


Cultural Studies



## UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL VALUES AND NORMS



Georgeta GHIGA



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### Introduction

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It is obvious that the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century is strongly related to globalisation and multiculturalism. Globalisation, whose integrative character covers not only economies but also cultures, is recognized as one of the major dynamics of change nowadays. Multiculturalism, as an alternative worldview, is assuming greater significance, largely because the effects of culture are pervasive in all markets. Therefore, both globalisation and multiculturalism bring new and consistent challenges to all marketers imposing the necessity of explaining cultural differences and of finding suitable solutions for dealing with cultural variability.

Cultural differences are not necessarily visible. They can be quite subtle and the elements we usually notice (such as lifestyle, clothing, body language, eating habits) are, in fact, manifestations of the invisible aspects comprising values and norms (family values, gender roles, friendship patterns, work relationships etc.) and

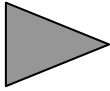
basic cultural assumptions (e.g. religion, ethnic culture, national identity) shared by a group of people. Consequently, doing business across countries and cultures requires understanding of cultural underpinnings.

Finding one's way in "the global village" may not be easy at all, despite the facilities it offers (fast exchange of information, highly organized institutions, global formal and informal systems for knowledge transfer etc.). The citizens of "the global village" are expected to be able to act adequately wherever their individual life and profession may take them.

Considered from this perspective, education, economic education included, has to adapt its objectives to the new requirements of society. In this context, teaching business English in a cross-cultural perspective becomes a necessity. Irrespective of their specialism, students of economics need substantial cross-cultural training. In today's world, a business career requires equally strong professional skills and abilities to communicate successfully across cultures. Working internationally has already become a common aspect of the business activity. Therefore, university training should emphasize the importance of cultural issues in the business practice and should help students develop adequate business behaviour so that they can communicate and act successfully in cultural environments different from their own.

Teaching cross-cultural issues is, in many cases, a serious source of stress for teachers. It involves substantial reading, judicious selection of materials, working on various examples and case studies found in the literature so as to make them relevant to the students, anticipating reactions and preparing suitable arguments to get out of critical situations. Moreover, our classes bring together students belonging to different cultures (not only different families and gender groups, but also different ethnic groups and countries). This may be an advantage in discussing, analysing and clarifying certain cultural points, but it may often create delicate situations in which teachers are confronted with unexpected problems of multiculturalism that have to be solved promptly and intelligently. Therefore, questions like "Where should I start?" "How should I make it easier for my students and for myself?" "Are my students prepared to understand other cultures?" "Do my students understand what culture is about?" are legitimate and can shed light on some obscure areas of teaching/learning.

In what follows, I am trying to give an argument in support of the idea that the answer to the third question above (a central one, in our case) depends on the answer to the last question in the above set. Thus, we can uphold that students will be better prepared to identify and adapt (in real life situations) to the system of values and norms of another culture, if they understand what the essence of culture is. Any attempt in this direction requires some theoretical background referring to cultural diversity, the structure of a culture, definitions of values, norms, rules and regulations, stereotypes. It also means raising the students' awareness of some of the basic values and norms that underlie different cultures.



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### Cultural diversity

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Culture is broad and complex and this may justify the abundance of definitions it has been given. Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) have shown that there are more than 300 definitions of culture. The multitude of attempts at defining culture is, no doubt, a consequence of the perspectives in which culture has been analysed. However, the common idea that culture is "the sum total of learned beliefs, values and customs that are shared by a society" (Hollensen, 1998, apud Darley and Luethge, 2003: 142) shows easily through.

Darley and Luethge's article *Cross-cultural communication and promotion*" (2003), though not written for didactic purposes, analyses cultural influences and differences on the basis of three basic contributions to the field:

- a) Hall (1960) - the concept of high/low context;
- b) Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961), who establish a set of value orientations common to all human groups;
- c) Hofstede (1983, 1984, 1994) whose studies focus on value dimensions.

Thus, E.T. Hall (1960) introduces the idea of context showing that it influences not only the way in which an individual sees the world, but also how the members of that culture communicate. In his view, *low context cultures* are characterised by explicit messages where words carry most of the information, while in *high context cultures*, the verbal part of a message carries less information and the meaning of the message cannot be understood without its context, which is essential in having a complete message. Consequently, non-verbal communication plays an important part in high context cultures.

Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) have shown that there is a set of values, common to all human groups that may explain cultural differences and similarities. These values illustrate the orientation of a certain society as regards *human nature, the relation between man and nature, time, activity and relationships*.

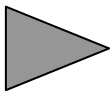
- ❑ Thus, *human nature orientation* focuses on the innate goodness or badness of human nature. Human beings are conceived as innately good, innately bad, or as possessing a combination of the two.
- ❑ *Man and nature orientation* refers to the relation between man and nature or supernature. There are three potential options: nature can be mastered; people can be subjugated to nature, or in harmony with nature.
- ❑ Cultures have different *time orientations*. They may be directed towards *the* past, present or future and this has a great impact on the organisation of individual life.
- ❑ *Activity orientation* is relevant for man's mode of self-expression showing whether people value an individual's accomplishments or his/her innate traits.
- ❑ *Relational orientation* illustrates how an individual relates to other people. It indicates the extent to which individualism is more highly valued than commitments and obligations to the wider group such as family, neighbourhood or society (Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, 1961: 10-20).

Hofstede's theory is perhaps the most popular of all these. Though it was originally developed to explain differences in work-related values (especially consumption-related values), Hofstede's pattern has spread rapidly being frequently used in various types of cultural analyses. The pattern is based on five dimensions, which should be taken into account when examining culture:

- ❑ *Individualism and Collectivism*. This is, no doubt, the best-known of the five dimensions selected by Hofstede to show the way in which cultures solve the competition between the individual's goals, needs and views and the group's interests.
- ❑ *Power Distance* refers to the acceptance of inequality in power and authority between individuals in a society.
- ❑ *Uncertainty avoidance* is relevant for the degree to which individuals in a culture feel threatened by ambiguous, uncertain or new situations.

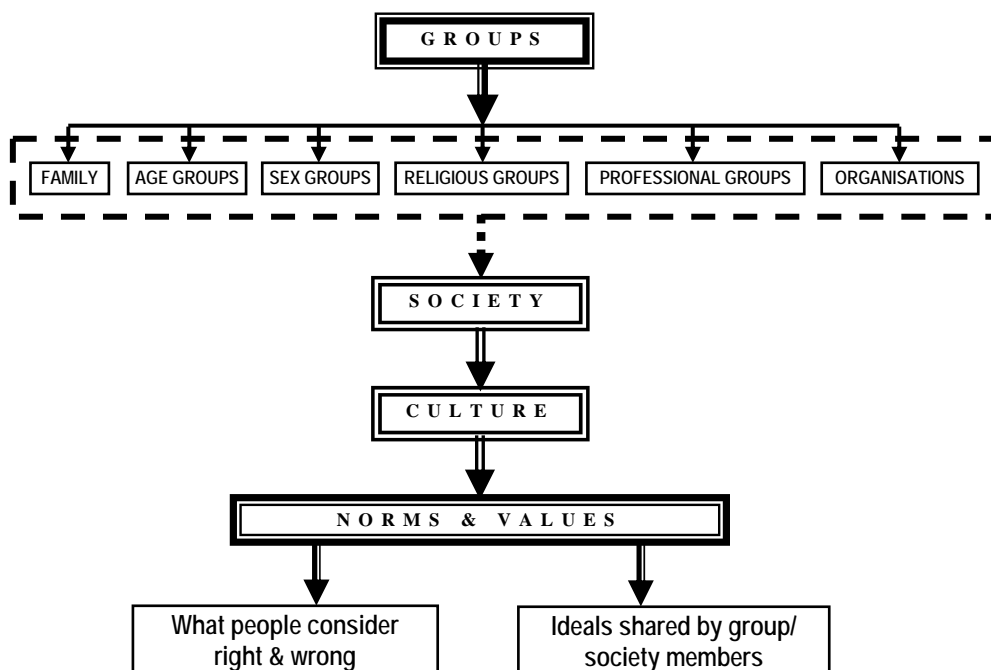
- *Masculinity and femininity* illustrate the degree to which cultures prioritise performance, achievement and winning (masculine), versus consensus, sympathy and quality of life (feminine).
- The fifth dimension, *long-term orientation*, focuses on pursuit of peace of mind versus pursuit of happiness.

Drawing up a theoretical framework of the topic will help students understand reality better and will encourage them to step further into a deeper analysis of culture.



## Norms and Values

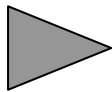
As the figure below shows, individuals, as members of a certain society, may belong to various age, gender, religious, professional, ethnic groups. Within each group they learn how to behave so that they should be recognized or accepted as members of that particular group. Either consciously or unconsciously, they come to observe a certain set of principles, goals, requirements, standards that they share with the other members of the group. In other words, they deal with norms and values.



It is not easy for students to distinguish between norms and values. In general, they "feel" the action, the power or the force of cultural norms and values. They can also recognize the effect of norms on individual behaviour (their own or their colleagues' behaviour). In some situations, classroom discussions may lead to what we can find in the relevant literature: norms give individuals the feeling of "This is how I normally **should** behave", while values are reflected by statements like "This is how I **aspire** or **desire** to behave" (Trompenaars, 1993: 22-23).

Because norms are "culturally ingrained principles of correct and incorrect behaviour" (Chaney and Martin, 2000:10), they can operate as written laws at formal level and as a means of social control at informal level. Since values are perceived as ideals shared by the members of a society, being related to the definition of "good" and "bad", Trompenaars (1993: 23) considers that norms and values may indicate the relative stability of a culture: "A culture is relatively stable when norms reflect the values of the group."

Being, in general, described as "social principles, goals, or standards accepted by the members of a culture" (Chaney and Martin, 2000:43), values are learned and transmitted from one generation to another. It is true that an individual's system of values will be influenced by what that person reads, hears on the radio, or sees on television but this involves judgement and choice and, when the culture is stable, the process is rather slow.



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### The structure of culture

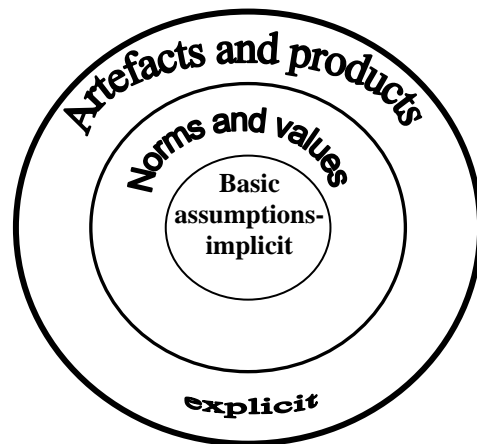
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Understanding someone else's culture depends on our correct perception of their cultural values and norms, which are not the first things people are inclined to take into account when they come into contact with another culture, or when they meet people from other cultural environments.

Our first impressions about another culture are regularly based on observable reality (language, buildings, houses, clothing, monuments, behaviours, etc.). According to Trompenaar's model of culture, they are "explicit products". They belong to the outer layer, or to "explicit culture" being symbols of a deeper layer of culture. As the Dutch researcher states, "prejudices mostly start on this symbolic

and observable layer". The deeper layer reveals the values and the norms of the culture, while the core of culture comprises the basic assumptions about existence.



**A model of culture**  
(Source: Trompenaars,  
1993: 23)

Trompenaar's model, describing culture as an onion, has become very popular, although the iceberg model, often referred to in the literature, is also suggestive. On our first contact with another culture, we respond only to the surface values, placed on top of the iceberg. Values and norms (upon which behaviours are based) are below the "waterline". In order to understand a culture, we must explore the area below the "waterline", or the middle layer, according to Trompenaars' model. Even if cultural norms and values are generally accepted, there will always be individuals and groups in a society who will not share all these values and norms. Things are much more difficult for outsiders. They need time to identify and learn the values and norms of a certain culture and act according to them. "Explicit culture" reflects the norms and values of a society.

However, norms do not cover all aspects of human behaviour. Culturally, it is not always clear how far a norm operates. Distinguishing between the boundaries of norms is sometimes very difficult. When human behaviour is involved, there are areas of indecisiveness, uncertainty, and ambiguity. Therefore, families, organisations, institutions and corporations have their own rules while sharing the general norms of the culture they live and work in. But, in doing that, they have to strike a **balance** between the *existing cultural norms* and the *required coercive level of the rules* inside the company. Multinationals may be faced with additional difficulties, as they have to deal with more than one culture. Success will always depend on the understanding of the implicit layer of culture. In fact, to explain

cultural differences and understand the variety of values and norms means, as Trompenaars (1993) shows, to go back to the core of human existence: *survival*. Hence, each society/civilisation will try to find suitable ways to deal most effectively with its environment.

Business people feel the influence of culture both within their native environment and in multicultural environments, especially when they work globally. But this is often presented to them in terms of broad descriptions of explicit behavioural differences: how people usually do things (customs, traditions, habits, etc.), or how people are usually organized in social institutions (family, education, government, justice, religion). Differences are often signalled by means of descriptive anecdotes that do not allow a deep understanding of cultures, and do not explain why people behave this way or that way. Therefore, when training business students/people, we have to focus on the more implicit level of cultural norms, values and social representations that have relevance to business activities.

Examining cultural values and norms may help students understand not only cultural diversity but also what different cultures have in common. In other words, this may help them understand unity within cultural diversity. Cultures may share the existence of a certain value, but still differ in the underlying meaning ascribed to that value.

In the field of cross-cultural research, the value orientation model developed by Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961) is particularly powerful in addressing the issue of cultural unity within diversity. They discuss the following set of assumptions:

- a. There are a limited number of common human problems for which all peoples/cultures, at all times, must find solutions (cultural universals).
- b. In solving problems, societies reveal variability (e.g. different possible foods to satisfy the need for eating).
- c. All alternatives to a solution are present in all societies at all times, but societies have different preferences in solving similar problems (e.g. the diversity of methods for curing a disease that range from surgery to prayer).



Consequently, cultures do not vary in essence (people have to solve similar problems) but in their preferences for certain solutions. Some important aspects derive from this:

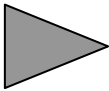
- the approach based on universal value refers to broad norms that guide most people most of the time;
- in societies that are undergoing change, the order of preferences may change depending on the situation (e.g. young people in Japan have become more self-centred in their consumption patterns, but are still traditional when it comes to relationships with their families);
- 'value paradoxes' (De Mooij, 1998): cultures may simultaneously ascribe importance to opposing values (such as the American valuing of both *freedom* and *belonging*, or the Japanese valuing of *tradition* and *innovation*). Value paradoxes exist in all cultures and reflect the contradiction between what is generally perceived as desirable and what individuals may actually desire.

Putting together the results of various cultural studies, a pattern of eight core value orientations may be established. This includes: *nature*, *relationship to others*, *power*, *rules*, *activity*, *affectivity*, *space* and *time*. To ensure better understanding of cultural variability, this set of values may be discussed in close connection with *possible cultural preferences* of various societies, as shown in the table below:

<i>Value orientation</i>	<i>Cultural preferences</i>		
<i>Nature</i>	Domination	Harmony	Subjugation
<i>Relationship to others</i>	Individualism		Collectivism
<i>Power</i>	Equality		Hierarchy
<i>Rules</i>	Universalism		Particularism
<i>Activity</i>	Doing		Being
<i>Affectivity</i>	Affective		Neutral
<i>Space</i>	Private		Public
<i>Time</i>	"time-is-money" cultures		plentiful, indefinitely available
	Monochronism	Polychronism	
	Past	Present	Future

(Based on Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, 1961; Hofstede, 1980, Hall, 1976; Trompenaars, 1993; Prime, 1994; Usunier, 2000)

Since cultural diversity is a characteristic of the international business environment, any new cultural research and capitalization on its results in terms of training will mean more efficient business people, aware of the cultural characteristics that affect the way business is done.



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## Conclusion

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In a world of increasing cross-border and multinational links and relationships, of great global ambitions and transnational operations, it is essential for those intent on becoming successful business people to develop an ability to respond flexibly at local, national, regional and international levels. Business students need to understand cultural diversity, as well as what different cultures have in common, so as to be able to overcome the barriers of nationality and build an international network of contacts.

In this article I have outlined the importance of approaching cultural value orientations for teaching Business English and for helping students gain an understanding of different cultural values and norms. Starting from the value orientation model proposed by Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (1961), I have described the pattern based on the universal core dimensions and its relation to cultural preferences, designed to develop the students' empathy, responsiveness and sensitivity to people from other backgrounds and cultures and ultimately enhance their performance in a cross-cultural and multi-cultural environment.

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#### **The author**

**Georgeta Ghiga**, Professor in English, Romanian and Business Communication, is Head of the Department of Germanic Languages and Business Communication of the Academy of Economic Studies, Bucharest. She has published studies and monographs in applied linguistics, sociolinguistics, business communication, cultural studies and language teaching methodology and holds a PhD with the Institute of Linguistics of the Romanian Academy. Her doctoral research has led to the publication of *The Phatic Function of Communication in Spoken Romanian* (1999). She is author and co-author of several textbooks for students of Economics, including *Aspects of Business Communication*; *Business and Cross-cultural Issues*; *Essentials of Financial English*; *Public Administration Matters*, and has contributed articles to well-known journals and reviews in the field.