

A Study of the Teaching Effects of Case Analysis in Cross-Cultural Communication Class—Taking Individualism-Collectivism Cultural Dimension Class as an Example

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This study introduces the individualism-collectivism dimension of the cultural dimension of cross-cultural communication initiated by Geert Hofstede. Different cultures must develop a way of correlating that strikes a balance between caring for themselves and showing concern for others. Individualist culture encourages uniqueness and independence while collectivist culture emphasizes conformity and mutual assistance. This article introduces how to use case analysis method to effectively carry out classroom teaching in this cultural dimension.

Keywords: cultural dimension, case analysis, cross cultural communication, teaching effects

Introduction

Geert Hofstede, a famous Dutch social psychologist and international communication expert, was once the HR director of the famous multinational IBM Europe Branch. Geert Hofstede believed that people are born with a set of psychological mechanisms or “brain software” (Hofstede, 1991). This mechanism was formed in childhood and strengthened through culture. These psychological mechanisms contain all the content of a culture, and they are presented through the main values. In order to confirm what the main values of different cultures are, Geert Hofstede has investigated more than 100,000 IBM employees in 71 countries. Through theoretical reasoning and data analysis, Geert Hofstede ultimately identified six dimensions, based on which the main forms of each culture can be arranged (Hofstede, 1984). These six cultural dimensions include individualism and collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, masculinity and femininity, as well as long-term versus short-term orientation and indulgence versus restraint. In every dimension, each country can find a scale of its own culture, and from this result, we can easily understand what people value the most in each different culture.

Individualism-Collectivism Cultural Dimension

In all cultures, the relationship between people and the social group they come from is an inseparable issue. In order to survive, people must live in groups and interact with each other, so they must find a suitable way to find a balance between caring for themselves and caring for others.

The degree to which individual independence and autonomy are considered as good varies depending on the standards of different cultures. Therefore, some cultures encourage uniqueness and independence, while

others emphasize conformity and mutual assistance. Geert Hofstede defined this difference as the individualism-collectivism dimension, using it to indicate whether a culture relies more on individuals or collectives, and is loyal to individuals or collectives.

It must be kept in mind that all ethnic groups and cultures have both individual and collective characteristics. Table 1 clearly shows the degree to which different countries value individualism and collectivism. The Individualism Index (IDV) designed by Geert Hofstede is used to represent the relative position of a culture in the individualism-collectivism dimension. At one end of this dimension are countries, such as Australia, Belgium, the Netherlands, and the United States. All of these cultures have a high IDV index. Therefore, they are individualistic. They believe that regardless of the size of the social scene, the individual is the most important unit in any social scene, and the uniqueness of each individual is very important. Everyone should take care of themselves and their small family. In individualistic culture, individual independence and autonomy are paramount, and the words they commonly use to define their cultural patterns, include independence, privacy, self, and the most important “me”. In individualistic culture, people generally value individual needs when doing things. For example, when setting goals, they do not focus on what is beneficial to the collective, but fully consider what is beneficial to the individual, because the individual itself is the main source of motivation to achieve goals. Similarly, when judging what is right and what is wrong, one can only start from the perspective of each individual. American psychologist Daniel Goleman summarized that individualism has the following characteristics:

1. People’s personal goals are higher than their collective goals, whether in the family or in the workplace;
2. Individual loyalty to the collective is very low;
3. People generally believe that they belong to many different groups, and when the time is right, they will change their “membership” status, such as changing religious beliefs or firing their boss.

Cultures, such as Guatemala, Indonesia, Pakistan, and West Africa have relatively low IDV indices, and they prefer collectivism as their cultural values. These cultures require absolute loyalty to the collective, which may be a nuclear family, extended family, caste class, or the collective they work for. The prominent feature of collectivist culture is that it has a relatively strict framework to distinguish between its own people and outsiders. People expect their own people who belong to the same group to take care of each other, and in return, they will also have a very high level of loyalty to their own people. In collectivist culture, when personal and collective interests are juxtaposed, collective interests are considered first when making decisions, and the collective to which an individual belongs is the most important social unit. Similarly, these collectives also take into account the interests and well-being of their members. Therefore, collectivist culture believes in responsibility towards the collective, individual reliance on the collective, a sense of “we”, and a greater emphasis on belonging.

The differences in this individualism-collectivism dimension can largely explain cultural differences. We have noticed that collectivist culture tends to focus on the collective. One thing they have in common is that they maintain a significant psychological distance from people who do not belong to the same group. People within the same collective should be unquestionably loyal to the collective, while not making the same demands on people outside the collective. On the contrary, individualistic culture is less strict in distinguishing between internal and external groups, where people within the same group are not as close, and people within different groups are not as distant.

Through long-term cultural influence, individuals in individualistic cultures tend to express their own opinions as a way to solve problems. For example, in individualistic culture classrooms, students actively ask

teachers questions, while in collectivistic culture classrooms, this is not the case. Similarly, individualistic cultures tend to use confrontational strategies when dealing with interpersonal problems, while collectivist cultures tend to use avoidance, third-party intervention, or other strategies that do not harm face (see Table 1).

Table 1

Ranking of Countries or Regions on Individualism and Collectivism Dimension

Individualism*		Individualism*	
U.S.A.	200	Arab countries	-22
Australia	195	Brazil	-22
Great Britain	191	Turkey	26
Canada	154	Uruguay	-30
Hungary	154	Greece	-34
Netherlands	154	Philippines	-47
New Zealand	149	Bulgaria	-55
Italy	137	Mexico	-55
Belgium	133	Romania	-55
Denmark	129	East Africa	-67
France	116	Portugal	-67
Sweden	116	Yugoslavia	-67
Ireland	112	Malaysia	-72
Norway	108	Hong Kong (China)	-76
Switzerland	104	Chile	-84
Germany	99	Bangladesh	-97
South Africa	91	China	-97
Finland	83	Singapore	-97
Estonia	70	Thailand	-97
Luxembourg	70	Vietnam	-97
Poland	70	West Africa	-97
Malta	66	Salvador	-101
Czech Republic	62	South Korea	-105
Austria	49	Taiwan (China)	-109
Israel	45	Peru	-113
Slovakia	37	Trinidad	-113
Spain	33	Costa Rica	-118
India	20	Indonesia	-122
Surinam	16	Pakistan	-122
Argentina	12	Colombia	-126
Japan	12	Venezuela	-130
Morocco	12	Panama	-134
Iran	-9	Ecuador	-147
Jamaica	-17	Guatemala	-155
Russia	-17		

A large positive score means the country prefers individualism; a large negative score means the country prefers collectivism. The average score is zero. Ratings are in standardized scores, with the decimal point omitted.

Case Analysis

The case analysis teaching method originated in the 1920s and is a special type of case-based teaching. These cases are all taken from real situations or events, which helps to cultivate and develop students' active participation in classroom discussions. After implementation, it is quite effective. The case analysis method is conducive to helping students better understand the causes of cross-cultural communication conflicts. Compared with the cultural information provided in traditional English teaching, cross-cultural communication teaching cases can reflect both the cultural information of the native language and the cultural information of the target language, enabling students to better understand that the main causes of communication conflicts are not caused by language skills and knowledge. Rather it is caused by the differences in Eastern and Western ways of thinking and values. The case analysis method is beneficial for enhancing students' sensitivity to nonverbal behaviors in cross-cultural communication. Non-verbal communication is also an important way of communication, referring to the process of using nonverbal behaviors to communicate and understand information in specific situations or contexts. They are not real language units, but sometimes they can express stronger meanings than language in daily life and communication. Some specific nonverbal behaviors often represent specific meanings, which must be taken seriously in cross-cultural communication. The differences in nonverbal cultural connotations between Chinese and Western cultural backgrounds are very significant. The case study method is conducive to cultivating students' global awareness and adaptability to different cultures. In actual cross-cultural English communication, if they do not establish a global awareness of cultural equality, they will more or less commit ethnocentrism (Jiang, 2007).

Cultural Dimension—Case Analysis and Discussion

In class, the teacher gave the following examples:

An American colleague Jones caught a cold, and a Chinese colleague Xiao Li expressed concern:

Xiao Li: "You don't look very well today, what's the matter?"

Jones: "I don't feel well, I may have caught a cold."

Xiao Li: "Why don't you go see a doctor and drink more water? Have you taken any medicine yet? Traditional Chinese Medicine is quite effective in treating colds. I had a little left over from my last cold. Would you like to give it a try? Wear more clothes and have a good rest."

Jones: "You sound like my mother."

Student discussion topic: Why do Jones and Xiao Li react so differently when faced with a colleague's cold? Why is Jones feeling a bit unhappy about Xiao Li's concern?

In the cultural dimension of Geert Hofstede, American culture is individualism-oriented, so Americans prefer individual independence. They believe that people should rely on themselves as much as possible, and they expect others to do the same. Therefore, being taken care of by others is often regarded as weak. When giving advice to others, they should not make the other party think that they underestimate his ability. The response of Americans to the first sentence above is usually "Take care of yourself. I hope you'll be better soon" (Zhu, 2002). There is no need to teach people how to do it. At the other end of the cultural dimension, Chinese culture is collectivism-oriented. When they encounter an emergency, the help or advice of others will be expected, so when others encounter the same situation, they also think they have the obligation to provide advice or help, and for a long time they will make suggestions to show concern, and in the voice of brothers, sisters, parents,

relatives, or past people. But this does not work for Americans. In this case, expressing concern for the patient is sufficient, and there is no need to provide advice. A simple sentence, such as:

1. I'm sorry to hear that (you've got a bad cold);
2. I hope you'll be all right very soon;
3. Take extra care of yourself;
4. That's too bad. What's the matter? will be enough.

Let us take a look at another case. When university teacher Li Hua went to the airport to pick up a visiting Canadian professor, he found that the professor had a lot of luggage and offered to help. However, after being refused, he took advantage of the other party's carelessness to pick up his luggage and walked in the direction of a taxi, resulting in the Canadian professor feeling unhappy all the way. Under the framework of individualism-collectivism in the Hofstede's cultural dimension, it is not difficult to understand that Westerners who believe in individualism place greater importance on individual independence, and relying on their own as much as possible is also deeply rooted in people's mind. Therefore, sometimes Chinese hospitality is not well-received.

Conclusion

In today's increasingly globalized society, international communication has further developed in a deeper direction. Simply being able to use English or read literary works from English speaking countries cannot truly guarantee the smooth and efficient cross-cultural communication process. Cultivating students' awareness of cross-cultural communication, enriching their cross-cultural theoretical knowledge, and enhancing their sensitivity to different cultural differences, students can actively use different communication strategies in future cross-cultural communication, and treat cultural differences objectively and rationally, so as to avoid the formation of ethnocentrism, and stay away from arrogance and prejudice. In this way, they can better improve their cultural tolerance and adaptability, and comprehensively enhance cross-cultural communication skills as future world citizens (Wu, 2006).

The cross-cultural case analysis teaching method is a teaching method that emerged in the absence of authentic multilingual contexts. It can maximize the representation of real-life scenarios in cross-cultural communication. It is typical and representative. It has been proven to be an effective teaching method widely recognized by teachers and students.

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