

Mobility and Individuality: Two Concepts ESP Students Should Know about American Culture

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Abstract

ESP students around the world who are intending to communicate with their American counterparts should be aware of the key concepts of American culture as well as the structure and skills knowledge of English. This paper reports the results of an ethnographic interview conducted with a female American college freshman. The study focuses on two key concepts of American culture: mobility and individuality. It is important for ESP students to know about these concepts as they can affect the quality of communication in the workplace and in daily life.

1. Introduction

Culture is an inseparable aspect of language. ESP students around the world who are intending to communicate with their American counterparts should be aware of the key concepts of American culture as well as the structure and skills knowledge of English. This paper reports the results of an ethnographic interview conducted with a female American college freshman. The study focuses on two key concepts of American culture: mobility and individuality. It is important for ESP students to know about these

concepts as they can affect the quality of communication in the workplace and in daily life.

Culture is basically defined as the set of ideas, beliefs, assumptions, and norms that are widely shared among a group of people, and that serve as a guide and reference to those people's behavior (Yamauchi, 1998; Goodeneough, 1973). Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) refer to culture as patterns of thinking, feeling, and potential acting that were learned throughout one's lifetime. These patterns are mostly acquired in early childhood, and they are extremely difficult to change. They state that "culture is learned, not innate. It derives from one's social environment rather than one's genes" (p. 4).

As people around the world live in different social environments, they develop different thinking, feeling, and acting styles in their lives. As these cultural differences affect people's ways of interpreting the environment, they should be taken into consideration carefully when people from different cultures interact with each other. Since the overall aim of teaching English as a foreign/second language is to help people to be able to interact in this target language, the culture of the target language should also be learned and taught by English teachers. As an English teacher, my overall aim in this study was to better understand some of the features of American culture, and for that purpose, following Spradley's (1979) guidelines, I conducted ethnographic interviews with a female American college freshman.

I have always been interested in American culture, first as an English learner, then as an English language teacher. However, before I came to the U.S.A. four years ago, my only source of information about American culture had been textbooks, some novels, and Hollywood movies. However, spending one year in America and experiencing the culture

shock taught me far more than I learned during my entire studies in Turkey. Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) state that “studying culture without experiencing culture shock is like practicing swimming without water” (p. xi). Conducting this study after spending some time in this culture also helped me to develop some further understandings and to correct some misconceptions related to American culture.

2. Ethnographic Interview

2.1. Describing the Informant

Celine (pseudo name) is a 21 year-old white female who was born and raised in Buffalo, New York until the age of 12. Although she is older than typical American freshmen (the reasons for this are going to be discussed in the following sections), she is a college freshman at a university in upstate New York. Both of Celine’s parents are American. Her father’s roots go back to France, and her mother’s grand grandfathers came to America from England. Her parents got divorced when she was 8 years old. Both of her parents still live in Buffalo. She also has two older brothers, one of them is 28 and the other is 32.

2.2. Interviewing the Informant

I met Celine two months before we started the interviews. In those two months, Celine had become one of my good friends. The rapport between her and me was one of the primary reasons why I chose her as my informant for this study. Spradley (1979) states ‘establishing rapport with the informant’ as one of the very important parts of the ethnographic interview process, and I had already established a good rapport with my informant. Another important reason was that during the time we spent together I

understood that she enjoys talking about herself. When I asked her for being my informant for this study, she said 'Yes' without any hesitation. In fact, the interviews with her were not so different from the regular time we spent together, she would talk about herself and I would ask questions to delve deeply into what she said. The only difference was that I was recording what she said, but she always seemed to be not bothered with the tape-recording.

I conducted four interviews with Celine, each interview took about one hour. Following Spradley's (1979) methodology, I built each interview on the information coming from the previous interviews. I assured her before the study that her name will remain anonymous, and a copy of the final paper will be shared with her. Also, before each interview I reminded her that she has the right to 'not to answer' any question she wants. During the first interview I wanted her to tell me about her education starting from kindergarten. This was in fact a brief history of her entire life because I asked follow-up questions whenever she mentioned something new. Therefore, although the first interview was focusing on her education in the beginning, it then turned out to be a general history of her life and experiences. The following three interviews were all based on the previous interviews. In other words, after each interview, I transcribed the tape-recordings and analyzed the transcriptions for emerging topics, and in the next interview I asked some major and minor questions about the topics I was interested in from the previous interview or interviews.

After the last interview I went back to the whole data, and read and analyzed it again in the light of emerging issues during the interviews. As a result of the final analysis, I came up with two main underlying themes about American culture which

emerged from the data: mobility and individuality. I have identified these two as the main themes because many notions that reoccur again and again in the data can be classified under these two umbrella terms. The rest of this paper is going to focus on both of these themes one by one.

3. Themes of Cultural Description

3.1. Mobility

Although I was non-judgmental and unprejudiced about American culture before and during the entire study, I had thought about possible themes I might have found with this study before I started data analysis. I have to admit that mobility was not one of the themes I was expecting to find out because my informant was a 21 year-old college student. How mobile could she have possibly been? By the end of the first interview, the one she talked about her education, I was totally shocked with the variety of places she went for educational purposes.

She attended a public school in Buffalo from kindergarten to sixth grade. Starting from seventh grade (age of 12), she moved to Toronto, Canada. It was a private boarding school, specializing in ballet. It was middle and high school together. She spent 7 years in Toronto. When I asked her about how she made the decision for going to Canada, her answer was:

*I decided alone, and my parents supported it, they said OK,
that's fine, if that's what you want.*

I think her parents' reaction to her decision is a good indicator of American attitudes towards mobility. They simply said OK, and they supported their 12 year-old daughter when she wanted to move to another country for education. This shows that in her culture it is quite normal to go abroad or to move to a different state for education or any other purposes such as a new job, even if you are 12 years old. Although during the entire study I tried not to look at the issues from the Turkish perspective, my own cultural background, from time to time I could not help myself thinking about the same situation in Turkey, and the moment Celine told me about her move to Canada was one of those times.

After Canada, Celine moved to France to work with a ballet company. Her parents' reaction was not very much different from the time she moved to Canada. She said:

*They were proud. My mother was especially very proud,
she was very encouraging.*

The company in France was training ballets for a professional career. It was a two-year program. She was dancing six or seven hours a day. At that point her education was over for her, she was not planning to go to college, all she wanted to do was to find a dancing job in France or anywhere in Europe. She spent 1.5 years in France. Then she decided to come back to the U.S.A. She did not finish the training program in France. When she told me that she decided to come back to the U.S.A., I thought something really important happened and she felt obliged to move back, but I was wrong. She said:

I did not want to pursue a ballet career at that point. I thought I wanted a college degree.

Although she made such a radical decision after spending so many years on ballet, and although this might also mean that at that point she still did not know what to do in her life, in my opinion, this decision of her also reflects the ease of mobility in American culture. She decided to do something other than dancing, and the first thing that came to her mind was to move back to America, start over and pursue for something different. I think the idea of ‘starting over’ in American culture is very strongly interrelated with the idea of mobility. When people see a chance of starting over somewhere else, they simply go for it, and what Celine did was no different.

When she came back to the U.S.A., she did not come to Buffalo immediately. Instead, she went to New York City in order to prepare for college and work simultaneously. She stayed in New York City for about half a year, working and preparing for the SAT. In my opinion, spending six months in New York City is another indicator of the easiness of mobility in the U.S.A. She had come to the U.S.A. to start over, she was planning to apply to a university in upstate New York, but she preferred to go and live in New York City. Currently she is a freshman at a university in upstate New York, but she is still considering moving to another city. For the next year, she is planning to go to Washington DC to study political science in Georgetown University. She has already applied for it, and waiting for the result.

Celine's brothers' lives are not very much different from her life. Although they never went to another country for education or job purposes, they moved from state to state during their lives.

All this mobility experienced by Celine and her brothers is also linked to the concept of 'change' in American society. Kohls (1984) puts 'change' as one of the values Americans live by. He states that "in the American mind, change is seen as an indisputably good condition. Change is strongly linked to development, improvement, progress, and growth".

From Celine's perspective, 'change' brings both advantages and disadvantages to a person. She says so many changes in one's life and lifestyle sometimes make the person feel insecure, especially the changes are experienced in early ages in life. When I asked her what 'change' means to her, she said:

Change is something I know very well. It is a good thing to have but I think as a young person a lot of change is not good because you need consistency in your life.

When I asked her the advantages of mobility, she stated 'adaptability' as the most important positive outcome of mobility in her life. She said:

I am adaptable. It means when you are put in a situation, you can adjust to it. That's a good skill to have.

Mobility in Celine's life may also be reflecting the 'low uncertainty avoidance' feature of American culture. Comparing the members of high uncertainty avoidance

cultures to the members of low uncertainty avoidance cultures, Hofstede (1979) states that people in high uncertainty avoidance cultures have a lower tolerance “for uncertainty and ambiguity, which express itself in higher levels of anxiety and energy release, greater need for formal rules and absolute truth, and less tolerance for people or groups with deviant ideas or behavior” (p. 395). In contrast to this, members of low uncertainty avoidance cultures, according to Gudykunst and Matsumoto (1996), “have lower stress levels, and weaker superegos, and accept dissent and taking risks more than do members of high uncertainty avoidance cultures” (p. 42).

According to Hofstede and Hofstede’s (2005) ‘Uncertainty Avoidance Index Values for 74 Countries and Regions’, United States is one of the countries with the lowest uncertainty avoidance. They also state that low uncertainty avoidance cultures are ‘comfortable in ambiguous situations and with unfamiliar risks’ (p. 176). This feature of American culture might also be contributing to Americans’ tendency for mobility.

All in all, I think all these experiences she and her brothers had related to mobility, and her parents’ reaction to their children’s decisions of moving so frequently clearly show that mobility is an accepted and a highly experienced concept in American culture.

3.2. Individuality

Second underlying cultural theme emerged from the interviews with Celine is ‘individuality’ in American culture. According to Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) “societies in which the interests of the individual prevail over the interests of the group” (p. 75) are individualistic societies. United States is in the first rank in their

'Individualism Index Values for 74 Countries and Regions'. Kohls (1984) states that "the individualism that has been developed in the Western world since the Renaissance, beginning in the late 15th century, has taken its most exaggerated form in 20th century United States. Here, each individual is seen as completely and marvelously unique, that is, totally different from all other individuals and, therefore, particularly precious and wonderful".

Independence in daily life and individuality are strongly interrelated concepts, and in most cases, in my opinion, independence (or constantly seeking for independence) in daily life, is a result of individualistic point of view in life. In collectivist societies the group's benefits are more important than the individual's benefits, and, therefore, dependency among people is necessary and promoted. On the other hand, in individualistic societies, the less dependent the people are to other people, the more individualistic they are because less dependency brings more rights to put the individual's benefits in front of the group's benefits. Therefore, we cannot speak about individualism in America without speaking the independence in America. During the interviews, Celine emphasized her independence many times. Following is an excerpt taken from the interviews:

Interviewer: *When you came back here for studying, why didn't you live with your mother?*

Celine: *My mother lives very far away. Plus, I am used to living on my own, since I was 12 years old, so it seemed like a strange idea to go back home.*

Interviewer: *So you wouldn't live with your mother even if she was living somewhere close to campus, can we say that?*

Celine: *Probably, yeah. Unless I had to. But I really said 'I don't want to live with you, I want to live on my own.'*

Financial independence is also very important for Celine. During the interviews she many times emphasized that she is supporting herself for years. When I asked her about her current financial status, she said that she is taking government loan, and she is also working in a part-time job. She then added in an embarrassed mode that her mother is paying a portion of the college tuition, but she emphasized over and over again that it is a very small portion. So, in her view, taking some financial help from her mother is something to be embarrassed about, and this shows how important the financial independence is for her.

Celine wants to make all the decisions about her life herself, and she thinks that depending on her mother, or on any other family member, financially or in any other way would restrain her independence for making her own decisions. The same philosophy is shared and followed by her family members in their behavior towards her. The following excerpts demonstrate the relationship between her and her mother and her brothers.

I discuss about my decisions with my mother, but I don't ask for permission. I wouldn't change my mind even if she says no for something because it's my life, it's my future.

They [her brothers] give me some advice but they never tell me what to do. Their philosophy is 'it's your life, do what you think is the best.

Child raising habits or practices in a society provides many clues about the underlying cultural values of that society. Therefore, at one point of the interviews I asked Celine about the values she would want her child to develop, following is her answer and our conversation after the answer:

Interviewer: *What kind of values would you want your child to develop?*

Celine: *Honesty, individuality, sense of self, integrity.*

Interviewer: *How would you define an individualistic person?*

Celine: *Someone who is not aiming to please other people, who is happy for themselves, and who is not afraid of doing what he feels right.*

Interviewer: *What is wrong with pleasing other people?*

Celine: *You have to please other people, but at a fundamental level. If you try to please others at every level, you cannot please yourself, you cannot be happy.*

Interviewer: *So individuality has a lot to do with happiness, right?*

Celine: *Yeah.*

As it is clearly seen in the excerpt, Celine puts individuality among the first values she would want her child to develop, and she associates individuality with happiness and pleasing oneself in life. These ideas are not different from the ideas of many American mothers and early childhood education teachers (Hoffman, 2000).

Celine's father's behavior to her brothers when they turned eighteen is another example of ideas related to child raising in America. Celine describes the situation as:

Celine: When they were 18 they (my brothers) left the house, they moved to California. My dad said they should move, he said 'you are eighteen and you are on your own, I don't support you anymore'.

Interviewer: What do you think that behavior of your father brought to your brothers?

Celine: I think they are both pretty self-sufficient, they are independent people, they can make their own decisions.

I think by doing so Celine's father wanted to cultivate independence, and individuality connected to independence, as early as possible in his children, and Celine appreciates that behavior by saying that leaving home at that age made her brothers self-sufficient and independent. In fact, what Celine's father did was not different from what many parents try to do across the U.S.A.: encouraging youths to be socially and economically independent (Shkodriani & Gibbons, 1995).

Since individuality was one of the emerging themes when I analyzed the first three interviews, in order to delve deeply into the theme of individuality, during the fourth interview I asked Celine her opinions about some situations which Hofstede and Hofstede (2005) state as the features of individualistic societies. The following are the excerpts from the fourth interview. Each question I ask focuses on one feature of individualistic societies.

Interviewer: *Do you think a job should be challenging or no?*

Celine: *Challenging is difficult. Typically the more challenging it is, the more accomplishment you make, the more important the job is. I would pick the challenging job.*

Interviewer: *Do children in American society learn to think in terms of 'we' or in terms of 'I'?*

Celine: *Typically in terms of 'I'. And even in school they foster individuality. You do have to learn to work in a group but you work in terms of yourself, what your preferences, goals, opinions are, they are always welcome, they want to get to you personally.*

Interviewer: *What do you think about speaking one's own mind? Is it an important characteristic?*

Celine: *Yeah, I think it is. If you cannot articulate what you want, then you will be lost, you should know what you want.*

Interviewer: *Which one do you think is encouraged in American society, showing happiness or showing sadness?*

Celine: *Happiness. Why would sadness be good to show. If you show a happy face, it shows that you can manage your life, you are optimistic, you are energetic. These are all very important in the USA.*

Interviewer: *But if you show your sadness, other people may help you?*

Celine: *People usually don't want to help you.*

As the excerpts clearly demonstrate, all the answers Celine gave to my questions reflected her individualistic perspective in life, which is no surprise. These excerpts once again show that American society is a highly individualistic society, and members of this society connect their individualism to many aspects of their lives from child raising to selecting a job.

4. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to report the results an ethnographic interview conducted with a female American college freshman in order to discover some

underlying cultural themes in American culture. Two main underlying themes emerged from the data collected for this study: mobility and individuality. Both of the themes were no surprise to me as they were also revealed by many other researchers in many different settings with many different research designs. However, seeing how they are reflected in a college freshman's life was a new and different approach to the understanding of those two underlying themes of American culture.

'Ethnographic interview' as a research design was very useful to discover underlying themes in American culture. Since mobility and individuality were the two continuously reoccurring issues during the interviews, I reported those two as the main underlying themes in this paper. However, I also want to emphasize that many other interesting topics emerged from the data such as attitudes towards friendship or attitudes towards education.

Cultural aspects of language in general, and the concepts of mobility and individuality in American culture in particular should be discussed in the ESP classrooms in order better equip the learners against possible communication problems that might occur due to cultural illiteracy.

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