

The aim of this article is to give insight into the important cultural considerations you need to think about when teaching students from other countries. The article begins by briefly discussing some general cultural factors that impact on teaching and then takes a closer look at teaching in both culturally diverse and mono-cultural classes.



Why consider cultural awareness in your classes?

As a second language teacher, you should give some thought to cultural awareness to ensure that you are delivering language instruction without bias, discrimination, or prejudice. Being culturally aware helps you to meet the needs of your students and create an environment where students feel comfortable and ready to learn.

So, how do you go about being culturally aware?

Cultural awareness begins with developing sensitivity and understanding of your students' beliefs, attitudes, behaviours, and values. Be proactive when it comes to learning about the different cultural backgrounds of your students. Learn about the cultural characteristics, history, and customs of your students' native countries. Also, talk to your colleagues as they may have invaluable information that helps you get a better understanding of cultural issues that may arise in the classroom.

Cultural taboos

Find out which topics and actions are taboo. Each culture is different, and there will be certain topics that are off limits such as politics, religion, money, or on-going conflicts. Also, be aware of your own actions. Actions that may be acceptable in your culture might be taboo in another. You do not want to embarrass or upset students through ignorant actions such as pointing, touching, or holding eye contact. If you are teaching in your home country, inform your students about your own culture and share information about which topics and actions are appropriate and which are not. This will not only help your students in the classroom, but also as they interact outside in a new culture.

Diversity and teacher assumptions

The diverse range of backgrounds and experiences students bring to the classroom offer many rewards and challenges. In many countries, students are brought up to be more passive and reserved when interacting with adults. Students in some cultures may often come across as less driven, less knowledgeable in certain topics, or less ambitious than the students you are used to. However, this is very rarely the case. Take the time to get to know your students and their abilities, and do not rely on your own cultural assumptions.

Learning styles

It is important to remember that someone's cultural background often affects the way they interact in the classroom, and how they learn English. Being sensitive to cultural ways of learning is a key step towards developing an understanding of your students' culture. Research online to familiarize yourself with how your students learn in their native country. Common learning methods that are used in classrooms across many cultures are games, storytelling, puzzle-solving, repetition, and visuals.

Cultural references

When teaching, you need to understand that students engage more in learning when the language is presented within the students' cultural frames of reference. If you continually reference a culture or nationality that is different from your students' in your material or teaching, your students may feel that their cultural background is being sidelined. Consequently, they may feel disengaged from learning. Therefore, it is important to adapt your teaching resources or techniques to prevent this. When possible, your lessons should incorporate content that reflects the different cultures of your students to help them learn more effectively and connect with the teaching content.

What are some activities for culturally diverse classrooms?

With multicultural classes, you can encourage cultural awareness by having the students explore and share one another's culture. For example, ask students to give presentations on their home countries or include cultural celebrations, such as Chinese New Year, Songkran, etc. Students can also share their culture by decorating the classroom with maps, flags, descriptions and pictures of traditional festivals, food, music, or sports. Group activities, such as discussing current events or comparing holidays across cultures also help promote cultural awareness.



In which ways can classrooms be culturally diverse?

Many teachers often find themselves teaching in culturally diverse situations. Many of us assume cultural diversity is generally limited to ethnicity and religion, but in fact, culture encompasses a broad range of categories. To promote cultural awareness, teachers need to account for all the different aspects of culture that can influence a student's perceptions, attitudes, and behaviours. These cultural categories include:

Race

Students who differ in skin colour and other physical attributes typical of the majority culture may be dealing with negative feelings connected to their own self-perceptions, or how their classmates may perceive them. It's important for teachers to be aware of this and factor it into their observations.

Religious persuasion

Many students may come from families where there is a tradition of religious adherence. Thus, it is useful for teachers to familiarize themselves with the ways religious traditions and requirements can impact their students' actions inside and outside the classroom.

Ethnic background

Ethnicity is not defined by physical appearance as much as it is by such things as culture, ancestry, language, or religion. Ethnic groups can differ in such things as values, rituals, and communication styles. Understanding these differences can help teachers become familiar with their students' interests and how they see the world.

Sexual orientation and gender identity

A student's sexual orientation and/or gender identity can often subject them to unwelcome attention outside of the class. This is often in the form of bullying or discrimination. This is something that they should not have to deal with in class. Therefore, if teachers find they have members of this community among their students, they should seek information and advice on how best to accommodate their learning needs.

Socio-economic status

A student's learning achievement can be influenced by their economic background. Teachers should be aware of how a student's financial circumstances can lead to classroom pressure and diminish their ability to find adequate time or a suitable place to study, not to mention accessing important learning resources.

How can you create a more inclusive classroom environment?

Lead by example

Teachers should play a leading role in fostering a culturally inclusive classroom by demonstrating their own desire to be culturally aware. This can be achieved by inviting students to share their stories and relate their cultural experiences in the classroom.

Be conscious of the impact of cultural differences

Not all students are openly expressive of their cultural differences, so teachers should respect certain boundaries while being accommodative. Sometimes, cultural differences might be influencing a student's learning progress, so try to be sensitive to this and avoid superficial assumptions. If you suspect issues related to their cultural background are impacting the student, be supportive and consider adjusting your approach.

Cultural differences do not equate to different expectations

Although students may have different needs, they must all have the same expectations. Maintain the same high expectations for all students. Maintaining different expectations for different students can incorrectly send the message that cultural differences determine educational outcomes.

Incorporate cultural diversity into your teaching

In the past, our respective educational systems were ethnocentric and made few concessions to cultural diversity. Try to cater to diversity in your lessons and teaching materials. In this way, you are telling your students that their culture is respected, and their needs are important.

Teaching mono-cultural classes that differ greatly from your own.

In many instances, teachers may find themselves teaching in a foreign country where all the students share the same national culture. This culture may be very different from the teacher's own and can present a unique set of issues.

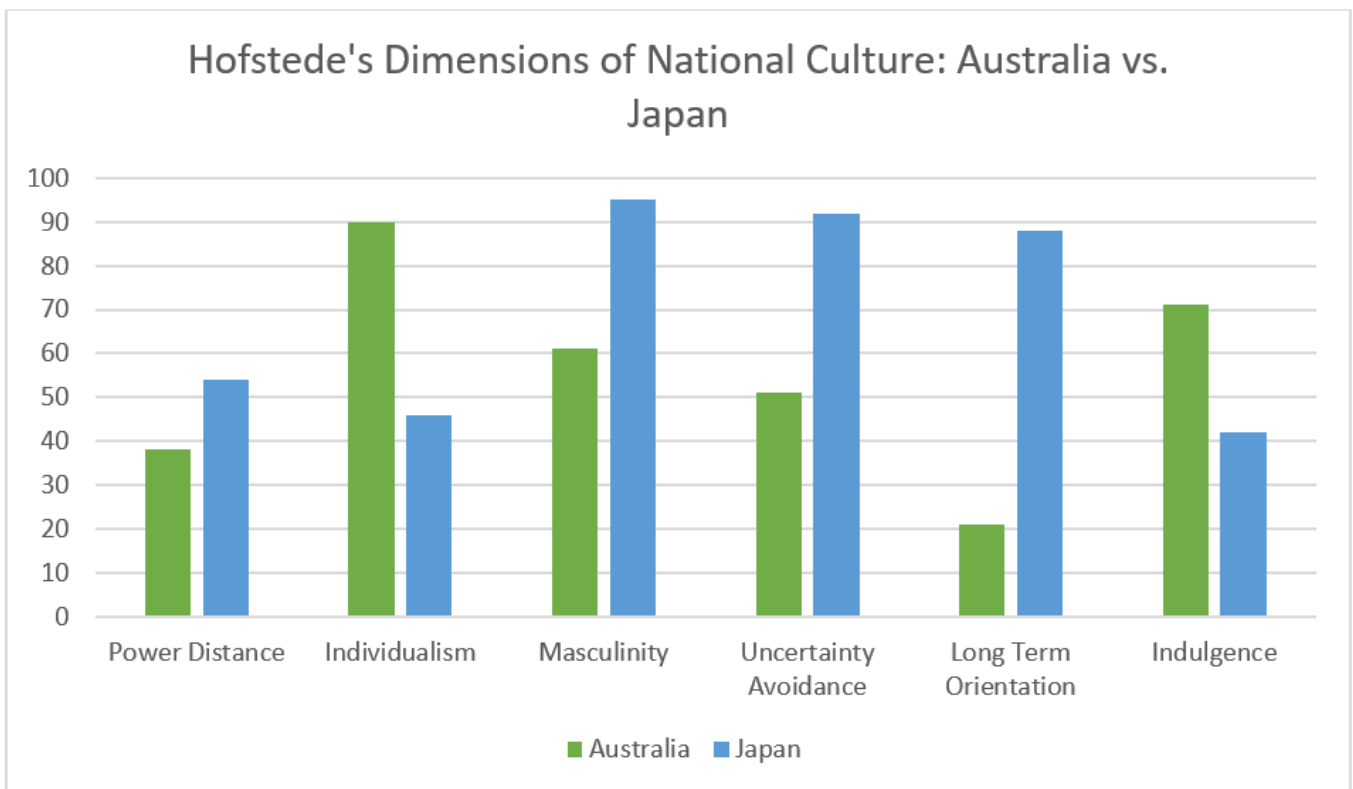
What issues could these differences manifest?

How can teachers navigate their way through these issues?

One way to deal with these questions is to familiarise oneself with a framework of culture such as Geert Hofstede's Dimensions of National Culture.

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory is a framework for understanding cultural differences, and to determine the ways these differences affect behaviour. This framework can be applied to any inter-cultural situation such as a language class.

Hofstede's framework identifies six categories that define culture, which can be seen in the chart below that compares two divergent cultures, Australia, and Japan.



Power distance - In high power distance cultures, social structures are more hierarchical and there is more respect for authority. In low power distance countries, people question authority and attempt to distribute power more equally.

Power distance can affect classroom communication. For instance, because Australia is a low power distance society, the communication style can be described as informal, direct, and participative. Conversely, Japanese communication is more indirect and less chatty than the style more common in Australia.

What are the possible classroom implications of power distance?

In this example, an Australian teaching English in Japan, the teacher should accept the different communication style of their students and employ strategies to accommodate it. This might mean creating an environment where students feel more comfortable communicating amongst themselves in smaller groups and to the class. Therefore, regularly incorporating group work activities and regularly switching students between groups should encourage more participative communication with students.

Individualism - Individualistic societies have looser interpersonal links outside of the immediate family or inner circle of friends. In contrast, collectivist societies have more tightly connected relationship links with extended families and other in-groups such as those at school or work. Australia scores very highly on this dimension, so Australians tend to be self-reliant and act independently. In contrast, the Japanese are more inclined to put the harmony of the group above the expression of individual opinions and people have a strong sense of shame for losing face.

What are the possible classroom implications of individualism?

As the risk of losing face may be a source of anxiety for students, try to avoid situations in which students may perceive such a risk. This could be as simple as avoiding singling out students to express their personal opinions to the whole class. Instead, have students discuss the issue in groups, and then ask one student to report back their group's findings to the class. In this way, a 'wrong' answer is not attributed to a particular student.

Masculinity - High masculinity countries value achievement, and material success. However, low masculinity countries tend to value cooperation, modesty, and quality of life over success and achievement.

Australia is moderately masculine, so people strive to be and do their best and individual success is celebrated. While Japan ranks higher in this dimension, competition to succeed is more between groups than individuals.

What are the possible classroom implications of masculinity?

This seems to suggest that the teacher should give priority to activities and tasks that are group focused. Where students may be required to work individually, it could be for the purpose of making a group or class-wide contribution. Also, it is likely students would respond positively to activities that require them to compete or work in teams.

Uncertainty avoidance - In high uncertainty avoidance cultures, people seek predictability and try to avoid unstructured situations. This often manifests in strict laws and rules. In low uncertainty avoidance countries, people tend to have a more relaxed, open, or inclusive attitude. In general, social conventions are not as strict.

Australia is a moderate uncertainty avoidance society, so people tend to cope with ambiguous or unknown situations. However, Japan shows high uncertainty avoidance, which can mean there is a tendency to not go against social norms and conventions.

What are the possible classroom implications of uncertainty avoidance?

This indicates that Japanese students prefer a more structured environment. This can mean communicating expectations, the course content, and assessment details from the outset. It would also help to ensure students always have easy access to this information. Furthermore, lesson aims should be made clear at the start of each class, and instructions and student roles for activities explained clearly.

Long-term orientation - Countries with a long-term orientation tend to be pragmatic, modest, and thrifter. In short-term oriented countries, people tend to place more focus on principles, consistency, and truth.

Australia scores low on this dimension and so there tends to be more focus on short-term planning and results, and people are more tolerant of boastfulness. In Japan, there is more emphasis on long-term planning, and an immediate result is not as important as the long-term goal. There is an expectation of more modest behaviour.

What are the possible classroom implications of long-term orientation?

The findings here could suggest that as a way of motivating students, it may be helpful to make it clear how a certain lesson or activity fits in with a long-term goal. For example, most students do not enjoy giving class presentations. However, by reminding them that this is an important skill for university and future professional life, it may motivate them to prepare and perform better.

Indulgence - In high indulgence cultures, making time for leisure and enjoying life are valued and looser standards of behaviour exist. In low indulgence societies, more value is placed in the suppression of gratification and the regulation of people's conduct and behaviour. There is also a stricter expectation to adhere to social norms.

With Australia being high in indulgence, there is a tendency for people to act on impulses and desires, and place importance on leisure and fun. Japan, on the other hand, is a more restrained, society, putting less emphasis on leisure time. Actions are restrained by social norms and there is a common feeling that indulging oneself is somewhat wrong.

What are the possible classroom implications of indulgence?

Games and fun activities are a mainstay of the second language learning classroom, and they are, without question, effective ways to teach the language. However, it may be the case, that a Japanese student may question the validity of such activities. They may view games as being frivolous.

Another implication of indulgence is the way the teacher communicates in the class. Showing and expressing excessive emotions and talking openly and freely about oneself may be perceived by some as foolish and unprofessional.

Hopefully, this article has given you some new and useful insights into the important role culture plays in the classroom, and you feel better positioned to explore the topic more with the aim of making classes more culturally inclusive, making classes where intercultural misunderstandings are less frequent, and making the classroom a more comfortable and fulfilling experience for both the students and the teacher.

