

Geert Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory and Its Implications in SLA

Chenchieh Su^{1,a,*}

¹*School of Foreign Languages, Zhaoqing University, Zhaoqing, China*

^a*chengchiehsu@gmail.com*

^{*}*Corresponding author*

Abstract: *Geert Hofstede's cultural dimension theory is among the most influential theories in the field of intercultural communication. It has played a pivotal role in the study of intercultural management, marketing, human resources, and intercultural teaching and learning. This study briefly introduces Hofstede's cultural dimension theory, explores the application of the theory in the field of Second Language Acquisition, and offers suggestions for strengthening the intercultural communication competence and performance of second language learners.*

Keywords: *Geert Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, Intercultural communication, SLA*

1. Introduction

Cultural differences are a primary factor leading to the failure of intercultural communication and can directly impact its effectiveness. However, many instructors teaching Western culture in schools focus on the cultural differences between China and the West, particularly Britain and the United States, and ignore the differences between China and other Western countries. In addition, the development of intercultural communicative competence is neglected in the teaching of Western culture, and instructors use a single mode of teaching and a single source of information. Students are taught Western culture only in schools and classrooms, generally via a single teaching method, and most teachers lack intercultural communication knowledge and practical experience. These factors lead to deficient knowledge of Western culture among students and poor intercultural communication skills.

In addition to teachers' lack of understanding and experience, instruction for intercultural communication is not emphasized in foreign language teaching because it lacks theoretical support and is limited in the cultural phenomena it describes. As a result, teaching on Western culture has been treated as an accessory and supplement to language teaching. Students are exposed only to fragmented and unsystematic knowledge of Western culture, and the contents and methods used are far from the target requirements of culture teaching.

Geert Hofstede's cultural dimension theory is commonly used to analyze intercultural differences and can be useful in this context. According to the theory, intercultural differences can be described and compared on five cultural dimensions: individualism-collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity-femininity, short-term/long-term orientation, and indulgence-restraint. Hofstede's cultural dimensions originate in a large survey he conducted from the 1960s to 1970s that examined value differences among different divisions of IBM. The study encompassed over 100,000 employees from 50 countries across 3 regions. Briefly put, the six cultural dimensions provide a practical framework for intercultural management, intercultural communication, and other interpersonal behaviors in intercultural settings^{[1][2][3][4]}.

This study aims to introduce Hofstede's cultural dimension theory and explore the theory's relationship with Second Language Acquisition (SLA for short). It proposes suggestions for strengthening SLA learners' intercultural communicative competence and performance.

2. The six dimensions in Hofstede's cultural dimension theory

Hofstede developed the theory of cultural dimensions through his study of how culture influences workplace values. According to Hofstede's definition, culture is the collective programming of the mind that allows each member of a group or class of people to distinguish themselves from one another.

Hofstede identified six dimensions of national culture based on this theory. We will briefly explore these six dimensions and identify why they are crucial within intercultural communication and management.

2.1 Power distance

Power distance refers to the degree to which people of low status in a given society or organization accept the unequal distribution of power. In a country with high power distance, people respect authority more, employees do not dare to challenge their supervisors, younger people obey older people, people in power have more privileges, and authority is not allowed to be challenged. In a country with low power distance, people agree more on equality, students challenge their teachers, employees call their supervisors by their first names, and authority can easily be challenged.

This dimension differs greatly across countries due to varying perspectives on power. On one hand, Europeans and Americans do not value power very much, focusing more on individuality. On the other hand, Arab countries emphasize the influences derived from power, and their institutions, whether government departments or enterprises, are more or less tinged with power. Thus, European and Arab countries differ substantially in their power distance.

2.2 Uncertainty avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance refers to whether a country is subject to uncertain events and unconventional environmental threats through formal channels to avoid and control uncertainty. Countries with high uncertainty avoidance place greater value on authority, status, seniority, age, and so on. Their people attempt to avoid these scenarios by providing greater job security, establishing more rules, not tolerating radical behaviors, and trusting absolute knowledge and judgments. Countries with low uncertainty avoidance are more tolerant of deviant behavior and opinions and have fewer rules and regulations. Their people more often than not allow a variety of different ideas to coexist; employees tend to work autonomously and independently. For example, Japan, which has a high degree of uncertainty avoidance, has implemented lifetime employment. In contrast, the United States, a country with a low level of uncertainty avoidance, has not implemented or actively explored lifetime employment.

2.3 Individualism versus collectivism

The individualism versus collectivism dimension measures whether a society is concerned with the interests of the individual or the group. Individualistic societies tend to have loose interpersonal relationships, and people tend to care about themselves and their families. Collectivistic societies focus on intra-community relationships and care about the extended family with strong communal relationships providing continuous protection; everyone must consider the interests of others, and members of an organization have a spiritual obligation and loyalty to the organization. Japan is an example of a collectivistic culture while the United States is an individualistic culture.

2.4 Masculinity versus femininity

The masculinity versus femininity dimension explores whether a society presents more masculine qualities, such as competitiveness and assertiveness, or feminine qualities, such as modesty and caring for others. The more value a society places on masculinity, the greater the difference in values between men and women. From a business perspective, in the United States, which is a more masculine country, major decisions are usually made at the top of the company, and employees are often not actively involved in management due to frequent job changes and lack of identification with the company.

2.5 Long-term versus short-term

The long-term versus short-term dimension refers to how comfortable members of a culture are with delaying the satisfaction of their material, emotional, and social needs. Individuals with long-term orientation believe that people should focus on the impact of the present on their future lives, know how to live a long life, and advocate persistence and frugality. Those with short-term orientation believe that people should focus on the results of the past on the present and advocate the virtues of valuing the past, preserving face, and fulfilling social obligations. The long-term orientation has a strong relationship with economic growth in all countries, and scholars believe that long-term orientation was one of the main reasons for the rapid economic growth in East Asia in the late 20th century. Long-term oriented countries

include China, Japan, Korea, India, and Thailand while short-term oriented countries include Nigeria, Philippines, and Canada.

2.6 Indulgence versus restraint

Indulgence versus restraint refers to the degree to which a society allows its people to meet basic needs and indulge their desire to enjoy life and pleasure. A culture of indulgence allows people to enjoy life relatively freely and encourages them to satisfy basic, natural human desires. A culture of restraint holds that desires should be restrained by social regulations and that people should not be self-indulgent but should have a greater sense of purpose and responsibility. There are three important value dimensions that determine whether people choose indulgence or restraint: the degree of need for happiness, the value placed on the manageability of life, and the value placed on contentment.

3. Hofstede's cultural dimension theory and SLA

SLA is both the process by which people learn a second language and a discipline devoted to the study of this process. SLA has multiple contexts. It includes natural and guided learning and can refer to both second and foreign language learning. SLA is naturally followed by second culture acquisition; in general, language learners acquire new cultural knowledge and a specific set of cultural constraints on language behavior. Several different models and theories have been constructed to explain the methods used by second language learners to adapt to a new culture.

Robinson-Stuart and Nocon synthesized some of the perspectives on culture learning seen in recent decades. They observed that the notion that culture learning is an automatic byproduct of language instruction is problematic. Robinson-Stuart and Nocon suggested that culture learning is a process that continues over years of language learning and penetrates deeply into learners' patterns of thinking, feeling, and acting ^[5].

Another theory related to cultural and language learning is social distance. Social distance refers to the cognitive and affective proximity of two cultures that come into contact within an individual. Schumann argued that the greater the social distance between two cultures, the greater the difficulty the learner will have in learning the second language and, conversely, the smaller the social distance (the greater the social solidarity between two cultures), the easier language learning will be ^[6].

Crucially, Hofstede, who employed different conceptual categories to study the cultural norms of different countries, proposed the Cultural Dimensions theory that has greatly impacted the study of SLA ^{[7][8][9][10][11][12]}. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions theory has shed light on how cultural differences remain significant today. Cultural dimensions can be used to account for why certain behaviors are more or less common in different cultures when SLA instructors are required to observe and explain individual learner differences as well as learner strategies. For example, since the individualism-collectivism dimension indicates why certain cultures place more emphasis on personal growth and achievement than others, SLA teachers can use different teaching methods for students from different sides of that dimension.

Furthermore, according to the theory, the power distance dimension can impact student learning through their perceptions of the teacher and institution. Students in countries with high power distance tend to respect teachers in school and strictly obey order in the classroom and hierarchy between people. Most students in such countries do not participate actively when the teacher, as an authority, asks a question or initiates a discussion. These students lack initiative and sense of innovation. Thus, teachers should change the previous didactic teaching method and instead use a variety of teaching methods, such as discussion teaching, group learning, and role-playing, to sharpen students' enthusiasm and initiative for learning a foreign language.

Hofstede's cultural dimensions can also be used to predict how people from different cultures will interact with each other. If two individuals meet from cultures with low levels of power distance, they may have difficulty communicating as they have different expectations about who should be in charge. Hofstede's cultural dimension theory is of great importance to understand the characteristics of students and improve the current situation of classroom teaching.

As is well known, inadequate intercultural communication knowledge and skills are among the main factors leading to failure in intercultural communication and management. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions theory allows much of the applied knowledge, research, and skills related to SLA to be available for language teachers to assist learners in the process of second culture acquisition and

acculturation. The following section offers suggestions for strengthening the intercultural communication skills and performance of SLA learners.

4. Suggestions to enhance the intercultural communication competence and performance of SLA learners

One of the purposes of this study is to be able to contribute to the application of SLA by combining Geert Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory with intercultural teaching and learning in practice. On the strength of the insights stemming from the previous sections, the following are suggestions to promote the intercultural communication competence and performance of SLA learners.

4.1 Giving full play to the role of foreign language teachers

In foreign language learning, it is necessary to seize any opportunity to communicate with native speakers. Foreign language teachers are the best candidates for this, and, by engaging with them, students can directly experience the cultural differences. Additionally, foreign teachers can introduce students to background knowledge about foreign society, culture, and customs. It is suggested that foreign scholars and students be invited to the language classroom to give intercultural speeches. In addition, holding a foreign language salon or a foreign language learning competition would provide a good opportunity to learn about foreign cultures. Foreign educators might find ways to adapt assignments involving ethnographic interviews to enrich learners' education experiences with authentic intercultural communication opportunities. Significantly, foreign teachers are likely to use instructional materials or ideas that reflect greater intercultural awareness, empathy, and Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions theory.

4.2 Highlighting the application of multimedia

With the rapid development of network technology, the application of multimedia to language teaching and learning has provided teachers and students with abundant cultural information related to the target language. Internet resources, films, and television series allow students to witness behaviors that are rarely found in texts. Creating a "context" for language learners is a prerequisite for language and culture construction.

Multimedia sources present teaching contents visually and graphically with a large amount of disseminated information, fast speed, timely knowledge, and breakthrough of time and space limitations. This has become one of the best teaching means reflecting the contextual view of intercultural communication. Teachers can provide students with real or simulated language-learning materials through films, videos, foreign news, and so on to stimulate students' associations to the greatest extent possible, awaken their memories of relevant illustrations and experiences, and integrate old and new knowledge to build their own knowledge system more deeply and broadly. For example, before the lesson, an SLA teacher can offer multimedia materials to give an overview of intercultural knowledge, explain difficulties associated with cultural differences, and avoid misunderstandings due to cultural differences in advance.

4.3 Enhancing the requirement of foreign literary texts

Teachers should guide students to read foreign literary works, magazines, and newspapers to accumulate materials on cultural background, social relations, cultural customs, and so on. For example, they might recommend reading materials such as Greek mythology, *Alice in Wonderland*, and *Little Women*. This will not only improve students' reading skills but also expand their horizons and allow them to learn more about cultural materials. Additionally, literature teaching can provide rich cultural knowledge of different nations. It helps students learn the history, economy, customs, and moralities of foreign countries. Literature teaching and learning can shorten the distance between the target language and the learners' native tongue.

4.4 Creating a collaborative learning environment

The impact of collaborative learning on learning outcomes is enormous. Effective learning usually emerges from the interactions between teachers and learners and among learners. SLA students should not only learn a foreign language but also interact and cooperate in developing the ability to work with and respect others. To make teaching more effective, teachers should organize cooperative and collaborative

learning whenever possible. In collaborative learning, students interact with each other, including group discussion, mutual evaluation, peer review, and mutual learning.

For example, before the lesson, students can be divided into small groups to discuss and reach a solution through communication and negotiation. When the solution is found, it can be presented to the other groups to gather better ideas. Collaborative learning allows students to broaden their thinking and to practice negotiation and conversation skills. In SLA classrooms, students of different races and cultures learn and collaborate in the classroom to strengthen their intercultural communication competence and skills.

5. Conclusion

This study briefly discussed Geert Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions theory and its implications in SLA. It also offered suggestions for language teaching and learning that will hopefully provide new insights and guidance in an effective way. Intercultural communication occurs not only between languages but also between cultures, and cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings among people with different nationalities or races. SLA teachers and learners also have a strong tendency to misunderstand each other. This phenomenon often happens in multicultural societies or classrooms. To address this issue, SLA teachers and students must be aware of the importance and necessity of studying intercultural communication and should learn as much as possible about the differences between cultures.

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