集団主義と個人主義の言語と教育

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Collectivism and Individualism in Language Education

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Abstract

Culture is thought to play an important role in the context of language teaching and learning. It is widely believed that it can affect learning and teaching styles, behaviors, and beliefs. Hofstede’s analysis of collectivism and individualism across cultures are two constructs that are widely used by scholars, educators, and others in explaining cultural differences and similarities. This paper explores language teaching and learning and provides some suggestions for language instructors using a collectivism / individualism framework. Among the suggestions is the notion that although individualism / collectivism is useful in providing initial guidance, language educators need to be weary of making generalizations and stereotyping learners.

Introduction

In the current age of globalization, attempting to explain and account for behaviors cross-culturally can be a difficult task. A particularly useful and perhaps one of the most widely utilized conceptual tools by scholars in this regard has been Hofstede’s (2001) cultural dimensions. In an educational context, and with respect to language teaching and learning, an analysis of Hofstede’s concepts is relevant in highlighting the potential effects of culture on teachers’ and learners’ attitudes, behaviors, and expectations. In today’s language classrooms, instructors must be aware of and sensitive to cultural differences and similarities and as such, knowledge of cultural tendencies
provides an important starting point. Although Hofstede considers a variety of cultural dimensions that should be taken into account in developing and implementing appropriate pedagogical practices, an examination of the distinction between notions of collectivism and individualism provides a useful theoretical framework that is capable of highlighting and accounting for how culture can affect and shape learning and teaching processes.

Being culturally aware is vital in overcoming some of the potential issues attributable to one’s culture that can arise in an educational context. As such, language educators need to be aware of how culture can affect learners and classroom dynamics. However, a word of caution is necessary since relying exclusively on collectivistic or individualistic explanations of culture can result in various forms of misunderstandings. Instead, educators need to be aware that people and individuals have certain cultural tendencies but, at the same time, culture and individuals in and of themselves are complex constructs that require a multitude of factors be considered. As Pennycook (2017) points out, we must be weary and careful to avoid cultural imperialism and stereotyping individuals based on their cultural background.

This paper outlines a theoretical framework grounded in a comparison of individualism and collectivism which is intended to provide guidance to language educators in developing and implementing sound pedagogical practices informed by cultural understanding. Additionally, specific examples and potential issues pertaining to language teaching and learning in the context of individualism and collectivism are provided.
Defining Collectivism and Individualism in Education

Since cultures tend to have either collectivistic or individualistic tendencies, it is important to begin by broadly defining the main characteristics of collectivism and individualism. Generally speaking, members of collectivist societies are primarily concerned with group loyalty and cohesiveness, harmony, avoiding hurting others’ feelings, saving face, and not imposing on other members, whereas individualistic cultures view these to be less vital (Gudykunst & Lee, 2003). In a society where individualism prevails, people tend to be primarily concerned with the needs of the individual being satisfied before the well-being of the group. In cultures whose main orientation is individualism, notions such as independence and self-reliance are greatly valued with group membership not being essential to one’s identity or success (Storti & Benhold-Semaan, 1997). According to Hofstede (2001), cultures and countries can generally be differentiated along a continuum according to whether they are oriented more towards individualism or collectivism. Although societies can exhibit both tendencies of collectivism and individualism, one generally prevails as the primary mode of identification. For instance, based on Hofstede’s analysis of cultural dimensions, members of Western cultures including the United States of America, Australia, and Canada act and orient themselves in an individualistic manner whereas East Asian societies such as Japan, China, and Malaysia tend to exhibit collectivist characteristics. A society’s individualistic or collectivistic cultural orientation can be particularly relevant in an educational context with the potential to affect teaching and learning styles. As Oxford, Hollaway and Horton-Murillo (1992) point out, learning strategies and teaching styles have a strong cultural component.
with individualism or collectivism contributing to these either directly or indirectly. As such, one’s cultural background can strongly impact the preferred choice of teaching and learning methods.

Although Hofstede’s research on cultures provides a useful tool for language educators in identifying students’ learning preferences and enabling teachers to modify their teaching styles and pedagogical practices, it can be problematic to rely on any single measure. Since cultures and individuals are complex, identifying them as either purely collectivistic or individualistic can have a negative impact and reinforce stereotypes. As noted by Guest (2002), any single approach in identifying tendencies and needs, such as relying too heavily on an anthropological one, has had the undesired effect of misinterpreting cultures by creating and reinforcing stereotypes of societies as monolithic and static in part due to educators viewing cultural teaching and learning as if it were an exercise in creating a taxonomy of differences, with similarities potentially being ignored.

Language educators need to realize the complex nature of any given culture generally and of individuals specifically, incorporating this line of thinking into their overall teaching styles. For instance, Gudykunst and San Antonio (1993) point out that while individualism predominates in the United States, collaterality and lineality (two forms of collectivism) also affect behavior and that both collectivistic and individualistic orientations also co-exist and have an influence in Japan. Accordingly, it is important to remember that both tendencies can exist in any given society with members not always purely adhering to one or the other.
The Influence of Individualism and Collectivism in Education

In most cases, culture, and specifically the characteristics associated with individualism and collectivism, have some influence on learners’ and instructors’ behavior, attitudes, and expectations. For example, in classrooms with collectivistically-oriented learners, face maintenance and harmony reign supreme so that neither teachers nor students should lose face and as such, any confrontations or conflicts are usually avoided or formulated in a manner so as not to hurt or cause any harm to anyone (Hofstede, 2001). Conversely, most individualistic societies have weak face-consciousness where conflicts are brought into the open with confrontation in learning situations being regarded as salutary (Hofstede, 1986). Coming to terms with these cultural differences can be difficult for language educators.

It is commonplace for most language instructors from Western and individualistic cultures to endorse a communicative and active learning approach in the classroom where speaking and engaging in discussions is seen as a vital aspect of language acquisition. One result of this is that many Western teachers complain that Asian students lack motivation since they don’t actively participate in class (Simpson, 2008). There is a belief that Asian learners are passive and committed to a surface approach to learning with teaching techniques emphasizing assessment that encourages reproduction of content (Niles, 1995). As Xiao (2006) argues, Western methods may be fundamentally problematic for Chinese (and other Asian) students because China’s collectivist culture can cause a mismatch between Western educators’ teaching styles and Chinese students’ learning styles in the face of the Western individualist approach leading to cross-cultural misunderstandings. Accordingly, since the desirability for students to
speak up in class is more strongly felt in individualistic societies, Western educators must try to understand that for many students in collectivist cultures, who conceive of themselves as being part of a group, it would be illogical to speak up without being sanctioned by the group so do so (Hofstede, 2001). As well, since most collectivistic cultures also maintain large power distance, their education tends to be teacher-centered, with a lack of two-way communication (Hofstede, 2001).

The notion of face provides additional insight with respect to collectivist and individualist orientations in an educational context. The concept of face can be summed up as “the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself which is interactionally and symbolically defined through approved social attributes” (Gagne, 2010, p.124). This is particularly relevant for learners from collectivist societies. According to Cocroft and Ting-Toomey (1994), learners from collectivist cultures are scared to lose face and consequently, are reluctant to speak out in class for fear of humiliation to themselves and others. This also partially explains why some students choose to use go-betweens to confront teachers (Simpson, 2008). Strong beliefs in the concept of face accounts for Asian students being seen as quiet, shy, and reticent in language classrooms with an insistence that the teacher be the ultimate figure of authority (Oxford, Hollaway & Horton-Murillo, 1992). For many Western educators, these beliefs and expectations may be difficult to overcome. One suggestion for Western teachers is that they should perhaps consider a culturally-appropriate cooperative learning approach because Asian learners not only show a preference for group learning, in many educational contexts they prove to perform better in groups (Phoung-Mai, Terlouw & Pilot, 2005).

Although referring to collectivism and individualism can potentially account
for learners’ attitudes, beliefs, and behavior, providing some guidance and at least a partial explanation of these, in some cases they are inaccurate and inadequate for dealing with individual and cultural differences. Some research suggests that educators should not ignore other factors and should question commonly held beliefs about Asian learners. For instance, some research shows a preference among Asian learners to work individually so that they can maintain full control of the final product and a negative preference for group learning, reflecting individualism and competitive spirit (Phuong-Mai Terlouw & Pilot, 2005). Although Asian students tend to be quieter in class, the reasons for this can be situation-specific rather than culturally pre-set (Xia, 2006). Littlewood (2001) concludes that we should question traditional assumptions and that Asian learners want to participate actively with many challenging the authority-based, transmission mode of teaching. This research demonstrates that cultures and learners are complex and multidimensional. Accordingly, so although referring to collectivism and individualism as a basis for teaching approaches is helpful, educators must take great care to avoid generalizations and stereotypes. Instead, language teaching and learning should be approached in a sensitive and understanding manner which, in turn, can be beneficial for students and teachers alike.

Conclusion

An understanding of collectivism and individualism is particularly important in educational contexts since it can provide some rather useful insights about cultural differences and similarities by helping teachers in organizing a complex social world. This can assist educators in identifying and
predicting beliefs, attitudes, and behavior among students which can help them in utilizing appropriate teaching approaches and pedagogical practices. As well, teachers need to be skeptical of generalizations and make an effort to avoid stereotyping learners. To do this, educators need to reconcile the influence of culture with situational and contextual factors while being able to recognize that differences, both cultural and individual, can exist — a challenging task indeed.

References


Littlewood, W. (2001). Students attitudes to classroom English learning: a cross-


