



## **Individualism-Collectivism and Power Distance: Applications for the English as a Second Language Classroom**

- This article addresses the issue of culture within the field of Teaching English as a Second or Other Language (TESOL), suggesting that it is essential that English as a Second Language (ESL) professionals understand students as both members of cultures and as individuals. It also discusses two dimensions from the field of intercultural communication that impact the ESL classroom: individualism/collectivism and power distance. Each dimension will be defined and illustrated with classroom situations in which intercultural misunderstandings have occurred. The misunderstandings will be explained from the point of view of each culture (the teacher's and the student's) and will demonstrate the need for ESL teachers to understand the intercultural dimensions operating in their classrooms.

For years (and even decades) many of us in TESOL have been concerned that we are not paying enough attention to the role of culture and intercultural communication in teaching and learning English as a second language (ESL) and English as a foreign language (EFL). One indication of this lack of enthusiasm for the notion of culture is that very few culture or intercultural courses are taught in Master's TESOL programs in the United States (Nelson, 1998). Atkinson (1999) also addresses this issue, contending:

Except for "language," "learning," and "teaching," there is perhaps no more important concept in the field of TESOL than "culture." Implicitly or explicitly, ESL teachers face it in everything they do. Yet there has been remarkably little direct attention given to the notion of culture in TESOL over the past 15 years. (p. 625)

Atkinson then reviews the number of culture-related articles in the *TESOL Quarterly* during the past 15 years (1984-1998) and finds merely 10 full-length articles concerning culture, 5 of which mention culture only casually.

One possible reason for the limited number of articles and courses in the field is the discomfort that many TESL professionals experience when making generalizations about students based on their memberships in cultures. In other words, discomfort at making cultural generalizations such as “Americans are achievement-oriented” or “An important Mexican value is the family” may have caused many to avoid the topics of culture and intercultural communication altogether. Atkinson refers to this “sweeping generalization” view of culture as a “received view” in which cultures are perceived as “relatively unchanging and homogeneous, and as all-encompassing systems of rules or norms that substantially determine behavior” (p. 626).

This definition could be considered a “strawman” or easy target to attack; however, it does serve a purpose in that it provides a framework for an in-depth discussion of culture. Atkinson presents four major criticisms of the received view of culture. The first is that all social groups are infiltrated by outside influences and are therefore in flux. Secondly, social groups also change from the inside; members of groups often act in ways that modify the cultural norms. A third is that the received view of culture masks real differences (e.g., differences in status, ethnicity, gender, and wealth) within the culture. Finally, the received view ignores the role of power. To clarify this last point, Atkinson notes that power is an *inescapable* part of social groups and relates to all aspects of a person’s life. In understanding humans’ relationships with each other, power cannot be ignored.

Considering these criticisms of culture, the question for TESL professionals is: Has culture become a useless term? It appears that some in the field think it is. For example, Spack (1997) argues that ESL “teachers and researchers need to view students as individuals, not as members of a cultural group” (p. 772). She expresses concern that we may stigmatize our students by making generalizations about them based on their membership in cultural groups. Spack appears to be arguing for the elimination of culture as a way of knowing our students.

However, although humans are individuals (as Spack points out), they are also members of groups and much of what we call personality (i.e., individuality) has cultural roots (Atkinson, 1999). At issue here is the definition of culture. The arguments against a received view of culture are legitimate and as TESL professionals, we need to incorporate them into our definition of culture. Strauss and Quinn (1997) provide the beginning of such a definition. They view cultures as unbounded constructs (i.e., influenced by internal and external forces), based on “people’s (more-or-less) shared experiences” (p. 7). Continuing, they propose that cultures consist “of regular occurrences in the humanly created world...[and that] when we speak of culture,...we do so only to summarize such regularities” (p. 7). According to this definition, culture is not static. It is continually changing as a result of external and internal factors. It is created and recreated by humans and human interaction in order to have regularity in our patterns of living. Without these shared regularities, we would have anarchy and chaos, with each individual having his or her own culture. The shared social nature of human interaction is

essential for human existence. However, a great deal of variation exists within groups—for example, variation in status, ethnicity, opportunity, and personality—and as ESL professionals, we need to know our students as both members of cultures and as individuals.

The importance of knowing the culture of our students is supported by numerous studies. Research reveals the problematic nature of pedagogical situations in which the teacher is from one culture and the student from another. Studies suggest that when the culture of the school is different from the culture of the learner, students experience less satisfaction in school, tend to learn less, and often fail (Delgado-Gaitan, 1987; Heath, 1983; Hoestetler, 1980; Hoffman, 1988; Lessow-Hurley, 1990; McDermott & Gospodinoff, 1981; Philips, 1983; and Witkin, Moore, Goodenough, & Cox, 1977). In contrast, when teachers adjust their teaching to the cultures of the learners, student satisfaction and learning increase (Kleifgen, 1988; Lipka, 1991; Vogt, Jordan, & Tharp, 1987).

A large-scale ethnographic study of native Hawaiian children demonstrates the relationship between culture and learning as well as the importance of learning about our students' cultures (Vogt et al., 1987). This study was conducted because the native Hawaiian children were not doing well in the traditional public schools. The curriculum included a phonics reading program, and the teachers had been trained in positive reinforcement techniques that rewarded individual student achievement. Yet, after three years of these classroom practices, student achievement was measured by standardized tests and no significant gains had occurred.

In response to the poor test scores, the classroom learning environment was changed to reflect the socialization that occurred in the *homes* of Hawaiian children. Classrooms were reorganized “into a system of teacher-independent centers with heterogeneous leveled groups, instead of traditional seatwork alone at individualized desks” (Vogt et al., 1987, p. 279). In these groups students interacted, worked together, and helped each other. This dynamic was similar to patterns in the children's homes in which children were more frequently helped by peers or siblings than by adults. The phonics program was also dropped. Instead, students read portions of a text, talked about events in the story in terms of their own lives, and after reading all the parts put the segments of text together and talked about its overall meaning. This emphasis on the meaning of the story is particularly appropriate for Hawaiian children because “learning at home is nearly always bound in an immediate meaningful context, usually involving joint participation” (Vogt et al., 1987, p. 279). Finally, the use of direct praise to reinforce individual students was dropped. Teachers began to praise indirectly or they praised the group, both practices that were consistent with the students' social community.

As a result of these changes, the Hawaiian students' scores on standardized exams increased. The findings of this study and others (Philips, 1983; Valdez, 1996) suggest that ways of learning and teaching are learned in families and other social relationships before children begin school. In addition, through instructional practices and classroom organization that are congruent with students' home cultures, teachers can increase student learning.

As ESL teachers, we seldom have the opportunity to learn as much about our students' socialization patterns as Vogt et al. (1987) learned about Hawaiian students. However, two dimensions from the field of intercultural communication can be helpful in understanding many ESL students. These dimensions are individualism-collectivism and power distance. Although knowledge of these dimensions is helpful, note that (a) cultures vary in their specific manifestations of the dimensions, and (b) the dimensions may be more applicable to some students than to others due to variations within a culture and the degree to which individual ESL students have adopted target culture norms.

### **Individualism and Collectivism**

In all cultures, human beings exist both as individuals and as members of groups. However, the degree to which the individual or the group (i.e., collective) is valued varies from one culture to another. Within the field of intercultural communication, this variation is referred to as individualism and collectivism, terms used to describe basic patterns of social ordering. Each pattern affects the world views, values, beliefs, norms, roles, behaviors, and identities of the members of the particular social group. This dimension of individualism-collectivism is perhaps the best-documented dimension of variation across cultures (e.g., Chinese Culture Connection, 1987; Gould & Kolb, 1964; Gudykunst, Yoon, & Nishida, 1987; Ho & Chiu, 1994; Hofstede, 1984, 1991; Hsu 1983; Hui, 1984, 1988; Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961; Marin & Triandis, 1985; Mead, 1967; Triandis, 1995).

#### ***Individualism Defined***

Triandis (1995) defines individualism as "a social pattern that consists of loosely linked individuals who view themselves as independent of the collectives" (p. 2). People are expected to take care of themselves and their immediate families and to pursue individual achievement. In fact, their identities usually come from what they have achieved, not from the family into which they were born. Members of individualist cultures tend to be proud of their accomplishments, act competitively, value equity and equality (i.e., believe that all humans have equal rights to achieve), and define status in terms of individual accomplishment (Triandis, Brislin, & Hui, 1988). Triandis (1995) also notes that individualists tend to be motivated by their own needs, preferences, and goals. This focus on the individual does not imply that groups are insignificant. Members of individualist cultures frequently belong to many groups, but no specific group is responsible for one's total identity (Triandis, 1995).

#### ***Pedagogical Implications for Individualist Cultures***

Hofstede (1984), in one of the largest intercultural studies ever conducted, studied 118,000 IBM employees from 40 countries and identified four dimensions that vary across cultures; one of these was individualism-collectivism. Later he extended his model to other societal institutions and correlated

the IBM employee scores with the results of studies on schools (Hofstede, 1991). Based on these correlations, he predicted ways in which each dimension could be manifested in educational settings. Using the same correlations, Hofstede (1986) presented educational differences between individualist and collectivist cultures. As shown in Table 1, one common characteristic of classrooms in individualistic cultures is that students speak up in class in response to a general invitation by the teacher. From an individualist point of view, it is appropriate or even “good” for students to draw attention to themselves by speaking in class. Students often want to be noticed, to be known as an individual who is separate from the group. Often many students will raise their hands, competing with each other for the teacher’s attention. A second characteristic of individualistic classrooms is a general acceptance of students asking the teacher a question. From an individualistic perspective, it is not considered selfish for a student to ask for clarification about something the teacher has said. Students are considered responsible for their own learning; therefore, if they do not understand something, they are expected to ask about it. A third characteristic is that the formation of groups for “groupwork” may vary from class to class. Because group membership continually varies in individualist cultures, there is no reason to keep group membership the same in the classroom. In fact, varying group membership may be seen as positive, providing all students with the opportunity to work with every student in the class. A fourth and final characteristic is that teachers are expected to be impartial, treating all students the same. Because equality and equity are valued (and legally monitored), teachers in individualistic cultures are not expected to give preferential treatment to some students over others.

**Table 1**  
**Five Possible Cultural Differences Between Classrooms**  
**in Individualist and Collectivist Cultures**

<i>Classrooms in individualist cultures</i>	<i>Classrooms in collectivist cultures</i>
1. Students often speak up in class <i>without</i> being specifically called on by the teacher.	1. Students speak up in class when specifically called on by the teacher; they seldom volunteer.
2. Students frequently ask the teacher questions if they do not understand a point or if they want additional information or clarification on a topic.	2. Students seldom ask the teacher questions.
3. Some teachers divide students into small groups to complete specific tasks. The membership in the groups often changes during the course of the class.	3. Teachers tend not to use small groups in class, but if they do, group membership may remain constant over a period of time.

4. Teachers are expected to be impartial and to treat all students equally, regardless of status.

4. Although teachers are expected to treat all students equally, preferential treatment is given to some students because of the students' memberships in particular groups.

5. Maintaining face is not particularly important.

5. Maintaining face is very important. Neither teachers nor students should ever lose face or cause someone else to lose face.

### ***Collectivism Defined***

Triandis (1995) defines collectivism as “a social pattern consisting of closely linked individuals who see themselves as parts of one or more collectives (family, co-workers, tribe, nation)” (p. 2). In general, collectivism is characterized by individuals who place the needs of the group above their personal needs. Their groups provide collectivists with a sense of self-identity (i.e., as members of particular groups), with roles and norms that determine their behavior, and with a sense of purpose (i.e., the welfare of the group). Most members of collectivist cultures believe that the smallest unit of survival is the group and, unlike individualists, they tend to belong to the same groups for a long period of time, if not a lifetime (Triandis et al., 1988). Because maintaining the group is so important, behaviors (such as cooperation) that contribute to group cohesion and harmony are highly valued whereas interpersonal conflict, competition, and public criticism tend *not* to be valued. Thus, in contrast to individualists who often say what they think, collectivists often give socially desirable statements or responses. (Triandis, 1995). These attributes of collectivism tend to occur in one's in-group and do not necessarily apply to out-group members. Group members' obligations are to their groups, not to all people.

The emphasis on harmonious relationships in collectivist cultures is closely related to the concept of “face.” Although all cultures are concerned with face to varying degrees, the concept is often associated with the cultures of Asia. A Chinese proverb states, “A person needs face as a tree needs bark” (*ren yao lian, shu yao pi*). Hu and Grove (1999) set forth the basic parameters of face. Although they are writing about China, the basic parameters apply to all social groups, albeit more centrally to some than others. Face includes each person's set of personal claims—claims that are socially and psychologically vital. One's face constitutes one's identity and generates a personal sense of integrity, dignity, and self-respect. In a social situation, those present have a stake in preserving everyone else's face as well as their own. This mutual preservation makes it possible for social events to proceed harmoniously. Loss of face occurs when one's set of claims is called into question by another. The result is embarrassment for the people whose claims have been questioned

and also for the person who caused the other to lose face. Thus it is a lose-lose situation—for the person who caused the loss and for the person who suffered the loss. When this happens, the social cohesion and harmony of the social interaction are broken.

### *Pedagogical Implications for Collectivist Cultures*

Hofstede (1986), in his discussion of cultural differences in pedagogy, juxtaposes the common characteristics of education in individualist cultures with those of education in collectivist cultures. However, it is important to keep in mind that these characteristics more accurately describe some cultures than others. Stated differently, the specific manifestations of collectivism (or individualism) may vary from culture to culture. As Table 1 illustrates, one characteristic of the classroom in many collectivist cultures is that students tend to speak in class only when *called upon personally* by the teacher. Students seldom raise their hands or volunteer to speak because they do not want to draw attention to themselves. The Chinese proverb, “The gun shoots the very first bird who protrudes its head” (*qiang da chu tou niao*) reflects this cultural value. A second characteristic of collectivist classrooms is that students are unlikely to interrupt the teacher to ask a question during class.<sup>1</sup> This characteristic is similar to not volunteering answers to teachers’ questions. From a collectivist point of view, speaking up in a large group may be perceived as drawing attention to oneself and being selfish by taking time away from the group for an individual’s question or comment. In such situations, students may lose face in front of their peers and in front of the teacher, especially if the question appears superficial to the teacher and other students. Students may also avoid asking questions of the teacher or disagreeing with the teacher because the student does not want the teacher to lose face. Finally, in some collectivist classrooms, teachers may give preferential treatment to some students for reasons of group affiliation or influential recommendations. For example, in China if a student is a relative of the teacher or from a powerful family (e.g., the son of a governor), the teacher may pay more attention to that student by offering individual guidance after class, providing extra reading materials, or recommending the student to a highly selective student organization. This kind of preferential treatment is not usually shown overtly in class. Most Chinese teachers try to be impartial to students. However, the social system and deeply rooted sense of duty to one’s in-group still influence behavior.<sup>2</sup>

It may be helpful to think of individualism and collectivism as two ends of a continuum; cultures are not completely individualist or completely collectivist. The terms are relative. For example, Taiwan, Peru, Korea, and Mexico are more collectivist than Sweden, Canada, Great Britain or the United States. And Canada and Great Britain are more collectivist than the United States. The United States appears to be the most individualistic country in the world (Hofstede, 1984, 1991).

### ***Classroom Misunderstanding #1***

The following authentic example illustrates an intercultural misunderstanding that occurred between a teacher and a student. The misunderstanding can be explained in terms of the differences between collectivist and individualist cultures. Yasumi, a 19-year old Japanese student, had studied ESL at a language institute in the United States for one year. At the time of this incident, she was taking a grammar course from an American who told the class he was interested in cultural differences in the classroom. On the first day of class, he asked students to tell him when he committed any cultural blunders. Two weeks later, he had completed teaching a grammar unit and told the students they would have a grammar test on Monday. The teacher had plenty of time over the weekend to construct the test, so he decided to use students' names in the test items. The teacher thought that the students would enjoy seeing their names in print and appreciate that he had custom-made a test especially for them. He was careful to include everyone's names in the test items; he did not want to leave anyone out. On Monday after all the students had taken the test, Yasumi lingered in the classroom. When the other students had left, Yasumi told the teacher that seeing her name on the test embarrassed her. She did not want to be singled out by having her name in print. She also told the teacher that she didn't want to hurt his feelings but knew that he was interested in intercultural communication and therefore might appreciate the information.

The American teacher had behaved as a member of an individualist culture. He singled students out individually by name, thereby giving each individual attention. He also used *all* the students' names in the test items, treating each equally and favoring no one over anyone else. Yasumi, as member of a collectivist culture, did not want to be singled out and see her name on a test that all students read. She later told the teacher that she was so embarrassed by seeing her name on the test that she became agitated and believed that she did not perform as well as she otherwise would have. It did not matter to her that all students' names were on the test. She was primarily aware of her own name.

This incident also illustrates a strategy teachers can use to become informed about cultural differences in classroom behaviors: ask students when a cultural faux pas has been made. Often students won't say anything because they do not want to hurt teachers' feelings, but sometimes they will.

### ***Classroom Misunderstanding # 2***

An ESL teacher and her supervisor met to discuss the oral skills class that the supervisor would observe. The ESL teacher's objectives were for students to talk and listen to each other. To this end, she had devised a plan in which each ESL student would interview three other students on their opinions about controversial topics. One of the topics was: Do you think men and women should live together before they get married? The teacher told her supervisor that during each interview, the student interviewer would write



down the other students' names and points of view. After the class had completed the interviews, the teacher would call on a few student-interviewers to read the responses they had received along with the interviewee's names. The supervisor cautioned the ESL teacher against identifying students by name because they might not want to stand out from the others in the class; they might be embarrassed and lose face.

Two days later the supervisor observed the class. The students completed the task as the teacher had described to the supervisor. After they had finished, the teacher asked if any of the students minded if their names and responses were read aloud. Several female students from Vietnam either laughed slightly or put their hands in front of their faces. The teacher said, "Oh, come on. You don't really mind, do you?" When there was no response, she asked each student *individually*, "Can the interviewer give your name?" Reluctantly each student nodded. However, when the student-interviewers reported on the interviewees' positions, the Vietnamese students lowered their eyes and stared at their desks.

After class, the supervisor asked the teacher how she had interpreted the Vietnamese students' behavior when they laughed and put their hands in front of their face. The teacher said, "Oh, they just wanted to be coaxed a little more. They really wanted their names mentioned. I mean, when I asked them again, they agreed to allow the interviewer use their names."

This incident illustrates face from an individualist's perspective and face from a collectivist's perspective. The teacher, a member of an individualist culture, assumed that students would want to be singled out by name. Her cultural assumptions were so strong that she did not follow her supervisor's suggestions. The Vietnamese students, as members of a more collectivist culture, did not want their names to be used in class—especially in relation to a controversial topic. They displayed their embarrassment by laughing slightly and covering their faces. When the teacher insisted, they did not want the teacher to lose face in front of the rest of the class, so they agreed to let their names be used. The students then displayed signals of discomfort that the teacher ignored or did not recognize. This teacher's behavior is common: believing so much in her own cultural norms (i.e., being so ethnocentric), she didn't or couldn't accept another culture's frame of reference.

### **Power Distance**

Human inequality exists in all cultures. Inequality can occur in a variety of areas: social status, wealth, power, laws, and privileges. Hofstede (1984, 1991) refers to this inequality as power distance and defines it as a measure of interpersonal power or influence between two persons. Power distance is another well-researched intercultural dimension that causes misunderstandings in ESL classrooms (Cotta, 1976; Inkeles, 1960; Mulder, 1976; Parkin, 1971; Whyte, 1969). It can perhaps be most easily understood as a continuum with high power distance (HPD) on one end and low power distance (LPD) on the other rather than as an absolute. A particular culture has a higher or

lower power distance ranking than another culture. In cultures on the higher end of the power distance continuum, there tends to be a greater power or status distance in relationships, for example, between employers and employees, between parents and children, and between teachers and students. In cultures on the lower end of the continuum, the degree of power or status difference in these relationships is less.

### ***Lower Power Distance Defined***

Hofstede's (1986, 1991) research has suggested general cultural differences between cultures on the lower end of the continuum and those on the higher end. Members of cultures on the lower end of the power distance continuum tend to believe that inequality in society should be minimized and that people should have equal rights (Hofstede, 1984; 1991). Instead of viewing a power hierarchy as a "natural" fact of life, hierarchy is often viewed as a temporary system established for convenience. In general, subordinates and superiors perceive each other as "people just like me" (Hofstede, 1984, p. 94). Instead of being authoritarian, parents are more likely to be negotiators, talking to their children and cooperatively setting up rules that are mutually acceptable. Another characteristic is that those with power often try to look less powerful than they are. In dress, they often look like other people with less status. A final characteristic is that those in power often cannot accept special privileges or gifts because of legal or normative reasons. For example, even presidents of companies cannot use their positions to guarantee their children's admission into certain schools. Countries with the lowest power distance scores include Austria, Israel, Denmark, New Zealand, Ireland, Sweden, and Norway. The United States is at the lower end of the power-distance continuum, but it is not at the extreme end of the continuum (Hofstede, 1991).

### ***Pedagogical Implications for LPD Cultures***

In educational settings, power distance refers to the distance between a teacher and a student. In LPD cultures, the distance between the teachers and students is often less than in a HPD culture. It is not uncommon for teachers and students to become "friends", for teachers to joke with their students, for students and teachers to dress casually, and occasionally for students to call their teachers by their first names. Instead of transmitting information to students, teachers are more likely to expect students to take some responsibility for their own learning (see Table 2).

**Table 2**  
**Four Possible Cultural Differences Between Classrooms**  
**in Lower and Higher Power Distance Cultures**

*Classrooms in lower power distance cultures*

1. Teachers often expect students to participate in their own learning, to talk in class, and to ask questions.
2. Teachers generally earn the respect of their students, often by treating all students fairly and by having classroom interaction about the course material.
3. Some classrooms appear informal, especially to members of higher power distance cultures. Teachers and students may dress more informally than in higher power distance cultures. Chairs may be arranged in more “informal” configurations, and it may appear that the classroom rules of respect and behavior are less rigorous.
4. Generally, an effective teacher is expected to know the subject matter, but it is not uncommon for effectiveness to also be evaluated by qualities of the student-teacher and student-student interaction. It is a common belief that students learn by engaging with or “owning” the material in a personal way.

*Classrooms in higher power distance cultures*

1. Teachers often are perceived as responsible for students’ learning, as the authority who knows and presents the material, and as the one who initiates communication.
2. Teachers generally expect their students to respect them because of their position as teachers. This respect is often shown by the dress of both the teachers and students and by the manner in which students address their teachers.
3. Some classrooms appear formal, especially to members of lower power distance cultures. Teachers and students may dress more formally, with students sometimes wearing uniforms. Chairs and desks may be arranged in neat rows, and the classroom rules may seem formal.
4. Generally, an effective teacher is expected to know the subject matter well and to transmit that knowledge to the students. This is often accomplished in a teacher-centered manner, frequently through lectures.

For instance, teachers often expect students to initiate communication, ask questions, and speak in class. Such behavior is not seen as disrespectful to the teacher. One reason that teachers employ these behaviors is to narrow the power distance between themselves and their students. Also in LPD

cultures, teachers tend to *earn* the respect of their students; respect does not always come with the position. Teachers may earn respect through their fair treatment of and interactions with students. A third difference relates to the degree of formality in the classroom. International students are often surprised by the casual dress worn by American students (and sometimes teachers) in public schools and universities. In addition, the classroom arrangement of chairs in circles, around tables, or in learning centers may be perceived as informal. A final difference relates to how teaching is assessed. In a LPD culture, the effectiveness of the teaching is often judged by how much discussion and two-way communication takes place in the classroom. The teacher who walks in, lectures, and walks out is seldom perceived as an effective teacher (Hofstede, 1986).

### ***Higher Power Distance Defined***

Cultures with HPD tend to possess a worldview in which all individuals have their own place in the hierarchy. This hierarchical order is perceived as “natural” and gives many members of the culture a sense of security. Confucianism, for example, stresses the benefits of fixed hierarchical relations in which respect is shown for age, seniority, rank, and family background (Hsu, 1981). Thus, inequality of power is often considered a basic fact of life. In many situations, this hierarchy may be perceived as authoritarian. For example, parents expect children to obey, and managers often make autocratic decisions. They may also see these decisions as benevolent. Another characteristic of HPD cultures is that those with power generally try to act and look powerful. They may dress formally and expect to be treated with respect. A third characteristic is that those with power may expect special privileges. The kind of special privilege varies from culture to culture, but it may include gifts, admission to a prestigious school for one’s child, or a job for a relative. Cultures on the higher end of the power distance continuum include Malaysia, India, Panama, Venezuela, France, Mexico, and many Arabic-speaking countries.

### ***Pedagogical Implications for HPD Cultures***

From Hofstede’s research (1986), it appears that students and teachers from cultures on the higher end of the power distance continuum often expect the teacher to be the authority and the one who knows the subject. In fact, Confucius taught that the teacher must know all and be the representative of knowledge and the book (Hudson-Ross & Dong, 1990). As shown in Table 2, one characteristic of classrooms in HPD cultures, then, is that classrooms tend to be teacher centered with teachers transmitting information and knowledge to their students. In teacher-centered classrooms, the teacher often initiates classroom communication, calling on specific students in class. Students are less likely to raise their hands if they have a question. A second characteristic of HPD classrooms is that teachers expect the respect of their students. This respect is shown inside and outside of class. For example, in

China, many students refer to their teachers as *laoshi* and in Japan as *sensei*. In addition to the use of titles, demonstrating respect includes many behaviors. Mexican parents often teach their children to show respect for teachers by not being disruptive, not calling attention to themselves, and not interrupting the teacher; in other words, by being quiet (Valdez, 1996). A third characteristic of classrooms in HPD cultures relates to formality. Teachers may dress more formally; students may wear uniforms;<sup>3</sup> classroom decorum may be stricter; seats may be in rows; and specific rules are often followed. For example, in China, elementary students are taught to sit “with backbones straight, eyes directly ahead...until they are called on to raise a hand, stand to recite, or take out materials to work.” (Hudson-Ross & Dong, 1990, p. 115). A final characteristic of HPD classrooms relates to how teaching is assessed. The perception of effectiveness of the teaching depends on the excellence of the teacher. Students perceive teachers as effective when they know their subjects thoroughly, present them well, and command the respect of their students.

### *Classroom Misunderstanding*

Allen Grabowski was a 23-year old ESL teacher who was very excited about his first teaching position. Allen became a teacher because of a close relationship he had had with a high school English teacher. The two of them would go for walks and talk and sometimes have coffee together. Allen wanted to have this kind of informal relationship with his students. On the first day of class, he introduced himself to his first class, saying, “Please call me Al or Allen.” He then wrote “Al” and “Allen” on the blackboard. Wanting to create an informal atmosphere in the class, he sat on top of his desk while he talked to the class. He knew the students came from Vietnam, Guatemala, Mexico, Venezuela, Eritrea, the Sudan, and Egypt and many had not been in the United States very long. To create a sense of community, he wanted the students to get to know each other and also to know him. He therefore asked the students to talk about why they had come to the United States. Many students, however, said very little and seemed uncomfortable. When the bell rang, a student from Vietnam stopped to ask Allen a question, addressing him as “Teacher.” Before the student could ask the question, Allen said, “Oh no, please, call me Allen.” The student said that he could not do that and left the room. Although he did not know why, Allen felt that the class had not gone well.

Allen behaved as a member of a LPD culture. He wanted to have an informal, relatively equal relationship with his students—similar to the one he had had with his former teacher. To create a classroom environment that would facilitate the development of such a relationship, he casually sat on his desk, asked students to call him by his first name, and asked them to talk about themselves on the first day of class. Many of the students came from HPD cultures and were probably uncomfortable addressing a teacher by the first name. They also might not respect a teacher who sat on the desk and asked them to talk instead of *teaching* them content.<sup>4</sup>

## Conclusion

As humans, we are both individuals and members of cultures. As Rogoff (1990) points out:

Individual effort and sociocultural activity are mutually embedded, as are the forest and the trees, and...it is essential to understand how they constitute each other. Rather than according primacy to the role of sociocultural activity or of the individual, the aim is to recognize the essential and inseparable roles of social heritage, social engagement, and individual efforts. (p. 25)

Therefore, even though human beings are embedded in culture, it does not mean that all humans in a given culture are the same. Humans are socialized into a cultural context and exist within that cultural context. However, individual variation within cultures is based on many of the factors discussed at the beginning of this article. As TESL professionals, we are responsible for knowing about the cultures of our students because who they have become as individuals cannot be separated from the context of their socialization.

Learning about students' cultures is a never-ending journey. Students and cultures are complex, dynamic, and subtle. Like many other journeys, travelers stumble and make wrong turns, but the committed traveler perseveres and experiences the insights and satisfaction of the adventure. Committed travelers learn from their cultural blunders and have the goal of blundering less.

Below is a list of some strategies for cultural learning that provides a starting or mid point for the journey.

1. Learn about your own culture.
2. Be aware of and on guard against your own ethnocentrism.
3. Avoid judging students by your own cultural norms.
4. Remember that societal and educational norms vary from culture to culture.
5. Read and learn about the cultures of your students (see Appendix).
6. Learn about your students' social realities at home.
7. When you think a misunderstanding has occurred, ask the student if a cultural misunderstanding has occurred. Request that the student explain the misunderstanding to you, but not in front of others. This strategy requires tact, understanding, and empathy.
8. Be open and observant.
9. Be aware of nonverbal communication.
10. Find "good" informants, members of cultures who are particularly insightful about cultural issues and are perhaps bicultural. Ask them about behaviors you do not understand and the reasons for particular behaviors. If you are unsure about the appropriateness of a particular classroom activity, ask for and listen to their viewpoints.

## 11. Show respect.

If ESL teachers do not learn about the cultures of their students and about the concepts of intercultural communication, they are more likely to enter into intercultural teaching situations from an ethnocentric perspective, evaluating (often negatively) what they experience in terms of their own culture. A reasonable goal for ESL teachers is to learn to shift *frames of reference* (Bennett, 1993) so they can *see* situations from both their own points of view and from the points of view of their students.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>In the Peoples' Republic of China, the practice of students not interrupting the teacher also relates to the value of order.

<sup>2</sup>The author would like to thank Yan Xin and Liu Jingfang for their examples and explanations.

<sup>3</sup>The wearing of uniforms may also be a way of de-emphasizing the individual in collectivist cultures.

<sup>4</sup>Although this incident may seem simplistic, the author has observed many new ESL teachers engage in these behaviors (e.g., asking to be called by their first names and sitting on desks) and has heard many ESL students comment on the inappropriateness of the behaviors. One Chinese graduate student wrote, "Nonnative speakers of English as well as native speakers of English from countries other than America often express surprise at the wide use of first names in the United States." In writing about the Chinese, she notes, "Formality is a sign of respect. Do not become too friendly too soon, and do not insist that the Chinese call you by your given name. This American pattern of quick informality should be resisted." (Student gave permission for author to cite from her paper).

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## Appendix

### Recommended Resources

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