

Cultural Values and their Effect on Learner Autonomy in an Omani EFL Context

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Abstract

There is general agreement that language learning and culture are closely linked and cannot be easily separated. Much research has been carried out on the effects of cultural attitudes on language learning in general. Learner autonomy has also been one of the dominant research topics in recent years. However, the interaction between these two variables, cultural factors and levels of learner autonomy, remains an underdeveloped area of research. Using the four-dimensional model of cultural differences in societies developed by Hofstede (1980), this study examines the relationship between cultural values and learner autonomy in Omani EFL classrooms. In particular, it looks at how cultural variations in attitudes towards learning may affect levels of learner autonomy in an Omani EFL context. An adaptation of Hofstede's cultural value survey to suit a language learning context was used to measure the cultural values of the students and their Western instructors. A comparison of the outcome of the students and instructors' responses reveals significant differences in all four of Hofstede's value dimensions (Power Distance, Individualist/Collectivist, Uncertainty Avoidance, and Masculinity/Femininity). The students' responses show a tendency to favour a larger power distance than their instructors, are more collectivist and masculine and have a stronger tendency to avoid uncertainty, all of which may contribute to the students' attitude towards learner autonomy. These results suggest that cultural differences between the instructors and the students may be a reason for the difficulty in increasing levels of learner autonomy in Omani EFL classrooms.

Keywords: Learner autonomy, Cultural attitudes, Hofstede's value dimensions

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1. Introduction

Cultures across the world vary in terms of their beliefs, traditions, and behavioural norms. People, being cultural beings, do not cease to be themselves when they decide to teach or learn a language, but rather bring their cultural beliefs and attitudes with them into the classroom. There is a general consensus among the English language teaching community that language learning and culture are closely linked (Borg, 2013; Brown, 2000; Byram et al., 1994; Hinkel, 1999; Little, 2002; McClaren, 1998; Roberts et al., 2001). Numerous studies examining the relationship between culture and language learning have found that factors of a culturally based nature can have an effect on the learning process (e.g. Dang, 2010; Hinkel, 1999; Holliday, 1994; Königs et al., 2007). In recent decades, learner autonomy, or the ability to take charge of one's own learning, has also been one of the dominant topics in language teaching. The amount of literature suggesting different approaches and methods English language teachers can use to help their students play a more active and self-directed role in the learning process is quite extensive (e.g. Dam, 2000; Fanning et al., 1988; Lamb, 2000; Nunan, 1997; Sinclair, 2000). However, the interaction between these two variables, cultural factors and levels of learner autonomy, has been accorded insufficient attention and remains an underdeveloped area of research.

The group of learners chosen for this study are Omani secondary school certificate holders enrolled in a foundation programme at a higher education institute in the Sultanate of Oman. Students on the programme are required to bring their level of English language proficiency up to an IELTS Band 6 before they are allowed to begin their tertiary education through the medium of English. In addition to enhancing the four language skills, the aim of the foundation programme is to increase levels of learner autonomy. The structure of the programme and the modules taught were primarily developed by those teaching on the programme, mainly Western, native speakers of English. Although the programme is considered successful at improving the students' language and academic skills, increasing learner autonomy among Omani students remains a challenge for the instructors and administrators of the programme.

The question of whether autonomy in learning is an ethnocentric concept was raised by Riley (1988) who termed it the "ethnography of autonomy". He suggests that those working in language teaching in general and autonomy in particular may be imposing their own views on how the learning should take place. Learner autonomy is generally regarded highly in western educational systems. Students who are aware of their learning goals and are able to assess their abilities and progress are viewed positively in western societies, whereas students who are dependent on sources of authority and are reluctant to take a more active role in their learning are viewed as incompetent by western educators (Fanning et al., 1988). This may not be the case in all cultures and societies.

Riley (1988) also raises the issue of whether the cultural background of learners predisposes them for or against autonomous methods of learning. He suggests that some cultures may be more favourable to certain educational approaches such as

autonomy. This may explain why tasks requiring independent, unsupervised work with limited guidance from teachers creates a sense of unease among Omani students. Using the four-dimensional model of cultural differences in societies developed by Hofstede (1980), this pilot study examines the relationship between cultural values and learner autonomy in an Omani EFL context. Cultural differences can be a major obstacle in EFL teaching and this study looks specifically at whether the differences in the instructors and students' value systems could be related to the unsuccessful attempts made by teachers to encourage students to adopt a more autonomous mode of learning.

1.1 Hofstede's Value Dimensions

Hofstede's (1980, 1983) value framework is the result of research on the cultural values of more than 100,000 IBM employees around the world over a period of 16 years. By examining 50 different countries, Hofstede was able to identify and define four dimensions of cultural variability. Although his work was carried out on business organizations, his research is also considered relevant to language teaching (Brown, 2000). The four value dimensions in his framework are individualism/collectivism, large/small power distance, strong/weak uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity/femininity. Learner autonomy, as with other aspects of language learning such as motivation and learning strategies is likely to be perceived by students in light of these socio-attitudinal variables.

1.1.1 Individualism/collectivism

According to Hofstede, the individualism/collectivism variable involves the relationship between an individual and other individuals in the group to which they belong. In collectivist societies where there are very close ties between individuals and groups, people are expected to conform to their group's behavioural norms and in return can expect the support of group members. In individualist societies, the individual is given a great amount of freedom but is expected to assume responsibility for decisions and not rely on the support of others. Because this variable relates to the extent to which people work together in a group, it has direct implications on language learning and autonomy. Students from individualist societies who are generally driven by personal ambition and want to be recognized for their own personal achievements may be more likely to work well autonomously. On the other hand, students from cultures marked by a high degree of social collectivism might prefer working in groups and, according to Tudor (1996: 154), may regard learner autonomy as "egotistic or even anti-social".

1.1.2 Power Distance

The power distance variable relates to the degree to which people accept inequality in power in a society, how authority figures are regarded and how authority is exercised. Large power distance societies give individuals a great degree of authority, whereas in small power distance societies, authority is spread among the group members. As Riley (1988: 22) points out, this variable is related to learner autonomy in that it can

affect the expectations students have on teacher-student interaction as well as on the role of the teacher in the learning process.

1.1.3 Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance relates to how accepting societies are of uncertainty as a part of life. People from societies with weak uncertainty avoidance are likely to take more risks and tolerate opinions and behaviour different from their own. People from strong uncertainty societies attempt to create security through various institutions. Students from weak uncertainty avoidance cultures may not wish to participate in activities where they may risk being negatively evaluated by teachers or peers. Low tolerance of uncertainty and ambiguity may also cause students to experience discomfort when using a mode of learning, such as autonomy, to which they may be unaccustomed.

1.1.4 Masculinity/Femininity

This variable involves the division of emotional roles between men and women in a society. Hofstede (1980) describes masculine societies as those in which men are more competitive, assertive, and interested in material gains whereas women are more nurturing and concerned with social harmony and the quality of life. Feminine societies are those in which both the sexes exhibit traits traditionally associated with women such as modesty and compassion (1980: 261 and 1983: 85). Levels of learner autonomy may vary in learners depending on where their society is located on the masculinity/femininity scale. Assertive students who have initiative may handle a more autonomous mode of learner better than students from more feminine societies who would prefer to maintain a low profile, seeing it as a more modest form of behaviour.

Hofstede and colleagues later added two dimension to the value framework. The fifth value dimension 'Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation' (Hofstede & Bond, 1988) relates to whether people choose to focus on the past, the present or the future. The sixth value dimension 'Indulgence vs. Restraint' relates to the degree to which people exercise control of basic human desires related to enjoying life" (Hofstede et al., 2010). As this is a pilot study involving a small number of participants and as Hofstede's original four dimensions are more relevant for language learning, only the original four dimensions detailed above will be used in this study.

The instructors involved in the present study are all either from the United States or the United Kingdom. According to Hofstede (1983; Hofstede et al., 2010), both British and American societies are individualistic, low power distance, weak uncertainty avoidance societies which tend to be more masculine. Based on my observations, Omani culture is characterized by relatively high collectivism, large power distance, a moderate tolerance of uncertainty, and is more on the feminine side of the scale. The cultural values of the teachers and those of the students seem to contrast one another in each of the four value dimensions. It is hypothesized that a reason behind the unsuccessful attempts to engage Omani students in more autonomous, self-directed activities may be due to the differences in the cultural

background and set of values held by the instructors and students. This study, therefore, seeks to examine whether such differences indeed exist between the students and their instructors and how this may affect levels of learner autonomy.

2. Methods

Participants consisted of 20 students and 10 instructors. The sample of students (10 female) were all Omanis aged between 18-21. They were selected by randomly choosing ID numbers from a computer generated list of the 350 students enrolled in the foundation programme. The 10 instructors (5 female) who took part in the study were all from Western societies, namely the United States and the United Kingdom.

The same questionnaire based on Hofstede's value survey was given to the instructors and students. The language of the questionnaire was adapted to suit the students' level of English which eliminated the need for explaining or translating items the students may not understand. The questionnaire had 24 items, with six items dealing with each of Hofstede's four value dimensions. The items in the questionnaire were jumbled and some items were reversed as well.

3. Statistical Analyses

Because the study involves two different groups, both of which are comprised of a small number of subjects (10 instructors and 20 students), a non-parametric, Mann-Whitney Test U was used to analyse the data.

4. Results

A comparison of the outcome of the students and instructors' responses reveals significant differences in all four of Hofstede's value dimensions. As illustrated in Table 1 and Figure 1, the students' responses show a tendency to favour a larger power distance than their instructors. Students were also found to be significantly more collectivist and have a stronger tendency to avoid uncertainty. The most significant difference, however, and most surprising finding, is with regards to the masculinity/femininity dimension. Contrary to what was hypothesised, students were found to be significantly less feminine than their instructors.

Table 1: Mean ranks of the instructors and students in each of the four value dimensions.

Value Dimension	Instructors Mean Rank	Students Mean Rank	Value of U
Power Distance	11.7	17.4	$p < 0.05$
Individualist/Collectivist	11.2	17.9	$p < 0.025$
Uncertainty Avoidance	11.3	17.6	$p < 0.025$
Masculinity/Femininity	21	13	$p < 0.01$

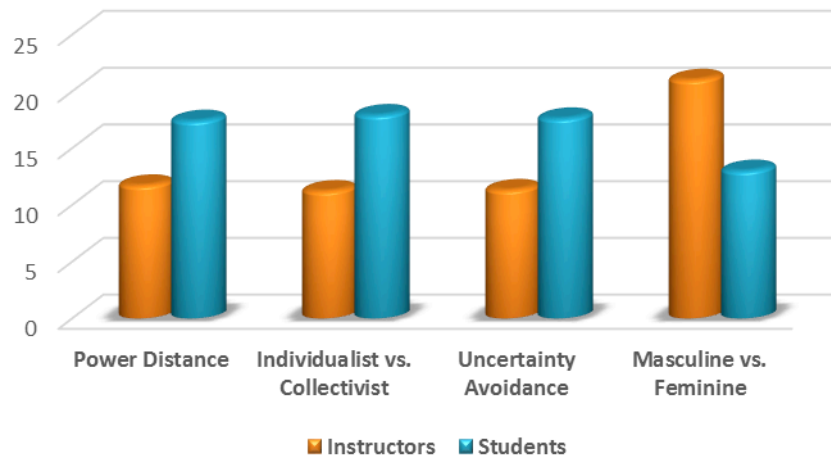


Figure 1: Responses of the students and instructors in each of Hofstede's four value dimensions. Differences in all value dimensions are significant. As compared with their instructors, students favour a larger power distance, have a more collectivist outlook, avoid uncertainty and are less feminine.

5. Discussion

This study examined whether differences exist in the cultural values held by students and their instructors in an Omani EFL context. Of interest was whether differences in the students and instructors' value systems may be related to the generally low levels of learner autonomy among the Omani students. A questionnaire based on Hofstede's value survey was administered to both groups. The findings of the questionnaire show that significant difference exist between the instructors and students in each of Hofstede's four value dimensions (Table 1, Figure 1). As compared with their instructors, students favour a larger power distance, have a more collectivist outlook, avoid uncertainty and are less feminine.

Based on their responses, the cultural values held by the students could be related to their attitude towards learner autonomy. For example, the results show that students favour a larger power distance. Because the teacher is seen as an authority figure in Omani culture, autonomous activities which usually require a change in the teacher-learner relationship could be seen as a challenge to the status quo of Omani culture, thus affecting students' interest in participating in such activities. Additionally, the Omani students' highly collectivist nature may explain why students prefer group related activities that require working together as a team as opposed to a more independent, autonomous mode of learning where students may be competing with each other or where they may feel that the teacher is not fulfilling his/her role in the learning process. Furthermore, a moderate to high level of risk-taking is necessary in language learning and autonomy (Brown, 2000) as is a degree of tolerance of ambiguity (Oxford and Erham cited in Tudor, 1996:104). Therefore, the Omani students' strong avoidance of uncertainty may also contribute to their disfavouring of autonomous learning.

According to Sinclair, although learner autonomy as an educational goal is generally considered important world-wide, promoting it requires "careful interpretation of the particular cultural, social, political and educational context in which it is located" (2000: 6). In highlighting similar sentiments, Pennycook points out that, as a concept constructed by western cultures, the applicability of autonomy to other cultures may be limited (1997). This does not mean that some cultures are not suited for autonomous learning. It does suggest, however, that cultural groups differ in their attitude and reaction to more self-directed study. Hofstede states that "the burden of adaptation in cross cultural learning situations should be primarily on the teachers" (1980: 301). He explains that ethnocentrism can be very subtle and that it is much easier to recognize in individuals from other cultures than in ourselves. Western EFL teachers ought to bear in mind that their students' culturally based expectations may be different from their own and that their students' attitude towards the learning process and teacher-learner roles can have an influence on levels of learner autonomy. Although differences between the students and their instructors in the present study are significant, the effects of these cultural variations on learner autonomy still needs to be further researched. The instructors and students involved in the study differ not only in terms of their cultural background but also in other aspects including age, level of experience, education and maturity. Therefore, differences in their responses may also be due to these factors and not solely a result of their cultural values. Furthermore, this was a pilot study involving a small number of participants. Results must, therefore, be interpreted with caution. A large scale study is currently being planned on the basis of the present findings as a larger sample size would yield more reliable findings and more meaningful conclusions.

6. Conclusion

This study examined the differences in cultural values between Omani students and Western instructors. In particular, it looked at how cultural variations in attitudes towards learning may affect levels of learner autonomy. The results suggest that the students' value systems may be related to their low levels of learner autonomy and that cultural differences between the instructors and the students may be the reason for the difficulty in increasing levels of learner autonomy in Omani EFL contexts.

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