

REFLECTIONS ON THE RELATION BETWEEN NATIONAL CULTURES AND INNOVATIONS IN EDUCATION - THE CASE OF BULGARIA

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Abstract

Pluralism, multiculturalism, learner autonomy and motivation have become buzz expressions discussed widely both by the Common European Framework of Reference and the European Centre for Modern Languages. However, despite the hard work to implement these new approaches in the classroom, some countries seem to be more adaptive compared to others. In the author's opinion, the answer is rooted in the specifics of national cultures. The article discusses the roles of teacher and student as an archetypal case of micro social organization as they reveal typical patterns of social behaviour. Provided is a detailed description of the specifics of the Bulgarian national culture along the six dimensions of Hofstede's theory of organizations and cultures with regard to the educational system. The readiness of the Bulgarian teachers and students to comply with the concepts of pluralistic approaches, multiculturalism, learner-centred teaching and autonomy in the Bulgarian classroom are explored. The general conclusion is that these ideas are highly culture-sensitive and the success of their implementation depends on the closeness of the cultures where they emerged and the recipient countries to which they are exported.

Key words: education, culture, cultural dimensions, autonomy, multiculturalism

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This article is part of a succession of publications of the author over the past three years devoted to the intrinsic relation between national cultures, educational systems and innovations in Bulgaria's national educational system. Each of these publications focuses on a particular aspect of the relation between culture (in anthropological sense) and education as a socio-cultural product such as learner-centred teaching (Boyadzhieva, 2014b; Boyadzhieva, 2016a), learner autonomy (Boyadzhieva, 2014c; Boyadzhieva, 2016a; Boyadzhieva, 2016b), learner motivation (Boyadzhieva, 2014b; Boyadzhieva, 2015b), multiculturalism and pluralistic approaches (Boyadzhieva, 2014a; Boyadzhieva, 2015a). The analysis of the central issues in each of these articles, as well as in this one, is consistently conducted along the lines of Hofstede's theory of cultures and organizations developed within the past 10 years (Hofstede, 1998; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov 2010).

Education: a product and a producer of culture

National educational systems are major elements of every national culture along with its language, religion, national values and social organizations. As such, they are products of national cultures. On the other hand, educational practices of a society are an important factor for the reproduction of the organizational behaviour patterns of a society. Along with training in particular disciplines, education systems can also be seen as carriers of historically established cultural models responsible for the transmission of skills, ideas and attitudes based on conventional historical practices. This is why national educational systems are ambivalent by nature – on the one hand, they are products of historically established cultural habits and behaviour, on the other, they are responsible for transmitting these particular cultural beliefs and values onto the next generations in order to ensure sustainability of culture in time.

However, in times of worldwide and regional globalization, national educational systems face the challenge to comply with innovations based on universalist educational ideas aiming at global unification of approaches and practices in education. This applies especially to the EU member countries where new approaches are

introduced under the “Strategic Framework for European Cooperation in Education and Training (‘ET 2020’)”¹ affecting all stages of their national education systems.

The issues raised in this article are based on the assumption that the attitudes towards the implementation of new approaches in the Bulgarian educational system are highly determined by both teachers and students as representatives of Bulgarian culture.

Previous observations (Boyadzhieva, 2014c; Boyadzhieva, 2016a; Boyadzhieva, 2016b) show that the degree of acceptance and applicability of novelties in educational systems fluctuates depending on national cultures, part of which are the society’s attitudes to and expectations of the national educational system. Results show that changes in education, including new policies, are instigated more easily in countries that have a similar cultural profile with those where the innovations originated, while in cultures with different profiles their implementation may face serious problems.

Learner-centred education, autonomy, motivation and multiculturalism: a glimpse into history

At the outset, it needs noting that the widely proclaimed idea of multicultural education is not a European invention. It was imported into the EU from the USA and included in the educational policies of the European Centre for Modern Languages (ECML²) in Graz. Embraced by European educators and policy makers, multiculturalism has become especially loud in the last few years as it was reinforced by external factors: the growing migrant flow into Europe resulting in changes of the demographic profile of many European countries and causing major changes in the political orientation of many countries, culminating in Brexit³.

Another important fact to consider is that not only did multiculturalism serve the needs of American education amidst the Cold War, but it also became possible in a culture commonly defined as a *melting pot* type. The term ‘*melting pot*’, first used in

¹ <http://ec.europa.eu/education>

² European Centre for Modern Languages of the Council of Europe - <https://fiply.com/more-etc/ecml-european-centre-of-modern-languages>

³ The idea of multicultural education emerged as a side effect of the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960’s in the US (Banks, 2010: 4; Fullinwider, 2003). Thus, it reflects a particular historical stage in the development of the US educational philosophy, which arose out of specific practical needs of America’s education system. With time multiculturalism grew to eventually include “... diverse courses, programs, and practices that education institutions [adopted] to respond to the demands, needs, and aspirations of the various groups [*in the US* - my remark].” (Banks, 2010: 5).

1887, describes places or the population of such places where “a variety of races, cultures, or individuals assimilate into a cohesive whole” and which presupposes “a process of blending...” (Merriam-Webster, n. d.). None of the European national cultures does belong to such a type of culture, which discharges the notion multiculturalism of its notional content. Nowadays, the Common European Framework of Reference for languages describe it as a means of overcoming ethnic differences among and prejudices of the nations in united Europe.

Last but not least, multiculturalism is both directly and indirectly related to other key educational ideas such as learner autonomy, motivation and learner-centred teaching. Although these notions appeared for the first time in relation to foreign language teaching (most probably because it was the most rapidly developing field in education in the 1960s and 1970s and a profitable export business for the Anglo-Saxon countries), they quickly encompassed the overall training process at school.

This connection trails the following logic: multiculturalism supports the idea that students and their backgrounds and experiences should be placed in the centre of education and thus help them develop a positive perception of themselves by demonstrating knowledge about their own culture, history, attitudes and beliefs. This refers to the desired shift from teacher-centred to learner-centred teaching. Next, learners’ positive perceptions are expected to strengthen their ability to make choices and become autonomous, which in turn is expected to enhance their motivation. This type of training contributes to the overall mutual understanding between diverse groups, which is a general aim in education deserving admiration. However, the extent (if at all) of its applicable in different cultures is a completely different issue.

Formal education as a micro model of society

Educational systems are micro model of societies, thus national education is a micro cosmos representing national culture. Similarly to the Parent and the Child or the Employer and the Employee, the Teacher and the Student is an archetypal pair. It exists in virtually any society regardless of geographical location or time. Complexities of their relationship, on the one hand, are due to the different social positions teachers and students have in a society and, on the other hand, to the differences in the established patterns of the teacher/student interaction in a particular society. The former are

universal for the pair, while the latter are particular and culturally biased. The differences in the ways parents and the society as a whole expect students to learn represent another specific factor depending on the historically established educational patterns.

In medieval European education, teachers acted as providers of knowledge, while learners were supposed to be an empty vessel. This model remained unchanged until the 1970s. As far as foreign language teaching is concerned, this role distribution was typical at the time of the dominance of the grammar-translation and the audio-lingual methods. With the development of the communicative approach in the late 1960s, and later on, of constructivism, the views about the roles of teacher and learner changed. Teachers came to be seen as facilitators and learners as an active participant in the teaching/learning process in and out the language classroom. As already mentioned, philosophical foundations of teaching and learning foreign languages were transferred into the educational philosophy of the 21st century as a whole. As a result, 'learner autonomy' (Holec, 1981; Little et al., 2002; Benson, 2006; Gardner, 2004) and 'motivation' (Dickinson, 1995) as concepts originating in the area of foreign language teaching became buzz-words related to the shift from a teacher-centred to a learner-centred approach in education and part of the methodology related to the philosophy of multiculturalism.

Hofstede's Theory of Cultures

Hofstede's theory of organizations and cultures seems to be the most appropriate framework for the purpose of the following discussion as it focuses on social and psychological parameters that underlie the basic attitudes and understanding of the social roles of teachers and students. In my opinion, this theory is undoubtedly helpful when formal education is concerned because, as mentioned above, social behaviour in education environment maps the basic beliefs and expectations governing the acceptable social behaviour of a given society. Although there may be some second thoughts as to how indicative a universal theory of culture may be when a particular society is concerned, there is no doubt that Hofstede's theory is able to capture most of the intrinsic features of national cultures.

My choice to use this particular theory among various other theories as rationale for the discussion below needs a brief explanation. First and foremost, Hofstede's pioneering systemic cultural theory is the only one that has proved over the last 35

years to be able to explain why and how national (and regional) system of values may influence the groups' societal and organizational behaviour thus providing a *tertium comparationis* for comparing and explaining different cultures. Second, it is extremely relevant today, when differences between cultures have become an unescapable issue in both politics and economy. Last but not least, despite some critiques of Hofstede's theory (McSweeney, 2002; Gerhard, 2005; Venaik & Brewer, 2013), re-analysis of the existing data and factor analysis used in the renowned World Values Survey ⁴ confirmed the validity of Hofstede's value scales. The main implications of Hofstede's theory have been re-confirmed especially when the power distance, individualism, term orientation and indulgence dimensions were correlated with values in similar research (Schwartz, 2006; Inglehart, & Norris, 2009, Khatri, 2009).

Hofstede defines culture as 'the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another' (Hofstede, 2009:24; Hofstede, 2010; Hofstede Homepage, n. d.). According to him and his team, culture should be described and explained along the lines of six cultural dimensions that are different but to some extent interdependent. As a result, different constellation patterns of social behaviour are isolated, each reflecting the specifics of a given culture. Hofstede's cultural dimensions are individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, term orientation, masculinity and indulgence. In the following discussion, Bulgarian culture is identified along these dimensions and the implications for the educational system are discussed.

Discussion

The first dimension is individualism (IND). Individualism differentiates between individualistic and collectivistic societies. Bulgarian culture is a typical collective culture scoring 30 along this dimension (Hofstede Homepage – Bulgaria, n. d.). The implications of this state of affairs are the following: teachers and learners form two different groups, where learners consider teachers as outgroup members and vice versa. The in-group relationship dominates task and the outgroup members are supposed to be natural enemies. There is no possibility for an individual to belong to two groups within one discourse simultaneously. This induces an 'either-or' type of group belonging which leaves no possibility of finding a medium space. This in essence prevents co-working

⁴ <http://www.worldvaluessurvey.org/wvs.jsp>

between the two archetypal groups as aim setting and task fulfilment are driven by different in-group motivation and expectations.

The second dimension is power distance (PD). It 'expresses the attitude of a society towards the inevitable existence of social inequalities' (ibid.). Cultures are classified in two opposing groups with high and low PD respectively. Both types accept that the society is organized in a social hierarchy that makes the society able to work as a whole. The difference is that in cultures with high PD, this hierarchy is thought of as reflecting inherent inequalities. In such societies, centralization is undisputable; students expect directives from above; the ideal teacher is a benevolent autocrat and his/her decisions cannot be refuted. The high power distance of BG scoring 70 in this dimension indicates rigid centralization. Both teachers and students expect clear instructions: teachers from their superiors and students from teachers, respectively. As a result, both groups follow passively the instructions of a few persons at the top without taking part in the decision making process. The communication flow is usually vertical following top-bottom directionality. With few exceptions, horizontal communication is little and concealed. Bulgarian society as a whole still believes that students should show respect to their teachers because they are older and thus deserve obedience. Until recently, it was also believed that teachers are highly competent, but now both students and parents sometimes question this belief. Despite such occasional cases, however, the overall situation remains generally unchanged as both students and parents are aware of the fact that high power distance gives almost unlimited rights to those higher in the hierarchy.

It can be concluded that collectivism combined with high power distance in Bulgarian culture helps maintaining a teacher-centred education and makes the shift to learner-centred one extremely difficult, if not impossible.

The same applies to the development of learner autonomy. In-group belonging and power distance do not allow collaboration between teachers and students to an extent that allows building autonomy which at this stage depends fully on the willingness and openness of individual teachers. A direct consequence of the existing high PD enhanced by the in-group sense of belonging is unethical behaviour on the part of both teachers and students, a situation that is taken for granted by the society.

Uncertainty avoidance (UA) is defined as ‘the way a society deals with the fact that the future can never be known which results in anxiety’ (ibid.). This dimension evaluates the degree of anxiety a culture experiences when making decisions related to future actions. UA also deals with what motivates the individuals in society to act and is directly related to motivation.

Bulgaria’s high UA with score of 85 indicates that society as a whole needs rules, which is an emotional necessity and which requires rigid codes of belief and behaviour. Since security is the basis of individual’s motivation, unorthodox behaviour and ideas are not normally tolerated and innovations are generally resisted.

Masculinity (MASC) is the fourth dimension referring to ‘what motivates people: wanting to be the best (masculine cultures) or liking what you are doing (feminine cultures)’ (ibid.).

Bulgaria scoring 40 along this dimension is defined as a feminine type of society. The dominant values are well-being and caring for others. The quality of life is a sign of success and is generally considered more important than the standard of living. The focus is put on “working in order to live” and incentives like free time and flexibility are dominant. One consequence of the femininity of Bulgarian culture is that standing out from the crowd is an exception as it is not acceptable for the majority of the society. This explains why the concept of “popular student”, so typical of Anglo-Saxon education, does not exist in Bulgarian school jargon. Another interesting observation is related to the use of the adjective *shy*. *Shy* bears a definitely negative connotation when used as an attribute to *student* in English culture, describing a manner that “shows discomfort or lack of confidence in association with others”. *Shy* also implies “a constitutional shrinking from contact or close association with others, together with a wish to escape notice” (Shy, n.d.). One possible translation of the word in Bulgarian is “*skromen*”. When used as an adjective to describe people, it is generally positive and, when used to describe a student’s personality, it expresses the teacher’s appreciation of their behaviour at school.

The fifth dimension is term orientation (TO) or Confucian dynamism that refers to ‘how a society maintains some links with its own past while dealing with the challenges of the present and future’ (Hofstede Homepage – Bulgaria, n. d.). World cultures fall into two opposing groups: with short and long TO.

With a score of 69 along this dimension, Bulgaria belongs to the group of short-term oriented cultures taking a more pragmatic approach and encouraging thrift and efforts as a way to prepare for the future. As a result, Bulgarians demonstrate the ability to adjust traditions to new realities. People generally believe that there is no absolute truth. Truth-values depend on particular situation and the moment of judgement. This is seemingly counter to the incentives of the high power distance and high uncertainty avoidance. However, the combination of the three dimensions explains why both Bulgarian students and teachers distrust the rules imposed by superior authorities and work against them following Mahatma Gandhi's non-cooperation principle of resistance by accepting them in writing and disregarding them in practice.

The last sixth dimension is indulgence (INDUL) which refers to 'the extent to which people try to control their desires and impulses. Relatively weak control is called "indulgence" and relatively strong control is called "restraint" (ibid.). It emphasizes the degree to which children are socialized and is closely related to the system of education as schools, together with parents, are responsible for preparing them to become 'human'. Indulgence cultures show relatively free gratification of basic and natural human drives related to enjoying life and having fun. Restraint countries, to which Bulgaria belongs with a very low score of 16 along Indulgence, on the contrary, show a tendency for cynicism and pessimism and control over their natural desires. Actions of both students and teachers in Bulgaria are restrained by social norms and with the prevailing feeling that indulgence is somewhat wrong.

As mentioned previously, the six dimensions are interdependent and often overlapping. For example, collectivist cultures are often cultures with high power distance and high uncertainty avoidance, which is the case with Bulgaria. Masculine cultures are more than often individualist cultures with low power distance. Indulgence and time orientation are also related in the sense that restrained cultures are most often short-term oriented, while long-term oriented cultures are frequently related to indulgent societies. Time orientation is also related to uncertainty avoidance, where short-term oriented societies typically show low scores in UC and vice versa - long-term oriented ones are usually of the high UC type. Bulgaria presents an exception to this correlation as it belongs to the short-term oriented cultures, but is simultaneously a typical high uncertainty avoidance one. Of course, these interrelations are not

compulsory and the dimensions should be discussed as complementary, which gives the theory the power to describe the different cultures both qualitatively and quantitatively.

The six dimensions and their relative weight within a culture show the distinct differences between national cultures as the table below illustrates. It demonstrates the drastic differences between Bulgarian and British cultural dimensions where the UK is an example of an Anglo-Saxon culture in particular and a typical representative of a Western type of culture, in general.

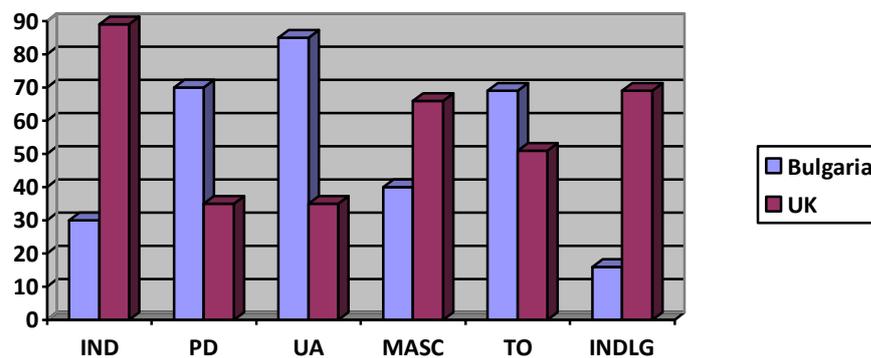


Figure 1: BG – UK – correlative scales

Cultural implications for education

An important fact to bear in mind is that most innovations in educational philosophy and practice emerged in western societies and this is why they bear all features of western thinking mirroring the mind-set of western cultures. Their export to and implementation in countries where culture is almost opposite in their systems of beliefs and values seems to be primordially doomed. From the discussion above, it becomes evident that concepts like multiculturalism, autonomy and motivation in education (and not only in education), which are very sensitive to culture, are assessed as foreign intellectual products clashing with the Bulgarian in-group type of thinking. As member of the European Union, Bulgaria is obliged to adopt them in accordance with European Council directives. What happens, though, is that they are officially adopted and promoted in legal documents and reports but are not implemented in classroom educational practice.

The high uncertainty avoidance index of Bulgarian culture as a rule blocks creativity and innovations reinforcing fears of novelty in education. Accompanied by

typical collectivism and high power distance, it prevents the quick implementation of innovations by both teachers and students as the two groups share the belief that what is new is unknown and thus dangerous as the outcomes are uncertain. The combination of the three dimensions also explains why students in general do not possess the ability of self-reflection and avoid trying new methods of learning. It is because in general they believe that learning is a responsibility of someone else higher in the hierarchy. This is especially evident in situations when teachers occasionally trying to provide room and opportunities for individual initiatives but fail to give clear instructions. In such cases, students tend to delay doing assignments as long as possible or seek help from their mates. What makes the situation even worse is that due to the high power distance students are reluctant to ask teacher for clarification if assignments are not clear.

The combination of high power distance, high uncertainty avoidance and the restrictive nature of Bulgarian culture contribute to the general belief of the society that teachers are supposed to have all the answers and dominate the process of learning. In this way, the widely proclaimed learner-centred teaching gives way to the traditional teacher-centred teaching. This combination prevents the idea of equal participation and shared responsibility of teachers and learners in the teaching/learning process leaving little or no room at all for learner autonomy. The short-term orientation that places Bulgaria among the pragmatic countries combined with indulgence tend to kill not only autonomy but also motivation, the latter remaining a personal asset of few individual students.

One interesting issue is the widespread practice of cheating in the Bulgarian educational space. Collectivism in combination with power distance, high uncertainty avoidance and short-term orientation explain why cheating is favoured by students.

In the Bulgarian classroom, cheating is a way to demonstrate solidarity and to expect loyalty from the in-group members in case of need. Caring for the others, which is a typical feature of the feminine type of societies, also facilitates the process and suppresses whispers of a guilty conscience. Cheating is also enhanced by the high uncertainty avoidance and the short-term orientation. Students as a group unite their efforts in the opposition against teachers as a group. Teachers view cheating as intolerable behaviour and a reason for conflicts with students. Interestingly though, teachers generally change their attitudes towards cheating and plagiarism once they shift

from the role of a teacher to the role of a student, which happens when they attend postgraduate university programmes. In such cases, they start behaving as typical students and become cheaters themselves. This comes to show the dominant role of the group belonging, the high power distance and the high uncertainty avoidance in shaping the individual's behaviour in a particular social situation where truth is a relative concept.

As far as foreign language teaching is concerned, additional complexities can arise both when teachers and students come from different cultures and when they belong to the same culture. In the second case, teachers are compelled to teach a different culture embedded in the foreign language being quite competent in the language but not necessarily aware of the culture.

In my opinion, the role of foreign language teachers in Bulgaria is still traditional and the training environment is still teacher-centred. I do not claim that this is their fault. More often than not, they fall victims to the cultural expectations of students, parents and society. Teachers are seen as 'knowledge providers' who are proficient in the language they teach. They are the ones who are expected to detect and correct students' mistakes. They are the ones who are believed to possess the expertise in the respective foreign language that makes them the main, and often the only, source of knowledge of and about this foreign language. Even when parents are competent in the foreign language their children are studying, the prevailing belief that 'Teachers know best' demonstrate the irrevocable trust that students have in their teachers, who are committed to meet their students' expectations.

Conclusions

From the above, it may be concluded that implementation of foreign approaches and innovations in any national education system, no matter how positive and well-intended they may be, can either be enhanced or prevented by factors embedded in the recipient native culture.. In summary, new ideas are more easily transferred between culturally similar countries and can be handicapped when the exporting and the recipient countries are located at the extremes of the cultural dimensions. This is the case with multiculturalism, learner autonomy and motivation, all of which are concepts that were invented in Western Europe corresponding to the basic belief and values underlying

Western cultures and which were exported to and imposed on several Eastern countries including Bulgaria through the EU educational institutions. EU directives are deemed to a failure if the national cultural specifics are not taken in consideration.

Another facet of the clash between cultures concerns teachers in Bulgaria and countries with a similar cultural profile. The conclusions below are especially valid for teachers of foreign languages as they carry a double burden. On the one hand, they belong to the national educational system, which is part of Bulgarian culture, and on the other, they are responsible for bridging the cross-cultural gap between Bulgarian culture and the foreign language and culture.

To be effective in carrying out their responsibilities and implementing the respective European directives to at least some extent, Bulgarian teachers, and especially foreign language teachers, need special training and new approaches. They should be trained to be aware of their own culture and be ready to change their own traditional attitudes to the educational process. They need to be trained to become cultural communicators who can mediate and motivate both students and parents to gain knowledge and adopt different learning practices. They should teach students to understand otherness in all its cultural dimensions and encourage students' autonomy, capability of making their own decisions and taking responsibility. They should adapt intellectually and emotionally to the fact that in other societies people behave and act in different ways and try to use good foreign practices that proved to be efficient in the classroom.

The suggestions above open a wide area for future research aiming at finding out which specific cultural traits facilitate or hinder the implementation of innovations in the Bulgarian classroom.

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