

Seminar 5 – Cultural Differences Part 3

READING ABOUT CULTURE

Task 1 Make notes on how you feel about the following concepts.
Are your feelings positive or negative?

culture country self society family community

Work in groups and compare your ideas. Which concept did people feel most differently about (i.e. where was there the most contrast)?

CRITICAL THINKING – EVALUATING DEFINITIONS

Read the three definitions of culture and decide which one you prefer and why.

A) Culture may be defined as the combination of a number of different but related phenomena, from the observation of people's attitudes, clothing, language, and religion through to their typical behaviour patterns.

B) Culture can be seen as an expression of individuality that emerges from collective and societal norms.

C) Culture varies within and between nations, and comprises a general and identifiable mix of characteristics such as appearance, behaviour and language.

Work in groups. Decide which of the following characteristics you would include in your own definition of culture. Add any further characteristics.

attitudes clothes / dress ethnicity language education religion behaviour diet

Task 2 Write your definition of culture, including your selected characteristics from above. Present your definition to the class and give reasons for your selection.

READING EXTENDED DEFINITIONS IN CONTEXT

Read paragraph 1 of the text below (Culture) and compare your definition from Task 2 with those given in the text.

Task 3 Find and underline three examples of language used to introduce the definitions.
Which one contains hedging?

Note: HEDGING is used in order to avoid being open to the criticism of over-generalization. The structures can be used: Modals – can, may, might; Adverbials – often, typically, to some extent.

Task 4 Select the best paraphrase (1 – 3) of each author's selected characteristics of culture.

(Bates and Plog 1990)

- 1) a system of valuable customs and ways of adapting
- 2) a system of people's changing beliefs and systems resulting from society
- 3) a system of people's main beliefs and behaviours across generations

(Hofstede 1994)

- 1) individual differences within cultures
- 2) people's basic mental processes within cultures
- 3) similarities between what people think within cultures

(Dahl)

- 1) the changing nature of culture
- 2) the capitalist view of culture
- 3) the personal nature of culture

RECOGNIZING SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES

Task 5 Read the rest of the text and complete the table of similarities and differences between geographical areas.

1) USA vs. Continental Europe	poverty is the fault of the poor	the poor are victims
2 West vs. East (in business)	_____	looks at things in the round
3 Americans vs. Chinese	_____	_____
4 West vs. East (socially)	_____	complex social environments
5 North Americans vs. Japanese	Americans follow agendas rigidly	_____
6 Australia vs. South Korea	_____	_____

Task 6 Categorize the above similarities and differences into two perspectives: social and business.

READING – Culture – Title: _____

1 Culture can be seen as a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, and behaviours prevalent in a society that are transmitted from generation to generation (Bates and Plog 1990). The management scientist Hofstede (1994), described these elements of culture as software of the mind, 'the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes members of one category of people from another'. The values in the culture are enforced by a set of norms which lay down rules of behaviour. These rules are usually supplemented by a set of sanctions to ensure that the norms are respected. Culture comprises a whole variety of different aspects, including religion, language, non-verbal communication, diet dress, and institutions to ensure that the values and beliefs are transmitted from one generation to another. Culture is dynamic, in other words, it changes over time not least due to the process of globalization with the increasing cross-border movement of goods, services, capital, and the migration of people (Dahl).

2 Different cultures can have significantly different attitudes and beliefs on a whole range of issues. As we will see later, when discussing the various social models, there is a significant divide between the USA and Continental Europe on attitudes to social issues such as poverty. In the USA, poverty tends to be seen as the fault of the poor whereas in Europe the poor tend more to be seen as victims of the system. Cultural attitudes can also vary towards issues such as corruption, women at work, sexuality, violence, suicide, and time.

3 Cultural attitudes can have important implications for business. Some of the most influential research on culture and the workplace was carried out by Hofstede (1991; 2001). His study, the largest that had been conducted, surveyed over 100,000 workers in IBM subsidiaries in 40 countries looking for cultural explanations of differences in employee attitudes and behaviour. He concluded that the norms and values embedded in national culture were a very powerful influence on the workplace, and that different approaches would be necessary when managing people from different cultural backgrounds. Hofstede (1994) concludes that the workplace can only change people's values to a limited extent. The message for multinational companies was that they would be unwise to assume that an organizational culture that was successful in the cultural context. For example of the USA, would be equally successful in a completely different cultural context in, say, China. Hofstede's work (2007) also contains another message for multinationals. He contends that countries, especially big countries like China, India, Indonesia, and Brazil do not have a single national culture but a variety of cultures that can vary significantly from region to region. A similar point could be made for smaller countries, in Western Europe for instance, where different cultures may be based on ethnic group rather than region.

4 Research has revealed fundamental cultural differences between East and West that have important implications for Western executives trying to do business in the East. Psychologists have shown that Eastern and Western cultures can vary significantly in terms of perception, logic, and how they see the world around them. Apparently, Westerners focus more on detail while Easterners tend to look at things in the round. For example, when American students were asked to look at a picture of a tiger in a forest they focused on the tiger while Chinese students concentrated more on the background, that is, the context within which the tiger was located.

5 Researchers attribute this to different social environments. In East Asia, social environments are more complex, collective, and constrained. As a result, Easterners need to pay attention to the social context if they are to operate effectively. On the other hand, Western societies prize individual freedom and there is not the same need to pay heed to the social environment. With their focus on the individual, Westerners tend to view events as the result of specific agents, while those raised in the East set the events in a broader context.

6 Cultural differences influence the way firms in the East and West do business. For example, when an applicant for a job appears uneasy, Westerners are likely to see that as an undesirable characteristic of the interviewee which makes them unsuitable for stressful jobs. In the East, they will tend to view the uneasiness in the context of a stressful situation, the interview, and thus be less likely to attribute it to the character of the applicant. Similarly, North Americans, when posing a question, expect a trustworthy person to respond immediately, with any delay inspiring mistrust. In contrast, the Japanese view more favourably individuals who take time to ponder before giving a reply. Attitudes towards contracts also vary. Once a contract is signed, Westerners regard them as agreements set in stone while Easterners, such as the Japanese, take a more flexible view. They are quite happy to renegotiate if circumstances change. They look at the situation of their customers as suppliers in the round and may renegotiate in order to maintain a long-term relationship. In the East there is a desire for consensus and harmony. Westerners sometimes perceive Japanese managers as incompetent or indecisive, because in *pursuit* of consensus, they *continually consult* their team and are usually reluctant to challenge the decisions made by others (Nisbett 2005; *Financial Times*, 27 November 2000). One of the authors came across an example of this during an interview with the Scottish executive put in charge of Mazda, the Japanese car company, by the parent company, Ford. Coming from a Western culture, he was used to debate, discussion, and disagreement when arriving at decisions. In Mazda he found the reluctance to disagree among his senior managers extremely frustrating.

7 Meetings in North America or Europe have formal agendas setting the order in which items are discussed, and each item is resolved prior to proceeding to the next. The Japanese, rather than deal with agenda items in a rigid sequence, may prefer a more flexible approach which enables them to get a better overview. To Westerners, meetings in Japan may appear unstructured, chaotic, and even threatening. However, Japanese managers are well used to such ambiguity.

8 Differences in approach can also be seen in negotiations. Westerners expect to focus on contentious issues and try to achieve the most beneficial outcomes for themselves. In contrast, the Japanese prefer to discuss areas of agreement, with the expectation that harmony will lead to the resolution of details. Such differences can lead to bad feeling in negotiations. Lee quotes a senior South Korean official involved in trade negotiations with Australia. Even though Australia was running a large trade surplus in agricultural products with South Korea, which was of serious concern to the Koreans, 'Australia, nevertheless, continuously puts pressure on Korea to buy more of them ... they are self-centred, one-sided, only concerned with self-interest, not in considering another's situation or position' (Lee 2004, p.76).

9 The upshot is that business has to take cultural differences into account when considering entry to foreign markets through exports, joint ventures, or through takeover or green-field investment. Similarities between the domestic and foreign cultural norms and values may make entry for a firm easier whereas large differences may cause major difficulties due to misunderstandings and conflict where social groups do not want to give up valued elements of their culture (Oudenhoven and van der See 2002).

Adapted from De Chazal, E. & McCarter, S.; Oxford EAP: A course in English for Academic Purposes, OUP, p. 105 [Hamilton, L. & Webster, P. (2009). pp.151-5. *The International Business Environment*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.]

Glossary

attribute something to something (*v*) to say or believe that something is the result of a particular thing

consensus (*n*) an opinion that all the members in a group agree with

sanction (*n*) a course of action that can be used to make people behave in a particular way

uneasy (*adj*) uneasiness (*n*) feeling worried or unhappy about something

Task 7 Think of a relevant title for the text.

LINKING IN-TEXT REFERENCES WITH MAIN IDEAS

Task 8 Write the correct reference from the text (author, date) after each paraphrased statement.

Example: *It was reported that the South Koreans were concerned by Australia's hard-sell techniques. (Lee, 2004, p. 76)*

- 1) Some researchers concluded that companies are likely to find it easier to operate abroad when the culture of the foreign country is more familiar rather than significantly different. _____.
- 2) Westerners may feel that managers from the East lack decisiveness due to their culture of consensus. _____.
- 3) Every large-scale research study found that cultural influences greatly affect the workplace. _____.
- 4) Different cultures often co-exist within a single large country. _____.
- 5) People's cultural values may be affected by the workplace, but to a limited extent. _____.

Task 9 Read paragraph 9 of the text again. Which sentence represents the authors' own evaluation, and which one is reported? How do you know?

Task 10 Write one sentence of your own which paraphrases the author's main conclusion. Then compare with a partner.

ACADEMIC LANGUAGE - Comparison and Contrast Language (1) Grammatical categories

There are many ways of expressing comparison and contrast (similarities and differences). The main grammatical categories are:

a) Coordinators (e.g. *and, but*)

...big countries like China, India, Indonesia, and Brazil do not have a single national culture **but** a variety of cultures.

b) Adjectives (e.g. *smaller than, more/less important than, as effective as, similar (to), different from*)
The Japanese ...may prefer **a more flexible** approach.

a completely different cultural context

c) Nouns and noun phrases (e.g. *similarities, differences*)

Similarities between the domestic and foreign cultural norms and values

d) Adverbials (e.g. *similarly, in contrast, by comparison, on the one hand / on the other, however, nevertheless*)

Similarly, North Americans ... expect a trustworthy person to respond immediate/y...

e) Subordinators (e.g. *while, whereas, although, even though*)

Similarities between the domestic and foreign cultural norms and values may make entry for a firm easier **whereas** large differences may cause major difficulties

f) Verbs (e.g. *vary, differ, contrast*)

Eastern and Western cultures **can vary** significantly.

g) Prepositions (e.g. *rather than, like, unlike, despite, in spite of*)

Different cultures may be based on ethnic group **rather than** region.

COMPARISON AND CONTRAST LANGUAGE

Task 11 Look again at the text and underline examples of the language of comparison and contrast.

For each word/phrase you find, decide whether it expresses comparison (similarity) or contrast (difference).

Task 12 Complete the text using the words / phrases below. Three spaces can be left blank.

also and but may vary significantly differences however larger similarly whereas

Cultural differences exist not only between countries but (1) _____ within them. Typical (2) _____ may include attitudes towards other cultures. In the UK, for instance, in the (3) _____ multicultural cities such as London (1) _____ Birmingham, people wearing (5) _____ clothing from another culture may pass unnoticed, (6) _____ in some smaller towns and villages this might not be the case. Attitudes may also differ with regard to such things as diet and beliefs. For example, most cities and towns offer a wide variety of cuisines in their restaurants. (7) _____, people living in these cities and towns may be accustomed to ethnic and religious diversity. People’s beliefs and behaviours (8) _____. In smaller towns and villages, (9) _____ such diversity is likely to be less common, and the choice of food might be more traditional (10) _____. These examples illustrate certain potential differences within a country, (11) _____ it should be noted that culture is dynamic: (12) _____ what is common in a city today might be familiar in a small village tomorrow.

Task 13 Rewrite the sentences using the word given.

1. Despite having difficulties, he succeeded. (but)
.....
2. In spite of trying hard, I failed. (although)
.....
3. Although they are neighbouring countries, their cultures are very different. (however)
.....
4. In spite of their poverty, the people there are very happy. (despite)
.....
5. Although he knew he was wrong, he refused to admit it. (in spite of)
.....
6. Her first book wasn’t very good. Her second one has already sold 5,000 copies. (whereas)
.....

Task 14 Rewrite the sentences using the word given and keeping the original meaning. You can alter the word in the parentheses.

1. French is a difficult language. I find German equally difficult. (as)
.....
2. The English are said to be prejudiced. I think the Swiss are even more biased. (less)
.....
3. The University had 30,000 employees last year. This year it has just 29,000. (fewer)
.....
4. The president of the country does not seem to enjoy high popularity in his own country. However, he is highly recognized abroad. (much)
.....
5. The Italians are generally perceived as open-minded but I think the Dutch are more. (not)
.....
6. The average working week in France is 35 hours. In the Czech Republic, it is 42 hours. (long)
.....

CRITICAL THINKING – *Discussing Cultures*

Look again at the observations about similarities and differences in the tasks above. In pairs, discuss the extent to which you agree with each idea. Give reasons and examples.

Task 15 *Prepare a short comparison and contrast of two cultures you are familiar with. Follow the stages below.*

- (A) Decide on the two cultures, including how specific they are (e.g. Latin / South American / Spanish).
- (B) Decide on two particular aspects (e.g. behaviour, diet).
- (C) Make notes on the main ideas, including specific examples to illustrate them.

Task 16 *Work in groups and take turns to present your ideas. Discuss the extent to which you agree.*

De Chazal, E. & McCarter, S.; Oxford EAP: A course in English for Academic Purposes, OUP, pp. 103-108.