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Cultural Dimensions Revisited: Practical Steps for Interaction

by Lucas Peltonen

Years ago, I found myself in the Guangzhou, China subsidiary of an international bank, hired to work with department leaders in developing their English language small talk and relationship-building communicative skills. Well-prepared with a PowerPoint presentation and language points I wanted to cover, I faced the following question from the learners: "How do we communicate across cultures?" That was not a question I was prepared to answer. Though I had heard of cultural theorists such as Hofstede and Hall, I had to spend hours on Google in order to pivot toward a more cross-culturally focused training program—per the learners' feedback—that I made up as I went along.

The more I investigated cross-cultural communication with these professionals, the more I realized that certain tricky miscommunications did, in fact, seem attributable to culture. I encountered a fundamental dilemma: How do you structure learners' understanding of cross-cultural communication without making it too simple or stereotypical? At the same time, investigating the myriad permutations of how cultures might interact would likely overwhelm learners.

The concept of cultural dimensions seemed to be a good starting point to strike a balance between structure and flexibility in not only understanding cultures but also in "teaching" cross-cultural communication to my multilingual learners of English.

Cultural Dimensions Defined

"Cultural dimensions summarize the extent to which cultural groups are found empirically to differ from one another in terms of psychological attributes such as values, beliefs, self-construals, personality, and behaviors" (Smith & Bond, 2020, p. 1). In other words, cultural dimensions endeavor to elucidate ways in which people of certain cultures think and act. Though there are several different ways of approaching cultural dimensions, developed by various theorists, I will focus on the most famous: The dimensions developed by Hofstede (1980). These include national cultures' measures of power distance, individualism, and uncertainty avoidance, among others. To see the dimensions in practice, go to the Hofstede Insights (2023) Country Comparison tool and type in whichever countries you want to compare.

On the other hand, the more I learned about cultural dimensions, the more the criticisms of these dimensions made sense to me: They homogenized heterogeneous groups, they could be reductionist, and the surveys upon which they were based were not always rigorously executed. Even worse, what if someone simply did not follow their cultural dimensions? For

example, if we consider Hofstede's individualist-collectivist dimension, the Japanese are supposedly more collectivist than Americans. However, what if there is an American manager who enjoys discussions to build consensus and values group harmony? And what if she is interacting with a Japanese IT professional who prefers to work alone and communicates in short, direct language? Does that mean that cultural dimensions are useless?

It is this question that I hope to answer in this article, reconciling the utility of cultural dimensions with a more nuanced understanding of how cross-cultural communications actually work.

Business English as a Lingua Franca

English in the world today functions on a global scale as the default lingua franca between speakers of different first languages, whether in the domain of the internet, industry, trade, or diplomacy. As such, it is estimated that 70% or more of English communication worldwide is between nonnative speakers (Rose & Galloway, 2019). Gone are the days of the British or Americans "owning" English language usage: Now, these so-called native speakers represent a small minority of lingua franca communicators worldwide, especially with the increase of English speakers in places like India and China. Thrust into this global communicative network are business professionals who need to interact across multiple cultures (including corporate cultures and subcultures), English varieties, and linguistic backgrounds.

Contemporary understanding of cross-cultural communication posits that cultures are not defined static entities; instead, they are fluid, temporary, and created in interactions—meaning all Americans are *not* 10% more individualistic than all Japanese. Specific to the business context, the degree to which a person or work team or even corporate culture represents a cultural dimension depends upon the specific situation and the person(s) with whom they are interacting. (For more about this, read Baker, 2022, and Davies & Harre, 1990). In other words, cultural dimensions do not apply to an entire national population; rather, they are manifested in individual communicative events.

Referring to the earlier example, the collectivist American manager interacting with the individualistic Japanese IT professional does not negate the utility of cultural dimensions. Instead, it requires a more nuanced understanding of how they work based on context and between specific interactants. In this case, the American is more collectivist than her Japanese colleague; however, it is also possible that when she interacts with her company's sales team, her orientation is more individualistic than theirs, in which case the dimension is still applicable and useful in understanding the culture and communication of the sales team, though her relative position changes.

The question turns to how this understanding of culture, cross-cultural communication, and cultural dimensions can be addressed in the classroom.

Principles we have learned so far:

1. Cultures are not static entities; instead, they manifest as fluid and are transient during interactions.
2. The position of the interactant in terms of a particular cultural dimension will change depending on the specific context of communication and their interlocutor.

Curricular Adaptation and Classroom Implementation

Before discussing possible curricular adaptations and classroom implementation, it is essential to note that teaching contexts, stakeholders, and learners' needs vary widely, so I will present principles and structures that hopefully allow teachers to make changes that suit their particular contexts.

The rationale for leveraging cultural dimensions in the classroom is that they can help structure students'/speakers' understanding of different cultural perspectives and how they interact; however, as stated previously, it is crucial to understand the dimensions as being applicable in specific contexts, dependent on the situation and the interactants rather than as fixed representations of the population of an entire country. With that as a starting point, more specific classroom implementation becomes apparent:

Raise Awareness

The first step in developing students' transcultural competence is to expose them to the various concepts that inform transcultural communication. In this article, I have provided the example of Hofstede's (1980) dimensions, though many other significant dimensions could have been included. Raising students' awareness of the dimensions should consist of two basic steps:

1. The dimensions should be presented and defined, ideally with visual support.
2. The instructor should provide tangible examples of how the dimensions might manifest (such as the preceding example about the American manager and the Japanese IT professional).

Reflective Writing

Reflective writing should also follow two steps: First, students should reflect on their own cultural dimensions. Again, that does not mean that their dimensions strictly follow their "national" dimensions (I put "national" in quotes as this understanding of cultural dimensions rejects the consideration of cultures as being national); rather, it is a more profoundly insightful self-reflection regarding how their own cultural perspectives do or do not match with their supposed "national" dimensions. As delineated in much literature, home cultural understanding serves as a foundation for understanding and interacting with other cultures.

The second step would be for the student to consider a target culture with whom they have to work or interact, or where they need to travel for work and perform a similar reflection as they did for the home culture. Experienced professionals can analyze, based on their experience, where their interlocutors seemed to match with their "national" dimensions and where they diverged.

Role-Plays

With the preceding foundational work in place, students can practice transcultural communication through role-plays. The simplest way to complete this is for students to represent a particular cultural perspective, forcing their partner to react accordingly. Such activities could help consolidate students' understanding of how dimensions manifest in communication as well as offer them practice in adjusting to the different dimensions in

communicative practice. In other words, the theoretical understanding would become tangible and practical.

Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that cultural dimensions have great utility in helping structure students' and speakers' transcultural understanding and communicative competence; however, they need to be understood as fluid, contextually specific, and temporary rather than static and boundary oriented.

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Lucas Peltonen *is a PhD student at the Hong Kong Polytechnic University. His research focuses on developing the linguacultural competency of business English speakers and learners. With 14 years of teaching experience, Lucas also holds a master's degree in English teaching from the University of Northern Colorado as well as CELTA, cert-IBET, and TEFL certificates.*