

**RAISING INTERCULTURAL AWARENESS AND BUILDING
INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE IN
PROFESSIONAL LANGUAGE CLASSES / SENSIBILISATION
INTERCULTURELLE ET RENFORCEMENT DES
COMPETENCES EN COMMUNICATION INTERCULTURELLE
DANS LES COURS DE LANGUES PROFESSIONNELS¹**

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Abstract: *The present article aims to point out the necessity to raise intercultural awareness and to build intercultural communication competence in Professional Foreign Language Classes. After defining the main concepts involved and having as a starting point G. Hofstede's cultural dimension's theory, the article brings forward several proposals of activities and makes reference to certain available and useful resources and methods that could serve the announced objective.*

Key words: *Intercultural Awareness, Intercultural Communication Competence, Professional Foreign Language, G. Hofstede*

Introduction

Professionally oriented foreign language is commonly defined as that branch of language teaching and learning which aims to address the functioning of a foreign language in different professional spheres and to prepare students to proficiently use a foreign language as a working language.

Professional language courses are commonly dedicated to undergraduate students or to professionals in various domains of activity. It is a complex field of study which involves building competences in listening/speaking, reading and writing by addressing such skills as: communicate effectively in face-to-face professional contexts, exchange information, participate in and chair meetings, negotiate, persuade, bargain, make compromise, make presentations, use business words and structures, write and reply emails, communicate in videoconferences, etc.

On the other hand, if scholars unanimously define professional language as “[...] a type of a social dialect or sociolect [...] a historical and national category resulted from the interaction of various factors and cultures” (E. Malyuga, 2012: 1) and given that in the general context, professionals interact more and more frequently with individuals belonging to different cultures, it is obvious that raising intercultural awareness and developing intercultural and cross-cultural competences within professional language courses take pride of place.

The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* states that “in an intercultural approach, it is a central objective of language education to promote the favourable development of the learner’s whole personality and sense of identity in response to the enriching experience of otherness in language and culture” and that “Knowledge, awareness, and understanding of the relation (similarities and distinctive differences) between the world of origin and the world of target community produce intercultural awareness [...] The linguistic and cultural competences in respect of each language are modified by knowledge of the other and contribute to intercultural awareness, skills and know-how” (cf. CEFRL: 1, 103).

Raising intercultural awareness presupposes therefore both the process of asking questions and that of knowledge building, regarding such aspects as values, beliefs, mentalities, lifestyles, characteristics of social groups, taboos, prejudices, stereotypes,

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history and social history, social and communicative behaviour, ritualistic behaviour, personal, social and cultural identity etc.

The main purpose and the expected result of raising intercultural awareness is to develop *intercultural competence* and *intercultural communication competence*. Byram (1997: 34) defines intercultural competence as the “knowledge of others; knowledge of self; skills to interpret and relate; skills to discover and/or to interact; valuing others’ values, beliefs, and behaviours; and relativizing one’s self. Linguistic competence plays a key role”, *intercultural communication competence* being therefore acknowledged as a key component of foreign language learning. On the other hand, *intercultural communication competence* is commonly defined as “the ability to effectively and appropriately execute communication behaviours that negotiate each other’s cultural identity or identities in a culturally diverse environment” (Chen, Starosta, 1999: 28).

Intercultural Communication Competence in Professional Foreign Language Classes:

How could the above-mentioned complex and challenging aspects become part of professionally oriented foreign language courses?

The first step is to encourage students to improve their general awareness and general knowledge with emphasis on: knowledge (*savoir*), know-how (*savoir-fair*) and being (*savoir-être*) (cf. Čaňková *et alii*, 2007: 27).

The second step would be to urge and stimulate students to address cultural universals which, even though are predominant and more significant, do not exclude cultural variables (cf. Ionescu 2019). For example, in G. Murdock’s (1945) list of cultural universals we encounter etiquette and politeness as common denominators of all cultures. However, the expression of etiquette and politeness vary by culture. Therefore, there is an increasing necessity for companies and organisations throughout the world to educate their employees in the rules of personal and business etiquette. Of course, this is only one aspect of the targeted intercultural communication competence.

One way to raise awareness and introduce new intercultural communicative roles and contexts in professionally oriented foreign language classes is to seek contact with individuals belonging to different cultures, to organise visits, meetings and to host events, whenever and as often as possible.

The extensive and frequent use of didactic materials (books, handbooks, movies, media resources, interviews etc.) bring up culturally bound issues and help students explore and understand how cultural experiences are reflected in different linguistic expressions and different communicative behaviours.

The use of various questionnaires has the advantage of both raising intercultural awareness and measuring or (self) assessing, at a certain extent, the intercultural communicative skills. The questionnaires could be adapted to the level and the specific characteristics of each group of students or various online resources could be used. The main purposes of such questionnaires are, for example, “to identify attitudes and perspectives regarding cultural diversity”; “to help become aware of and understand prejudices and biases”; “to help understand the potential consequences of a certain approach to diversity at the workplace”. (https://edge.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/9.3_cultural_diversity_awareness_questionnaire.pdf).

For an extensive list of online assessment tools of intercultural competence see the list of Alvin Fantini and Bratteboro (2006) at https://cwil.saintmarys.edu/files/cwil/old-content/php/intercultural.learning/documents/feil_appendix_f.pdf.

Geert Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions Model:

The most renowned metric of culture is Geert Hofstede’s (1980, 1984, 1991, 2001, 2010) five-dimensional model of cultural variables:

1. *High Power Distance* vs. *Low Power Distance* – a parameter which measures “the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally”;
2. *Uncertainty avoidance* – “the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations”;
3. *Individualism* vs. *Collectivism* – individualism “pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family”, while collectivism is specific to societies which place a greater importance “on the goals and well-being of the group”;
4. *Masculinity* vs. *Femininity* – Masculinity refers to “the dominant male sex role pattern in the vast majority of both traditional and modern societies.”; Femininity reflects the preference of a more consensus-oriented society for cooperation, modesty, caring for the disadvantaged or deprived;
5. *Long-term orientation* vs. *Short-term orientation* refers to the oppositions: focus on the distant future vs. focus on the near future; delay short term success vs. emphasis on rapid success.

Having as a starting point Hofstede’s model, numerous instruments which aim to measure cultural variables and values have been developed, in order to point out the advantages or the disadvantages of the model, the methodological issues or the validity of the various implemented scales.

A valuable and easily accessible online resource for professional foreign language students could be the Hofstede Insight Program which provides a set of very useful tools and skills and three models regarding organisational culture, national culture and cultural connections (<https://www.hofstede-insights.com>). For example, at a simple search, the program provides a synthetic description and an estimation chart for each of the five cultural parameters enumerated above, but adding a new parameter – *indulgence* (defined as “the extent to which people try to control their desires and impulses”) – , in all the cultures of the world. See below their results for Romania, United Kingdom and France:

Romania	United Kingdom	France
1. Power Distance		
<i>Romania scores high on this dimension (score of 90) which means that people accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place and which needs no further justification. Hierarchy in an organization is seen as reflecting inherent inequalities, centralization is popular, subordinates expect to be told what to do and the ideal boss is a benevolent autocrat.</i>	<i>At 35 Britain sits in the lower rankings of PDI – i.e. a society that believes that inequalities amongst people should be minimized. Interestingly is that research shows PD index lower amongst the higher class in Britain than amongst the working classes. The PDI score at first seems incongruent with the well established and historical British class system and its</i>	<i>With a score of 68, France scores fairly high on Power Distance. Children are raised to be emotionally dependent, to a degree, on their parents. This dependency will be transferred to teachers and later on to superiors. It is, therefore, a society in which a fair degree of inequality is accepted. Power is not only centralised in companies and government, but also geographically. Just look at the road grid in</i>

exposes one of the inherent tensions in the British culture France; most highways lead to Paris.

– between the importance of birth rank on the one hand and a deep seated belief that where you are born should not limit how far you can travel in life. A sense of fair play drives a belief that people should be treated in some way as equals.

Many comparative studies have shown that French companies have normally one or two hierarchical levels more than comparable companies in Germany and the UK. Superiors have privileges and are often inaccessible. CEO's of big companies are called Mr. PDG, which is a more prestigious abbreviation than CEO, meaning President Director General. These PDGs have frequently attended the most prestigious universities called "grandes écoles", big schools.

2. Uncertainty Avoidance

Romania scores 90 on this dimension and thus has a very high preference for avoiding uncertainty. Countries exhibiting high Uncertainty Avoidance maintain rigid codes of belief and behaviour and are intolerant of unorthodox behaviour and ideas. In these cultures there is an emotional need for rules (even if the rules never seem to work) time is money, people have an inner urge to be busy and work hard, precision and punctuality are the norm, innovation may be resisted, security is an important element in individual motivation.

At 35 the UK has a low score on Uncertainty Avoidance which means that as a nation they are quite happy to wake up not knowing what the day brings and they are happy to 'make it up as they go along' changing plans as new information comes to light. As a low UAI country the British are comfortable in ambiguous situations – the term 'muddling through' is a very British way of expressing this. There are generally not too many rules in British society, but those that are there are adhered to (the most famous of which of course the British love of queuing which has also to do with the values of fair play). In work terms this results in planning that is not detail oriented – the end goal will be clear (due to high MAS) but the detail of how we get there will be light and the actual process fluid and flexible to emerging and changing environment. Planning horizons will also be shorter. Most importantly the combination of a highly Individualist and curious nation is a high level of

At 86, French culture scores high on Uncertainty Avoidance. This is clearly evident in the following: The French don't like surprises. Structure and planning are required. Before meetings and negotiations they like to receive all necessary information. As a consequence, the French are good in developing complex technologies and systems in a stable environment, such as in the case of nuclear power plants, rapid trains and the aviation industry. There is also a need for emotional safety valves as a high score on Uncertainty Avoidance and the combination of high Power Distance and high Individualism strengthen each other, so to speak. The French, for example, are very talkative and "engueuler", giving someone the sharp edge of one's tongue happens often. There is a strong need for laws, rules and regulations to structure life. This, however, doesn't mean that most Frenchmen will try to follow all these rules, the same as in other Latin countries. Given the high score on Power

creativity and strong need for innovation. What is different is attractive! This emerges throughout the society in both its humour, heavy consumerism for new and innovative products and the fast highly creative industries it thrives in – advertising, marketing, financial engineering.

Distance, which means that power holders have privileges, power holders don't necessarily feel obliged to follow all those rules which are meant to control the people in the street. At the same time, commoners try to relate to power holders so that they can also claim the exception to the rule.

3. Individualism vs. Collectivism

Romania, with a score of 30 is considered a collectivistic society. This is manifest in a close long-term commitment to the member 'group', be that a family, extended family, or extended relationships. Loyalty in a collectivist culture is paramount, and over-rides most other societal rules and regulations. The society fosters strong relationships where everyone takes responsibility for fellow members of their group. In collectivist societies offence leads to shame and loss of face, employer/employee relationships are perceived in moral terms (like a family link), hiring and promotion decisions take account of the employee's in-group, management is the management of groups.

At a score of 89 the UK is amongst the highest of the Individualist scores, beaten only by some of the commonwealth countries it spawned i.e. Australia and the USA. The British are a highly Individualist and private people. Children are taught from an early age to think for themselves and to find out what their unique purpose in life is and how they uniquely can contribute to society. The route to happiness is through personal fulfillment. As the affluence of Britain has increased throughout the last decade, with wealth also 'spreading North', a much discussed phenomenon is the rise of what has been seen as rampant consumerism and a strengthening of the 'ME' culture.

France, with a score of 71, is shown to be an individualist society. Parents make their children emotionally independent with regard to groups in which they belong. This means that one is only supposed to take care of oneself and one's family.

The French combination of a high score on Power Distance and a high score on Individualism is rather unique. We only find the same combination in Belgium and, to some degree, in Spain and northern Italy.

This combination is not only unique, but it also creates a contradiction, so to speak. Only so to speak, because scores in the model don't influence anything. They just give a structured reflection of reality. This combination manifests itself in France in the following ways:

It is claimed that one reason why the French are less obese than people in other EU-countries is that parents still have more sway over children than in other EU-countries. Whether this is true or not is not known by us. All the same, what is true is that the family has still more emotional glue than in other Individualist cultures. This is a reflection of the high score on Power Distance with its stronger

respect for the elderly [...].

4. Masculinity vs. Femininity

Romania scores 42 on this dimension and is thus considered a relatively Feminine society. In Feminine countries the focus is on “working in order to live”, managers strive for consensus, people value equality, solidarity and quality in their working lives. Conflicts are resolved by compromise and negotiation. Incentives such as free time and flexibility are favoured. Focus is on well-being, status is not shown.

At 66, Britain is a Masculine society – highly success oriented and driven. A key point of confusion for the foreigner lies in the apparent contradiction between the British culture of modesty and understatement which is at odds with the underlying success driven value system in the culture. Critical to understanding the British is being able to “read between the lines” What is said is not always what is meant. In comparison to Feminine cultures such as the Scandinavian countries, people in the UK live in order to work and have a clear performance ambition.

With a score of 43, France has a somewhat Feminine culture. At face value this may be indicated by its famous welfare system (securitate sociale), the 35-hour working week, five weeks of holidays per year and its focus on the quality of life. French culture in terms of the model has, however, another unique characteristic. The upper class scores Feminine while the working class scores Masculine. This characteristic has not been found in any other country. This difference may be reflected by the following:

Top managers earn on average less than one would expect given the high score on Power Distance. Married couples of high society could go public with a lover without negative consequences, at least certainly in the past. The scandal in the US about Clinton and Lewinsky has never been understood in France. In addition, “crime passionnel”, i.e. crimes of passion, have always been sentenced very leniently in comparison to other murder trials.

5. Long-term orientation vs. Short-term orientation

Romania has an intermediate score of 52 on this dimension.

With an intermediate score of 51 in this dimension, a dominant preference in British culture cannot be determined.

France scores high (63) in this dimension, making it pragmatic. In societies with a pragmatic orientation, people believe that truth depends very much on situation, context and time. They show an ability to adapt traditions easily to changed conditions, a strong propensity to save and invest, thriftiness, and perseverance in achieving results.

6. Indulgence

With a very low score of 20, Romanian culture is one of Restraint. Societies with a low score in this dimension have a tendency to cynicism and pessimism. Also, in contrast to Indulgent societies, Restrained societies do not put much emphasis on leisure time and control the gratification of their desires. People with this orientation have the perception that their actions are Restrained by social norms and feel that indulging themselves is somewhat wrong.

A high score of 69 indicates that the British culture is one that is classified as Indulgent. People in societies classified by a high score in Indulgence generally exhibit a willingness to realise their impulses and desires with regard to enjoying life and having fun. They possess a positive attitude and have a tendency towards optimism. In addition, they place a higher degree of importance on leisure time, act as they please and spend money as they wish.

France scores somewhat in the middle (48) where it concerns Indulgence versus Restraint. This, in combination with a high score on Uncertainty Avoidance, implies that the French are less relaxed and enjoy life less often than is commonly assumed. Indeed, France scores not all that high on the happiness indices.

Source: Hofstede Insight Program <https://www.hofstede-insights.com/>

It must be stated that Hofstede's model does not operate rigid classifications, given that characteristics pertaining to all the above-mentioned parameters are to be found in all the cultures of the world, in a larger or a smaller extent, as a result of various factors, such as personal experience of individuals, education and personality, regional differences within the same culture, the evolution and the transformation of social and cultural systems, the influences of other cultures in various circumstances, etc. The main purpose of Hofstede's model and of the measurements derived from it is to emphasize and observe the general tendencies within cultures, to make predictions regarding the attitudes and the behaviour of individuals with a different cultural background and to facilitate human interaction in intercultural communication contexts. It is therefore a valuable instrument for professionally oriented foreign language courses.

Conclusions

Given the complexity of the topic, the conclusions of the present article can only be partial. However, we believe to have successfully argued the necessity to raise intercultural awareness and to build intercultural communication competence when delivering professional foreign language classes. The article also points out several guidelines and activities which are meant to sustain the above-mentioned objective. It also makes reference to some very useful instruments, both for the development of intercultural competence and sensitivity (among which Hofstede's model is the most significant), and for the assessment of intercultural competence. The references and the online resources mentioned below are, of course, only a very small part of the literature dedicated to the subject.

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Online resources:

<https://www.hofstede-insights.com/>

<https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages>

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