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Foreign Language Classroom Practice in Collectivist Educational Contexts: Issues and Pedagogy

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Abstract **Original Research Article**

Foreign language (FL) teaching activities that originate in individualist, low power distance contexts are widely adopted in collectivist educational contexts, such as communicative language teaching (CLT), task-based learning, pair and group work, and learner-centered discussion. Their implementation often causes friction regarding pedagogical design and learners' culturally shaped expectations. This systematic review analyzes Hofstede's cultural dimensions in an effort to report the issues that become visible in FL classroom practice. Following the PRISMA 2020 guidelines, we searched the international and regional databases for peer-reviewed studies on FL classroom practice in collectivist contexts. The included studies are appraised and synthesized using thematic synthesis. The review identifies recurring problems within each dimension: teacher authority and learner passivity (power distance); group harmony, face-saving and unequal group participation (individualism-collectivism); preference for structured, accuracy-oriented instruction (uncertainty avoidance); competition, exam orientation and gendered participation patterns (masculinity-femininity); examination-driven persistence and memorization (long-term orientation); and restraint in self-expression (indulgence-restraint). The findings also indicate that the uncritical application of Hofstede's framework risks essentializing learners. We argue that the dimensions are best used as heuristic lenses for diagnosing mismatches, rather than as fixed descriptions of students. Implications for culturally responsive FL pedagogy are discussed.

Keywords: Hofstede's cultural dimensions, foreign language teaching, collectivism, classroom practice, culturally responsive pedagogy, systematic review.

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1. Literature Review

1.1 Background Information

Many national systems of education in Asia have adopted pedagogical approaches developed in Anglophone contexts in the last thirty years. Communicative language teaching (CLT) is the most influential of these in FL education. In Vietnam, the National Foreign Languages Project 2008-2020 (Government of Vietnam, 2008) and its extension explicitly promoted communicative, learner-centered methods in schools and universities. Yet, researchers have consistently questioned the suitability of such "pedagogical imports" to the sociocultural realities of the classrooms to which they are imported (Holliday, 1994; Hu, 2002; Pham, 2005). Ellis (1996) questioned the cultural appropriateness of the communicative approach and Bax (2003) argued that methodology should take account of the whole teaching context.

Kumaravadivelu (2001) advocated a postmethod pedagogy based on particularity, practicality and possibility. These debates suggest that classroom practice cannot be separated from the cultural setting in which it occurs.

1.2 Hofstede's cultural dimensions as an analytic lens

A framework based on comparative research on national value orientations by Hofstede (1980, 2001) has been developed and applied in many contexts of intercultural communication, management and education. The original framework had four dimensions: power distance, individualism-collectivism, and masculinity-femininity and uncertainty avoidance. Long-term orientation was added later by Hofstede and Bond (1988), and indulgence-restraint was added later (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). Hofstede (1986) adapted the framework specifically to education and suggested that the dimensions influence expectations of teacher-student relationships, the acceptability of questioning, the importance of group harmony and the significance of academic achievement. Hofstede Insights country data shows Vietnam as having high power distance, strong collectivism, moderate masculinity, low uncertainty avoidance and a moderately long-term orientation. Vietnam is therefore an interesting but complex case and the profile is not the same as in other Confucian-heritage cultures.

The framework has faced persistent criticism. McSweeney (2002) questioned the assumption of national culture being uniform and stable and the original data came from a single multinational company. Research on "Chinese learners" has also found that stereotypes of passive, rote-learning Asian students are often unfounded. As Biggs (1996) wrote, there was a "paradox of the Chinese learner" where memorization co-existed with deep understanding. Kennedy (2002) and Tweed and Lehman (2002) warned against the essentialism of learning cultures. These criticisms result in a more cautious use of the dimensions: as sensitizing concepts to interpret what happens in classrooms, not as predictions about individuals.

1.3 FL teaching activities in collectivist classrooms

Several recurring tensions have been documented in empirical work on FL classrooms in East and Southeast Asia. Despite policy support for communicative methods (Hu, 2002; Littlewood, 2007; Pham, 2005), teacher-centred, textbook-driven and exam-oriented practices persist. Liu and Littlewood (1997) and Tsui (1996) identified anxiety, fear of losing face and expectations of teacher authority as factors that contributed to the reluctance to speak. Cortazzi and Jin (1996) and Jin and Cortazzi (1998) talk about "cultures of learning" where teachers are expected to be transmitters of knowledge and moral guides, and this can clash with the expectations of expatriate teachers. For example, cooperative learning as introduced without adaptation may be in conflict with group dynamics in a Confucian-heritage context, with in-group and out-group distinctions and the dominance of high-status members (Nguyen, Terlouw, & Pilot, 2005, 2006). Rao (2002) found that Chinese university students valued both communicative and non-communicative activities, pointing to the fact that learners' preferences are more complex than polarized accounts would have us believe. Phan (2008) studied the negotiation of identities between local and imported norms by Vietnamese teachers.

4. Culturally responsive pedagogy

Culturally responsive (or relevant) pedagogy arose from research on minority students in western schools. It argues that teaching must draw on students' cultural knowledge, build critical consciousness, and hold high academic expectations (Ladson-Billings, 1995; Gay, 2002, 2018). It has since been extended in later work as culturally sustaining pedagogy (Paris, 2012) and its marginalization in teacher education has been noted (Sleeter, 2012). These frameworks were developed in multicultural, mostly Western contexts, but the principle is applicable to FL education in collectivist contexts. The question is how to use that culture as a resource, not how to get rid of it, in cases where learners are part of the culture of the institution.

Existing studies generally focus on one technique

(e.g. group work) or one institution. They rarely arrange evidence along cultural dimensions or separate classroom issues that derive from culture from those that arise from institutional or policy constraints. This review seeks to answer the question: What issues are mirrored in the classroom practice through the use of Hofstede's cultural dimensions in the implementation of contemporary foreign language teaching activities in collectivist educational contexts?

2. Method

2.1 Research design

We performed a systematic review following the PRISMA 2020 statement (Page et al., 2021; see also Moher, Liberati, Tetzlaff, Altman, & The PRISMA Group, 2009). A review protocol was designed before screening, which included the question, search strategy, eligibility criteria, appraisal methods and synthesis approach. Searches were conducted in Scopus, Web of Science Core Collection, ERIC, ProQuest Education and Google Scholar. We also searched Vietnamese Journals Online (VJOL) to capture work from the region. The search window spanned from January 2000 to September 2026. Search strings combined four concept blocks using Boolean operators and truncation such as Culture, Language education, classroom practice, and culturally responsive pedagogy.

2.2 Selection criteria

Studies were eligible if they (a) were peer-reviewed empirical studies (qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods) or systematic or conceptual analyzes based on empirical evidence; (b) focused on the teaching and learning of FLs in classroom contexts at secondary or tertiary level; (c) were situated in collectivist or Confucian-heritage contexts, or explicitly discussed cultural values (including Hofstede's dimensions) in relation to classroom practice; (d) reported issues, tensions or perceptions of teaching activities; and (e) were published in English or Vietnamese. Studies that focused solely on online or computer-mediated learning without classroom components, opinion pieces without data, studies that focused exclusively on language outcomes without reference to culture or practice, or studies not available in full text were excluded.

2.3 Screening and selection process

All records were imported into reference management software and duplicates removed. Two reviewers independently screened titles and abstracts and then full texts for inclusion criteria. Disagreements were settled by discussion, with a third reviewer consulted if necessary. Inter-rater agreement was calculated with Cohen's kappa. The methodological quality was assessed using the Mixed Methods Appraisal Tool (MMAT; Hong et al., 2018) which allows the inclusion of qualitative, quantitative and mixed-methods designs. The review was intended as conceptual synthesis and did not exclude any study on quality basis only. Appraisal results were then used to weigh the confidence in the individual findings in the synthesis.

3. Results and discussion

The included studies comprise primary, secondary and mostly tertiary FL classrooms, predominantly English as a foreign language, in Vietnam, China, Hong Kong, Japan, Korea, Thailand and other collectivist contexts. Methods were mainly qualitative (interviews, observation) or survey-based. Few studies explicitly adopted Hofstede's framework, most invoked related constructs such as Confucian heritage, face or teacher authority, which we mapped onto the dimensions. The following themes are organized by dimension.

3.1. Power distance: teacher authority and learner dependence

- **Teacher as the only authority of knowledge.**

The most common problem is related to the teacher. In high power-distance classrooms, teachers are expected to be knowledgeable experts and moral guides, and students are expected to be attentive and compliant, showing respect (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Hofstede, 1986). If activities require teachers to leave the center, as in student-led discussion, peer

feedback or open-ended tasks, both parties may feel uncomfortable. As Pham (2005) reported, teachers who adopted CLT in Vietnam were pressured by learners and colleagues who viewed a loss of teacher control as a loss of teaching quality.

- **Intolerance to questions or challenges**

Questioning the teacher might be perceived as disrespectful or as an indication that the teacher's explanation was not adequate. Students may therefore be silent when they are confused. Liu and Littlewood (1997) found that students in Hong Kong and mainland China were less willing to participate in classroom discussion than their own stated attitudes would suggest, with the social dynamics of the classroom contributing to this reluctance.

- **Feedback asymmetries**

Teacher feedback is viewed as authoritative and corrective, while peer feedback is often viewed as unreliable or inappropriate. Activities based on peer review often do not yield substantive comments and students revert to the teacher's judgment.

The results support but also qualify Hofstede's (1986) account of teacher-student relations. Respecting the teacher is not lack of agency. Several studies suggest that students actively choose silence or deference as an appropriate strategy for the context (Cortazzi & Jin, 1996; Biggs, 1996). Thus pedagogically the issue is the mismatch between the implicit assumptions of an activity (equal status, open challenge) and the participation norms students bring to it. This is beyond the ability of the learners.

3.2 Individualism-collectivism: Harmony, Face, and Group Dynamics

- Face-saving and fear of error

Public error is felt as loss of face by the individual and sometimes by the group. Reticence has been identified as occurring due to fear of making mistakes, fear of ridicule and teacher intolerance of silence (Tsui, 1996). Thus, learners avoid risk during focus-on-accuracy speaking activities, which reduces the very practice that CLT requires.

- Group harmony over honest contribution

Collectivist values encourage consensus and the avoidance of open disagreement. In discussion tasks, students might agree quickly and produce shallow interaction rather than debate. Nguyen et al. (2005, 2006) found in group work that in-group/out-group distinctions, dominant members and loyalty to existing friendships affected participation. Sometimes the teacher formed cross social groups that did not work well.

- Unequal contribution and 'social loafing' tensions

Group assessment can raise questions of fairness – students don't like unequal workloads but they don't want to challenge peers. Thus the expected benefits of cooperative learning are not automatically achieved.

- Positive collectivist resources

Not all effects are negative. Students also assist each other, share notes and support weak peers outside the class room (Nguyen et al., 2006). Many studies report strong peer support networks that activities could tap into. This is an important point for culturally responsive design, because the same value that limits public dissent can also encourage reciprocal help.

The review indicates that group work is not inherently inappropriate for collectivist contexts. It fails in its implementation, as it would in individualist classrooms, with random grouping, individual public accountability and open conflict as the way to learning. Additional positive results were identified when tasks were structured around stable groups, shared goals, and teacher-facilitated roles (Nguyen et al., 2006).

3.3 Uncertainty avoidance: structure, precision and ambiguity

- Discomfort with open-ended tasks

High uncertainty avoidance is linked with preference for clear instructions, defined answers and detailed lesson structure (Hofstede, 1986). Open-ended tasks, role-plays without scripts or discussions without a 'right' conclusion, can provoke anxiety." Although Vietnam scored relatively low in this dimension, studies in exam-dominated classrooms still report strong preference for explicit grammar explanation and correct models (Pham, 2005; Rao, 2002).

- Preference for form-focused instruction

Rao (2002) found that Chinese university students appreciated both traditional activities such as teacher explanation and drills as well as communicative ones. Littlewood (2007) found that East Asian students are not uniformly passive or uniformly resistant to CLT and that preference depends on how tasks are structured and what assessment demands.

The pattern may reflect the assessment structure more than cultural values. High-stakes tests reward accuracy and grammar, thus justifying structured, form-focused instruction. This highlights the limits of a purely cultural explanation and the justification for our separate coding of institutional constraints.

3.4 Masculinity-femininity: competition, achievement and participation

- Competition and ranking

Societies with higher masculinity scores are achievement- and ranking- and visible success-oriented. This could lead to competitive grading and public comparison in FL classes, potentially increasing anxiety levels in less successful students and negatively impacting collaborative tasks. Evidence in this dimension is less thick than for others and few studies deal with it explicitly.

- Gendered participation patterns

Research has documented differences in the participation of male and female students in speaking activities, which are linked to expectations of modesty or assertiveness. The evidence is mixed and context dependent and must be interpreted with caution.The moderate masculinity score of Vietnam indicates that this dimension is less diagnostic here. We therefore consider its explanatory value to be limited and highlight the need for further research.

3.5 Long term orientation: consistency, remembering and exams

- Examination orientation and rote learning

Long term orientation, which Hofstede and Bond (1988) associated with Confucian values, is connected with perseverance, thrift and respect for effort. In FL classrooms this takes the form of a strong commitment to study but also a heavy emphasis on exam preparation, vocabulary lists and memorization. Biggs (1996) noted that in such contexts memorization is often a means to understanding, rather than a substitute.

- Delayed gratification vs. communicative immediacy

Students may be okay with less interactive lessons because they think that effort will eventually pay off. Teachers who use spontaneous communicative tasks may find that students consider them a "waste of time" compared to exam preparation.

The main challenge is to link classroom activities to the long-term goals that students care about. The students are more inclined to get involved when the work is clearly linked to the success of the examination or to their professional needs. It implies that content-based and ESP approaches might be particularly compatible, an argument explored further in culturally responsive pedagogy.

3.6 Indulgence-restraint: free gratification of basic and human desires

Restraint in expression of opinions and feelings. Restrained societies discourage open display of emotion and personal opinion, especially to those in authority. FL tasks that require students to express personal opinions, share feelings or talk about

private life may be culturally uncomfortable. This dimension has been the least researched dimension in the FL literature, but obviously it has a bearing on speaking tasks and affective engagement (Hofstede, 2001)

3.7 Cross-cutting issues

- Interaction of dimensions

Problems seldom originate in one dimension alone. For example, silence in a discussion, simultaneously reflects high power distance (do not challenge), collectivism (avoid disruption of harmony) and face concerns. So a single dimension analysis can be an oversimplification.

- Cultural vs. institutional causes.

Many classroom behaviors that are attributed to culture are also being caused by class size, textbooks, assessment systems, teacher training and policy (Hu, 2002; Holliday, 1994). When culture is the only explanation, structural problems become invisible.

- Heterogeneity and change

Younger students exposed to global media, travel and online communication may have different values to older generations. Kennedy (2002) and McSweeney (2002) caution against static portraits. Studies in this review show variation according to institution, discipline, and proficiency level and teacher background.

3.8 Implications of the Hofstede framework for FL research

The review makes three methodological observations. First, there is a paucity of explicit application of Hofstede's framework in FL classroom research, and many studies depend on generic references to "Confucian culture," thereby decreasing analytic precision. Second, much of the data is perception-based and there is less observational data of what actually occurs during activities. Third, most studies identify problems but test few culturally adapted interventions. Future work could employ design-based research to implement and evaluate adaptations. Overall, the evidence suggests that FL classroom issues in collectivist contexts are real but should be conceptualized as mismatches between activity design and participation norms rather than as deficits in learners. Imported activities often assume individual voices, open challenges, tolerance of ambiguity, and informal teacher-student relations. But when these assumptions are at odds with learners' expectations for respect, harmony and structure, tasks do not work as planned. At the same time, collectivist values provide resources: mutual support, diligence, respect for learning and willingness to invest effort. A culturally responsive approach (Gay, 2018; Ladson-Billings, 1995; Paris, 2012) would modify activities to align with these values but also increase learners' repertoire of communication. This is also a sign of postmethod thinking (Kumaravadivelu, 2001) and the demand for the context-sensitive methodology (Bax, 2003; Holliday, 1994).

4. Conclusion

This review synthesized evidence of issues that arise in FL classroom practice in collectivist contexts when viewed through Hofstede's dimensions. The strongest evidence is for power distance and individualism-collectivism, affecting teacher authority, questioning, feedback, and face and group dynamics. The preference for structure and exam-oriented learning can be explained by uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation, but the evidence for masculinity-femininity and indulgence-restraint is limited. Issues are intertwined, partly cultural and partly institutional.
Three conclusions follow. First, Hofstede's dimensions are diagnostic lenses, but not to be used for stereotyping learners. Secondly, teaching activities need to be adapted, not dumped, regarding grouping, feedback, face-saving, scaffolding and alignment with assessment. Third, collectivist values can be used as pedagogical resources. Thus, practitioners and policy makers should consider culturally responsive pedagogy as a framework for improving FL teaching in such contexts.

Limitations include limitation to English and Vietnamese language publications, dominance of perception-based data and uneven coverage of dimensions. Future research should include observational and intervention studies, explore under-researched dimensions and include the voices of learners across disciplines and institution types.

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