



## **A Framework for Understanding Crosscultural Issues in the English as a Second Language Classroom**

- **English as a Second Language (ESL) teachers often assume that they deal with the issue of culture simply because many cultures are represented in their classrooms. However, the specifics of how cultures vary and how that variance impacts teaching are rather vague in the current TESOL literature. This article presents a framework for understanding cultural variation and suggests further research applications for the framework.**

**T**he growing awareness that cultural competence should be required for all English as a second language (ESL) teachers has finally emerged as a vital consideration in appropriate pedagogy. By cultural competence, I mean an awareness of the deeply held values and beliefs of students and the impact of those values and beliefs on classroom interaction and language learning. In the past this competence has sometimes been mistaken for knowledge of “surface level” culture such as festivals, foods, and costumes. However, the deeper assumptions and values that serve as the basis for behavior and decision making are actually the factors that affect the classroom environment most significantly. In addition to understanding other cultures, cultural competence also involves knowing one’s own cultural values and beliefs. Moreover, for ESL teachers this competence includes the ability to convey to the students the cultural knowledge needed to understand the contact culture and the sociolinguistic skills they must master in order to interact appropriately.

The practical problem for teachers who recognize the need for fostering and teaching intercultural understanding is the complexity of this issue. How can ESL teachers hope to really know and understand all the cultures from which their students originate? And what specifically does a teacher need to know in order to understand a culture? Culture is such an inclusive concept that most people are not sure what is meant specifically when the term “culture” is used. Moreover, if we wanted to teach cultural awareness to our

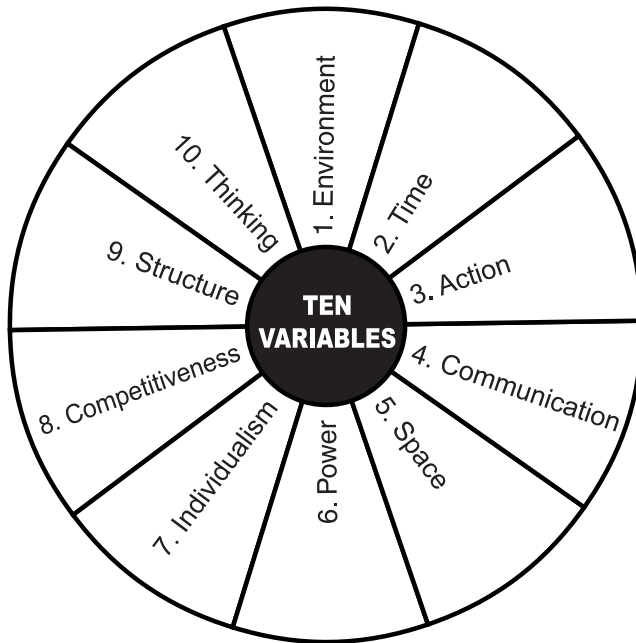
students, what skills would they need to have, and how could we teach these skills to them? These questions lie at the heart of developing a curriculum that is infused with the tools for learning cultural competence and a classroom environment that is founded upon intercultural awareness.

Not surprisingly, interculturalists have focused most of their research on cultural competence in the field of business. Global corporations cannot afford to remain unschooled in cultural issues that affect how they do business and ultimately what profits they make through international business agreements. The more recent work in this area grew out of early anthropological thinking on variations in values across cultures (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961; Parsons & Shils, , 1951). In this early work, researchers attempted to organize the variations of values into systems based on the fundamental problems that are crucial and common to all cultures. For example, questions such as how humans relate to nature and how they relate to other people were dominant issues in early values orientation research.

Empirical work in actual global business settings (Hampden-Turner, 1990; Hofstede, 1980, 1991; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998) has produced a much clearer understanding of the variations in values that impact crosscultural differences. Hofstede's research (1980), for example, investigated the cultural values of employees in 100 companies. Similarly, the more recent Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner research is based on data from 30 companies in 50 different countries. This work has been augmented by sociological research that examines society at large rather than corporate cultures (Hall, 1976; Stewart & Bennett, 1991). In the recent literature on values orientations, Brake and Walker (1995) consolidated the work of all these interculturalists into a framework that includes the 10 variables illustrated in Figure 1. This Cultural Orientation Framework provides a scheme for understanding in specific terms the issues of culture that in the past have appeared to defy definition or concise examination. While it is clear that this type of analytic approach cannot encompass all that is meant by the term "culture," it is the intent of this article to demonstrate how a cultural orientation framework can be used by ESL teachers to achieve cultural competence.

### **Framework for Cultural Orientations**

The Cultural Orientation Framework was designed to account for the most significant variations in values that affect international business. Each of the 10 variables in the framework includes a set of two or more behavioral opposites, creating a value continuum for each variable. Cultures do not tend to lie at one extreme or the other, but rather gravitate toward some relative point along a continuum. In other words, cultures tend to have proclivities that are reflected in group behavior. In addition, some of the variables are related and tend to overlap while others appear to exist independent of the others. But each culture has its own profile, which may be more or less similar to the profile of another culture.



**Figure 1.** Cultural Orientation Framework. This wheel represents a simple frame of reference for profiling a culture and understanding its major characteristics.

**Note.** From *Doing Business Internationally* (p. 5), by T. Brake & D. Walker, 1995, Princeton, NJ: Princeton Training Press. Copyright 1999 by Training Management Corporation. Reprinted with permission.

As indicated previously, this framework is based on many years of exhaustive data collection. The Trompenaars' database (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1998) alone consists of 30,000 participants. As a consequence, the generalizations suggested are not based on isolated anecdotal evidence but carefully controlled investigation. At the same time, it is important to note that cultures are made up of sub-cultures and individuals who also vary along the continua, so that particular sub-populations or any given individual may behave at variance to their own culture's tendency. For example, while Americans tend strongly toward individualism, there are those among us who are more collectivist than the norm. It is also important to acknowledge that past intercultural research has been criticized for its Eurocentric bias. The Hofstede (1980) research in particular is plagued by this problem. However, as I will argue later, the model itself actually provides a way out of this problem.

Before proceeding with an in-depth examination of Brake and Walker's (1995) variables, several caveats are in order. First, it is worth noting that the

data used to construct the Cultural Orientation Framework were taken from the business world, not from empirical studies of teachers and their students. In the absence of such empirical studies, the existing framework serves as a legitimate starting point for examining culture in the ESL and English as a Foreign Language (EFL) arenas. A second caveat concerns the regrettably brief definitions of the 10 cultural variables that I present below. Although a complete treatment of each of these variables is deserving of an entire article, I will focus instead on how each can be observed in classroom environments. The final caveat concerns the somewhat truncated examples given below of American classroom behavior, itself a ripe area for empirical research. The examples provided here are drawn from my own 20 years of post-secondary ESL classroom experiences and from those of colleagues and are intended as an introduction rather than an adequate treatment of the subject.

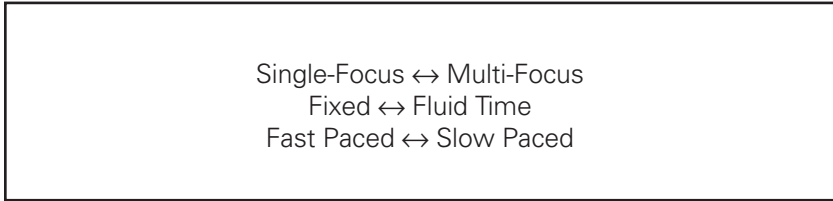
### *Cultural Variable Number One*

Control of Nature ↔ Harmony with Nature ↔ Constrained by Nature

**Figure 2.** *Environment variable.*

Cultures tend to view the environment in terms of the degree to which nature can be controlled or the degree to which nature controls humans. In the United States, there are many indications that human control is the preferred value. For example, Americans tend to try to control the environment for their own purposes. Examples of this assumption are seeding clouds for rain, damming rivers to control floods, using chemical pesticides on plants, and getting face-lifts or breast implants to “improve” personal appearance. In contrast, there are many cultures that tend to view people as controlled by nature. These cultures usually have a strong sense of fate. In fate-oriented cultures, students may be less achievement oriented, feeling that there is no point in working toward a goal. ESL teachers who have students with this attitude may need to explore the hopes and desires of their students and the options and opportunities available to them of which they may be unaware. There are also cultures that view the proper place of human beings as in harmony with nature. This orientation is evident in Navaho culture, where there is no separation between Man, nature, and the supernatural. In harmonious cultures, people tend to accept that things simply are what they are. The desire to control or to submit does not exist. As with the belief that people are constrained by nature, this concept may come into conflict with the Western concept of work and motivation. From the Western perspective, if one works one will achieve the goal. Thus, the harmonious soul may be seen as lazy. The Western need to assign causality may lead to a negative evaluation of a student’s character when the behavior of the student is actually a product of a “harmony with nature” orientation.

### *Cultural Variable Number Two*



**Figure 3.** *Time variable.*

The time variable can be analyzed in terms of three separate dimensions of time: (a) single focus versus multi focus, (b) fixed versus fluid, and (c) fast paced versus slow paced. Single-focused cultures tend to attempt one task at a time while multi-focused societies tend to deal with several tasks or topics at once, giving attention to all simultaneously. American ESL teachers who have taught in Middle Eastern cultures where natives seem to have no trouble maintaining several conversations at once usually immediately recognize this cultural difference. Time focus is also referred to as monochronic or polychronic time, and as Edward Hall (1966) notes, people from single-focused (monochronic) cultures tend to schedule one thing at a time whereas those from multi-focused cultures (polychronic) tend to have several things going at once because they are so much involved with one another. As Hall states, "...the monochronic person often finds it easier to function if he can separate activities in space, whereas the polychronic person tends to collect activities" (p. 162). The relationship between time and space that Hall recognizes is interesting, and I suspect that the litmus test for defining time focus in a culture is found in the nature of its traffic intersections. Cultures with traffic lights and an orderly regulation of vehicles at large traffic intersections seem to be invariably single-focused cultures, while those cultures with traffic intersections in which everything and everyone converge en masse and meander through seem to be multi-focused. By analogy, an ESL class filled with students from multi-focused cultures is not likely to be an orderly affair.

Fixed-time cultures place value in being on time and getting things done on time while fluid-time societies are comfortable with flexible deadlines and shifting priorities. Fast-paced cultures emphasize efficiency and accomplishing tasks while slow-paced cultures tend to conceive of life as a journey. In the United States, most of the society tends toward single-focus, fixed, fast-paced time orientation. At the same time, however, great variation exists and there are some indications that this variable is currently in flux. Many people are always late by a few minutes, even though I know from my own experiences that this tendency is usually criticized. In general, people from the United States tend to be single focused in business interactions (e.g., standing in lines, waiting one's turn). At the same time, however, most working mothers have mastered multi-focused tasking as a matter of survival. Moreover, some computer companies such as Hewlett-Packard and Intel list "multi-tasking" as a desirable characteristic that they look for in prospective employees. These

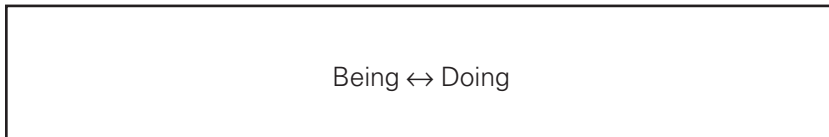
exceptions are pointed out in order to emphasize, again, that although a strong cultural tendency exists, variation does occur.

In classrooms, it is important for students to understand clearly the teacher's expectations and whether or not time expectations are negotiable. For example, students may be expected to be on time for class, but the degree of flexibility allowed is an important aspect of being on time. Moreover, students are generally expected to hand their work in on time, but this may or may not be negotiable. There is great variability among teachers on this value, and the variability itself makes the issue extremely confusing for students. Non-native students need to understand the limitations clearly, and thus, teachers need to articulate in their syllabi in very specific terms the meaning of "on time."

The time variable also has other implications. Since teachers in the United States tend to be single focused, students ought to interrupt a teacher for questions or comments in an indirect way, for example, by raising their hands. A simple verbal interruption may be interpreted as being rude. One method that Americans use for polite interruption is apologizing in advance: "Excuse me, I'm sorry to interrupt, but I had one question." Not all students (i.e., those coming from multi-focused societies) will understand this without being taught it. And those coming from hierarchical societies may not understand that it is sometimes acceptable to interrupt.

The fast pace of American classrooms sometimes seems unfathomable to non-native students, particularly at the college and university levels. It is not just the pace itself that is disconcerting. What is important for students to understand is that they are expected to interact (even if only silently) with the lecturer. In other words, even if they are not verbally interacting with the teacher, they must be prepared to engage in the interaction between the professor and overheads, videos, and other students' questions. Moreover, lectures move quickly and are often organized around handouts or overhead displays, and students are expected to take notes as material is presented. To be prepared for this environment, students need practice in noticing the general organizational structure of a class and also practice in note taking, especially from overhead displays.

### *Cultural Variable Number Three*



**Figure 4.** *Action.*

The action orientation of a social group lies along a continuum from "being" at one extreme to "doing" at the other extreme. "Being" cultures tend toward spontaneity and living in the moment while societies at the "doing"

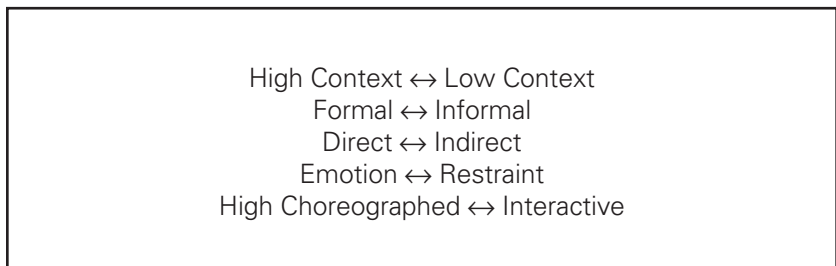
extreme tend to value action and accomplishments. Decisiveness tends to be valued over reflection in “doing” societies.

Americans are often stereotyped as “doing” oriented people, and to a certain extent this stereotype is earned. When there is a problem, the response is frequently, “What can I do to help?” For us, listening is not enough. As a result of this strong focus on doing, it is often difficult for Americans to interact appropriately within “being” cultures. To sit and wait for others to speak or act is quite difficult for most Americans.<sup>1</sup>

The connection of this value to classroom culture is indirect. The American focus on doing sometimes creates a disjuncture between people. It is possible to become so busy doing things that we don’t have time to connect on an empathetic level with other people. Thus, the task can become more important than the person. An aggressive focus on work is sometimes perceived as arrogance and demonstrating a lack of personal connection. A cultural mismatch in this value can have a serious impact on classroom dynamics, and it is generally difficult for teachers to help students not take the lack of connection personally.

Perhaps an example from outside the classroom best illustrates this variable. Many years ago, a tragedy occurred in my family. Responding to the tragedy, friends came and took over my household for me. They made calls; they cooked; they set my house in order. They *did* things. As an American, I felt comforted and grateful. However, one of the singular events that I will never forget in this experience was a visit from an African friend who had been a student. He came and sat next to me and quietly said, “Some things we cannot understand; we can only accept.” This man sat silently with me for 30 minutes and simply held my hand. His gesture was empathic. This is “being.” It is relatively uncommon in American society. For students from “being” cultures who are disconnected (in the classroom or in general life) from the empathy of “being,” life is lonely, and they feel isolated.

#### ***Cultural Variable Number Four***



**Figure 5.** *Communication.*

The variable of communication actually includes five dimensions: (a) high context versus low context, (b) formal versus informal, (c) direct versus indirect, (d) emotion versus restraint, (e) high choreographed versus interac-

tive. In high-context cultures, the message communicated is embedded in extra-linguistic considerations such as body language, gestures, relations of participants, and seating arrangements, as well as in the linguistic code. In low context cultures such as the United States, the message lies almost exclusively in the verbal code so much more must be said.

Japan is said to represent an extreme high context culture. If you look at many aspects of Japanese society, you find that less language is necessary compared to other societies. While once doing business in Japan, an American friend received a lesson in high context communication from a Japanese associate who explained how he had surmised all the power relations in a meeting based on the depth of the bows, the seating arrangements, and the manner and order of introductions. As a low-context American, my friend had not noticed these messages.

In formal cultures, the formality of communication signals predictability and is non-threatening, which helps participants relax. For example, politeness levels in many languages signal the appropriate level of discourse. On the other hand, in informal societies such as the United States, the lack of formality signals friendliness and equality, which also is intended to reassure participants. For example, the informality of Americans is intended to encourage interaction and acceptance. This contrast demonstrates that diametrically opposed orientations can receive the same interpretation, and the contradiction can lead to a great deal of misunderstanding. For example, ESL students may assume that informal teachers or professors lack authority. Similarly, Americans may interpret an insistence on hierarchy in an EFL context as cold and distancing.

In direct cultures, meanings, choices, and preferences are stated explicitly while in indirect cultures meanings, choices, and preferences are implied or perhaps only signaled non-verbally. In societies that foster emotional expression, overt emotion is valued. In these societies, passionate oratory is often valued in convincing an audience, and people may believe speakers because they feel so strongly about an issue. In contrast, in cultures that promote emotional restraint, emotions are controlled and conflict is perceived as damaging. In these societies, a person who wants to introduce a proposal will often check with all the players before a meeting in order to avoid confrontation, amending it to achieve consensus.

Finally, the performance of language also varies among cultures from highly choreographed to interactive to relatively independent. In Japan, for example, the use of language is largely choreographed. Interlocutors generally know what is going to be said before it is actually said, so the act of language is more of a ritual than an active and unpredictable exchange. In other societies (i.e., the Middle Eastern, Latin, and southern European cultures), language is highly interactive. Each speaker actively responds to the comments of the previous speaker, so the direction of the conversation is contingent upon each speaker's response. In cultures where discourse tends to be relatively independent, such as the United States, conversations tend to progress in a more fragmented manner. Interlocutors tend to change the direction of the



conversation frequently, and one comment is not necessarily contingent on the comment that came before. In this sense, speakers tend to follow an internal agenda on the topic, and they are not as engaged with the other speaker as in interactive cultures.<sup>2</sup>

In the classroom, the communication variable plays a significant role in intercultural understanding. Students from high context cultures need to understand the nature of low context cultures, so they will not be looking for meaning in areas where there is none. For example, it is fruitless in the United States to look for meaning in the physical arrangement of furniture or in body language as a reflection of hierarchy. In a sense, high context students have the same needs as low context students when they are out of their home environments. They need much more explicit information than they need at home. Similarly, students from low context cultures always need very explicit information. They tend to be very literal in their interpretations; thus, much more needs to be said in order for them to reach a sense of understanding.

The message for the teacher, then, is to treat the ESL classroom as a very low context environment. Providing information in a number of modalities—overheads, handouts, verbal explanation and review—seems the most effective. Teachers can assist students through learner training, by teaching students the characteristics of low context and high context environments. It is also useful for teachers to know where different populations fall along this continuum. Based on my own experience as well as on information related by friends and colleagues, the Japanese, Koreans, Chinese, and South East Asians are generally more high context, followed by Middle Easterners, Latins, southern Europeans, and Americans. Northern Europeans, Germans, and Swiss seem to be very low context. As these are my own untested observations, I enthusiastically encourage empirical investigation. Communication context is an interesting area of intercultural relations that deserves more study.

Along the formality-informality continuum, classroom formality creates enormous confusion for ESL students. Professors may use their first names as a form of address, may dress informally, and may sit on the desk or drink soda in front of the class. These behaviors in a respected professor present conflicting signals to students from formal cultures. Through learner training, teachers should teach ESL students that although we have a sense of hierarchy in the U.S., it is not represented by the same behaviors as it is in other cultures. Furthermore, in an informal classroom setting, they are likely to find what seem to be contradictory expectations. One approach to encourage students to change their cultural assumptions regarding appropriate language is to require classroom participation as a factor in their grades and evaluations. In addition, students may be required to use informality in address between instructor and students in some areas, but not in others. For example, they may practice using the given name of an instructor in some settings, but at the same time practice using common forms of politeness when speaking with the instructor in class.

### *Cultural Variable Number Five*

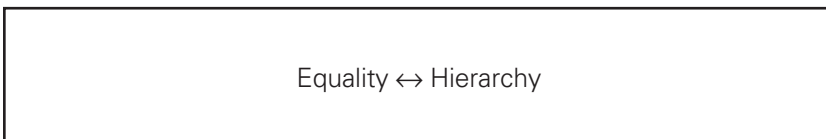


**Figure 6.** *Space and distance.*

The variable of space and distance can be understood as a continuum from public on one extreme to private on the other extreme. Many cultures have a strong sense of the public self—the image they present to society at large—and the private self—the uncensored self who is revealed to only a few close friends or relatives. In United States culture, the private and public self seem to converge. Thus, in society at large and in the classroom, Americans do not find it difficult to reveal opinions and thoughts about controversial issues.<sup>3</sup> This cultural characteristic may present a dilemma to ESL students who feel uncomfortable discussing their opinions in public. Some students may, in fact, be from cultures in which it is dangerous to reveal one’s opinion on controversial issues.

In terms of physical space and distance, cultures vary with regard to how closely people stand when speaking, how much touching is expected and allowed, and the extent to which eye contact is expected. Students need to understand the norms of physical contact, particularly eye contact and standing distance. Any experienced ESL teacher can give many examples of the lack of eye contact among Asians, the mismatch in body distance between American and Middle-Eastern cultures, and the Thai smile for contrition. Although students may be unable to develop the American patterns of space behavior, through learner training they will be able to understand the differences and avoid embarrassing situations.

### *Cultural Variable Number Six*



**Figure 7.** *Power.*

The variable of power is defined along a continuum ranging from equality at one end to hierarchy at the other. Those societies that value equality view inequalities of power as unacceptable. At the opposite extreme, societies that value hierarchy tend to accept inequalities in power and authoritarian behavior as a fact of life.

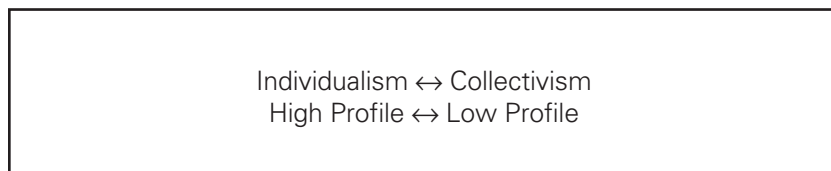
It is important for international students to understand the American perspective on power because it is embedded in many aspects of everyday life.

In general, the American point of view values equality while hierarchy is minimized. In terms of behavior, equality correlates with informality and friendliness, so the issue of power is reflected indirectly in almost all interactions. This perspective cuts across major sub-cultures and contrasts sharply with many collectivist cultures, where form and formality act as an equalizer (assuming most of the population learns the same forms). For example, general restraint and formality in public settings within an entire society gives the outward impression that everyone is the same when, in fact, nothing could be further from the truth. When these two contrasting points of view meet, there is confusion. For example, the ESL student may misinterpret the American who attempts friendly informality, believing it is an attempt to develop a friendship, when it is instead only intended to convey civility.

Similarly, American classroom culture appears to be more egalitarian than that of most other cultures. Students are expected and encouraged to express their own opinions and are almost always allowed to ask questions, either during classes or after lecture—forbidden behavior in many hierarchical cultures where it is said, “If the professor was clear, questions would not be necessary.” Reliance on group work and pair work also tends to break down the authoritarian nature of relations between teachers and their students because the teacher becomes a facilitator rather than the all-knowing source of wisdom. For this reason, students from hierarchical cultures may not understand or value communicative approaches. ESL teachers need to be aware that a great deal of explanation often needs to accompany communicative language teaching in order to validate this approach among students.

In addition, international students need to be forewarned that the power distribution in the American classroom is often not reflected in the interactional structure of the actual class. In spite of their egalitarian appearance, most instructors and professors still expect deference and respect, and they still hold the student’s fate in their hands.

### *Cultural Variable Number Seven*



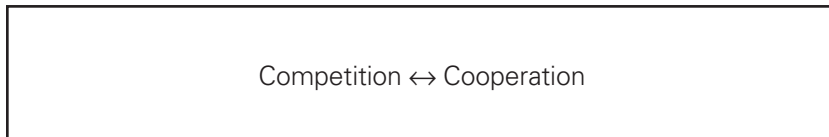
**Figure 8.** *Individualism.*

In societies that fall toward the extreme of individualism, individual achievement is highly valued and personal goals and competition are seen as acceptable ways of achieving. In collectivist cultures, group identification and decision-making are emphasized and compromise, cooperation, and consensus are promoted to create harmony. In addition, high profile behaviors (i.e., self-promoting actions) tend to be encouraged in individu-

alistic societies while low profile behaviors, emphasizing modesty and humility, are encouraged in collectivist societies and are seen as a means for promoting group harmony.

American classroom culture frequently assumes a high level of individualism in the form of high profile behavior and independent thinking. Students are most often evaluated individually, and they are typically evaluated positively for thinking outside a prescribed model. In addition, students often openly critique the position of those in authority and add their own ideas to established orthodoxy. ESL students need to be taught that reliance on the opinions and ideas of others, while valued in many other cultures, is not valued or rewarded in the general United States classroom culture. Similarly, ESL students may need learner training on plagiarism and what they can claim as their own thinking. With regard to behavior, American students create a high profile by asking questions and expressing their opinions in class. They usually do this to be recognized by the professor, and international students sometimes adopt such behavior in order to conform and succeed. While the sojourner student may need to adopt certain aspects of this behavior, non-native students should be aware that high-profile behavior, when taken to the extreme, draws sharp criticism. For example, the female Japanese student who becomes an extremely vociferous advocate of all liberal causes may be viewed negatively by Americans because of their own stereotypes regarding the behavior of Japanese women. This example is not intended as an endorsement of American stereotypes; it is simply an example of the complexities involved in crossing cultures.

### *Cultural Variable Number Eight*



**Figure 9.** *Competition.*

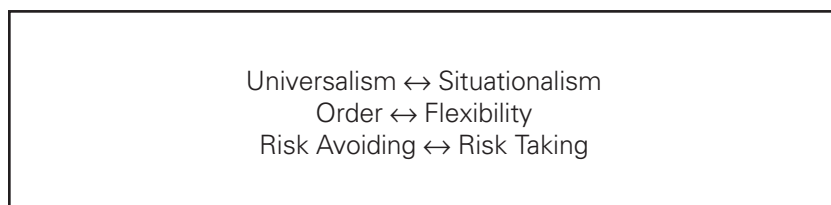
This variable is closely correlated with the parameters of individualism and collectivism. Societies that value competition generally view this characteristic as breeding excellence and these societies tend to value individualism also. On the contrary, cooperative societies tend to be correlated with collectivist societies. They value compromise and they tend to view their business associates in terms of relationships rather than in terms of competition.

At the post-secondary level in American classroom culture, competitiveness varies from one institution to another. It is generally the case, however, that American students exhibit behaviors that support competitiveness. Indeed, competitiveness is considered to be a positive behavior in most cases. Students compete for the attention and approval of an instructor, raising their hands and responding quickly to questions. At some institutions, students will go so far as to refuse to share notes or

ideas because of the competition. However, this is an extreme. Ironically, the opposite value seems to be dominant in United States primary schools where cooperation and sharing are fostered as necessary classroom values. The difference in the representation of this value probably indicates an attempt in the early years to socialize children in ways that minimize the negative extremes of intense competition.

Interestingly, many educational settings in cooperative cultures are far more deeply competitive than American classroom culture, with students choosing activities such as studying longer hours and on weekends, hiring tutors, and going to cram school. However, in these cultures, it is not the competition that is discouraged but the public displays of competitive behavior that are not valued or tolerated.

### *Cultural Variable Number Nine*



**Figure 10.** *Structure.*

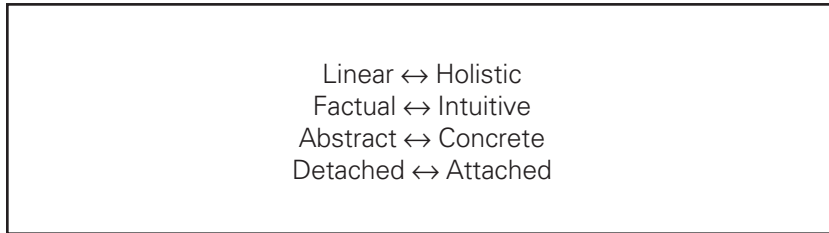
The concept of structure encompasses three dimensions: (a) universalism versus situationalism, (b) order versus flexibility, and (c) risk avoiding versus risk taking. In cultures at the extreme of universalism, right and wrong can be clearly defined and there are no exceptions to the rules. Strongly situational thinking argues that right and wrong always depend upon the circumstances. In highly ordered societies, ambiguity and change are perceived in negative terms while in relatively flexible cultures, ambiguity and change are seen as inevitable and in the extreme cases are valued. Risk-avoiding cultures tend to value rules and structure and are correlated with ordered and universalistic thinking; risk-taking cultures, on the other hand, tend to feel comfortable with less structure and correlate with flexible, situation-oriented social groups.

There is considerable variation between universalism and situationalism in the United States. For example, is it justifiable to inflict violence on someone who has caused you great personal harm? Is it acceptable to steal from the rich for a good cause? It is difficult to find consensus on these issues.<sup>4</sup> In the classroom, however, rules are sometimes strict and invariant.

Structure often appears in the classroom with regard to instances of plagiarism and cheating. American teachers, in general, do not view these activities as “sharing” (as they are interpreted in some other cultures). Students need to be informed of the gravity of such a violation, and even though the long-term consequences are relatively inconsequential within the context of the ESL classes, they need to experience an unwavering response so they can avoid swifter, harsher punishment in other settings.

Finally, risk-taking is encouraged in most American classrooms, and loss of face is not a concern of most instructors or most American students. However, as previously noted, in some societies making a public mistake is seen as shameful. This tends to be particularly true in places where one's success or failure in public is seen as a reflection on family honor. As a result, public risk-taking is not an easily adopted cultural change. Learning to participate in high-risk activities may require learner training and much practice.

### *Cultural Variable Number Ten*



**Figure 11.** *Thinking.*

What is considered logical in one society is not necessarily viewed as logical in another. Our estimation of acceptable thinking can be analyzed within four parameters: (a) linear versus holistic, (b) factual versus intuitive, (c) abstract versus concrete, and (d) detached versus attached.

Strong linear thinkers tend toward sequential logic; all points that do not lead clearly and directly to the stated goal are eliminated. Holistic thinkers, on the other hand, prefer to explore an issue from many different angles, sometimes leading to digressions. Linear thinkers also value data and logic-driven persuasion while holistic thinkers tend to persuade through emotional appeal. In addition, while linear thinkers tend to frame their arguments in abstract theory, holistic thinkers often support their positions with examples, stories, and metaphor. Finally, linear thinkers tend toward an objective, impersonal relationship to their position while holistic thinkers tend to be emotionally attached to intellectual issues. Thus thinking tends to fall into two categories: (a) linear versus factual versus abstract versus detached or (b) holistic versus intuitive versus concrete versus attached.

In post-secondary classrooms, American logic assumes that an argument is linear and based on fact. Students may need to practice thinking skills that require linear logic (e.g., drawing conclusions, making inferences, reasoning inductively and deductively, using causal relationships to illustrate a point). Moreover, American classroom culture often strongly values detached argumentation in which one party respectfully attempts to understand but not adopt another's position. For some groups, this value of detachment is irrationally opposed to deeply held cultural and religious values. Asking a student to participate in detached debate may be considered a violation of that person's identity. For example, it may be impossible for a devout Moslem student to write an essay that argues in favor of a woman's individual right to

divorce. If students think in an attached manner, it may not be possible for them to take the other side just for the sake of argument without violating their own sense of self-identity. The refusal to think in relativistic terms may impact sojourner students' evaluations once they enter regular university classes, and they need to be aware of the consequences. However, it is always, finally the student's right to choose and the teacher's responsibility to understand. In conclusion, I would say that attached and detached thinking with regard to teaching non-Western students deserves a great deal of consideration and research. Many Americans tend to consider detached thinking as sophisticated, indicative of the ability to think critically and of intelligence in general. By extension, those who find detached thinking repugnant are often seen as lacking in intelligence rather than exhibiting a cultural preference. My own experience indicates that this difference is irreconcilable.

### **How Teachers Can Use the Framework**

In the previous section, the classroom applications for the variables demonstrate that to varying degrees, dimensions of culture are at work all the time in educational settings. Recognizing that cultural variation exists and being able to name and define expected types of variation are the first steps toward cultural competence. If we can name it, we can begin to observe its role in classroom dynamics. Along with recognizing cultural variability, there are five additional ways that a cultural dimensions framework can assist ESL teachers:

1. It can help teachers understand their own preferences and biases.
2. It can be used as a template for creating an ESL classroom culture.
3. It can help ESL teachers define sources of intercultural conflict.
4. It can assist ESL teachers to understand the behaviors of particular cultural groups
5. It has potential as a research framework for examining acculturation and the relationship between acculturation and second language acquisition.

Just as the research on learning styles enabled teachers to de-center and look at classroom practice outside themselves, the cultural variables provide the same tool at a different level—at the level of culture rather than at the level of the individual. The variable of power provides an instructive example of this sort of revelation. For many years as an ESL teacher, I attempted to create an egalitarian classroom in which students were consulted with regard to the curriculum and in which I strove to create an informal and familiar environment. Because of my own cultural bias, I defined hierarchy as distancing and unnecessarily authoritarian, and I attempted to minimize my own authority as much as possible. After considerable teaching experience and after I had studied culture more carefully, I realized that people from many other cultures did not regard hierarchy in the same pernicious light as I did. In fact, in time I realized that students were actually looking for hierarchy as a guide for their own behavior. Without it, they were confused. To complicate matters, over time I realized that in fact the hierarchy did exist in my own

setting. Americans tend to minimize or disregard the existence of hierarchy because we interpret it negatively. Knowing this fact did not solve the problem of how to handle authority in the classroom. It did help me consider, however, possible ways to handle hierarchy in a culturally sensitive manner. Over time I learned that my own classroom needed to encompass and reflect the needs and goals of the students. How I handle hierarchy now depends on where the students are learning English, where they will be going, and how and where they expect to use English in the future.

Thinking about the cultural variables in the manner just described can lead one to begin developing a template for classroom culture. By classroom culture, I am referring to the overtly expressed norms of behavior for a specific class that are defined in terms of the 10 cultural variables.

Why would one want to create or define a classroom culture? In cases where there is great variation among the participants, creating one's own local culture establishes a forum for discussing cultural difference, and it diffuses the potential for cultural conflict within the group. Corporations long ago realized the value of this practice. Intel, for example, many years ago defined "Intel culture" and anyone hired by the corporation is provided with the definition in a document.<sup>5</sup> For Intel, it was necessary to define their corporate culture because it differed in fundamental ways from culture at large. In addition, Intel hires engineers from around the world to work in multicultural work groups. Because of this diversity, it was necessary to have neutral ground rules for interaction. The definition of Intel culture helped to create this environment with ground rules. We need to adopt the same practice in our classrooms.

Another issue that makes classroom culture necessary is the question of whose culture to honor and whose culture to teach. Should we expect students to adhere to the norms of behavior of "mainstream" America (whatever that may be), or do we create a cultural cushion by trying to replicate the culture of the students' first language in the classroom? In addition, for immigrant students who may choose to become acculturated, over time their own cultural profiles will change. They will adopt a sort of "interculture" that manifests some values of the first culture and some elements of the new culture. It is common to find immigrant students who speak English very fluently but who still maintain the collectivist practice of not talking in public, especially to the teacher or professor, and not practicing risk-taking behavior. It is also common to find students who appear to have two separate, intact sets of cultural behavior patterns—one set to be used at home or with friends in the first culture, the second set to be used with the new culture.

In any event, the kinds of cultural fusion that occur in a classroom are varied and complex. Teachers can avoid some of the most complex problems that the diversity presents by clearly articulating the norms of behavior in class. These norms might include such elements as guidelines for taking turns, policies for being on time, standards for terms of address and explanations for why a particular term is used or required, guidelines for group work, and procedures for changing the daily schedule when necessary. The careful, overt articulation of classroom culture has several functions: (a) It draws the students' attention



to issues of culture that usually go undiscussed; (b) moreover, if the guidelines are discussed, it causes students to reflect on their own cultural assumptions and practices; and finally (c) it clarifies the norms of behavior in class. All of us need to begin to develop standards for creating culturally sensitive classrooms. There is a great deal of work to be done in this area.

The 10 cultural variables can also assist teachers in identifying the source of classroom conflict, either among students or between the teacher and a student. Once a primary school teacher, in great frustration, told me about a parent-teacher conference that had left her puzzled and a little angry. She had invited the parents of a Chicana child for conferencing because the child was doing poorly in several subjects. The teacher explained to the parents in great detail the problems the child was having with the subject and skill areas. Then, she finished with a verbal olive branch by saying that the child was very kind, well mannered, and loved by all her classmates. To her amazement, as they were parting the teacher realized that the parents were extremely pleased with their daughter's report. To fully understand any response one needs to be familiar with the entire context. In this situation, there are a number of possible interpretations of the parents' response. However, there is a viable cultural explanation that should at least be considered. Mexican culture places a high value on relationships. Cooperation and "being" are important Mexican values. From this point of view, the child was exhibiting *simpatico* characteristics, which would be more highly valued by this culture than competing successfully in an American academic setting. It is quite possible that from the parents' point of view, they had inculcated in their daughter one of their most cherished values, and they were pleased. Understanding the cultural implications embedded in this interaction may help the teacher understand more about the child's perspective and how the child learns most efficiently.

When great variation exists within a school or a single classroom, conflict that emanates from the variables is bound to occur in many different combinations. The cultural orientation framework provides a way of predicting where we can expect to see conflict, just as contrastive analysis provides a way of predicting where we might find problems in language acquisition. If, for example, you have a class composed of a relatively large group of Swiss, who are highly ordered in terms of structure, and a large group of Italians, who are flexible with regard to structure, you are likely to have a variety of difficulties that result from this mixture. The Italians are probably going to want to spend more class time talking and getting to know each other before they begin the actual work to be done. Their reasoning will likely be: "How can you work with someone you don't really know?" The Swiss, on the other hand, will want a well-organized handout that contains a schedule for tasks to be completed. They will also probably insist on staying on schedule and will most likely be distressed if there are changes in the schedule. Why? They want to make sure they complete all the tasks because they are here to learn English; the schedule represents how they will accomplish this. For one group, it is the relationship that matters most. For the other group, it

is completing the task that matters. There are, of course, variations among individuals. Not all Italians are so relation-oriented and not all Swiss are so task-oriented, but groups do tend to exhibit proclivities, and the 10 variables provide a starting point for understanding difference. However, it is crucially important to be attuned to and to allow for individual variation. Otherwise, the variables act as stereotyping guidelines rather than broad-based cultural characteristics.

The cultural framework provides teachers with a clear guideline for identifying existing cultural differences within a given set of students; it also helps teachers better understand these differences. Each group of newly-arrived immigrants brings its own set of cultural differences and challenges to the ESL teacher. The larger and more concentrated the group, usually the more difficult are the cultural differences encountered by the teacher. As an example, the issue of cheating, which is related to the variables of universalism and situationalism, can be highly problematic when it occurs widely among members of a particular group. For highly universalist cultures a rule is a rule; hence individuals from such cultures expect all laws to be followed. However, in situational societies, whether a rule has been broken always depends on the context of the infraction. In our universalistic society, cheating is against the rules. If caught cheating, an individual is punished. In situational societies, it is not considered wrong to cheat if, for example, a friend who needs to get a scholarship asks for an answer on a test. In other words, the context justifies the action and the action can only be understood within the context. Irina Smith's article in this volume demonstrates the use of the framework for investigating such cultural variations within the recently arrived Russian immigrant population. The framework could be used similarly to investigate any other specific immigrant group.

Finally, the framework has great potential as a means for examining acculturation and the relationship between acculturation and second language acquisition. There is much that we don't know about the acculturation process. Moreover, the existing research on acculturation is dated and thin (see Peirce, 1995; Schumann, 1978). The cultural orientations, however, will provide an analytic framework for examining a number of important issues. For example, among the 10 variables, which ones are most easily changed or influenced as an immigrant acculturates? Can we see how some cultures differ more from our culture than from others? In what ways do more dissonant cultures exhibit problems with language acquisition? Are some variables more important than others in particular cultures? If the answer is yes, what does this say about the culture and why would that one variable play such a significant cultural role? Is there an order in which the variables change or rather in which people acculturate? Is it possible for immigrant students to have two completely separate cultural profiles? Much of the literature these days indicates that this is, in fact, the norm. If cultural bimorphism is common, what are the consequences of this phenomenon on a first generation student's identity? And finally, is there a relationship between the cultural variables and language acquisition. Is the acquisition of language dependent on the acquisi-

tion of specific variables? More specifically, is there a relationship between interlanguage and “interculture”? These are some of the questions that an analytic framework of values orientations will allow us to examine.

In conclusion, the issues that I have focused on in this article are related to the interaction between teacher and student and student to student, classroom management, and cultural conflict. Many of us entered the field of TESOL because of an abiding fascination with cultural difference. We assumed that value differences were a part of our profession because we saw them trotted out before our eyes every day. However, traditionally, ESL training and pedagogy have emphasized linguistics and been culturally ethnocentric. In addition, ESL teaching methodologies have been ridden with cultural naivete. Since serious work in the field began, methodologies have been largely based on our knowledge of linguistics and learning theory; in most cases, the issue of culture never even came up. This has led to the promulgation of United States approaches outside the western world, approaches that are culturally inappropriate. In our field, teaching practice and pedagogical choices need to *begin* with culture. As Jose Galvan and I (Galvan & Buckley, 1999) have argued, we need an *ecological approach* to teaching pedagogy that begins with the environment and circumstances of the learner, and that includes the learner’s culture. If we begin to move in this direction, ESL teachers and curriculum designers need to know as much about culture as they know about language, and this knowledge will include a high degree of cultural competence that is grounded in an understanding of the variations of values.

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## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> The explanations in this section are framed within the perspective of the needs of ESL students. However, American EFL teachers also need to understand the variations within the frame of the society they are entering.
- <sup>2</sup> Some of my own research currently in progress indicates that this feature is closely linked to cultural expectations regarding writer and reader responsibility in composition.
- <sup>3</sup> Students (and teachers) need to be informed of these differences. However, my own experiences indicate that these behaviors are deeply ingrained and difficult to change.

<sup>4</sup>The recent work by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (1998) offers an interesting and well-documented cross-cultural analysis of the variable.

<sup>5</sup> See the Intel Web site at <http://www.Intel.com> for further information.

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