

THE IMPORTANCE OF TEACHING CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION: APPLYING HOFSTEDÉ'S POWER DISTANCE IN BUSINESS ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

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Abstract: *In today's globalized and interconnected world, the ability to communicate effectively across cultures is a critical skill. This paper explores the importance of teaching intercultural communication to promote understanding, reduce conflict, and enhance collaboration in diverse social, educational, and professional environments. Central to this discussion is Geert Hofstede's theoretical framework, particularly the cultural dimension of Power Distance (PD), which examines how societies handle inequalities in power and authority. The paper analyzes how PD manifests in various cultural settings, including family dynamics, educational institutions, workplaces, and communication styles. It further investigates historical and linguistic roots of power distance differences and highlights their implications in modern interactions. Practical teaching strategies and classroom activities are proposed to engage students in critical thinking and real-world application of intercultural communication concepts. Finally, the paper underlines the importance of integrating intercultural communication education in academic and professional training to better equip students for success in a multicultural world.*

Key words: *Intercultural communication; English for Specific Purpose, Power Distance, Cultural Awareness, Globalization*

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1. Introduction

In an increasingly interconnected and globalized world, the ability to communicate effectively across cultures is not just a valuable skill, it is a necessity. As individuals interact more frequently with people from different cultural backgrounds, whether through travel, work, education, or online platforms, the need for competent intercultural communication becomes critical. Teaching intercultural communication is essential for fostering understanding, reducing conflict, and promoting cooperation in diverse social, educational, and professional environments.

Intercultural communication refers to the process by which people from different cultural backgrounds exchange information and meaning. It goes beyond language differences to include values, beliefs, behaviors, communication styles, and

worldviews. Teaching intercultural communication equips individuals with the knowledge and skills to navigate these differences effectively and respectfully.

One of the most significant benefits of teaching intercultural communication is that it enhances cultural awareness and sensitivity. Students learn to recognize and appreciate the diversity of human experiences and perspectives. This understanding helps individuals move beyond stereotypes and assumptions, promoting empathy and respect for others. In educational settings, this can lead to more inclusive and supportive learning environments. In workplaces, it can foster teamwork and a more positive organizational culture.

Cultural misunderstandings are a common source of conflict in both personal and professional interactions. Teaching intercultural communication provides individuals with the tools to recognize potential sources of miscommunication, such as differing non-verbal cues, language nuances, and cultural norms. When individuals understand and anticipate these differences, they are better equipped to resolve conflicts and build harmonious relationships.

2. Theoretical Framework of Geert Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

Geert Hofstede was a Dutch expert in cultural studies, and a professor of Organizational Anthropology and International Management at Maastricht University. He used to analyze the connections between national cultures and corporate cultures, associating culture with a "mental software". According to him culture is the "collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another". (Hofstede 2011: 4)

In his book *Cultures and Organisations. Software of the Mind*, Geert Hofstede carried out one of the most extensive empirical study on cultural differences: from 1968 to 1972, he questioned around 116,000 IBM employees from 53 countries. Using this study, the company's aim was to find out the ideal working conditions for its employees. However, the result showed that views on the ideal working conditions are different from one country to another. After analyzing the questionnaires Hofstede created cultural dimensions that would differentiate the values and attitudes of the employees from various countries. The statistical analysis revealed common problems, but different solutions. He established four cultural dimensions and later on he added two more. The following six dimensions are aspects of a culture that can be measured and compared in relation to others:

- **power distance:** how is power and inequality dealt with in a culture?
- **collectivism versus individualism:** is individualism or collectivism preferred in a culture?
- **masculinity versus femininity:** is the culture more masculine or more feminine?
- **uncertainty avoidance:** how is uncertainty dealt with in a culture?
- **long-term orientation versus short-term orientation:** is there a short-term or a long-term orientation in a culture?
- **indulgence versus restraint:** control over one's life or the importance of free time and leisure in a culture?

3. Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Power Distance: Concept and Global Examples

Geert Hofstede's concept of power distance refers to the degree of inequality that exists and is accepted within a society. It is "the extent to which less powerful members of organizations and institutions (such as employees or citizens) expect and accept that power is distributed unequally". (Hofstede 2011: 57-58) In a culture with a high-power distance, there is a strong hierarchy and a centralized power structure, where those in positions of authority are highly respected and obeyed. In contrast, in a culture with a low power distance, power is more evenly distributed, and there is less of a hierarchical structure.

High power distance scores are found in most Asian countries (such as Malaysia and the Philippines), Eastern European countries (such as Slovakia, Russia, and Romania), Latin countries (Latin American countries such as Panama and Mexico, and Latin European countries such as France), Arabic speaking, as well as the African countries. Low power distance values are found in the German-speaking countries Germany, Austria and Switzerland, as well as in Israel, the Nordic countries (Denmark, Finland, Norway and Sweden), the USA, Great Britain and the Netherlands.

3.1. Historical and Philosophical Roots

Throughout history, philosophers and founders of religions have always been concerned with power and inequality. Already in the year 500 BC Confucius in China claimed that the stability of a society is based on unequal relationships between people. The positions of the countries such as China, Singapore, Hong Kong, South Korea, Taiwan and Japan in the power index scale can be found in the top third and in the middle of the ranking. People in these countries accept and even appreciate inequality, but find that the use of power must be restrained by a sense of obligation. (Hofstede 2011:83)

In Ancient Greece, about 350 BC, Plato emphasized a fundamental need for equality among human beings. At the same time, however, he defended a society in which an elite class, the guardians, would exercise leadership. This reminds of George Orwell's famous quote: "All animals are equal, but some animals are more equal than others". Greece is found in a middle position on the power distance scale (60 points).

The New Testament of the Bible preaches poverty as a virtue. The pursuit of this virtue leads to equality in society, but the exercise of this virtue was not common among statesmen or among the priests. The Roman Catholic Church reflects the hierarchical order of the Roman Empire; the same applies to the Eastern Orthodox churches. Protestant denominations tend to be less hierarchical. The power distance in Protestant countries is therefore lower than in Catholic or Orthodox countries.

Niccolo Machiavelli distinguishes two models of political power theories: that of the fox and that of the lion. The cunning of the fox will detect all snares, and the strength of the lion will scare the wolves. (Hofstede 2011:84)

If one translates Machiavelli's thoughts to country-specific differences in power distance, one can transfer the fox model to countries with a low power distance and

the lion model to countries with a high-power distance. Italy scores in the middle of the power distance scale (position 51). Thus, Northern Italy can be compared more closely to the fox model, while Southern Italy can be compared more closely to the lion model.

Geert Hofstede points out a connection between power distance and the following factors:

- a) the distribution area of the language
- b) the latitude of the country
- c) the size of the population
- d) the wealth of the country

European countries where the mother tongue is a Romance language (French, Italian, Portuguese, Romanian, Spanish) occupy medium to high positions on the power distance scale. European countries where the mother tongue is a Germanic language (Danish, German, English, Dutch, Norwegian, Swedish) are in the lower positions. In terms of power distance, there seems to be a connection between the regions where the language is spoken and how people think today. The Romance languages evolved from Vulgar Latin (spoken Latin) and spread throughout the territories that were once part of the Roman Empire. Both the Roman and the Chinese were ruled by a central power and the population became accustomed to orders and obedience. (Treichel, Mayer 2011: 244). The emperor acted as an absolute ruler, above the law. He had all the power and authority, and the well-known Latin saying "Quod licet jovi, non licet bovi" ("Gods may do what cattle may not") underlines this fact. (Schugk 2004: 111).

Germanic languages are spoken in the countries that remained "barbarian" even in Roman times or were later conquered by barbarian tribes. Most of these countries were divided into small, independent tribal groups headed by a lord. People were not used to receiving orders from anyone else (shown today in a low power distance). (Treichel, Mayer 2011: 244-245).

Geographic latitude is also a measure related to power distance. In lower latitudes societies meet a more abundant nature. To survive in these climatic zones, people only have a limited intervention in nature. The greatest threat to such a society comes from other human groups, when these claim territories or natural resources. Society has the best chance of survival when it has a strong hierarchical order and a central authority that maintains order and balance.

In higher latitudes there is a less fertile nature. People must intervene more in nature to secure their existence. These conditions support the setting up of industry next to agriculture. The survival of people in countries with temperate or cold climates relies more on their ability to support themselves and to be independent. Size of population is also closely related to power distance, as people in highly populated countries accept political power that is more distant and less accessible than people from a small nation, i.e. a higher power distance.

Factors related to national wealth and less dependence on those in power. (Treichel, Mayer 2011: 90).

- less traditional agriculture;
- more modern technology;
- more urban living;
- more social mobility available;

- a better educational system;
- a larger middle class.

In the former colonies, the power distance is higher than in the countries that had colonies. Whether a country has been or has had a colony for the past two hundred years also influences the power distance index and is strongly related to their present wealth.

3.2. Family Dynamics

Geert Hofstede's concept of power distance can be applied to family relationships, and it helps to explain the degree of inequality that exists and is accepted within a family. In a family with a high-power distance, there is a strong hierarchy, and the parents or older members of the family hold most of the power and make most of the decisions. Parents expect obedience from their children and, sometimes even the older siblings hold authority. In high power distance families, communication is often top-down, with parents or older members of the family giving directives and the younger members following them. In these families, there is also a greater emphasis on obedience and respect for authority. Younger siblings are expected to imitate the behavioral patterns of the older ones, moreover they are not encouraged to become independent. Parents and grandparents are treated with particular respect, even after the children have moved out and became independent. When parents grow old, their children are expected to take care of them, even to support them financially. Grandparents often live with their children and grandchildren.

In a family with low power distance, power is more evenly distributed, and there is less of a hierarchical structure. Children are encouraged to become more independent and have their own opinions. In low power distance families, decision-making is more democratic, with a greater emphasis on participation and input from all members of the family. The parents play the role of a partner, rather than of an authority. It is also allowed for the children to contradict their parents and disagree. The connections within the families in such societies are often perceived as cold, distant, and not very intense by people from other cultures. The need for independence is considered very important in adult mental software. As children grow up, they begin to develop a friendly or at least equal relationship with their parents. They cannot count on their children's support later or expect to live with them.

Understanding power distance in family relationships can help families manage the differences they may encounter and build more effective and inclusive family dynamics. It can also help individuals to understand the cultural influences that shape their own families and how it may impact their relationships with parents and siblings.

3.3. The Educational Context

Geert Hofstede's concept of power distance can also be applied to the educational background, and it helps to explain the degree of inequality that exists and is accepted within a classroom or a school community. In high power distance cultures, teachers are treated with respect; students are expected to be obedient and to stand up when the teacher enters the classroom. In school there is a strong

hierarchy, and the teachers hold most of the power and make most of the decisions, the educational process is thus teacher-centred. Students only say something when they are asked to do so; the teacher is not contradicted or criticized in public and is also treated with respect outside the school. If students misbehave, their parents are immediately involved and expected to correct their children's behavior. In such an educational system, the quality of the learning process depends on the excellence of the teacher.

In low power distance cultures, the teacher is expected to treat and view students as equals. Students are more likely to perceive younger teachers as their peers and like them better than older teachers. The education process is student-oriented, where the student's initiative is highly valued. Students are expected to ask questions when they do not understand something. They discuss with their teachers, expressing their opinions even if they have a different view. Students may argue with teachers, express disagreement and criticisms in front of the class, and show no particular respect to teachers outside school. When a student misbehaves, parents often defend their children. The quality of the learning process is largely determined by the excellence of the students.

According to Geert Hofstede, in countries with low power distance, a relatively large part of the education budget is invested in secondary and high school education, which contributes to the development of the middle class in society. High power distance countries invest more in university-level education, thereby maintaining the gap between the elite and the less educated. (Hofstede 2011:69).

3.4. Workplace Dynamics

In cultures with a high-power distance, there is a strong emphasis on hierarchy and centralized power. This can manifest in a number of ways in the workplace, such as a rigid organizational structure, a clear chain of command, and a strong emphasis on respect for authority. Employers are seen as figures of authority, and employees are expected to be obedient and loyal. In these cultures, employees are willing to accept decisions made by their superiors without questioning them, and communication is conveyed from the top of the company with directives coming from those in higher positions and being followed by those lower in the hierarchy. Managers and employees do not consider themselves as having equal rights. In the organization power is concentrated in a few hands. There are also large differences in salaries. The educational level of workers is low and manual work is less prestigious than office work. Supervisors are entitled to certain privileges and they are supposed to initiate contact with their employees. The employees perceive their ideal boss as a benevolent autocrat or a "good father". In these organizations the relationship between superiors and employees can be often based on emotions. Externally visible status symbols consolidate the authority of the superior in such countries. For example, an employee might proudly tell his neighbor that his boss drives a bigger car or lives in a bigger house than the neighbor's boss. Older supervisors are usually more respected than younger ones.

In cultures with a low power distance, there is a greater emphasis on equality and participation. This can manifest itself in a flatter organizational structure, a greater emphasis on teamwork and collaboration, and a culture that values and encourages employees' input and feedback. Employees and supervisors perceive

each other as equals. The existing hierarchy is just an unequal distribution of roles established by convenience and these roles may be changed, so that someone who is a subordinate may become a supervisor in the future. The salary differences in the organization are relatively small. The workers are highly qualified, and high-skill manual work is more appreciated than simple office work. Privileges for superiors are generally not considered desirable. The same parking lot, the same canteen and the same toilets should be available for everyone. The supervisor should always be available to the employee and the ideal boss is a resourceful democrat. Employees expect to be asked for their opinion before making decisions that affect their work. However, they accept that the boss is the one who finally makes the decision. Status symbols are viewed with suspicion. For example, employees disapprove of the fact that their boss drives a large car at the company's expense. Younger bosses are generally more appreciated than older ones.

3.5. Communication and Advertising

Language is another example of the differences that can be perceived in power distance. In the USA, a country with a lower power distance, the personal pronoun "you" is used for both polite and informal addressing. In Spanish, French or Romanian, however, there are differences in the form of address (tu - usted, tu - vous, tu - dumneata - mata - Dumneavoastră).

In high power distance cultures, people dress elegantly, especially when they go out, since their position in the social hierarchy is largely determined by their clothes, shoes, makeup, and so on. In cultures with a low power distance, people care less about their appearance and often wear the same clothes both at home and in public. Presidents jog in shorts and movie stars wear jeans and T-shirts.

The advertising messages in high power distance cultures often feature powerful, authoritative figures, and they may use language and imagery that is designed to appeal to a sense of respect and obedience. Social status is particularly important, which is also reflected in advertising through the increased use of status symbols. Advertisements are more likely to feature older figures directing or giving advice to younger ones. The master-disciple principle is very often applied in advertising. (Schauerhofer, 2011:36).

Advertising messages in low power distance cultures feature more relatable and approachable figures and use language and symbolism that emphasizes collaboration and inclusivity. Older people try to look younger and the powerful try to look less powerful. In advertising, it is more common for younger people to give advice to older people. When children's behavior in the classroom is shown in advertisements, students may tease their teachers. Low power distance is also reflected in advertising in the use of anti-authoritarian elements such as parody or the use of humorous advertising in general. (Schauerhofer, 2011:37).

4. Teaching Intercultural Communication and Power Distance in ESP Classrooms: Strategies and Applications

Teachers can employ a variety of interactive and context-rich strategies to effectively explain intercultural communication and cultural dimensions like Power Distance. These strategies can significantly enhance students' engagement and understanding by connecting abstract theoretical frameworks with real-world professional applications. This approach not only improves linguistic competence but also encourages cultural awareness and critical thinking, all of them being necessary in today's globalized workforce.

4.1 Visual Aids and Interactive Tools

Visual aids play a crucial role in English for Specific Purposes (ESP). They facilitate comprehension, reinforce the acquisition of targeted vocabulary and concepts, and create a dynamic, engaging learning environment. In teaching cultural dimensions like Power Distance, teachers can utilize digital tools and visual resources that encourage student participation and intercultural comparison.

For example, teachers can introduce students to the Hofstede Insights website, an interactive platform that allows users to visually compare cultural dimensions across different countries. By navigating the site, students are exposed to comparative data that provide a real understanding of theoretical concepts such as hierarchical relationships and authority distance. A particularly effective classroom activity involves having students select two countries—Romania and another of their choosing—and analyze the differences in Power Distance. Through this exercise, students not only grasp the implications of PD but also begin to appreciate the broader socio-cultural variables that shape communication styles and workplace norms.

4.2 Real-Life Scenario Analysis

Incorporating real-life scenario analysis into ESP instruction encourages students to think critically about the role of cultural values in professional contexts. These activities often center on case-based discussions where students are asked to evaluate how Power Distance influences various aspects of international business communication, leadership styles, conflict resolution, and workplace hierarchy. For instance, students might be asked to consider how an American manager, accustomed to a relatively low Power Distance culture, would need to adapt when working in Romania, a country with a higher Power Distance score. Another scenario might explore the divergent communication styles between high and low PD cultures, particularly in terms of assertiveness, deference to authority, and decision-making processes. Discussions could also extend to the implications of Power Distance on teamwork, negotiation strategies, and leadership approaches. Such practical analyses help students link theory with practice, cultivating skills necessary for intercultural proficiency.

4.3. Expanded Class Activities

There are other classroom strategies that can be employed to reinforce the understanding of Power Distance and related cultural dimensions. Case study analysis is a fundamental approach in ESP classrooms. By examining real or simulated business situations through the lens of Hofstede's model, students can identify how cultural expectations influence managerial decisions and team dynamics. Teachers may also incorporate short video clips that depict various cultural power dynamics. These can include interviews with professionals from diverse backgrounds or scenes from documentaries and films illustrating intercultural interactions. Visual case analyses can be also effective. For example, students can examine international advertising campaigns that reflect different degrees of authority and control, encouraging them to interpret non-verbal cues, messaging hierarchies, and culturally embedded values.

4.4. Role-playing Simulation

Role-play is one of the most dynamic and impactful teaching strategies in ESP. Its purpose extends beyond mere language practice, engaging students in authentic, context-driven activities that simulate real-life communication scenarios they will likely encounter in professional or academic settings. These simulations are particularly effective in preparing students for the kinds of international and multicultural interactions they are likely to encounter in their professional or academic careers.

To explore the concept of Power Distance, teachers might set up a role-play scenario in which students simulate a meeting between representatives from a high PD culture and a low PD culture. Participants would need to adapt their communication strategies based on their assigned roles, thereby gaining firsthand experience with hierarchical and egalitarian interaction styles. These exercises build not only linguistic fluency but also empathy and strategic communication skills.

4.5. Debate as a Pedagogical Tool

Debate is another powerful technique for developing language proficiency and intercultural awareness in ESP classrooms. By engaging in structured argumentative discourse, students practice articulating ideas clearly, listening actively, and responding thoughtfully. These skills are essential for professional communication. More importantly, debates require students to critically engage with complex cultural concepts and consider multiple perspectives. Thus, it is important to use debate in ESP classes because it enhances language proficiency and develops intercultural skills. An example of a debate topic relevant to Power Distance might be: "Is low Power Distance always better in modern organizations?" This prompts students to explore the advantages and disadvantages of hierarchical versus egalitarian structures, drawing on examples from different cultures and industries. Such activities not only challenge students to use language persuasively but also deepen their understanding of the cultural values that underlie communication styles and workplace dynamics.

5. Reflective Writing Assignments

Reflection essays are a critical component of ESP instruction. They are links between theoretical learning and personal experience, allowing students to internalize course content and articulate its relevance to their lives and future careers. Reflective writing helps cultivate self-awareness, a key element of intercultural competence. In the context of Power Distance, teachers can ask students to write a reflection essay on how this dimension is manifested within their own culture. For example, a Romanian student might be prompted to consider how Hofstede's concept of Power Distance aligns with their personal and societal experiences. A guiding essay prompt might be: "How do Hofstede's dimension of Power Distance reflect in my culture and personal experiences?" Through this assignment, students engage in critical self-reflection and apply academic concepts to real-life scenarios, enhancing both their cognitive and communicative skills.

6. Conclusion

The importance of teaching intercultural communication cannot be overstated. In a world marked by diversity and globalization, students must be prepared to communicate across cultural boundaries. Understanding and teaching intercultural communication, particularly through frameworks like Hofstede's Power Distance, can lead to more inclusive, respectful, and productive relationships in educational, familial, and professional settings. By incorporating visual aids, real-life scenarios, multimedia resources, role-playing, debates, and reflective writing, teachers can create an immersive and effective learning environment. These strategies not only develop linguistic skills but also foster the intercultural competence necessary for success in today's diverse and interconnected professional world. The deliberate incorporation of Hofstede's cultural dimensions, especially the aspect of Power Distance, reconfigures the ESP classroom into an engaging environment that promotes experiential learning, encourages critical reflection, and cultivates communicative skills essential for global professional contexts.

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