

# Some American Values from Ideological Perspectives

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**Abstract:** Values are part of a culture and they can be ideologically distinguished. In English Language Teaching, the study of culture, values and ideology is as much important as the study of language skills and linguistic rules as they make up major parts of the curricula of foreign language education. In this article, the ideas of culture, values and ideology prior to the introduction of my classification of some American values from an ideological approach will be reviewed. This is the first step of the author's effort in a Critical Discourse Analysis of an American English course-book where American values are judged by culture, ideologies and power before they are transmitted to the learners. Despite a very short discussion, the argument will work as the key idea of further studies in which such issues as what values people may teach in the English lessons of this course-book and why they are teaching them must be found.

*Keywords:* American values, American culture, American ideologies, values, culture, ideology.

## 1. Introduction

The study of culture and its values as well as the related ideologies is necessary for successful language education. This paper will briefly revise the concepts of culture, values and ideology prior to a quick reference to American culture. Especially, the paper will also offer a classification of some American values from ideological perspectives. In other words, the author hopes to point out the differences when these values are separated and arranged on the basis of American political ideologies. Then this paper may work as an appropriate background for research on English

Language Teaching (ELT) in the relationship with politics and culture.

## 2. Culture, Values, the Vietnamese Culture and the American Culture

Society is a social organization of a group of people sharing the same geographical, political and cultural features. The definitions of culture of a society vary due to the different approaches to this concept. First, culture can be known as the finest knowledge of and the best attitudes towards human's mind and heart creations. This is especially right in Hornby [1]'s definition when he stated that culture was a refined understanding and appreciation of arts, literature, customs, social institutions and

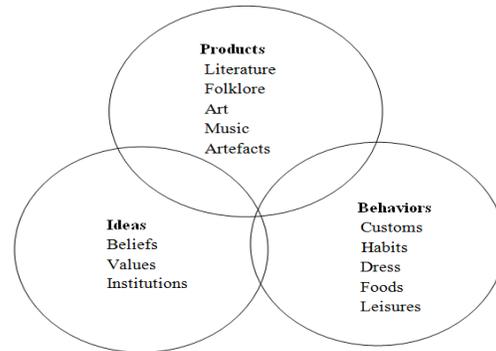
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so on of a particular group or people. Secondly, in everyday life, culture can be simply understood as people's habits, their behaviors and ways of life. In fact, people live in different places, speak their languages, eat certain foods and vote for the people they trust in their own ways. These people enjoy certain literature works, some pieces of music or specific kind of amusements and do their jobs in their routines. That is their culture. The culture of a society can be abstract or concrete: it is tangible and intangible, ranging from the enamels of the ancestors' potteries to the respect of a wife towards a husband in an Asian country. The examples of cultures can be the cultures of Vietnam, the Middle East or the Western nations.

So, what really makes up a culture for it to play such an important role? Samovar *et al.* [2] assumed that culture has subjective elements such as: "...values, attitudes, beliefs, orientations, and underlying assumptions prevalent among people in a society...the subjective cultural beliefs and values you hold that influence your interpretation of the world and the interaction in it. Your view about American flag, work imagination, freedom, age, ethics, dress, property rights, etiquette, healing and health, death and mourning, play, law, individualism, magic and superstition, modesty, sex, status differentiation, courtship, formality and informality, bodily adornment, and the like are all part of your cultural membership."

With a view to providing an all-over structure of culture, Tomalin & Stempleski [3] showed that culture comprises of cultural products, ideas and behaviors, which, in turn consist of other cultural elements, as shown in the figure. The cultural products include literature, folklore, art, music, and artifacts. The cultural behaviors comprise customs, habits,

dress, foods and leisure. Especially, the cultural ideas contain beliefs, values and institutions as elements.



*Elements of culture*

Anyway, culture can be about more than the elements in the above model. In the book "*Communication between Cultures*", Samovar *et al.* [2] mentioned other cultural components: cultural worldview with explanations of life and death; culture and the individual with cultural identity; alternative views of reality with cultural values; words and meaning with language and culture; non-verbal communication with the messages of action, space, time and silence; cultural influence in context with the business setting, the educational setting and the healthcare setting. They assumed that culture has its own characteristics: it is learned, shared and transmitted from generation to generation. According to these scholars [2], it is family, community and religion that initially make up a culture: "...family, community (country) and worldview (religion) were three of the earliest markers in the evolution of what we now call culture."

Values are essential particles in a culture. We know that values and valuing are not new to humans. Long in axiology or ethics in ancient philosophy, people began to find out how, why

and to what extent they should value a person, an idea, an object or something else. Value theory deals empirically with what people value and why they value it in psychological, social and economic contexts. People always try to understand about good and evil.

Aspin [4] took values as standards for judgments and decisions: “to refer to those ideas, conventions, principles, rules, objects, products, activities, practices, procedures or judgments that people accept, agree to, treasure, cherish, prefer, incline towards, see as important and indeed act upon. Such things they make objects of admiration, high levels of aspiration, standards of judgment, prescriptions for action, norms of conduct or goals of endeavor in their lives seeing them as generally prescriptive in all their values reflection and decisions, and they commend them so to others.”

The above statement goes well with Leo’s idea [5] that values can influence us in our careers or in our lives: “Values are ideals that guide or qualify your personal conduct, interaction with others, and involvement in your career. Like morals, they help you to distinguish what is right from what is wrong and inform you on how you can conduct your life in a meaningful way.”

As for Rokeach [6], values are either “a learned organization of rules for making choices and resolving conflicts”. Nanda and Warm [7] see them as “shared ideas about what is true, right, and beautiful that underlie cultural patterns and guide society in response to the physical and social environment”. Samovar et al. [2] mentioned Albert’s highlighting of the significance of values: “a value system represents what is expected or hoped for, required or forbidden. It is not a report of actual

conduct but the system of criteria by which conduct is judged and sanctions applied.” These scholars also noted Hofstede’s short list of value counter pairs:

- *Evil versus good*
- *Dirty versus clean*
- *Dangerous versus safe*
- *Decent versus indecent*
- *Ugly versus beautiful*
- *Unnatural versus natural*
- *Abnormal versus normal*
- *Paradoxical versus logical*
- *Irrational versus rational*
- *Moral versus immoral*

According to Leo [8], values are of four kinds: personal values, cultural values, social values and work values. First, he stated that personal values, such as honesty, reliability, and trust, determine how you would face the world and relate with people. These values would act as principles that define you as an individual. He provided some examples of these values like caring, courage, creativity, friendliness, honesty, honor, and independent. The other values, cultural values would help you feel connected to a larger community of people with similar backgrounds. They are like the practice of your faith and customs, like the principles that sustain connections with your cultural roots. Tradition, faith, linguistics are the sources of some cultural values. Thirdly, Leo mentioned family, friends, and co-workers as related indicators of social values, the principles that show how you relate meaningfully to others in social situations. Examples of these values are equality, fairness, reliability, family, environment, diversity and so on. Finally, what define how you work and how you relate to your co-workers, bosses, and clients are the

work values, the principles guiding your behavior in professional contexts and revealing your potential for advancement. Autonomy, competitiveness, conscientiousness, dedication, loyalty, punctuality, teamwork could be in the list of work values. The distinction also tells us of the natural differences between an individual, a culture, a society and the earning of our living with work. Leo thought that for certain aspects of life, humans have certain values respectively.

Much influenced by Buddhism from India and Confucianism from China, Vietnamese culture is well known for its traditional cultural values such as loyalty, formality, intelligence, bravery, trustworthiness, forgiveness, diligence. They show respect for community and family, handicrafts and manual labor, devotion to study and so on. The feudal society which lasted for four thousand years, though having many shortcomings, has still given us a treasure of kindness and creation. In addition, values of a society have much to do with cultural and politic assumptions and requirements. They always go along with power and set standards for us to strive for. The adoption of communism and socialism also features the values of Vietnam: the longing for the common benefits of all the people and the share of the social welfare and property between them.

American culture can be seen as a special topic of interest in the teaching of American English. The culture of the United States originates from English, Scottish, Irish settlers with their languages, legal system and other cultural influences. A big influence is from Western Europe (from German, France, Italy etc.) with a long history before its own in dialect, music, arts, social habits, cuisine, and folklore etc. The USA is now, as many people call it, a “melting pot” or “a salad bowl” with

cultural diversity from its immigrants. What make the pride of the Americans are their holidays, sports, military, arts and entertainment. What include in American society and culture are conservative tendencies, military and scientific competitiveness, political structures, risk taking, free expression, material and moral lives. With the influence of whatever made in the USA, American values sometimes become standards for the young generations. These American values are more or less imposed on by American ideologies.

### 3. Ideology & the American Ideologies

The term ideology can be understood in several ways. Ideology can mean everything – values also, which is much related to politics and power, and can be equal to commonsensical assumptions of a group of people. In their book, Thomas et al [9] showed that the concept of ideology was first introduced by followers of Karl Marx, notably Louis Althusser. Althusser saw the majority of working people who worked long hours and lived in poverty while the rich enjoyed lives of luxury. They did not overthrow the rich minority or refuse to work for the rich because they were persuaded that the situation was quite ‘natural’ and could not be changed. Thus, the ideology had been established – the beliefs people should hold seemed such a common sense that nobody would question it.

Today, ideology refers to any set of beliefs which, to the people who hold them, appears to be logical and natural. Ideology is not necessarily a pejorative term, because it can be argued that virtually everything we know and think is in fact ideological/ideology in nature. People can question the ideologies of their

culture, but it is often difficult. Not only can it be a challenging intellectual task, but it can also result in social stigmata.

Fairclough [10] related ideology with politics, specifically with power of dominant classes and dominant blocs. For him, ideology is: "Institutional practices which people draw upon without thinking often embody assumptions which directly or indirectly legitimize existing power relations. Practices which appear to be universal and commonsensical can often be shown to originate in the dominant class or dominant bloc, and to become naturalized."

Ideology, as for Johnston [11] is a biased set of values that other people might have but from which we ourselves are free. And we all have our ideologies and we use them in dealing with other people. Here, we can see that there is a direct link between ideology and values. If the attitude of social groups as a whole towards the needs of other social groups in the society is expressed through the ideas called 'political values', we can use the word 'ideology' for them, instead.

As for Halpin and Agne [12] for years in the USA, traditional public opinion polling has broken down ideology into three distinct groupings: liberal, moderate, and conservative. We also learn from Wikipedia [13] that, in the United States, liberalism is different from liberalism elsewhere in the world. Liberalism in the United States centers on the rights of the individual in speech, the press, and religion. Liberalism respects the separation of church and state, right to due process and equality under the law. Modern liberalism in the United States focuses on voting rights for adult citizens, equal rights, protection of environment and provision of social services in education,

health care, transportation, infrastructure, basic food for the hungry and basic shelter for the homeless. Some classical liberals, neoliberal or libertarians think that economic freedom is more important than equality of opportunity and promoting general welfare of society exceeds the legitimate role of government. Since the 1930s, liberalism in the United States has referred to "modern liberalism", a political philosophy exemplified by Franklin Delano Roosevelt's New Deal and, later, Lyndon Johnson's Great Society.

American Conservatism mostly means liberalism or neo-liberalism. It has been associated with Republican Party since the 1950s. Many Southern Democrats were also conservative when they controlled the Congress during the period from 1937 to 1963. According to Wikipedia [14], the conservative tradition has played a major role in American politics and culture since the American Revolution by the end of the 18th century. American conservatives respect tradition, support republicanism and Christian religion, defend "Western civilization from the challenges of modernist culture and totalitarian governments". Economic conservatives favor small government, low taxes, limited regulation, and free enterprise. Social conservatives see traditional social values as threatened by secularism; they tend to support school prayer and oppose abortion and the legalization of same-sex marriage. Neoconservatives want to expand American ideals throughout the world and show a strong support for Israel. Paleo-conservatives stand in opposition to multiculturalism, and press for restrictions on immigration. Most conservatives prefer Republicans over Democrats, and most factions favor a strong foreign policy, a strong military. The conservative movement of the

1950s attempted to bring together these divergent strands, stressing the need for unity to prevent the spread of "Godless Communism". The American conservatives consider it their jobs to have a centralized government to protect its citizens' lives, liberty and property. The growth of government must be fought relentlessly.

Ideologies can be the first and firm ground for values. There is a strong connection between what people should do and how they should be. For example, they should devote to, contribute to and scarify for their nation, and thus, they should be honest, fair and kind to other people. Ideologies may influence and decide the tendency of value selection in a society. Capitalist ideology will direct personal and private, practical and materialistic values.

#### **4. Some American Values in Terms of Ideologies**

American values could be described differently by Samovar et al., (2007) [2]; Nussbaum, (2005) [15]; and Wanning. (1999) [16], but they mostly agreed on many characteristics making up American beliefs, behaviors, ideas and products. They are what the majority of Americans favor, support and pursuit. From the features of the American ideologies presented above and the American values introduced by those scholars, the classification of some American values can be listed as the estimation of the author on his own. Some values are inclined to the conservative, some to liberal-progressive and some to both of the ideologies.

##### **More conservative values**

*Capitalism*  
*Strength*

*Rightness and righteousness*

*Family*

*Wealth*

*Faith*

*Energetic, goal-oriented society*

*Competition and free enterprise*

##### **More liberal-progressive values**

*Freedom*

*Privacy*

*Having as much as fun as possible*

*Shopping as a form of recreation*

*Enjoying life to the full*

*Standing up for your rights*

*Not just obeying rules*

*Equality*

*Democracy*

*Helper of the oppressed*

*Defender against tyranny*

*Freedom of religion*

*Entertainment and happiness*

*Individuality*

*Informality*

*Looking to future and to change*

*Personal control over the environment*

*Egalitarianism*

*Optimism*

*Progress*

*Universal suffrage*

##### **Common values for both conservatives and liberal-progressives**

*Success*

*People of action*

*Time-conscious and very money-conscious*

*Hardworking*  
*Taking risk*  
*Independence*  
*Achievement*  
*Efficiency*  
*Future orientation*  
*Action and work orientation*  
*Directness and openness*  
*Practicality*  
*Materialism and acquisitiveness*  
*Improvement*  
*Responsibility*  
*Self-made man*  
*Love for sports*  
*Tolerance*  
*Taking advantage of every opportunities*  
*Honesty*  
*Assertiveness*

From the list, it is observed that many of the values are shared between the two ideologies and they can be not much different from the values of other cultures. Anyway, these values are not exactly the same for the two trends of ideologies and they can, for some reasons, characterize the American cultural and ideological styles. The differences are of either cultural or political nature. Some of them are strong values of traditional American conservatism such as *capitalism, strength, wealth, competition and free enterprises* etc., which have made USA very special: a country of military mighty, prosperous economy and political influence. Other values are about a new United States of change and progress, the America of the liberal and progressive: *freedom, privacy, environment control, equality, entertainment and happiness* etc. In

the limit of a paper, it is not possible to explain the reasons for the adoption of different values of the different American ideologies sufficiently.

### **5. The Relationship between Culture, Values, Ideology and the English Language Teaching**

Values can be seen as of either cultural or political nature. Political values make up what we call the ideologies. Ideologies are special values of the social classes, which are established and handled for their benefits in the struggles against other social classes. Such values as moral, religious, aesthetic, social, educational, technical, economic, personal values, social and work values can be collectively referred to as cultural values. They form the ground of thoughts and actions of an individual, a home, an institution or a government in the sense of what and how something should (not) be done. Political values, or the ideology, form the decisive orientation of an individual, a home, an institution or a government in the sense of why and for whom something should (not) be done.

In education, all syllabi and course-books are culturally and politically value-laden. They are prepared to transmit values to the learners automatically as the accepted norms – the matters-of-course of the society. Values are there to be learnt and absorbed. These values construct a general image of a society. That image is the standard and ideal for the people living in that community. Values are contained in the curricula in the language policies, the teaching plans, the visual aids and, very clearly, in the course-books. Values education, at a lesser or greater extent will always makes part of the learning, including foreign language

learning. According to Carr and Mitchell [17], “*there are values embedded within any curriculum and instructional process*”. And the values of the Americans are of no exception in the (American) English Language Teaching.

## 6. Conclusions

There is a close relationship among culture, values and ideology in a society as well as in Foreign Language Teaching in general and English Language Teaching in particular. The relationship is complicated, interdependent and dialectically interwoven.

Values can be culturally and politically constructed and handled. Cultural values build the foundation of a society along a nation’s history in terms of beliefs and attitudes. Political values, or the ideologies, build the legal orientations, the powerful institutions and authorities for ruling and also for the struggles against the domination.

Values are clearly transmitted in the teaching and learning of a language. They can be dealt with through cross-cultural issues, cultural hegemony or cultural imperialism in the languages being taught. Ideologies can be expressed by the types of values we give priority to in our everyday life and in our curriculum designs.

Many American values are very common but many are very special. In the teaching of American English language, the natives’ (the Americans’) values should be aware of so that we can run the lessons successfully. What values are embedded in the lessons and why, what values can be and cannot be adapted and adopted for Vietnamese learners? These questions are for serious consideration of the teachers of (American) English in Vietnam.

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## Một số giá trị Mỹ trên phương diện tư tưởng

Cao Duy Trinh

*Trường Đại học Khoa học – Đại học Thái Nguyên, Xã Quyết Thắng, Thành phố Thái Nguyên*

**Tóm tắt:** Giá trị là một phần của văn hóa và có thể được phân biệt ở bình diện tư tưởng. Trong giảng dạy tiếng Anh, việc nghiên cứu văn hóa, giá trị và tư tưởng cũng quan trọng không kém việc nghiên cứu các quy tắc và kỹ năng ngôn ngữ bởi chúng cấu thành một phần thiết yếu của các chương trình dạy ngoại ngữ. Trong bài báo này, chúng tôi sẽ điềm lại khái niệm văn hóa, giá trị và tư tưởng trước khi phân loại các giá trị của Mỹ từ phương diện tư tưởng. Sau đó, từ góc độ phân tích diễn ngôn phê phán, chúng tôi tiến hành tìm hiểu các giá trị Mỹ vốn được quy định bởi văn hóa, tư tưởng và quyền lực trong một giáo trình dạy tiếng Anh-Mỹ. Cách tiếp cận này có ý nghĩa quan trọng trong việc gợi mở các nghiên cứu liên quan đến vấn đề lựa chọn các giá trị để đưa vào giảng dạy.

*Từ khóa:* giá trị Mỹ, văn hóa Mỹ, tư tưởng Mỹ, giá trị, văn hóa, tư tưởng