

‘Power distance’ dimension and methodology

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For

University of Birmingham

MA TEFL/TESL

Open Learning Programme

Language Teaching Methodology

&

Classroom Research and Research Methods

March 31, 2001

1. Introduction

Although teaching English as a second or foreign language is ‘a worldwide profession’ that utilizes ‘similar or at least comparable principles’ (McDonough and Shaw: 1993: 3), there are cultural differences that may have a major influence on a method that is accepted by a teacher, his or her interaction with students and relations between students themselves.

1.1 Socio-cultural factor and method

Society’s culture may play a decisive role in choosing materials as well as methods accepted by a teacher working in a particular environment. As McDonough and Shaw (1993: 10) point out, ‘some textbooks contain topics which are inappropriate to the setting, and some classroom methods require an unacceptable set of teacher and learner roles’. This means that teachers, when deciding what materials and methods they are going to employ, base their choice on models they have already experienced, are familiar with and expect to function in future. This also means that the models vary from society to society.

1.2 Culture and interactions

The above statement is directly connected with the other one, which suggests that a culture has an influence on future interactions. In one of his articles, Hofstede (1986: 301-302) distinguishes four types of institutions: the family, the school, the job and the community. He goes on to state that they ‘interact, so that, for example, patterns of parent/child interaction in a society are carried over into teacher/student ... relationships’. Basically, it is said that models, which are used, have been created and present in the society for years and have been transferred from one institution to another. If compared to the conclusion from the previous paragraph, these two perceptions seem to be very similar.

1.3 Cultural differences and common grounds

Cultural differences, however, may be a significant obstacle for anybody who wants to start working in a foreign country. It is very important then, to find a common ground for comparing various societies and cultures. Hofstede tries to do that in his four-dimensional model of cultural differences. He examines 50 different countries and finds four common grounds where he creates distinct dimensions. These are characterized as: individualist/collectivist, small/large power distance, small/large uncertainty avoidance and masculine/feminine cultures. Then, he describes the differences in teacher/student and student/student interactions within each of these groups (Hofstede, 1986: 306-315).

2. Purpose

This assignment will focus on one of these dimensions, which is small/large power distance and its author will try to explain how it affected the methodology adopted by her.

2.1 Power distance

Hofstede says that power distance as a cultural characteristic defines the extent to which inequality in power is accepted and considered as normal by less powerful people in a society (Hofstede, 1986: 307). To better describe and compare differences between societies functioning within this one dimension, he divides it into two categories:

small and large. Listed below are the differences in teacher-student and student-student interaction related to the power distance dimension adapted from Hofstede (1986:313):

Table 1

SMALL POWER DISTANCE SOCIETIES	LARGE POWER DISTANCE SOCIETIES
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers respect the independence of his/her students • Students' initiative is considered very important (student-centered education) • Students initiate communication • Teachers expect students to find their own way • Students are encouraged to speak up spontaneously • Students are allowed to express their own opinion • Effective learning depends on two-way communication in class • In conflicts between teacher and student, parents take the student's side • Teachers are treated as equals outside class • Young teachers are more liked than older ones 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students respect their teacher • Order in class is very important (teacher-centered education) • Students wait for the teacher to initiate communication • Students expect teacher to show them paths to follow • Students speak up only when asked by the teacher • Students always accept what teacher says • Effective learning is a result of excellence of the teacher • In conflicts between teacher and student, parents take teacher's side • Teachers are respected also outside class • Old teachers are more respected than young ones

2.2 Small versus large power distance

These two extremes describe to what extent members of a society are willing to accept the inequality, and so:

- small power distance means that the extent to which less powerful people accept the social inequality is small, that is members of a society are treated as equal as possible in an unequal society (Hofstede in Hofstede, 1986: 307);
- large power distance means that a big inequality in power is considered by the less powerful members of a society as normal.

It is important to remember that the table gives a description of two extreme environments and characteristics for majority of countries would lie somewhere in the middle. While some of the societies may find either small or large power distance description familiar some other may identify themselves with features described in both categories. Austria and Israel, for example, would be closest to the extreme model of small power distance society while Malaysia and Panama would represent the opposite category. However, other countries like Italy or Spain, fall somewhere in between these two groups and this is the group the author would like to devote more attention to and describe how it affected methodology that she adopted.

3. Poland - a small or large power distance society?

Poland as a country for years ruled by a communist government was an excellent example of a large power distance society. People accepted the rules, as the demonstration of power was very common. With time, this attitude started to prevail especially in educational institutions, where it was easy to manipulate and impose some certain way of thinking on children and the youth.

However, after a political transition in 1989 and a very strong drive to change prohibitions that were not considered to be progressive, people were also ready to change their lifestyles and attitudes. It was time for the 'cultural revolution'. This revolution moved quickly to schools, changing many of the earlier established rules.

3.1 Author's experience with large and small power distance dimension

As I grew up at the turn of these two eras, I was able to experience the phenomenon of this transition. First, it was the interaction characteristic for a large power distance society with practically all its features. Basically, a teacher was a center of all the attention, the most important person in the class who established the rules. As a source of all the information, he or she was never contradicted, always right. Students, on the other hand, were expected to follow the rules, not questioning teacher's authority or criticize any method accepted by him/her. Very often the lesson looked more like a monologue that a teacher went into and the students' only role was to listen to it, occasionally answering questions whenever asked to do so. English lessons were for 'connoisseurs' interested in the language and determined to learn it rather than for average students who often were not able to follow the material.

In about 1990, I was able to experience changes that started to take place in Polish society including how they affected teacher-student and student-student interactions. Not only did students start expressing their own opinions, but their attitude toward teachers changed as well. Students better interacted with and preferred young teachers to their older colleagues. Teachers were no longer 'untouchable', they were treated as equal outside the class, they also started being contradicted and criticized. Also parents started to defend students in teacher-student conflict situations. Lessons were not monologues anymore. Gradually, teachers expected students to initiate communication as well as find their own way to understand and solve outlined language problems. Although, they were just the beginnings, it was becoming more and more obvious that the era of a two-way communication was entering the classroom environment. Considering the circumstances, it became quite obvious that with all the changes that took place in the society it was time to accept a methodology that would rise to the times.

4. Choosing methodology

Choosing a methodology in a rapidly changing environment is not an easy task. It is rather a long and relatively complicated process that demands a lot of attention and involvement. One of potential mistakes that can be made in such a situation is to go to extremes. Very often, however, a natural reaction is to deny and disapprove of everything that took place 'before', hoping that if it is done quite the opposite way, it should be successful.

First choices of very young and just starting their career teachers can sometimes be based on that assumption. For example, I believed that treating students as equals may improve student/teacher interaction. However, at this point they were treated as equals not only outside but also inside a classroom, which very quickly led to abuse of that 'relationship'. As a result, general purposes of English Language Teaching were not fulfilled, the teacher was not satisfied with her work and the students did not make any progress.

The situation described above led to the conclusion that students expect a teacher to teach them rather than 'be friends', and there still has to be some kind of a distance that implies respect. That respect, however, should be mutual which in two-year tutoring experience of the author proved to be one of the most important elements in student/teacher interaction. This tutoring experience was also significant in understanding that students are different

and so are the ways they understand and acquire the knowledge. These elements were decisive in the process of choosing a methodology that would fit the needs of rapidly changing society.

5. 'Establish Rapport'

'Rapport is the relationship or connection you establish with your students, a relationship that is built on trust and respect and that leads to students' feeling capable, competent and creative' (Brown 1994: 421). Further on, Brown (ibid.: 421) gives a list of elements that are helpful in building that relationship:

- showing interest in each student as a person,
- giving feedback on each person's progress,
- openly soliciting students' ideas and feelings,
- valuing and respecting what students think and say,
- laughing **with** them and not **at** them,
- working **with** them as a team, and not **against** them, and
- developing a genuine sense of vicarious joy when they learn something or otherwise succeed.

5.1 Interest in a person

It could be said that in large power distance societies since a teacher is the one that 'merits the respect of his/her students' (Hofstede, 1986: 313), it is only him/her that deserves the respect and students are only to show it. This attitude, however, does not seem to be natural as students themselves are human beings as well, and mutual respect is a very important element of every well functioning relationship. For that reason, it is good to find time to listen to problems that some students may have to face which may affect their ability to learn. Illness, family problems like, for example, a divorce or a death of a family member, or difficult living conditions may significantly decrease the student's ability to learn. If aware of the situation, the teacher can work together with the student and his/her family and/or the authorities to find an effective solution to a problem. It is also good to know students' personalities as they each may react differently to certain situations.

5.2 Feedback

Feedback is a form of appreciation of students' work and also a way to show them how they are progressing. Regardless of how much effort they put into the learning process itself, it is important to keep them informed of their progress. Based on that feedback, they are able to revise how much they really know compared to how much they think they know as well as what kind of mistakes they make even if afterwards they seem to be 'obvious' and 'unnecessary'. It also gives a teacher insight into students' progress in terms of 'mastering' the material and how successful he or she has been as a teacher so far. It is important to remember, however, that feedback can be encouraging as well as discouraging and the teacher should make every effort to keep it in balance. 'Too much of either [praise] or [criticism] renders it less and less effective' (Brown, 1994: 421). Instead of pointing out all mistakes students make, it is good to notice their successful efforts as well.

5.3 Students' ideas and thoughts

As teachers work is based on interacting with students and its purpose is to teach them it is very important to know what their feelings about the process are, whether lessons are interesting or boring and explanations clear or complicated. Sometimes ways teachers and students perceive problems are different, for example, because of differences in their knowledge, which may result in misunderstanding. Encouraging students to openly express their feelings may help remind teachers about those differences and listening to their ideas may throw a new light on how to make a lesson more interesting.

It is also very important to show students appreciation for expressing their thoughts. This way students realize they are an important part of a process, being its subject not object, feeling respected and valued.

5.4 Enjoy students' success

While establishing positive relationship with his/her students, a teacher should show him/herself as a genuine person truly involved in educational process of his/her students and what follows enjoying their success. To some extent it could be said that students' success is also a teacher's success. The best way to feel accomplished in teaching is to see the accomplishments of his/her students. If directing, suggesting and looking for new solutions on teacher's side, and persistence in applying these new solutions on students' side result in success, it is important to share the joy.

After all, the teacher only instructs how to work and the student is the one that 'does the job'.

5.5 Be a team

Last but not least, a teacher and students should be a team. A team that would work together and laugh together, that would together solve problems and work on improving the relationship and quality of work results. To create a good team is very demanding and it is not a short time commitment. It means constant work, as people and times change and so do expectations. It also needs to be remembered that what worked in one environment does not have to work in another. There is no such thing as universal model for creating a team in a school environment.

6. Theory and reality

All of the elements described by the author above are the same elements that she used while teaching in a secondary school in Poland. She worked with three different classes where the average number of students was 34. Every class started from beginners level, although motivation in each of these environments was different. The strongest motivation was present in a class with an extended program of English, and the weakest in a class with a basic English program and an extended physical education program. The third class, also with a basic English program, had relatively average motivation. Although motivation is very important in terms of hard work for good results, the author noticed that establishing a good relationship with a class can be very helpful in improving a quality of process itself.

6.1 Respect

Students who felt respected responded much better and were much more willing to participate in lessons than students dominated by teachers in large power distance era in Poland. Encouraged to share their ideas and feelings by valuing their thoughts they were ready to speak spontaneously. Subsequently, the results were better as the learning process was based on a two-way communication that enabled to decrease the element of misunderstanding or at least significantly reduce it.

6.2 Feedback once more

As students always inquired about their mistakes, I tried to provide them with a comprehensive feedback on their written and oral progress. Very often they were advised some follow up exercises that would touch problematic areas if a problem considered their written skills. If it considered oral skills additional explanation was provided by either their peers, if the problem seemed to be of an individual, or by the teacher if it seemed to be either more complex in matter or shared by a group. Additionally, reaction of students who were not only shown their mistakes but also praised for the effort or at least guided to improvement was more optimistic than skeptical.

6.3 Treat them personal and share their joy

Showing interest in each student as a person and understanding to his/her problems is a very important part of building a mutually rewarding relationship. At this point, I would like to use a very specific example from my experience as a teacher:

One of my students felt that she had a problem with mastering the English language. After a thorough discussion about the nature of the problem, we jointly agreed on accepting a completely different strategy. One of her peers, chosen by her and accepted by me, was appointed to help her on a regular basis after school. The 'peer-tutor' was also responsible for keeping the records on what they did and reported to me once a week. After two months, there was a visible progress and to everybody's joy the girl decided to continue her education in the same class.

This was one of the most positive experiences I have had in my career as a teacher.

Enjoying her success was a real pleasure and so it was in case of many others that worked hard for their results.

6.4 Team

Once students understood that their teacher cared for them, respected them and valued their opinion, it was much easier to be treated as a part of a team. However, it also depended how much motivated a team was. Basically, the more motivated a team, the easier it was to be accepted as a part of it. It may be because of the willingness to achieve some goals and a necessity for a source of information in the school environment.

7. Reflective teaching as part of methodology

'Reflective teaching goes hand-in-hand with critical self-examination and reflection as a basis for decision making, planning and action' (Richards and Lockhart, 1996: ix). Tutoring experience was very helpful in realizing that every student is different and finding a way to teach that would best suit the needs of an individual is crucial (as mentioned by the author in paragraph 3.3). However, this can hardly ever be achieved without trying different ways. Basically, it means experimenting with different kinds of approaches or techniques with a student. This demands observation of a student's progress and reflection over planned and real results.

7.1 Reflective teaching and tutoring

If student's goal were to prepare for exams that involve good writing and reading skills then, as a teacher, I would consider the Grammar Translation Method. However, the way the material would be introduced to the individual would depend on his/her preferences and abilities to absorb it. For example, it might be preferable to explain a

material in small sections (e.g. each tense separately), more complex sections comparing its elements (e.g. groups of tenses) or using tables, which would show differences and similarities of described components. In this way, a teacher not only plans a lesson but also through reflection tries to find new ways to motivate a student.

7.2 Reflective teaching and individualization

Working in a class environment with average of 30 students is more challenging, however. Even though they may share their goals, their motivation, preferences and abilities will differ. For that reason teacher has to pay intensified attention not only to motivating his/her students but to individualizing their needs as well. It is now, that reflective teaching is even more important as a teacher has to think about 30 students participating in a lesson at the same time. In a small power distance society, however, it is much easier to find out what their opinions and suggestions are by preparing a questionnaire, for example. Subsequently, this information may be used in the process of planning a lesson, or motivating and encouraging students to independent or group work depending on individual preferences.

7.3 Teacher roles

Richards and Lockhart suggest that based on teaching and learning theories and 'the kind of classroom interaction they believe best supports these theories', teachers create certain roles (1996: 104). Some of the roles were briefly described by the author in two previous paragraphs. According to Richards and Lockhart list (1996:105-106) they could be named as:

- planner and motivator in one-to-one interaction (tutoring),
- planner, motivator, facilitator and group organizer in a classroom environment.

8. Method and approach

Not always teaching means using a specific method. 'For many teachers, a teaching approach is something uniquely personal which they develop through experience and apply in different ways according to the demands of specific situations' (Richards and Lockhart, 1996: 104).

After political changes in Poland the Grammar Translation Method, that for decades had been dominant in school environment, lost its superior position in favor of Communicative Approach. Communicative Approach was a new idea on Polish education market and very easily attracted both students' and teachers' attention. However, students, as well as some teachers, did not seem to be ready to accept the challenge yet. That rapid change from large to small power distance society was rather superficial. Students wanted to receive but they were not quite ready to give. Additionally, they were used to learning grammar and working with texts and as Richards and Rodgers (1986: 77) say:

'Often there is no text, grammar rules are not presented, classroom arrangement is nonstandard, students are expected to interact primarily with each other rather than with the teacher, and correction of errors may be absent or infrequent'.

Based on this observation, I decided not to accept any particular method or approach but rather use reflective teaching instead. I worked with different materials and always tried to fit them to my students needs, expectations they had and goals they set for themselves.

9. Short summary

Methods and approaches constantly change and as Swan (1985: 2: 86) points out ‘... the theoretical pendulum swings from one extreme to the other, [and] each exaggeration is followed by its opposite’. However exaggerated this opinion may seem itself, it might be concluded that as long as a teacher does not stop on a particular stage his/her methodology should be effective.

Methodology accepted by the author is not based on any particular method or approach. It is rather a way of dealing with the cultural change. It is also an effort to use whatever means available to help students get through the transition and notice new opportunities. Eventually it is about creating a communication level which will facilitate a teaching/learning process. It is the author’s belief that as every student is different, and so are their motivation and goals, accepting any particular method is not desirable. However, well functioning two-way communication and reflective teaching may be very helpful in defining students’ needs. It is also very useful in accepting methods and approaches most suitable for the individual. It has always been author’s intention to act in best interest of her students. For that reason, reflective teaching seems to be the most important part of methodology accepted by her that was influenced by a change from large into small power distance society.

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