



(REVIEW ARTICLE)



## Cultural dimensions and teaching English as a second language and the ICT's role

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### Abstract

The purpose of the particular paper is to present a language teaching situation in the Greek educational context and evaluate the appropriacy of the methodology used by the EFL teacher. In the first part, there is a presentation and description of the teaching context, while in the second part there is a literature review upon the broad concept of cultural dimensions. In the third part, there is a cultural dimensions analysis of the particular teaching context, followed by a brief conclusion summarizing the key concepts mentioned earlier.

**Keywords:** ICT; English Language; Teaching; Cultural Dimensions

### 1. Introduction

Generally speaking, there is a wide variety of definitions around the concept of culture which includes various aspects of human existence and life, among which gender (male/ female), socioeconomical background, traditions and stereotypes (Hofstede, 2011). According to Hall (1959) (in Hall, 1990: 186) and Barnlund (1994) (in Samovar & Porter: 1994: 28), culture is a medium of communication and vice versa, as everything in human life (ideas/ values/ concepts) shows/ expresses something, exists for a reason and it is expressed through communication, while Hofstede (2011) defines it as the collective programming of the mind which differentiates the members of a social group from the members of another one. However, a culture can be preserved only through cultural transmission from one generation to the next generation. It is worth- mentioning that educators can play this key role through their teaching and language use, the assignment of cultural tasks, activities and projects and finally, the creation of a learner- friendly and supportive teaching context treating everyone equally and respecting any kind of multicultural differences, relations and diversity (Duff & Uchida, 1997), while the TESOL class seems to hold a fundamental role in the whole process, developing learners' intercultural and multicultural awareness (Tomalin & Stempleski, 1993: 5).

Concerning my past experiences, I had only once lived for 6 weeks in Spain, where I was hired as an ESL teacher in a program addressed to 20 Spanish teenage learners. Despite the fact that I knew it would be an unforgettable experience for me, I felt various times uncomfortable and a little bit embarrassed, because of our cultural differences (Fay, 2008), as our group (me -students - colleagues) was quite heterogeneous belonging to different socio- cultural backgrounds, but there was mutual respect for each other's 'diversity' (Akkerman et al., 2006). That experience offered me the chance to acquire new knowledge around nations, understand our differences, raising my cultural awareness and improving my intercultural communication skills.

Regarding the Greek context, the vast majority of citizens speak Greek in their everyday interactions, while there are some people coming from Albania and Bulgaria who use their native language mostly. As a consequence, the Greek educational system is considered to be quite ethnocentric as Greek is the language used in the everyday interactions among learners and teachers in the school context. In addition to this, all school subjects are exclusively taught in Greek. Concerning the English language in the Greek school, it is taught as a foreign language (TEFL) from the kindergarten till

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the third grade of senior- high school. There are various reasons why it is the main foreign language taught to learners, while many times it is taught/ used as an international language (TEIL) / lingua franca in order to bridge any multicultural and communication gaps or problems among speakers from different countries (Pakistani/ Iraqi learners/ students attending Greek schools but not knowing Greek at all).

Concerning my teaching context, the teaching of English to preschool learners is considered to be a central part of the kindergarten's curriculum and not a different school subject, while it has numerous advantages to offer them (it is easier to learn a foreign language at a young age, easier adaptation to school, following routines more easily and successfully). Young learners are supposed to take part actively in the whole language learning process that takes place twice a week for 45 minutes each time. The majority of my learners (4-5 years old) are Greek ones, but there are few coming from numerous cultural backgrounds (economic immigrants/ intercultural families with both parents coming from different countries). So, my TESOL context is directly linked to intercultural communication (Damen, 1987: 23), as my main focus is to assist my EFL learners as much as possible in order to make them communicate meaningfully and successfully when necessary, respecting and accepting each other's cultural differences. Finally, what actually seems to play a crucial role in learning a foreign language at such a young age is learner's encouragement by their teachers, the motivation they are offered for active in class engagement which can be achieved through engaging, communicative, interactive and interesting material and activities designed or chosen by teachers, respecting every learning style while at the same time, the teacher's goal should be to make learners deeply love the new language and develop their multiple intelligences (musical, spatial, etc.) at the same time. However, the real focus should not be only on the final product (language itself) but rather on the whole language learning process, during which learners will be taught how to respect diversity, experience 'otherness' (Byram, 1989), feel empathy, develop their cultural knowledge/ understanding (ideas around a foreign country presented in a structured way) (Byram, 1989: 120), communicate with others and cooperate with their peers, both the native speakers of the Greek language and the non- native ones.

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## 2. Cultural Dimensions

Culture is affected by various environmental factors, while it is a non- verbal phenomenon acquired through constant observation and imitation (Anderson, 2010), while it is seen as 'prescribed ethnic, national and international entities' according to Holliday (1999: 237). According to Hofstede (2010), all human beings have the capacity to think, feel, act and react in every situation based on their background knowledge and life experiences, a capacity they have acquired during their infancy and cultivated progressively in their life later on. It is though the culture that governs and defines how someone expresses his feelings (happiness, anger, empathy) and behaves towards the rest members of a society.

Regarding cultural dimensions, it is a term that refers to the degree to which beliefs, perceptions, actions and values vary among different cultural groups of people (Smith & Bond, 2020). According to Hofstede (2010), there are 6 cultural dimensions in a society: The Power Distance (PD) Dimension, the Individualism- Collectivism (I/ C) Dimension, the Uncertainty Avoidance (UA) Dimension, the Masculinity- Femininity (M/F) Dimension, the Long-Term Orientation (LTO) and the Indulgence versus Restraint (I/ R) Dimension.

The first cultural dimension, namely the Power Distance Dimension (PD) refers to the least powerful members of the society and to the extent to which they consider and finally, accept that power is distributed to others unfairly and unequally.

The second cultural dimension is called the Individualism- Collectivism (I/ C). The term 'Individualism' refers to a person's ongoing process to achieve his goals in a selfish and individualistic manner without caring for the other members of the society and their attempts to succeed as well, while according to 'Collectivism', people feel and perceive themselves as members of a particular group that shares common goals, struggling together to achieve, feeling loyalty and trust for each other.

The third cultural dimension is the Uncertainty Avoidance (UA). According to it, some members of the society may experience feelings of threat and stress because of unclear circumstances and that is the main reason why they express their need to follow specific rules (Hofstede, 113).

The fourth cultural dimension is called the Masculinity- Femininity (M/ F) Dimension. This dimension refers to the gender roles and stereotypes governing a society, where the female sex is seen as inferior and modest, usually caring about household chores, while the male as powerful, strong and successful in the workplace.

The Long Term versus Short Term Orientation (LTO) Dimension is concerned with the degree to which a culture is focused on future- oriented perspectives instead of near- sighted ones (Karras, 2018: 15-18).

Finally, the Indulgence versus Restraint Dimension refers to the value a culture may have on someone's life. For instance, it may lead them to happiness by fulfilling their wishes or a restricted and pessimist life, feeling forever suppressed and totally controlled.

Additionally, Andersen (1994: 230- 231) through his study focused on 8 non- verbal communication elements that may be different in people across nations: olfactics (how we communicate with others using our smell), vocalics (paralanguage), oculusics (eye contact/ eye messages and various eye movements), physical appearance (its crucial role in interpersonal communication and interactions), haptics (tactile communication / touch), kinesics (facial expressions and body movements), proxemics (space and distance) and chronemics (use of time).

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### 3. Cultural Dimensions Analysis of the context

Cultural dimensions have been studied thoroughly through various researches throughout the years and they appear to have a vital role both in our society (Triandis, 2004) and in the foreign language class as well. Although, most of them focus on the differences and not on the similarities across nations, foreign language teachers are able to apply them into their classes (localized point of reference) in order to obtain a critical point of view upon their teaching and finally, adapt it to the new needs, necessities and the individuals involved in the whole learning process each time (Fay, 2008).

According to Holliday (1999), a class is a 'small emergent culture' situated in a "host educational environment", which could be any school, state or private or even any educational institution. Additionally, every single educational environment can have a great influence on the host institution, the classroom itself, the learners and the teacher as well (Holliday, 1994). So, the cultural context of learners and teachers can play a crucial role in the class decisions and the teaching and learning processes as well.

Regarding the particular teaching context, kindergarten learners come from various ethnic backgrounds (Greek/ Albanian/ Bulgarian/ Iraqi/ Pakistani). The main reason for teaching English to the particular age group (YL) is to cultivate their intercultural and multicultural awareness, respect and acceptance of diversity, build and boost their communicative and interpersonal skills, while at the same time it is important to develop learners both linguistically but mostly holistically. At the same time, all kids are given the chance to feel totally equal as they are all exposed together to a new 'strange' but yet interesting language (English) for the first time, they show high motivation in learning it and they get to the point even to interact using a few words in English with their classmates not sharing the same native language. For the above reasons, it is more than necessary for the foreign language and Greek teachers to cooperate, learn and use what is necessary in order to achieve all the goals set.

Over the last years, the Greek educational context has turned less ethnocentric compared with the past, while teachers and learners accept more easily multiculturalism. Thus, there should be more programs raising awareness over cultural diversity and training (seminars, workshops) for teachers, learners and parents. Concerning my teaching, there are many strategies I employ so as to encourage and boost multiculturalism and respect to cultural diversity. However, there are numerous things that could be done to reinforce it even more, among which group- pair work, ongoing collaboration, experiential learning, interactive, communicative and purposeful activities and roleplaying. All these activities include some of the non- verbal communication elements mentioned earlier (Andersen, 1999a) and they are used quite frequently by Young Learners. According to Andersen (1999a), this non- verbal communication can be expressed in many ways, among which haptics, vocalics, oculusics, kinesics and physical appearance through crafts, games, singing, eye blinks and dance.

Regarding Hofstede's cultural dimensions, most of them are applied in the particular English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context. First of all, according to the Power Distance (PD) Dimension, my learners seem to respect and understand their teacher's role in class, while at the same time they express their love and treat teachers as parental figures, asking constantly for praise, help and reassurance. Additionally, the Individualism- Collectivism (I/ C) Dimension is applied, too. Most of the learners tend to cooperate in their class activities and games with the aim to achieve their goal, while they seem to celebrate really vividly and cheer up every time their team wins a game. Moreover, their teachers offer them various chances for group- pair work in order to communicate, develop their interpersonal skills and raise their cultural awareness. For example, in one of our intercultural play- based and roleplaying activities, learners were supposed to create food items using play dough, order and eat in a restaurant with their peers, tasting 'different' but 'delicious' though dishes from each other's country making a positive comment in the end. In this way, they were given

the chance to learn precious things around eating habits and food items and they welcomed the idea of being different, but seen as important and 'tasty' by everyone. However, there are some kids always wanting to play on their own and win, treating others unfairly and showing disrespect to kids coming from other countries. In such cases, the teacher emphasizes the need to follow the rules, act collaboratively, respect the rest members of a team/ group, respect uniqueness and accept diversity. Concerning the Masculinity- Femininity (M/ F) Dimension, it is true that the TESOL contexts worldwide are mostly female. In the particular teaching context, all teachers are females despite the fact that Greece is mostly a masculine- governed country. Regarding learners (girls and boys), they are all treated equally, while they have exactly the same tasks to perform and freedom in and out of class. Furthermore, the teachers have mentioned numerous times that there are not male/ female toys/ games/ colors but everyone is given the right to choose what he/ she wants based on their own personal preferences and interests. Finally, according to the Uncertainty Avoidance (UA) Dimension, learners find it quite difficult when they are given plenty of freedom and not quite clear, structured and guided instructions to follow on how to perform/ do/ construct something, while at the same time they seem to experience feelings of anger, loads of stress and frustration. For this reason, their teacher should set the objectives and plan their daily routine and activities very carefully, give them clear instructions and emphasize the need to work as a team helping each other.

Finally, during English lessons learners are offered a wide range of chances to develop their personality, their feelings of empathy and compassion and respect towards multiculturalism through various class activities, games, tasks, songs, videos and theatrical performances. On the 17th of November, my learners were shown a film whose focus was on the creation of a real relationship- strong bond in a very difficult period. According to it, during a war two girls, an American and an Iraqi faced a cruel reality, that of their parents fighting against each other's family in order to survive. Despite their need to survive and the cruelty of the war, the two girls managed to remain friends after fighting for it. Afterwards, learners were given some time to express their feelings upon the girls' choices, background and plot, their reactions, they hugged each other, while some of them claimed that people are very lucky to have each other in their life, whether they come from the same or a different country. This film gave everyone the opportunity to share their own life experiences, talk about war, real friendship, equality and values. It also assisted learners in seeing themselves as equally important with the others, neither superior nor inferior.

Thus, according to Holliday (1994a), the English language teaching and learning should adapt to the sociocultural background of learners, teaching fairness, equality and cultural acceptance. This can be achieved if teachers develop appropriate culture- sensitive methodology. To do so, teachers should be fully aware of their learners' relations within the class setting and then, as a second step find ways to plan and finally, teach them effectively. In other words, the teacher should know everything about the social dimensions of his/ her learners, conduct endless ethnographic research and finally, put into practice all the above by keeping in mind to adapt accordingly whatever necessary each time based on the new conditions. Finally, concerning the multiculturally- sensitive teacher, he/ she should be able to teach and to be taught, plan, design, set goals, create chances, observe, present, collaborate, boost active in- class engagement and participation, implement and develop learners' intercultural awareness and respect (British Council, 1998: 132-133). The last seems to be quite demanding as according to Trompenaars (1993: 81), people are always suspicious with something or someone unknown, different or 'strange', while they usually have the tendency to learn something better first, understand it and then, approach it, after becoming really used to it. In other words, even the Young Learners (YL) of a particular teaching context may experience feelings of mistrust towards their peers coming from different cultural backgrounds (mostly because of their physical appearance differences) or they may not be willing to cooperate and interact with them in any possible activity or even create any kind of bonds, such as a friendship. For the above reason, it is essential to teach them at a very young age the necessity to accept everyone without criticizing, misjudging or marginalizing a person because of his/ her cultural background, because the similarities and the common grounds are actually more than the differences.

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#### 4. Conclusions

Finally, it's critical to emphasize the useful and vital function that digital technologies play in the field of education. These technologies, including mobile devices (23-27), a range of ICT applications (28-40), AI & STEM ROBOTICS (41-55), and games (56-58), facilitate and improve educational processes including evaluation, intervention, and learning. Additionally, the use of ICTs in conjunction with theories and models of metacognition, mindfulness, meditation, and the development of emotional intelligence [59-93], as well as with environmental factors and nutrition [19-22], accelerates and improves educational practices and outcomes, particularly for language learning students.

More particularly, in this article, a language teaching situation was presented within the Greek context, while the appropriacy of the methodology used was evaluated. There was also a literature review around cultural dimensions

followed by a cultural dimensions analysis for the particular TESOL context. What was mentioned is the need to study, acquire new knowledge, set goals and put the theoretical knowledge into practice in order to establish intercultural communication, boost interpersonal skills and finally construct a supportive multicultural teaching and learning context free from racism, prejudice and social hypocrisy. In this attempt, the cultural dimensional framework can play a leading role as according to Hofstede (2011), it can lead to a deeper and better comprehension of the society and its rules.

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## Compliance with ethical standards

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The Authors proclaim no conflict of interest.

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