eltconcourse.com

Axel Lidenbrock

Crossing Cultures 1: Power Distance and Uncertainty Avoidance

Consider this, if you will:

> *Our shared human nature is intensely social: we are group animals. We use language and empathy, and practice collaboration and intergroup competition. But the unwritten rules of how we do these things differ from one human group to another. "Culture" is how we call these unwritten rules about how to be a good member of the group. Culture provides moral standards about how to be an upstanding group member; it defines the group as a "moral circle". It inspires symbols, heroes, rituals, laws, religions, taboos, and all kinds of practices - but its core is hidden in unconscious values that change at a far slower rate than the practices.*

Geert and Gert Jan Hofstede http://www.geerthofstede.nl/index

Cross cultural studies are not something that seem to get much focus on most training courses (either initial or in-service types) but they seem to me to be a rich resource, especially, but not exclusively, for those of us working in multi-lingual classrooms, because multi-lingual implies multi-cultural, too.

Cross-cultural studies are closely associated with international business studies because it is this area that getting business done and making agreements with people from other cultures has been seen to be crucial. However, English-language teachers also work in cross-cultural situations and, in a real sense, need to 'get business done'. Teachers are, first and foremost, managers of the learning environment and in that environment we are managing people from a variety of cultures who have a variety of expectations about what a good manager does.

Legitimately, many teachers have been cautious about the danger of stereotyping students in terms of their cultural backgrounds and remembering that first language does not always = nationality or culture. Sweeping statements such as Japanese students are quiet and reluctant to speak, Italians are voluble and Spanish-speaking students don't care about the grammar are simply generalisations often based on anecdotal evidence alone. We are right to treat them with some disdain. However, consider the following exchange between a Greek student and a US teacher:

Teacher: *You need to get the project report to me. How long do you need to do it?*
Student: *I don't really know. When should I give you it?*
Teacher: *As soon as you can get it to me. Say next Monday?*
Student: *Yes, I think that's possible.*
Teacher: *Well, let's be safe and say Tuesday. OK? OK. So that's agreed. Tuesday it is.*
(In fact a lot of things happen in the student's life and the report is not ready when Tuesday comes around. The student has worked all weekend and late into Monday night but it still isn't finished …)
Teacher: *Have you got the report for me?*
Student: *I can give it to you tomorrow.*
Teacher: *But we agreed today.*
Student: *I want to change my class.*

eltconcourse.com

What's going on here? The key is something called attribution analysis. Here's how the conversation goes in the heads of the participants:

Dialogue	Attribution
Teacher: *You need to get the project report to me. How long do you need to do it?*	Teacher: I'm handing him some autonomy here because he's not a lazy student. Student: This is a puzzle. Why doesn't she just tell me what the deadline is?
Teacher: *As soon as you can get it to me. Say next Monday?*	Teacher: I'm including him in the decision-making process here and trying to get him to commit. Student: Doesn't she know when it should be done? She's the teacher, after all.
Student: *Yes, I think that's possible.*	Teacher: Good. He's committed himself. Student: She's letting me decide because she doesn't know the answer.
Teacher: *Well, let's be safe and say Tuesday. OK?*	Teacher: I'm offering him a final agreement. Student: Right. I'll try for Tuesday but it's up to me.
Teacher: *Have you got the report for me?* Student: *I can give it to you tomorrow. I've been working on it all weekend.*	Teacher: I am acting as agreed. Student: She is asking for the report but it's not ready. We **agreed** it might take a bit longer.
Teacher: *But we agreed today.* Student: *I want to change my class.*	Teacher: I'm holding him to the contract we made. Student: This teacher is inept. She doesn't know how long something should take, isn't clear about when it should be done and doesn't understand how much work I've put in. I can't stay in this class.

This silly outcome results from a simple fact of culture. The US teacher feels that she should involve her students in the decision-making process and allow them autonomy to run their own study programme. The Greek student expects the teacher to tell him clearly what to do and when she doesn't, he feels disorientated and doubts his teacher's competence.

According to the theory there are two conflicts. Greek society is one in which people avoid, if they can, uncertainty. The culture values clarity and security. US society is much weaker in terms of avoiding uncertainty and more tolerant of risk and ambiguity. Greek society is much more hierarchical than US society with clear power roles and quite a lot of power distance between roles. US culture is more forgiving with a much smaller power distance between roles. The two cultural dimensions can be plotted against each other on a grid like this. Forty cultures are plotted here so this is a good source for those of you working in multi-cultural classrooms. Note the large discrepancy between Greek and USA cultures in terms *both* of power distance *and* uncertainty avoidance.

Of course, these aren't the only two dimensions that can be plotted against each other. There are at least six. For more, go to http://www.geerthofstede.com/dimensions-of-national-cultures.

Axel Lidenbrock
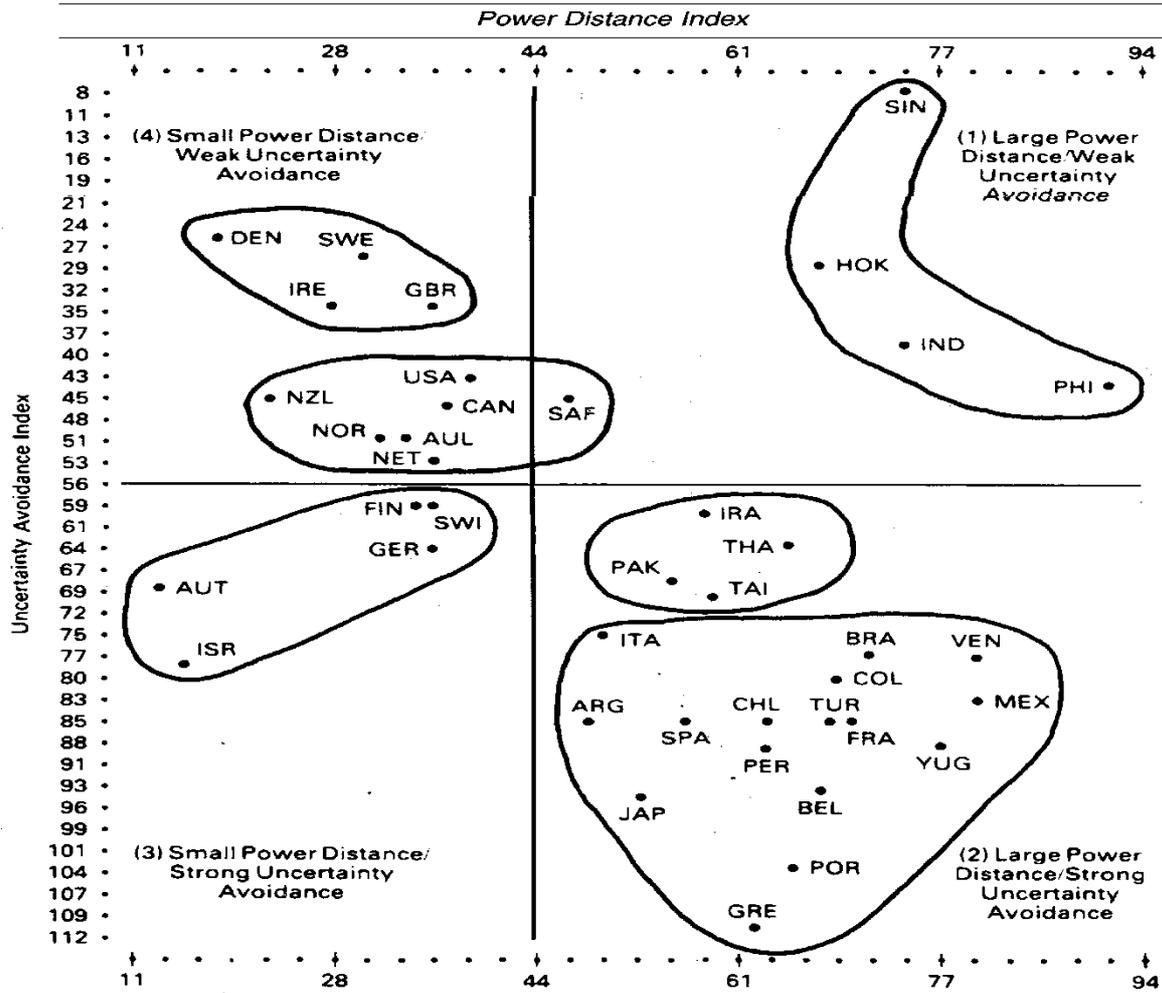
Source: University of Hawaii

Other cultural dimensions, including particularly individualism vs. collectivism seem to be highly relevant to the ELT classroom but that is for another article.

References:

Geert and Gert Jan Hofstede http://www.geerthofstede.nl/index, http://www.geerthofstede.com/dimensions-of-national-cultures accessed December 2013

University of Hawaii, www2.hawaii.edu/~bgaston/340Lecture08.ppt (n.d.), accessed December 2013

(This reference takes you to a very useful PowerPoint presentation in the area of cross-cultural studies.)