

THE UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM

Centre for English Language Studies

MA TEFL/TESL

Module 1 Assignment

January 2007

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LT 06/07

Brown (Principles of Language Learning and Teaching 2000:192) suggests various ways in which the values inherent in ‘collectivist’ and ‘individualist’ societies might affect student-student and teacher-student interactions. Choose from either ‘uncertainty avoidance’ or ‘power distance’ and list how your choice of dimension might affect student-student and teacher-student interaction in your work setting. Discuss how items on your list might affect the methodology you adopt.

The Effects of Uncertainty Avoidance in EFL Learning Situations

1. Introduction

Uncertainty Avoidance is one of the four original dimensions of Geert Hofstede's framework for the study of national cultural differences, and their impact on the relationships between those of different cultures. Whilst Hofstede's work in the early 1970s was primarily for his employer at that time (IBM Europe), there is no doubt that it is of immense value to those of us in the English language teaching profession today.

This paper aims to focus on the ways that uncertainty avoidance affects interaction in the classroom, and how our awareness and understanding of it may enable us as teachers to adapt our methodology to better-serve those whom we are endeavouring to assist in the challenging world of English language learning. The second section of the paper will provide a general overview of Hofstede's model and its five dimensions (the fifth dimension having been added after the initial study). This is necessary, as there are clearly areas where Hofstede's dimensions overlap and intertwine.

The third part will be devoted to a deeper examination of the uncertainty avoidance dimension in teaching and learning. Differences between weak uncertainty avoidance societies and strong uncertainty avoidance societies will be highlighted, along with some of the potential pitfalls in interpreting Hofstede's work. The fourth part of this paper will be a more personal examination of the effects of uncertainty avoidance in my own employment situation, and how it influences my teaching methodology. Finally, in conclusion, I intend to reiterate the need for greater cross-cultural understanding, particularly on the part of native English-speaking teachers (NESTs) working in such relatively homogeneous societies as Japan.

2. Hofstede's 'New Paradigm'

1980 saw the publication of the first edition of Hofstede's seminal book *Culture's Consequences*, a text based upon the data obtained from a large-scale study of the values of over 116,000 IBM employees in forty countries conducted between 1967 and 1973. In his later book, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, designed to present his findings in a "much more reader-friendly manner" (Hofstede, 2001), the author himself states that:

"The basic innovation of *Culture's Consequences*, when it appeared in 1980, was classifying national structures along a number of dimensions. In the study of culture this represented a new paradigm".

(Hofstede, 2005: 31)

Naturally, one would be reluctant to place too much faith in a single survey which was conducted over a generation ago, but since the original publication of *Culture's Consequences*, Hofstede has continued to work on his model, and to look for corroboration for his original findings from other sources, including both replication studies and secondary research. These sources include Ng et al.'s 1982 'Independent Validation Using Rokeach's Value Survey' (discussed at length in Hofstede and Bond, 1984) as well as Schwartz's values study of college students and elementary school teachers. This research was conducted for very different reasons, and allowed Schwartz to determine seven dimensions, yet Hofstede considered these results to be very much in harmony with his own, and refers to Schwartz's classification as "a different way of cutting the same pie" (Hofstede, 2005: 32).

2.1. 'The Collective Programming of the Mind'

Hofstede (1986: 302) states that 'culture' is "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another". This collective programming comes from the four fundamental institutions of human societies: the family, the school, the job and the community. Variations between the collective programming of different cultures inevitably mean potential for discord when people of different cultures come into contact. Thus, in order to be successful in

any situation where different cultures interact, we must understand these differences and find a way to ‘bridge the gap’ before true conflict develops.

2.2 Values – ‘the Core of the Onion’

Hofstede (2005: 6) offers us the image of culture as an onion, from the most superficial aspects (symbols) on the outer layers, to deeply-rooted values at the core. Culture bumps regarding symbols can be resolved relatively easily – by observing and imitating foreign language or actions. But those arising from differing values are far more complex. Our values are obtained in our formative years, and the process is largely unconscious. We therefore find it difficult to even discuss our own values (hence the common yet redundant response to further queries regarding our position on a moral issue: ‘That’s just the way I feel about it’), and there is obviously no method which allows outsiders to accurately observe our values directly. However, statistical analysis of the IBM data revealed that there were clear differences in country averages, allowing Hofstede to identify four problem areas, which he named after already existing terminology (Hofstede, 2005: 23):

- **Uncertainty Avoidance** (from weak to strong)
- **Power Distance** (from small to large)
- **Collectivism versus Individualism**
- **Femininity versus Masculinity**

2.3 Hofstede’s Dimensions

2.3.1 Uncertainty Avoidance

“Uncertainty Avoidance can... be defined as the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations”.

(Hofstede, 2005:167)

Widespread uncertainty is an unavoidable part of human existence. Of course, every society expends a great deal of its resources attempting to reduce the level of uncertainty which pervades it. The study of meteorology to predict the upcoming weather is one obvious example of the widespread use of technology to limit

uncertainty. The laws of each society are also largely designed to limit, or at least discourage behavioural uncertainty amongst its citizenry. We try to regulate the uncertainty of human behaviour by threatening penalties for any behaviour which is deemed to be ‘anti-social’.

Opponents of religion could argue that it is merely man’s desperate attempt to control the one uncertainty that we are all certain to face; the meaning of death. Death is inevitable for us all, but the consequences of death remain unknown. Faith is a powerful tool in making our uncertainty anxiety levels tolerable.

To what extent do the people of any particular culture try to avoid situations which are unstructured or unpredictable? How far do the rules of society go to try to eradicate such ambiguity from everyday life? These issues determine the level of uncertainty avoidance.

2.3.2 Power Distance

“All societies are unequal, but some are more unequal than others”

(Hofstede, 1980. Quoted in Hofstede, 1986: 307)

Despite Marx’s egalitarian dreams, and the idealistic intentions of many national constitutions which seek to ensure equality for all, inequality exists in every society. Even in my son’s kindergarten class of eighteen 2-year old children, some toddlers have more power than others to influence events. The child whose speech is more developed has more say in determining which book the teacher reads at story time. The physically stronger child has greater freedom in choosing which toy he plays with, as he will simply take it from the weaker child if necessary. Gradually, children of any culture learn that there are limits to how acceptable such inequality is. But the degree of acceptability varies considerably from one culture to the next. To what extent do the weaker members of a society accept these inequalities and perceive them as normal?

2.3.3 Collectivism versus Individualism

An individualist culture is defined as one which assumes that people are all concerned primarily with their own personal well-being, and the well-being of their immediate family unit. A collectivist culture on the other hand, assumes that people belong to one or more “in-groups” (Hofstede, 1986: 307) which protect the interests of all members, in return for each member’s permanent loyalty. The ‘in-groups’ may be one’s extended family network, or an organisation such as a social group or even an employer, and these groups are very difficult for an individual to extricate oneself from. In summation, “a collectivist society is tightly integrated; an individualist society is loosely integrated” (Hofstede, 1986: 307).

2.3.4 Femininity versus Masculinity

Masculine cultures have highly differing expectations of male roles and female roles. Men are expected “to be assertive, ambitious and competitive, to strive for material success, and to respect whatever is big, strong and fast” (Hofstede, 1986: 308). Women on the other hand, are expected to fill the traditional nurturing, caring roles, and to be less materialistic in their concept of success. In a more feminine culture though, the distinction between the sexes is less defined. Men may be driven primarily by a desire to obtain a better quality of life, and they “may respect whatever is small, weak and slow” (Hofstede, 1986: 308).

It should be noted here that Hofstede is not claiming that feminine cultures are gender-equality utopias in any way. In fact, he points out that this dimension primarily concerns the role of males in societies:

“My data show that the values associated with this dimension vary considerably less across countries for women than men. I attribute this to the fact that the social roles of women vary less... In both masculine and feminine cultures, the dominant values within political and work organizations are those of men.”

Thus:

“...in masculine cultures these political / organizational values stress material success and assertiveness; in feminine cultures they stress other types of quality of life, interpersonal relationships, and concern for the weak.”
(Hofstede, 1986: 308)

2.3.5 The Fifth Dimension

Shortly after the original publication of *Culture's Consequences*, Hofstede was pleased to find support for his findings in the work of Michael Bond, which involved comparison of the values of female and male psychology students in the Asia-Pacific region. However, both studies had been devised by Westerners (Hofstede being Dutch, and Bond Canadian). The two men realised that there must have been an element of cultural bias in the questionnaires themselves. Bond's solution was to arrange another survey, which would have a deliberately non-Western bias.

Forty questions with a Chinese cultural bias were given to a hundred students in each of twenty-three countries around the world. Statistical analysis of the results again provided four dimensions. Three of these replicated dimensions from the IBM study, but the fourth did not. Interestingly, the IBM dimension which was not replicated by the Chinese Values Survey was that which is the focus of this paper: Uncertainty Avoidance. However, Hofstede insists that this is simply down to the researchers who composed the questions. 'Uncertainty Avoidance' highlights the concern about certainty, based upon the Western philosophical pursuit of absolute Truth. The Chinese scholars who composed the questions for the CVS did not share the western concern for Truth, and instead included questions based on Confucian ideas about Virtue, which in turn had not been considered by the Western researchers. This all serves to provide us with "a clear illustration that academics who do research, too, are children of a culture" (Hofstede, 1994: 11)

The fourth CVS dimension assessing Confucian values was given the label 'Confucian Work Dynamism' by Bond, and dynamic cultures were deemed to value persistence, thrift and an orientation towards the future. On the opposite side were other Confucian values, but ones more oriented towards the past and present, such as respect for tradition, and obligation to society. Hofstede "embraced this dimension as an essential addition to his earlier four" (Hofstede, 2005: 210), but considered that given the general lack of knowledge regarding Confucianist thought in the majority of countries surveyed, a different label would be more appropriate. He adopted the term **'Long-term Orientation versus Short-term Orientation'**.

3.1 Uncertainty Avoidance in Teaching and Learning

Over the past few decades, the need to consider cultural differences in determining how best to teach English language has been discussed frequently. Holliday has strong feelings on the matter, and pushes for greater discourse and research:

“Clearly we need to re-think the whole fabric of English language teaching methodology; and we must do this through a greater awareness of social context and cultural variety”

(Holliday, 1997: 418)

Our understanding of the concept of varying uncertainty avoidance levels, and the impact these can have in language learning situations, is of great value in this quest. The ‘confused encounters’ (Thorp, 1991: *passim*), or ‘culture bumps’ (Carol Archer, 1986, quoted in Jiang, 2001: 382) which we experience can be overcome, if teachers are aware of their own cultural norms, as well as those of their students. Jiang provides several examples of frequently encountered culture bumps, and offers us a set of six principles that NESTs should follow to negotiate them successfully (Jiang, 2001: 387-389).

In his paper relating his dimensions of cultural differences to teaching and learning, Hofstede includes a table of ‘Differences in Teacher/Student and Student/Student Interaction Related to the Uncertainty Avoidance Dimension’ (Hofstede, 1986:314. Reproduced in Table 1 below).

Table 1

WEAK UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE SOCIETIES	STRONG UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE SOCIETIES
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• students feel comfortable in <i>unstructured</i> learning situations: vague objectives, broad assignments, no timetables• teachers are allowed to say “I don’t know”• a good teacher uses plain language• students are rewarded for innovative approaches to problem solving• teachers are expected to suppress emotions (and so are students)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• students feel comfortable in <i>structured</i> learning situations: precise objectives, detailed assignments, strict timetables• teachers are expected to have all the answers• a good teacher uses academic language• students are rewarded for accuracy in problem solving• teachers are allowed to behave emotionally (and so are students)

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • teachers interpret intellectual disagreement as a stimulating exercise • teachers seek parents ideas 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • teachers interpret intellectual disagreement as personal disloyalty • teachers consider themselves experts who cannot learn anything from lay parents – and parents agree
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3.2 Potential Pitfalls

Several of the above differences in classroom interaction are clearly at least partly attributable to one of the other Dimensions, particularly Power Distance. In Large Power Distance Societies, “teacher is never contradicted or publicly criticized” (Hofstede, 1986: 313). Clearly this overlaps with the notion that “teachers interpret intellectual disagreement as personal disloyalty” in strong uncertainty avoidance societies. Thus, if overlap already exists, it would seem prudent to allow several other differences to be listed in the table relating to uncertainty avoidance. Hofstede lists the level of student spontaneity in speaking up in class as relating to power distance, as well as the collectivist/individualist dimension, and it would appear that it also relates to uncertainty avoidance. However, it is explained that uncertainty avoidance does not equate to risk avoidance. The fear of being wrong leads to risk avoiding strategies rather than uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede 2005: 172).

As Hofstede states (2005: 165), uncertainty is a subjective experience. He gives the example of lion tamer who is reasonably comfortable in a job which would cause considerable anxiety to the average person. This notion of uncertainty as a subjective feeling is critical. Individuals within a particular society may well have quite different levels of uncertainty tolerance, so the limitations of Hofstede’s dimension as a way of understanding national cultures must be kept in mind. There is more than one culture in a country, and there is certainly more than one personality within a culture. The danger of stereotyping is apparent, and should be guarded against.

We can do no more than make generalisations using this model. Hofstede ranks his seventy-four countries and regions in a table (Hofstede 2005: 168) which allows us to consider them on a scale running from Strong Uncertainty Avoidance Culture to Weak Uncertainty Avoidance Culture. But Hofstede reiterates:

“The national culture index scores, it should be emphasized again, only describe differences between countries: Their absolute value has no meaning”.

(Hofstede, 2001: 12)

This is crucial, as he refers to strong uncertainty avoiding cultures as “active, aggressive, emotional, compulsive, security-seeking, and intolerant” (Hofstede, 1986: 308). If such a description was assumed to be the writer’s assessment of the countries at the top of his Uncertainty Avoidance Index, he would be unlikely to find much favour in Greece or Portugal. Such a damning indictment of national cultures seems hardly in keeping with Hofstede’s stated goal of assisting us all in “becoming more cosmopolitan in our thinking”. (Hofstede, 2005: 365)

4.1 Uncertainty Avoidance from a Personal Perspective

As a British teacher of English who is living and working in Japan, it is perhaps understandable that the dimension of Uncertainty Avoidance is of the greatest interest to me both personally and professionally. According to the Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) Values for 74 Countries and Regions (Hofstede 2005, p168), Japan is ranked 11th (with a score of 92) and Great Britain joined by Ireland in 66th place (with a score of 35). I am a product of a comparatively very weak uncertainty avoidance culture. The place I live and work has a very strong uncertainty avoidance culture. Table 2 is adapted from Hofstede’s *Table of Differences in Teacher/Student and Student/Student Interaction Related to the Uncertainty Avoidance Dimension* with this situation in mind.

Table 2

Students from a Strong Uncertainty Avoidance Society	Teacher from a Weak Uncertainty Avoidance Society
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students are most comfortable in structured learning situations, with precise objectives, detailed assignments and strict timetables • Students expect their teachers to have all the answers • Students expect their teachers to use academic language in class • Students expect to be rewarded primarily 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher believes unstructured learning situations have more potential to facilitate learning • Teacher is quite comfortable being in situations where he learns along with the class • Teacher tries to avoid the use of academic language in class, preferring to use simpler, everyday terminology where possible • Teacher looks to reward students who show

<p>for their accuracy in problem solving</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students accept that the teacher may behave emotionally on occasions, and feel it is acceptable for themselves to do-so too • Students feel that disagreement in class is both disruptive and disrespectful • Students and their parents feel that the teacher is expert, and should therefore have full authority and control of the classroom 	<p>innovative thought in problem solving</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher believes that there is no place for mood swings in the classroom, and that he (along with students) should make every effort to suppress such emotions • Teacher welcomes disagreement as an opening for stimulating debate and discussion • Teacher appreciates his own responsibilities, but feels that both students and their parents have invaluable input to give, which could result in a more effective classroom
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My current employment situation is extremely varied and diverse. I teach all of the following:

- large-sized junior high and elementary school classes (35-40 students per class)
- mid-sized adult ESP classes (including technical English, hotel & tourism English – 8-12 students per class)
- mid-sized conversational English classes for adults (8-15 students per class)
- small-sized private children's conversation classes (1-5 students per class)

Uncertainty avoidance issues play an ongoing role in all of these teaching scenarios. However, to avoid excessive length, I will focus primarily on my adult classes for the purpose of this paper.

4.2 English for Special Purposes Classes

These include classes for employees of a major international hotel group, and classes for employees of an aircraft engine parts manufacturer. Ability and motivation levels vary quite considerably in each class. Given that the students only have one hour-long class per week, I believe it is beneficial to follow a textbook-based course in class, but to have the students do almost all of the written work at home. This opens up more class time for a greater number of 'unstructured' activities. Stepping out of the classroom occasionally, and having students guide me around their workplace, explaining elements of their work, is a very fruitful activity. It allows the student to be the expert, and the teacher to be the learner, stimulating genuine questions from the teacher, and equally genuine responses from the student. I make a conscious effort to

encourage innovative thought in problem-solving, and make frequent use of the adage ‘There’s more than one way to skin a cat’.

Most of these students undoubtedly have an image of the classroom which was obviously shaped by their experiences in school. This is the image that the lesson should be tightly structured, textbook-based, and involve a great deal of teacher lecturing, conversation drills, and even memorisation of large portions of text. They also appear to be quite inclined to subscribe to the notions that the ‘teacher has all the answers’ and that ‘teachers interpret intellectual disagreement as personal disloyalty’. In fact, many students seem to believe that *any* disagreement with the teacher is to be avoided. This image of the classroom is hard to change overnight.

Several years ago, in the very first meeting of an ESP class, one student said that he liked a particularly popular musician of the time. I responded jovially (or at least in a manner I considered to be jovial) that I thought she was terrible, and asked if any other class members liked the same singer. No other student would admit to this, and the student looked rather red-faced, and fell silent. At the time, I gave it little thought, and the class discussion moved on.

A few months later, at a class party, the same musician’s name came up in conversation. At this point, the previously embarrassed individual jumped up from his seat, saying he knew for a fact that at least five of the other class members owned the singer’s CDs, and that two of them had even attended her concert a year previously. It transpired that the vast majority of the class liked this musician, but on that first day, they all felt embarrassed liking a singer who was so clearly untalented, in the eyes of their esteemed new teacher, at least.

It was only then that I became aware of the difference in status which teachers in Japan have, compared to my own country. I also became painfully aware of the serious mistake I had made in that first class. My feeble attempt to introduce some light-hearted debate over the artistic merits of a popular musician resulted in considerable embarrassment for a student on our very first meeting. This almost certainly had a detrimental effect on his willingness to participate in class discourse. I attribute this error on my part to another culture bump arising from different UA

levels. I had considered a trivial pseudo-argument to be a good way of establishing a rapport with a new class. Yet it clearly had the opposite effect.

4.3 Conversational English Classes

These classes allow me the greatest freedom to follow my preferred teaching methodology. The students are motivated, there is no pressure to follow a prescribed syllabus, and there is no formal assessment. I make no attempt to prepare a structured lesson plan, and simply arrange a selection of topical materials (such as newspaper articles, movie clips et cetera) which may or may not be used during the course of the class.

In the most satisfying of these classes, students take the initiative and lead the conversation in every lesson. For the most part, I simply allow the dialogue to develop naturally between the students, only intervening to assist when the conversation is in danger of breaking down as a consequence of miscommunication, or to elicit vocabulary when a student is unable to convey his or her intended meaning. These students are even comfortable arguing with each other in English, something which many say they would not do in the L1.

Alas, this is the exception rather than the norm. This is a particularly motivated group, many of whom take regular overseas vacations. There is an excellent group dynamic, and I have been teaching the class for over six years now. I would argue that this class has its very own distinct culture, and it has a far weaker level of uncertainty avoidance than Japanese culture in general. In other classes, the majority of students also reject the notion of a textbook, and claim that they want to ‘enjoy free conversation’. But few are equipped to do so.

In practice, students often tend to display several of the characteristics of a strong uncertainty avoidance culture. Many students are clearly uncomfortable in such unstructured situations, and look for the teacher to lead every discussion. In a recent experiment, I walked into class, said ‘hello’, sat down and waited for someone to take the initiative. As always, the students ceased their L1 conversations as I entered the room, and returned my greeting in English. But a silence well in excess of one minute ensued, until it was broken by the students returning to their L1, asking what the

problem was. I explained that I was fine, but that there was no rule which stated that the teacher must always start the conversation. Another lengthy silence followed, until one student finally asked me a grammar-related question, as he often does (Incidentally, this student is clearly someone who ‘expects the teacher to use academic language in class’, although it must be said there are few such students in my classes).

A similar pattern emerged when I repeated the experiment with three different groups. The following week, I explained the purpose of what I had done, and reiterated my desire for less teacher-dominated environments. The students all emphatically agreed, and there has been a measure of progress in each of these classes since. But the students do continue to look to the teacher as the source of all facts, even on topics related to the local culture, which, I have to remind them, I am the student of! Disagreement is also still exceptionally rare, even between students.

4.4 Emotion in Class

The issue of whether or not teachers should be allowed to behave emotionally is an interesting one. At first glance, it would seem that I always display far more emotion in class than any of my students. However, my demeanour and actions are frequently quite unrepresentative of my true emotions. I believe students should never have to suffer as a consequence of my personal problems. But from my own experience, I would argue that many Japanese teachers share the same belief, and I don’t perceive any greater amount of emotional behaviour among Japanese students, compared to their British counterparts.

Hofstede does qualify his assertion that “Anxious cultures tend to be expressive cultures”, by mentioning that “Japan may seem to be an exception in this respect” (Hofstede, 2005: 171). He contends that Japan has “institutionalized places” to release one’s emotions, and although the example he provides of getting drunk after work does not fit every situation (particularly regarding junior high and elementary school students!), alcohol did play a part in encouraging my ESP student to defend his musical tastes at the party.

5. Conclusion

“... the teacher and the learner, as experienced members of the classroom community in a particular society, bring with them their own perceptions of what constitutes language teaching, language learning, and learning outcome, and their own prescriptions about what their classroom roles ought to be”.

(Kumaravadivelu, 1991: 99)

I must confess to sometimes feeling frustrated when I see that many of the ‘problems’ in English learning and teaching in Japanese schools identified over half a century ago (Bryant, 1956: 35), are still in evidence today, and having a long-term effect on adult perceptions of ‘good learning’. But rather than rejecting the students’ culture outright, and attempting to ‘convert’ them to the NEST’s, or more accurately BANA (‘British, Australasian, North American’, from Holliday, 1997: 410) way of thinking, it would perhaps be far more productive to work within the existing culture of the classroom. As an example, explanations which seem excessively detailed to the BANA teacher, may give the students the level of security they need to engage fully in the activity.

The NEST must also learn to deal with his or her fear of silence (Thorp, 1991: 114). I realised several years ago that Japanese people generally have a far higher tolerance of silence than British, yet I still feel uncomfortable with classroom silences of more than a few seconds. But giving my students those extra few moments to collect and order their thoughts more accurately before speaking may well also help lower their anxiety levels.

In concluding her argument that foreign language anxiety is a cause, rather than a consequence of poor achievement in foreign language learning, Horwitz provides us with the colourful analogy of foreign language anxiety as having “a bad hair day” (Horwitz, 2000: 258). In both situations, we are conscious that we are “presenting a less positive version of ourselves to the world than we normally do”. There is considerable merit in this analogy. Speaking in a foreign language can make many people, particularly those from a strong uncertainty avoidance society, highly uncomfortable, as there is far less likelihood of being able to attain the accuracy

which is so highly valued in a culture such as Japan's. If students are already having 'a bad hair', figuratively speaking, what is the value of intensifying that anxiety by forcing them to act in ways completely alien to their own cultural norms?

While the NEST has some responsibility to 'teach' students about the cultures of English-speaking countries, he or she must be careful not to 'preach'. The teacher has the primary responsibility to negotiate the culture bumps encountered, while at the same time allowing students access to information which will help them to negotiate the culture bumps that they will most likely face when using English outside of the classroom. Despite a surface convergence (visible in the global popularity of franchises such as McDonalds or Starbucks), there is little proof of any true convergence at the core of the 'onions' which are national cultures (Hofstede, 2005: 366). Differences in cultural values are still very much in evidence, and only through compromise and patience is it possible to negotiate positive changes in the classroom (Brown, 2001: 202).

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