# The Effects of Uncertainty Avoidance on Interaction in the Classroom

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**July 2000**

## 1.Introduction

All cultures carry with them different cultural norms and accepted patterns of behaviour. "Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another" Hofstede (1997). This emphasises that culture is the property of the group and that not all individuals within a group hold homogeneous beliefs about behaviour, rather that expected behaviour in certain situations will usually fall within certain boundaries. "Culturally sanctioned places where the Japanese feel comfortable talking freely do not correspond to those of the West" Anderson (1993: 102).

Hofstede's (1980) extended study from 1967 to 1973 of IBM employees' cultural values in 50 countries around the world was initially undertaken "focussing on value differences as part of national cultures, and on the implications of these differences for management and public policy" (Institute for Research on Intercultural Co-operation Homepage (IRIC)). I also believe it to be relevant to a cross-cultural classroom. In his first study and in subsequent articles he has defined four dimensions of cultural variability. These are (1) Individualism-Collectivism; (2) Power Distance; (3) Uncertainty Avoidance and (4) Masculinity-Femininity (a fifth dimension has also been introduced in his later studies; Long Term Orientation-Short Term Orientation).

In this paper, I will look at the third dimension, *Uncertainty Avoidance*, and endeavour to relate its consequences to teaching in a cross-cultural context and with particular reference to teaching in a Japanese high school. I will show how *Uncertainty Avoidance* is particularly relevant to teaching methodology in a cross cultural setting. Foreign teachers starting teaching in Japanese high schools may be surprised by the marked differences in behaviour between their students and others they have taught in other countries. I believe that

*Uncertainty Avoidance* can be used as a way to conceptualise and explain some of these differences in behaviour.

## 2.Hofstede and Cultural Differences

The majority of this paper is based upon the interpretation of Hofstede's research in the field of national cultural differences.  He has defined the cultural characteristic of *Uncertainty Avoidance* as:

> . . . the extent to which people within a culture are made nervous by situations which they perceive as unstructured, unclear, or unpredictable, situations which they therefore try to avoid by maintaining strict codes of behaviour and a belief in absolute truths.  Cultures with a strong uncertainty avoidance are active, aggressive, emotional, compulsive, security-seeking, and intolerant; cultures with a weak uncertainty avoidance are contemplative, less aggressive, unemotional, relaxed, accepting personal risks, and relatively tolerant.
>
> Hofstede (1986: 307-308) in Brown (1994a: 175)

Like the other 3 dimensions Hofstede identified in his original studies, *Uncertainty Avoidance* (UA) is a spectrum of possible situations between two extremes, and almost all groups or societies, be they national cultures or high school classes, fall somewhere between these extremes.

It is a natural human instinct to avoid situations in which we feel uncomfortable; our cultural perceptions and expectations regulate the strength of desire with which we seek to avoid these situations.  Any situation that does not fit within ones perception of what is normal will create a degree of uncertainty.  A British person may feel decidedly uncomfortable singing karaoke in front of a hundred teachers at a party, as a Japanese high school student might find it equally uncomfortable asking her teacher a question in front of the whole class.

Some recent studies (Fernandez et. al. 1997, and Merrit 1997) have found UA particularly difficult to replicate from Hofstede's four dimensions and it may be that it is very specific to small groups or organisations.

## 2.1. The Teacher and Culture

A wide range of conditioning factors affect the patterns of interaction and behaviour within the cross-cultural classroom. These factors may include previous experiences at school including expected patterns of interaction, the expectations of parents, teachers and peers, class size, etc.:

> . . . the expectations of students will be influenced by what they experience in other subjects. Strong traditions of both teaching and learning will be carried from previous generations of teachers and students within the institution. Moreover, every member of the community will have an influencing perception about what should happen in a school or university. What happens in . . . classrooms stems from deep within the society as a whole; and the role of the . . . teacher is not only to teach . . . but also to socialize the student as a member of that society.

> Holliday (1994: 4)

Every class of students within every institution in every country behaves differently, but classes within the same country and institution are likely to behave in a similar way. In the above quote from Holliday he states the teacher's role is "to socialize the student as a member of that society" Holliday (1994: 4). This role of the teacher is further echoed by Anderson: "Classroom interaction is more than a reflection of adult society: It in many ways systematically prepares students for it." Anderson (1993: 107). The Western instructor who tries to impose her culture upon a class of Japanese high school students, albeit with good intentions may in fact be doing the students a disservice. Hofstede states: "The burden of adaptation in cross-cultural learning situations should be primarily on the teachers" (1980: 301). It is much easier to teach the teacher how to teach in a new culture than to change the learning behaviour of all the students. Also a student learning English in South-east Asia is very likely to use this English for communication with people from neighbouring countries who share similar cultural values to their own and the teacher's culture may be of no consequence to their future as English speakers.

Separation of language and culture is very difficult to achieve. "Language is the vehicle of culture and it is an obstinate vehicle" Hofstede (1986: 314). Many of my students appear interested in cultural differences between countries and it may be this is a way of reducing

uncertainty in the classroom. Brown notes that students " . . . in some sense must learn a second culture along with a second language" (Brown 1994a: 134) but this may not always be the case if the teacher comes from within their own society.

## 2.2. Uncertainty Avoidance and Likely Effects on Interaction Patterns

The *Concise Oxford Dictionary* defines Uncertainty as "The fact or condition of being uncertain" Allen (1991: 1328). Some synonyms given by Roget's Thesaurus (on-line) are: "doubt, embarrassment, bewilderment, vagueness and ambiguity". In various dictionaries I have found a number of synonyms for uncertain, these included: "unpredictable, unreliable, not definite, changeable, erratic" Allen (1991: 1328) and Crowther (1995: 1294). It can be seen that these words have negative associations especially when related to interaction in the classroom. The degree to which societies try to avoid these situations may greatly effect interaction patterns.

Table 1. below shows a proposed list of contrastive elements of UA and is adapted from the interaction differences identified by Hofstede.

**Table 1.** - Differences in Teacher/Student and Student/Student Interaction Related to the Strong versus Weak Uncertainty Avoidance Dimension (Based on Hofstede 1986: 314)

| SOCIETIES WITH STRONG UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE | SOCIETIES WITH WEAK UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE |
|---|---|
| Low tolerance of ambiguity/vagueness/imprecision | High tolerance of ambiguity/vagueness/imprecision |
| Low risk-taking - there is a need to avoid failure | High risk-taking - mistakes are seen as part of the learning process |
| "Teacher knows everything" | Teacher can say "I don't know" |
| A good teacher uses academic language. | A good teacher uses language to communicate |

| Student accuracy is rewarded | Student innovation is rewarded |
|---|---|
| Strong need for affirmation and consensus. | Conflict can be used constructively and seen as fair play |

2.2.1. Low/High Tolerance of Ambiguity

Students from weak UA groups will "feel comfortable in unstructured learning situations: [with] vague objectives, broad assignments [and] no timetables" (Hofstede 1986: 314). Students from strong UA groups will need much more structure, precision and detail. I believe this to mean that teachers must always be aware of these differences in order to be successful and avoid alienating students. This is supported by Stevick (1976b) in Brown (1994a: 173): "In teaching an alien language we need to be sensitive to the fragility of students by using techniques that promote cultural understanding."

If a teacher gives an instruction or explanation, and it is ambiguous, the meaning is by definition uncertain. The degree of uncertainty may be further increased if it is in a language other than the mother tongue. This uncertainty will have negative effects in strong UA groups so much as tasks may not be performed at all or will only be started after long consultation with others to reduce the uncertainty. Instructions need to be clear in order to reduce uncertainty. This tolerance will also affect the success someone has when encountering a foreign culture or language. Brown suggests:

> The person who is tolerant of ambiguity is free to entertain a number of innovative and creative
>
> possibilities and not be cognitively or affectively disturbed by ambiguity and uncertainty.

Brown (1994a: 111)

In a country with weak UA, ambiguity may be welcomed as providing an opportunity to express individualism. If instruction is too clear and precise, it may be seen as restrictive and authoritarian. However, too much tolerance of ambiguity may lead to imprecision and lack of accuracy in carrying out tasks.

2.2.2.Low/High Risk-taking

When taking a risk of any kind there is obviously an element of uncertainty in the outcome or it would not be a risk.  A country with strong UA will therefore be less likely to take risks.  In the classroom, this may manifest itself in students not offering answers to questions in large classes due to the potential risk of failure.  The way in which errors are corrected and the praising of intelligent guesses may be particularly important in reducing the perceived risk of a situation.

> Successful language learners, in their realistic appraisal of themselves as vulnerable beings yet capable of accomplishing tasks, must be willing to become "gamblers" in the game of language, to attempt to produce and to interpret language that is a bit beyond their absolute certainty.

Brown (1994b: 24)

I interpret from this that in a group with strong UA a teacher should try to nurture a situation to a point where there is more of a willingness to take risks.  Brown suggests that risk taking is strongly connected to self-esteem.  It may also be directly related to other cultural and personal phenomena such as the extent to which a group is collectivist or the age of the students in the group.

2.2.3 Teacher Status

The teacher is often seen as the person responsible for reducing uncertainty in the classroom, especially in a group with strong UA.  This is because the teacher is perceived as having all the information.  There is a greater perceived distance between the roles of teacher and student.  Teacher talk time in such situations may take up a high percentage of the lesson time.  In a group with weak UA the teacher may be seen more as a fallible human being capable of making mistakes or not possessing unlimited knowledge.  Trying to contradict either of these perceptions may create more uncertainty in the classroom.

2.2.4. Language Use

Following on from the above point a teacher in a strong UA group or society may be expected to use academic language in the classroom.  This could be perceived as an attempt to maintain the distance between herself and the students, maintaining superior status and protecting the student's perceived role in the class.  This will reduce role uncertainty, but my in fact create

more uncertainty of understanding, especially in the language classroom. In a weak UA group, the teacher is expected to use plain language when teaching. This plain language is not for reducing uncertainty but maintaining teacher status and may in fact be ambiguous in nature.

### 2.2.5. Accuracy/Innovation is Rewarded

Societies and groups with strong UA are by nature security seeking and resultantly prefer to see things in terms of right or wrong, relating back to ambiguity tolerance. Questions in class may be set with one correct answer in mind. Accuracy is seen as certain. Alternative answers although innovative may be discouraged. In societies with weak UA, innovation may be praised above accuracy as it shows individuality of thought and a certain degree of risk.

### 2.2.6. Consensus or Conflict

Student/student and student/teacher conflict will be perceived very differently in strong and weak UA groups. Agreement and consensus provide security and certainty for a group with strong UA. Disagreement with the teacher's views may not be welcomed and in fact may be perceived as disloyalty. Conflict in a group with weak UA may be welcomed as debate and seen as constructive.

## 3.Uncertainty Avoidance and My Methodology

In this section, I would like to explain my own teaching context and situation and describe how *Uncertainty Avoidance* affects my teaching methodology. I teach in a number of different contexts and in an attempt not to generalise, which is somewhat difficult when talking about cultural or group norms of behaviour, I will focus my attention on one of these contexts.

### 3.1 My context

I teach four classes of Oral Communication 1 at a quite high level private Japanese high school for two hours each a week. The students are assigned to each class without consideration of English ability. These lessons are taught with the assistance of a Japanese

English teacher who is there to explain complicated grammar points and assist with general classroom management.  I am responsible for deciding teaching methods and for presentation of target language although there are a number of constraints imposed on me by the institution, mostly to do with testing.  The main textbook that we use is called "PASSPORT" (OUP 1995) "a low-level speaking and listening course" which is written specifically for Japan and claims "The primary goal of *Passport* is to teach communicative competence" Buckingham (1995: 5).  This has been chosen through negotiation with the school English department heads and I see it as much more effective than previous texts used.

I have identified a number of differences in cultural behaviour from my expectations as a Briton.  The four classes have many similarities though; the same institutional constraints as they are all in the same institution; the students are all aged 15 or 16; class sizes are between 41 and 43 students and the curriculum is basically the same, i.e. we use the same text books and the students take the same tests.  They also have a number of differences.  The level of motivation, student involvement and enjoyment is seemingly different.  In this paper, I will try to focus on the similarities between the classes and the relationship to *Uncertainty Avoidance.*

I do not intend for this to be a prescription of how to teach in Japan but only a commentary on how my perception of *Uncertainty Avoidance* in my classes at a particular Japanese high school affects my personal methodology.  It may be that incidentally this has some relevance to other teachers in various teaching situations.

In his original study of 50 countries, Hofstede identified Japan as being amongst the seven countries with strongest UA.  This situation has in recent studies been questioned, Fernandez et. al. (1997).  Japan's position has been identified as moving away from such strong uncertainty avoidance towards a more moderate tendency to avoid uncertainty.  "willingness to take risks may be more accepted now in that country" Fernandez et. al.(1997).  This shift in national behaviour has been echoed in the school and confirmed by some of my Japanese colleagues with long teaching careers.  The level of UA in the country may not however may be directly related to UA in the high school classroom.

Many contextual variables effect lesson content and curriculum. These include: learner proficiency, age of students, institutional and socio-political contexts. Brown notes concerning institutional and socio-political contexts "Both of these domains intertwine in such a way that it is sometimes impossible to disentangle them and examine one domain without considering the other" Brown (1994b: 119). I will attempt to isolate UA from other socio-political factors and show how this factor affects my methodology using the above table.

### 3.2 Methodology

- *Tolerance of Ambiguity/Vagueness* – When I started researching and planning this paper my initial reaction was that my classes had very low tolerance ambiguity. This was because when I explained a new item of vocabulary or a new grammar point that could not neatly be translated into Japanese my students looked puzzled and did not do anything. This on reflection may have been down to them just not possessing the required level of spoken English comprehension to understand my explanation.

Having studied Japanese and lived in Japanese society, I consider both to contain a high degree of uncertainty and guessing. This uncertainty may be a way of avoiding conflict and loss of face. Often what is not said is more important than what is said.

Sometimes I have set tasks that have some vagueness or ambiguity in them and once the students have understood why I have wanted them to do it they have performed the tasks well and with no apparent or undue stress. I believe that what I originally perceived to be intolerance of ambiguity may have been surprise at being asked to perform a task they could see no reason for doing.

I have included a chart below to show where I feel my classes lie on the spectrum of Tolerance of Ambiguity/Vagueness:

Figure 1.1.
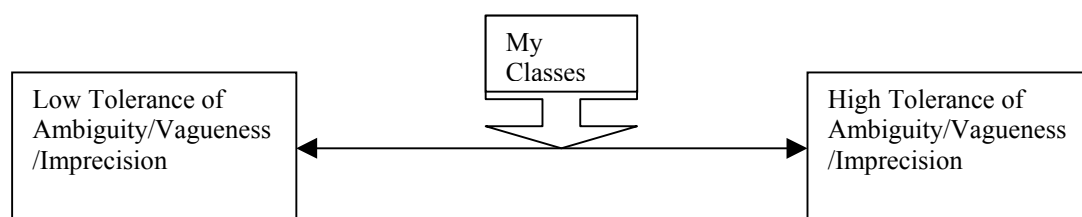
Tasks must always be explained clearly and demonstrated, but I believe this to be the case with all elementary or beginner (false or otherwise) level students. Explanations that will be needed in a lesson are predicted before hand and clear understandable definitions are thought out. I do also find it necessary at the beginning of the school year to provide a list of rules for my classes. I consider these rules not to be for ambiguity reduction but are "based on transmission of subject matter, and [are] not managerial in nature" Holliday (1994: 6) i.e. they are for facilitating the learning process due to the large class sizes.

When teaching a language point, such as *request formulae*, it is necessary to provide a lot of information about use/usage, especially with relation to formality and politeness. This reduces the ambiguity of these new forms of language due to the marked differences of mother tongue.

- *Risk-taking* - At the beginning of the school year many of my students have very little experience of speaking English and the thought of doing so in front of a large class is less than inviting. Other subjects at junior high school and high school do not necessitate them venturing answers to risky questions and this has perhaps conditioned them. After a year of studying and becoming more confident in their spoken English the level of participation in lessons has increased. I believe that in my classes fitting into the class group is very important. This may be as a result of what I perceive to be the collective nature of Japanese society. My students perceive answering a question as taking a great risk. They risk answering the question incorrectly, which in other subjects, may result in mocking and a feeling of rejection by the group.

There are a number of methodological adaptations that I consider when planning lessons. Especially at the beginning of the school year, I try to avoid asking questions directly to individual students if there is a degree of uncertainty in the answer. I often use true/false questions and get the whole group to answer by a show of hands. The drilling and practising of adjacency pairs when teaching a new language point serves to reduce the
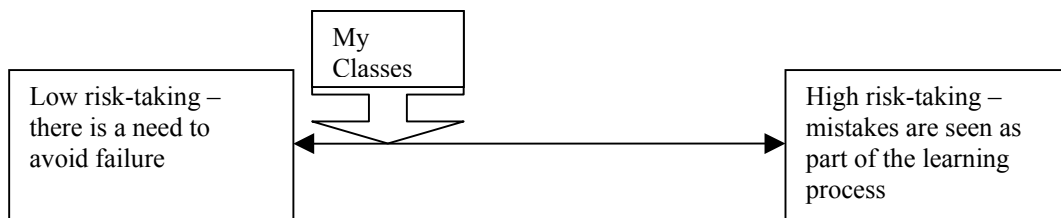
risk of answering questions incorrectly. If a wide range of possibilities exist in one language point it is often useful to provide a 'safe' option. When teaching request formulae as in the example above I usually suggest "Could I have . . . ?" as the safest option for use in most situations.

I also find that getting students to answer questions or complete tasks in groups, with one student giving the group answer reduces personal risk to the individual student. It is not possible to avoid asking questions to individual students so when I do this I believe it to be necessary to give the students a chance to check their answers with a neighbour. This serves the purpose of reducing risk and building self-confidence.

In the list of rules I provide at the beginning of the year, outlining acceptable patterns of behaviour, I include "Don't laugh at others mistakes" which I feel very strongly about. I believe praise of intelligent guesswork is very important in encouraging risk taking. Error correction in classes like this should also not be directed at individual students, but instead directed at the class in general. This saves face for the individual.

I believe my classes to be strongly adverse to taking risks in lessons:

Figure 1.2.



Low risk-taking – there is a need to avoid failure

My Classes

High risk-taking – mistakes are seen as part of the learning process

- *Teacher's knowledge* – It seems that in my classes my students expect their teacher to provide the answer to every question that they may ask (although in practice this may be few). The teachers perceived role is that of the person who provides information. The teacher who fails to provide all of the information is seen as a bad teacher. In order to avoid a situation where I cannot provide a concise answer I try to pre-empt any questions that may be asked. This is done at the planning stage of the lesson. The "team-teaching" element of my lessons also needs to be thought out well before hand to avoid putting the

Japanese teacher in a situation where they lose face.  Sometimes in order to speed up information transfer about the language to the lower level students in the class I ask the Japanese teacher to explain something.  I always check before the lesson that they can do so.

The figure below shows where I would position my classes on the teachers perceived knowledge spectrum:

Figure 1.3.
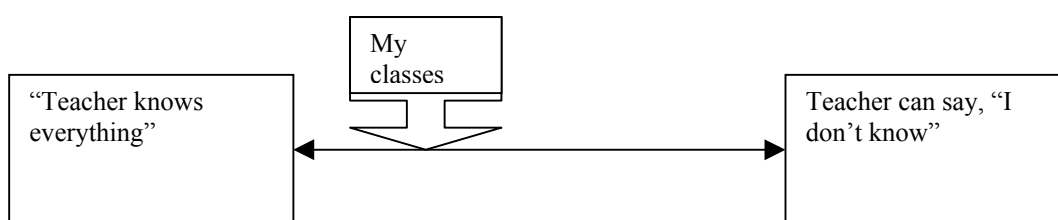


- *Classroom Language* – I view the fact that I team-teach as a valuable opportunity to observe the language used by the Japanese teacher in the classroom.  I find that with the older teacher I teach with he does tend to use what he perceives as academic language in the classroom especially after I have explained a task in plain English and the students have started to do it.  This may be because he feels it is important for the students to be exposed to academic language in preparation for university entrance tests or because he wishes the students to see him as a good teacher.  Originally, I thought it was just that he had no grasp of language appropriacy in the classroom.  I am not completely sure of the reasons, as I feel it would not be correct for me to ask him.  I feel my own use of plain language may counteract the problem.  In classes with other younger, less experienced teachers they have very little input in English into the lessons.  This on reflection may be due to lack of confidence in their own English ability and not wishing to lose face by making mistakes in front of the students.  I do not feel able to position my classes on the spectrum for this aspect of *Uncertainty Avoidance*.

- *Student accuracy or innovation* – I feel that in the Japanese high school system student accuracy is rewarded above innovation.  Tests are usually of the multiple-choice type where there is only one correct answer.  Students in my classes are praised by the

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Japanese teachers for accuracy when a perfectly understandable sentence with imperfect grammar is seen as wrong. I always praise students for trying to communicate their ideas using the communication strategies at their disposal. When I first started to teach at the school, I was frustrated by Japanese teachers making students answer questions with long answers containing redundant information. I can see that it is necessary to master the long form of a reply before you can start to use or understand the short form, but I still feel uncomfortable when I hear a teacher telling a student she is wrong because she used a short answer. Accuracy is something that will help my students to enter a good university in the future but I feel it is often taught at the expense of fluency or communicative competence. I have plotted where I perceive my classes to be at the beginning of a school year and I believe them to move a little to the right over the course of the year:

Table 1.4.
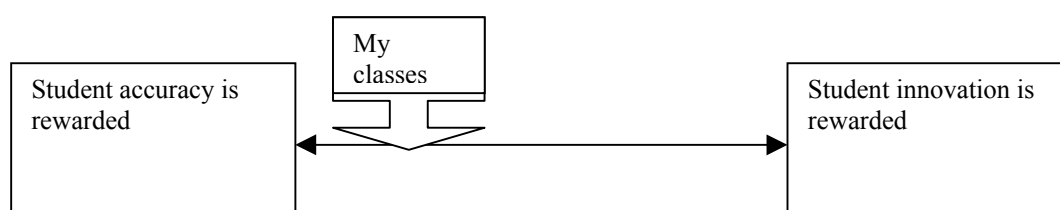


- *Consensus or Conflict* – I feel that without danger of polemics I can say that Japanese society is affirmation and consensus seeking. This is well documented in many books written about Japanese society (see Yoshimura and Anderson 1997 and Rosenberger 1994). I teach a number of Japanese businessmen and they often complain of spending all day in a meeting. They explain that in order to finish a meeting a consensus must be achieved or the meeting continues. This frustration does not result in heated discussion but leads to a slow compromise of opinions.

I have rarely observed a situation involving conflict of any kind in my classes. Sometimes students do not conform to expected level of concentration required by the Japanese teacher and they are quietly spoken to and almost immediately conform. I have once ventured to dispute the opinion of the high ranking Japanese teacher that I teach with in front of a class. This was definitely viewed as disloyalty on my part and I received the

"silent treatment" for a number of days afterwards as well as an informal reprimand (although I was correct and the teacher was wrong). I am always very careful when teaching students to politely disagree with false statements. It is important to point out that disagreement is acceptable even with people in authority as long as it is polite and it is often welcomed in the classroom.

The figure below shows where I would place my classes I would place my classes on the spectrum:

Figure 1.5.
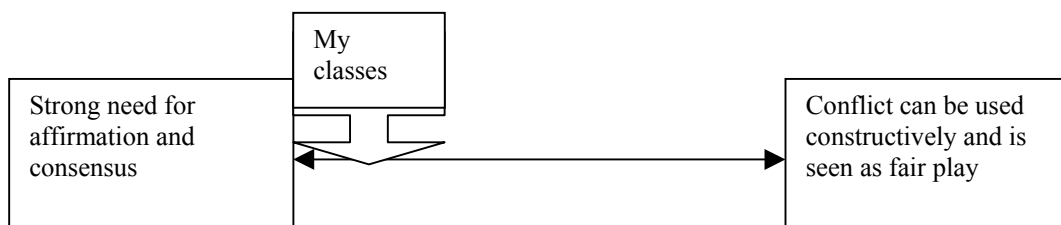


## 4. Conclusion

Every class in every school is different and the methods we adopt as teachers, should be based to some extent on our knowledge of our own culture and that of the students whom we teach. Hofstede provides us with the advice:

> Of course, not all differences in teacher/student interaction can be associated with one of the four dimensions. Certain interaction patterns are particular to a given country or even to a given school; often differences may relate to other dimensions, not identified in my study . . .

> Hofstede (1986: 313)

Following on from this, certainly not all differences can be associated with *Uncertainty avoidance*, but I strongly believe that teachers must take into account cross-cultural as well as other differences in classroom interaction (see McDonough and Shaw 1993: 288-291) when deciding on methods and techniques to use. This however, in opposition to Hofstede's advice (1986: 316) may not mean adopting methods that are outmoded, but adapting the methods you believe in to fit the culture and situation in which you teach.

By looking at just one of Hofstede's dimensions, I have become very aware of all of the others and I can see that they have a distorting effect on each other. Hofstede identified Japan as the most "*Masculine*" country from the fifty in his original study. This may to some extent explain the inconsistency of my classes' *Uncertainty Avoidance* in the figures I have shown.

The students in my classes are naive and vulnerable but not considerably more than students of the same age from other countries. They have fragile egos and self-esteem and tend to want to fit into the group. The extent to which they seek to avoid uncertainty is seemly greater than I would expect for their peers in the U.K.

A teacher should be aware of cultural differences between herself and her students, but in practice, this awareness may only come from experience. It may however be prudent to make oneself aware of one's own cultural expectations before starting work in a foreign land. Lack of awareness may account for the fact that many teachers are less than happy with classroom performance when starting work in a new country as I was. I do not profess to ideal teaching practices, but I feel the efficacy of my teaching has improved along with my awareness of my own cultural expectations and those of my students.

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