal Spring'. There are all the same kinds of natural land forms as in Mexico but are [*Jim Neuman interrupts*]

**Jim Neuman:** Mr Gutierrez, I have a question.

**Mr Gutierrez:** Jim, stop interrupting, please.

**Jim Neuman:** May I ask a question?

**Mr Gutierrez:** No! If you continue to disobey, I will punish you! Be quiet!

(from Neuliep, 2012, p. 83)

2. How would you expect language students from high power distance cultures to behave in class?

3. How about those from low power distance cultures?



# Uncertainty avoidance

- 'the extent to which people within a culture are made nervous by situations which they perceive as unstructured, unclear, or unpredictable, situations which they therefore try to avoid by maintaining strict codes of behaviour and a belief in absolute truths.' (Hofstede, 1986, p. 307)
- **Uncertainty oriented people vs certainty oriented people:**
  - **Weak/low** uncertainty avoidance orientation (uncertainty is normal)
  - **Strong/high** uncertainty avoidance orientation (uncertainty is not normal)
- One's level of tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity and communicative strategies for reducing uncertainty vary across cultures.
  - Low-context cultures: verbal info seeking strategies
  - High-context cultures: look to the environmental, sociorelational and perceptual contexts for info.

# Uncertainty avoidance ranking

## Certainty-oriented

Japan  
Guatemala  
Portugal  
Peru  
El Salvador  
Panama  
Chile  
Spain  
Uruguay

## Uncertainty-oriented

USA  
Canada  
New Zealand  
Sweden  
Ireland  
GB  
Denmark  
South Africa  
Norway

from Neuliep (2012, p. 85)

# Uncertainty avoidance

## Discussion

What kind of student (and teacher) behaviours might we expect to find in low uncertainty avoidance cultures?

- How does this compare to high uncertainty avoidance contexts?

How might factors related to uncertainty avoidance influence the methodology and techniques adopted by L2 instructors?



**Observations of another culture  
are vital to better understand  
another culture.**

**A tool to compare cultural  
dimensions**



# To sum up,

- The strong influence of culture on our cognitive, affective and behavioural choices.
- Hall's high and low context orientations
- Hofstede's value dimensions:
  - Individualistic vs collectivist cultures
  - High power vs low power distance cultures
  - High uncertainty avoidance vs low uncertainty avoidance cultures
- The consideration of the values in our teaching.



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# Thank You!

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