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When West Meets East: Decoding Chinese Culture and How Intercultural Communication Is Applied in Classrooms

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Abstract

This chapter reviews Hofstede's cultural dimension model, the Lewis model, and Trompenaars's cultural universalism versus particularism to provide intercultural communication tools to educators who are confronted with the challenge of how to effectively teach foreign students, particularly from China. This chapter also investigates how cultures are exhibited and intertwined in students' use of the English language. Techniques on

how to navigate a class mostly made up of Chinese students and strategies for how to help students succeed in their graduate studies are provided.

Overview

In 1995, the author came to the United States to pursue her master's degree in teaching English. Her university in Virginia was relatively small, and she was the only international student in the graduate program. Being foreign to every aspect of the States, she quickly realized her desperate need to learn to adjust. While attaining her degree, the author came across a variety of professors: professors who thought highly of her simply because she fought through endless cutthroat competitions to win her place in a college in China, professors who were kindhearted and fascinated about the Asian culture but couldn't quite figure out how to offer academic support, professors who felt sorry for her because she was a lonely "poor thing" and decided to give her high grades that she probably didn't earn, and professors who challenged her the same way they did her American peers. These professors refused to lower the university's academic standards just to preserve her "self-esteem." They assumed strength and challenged her and helped her grow.

After one year of being silent in class, learning to adapt to linear thinking and apply it in writing, and all the tears, self-doubts, and fatigues later, the author started to think and act like a graduate student. She came to realize her journey could be of great value to the professors who teach those excited, but often feeling lost, newcomers from China. That became the genesis of this chapter: an insider's view.

Review of the Literature

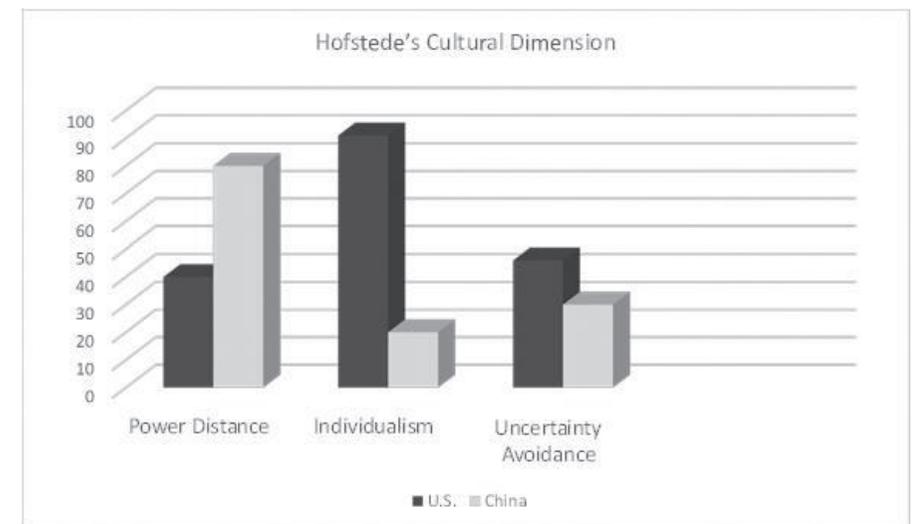
As the world is becoming increasingly globalized, so is education. To many Chinese, an educational experience in the United States is the key to becoming a global citizen and, most importantly, a ticket for a better job, hence a better life. China's GDP in 2014 was an estimated \$13,200 per capita, and China has always been a saving society with the gross national saving rate close to 49 percent (Central Intelligence Agency, n.d.). Chinese parents save to sponsor their only child to learn innovation and creativity in the United States. As China's middle class is expanding, sending children to the West

is no longer an impossible dream. Data from the Institute of International Education (n.d.) indicates that as of 2013/2014, 274,439 Chinese students were studying in American universities or colleges, which comprised 31 percent of the total international student population in the United States.

As the number of students from China pursuing higher degrees in the United States increases, many professors find themselves in uncharted territory teaching a class where the majority of students are from the Far East, or particularly China. To prevent cultural communication breakdowns from happening while helping students grow academically, professors need to quickly learn and understand students' cultures and effectively apply cultural communication skills in classroom instruction.

Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Model

Hofstede's cultural dimension model illustrates how a certain national culture is scored in relation to other cultures. Of the six dimensions, power distance, individualism/collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance are particularly applicable in promoting understanding between Western instructors and Eastern students in an increasingly globalized classroom setting. The following chart shows how the United States and China score on Hofstede's power distance, individualism/collectivism, and uncertainty avoidance dimensions.



Source: Hofstede (n.d.), *China in Comparison with United States*

Power distance. Power distance explains how equal a society is, how people in this society see equality and authority, whether they accept inequality, how much they are willing to defend themselves when confronted with power, and how much fear authority can provoke. Compared with the United States' score of 40, China's 80 points indicate that power disparity is accepted, fearing authority is the norm, superiors hold most of the power, going beyond ranking and questioning authority is unacceptable, and punishment for those who do is well justified (Hofstede, n.d., *China in Comparison with United States*). In the States, democracy is the foundation, and achieving equality is the end goal. In a society as such, people are encouraged to break barriers, and challenging authority is greatly admired.

The power distance dimension is a useful tool in analyzing interactions between instructors and students. When instructors from a low-power distance society meet students from a high-power distance society, misunderstandings will likely occur. Seeing instructors as authority figures who can't be challenged, Chinese students are reluctant to voice their opinions or express their disagreement because in China asking questions and voicing disagreement are seen as disrespectful and will be penalized or publicly shamed. In the States, educators are facilitators; they are not seen as know-it-alls. They encourage students to participate, interact, and approach them with questions and concerns. The flip side of this democratic, nonauthoritative Western approach is that it may confuse foreign students. To put it simply, Chinese students prefer to see their professors as authority figures. Otherwise, they will quickly lose respect for their instructors and question the value of the education they are receiving if they see their instructors as their equals.

Individualism vs. collectivism. Hofstede's individualism dimension measures "the degree of interdependence a society maintains among its members" (The Hofstede Centre, n.d., *What about China*, para. 4). China scores a 20 as opposed to a 91 for the United States in individualism. In the States individualism is a mindset and way of life; individuals are responsible for their own achievements. Whereas in China, the translation of individualism is "GeRenZhuYi," which connotes selfishness. Although it might be overgeneralizing to define China as a "we" society and the United States as an "I" society, this wide gap does explain why Chinese students frequently struggle to establish an individual identity in the States. They likely form in-groups among their Chinese peers, and within the group they will help each other, trade favors *quid pro quo*, and live a comfortable Chinese life

in the United States. The positive side of this cultural bondage is they are less lonely; the negative side is that they fail to gain new experiences, take risks, and take advantage of what the United States offers.

Uncertainty avoidance. Hofstede defines uncertainty avoidance as "the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations and have created beliefs and institutions that try to avoid these" (Hofstede, n.d., *What about China?* para. 9). China scores a 30 in this dimension, whereas the United States a 46 (Hofstede, n.d., *China in Comparison with United States*). Hofstede's interpretation of the States' relatively low score lies in its willingness to tolerate the unknowns, welcome new and different ideas, and underscore technological innovation and creativity. As Hofstede puts it, the American society is less likely to be threatened by the unknown and will play an innovative force to influence other cultures (n.d., *What about the USA?*). China's low score in this dimension can be highlighted by "pragmatism" and "ambiguity" (n.d., *What about China?* para. 10). Although social norms are strictly conformed to and anyone who violates them will be crucified, laws and rules are seen as bendable. The "go with the flow" mentality is exhibited by Chinese students in both academic and nonacademic lives, where they occasionally fail to comply with the schools' rules and policies, and laws in general.

The Lewis Model

The Lewis model divides cultures into multi-active, linear-active, and reactive. "Reactive or listening cultures rarely initiate action or discussion, preferring first to listen to and establish the other's position, then react to it and formulate their own" (CrossCulture, n.d., *Cultural Classification: Reactive*, para. 1). Lewis (n.d.) describes Chinese culture as reactive, where people are "courteous, amiable, accommodating, compromising, and good listener(s)." In a reactive world, people tend to be polite to the extent of hiding true feelings, and losing face can lead to communication breakdown or even contractual rejection. The Chinese are good listeners and compromisers who are eager to accommodate. Voicing opinions is not encouraged, and if they feel compelled to express themselves, they will express something nice and complementary. The Lewis Model explains why Chinese students in the US universities are seen as passive

participants in teamwork, whose opinions are indirect and sometimes hard to comprehend. On the bright side, they are pleasing and polite and nonconfrontational.

Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner's Model of National Culture Differences

One of the seven dimensions developed by Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner is universalism versus particularism. Universalists believe that rules are equally applied, and they tend to trust the legal systems and not to rely on personal connections, whereas particularists believe that connections and personal relationships trump rules and laws (2012). "GuanXi," a Chinese term meaning important ties or connections, is the number-one priority if people want to achieve their goals. With people, rules are flexible; "GuanXi" can bend laws. Chinese students in the States tend to carry over this type of mentality and try to manipulate rules. They may cheat on tests or commit plagiarism and expect not to be caught or not to be penalized. This behavior is not typical of Chinese as long as a society rewards those who bend rules.

Integration into the Student Experience

Cultural communication skills can be used in all aspects of instruction. Professors can teach students to accept their responsibilities for learning, which is quite the opposite of what they were taught in their home country. Professors can help students understand that syllabi and schedules are academic contracts, and deadlines should be respected. Professors can create a learning environment where risk taking is rewarded, and students can actively participate in discussions and voice their opinions without worrying about "losing face" or being punished. Professors can teach students to be resourceful and help them develop the needed confidence to navigate university services without fear of being judged. Professors can help prevent cheating and plagiarism by enforcing the scholastic honesty policy and making students understand that no one is above the "law" of the school, even though he/she is from a culture where power and influence can bend rules.

Proven Practices, Examples, and Results

Channeling culture and putting intercultural communication skills in use are vital to instructional success in a globalized classroom. Instructors need not feel like they're walking on eggshells for fear of offending foreign students or hurting their feelings. As much as they need instructional support, foreign students are rather resilient, so by being firm and resourceful and not lowering the school's academic integrity, instructors will likely provide the support that students desperately need.

Multisensory Instruction

International students learn two things: content and language skill. Fulfilling the requirements of the test of English as a foreign language (TOEFL) and graduate record exam (GRE) can get a foreign student admitted to an institute in the United States, but to succeed and grow academically requires far more than high scores on the two tests. Information retention in a second language is low. International students often complain they heard everything their instructors said but could not recall a thing, or they read the text material a few times but still couldn't recall what they just read a few minutes ago. Almost all international students have had this type of almost "out-of-body" experience to various degrees. To help students retain knowledge in their second language, instructors need to employ a multisensory instructional strategy. For example, instructors may need to give students a variety of instructional choices such as breaking down texts into small pieces, using PowerPoint, videos, and study groups, and meeting with students in person.

Structured and Explicit Instruction

Foreign students' daily life is filled with surprises. They interact with confusion and ambiguity, constantly guessing, negotiating meaning, and making sense of their academic and nonacademic environments, and none of these interactions is natural for them. To reduce students' confusion and stress caused by confusion, instructors need to better structure their course materials and instruction. Structured and explicit teaching helps students understand and follow instructions more effectively.

Silence and Face

“The bird that sticks its head up will get shot first”—a Chinese proverb

“The squeaky wheel gets the grease”—an American proverb

The two proverbs show a sharp contrast between the two cultures; one emphasizes standing out, one blending in. The American culture encourages people to voice their ideas, to get noticed, to be heard, while Chinese people choose to be silent for fear of punishment for speaking out or being wrong. China is a high-context culture where what is said is not as important as what is not said, and face has become a complex concept that many non-Chinese find extremely challenging to interpret. Worrying about losing face, Chinese students tend to be quiet because they don't want to feel embarrassed with their ideas in addition to their relatively low English-speaking skills. Sometimes students will say yes or lie to protect their instructor's face. So one lesson to instructors is when students say yes, it may not mean that they agree, but if they say maybe, it most likely means no. Instructors from a low context culture as the United States may need great exposure to be able to interpret these types of behaviors.

Lessons Learned, Tips for Success, and Recommendations

The SCORE communication principle by Berardo (2012, p. 225) is of great value to instructors who teach students having cultural, academic, and language challenges in the United States.

S—Simplify and Specify

When instructors' language use is not simple and information is not specific, misunderstandings will likely occur particularly for foreign students. Instructors need simple, direct language with clear details; the use of idioms and slang needs to be avoided.

C—Clarify and Confirm

For foreign students, misunderstanding is common, so it is important for both instructors and students to apply this principle and check understanding regularly. To minimize misunderstanding, they both need to use expressions such as “what I meant was . . .,” “just to clarify . . .,” “so what you are saying . . .”

O—Organize and Outline

When instructors present course materials in a well-organized manner and outline the key points, students are likely to be able to understand and follow the instruction effectively. Numbering key ideas and using headings and subheadings are helpful.

R—Rephrase and Reframe

Instructors need to use a variety of ways to communicate ideas. When one way doesn't work, instructors need to try another way to be understood, and to check students' understanding, instructors need to ask students to rephrase what they just heard.

E—Explain with Examples

Using examples is an effective way to help students understand instructions and course materials. However, instructors need to be mindful when choosing examples. Examples need to be generational and less culturally rich because students may get confused and miss the point.

Conclusion

International students will likely succeed when they have professors who “get them.” Professors with higher cultural intelligence will likely challenge students and help them grow. They will not simply pass

students on to become someone else's problem, or coddle and patronize them because they feel sorry for "these poor kids" and don't want to hurt their feelings. Cultural communication skills will help American professors properly challenge and sufficiently support international students. In doing so, they maximize students' learning outcomes and experiences.

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Author Biography

HongYing Douglas received her MA in education with a focus on language and literacy from Christopher Newport University. She taught

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