

---

**| RESEARCH ARTICLE**

## **Cultural Awareness as a Main Approach to Teaching a Course of Web Customization for Effective Cross-Cultural Communication**

**Pinfan Zhu**

*Professor, English Department, Texas State University, U.S.A*

**Corresponding Author:** Pinfan Zhu, **E-mail:** [pz10@txstate.edu](mailto:pz10@txstate.edu)

---

**| ABSTRACT**

Website customization is an important part of cross-cultural communication. Its goal is to make an existing website culturally, linguistically, graphically, technically, and rhetorically adapted (customized) to the target audience so that they can read and use it for a practical purpose as if it were originally created for their own use. Web customization places two tasks on cross-cultural communicators: to have a good understanding of the culture of the target country and a good command of its language conventions. They are the guarantee for making a source website well customized and accepted by the target audience. This article explores important cultural elements involved through secondary research or text analysis and worked out guidelines for teaching a course on Website Customization for effective cross-cultural communication. Important findings include that the effectiveness or success of customized websites is directly influenced by the impacts of cultural understanding and awareness. These impacts infiltrate every aspect of communication. The significance of the research is that it points out the aspects where problems easily pop up in web customization and has worked out guidelines for solving these problems, which is a contribution to successful cross-cultural communication.

**| KEYWORDS**

Web customization, cross-cultural communication, language use, and culture.

**| ARTICLE INFORMATION**

**ACCEPTED:** 01 November 2023

**PUBLISHED:** 28 November 2023

**DOI:** 10.32996/ijllt.2023.6.11.23

---

### **1. Introduction**

#### **1.1 Course Goal and Literature Review**

Web site customization falls in the category of cross-cultural communication, which is about communication between different nations or cultures. To successfully teach a course of localizing or customizing a website, the author first set up clear a goal, which is to either effectively adapt an existing website to a country of a foreign culture or create a website for the audience of that culture so that it follows the cultural conventions and customs of that country and the target audience can use it as if it were designed in their own culture and language. Text books used include *Usability and Internationalization of Information Technology* by Nuray Aykin (2006), *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation* by Mona Baker (2005), and *The Culturally Customized Web Site* by Nitish Singh and Arun Pereira (2006), and some online readings on contrastive rhetoric. Aykin's book, which was highly recommended in *Technical Communication Vol.52* of 2005, consists of a dozen articles written by well-established intercultural communication scholars on international technical communication. These articles are systematically arranged and categorized so that learners can approach cross-cultural communication from different perspectives and at different levels. Important cultural models such as Edward Hall's high-context and low context cultures, Geert Hofstede's six cultural dimensions, etc. and their applications are introduced; major issues in the fields are discussed. Learners will find the books very helpful, especially with some case studies provided, which help them conduct their cross-cultural research in an economical and effective manner. Singh and Pereira's book has abundant samples of customized websites with insightful comments which are very instructive. This book has also many useful examples for using Hofstede's cultural dimensions' theories, which help students gain a deep understanding of

website customization principles. As mentioned before, language is a big problem that website customization designers must encounter in their actual work of web site customization; naturally students need to command some language skills to cope with the situation. Baker's book offers useful theoretical guidance in how to achieve maximum linguistic equivalence at semantic, syntactical, and discourse levels. Students find the book very useful as it provides them with practical language knowledge and skills to cope with translation problems. In designing the course, the author also emphasized that students should command a software technology for customization; he required that students should be able to use XML and HTML languages for website customization and Dreamweaver for the goal, but this article mainly focuses on the cultural aspect.

## 2. Teaching Objectives

As seen from the above paragraph, this course mainly consists of three parts: understanding cultures, use of linguistic and rhetorical knowledge, and command of webpage design technology (XML, HTML and Dreamweaver). These three parts form the general goals of course. Then, in light of the goals, the author designed teaching objectives which helped achieve the goals. Specifically, the objectives include cultural understanding, cultivation of cultural awareness, mastering the theories of important cultural models, and the application of the models' theory in customizing websites. Teaching objectives for the language and rhetoric part include understanding of language differences at the semantic level, syntactical level, and discourse level, how to achieve equivalent effects at these different levels, and using the right rhetorical strategy to target a cross-cultural audience. The technology section requires students to write XML, HTML documents and create DTDs and schema out of the given data or Dreamweaver to create websites. The author's specific teaching tactics to achieve these objectives are discussed in the following sections together with the methods for assessing students' learning results. However, the main focus of this article is the cultural part, limited by the space.

## 3. Cross-Cultural Awareness

Cross-cultural awareness refers to the good understanding of one's own culture and others' cultures and the sensitivity to cultural differences. Cross-cultural awareness is very important as attitudes, behaviors, values, beliefs, motivations, management, and leadership styles vary significantly from country to country, which have a considerable impact on how business or communication is done and whether they both will be successful or not. So, to cultivate students' cross-cultural awareness is the first teaching objective in the web customization course. As the author's students were graduate students, some of whom possessed some knowledge of a foreign language, had some working experience in foreign countries, knew the basic research skills, and were well motivated; he considered it more appropriate to use problem-solving based methods and research-oriented approaches to enable the students to reach the course goals.

Students need to understand what culture is before they develop their cross-cultural awareness. So, the author prompted them to respond to a discussion board question about how they could define *culture*. After they posted their definitions on the web board, they continue to use search engines such as Google to search for more definitions by entering words like "definitions of culture," and "what is culture." The purpose for this practice is that they are able to discuss and comment on the definitions they have searched out and compare them with their own definitions so as to have a broad understanding of culture. They focused on definitions by famous scholars such as Edward Tylor, Damen, L, Franz Boas, Clifford Geertz, Geert Hofstede, Edgar Schein, Kroeber and Kluckhohn, Michel Foucault, Raymond Williams, Edward Hall, Margaret Mead, John H. Bodley, and Matthew Arnold, which largely broadened students' minds and deepened students' understanding of culture. They realized culture has much broader implications than they thought, and different scholars tend to interpret culture from their disciplinary perspectives, but all these definitions contribute to forming a panoramic view of culture. They know culture needs to be understood in a broad sense though some definitions are narrow in scope. The definitions searched out may also contribute to the total definitions of culture. This research-based learning strategy really helped achieve the objective effectively as students commanded the concept comprehensively. However, for the course purpose, the following definition was preferred as it summarizes the key ideas of most of the definitions of culture and is more suitable to bear in mind regarding the aspects we need to pay attention to when customizing a web site. The definition is as follows:

Every aspect of life: know-how, technical knowledge, customs of food and dress, religion, mentality, values, language, symbols, socio-political and economic behavior, indigenous methods of taking decisions and exercising power, methods of production and economic relations, and so on" (Verhelst 17).

## 4. Using Cultural Models to Develop Cross-Cultural Awareness

After students were able to define culture, the next teaching objective was to develop their cross-cultural awareness, for which the author designed the following teaching tactics: 1) mastering the models for understanding characteristics of major genres of cultures, 2) avoiding ethnocentrism and cultural stereotypes, and 3) categorizing students' cultures according to the cultural

models by using facts and examples. As cultural models are generally rules and principles based (Social customs or conventions are comparable to unwritten rules or principles), so the teaching tactics the author adopted included these steps:

- a. demonstrating and explaining the rules (showing the models on PowerPoint slides), presenting examples, or personal experience,
- b. offering cues for interpretation, and
- c. providing practice and feedback.
- d. Students were required to read the relevant books and chapters assigned from Aykin’s textbook so as to get prepared for class discussions or online research for their responses to Web board questions I posted.

To introduce the models, the author explained that, though cultures vary with peoples’ ethnicity, gender, age, language, values, beliefs, world outlook, religion, socio-economic status, education, geographical conditions, etc., intercultural communication theorists and anthropologists were able to identify cultural patterns in light of their common characteristics. Emilie W. Gould explains the models for understanding these cultural patterns in Chapter 4 under the title “Synthesizing the Literature on Culture Values” in Aykin’s book. Students were required to read the chapter closely for later class discussion. For this course, the author focused on Edward Hall’s model, Geert Hofstede’s model, and Trompenaars’ model as these models are closely related to communication styles and cultural aspects related to web customization. Since this part of learning is largely about reading verbal information, the author decided to list the key points so that students would not get lost in their reading. In fact, according to Robert M. Gagne, the right teaching tactic to teaching verbal information is to draw attention to key information, explain it, and provide cues (67). So, the author listed the key ideas of the three models in three tables for easy reference and memorization. To save space, the author put the tables of Hofstede and Trompenaars’ models in the Appendices A and B but display the table of Hall’s model as follows:

Table1. Characteristics of Communication Styles of Hall’s Low-Context Culture in Contrast with Those of High-context Culture

(1) Low-context Culture	High-context Culture
1. Overtly displays meanings through direct communication forms	1. Implicitly embeds meanings at different levels of the sociocultural context
2. Values individualism	2. Values group sense
3. Tends to develop transitory personal Relationships	3. Tends to take time to cultivate and establish a permanent personal relationship
4. Emphasize linear logic	4. Emphasizes spiral logic
5. Values direct verbal interaction and is less able to read nonverbal expressions	5. Values indirect verbal interaction and is more able to read nonverbal expressions
6. Tends to use “logic” to present ideas	6. Tends to use “feeling” in Expression
7. Tends to emphasize highly structured messages, give details, and place great stress on words and technical signs	7. Tends to give simple, ambiguous, noncontexting messages

(Source: Adapted from Guoming Chen and William Starosta’s Foundation of Intercultural Communication: Allyn and Bacon, 1998)

These three tables, the author explained to the students, provided important cultural characteristics and guidelines to cross-cultural communication that help them understand cultural differences. For example, Table 1 explains the conventional rhetorical patterns or organizational patterns used in high-context culture and low context culture, e.g. linear pattern vs. non-linear pattern or indirect vs. direct, or inductive vs. deductive patterns as called by different scholars such as Kaplan Robert, Ron Scollon, and Ulla Connor, as well as the conventional rhetorical strategies used in verbal communication: pathos-oriented vs. logos-oriented strategies as used in high-context and low-context cultures respectively. Table 2 explains the values, assumptions, and beliefs of different genres of cultures, which are cues for them to follow in analyzing a cross-cultural audience.

Table 2 Geert Hofstede’s Six Cultural Dimensions Model

Cultural Dimensions	Characteristics
Cultures of Large Power Distance	Accept power inequalities between individuals, respect authority, make autocratic decisions, expect one-way, specific, exact, and detailed communications from superiors, expect communications to reflect status, authority, professional experience and expertise, etc.
Cultures of Small Power Distance	Favor egalitarian ethos, prefer a consultative style of decision-making, more creativity and flexibility among employees and managers, etc.
Cultures of Collectivism	Emphasize group harmony, trust, we-relationships; share interests and prefer community collaboration, care about others, and stress the public good, etc
Cultures of Individualism	Loose ties between individuals, emphasize personal freedom, opinion, innovation, privacy, and everyone looking after himself/herself and their family, etc
Cultures of Masculinity	Encourage strength, assertiveness, competitiveness, material success, ambition, confrontational communication style among men, etc.
Cultures of Femininity	Gender roles overlap,; prefer feminine traits such as modesty, tenderness, gentleness, concern for quality of life; encourage harmony, politeness etc.
Cultures of High Uncertainty Avoidance	Resist deviant ideas, or innovation, little tolerance of ambiguity, distrust of outsiders, suspicious of

	strangers; prefer precise, detailed information, respect punctuality and the rule of law, prefer predictability, etc.
Cultures of Low Uncertainty Avoidance	Tolerant of youthful opinion, innovation, ambiguity, regard deviant behaviors as curious rather than dangerous.
Cultures of Polychronic Orientation	Do many things at a time, stress more involvement with people and transactions rather than adherence to schedule; emphasize commitment to people and lifetime relationships, regarding time as recurrent, etc.
Cultures of Monochronic Orientation	Do one thing at a time; compartmentalize relationships and tasks according to strict time schedule, value promptness, and detailed information.
Cultures of Long-Term Orientation	Adapt tradition to modern perspectives, respect social and status obligations within limits, thrifty and sparing of resources, persevere toward slow results, willing to subordinate to a purpose, and respect the demands of virtue, etc.
Cultures of Short-Term Orientation	Respect social standing, tradition, and status, regardless of cost "in keeping up with Joneses, expect quick results, and save faces, etc.

(From *Usability and Internationalization of Information Technology* by Aykin)

Table 3 provides very practical guidelines for interface design which is the major element of a web site construction. Needless to say, they are of great importance to them in their website customization studying.

Table 3 Trompenaars' Eight Cultural Dimensions Model for Interface Design

Cultural Dimensions	Design features
Universalism	Overall focus on products, functionality, and the price, little information about company, price comparison, formal rhetorical style, sharp focus images that highlight the product, symmetric templates, and consistent interaction style
Particularism	Overall focus on business relationships and services, strong branding, customer testimonials, familiar rhetorical style, soft focus images highlighting customers, asymmetric templates,

	and use of different interaction models to achieve different goals
Individualism	Focus on individual self-interest and enhanced performance, text reinforcing self image, status, innovation or material success, and images of individuals using the products or people at play or working
Communitarianism	Focus on collaborative behavior or group communication, text information on benefits to others, emphasis on quality and reliability, images of group of people using product (product alone may never appear), and images of people formally dressed working with others.
Neutral Communication Style	Subdues color, reversed rhetorical style, more text than graphics, uncluttered layout, long-and middle range images, people in images with reserved eye contact, and use of irony and word play
Expressive Communication Style	Bright, expressive colors, exaggerated claims, elaborate words, and emphatic punctuation, equal or large amount of graphics to text, rhetoric anchored in personal stories or narratives, dense layout, close-up images, strong eye contact, and comic images or animations
Specific Relationships	Task oriented information, direct rhetorical style, evocation of personal satisfaction, images of happy, smiling people, specific to general logic
Diffuse Relationships	Information that references the business relationship, indirect rhetorical style, evocation of public principles, images of reserved, serious people, and general to specific logic
Status by Achievement	Programmatic sites that 'do' something, focus on outcome, visual angle giving power to viewers, images of youth of both sexes, leaders made to appear approachable, names used without titles, frequent updates and revisions, and many links presenting many choices

Status by Ascription	E-commerce functions secondary to organizational information, focus on reputation and qualifications, visual angle enhancing size of object, images of old men, leaders given full job titles and honorifics, sites relatively static, and fewer links with choices more strongly structured
Orientation to the past	Dark colors with historical connotations, background information before new information, emphasis on text and historical information, and images of historical figures or older people
Orientation to the present	Bright , active colors, current information only, emphasis on empowering users to act quickly, and images of contemporary people doing things
Orientation to the future	Futuristic or dreamy colors, information on mission and future plans, promotional innovation and use of novel interface features, and non-presentational or idealized images
Inner-Directed Cultures	Focus on action and technology, spare, instructional text, images of human achievements, bright active colors, and symmetric templates,
Other-Directed Cultures	Focus on nature and human community, figurative, metaphoric text, images of nature, pale, "natural" colors, and asymmetric templates.
Sequential use of time	Strongly structured task hierarchies, wizards, and "breadcrumb trails" and site maps
Synchronic Use of Time	"one-click interactional model, tolerance for failure, and total reliance on search engines

(From *Usability and Internationalization of Information Technology* by Aykin)

The command of verbal information by students also needs the teacher to provide a meaningful context in which the features manifest themselves, or cues to understand the features, in addition to highlighting the important features and having them chunked in tables for easy learning. So, for all the three tables, the author contextualized in class some of the features to show how cultures differ in the same rhetorical situation.

For example, when explaining the first cultural difference in table 1, the author commented that by overtly displaying meanings through direct communication forms is meant that people use explicit message to express their idea. For instance, Americans, who belong to the low context culture, will say what they want to say. In contrast, by implicitly embedding meanings at different levels of the sociocultural context, people like Chinese who belong to the high-context culture would “beat around the bush” rather than state their intention or meanings directly or explicitly. For example, if a host asks whether a Chinese guest is hungry, the Chinese would possibly say “not hungry.” However, a Chinese host, by referring to the clues such as the weak tone used, the unassertive facial expression, and the time the answer is made, and the long journey that the guest is just back from, etc., s/he gathers the negative answer is just a courteous response that the guest does not want to disturb the host too much, but not that s/he is not really hungry. So, the host would still provide the guest with a meal in such a case. So, a Chinese people’s ‘no’ is not a really ‘no.’ By the example, the students understood the first difference in the table.

To explain large power distance dimension in Table 2 (in Gagne’s term, using demonstration, or expository tactic), the author used screenshots of a Chinese medical website from the home page to show how large power distance features are reflected in a website interface. Look at the three screen shots below:



Fig.1. Screen Shot of a Chinese Medical Web site (Source:www.bdfkf120.com)





Fig. 2. Screen Shot of the Middle part of the Website (Source: www.bf120.com)



Fig.3. Screen Shot of the Bottom Part (Source: www.bdfkf120.com)

All the three screen shots show what characteristics a website of a culture belonging to a large power distance has. In the first screen shot, some pictures are shown: one is about a group of doctors treating patients (value collectivistic or communitarian sense); the second one is about an expert using highly advanced and sophisticated equipment (value expertise), and the third one is the imposing building of the hospital (value strong financial power of the hospital). The second screenshot shows two army experts (in fact three with one not included in the shot) of leukemia and an introduction to their marvelous medical achievements in treating leukemia, with other academic achievements (value authorities and experts). The third one shows the awards they received for their service and a certificate for their expertise. These shots show the awareness of large power. When readers see the powerful evidence, they would feel at ease in seeking medical treatments from this hospital with such strong power in Beijing. There are also four contrastive pictures showing how marvelously two patients have recovered from their leukemia, which was not included here to save space. The evidence further assures patients of their recovery after treatment in the hospital. These explanations not only helped students understand how to interpret the cultural dimensions but also provided them with a way to find evidence to justify the interpretations. This is the effective way of addressing verbal information learning.

Of course, verbal information learning type is inseparable from concept study. My specific teaching tactics to cope with this type of learning includes: 1) Students are supposed to pick out the commonly used terms in cultural studies in their reading, 2) try to

define the terms and provide examples to support their definitions, 3) categorize their culture according to the definitions, and 4) take a quiz on concepts, rules, or principles they have learned, a kind of assessment of their learning results.

All these tactics serve the same objective: developing their understanding of cultural differences and their cross-cultural awareness. Tactic 1 ensures students to read carefully the first few chapters of Aykin's *Usability and Internationalization of Information Technology*, which has the basic knowledge about cross-cultural technical communication so that they are prepared for in-class discussions. At the same time, it trains their research skills since they are also encouraged to use Google to browse numerous websites concerning cross-cultural communication that have commonly used terms and explanations. Next in class, they exchanged to each other their definitions for concepts, commented and critiqued their findings in groups, and finally reported their research results to the whole class. Concepts such as large power distance, masculinity vs. femininity, collectivism vs individualism, uncertainty avoidance, polychronic vs. monochronic, and those terms listed in tables of Appendices A and B are the key concepts students must command.

Tactic 2 aims at making their understanding more accurate. Students may overlook something, misinterpret something, or confuse something when they define concepts and terms. This is the moment when an instructor can help set them on the right track. For example, some of them may regard communitarianism and collectivism as two different things while the two terms actually mean the same thing. Others confuse 'website internationalization' and 'website customization' as the same thing though the terms actually have different meanings. The former refers to websites designed for general international audience while the latter refers to websites designed for a particular group of cross-cultural audiences.

Tactics 3 and 4 are used to improve students' cognitive level and consolidate their cultural awareness. The author required the students to define their culture in light of the definitions and characteristics they learned from chapters and what is listed in the three tables and to provide their personal experiences, facts or secondary research results to justify their understanding. Specific instructions are these:

- Explain Hall' cultural model.
- Define American culture in light of the communication characteristics of low-context or high-context culture.
- Evaluate a country's cultural dimension like Japan; is it a high-context culture or low-context culture? Why?
- Support their definition with facts, personal experiences, or either primary or secondary research results.
- Choose a different country (China or France) to define it following the same steps.
- Define American culture in light of the characteristics of the six cultural dimensions of Hofstede's model. Which dimensions does American cultural fall in, large power distance or small power distance, collectivism or individualism, high uncertainty avoidance or low uncertainty avoidance, etc?
- Choose a different country to provide interface design principles for its culture by following Trompenaars' model.

To assess the students' learning results, the author designed the quiz that consists of concept definitions, multiple choices according to the scenarios, short answers to questions about communication styles, and true or false questions.

### **5. Further Enhance Students' Cultural Awareness and Knowledge**

After students have commanded the basic cultural knowledge, it necessary to enhance their cross-cultural awareness and further expand their knowledge. To reach this teaching objective, the author used the following teaching tactics:

1. Explain the importance of cross-cultural awareness by using reasons and examples.
2. Emphasize the importance of avoiding ethnocentrism and cultural stereotypes.
3. Encourage students to find examples or life experiences to show the importance of cross-cultural awareness.

Cross-cultural awareness is important because poor awareness will lead to misunderstanding, embarrassing situation, offence, confusion, and business failure. What's more, problems that occur because of cultural barriers are so frequently encountered that they are simply unavoidable in areas such as management, PR, advertising, non-verbal communication, negotiation, and collaboration. In a study of 200 business executives in the US, a global management company, Accenture, found that two thirds of respondents had experienced miscommunication issues within their outsourcing operations. On the internet, there are numerous such examples. Neil Payne tells the following events in his article "The Impact of Culture Mistakes and Poor Communication"

An American oil rig supervisor in Indonesia shouted at an employee to take a boat to shore. Since no one berates an Indonesian in public, a mob of outraged workers chased the supervisor with axes.

A company advertised eyeglasses in Thailand by featuring a variety of cute animals wearing glasses. The ad was a poor choice since animals are considered to be a form of low life and no self-respecting Thai would not wear anything worn by animals.

The soft drink Fresca was being promoted by a saleswoman in Mexico. She was surprised that her sales pitch was greeted with laughter, and later embarrassed when she learned that *fresca* is slang for "lesbian."

When President George Bush went to Japan with Lee Iacocca and other American business magnates, and directly made explicit and direct demands on Japanese leaders, they violated Japanese etiquette. To the Japanese (who use high context language) it is considered rude and a sign of ignorance or desperation to lower oneself to make direct demands. Some analysts believe it severely damaged the negotiations and confirmed to the Japanese that Americans are barbarians.

A soft drink was introduced into Arab countries with an attractive label that had stars on it--six-pointed stars. The Arabs interpreted this as pro-Israeli and refused to buy it. Another label was printed in ten languages, one of which was Hebrew--again the Arabs did not buy it.

U.S. and British negotiators found themselves at a standstill when the American company proposed that they "table" particular key points. In the U.S. "Tabling a motion" means to not discuss it, while the same phrase in Great Britain means to "bring it to the table for discussion" (Screen 1).

In fact, in addition to examples online, numerous other examples can be also found in books on intercultural communication. In terms of interface design, Jakob Nielsen gives an example in the forward to *Usability and Internationalization of Information Technology* by Aykin. He points out that, while testing a customer service site for an American technology product in Korea, they find the Koreans have difficulty navigating the site because they cannot understand the information structure, though the interface is designed in Korean (Aykin xvi). The reason is that the designer does not understand the ways Koreans approach Web site tasks are different from the ways American do in the similar situation. The examples undoubtedly explain the importance of cross-cultural awareness.

Having demonstrated the importance of cross-cultural awareness, the author encouraged students to find their own examples to show the significance of cross-cultural awareness in different areas such as management, PR, advertising, use of language, negotiations, etc. and post their findings on the web board. The rationale for this practice is that it not only enables students to see the omnipresence of this poor awareness problem, but also shows the serious consequences of the problem, which greatly increases their cross-cultural awareness. However, to understand the cultural differences and have a good cross-cultural awareness are not enough, for there are two trends we need to remind students of in learning cross-cultural differences: ethnocentrism and cultural stereotype.

## **6. Avoid Wrong Attitudes toward Understanding Cultural Differences**

One important point we need to bear in mind in teaching cultural differences is that we need to remind our students of the right attitude to hold towards others' cultures. It is only with the right attitude that students can conduct objective research and audience analysis when they try to localize a website for a certain culture. Also, they can use the appropriate language to address their cross-cultural audience only when they have the right attitude towards their language. Finally, because the United States is the most powerful country in the world, American students tend to think it is the center of the world, so they tend to have American ethnocentrism. They tend to use their cultural values and beliefs to evaluate other cultures, which is not appropriate in cross-cultural communication. This is why we need to draw students' attention to this. As this type of learning is about attitude change, which, according to Willie Savenye, a professor from Texas State University, is difficult and takes a long term to succeed. A semester is too short to see the change. However, it is still necessary for students to understand the relevant concepts in this regard. So, the author decided to first adopt expository tactic, then the inquiry tactic, and finally he required students to critique some texts to find out any ethnocentrism. What the author did here is to first explain the concepts of ethnocentrism and cultural stereotypes and then cite examples to show them (demonstration). The author cited Howard Culbertson's explanation: "We are ethnocentric when we use our cultural norms to make generalizations about other peoples' cultures and customs. Such generalizations -- often made without a conscious awareness that we've used our culture as a universal yardstick -- can be way off base and cause us to

misjudge other peoples. Ethnocentrism is very bad as it leads us to make false assumptions about cultural differences. Ethnocentrism also distorts communication between human beings." Here are some examples:

We often talk about British drivers driving "on the wrong side" of the road. Why not just say "opposite side" or even "left hand side"?

We talk about written Hebrew as reading "backward." Why not just say "from right to left" or "in the opposite direction from English." (Culbertson).

The opposite of ethnocentrism is xenocentrism which means preferring ideas and things from other cultures over ideas and things from your own culture. At the heart of xenocentrism is an assumption that other cultures are superior to our own. This is also a wrong attitude students need to guard against.

William B Gudykunst points out, "Cultural stereotypes are all too often overgeneralized, inaccurate, and negative" (130). People who generate cultural stereotypes are often cognitively biased. They tend to oversimplify, exaggerate, or distort what they observe about people from another culture. For example, an American tells his friends that South Koreans are good at stealing because his wallet was stolen there in South Korea. Other stereotypes about Americans often heard include: Americans are poor at math; Americans are bad foreign language learners, and American students do not show respect for their teachers. Cultural stereotypes are misleading and cause hostile attitudes. They must be avoided as they are harmful to cultural studies. Otherwise, cross-cultural audience will refuse to read the localized the Web site because of the biased language, and the communication will end in failure.

### **7. Avoid Mechanical Understanding of Cultural Variables**

This is also an imperative part of the teaching. Students, lack of experience, tend to understand things mechanically, which may yield undesired results when they are studying a different culture. Though experts have categorized cultures in different ways, by no means can we understand they are invariable, exhaustive, and constant all the time. It is also hard to absolutely ascribe a culture to a certain dimension, and it is the same with a culture's people who may happen to possess characteristics contrary to their general cultural traits. Just as Peter Anderson *et al* point out, "Not all people in a culture share equally in the general traits of that culture. Some Americans are collectivistic and other oriented, and some Japanese are highly tactile. One should never attribute all of the characteristics of a culture to any individual with great certainty" (Gudykunst 101). Mike Markel has some specific instructions for students to follow in this aspect:

- Each variable (cultural dimension) represents a spectrum of attitude. Terms such as *high context* and *low context*, for instance, represent two endpoints on a scale. Many cultures occupy a middle ground.
- The six variables (dimensions of Hofstede) do not line up in a clear pattern. For example, individualistic cultures tend to see great distance between business and personal lives-in any culture. These variables do not form a consistent pattern. For example, the dominant culture in the United States is highly individualistic rather than group oriented, but is only about midway along the scale of attitudes toward accepting uncertainty.
- Different organizations within the same culture can vary greatly. For example, one software company in Germany might have a management style that does not tolerate uncertainty, whereas another software company in Germany might have a management style that tolerates a lot of uncertainty.
- An organization's cultural attitudes are fluid, not static. How an organization is operated is determined not only by the dominant culture but also by its own people. As new people join an organization, its culture changes. The IBM of 1986 is not the IBM of 2006 (80).

With all the advice and explanation above, students are put on guard against the improper attitudes toward other cultures if they are not totally changed in their attitude.

To assess the learning result of my students' knowledge in this aspect, the author gave this assignment to my student. Specifically, he asked the students to: 1) choose any article in the public media, or in academic journals, or Web site that aims at communicating with cross-cultural audience and then apply critical reading of the article, 2) to identify any terms or expression that connotes ethnocentrism or stereotype, and 3) to justify why the terms are ethnocentric or stereotypical. This assignment may help them synthesize what they have learned, apply critically what they have learned, and improve their cognitive and research levels.

### 8. Expand Cultural Awareness in Different Aspects

Now that students have mastered the basic knowledge about cultural differences and have developed their cultural awareness, it is necessary to further expand their cultural knowledge so as to get prepared for web customization. Web customization is related to many cultural aspects such as the use of graphics, design patterns, verbal information, technology, knowledge about the life style, knowledge of the political, economic, religious, educational situations, social customs, and communication styles of the target culture. The teaching objectives mainly focused on the three categories that were closely related to web design and customization: 1) Identifying the cultural differences in using graphics, 2) Understanding non-verbal communication manners, and 3) Being aware of other cultural elements.

Graphics include use of colors, icons, charts, tables, layout designs, and images while non-verbal communication includes the knowledge about how people from a different culture use personal space (proxemics), body language (kinesics), time (chronemics), and paralanguage (pitch, volume and intonation of speech) in communication. This body of knowledge is taught by using pictures. In other words, students are engaged in visual information-based learning type. In this case, the best teaching tactic is to use video clips, actual websites, and multimedia.

However, before actually showing the video clips and websites, the author used some examples to show these. People from different cultures use different icons to express the same idea, or the same sign have different meanings in different cultures. So, when using icons, symbols and signs, a web customization designer needs to be careful. For instance, Americans use a semi-cylinder-like box as a mailbox, but Chinese use a square box as a mail box. Thus Chinese people may not recognize Americans' mail box as a mail box. To indicate money, different symbols like \$, €, £, and ¥ are used by peoples from different cultures. Similarly, the "OK" hand gesture used by Americans means "nobody" in France, "a coin" in Japan, and "an invitation to have gay sex" in Malta. As websites normally contain many graphics, I choose one to illustrate the differences in using graphics according to different cultural values. Below are two governmental web sites. The one on the left is the Web site of Austin City, and the one on the right is the Web site of Nanning City in China.



Fig.4. Austin City of the United States                      Nanning City of China

(Source: <http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/> and <http://www.nanning.gov.cn>)

On these two Web sites, the first difference we notice is the use of colors. Nanning city uses more colors and bright colors (bright green, red, and blue) while Austin uses less colors and not bright colors (dark green and grey). This phenomenon reflects the features of Trompenaars' model for interface design (expressive vs. neutral).

Second, Nanning site is highly structured, populated, and categorized in terms of its layout (more categories such as governmental agenda, achievements, city construction with a blue print, commercial section, mayor's section, city policy, FAQ, etc. while Austin's is relatively simple with fewer categories (Sequential vs. Synchronic).

Third, icons are used for different purposes. Nanning uses icons to show power, or formality such as the towering office buildings, banners to show government conferences, archives, and key urban projects, a writing pad with a pen to show "contact the mayor," and two red flowers to show the blooming situation of the city. In contrast, Austin uses four icons at the bottom to show the emphasis on quality life (see below). The home page does not look so formal as that of Nanning's (individualism vs. communitarianism).



Fig.5. Icons of Austin City Web site  
(Sources: <http://www.ci.austin.tx.us/>)

The author chose these two Web sites because they were representative of low-context culture (Austin) and high-context culture (Nanning) respectively. With the example, students found it easier to understand the different uses of graphics. The analysis also confirms Trompenaars' model of cultural interface design features. So, it is very instructive.

In addition to showing website screenshots, the author also played some video clips that show how red is used on celebrating occasions in China, such as wedding ceremonies, business opening ceremonies, festival celebrating occasions, and honor boards. The purpose is to show colors have different cultural implications. Red is more associated with auspicious occasions and positive things while it is more associated with negative things such as danger, bloodshed, anger, warning, and war.

To introduce non-verbal communication, the author played VHS tapes and DVDs to the students. Each of these lasts 20 to 30 minutes. Items include "Non-verbal Communication and Culture," "Body Language: An International View," and "Non-verbal Communication in a Global Marketplace." These video tapes and DVDs are interesting, informative, and well categorized. Topics cover proxemics, paralanguage, kinesics, and chronemics. The videos describe the components of nonverbal communication, teaching how to interpret messages based on eye contact, posture, gesture, appearance, and the use of space. The DVDs describes the vast range of interpretations that people from different cultures apply to similar physical attitudes and movements. These media are published by Insight Media Company. Students are required to write a memo report on a specific category and answer questions about what they see on the video tapes and the DVDs so as for the instructor to assess their learning results.

For identifying different cultural elements used in Web design, the author started with a website and asked the students to point out what elements they see on a Web page; then, he used an inquiry approach to prompt the students to identify the elements that may have different cultural representations. Here is the website used in class:



Fig.6. Screen Shot of a Website (Source: [www.money.com](http://www.money.com))

Students identified elements like currency unit, date and time, font, punctuations, typographical unit, size and measurement, text direction, telephone number, address, number formats, etc. Then the author further explained that all these elements needed converting to their respective formats of the target culture in web customization, together with Window XP as an example. In this way, they knew more about the significance of converting these elements.

To further expand their knowledge in this aspect, the author decided to give the students a problem-solving and research-oriented assignment. He required them to fill up a form that can summarize the commonly used cultural elements on a Web site. He referred them to Chapter 2 “International Information Display” of Aykin’s book which lists a lot of such elements for reference. The author also encouraged them to search on the internet to find more data. A table for them to fill in is as follows. The purpose is that, with the help of the table, students are clear of what is to be researched, how to summarize and categorize their research findings. In addition, the assignment also helped train their problem-solving ability. The table below is an open-ended one so that students may have more leeway to choose the countries they are interested in.

Table 2. Identify Cultural Elements in Different Countries

Countries Cultural Elements	USA	Germany	Japan ...
Telephone Number	(123)456-7890	(123) 4 56 78 90	123-45-6-789-0000
Address			
Typographic Units			
Text Direction			
Clothes Size			
Punctuations			
Time			
Date			
Currency display			
Color meanings			
Person’s Name			
Character set			
---			
---			
---			

In addition to knowing the above elements, they are also supposed to know how to apply Hofstede’s theories to culturally localize Web sites. Nitish Singh and Arun Perira’s *The Culturally Customized Web Sites* provides detailed information regarding how to use Hofstede’s theories in this regard. To facilitate students’ learning, the instructor summarized the key points for them in terms of the design features for different cultures. In Gagne’s theory, this is to provide students with decoding cues, an effective way for the verbal information type of learning (93). They are as follows:

**1) For cultures of Collectivism**

- Design clubs/chat rooms
- Emphasize community relations
- Family theme
- Loyalty programs
- Newsletter
- Links to local web sites
- Symbols and Pictures of national identity

**2) For cultures of Individualism, use:**

- Independence themes
- Good privacy statement
- Personalization and product uniqueness

**3) For culture of High Uncertainty avoidance, use:**

- Customer service
- Guided navigation
- Tradition theme
- Local stores
- Local terminology

- Free trials and downloads
- Transaction security and testimonials

#### 4) Power distance

- Hierarchy information and picture of important people
- Proper titles
- Quality assurance and awards
- Vision statement
- Pride of ownership appeal

#### 5) Masculinity

- Product effectiveness
- Quizzes and games
- Realism theme
- Clear gender role

#### 6) Femininity

- Share high-context value

#### 7). High-context cultures

- Aesthetics
- Politeness and indirectness
- Soft-sell approach

#### 8) Low-context culture

- Terms and conditions
- Hard-sell approach
- Rank or prestige and use of superlatives ( Singh 71-190)

Students commented that the summary enabled them to see the general picture and understand the book easily. They gave a high evaluation of the book saying that they learned a lot of useful information from this book regarding web customization.

### 9. Apply Theories into Practice

As stated before, the general course goal is to help students localize websites culturally, linguistically, and technologically. Naturally, the instructor needs to know if the students understand and are able to apply what they have learned regarding cross-cultural communication which is the final objective for this part. In other words, it is necessary to assess their learning results at this stage. The focus will be on their cultural knowledge. The author designed some assignments that require students to apply cultural communication knowledge and theories.

Written assignment 1 tests students' understanding of the cultural models by Hall, Hofstede, and Trompenaars and their applications in practical international technical communication, which is goal 1 of the course. To complete this paper, students need to do some research into a culture (or a foreign country) they are interested in. Then, they write a short report on how to conduct effective international technical communication with that country (culture) on a specific occasion such as oral presentations, writing business letters, conducting negotiations, and using visuals (colors). They are supposed to act as a cultural consultant in this situation. They can write the assignment paper in the form of a memo report in which they have an introduction, the body, and the conclusion. In the introduction, they need to state their purpose, reasons, issue, approach to the problem, and scope of the research. In the body, they may use a comparison and contrast method to discuss the differences in communication style in that chosen area between the American culture and the target culture, the possible misunderstandings caused by the differences, and suggestions for solving the communication problems in that area. Along the way, they must cite intercultural theories by Hall or Hofstede or Trompenaars or others to explain or support or justify their points. In the conclusion, they may summarize the main points or make suggestions for effective communication, or for further research in the area. They need to be well focused on a certain topic and write about 2000 words. They are not supposed to write a bit of everything without a theme to govern it. Obviously, the focus of the assignment is on the cultural awareness and application of theories to solve the cross-cultural communication problems.

Assignment 2 is an analytical paper that tests their understanding of the theories of customization, which is also the course goal. They can choose a specific medium such as software, a website, a technical document, online help, etc. and discuss it from



customization's perspective. They need to focus on graphics or cultural elements or verbal information and see if those items are appropriately adapted to the target culture. They still need to explain the problem by using the theories they have learned before and are also supposed to identify any term that smacks of ethnocentrism or stereotype used in the document. This assignment can be regarded as a small project as well. This assignment will assess their ability to read critically or to critique localized information product correctly or appropriately in light of the theories they have learned.

These are the main assessment tools I used for the cultural learning section, in addition to Web board responses and small quizzes. Students choose some topics such as negotiations with French businessmen and Japanese Businessmen, oral presentations in Japan, how to write business letters in Japanese etc. Their learning results met the author's expectations as they were able to use theories to solve practical communication problems.

## **10. Discussion**

The author's above-mentioned teaching experience indicates taking cultural awareness as the focus in teaching a web customization course is an effective method to lead the students on the right track. As Jon Gorden points out "Culture is not just one thing; it is everything" What we say, what we do, what we write, what we draw, and what we think are imbued with our cultural values, beliefs, assumptions, frames of reference, and ways of life. It is only when our communication happens with these systems of ours that the messages can be well accepted, and communication goes on smoothly. So, culture understanding should come first in cross-cultural communication, not language problems. After all, language is only the carrier of our culture; it is only a tool for communication across cultures. We should not put the cart before the horse and let language take an overall dominant role in web customization. In addition, a web customization course also needs more hands-on practice and lets students accumulate the experience in the actual web customization process though other skills of learning can not be excluded. Finally, the author wants to point out the limitation of this research. Some views in the article of the author's may have their limitations as they were formed on inadequate data basis and are the author's personal views, which may bear personal subjectivity and thus, affect some objectivity of the research. What's more, the area of graphical use and language use have limited study in this article, which may affect the comprehensiveness of the research as well. These are the weaknesses of the research that affect the study in terms of the adequacy and the objectivity. However, they do serve as stimuli for eliciting better ideas concerning the teaching of a web customization course. Readers are welcome to offer instructive advice.

## **11. Conclusion**

Teaching a course of website customization or localization mainly involves three parts: culture understanding, language and rhetorical applications, and use of technology. Among the three, the cultural part appears the most important, for even if the language has no errors and technology is properly used, if the website does not contain the content that accommodates the needs of the target audience, the communication will not be successful because the audience may not find it acceptable in terms of their cultural values and convention. The teaching of website customization involves the impartment of intellectual skills (critical thinking skills (reasoning, weighing, assessing, etc.), problem-solving skills, verbal comprehension, attitudes changing, etc. so, using Gagne's pedagogical theory as guidelines would be implementable. In designing the assignments, emphasis should be laid on developing students' critical thinking ability, problem-solving competencies, and research skills. This way, students could greatly maximize their learning effectiveness and reach the course goal successfully. Last but not the least, this study is mainly limited to the cultural aspect of web localization, so the author would recommend more studies from the layout aspect, graphical aspect, and linguistic aspect of web customization. In this way a comprehensive picture of the study will be formed. Also, in terms of teaching strategies, this study is basically following Gagne's learning theory, there are other learning theories like constructivism learning theory, humanism learning theory, behaviorism learning theory, etc. that the author would recommend further exploration as teaching strategies and testing their respective effectivenesses as well. By conducting futher research into these two areas: teaching content and teaching strategies for teaching a web customization class, cross-culturel communication effectiveness will be further developed.

**Funding:** This research received no external funding.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The authors declare no conflict of interest.

**Publisher's Note:** All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

## References

- [1] Aykin, N (2005). *Usability and Internationalization of Information Technology*. New Jersey: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers.
- [2] Baker, M. (2005). *In Other Words*. New York: Routledge.
- [3] Connor, U. (1996). *Contrastive Rhetoric*. Indianapolis: Cambridge University Press.
- [4] Culbertson, H. (2006) "Why ethnocentrism is Bad" *Ethnocentrism*. <home.snu.edu/~HCULBERT/ethno.htm>.
- [5] Enwei (2003). "Traditional Chinese Medicine". <www.enwei.com>.
- [6] Fawcett, P. (1997). *Translation and Language: Linguistic Theories Explained*. Manchester: St Jerome Publishing
- [7] Gagne, R. (1985). *The Conditions of Learning* 4<sup>th</sup> ed. New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston.
- [8] Gudykunst, W. (2000). *Handbook of International Communication and Intercultural Communication*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications.
- [9] Guo, M. & Starostar, W.(1998). *Foundation of Inter-cultural Communication*, Allen & Bacon
- [10] Gentzler, E. (1993). *Contemporary Translation Theories*. New York: Routledge.
- [11] Kaplan, R. (1967). "Cultural Thought Patterns in Intercultural education." *Language Learning*, 16.1: 8-20.
- [12] Markel, M. (2009). *Technical Communication*. 8<sup>th</sup> ed. Boston: Bedford/St.Martin's.
- [13] Neil, P. (2006). The Impact of Culture Mistakes and Poor Communication. *Cultural Blunders*. Aug. 2005. <<http://www.culturocity.com/articles/culturalblunders.htm>>.
- [14] Savenye, W. (2005). *Instructional Strategies*. Alkek Library, Texas State University.
- [15] Scollon, R & Scollon W. (1995). *Intercultural Communication: A Discourse Approach*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- [16] Singh, N, and Pereira A (2005). *The Culturally Customized Web Sites*. Burlington: Elsevier Butterworth Heineman.
- [17] Smith, P, & Ragan, T. (1999). *Instructional Design*. 2nd ed. Toronto: John Wiley & Sons.
- [18] Verhelst, G. (1990). *No Life without Roots*. London: Zed Books.