



# The Impact of Power Distance on Classroom Equity in Second Language Teaching in a Cross-Cultural Communicative Context

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**Abstract.** The purpose of this study is to examine the effect of power distance on classroom equity in English language teaching in junior high schools in China in the context of cross-cultural communication. The study was conducted at an international school in Shandong, China, and the authors collected and comprehensively analyzed teachers' and students' perceptions of the impact of power distance on second language acquisition classrooms in a cross-cultural context. The study shows that students' knowledge of the target language country's culture is beneficial to their learning of that country's language, that power distance is destructive to classroom equity in second language acquisition classrooms, that teachers are unable to allocate resources in a truly equitable manner, and that students are vulnerable to unequal treatment. Students fear the teacher and are afraid to express their opinions, which affects the production of creative and critical thinking.

**Keywords:** Power Distance · Classroom Equity · English Teaching · Intercultural Communication

## 1 Introduction

In recent years, maintaining fairness in the classroom has become a hot topic. In the context of cross-cultural communication, Dutch sociologist Geert Hofstede distinguishes between different national cultures using six different dimensions (Hofstede, 2001) [1], and this paper starts from one of these dimensions, "power distance". According to Hofstede's (2001) definition of power distance, power distance in the classroom should include, but is not limited to, students' acceptance and expectations of unequal power distribution as a relatively disadvantaged group in school, teacher, or group work settings [1]. According to Hofstede (2010), China is a relatively high power distance country compared to other European and American countries, with a Power Distance Index (PDI) as high as 80 in mainland China. In this high power distance socio-cultural context, people's perception of hierarchy is also stronger [2]. Combined with the traditional Chinese Confucianism, which promotes the concept of "respecting the teacher and emphasizing the way", teachers and students have long been on unequal footing. Confucianism constrains students to become passive learners. Especially in the context of high-stakes

testing, students are accustomed to learning by rote, obeying authority, fearing to express their opinions, and lacking critical thinking (Murphy, 1987) [3]. The “classroom equity” that is the focus of this study is the teacher’s attitude and the teacher’s ability to allocate resources appropriately. This is because L2 classrooms are different from other classrooms in that students’ learning in L2 depends on teachers, and therefore teachers’ attitudes and behaviors play an important role in improving students’ L2 skills. In this context, it is important to critically reflect on the impact of distance on classroom equity.

## 2 Literature Review

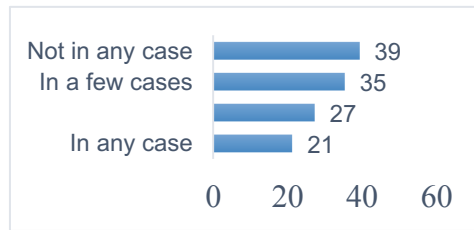
Some scholars argue that power distance in English classrooms leads to students’ transitional dependence on teachers, increases students’ classroom anxiety and learning anxiety, and puts teachers at the extremes of power, resulting in teachers becoming dominant in the classroom (Xu & Fan, 2010; Qian & Xu, 2019) [4, 5]. Such an approach can greatly limit the formation of students’ critical thinking and curb students’ initiative and creativity in learning, as well as reduce student-teacher interaction and damage the teacher-student relationship (Xu & Fan, 2010) [4]. However, other scholars argue that the Chinese teacher’s authoritative position in the classroom does not affect the classroom from becoming learner-centered because the teacher is a constructivist educator (Biggs, 1998) [6].

Hofstede’s (2001) remarks on power distance and cultural dimensions could not identify the specific impact of power distance on second language acquisition in the classroom [1]. While most of the research on combining power distance and instruction stays in the field of contrastive analysis and combining with individualism and collectivism (Alshahrani, 2017; Spencer-Oatey, 1997) [7, 8] another part is combining behavioral research and lacks research that addresses classroom equity under this field. The main purpose of this paper is to analyze and critically assess the impact of power distance on second language learners in classroom learning in the context of cross-cultural communication and how power distance affects equity in second language classrooms by using sample surveys and semi-structured interviews. It also aims to address the negative effects of power distance on equity in the second language classroom, which can be of great importance in maintaining classroom equity, improving teachers’ effectiveness, and harmonizing teacher-student relationships.

## 3 Method

### 3.1 Research Methodology

The questionnaire was designed based on Hofstede’s definition of interculturalism and power distance, combined with Xu Linlin & Fan Rong’s (2010) [9] findings on the negative effects of power distance on foreign language teaching. The subjects of this study were 122 students enrolled in junior high school at an international school in Shandong, China, and their teachers.



**Fig. 1.** Do you feel psychologically pressured as a student to ask for help from teachers or group leaders? (Self-drawing)

### 3.2 Findings of the Study

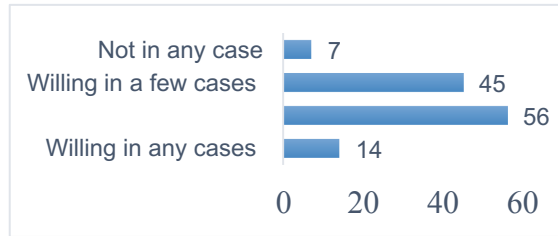
First, the semi-structured interviews with the teachers revealed that the teachers were conscious of making the students the leaders of the classroom, but that this was difficult to achieve due to various “pressures” and that it was difficult for the teachers to accommodate the needs of all students in the teaching process. Teachers indicated that they believe students should be treated fairly and equitably in the classroom and should receive the same level of attention, but that this is difficult to achieve in the classroom. The importance of students’ academic performance, the pressure on students to advance to higher education, and parents’ concern for students’ performance were factors that teachers emphasized repeatedly in interviews, forcing them to give in to the reality that they could not increase or decrease the pace of lessons for a few students.

Secondly, teachers are unable to allocate resources and attention to students in a reasonable and equitable manner, and they are unable to treat students fairly when they achieve. In an interview with a teacher about two students with different grades participating in an English competition at the same time, the teacher said that she would focus her efforts on the student who was more likely to win. When it was mentioned that a student with a low grade suddenly achieved a good grade, the teacher’s first reaction was to doubt the student’s grade. More notably, when asked a question related to classroom questioning, the teacher indicated that if a poor student and a top student answered a question correctly at the same time, the teacher would give extra praise to the poor student. All of these behaviors are challenges to equity in the L2 classroom.

Thirdly, as shown in the Fig. 1, in the context of a high power distance classroom, most students experience additional psychological stress and anxiety, and their subjective and critical thinking is affected, resulting in a transitory dependence on the teacher’s decisions. Students’ psychological stress is mainly reflected in the process of interaction with people of higher hierarchical status (e.g., teachers, group leaders, etc.).

Images and data are from the author’s research.

Finally, as shown in the Fig. 2, the context of high rights distance still leaves some students silent in the face of teachers’ reproach, even if there is a teacher’s error of judgment. Under such conditions, the teacher’s position becomes more and more unassailable, the teacher’s decisions are regarded as supreme, the students’ feelings are easily ignored, and the students’ rights are not fully protected.



**Fig. 2.** Are you willing to follow the instructions of your superiors (e.g., parents, teachers) unconditionally? (Self-drawing). Images and data are from the author's research.

## 4 Reflection

Based on the above reflection, the author proposes the following ideas to maintain fairness in the classroom.

The first point is to redefine the status of the teacher in the classroom and to transform the classroom into a learning-centered classroom. In the context of high entitlement distance, teachers are perpetually at the extremes of entitlement, which tends to create stress and anxiety for students, which is detrimental to student learning and hinders the development and interaction of teacher-student and student-student relationships. According to Chickering and Gamson's (1987) [10] vision of the learning-centered classroom, teachers in a learning-centered classroom provide timely feedback to students and emphasize the development of students' active learning awareness and skills. The learning-centered classroom emphasizes reciprocal teacher-student and student-student interactions and respect for diversity. This approach can fully resolve these conflicts by allowing students to feel that the teacher cares about them, thereby relieving student stress and alleviating hierarchical tensions in the classroom.

The second point is to pay attention to students' needs, listen to students' opinions, and develop students' sense of self-directed learning (Xu & Fan, 2010) [4]. Teachers need to pay more attention to students in the teaching process and implement the idea that students are the main body of learning and that teachers' decisions should be made in order to better guide students' learning. Teachers should listen carefully to students' opinions, which helps to reduce the distance between teachers and students' rights. Such an approach facilitates an equal relationship between students and teachers to enhance teacher-student interaction and student-student interaction. Teachers should act as facilitators of student learning, as well as builders and developers of the classroom. Rather than standing on the high ground of power and ruling the classroom with personal emotions. Students should develop a sense of self-directed learning, improve their critical thinking skills, and reject blind dependence and trust in the teacher.

Finally, teachers need to be reasonable in their demands on students and treat each student fairly and equitably. Teachers need to give equal attention to each student and refuse to be biased, selfish, or favorable to any student, so as to promote fairness in the classroom.

## 5 Conclusion

To sum up, power distance can adversely affect classroom equity in ELT in the context of cross-cultural anxiety. It is a long way to go to maintain classroom equity in second language teaching in the context of high power distance. Teachers should increase their emotional investment in students, remove personal prejudice, and treat each student in a fair and equitable way and attitude. They should also focus on cultivating students' interest in learning, creating a good learning atmosphere for students, increasing the interaction between teachers and students, focusing on the cultivation of students' critical and creative thinking, and making the classroom a learning-centered classroom. Thus, the power distance in the classroom is reduced, classroom fairness is maintained, and students' learning efficiency is improved.

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