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MA TEFL

Uncertainty Avoidance and its Influence within the EFL Classroom

Module 1 Essay

LT/02/07:
  Brown provides a list from Hofstede, showing the likely differences in student-student and teacher-student interaction between 'collectivist' and 'individualist' societies. Make a similar list based on 'uncertainty avoidance' or 'power distance', and discuss how this dimension affects the methodology you adopt.

Approx. 4,360 words
13 pages

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1   Introduction

The ESL/EFL classroom is, by definition, a place where different cultures meet and interact. The intent of these classrooms is to teach English, and as experts in English conversation, native English speakers often take positions as teachers. As cultural beings, they take into their classrooms assumptions and values regarding what make good teachers and good students. However, native speakers' values aren't necessarily congruent with the assumptions and values brought into the classroom by their students. Communication barriers make it difficult for language students and teachers to identify these value differences, yet their affect on classroom interaction is pervasive. Fortunately Hofstede (1986 and 1991) offers a means of objectively quantifying and defining cultural attributes and their underlying values. An analysis of his definitions yields a rich framework that illustrates assumptions students and teachers have when they enter the EFL classroom, and offers a foundation from which cultural understanding gaps can be bridged.

This paper concerns itself with the impact of one of Hofstede's dimensions, "uncertainty avoidance", on Japanese EFL classrooms with a native English speaking teacher. To better understand what uncertainty avoidance is and isn't, it is first necessary to address and elaborate on Hofstede's culture dimensions in section 2. In section 3 uncertainty avoidance as it impacts the EFL classroom is considered, and a table detailing this dimension's impact on classroom interaction is offered. Classroom elements, teacher and students, are also analyzed in regard to uncertainty avoidance. In section 4 the table is further elaborated by considering how uncertainty avoidance impacts classroom methodology in general and my personal methodology specifically. Finally, in section 5 a conclusion is offered that encourages the view that Hofstede's cultural definitions, particularly uncertainty avoidance, should be used to bridge gaps in cultural understanding, helping to make the EFL classroom a more effective venue for learning.

2.2   Introduction to Hofstede

Whenever two people from different cultures interact there is potential for conflict, or 'culture bumps', as Archer (1986, 170) labeled them. While many culture bumps are situation-specific, such as whether two people should shake hands or bow when they meet, Hofstede (1991, 9) encourages the view that culture is like the layers of an onion with superficial aspects visible on the outside and deeper-rooted values anchored and concealed at the core. Interaction such as language and rituals for greeting are superficial and visible aspects of culture. These superficial layers are influenced by values which are embedded and unconscious. While considerable variation can exist between individuals within a culture, through inductive analysis Hofstede (1986, 301-320) isolated four different dimensions of culture and scored countries according to these dimensions.

2.2   Hofstede's Dimensions of Culture

While Hofstede (1986 and 1991) was principally concerned with business interactions within multinational corporations, according to Brown (2000, 201) the elements of culture he isolated are also significant in the ESL or EFL classroom with a native speaking teacher. By definition native speaking teachers interact with students who aren't native speakers, so teacher and students are from different cultures that may promote different values. These values are unconscious and the teacher or students may unwittingly apply their expectations to someone who doesn't hold the same values, leading to "culture bumps" (Archer 1986). Thorp (1991) observed that in many instances of culture bumps teachers evaluate their students negatively. An understanding of Hofstede's definitions helps teachers better sympathize with their students and raises culture-consciousness within the classroom. The four dimensions Hofstede suggests are 'power distance' (strong vs. weak), 'collectivism vs. individualism', 'masculine vs. feminine', and 'uncertainty avoidance' (strong vs. weak). These dimensions were independently verified in similar form through an unrelated survey developed by a multinational research team (Hofstede and Bond)[1]. The multinational team also recorded a fifth dimension, not measured by Hofstede, labeled 'Confucian dynamism' by Michael Bond and 'long-term vs. short-term orientation' by Hofstede (1991, 159-174).

2.3   Interpreting Hofstede's Dimensions

The differences in labeling between Bond and Hofstede belie the mutability of definitions for culture attributes, and the difficulty in subjecting them to scientific scrutiny. Hofstede (1986) defined culture dimensions according to two opposing extremes, with cultures scored on a scale between the extremes. A culture's score is significant when contrasted with the score of another culture along the scale, and cultures can be statistically grouped, with the attributes of groups compared and contrasted (Hofstede 1986).

A culture's score on a dimension is an informative tool rather than a defining rule. Individuals differ between each other within a group, and situational factors have strong effects, making application of the dimensions to individuals problematic. The rating system enlightens observers about motivations behind culture, but its benefit is minimal if used to pigeon-hole and stereotype. Hofstede (1986) observed that while culture ratings do not predict specific attributes, they do indicate tendencies to consider certain characteristics more desirable than others. According to Archer (1986, 172), "In many cases, this mere comprehension (of the other culture) will be sufficient to defuse the incident and clear the way for better understanding in the future." The scales are descriptive, not evaluative, and one side is not better than the other. They are tools for bridging understanding gaps, discovering the roots of how cultures differ, and anticipating (and smoothing) culture bumps. I will summarize each of Hofstede's dimensions before considering uncertainty avoidance as an individual dimension in the classroom.

2.3.1 Power Distance

Keeping the limitations of any definitions in mind, comparison between Hofstede and Bond is informative, as Hofstede's definitions represent a Western orientation and Bond an Eastern orientation. Hostede states that in the Western definition, large power distance represents "the extent to which the less powerful members…expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (1991, 28) while in the Eastern tradition it promotes "moderation of individual desires" (1991, 162). Here one can see differences in the basis of the definitions, as one concerns acceptance of authority, and the other internal orientation toward modesty. Low power distance in the Western definition is reverence for equality, where unequal relationships (such as between teacher and student) only exist in specific contexts (such as during class but not after). The Eastern description encourages 'adaptability' and 'prudence' (Hofstede 1991, 162).

2.3.2 Collective vs. Individual

In Hofstede a collective culture is concerned with the well-being of an in-group individuals are born into. In the Bond analysis collectivism attributes are respect for elders (and ancestors) and patriotism. An individual culture, according to the Western scale, is one where people are concerned with immediate family and personal well-being, or "tolerance", "conservatism", and "solidarity" in the Eastern scale (Hofstede 1991, 163).

2.3.3 Masculine vs. Feminine

A society's masculinity or femininity is determined by roles attributed to males (Hofstede 1986). Masculinity is defined by Hofstede (1986) as sympathy and respect for power and pursuit of wealth, whereas femininity is sympathy and respect for beauty and quality of life. According to the Chinese survey masculinity embodies 'patience', 'courtesy', and 'kindness' (Hofstede 1991, 163) while femininity promotes 'patriotism' and 'a sense of righteousness' (Hofstede 1991, 163).

That patriotism appears in both collectivism and femininity indicates that dimensions can and do overlap. A dimension is not an isolatable unit, but dependant upon the other dimensions (Hofstede 1991).

2.3.4 Confucian Dynamism

The dimension not measured by the Hofstede analysis, 'Confucian dynamism' or 'long-term vs. short-term orientation' concerns fiscal conservatism. In short-term oriented cultures social obligations are fulfilled regardless of cost, whereas in long-term oriented cultures financial resources are reserved and individuals subordinate needs to causes (Hofstede 1991, 173).

2.3.5   Uncertainty avoidance

The dimension this paper is concerned with is uncertainty avoidance, which is strong or weak. Hofstede (1991, 113) defines uncertainty avoidance as "the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations". Following that definition, Hofstede shows that a strong uncertainty avoidance culture fears the unknown and considers everyday uncertainties a source of worry and stress, while a weak uncertainty avoidance culture accepts risk and the unknown. The dimension definitions are descriptions of extremes and don't necessarily reflect particular cultures (Hofstede 1986). A culture that scores high (or strong) uncertainty avoidance will exhibit some of the characteristics listed, but may show areas where the society, due to interaction with other culture elements, may act differently to what its rating suggests. The key to understanding cultural behaviors is to analyze the different dimensions and remember they exist as a framework for describing and not a means of defining a culture. If application of a definition to a cultural trait proves illuminating, then the dimension is serving its purpose. If it increases confusion, then another explanation of the cultural trait should be sought.

3.2   Uncertainty Avoidance in the ESL/EFL Classroom

Despite the relativity of the dimension definitions, they serve as a base from which to compare, contrast, and analyze cultures. While all aspects of culture influence the EFL classroom, this paper is principally concerned with the impact of uncertainty avoidance on classroom interaction. As defined by Hofstede, uncertainty avoidance is the tendency for people in a culture to fear chance, change, and the different. As an American English teacher in Japan, I have found this dimension, of all the dimensions proposed by Hofstede, most significantly affects my teaching methodology. According to Hofstede (1991, p113), Japan's ranking for uncertainty avoidance was 7 of 53 (scoring 92 points), while America's was 43 (scoring 46 points). Of the dimensions measured in the Hofstede study, uncertainty avoidance exhibits the largest disparity between the USA and Japan.   In Table 1 elements of this disparity in the EFL classroom are listed in a form adapted from Hofstede. Hofstede described interaction differences in terms of teacher and student attributes.   This paper concerns how uncertainty avoidance impacts teacher and student expectations for interaction. The order of description, to allow critical comparison, mirrors Hofstede's.

Table 1: List of Differences in Classroom Interaction According to Uncertainty Avoidance
(adapted from Hofstede (1986, 314))

Teacher: Weak Uncertainty Avoidance

1. Teacher considers unstructured learning environments superior
2. Teacher is a fellow learner
3. Teacher uses lay language, is responsible for student comprehension
4. Problem solving emphasizes process
5. Teacher promotes student opinion

6. Teacher expects student disagreement
7. Teacher seeks student input regarding lessons and planning

Students: Strong Uncertainty Avoidance

1. Students expect structured learning environments
2. Teacher is an expert, not a learner
3. Teacher uses professional language, students responsible for comprehension
4. Problem solving emphasizes fact
5. Students consider teacher opinion essential and uncontestable
6. Students think disagreement rude
7. Students are not qualified to contribute to lesson planning

3.2   Classroom Elements and Uncertainty Avoidance

Within uncertainty avoidance there are two poles, high and low, and within the classroom there are two elements, teacher and students. Considering this, a 2x2 grid of classroom elements and culture attributes can be made, yielding 2x2=4 variables with independent characteristics, illustrated in Table 2. In 3.3 implications of high uncertainty avoidance are considered for teachers and students, and in 3.4 low uncertainty avoidance is considered. After discussing the 4 classroom variables, implications for classroom interaction are considered in 3.5. As my personal context is teaching conversational English at a private school, AEON East Japan, to mainly adult students of all levels using in-house designed texts, special emphasis is given to the conversation classroom.

Table 2: Classroom Elements and Uncertainty Avoidance

	High	Low
Teacher	3.3.1	3.4.1
Student	3.3.2	3.4.2

3.3   Implications of High Uncertainty Avoidance

As a cultural dimension, uncertainty avoidance affects the roles of teachers and students and the nature of their interactions. Ideal characteristics of teachers and students are determined by all members of a culture, and institutions, employers, and policymakers promote their views through beliefs and policies (Hofstede 1991). As Hofstede (1986, 305) says, "cross-cultural learning situations are rife with premature

judgments" because we "seldom recognize the cultural relativity" of "feelings of good and evil, right and wrong, rational and irrational, proper and improper". Knowing the implications high uncertainty avoidance has for teacher and student attributes is the first step to understanding its impact on classroom interaction and methodology.

3.3.1   Implications for Teacher Characteristics

In high uncertainty avoidance cultures the teacher is an independent expert and as such is intellectually unchallenged by students (Hofstede 1991). As Hofstede (1986, 314) observed, "Teachers interpret intellectual disagreement as personal disloyalty". As professionals, instructors express personal opinions and expect students to accept and not question them. The teacher uses academic language, and students are responsible for understanding it (Hofstede 1991). Teachers should never admit academic uncertainty and they control the lesson structure (Hofstede 1991).

3.3.3   Implications for Student Characteristics

Students from high uncertainty avoidance cultures are laypeople in the classroom, and questioning the teacher is disrespectful (Hofstede 1991). Students expect their teacher to ask questions regarding information covered previously, and assume there are pre-determined right answers to teacher questions. Good students are attentive and do not interrupt when they don't understand, as comprehension is their responsibility (Hofstede, 1991).

3.4   Low Uncertainty Avoidance Implications

In a low uncertainty avoidance culture, classes are less structured and more student-oriented (Hofstede 1991). Student opinions are important, and most questions contain complexities that preclude right or wrong answers (Hofstede 1991). Education is considered a process of learning to learn and not an act of conveying factual information (Hofstede 1991).

3.4.1   Implications for Teacher Characteristics

Teachers in low uncertainty avoidance settings are educators as learners and not independent experts (Hofstede 1991). They cover factual course information, subordinate personal opinion, and encourage students to discuss what and how they think (Hofstede 1991). Teachers rate student performance according to intellectual prowess and reasoning instead of memorization and regurgitation. Even the term regurgitation has a negative connotation in English. Teachers are responsible for "talking down" to students and bear the burden of student comprehension (Hofstede 1991).

3.4.2   Implications for Student Characteristics

Students in low uncertainty avoidance societies expect to be able to express their opinions. They are more likely to raise questions and objections, and don't necessarily expect their teacher to always have answers. Hofstede (1986, 314) notes that teachers are allowed to say they "don't know". If students disagree with their teacher, they feel they should raise the issue, and expect the teacher to welcome their objections, as disagreement stimulates class discussion. During examinations and evaluations students expect opinions and argumentation, rather than factual knowledge, to be tested.

3.5   Implications for Interaction

As I am an American teaching in Japan, this paper is concerned with teachers from low uncertainty avoidance cultures interacting with students from high uncertainty avoidance cultures. Additionally, since my primary teaching experience is in a conversational setting, the settings considered are conversation lessons, opposed to academic or primary school classrooms. With this in mind it is important to remember teachers and students have assumptions about proper student and teacher behavior (outlined in 2.3 and 2.4) they bring to the classroom from their cultures. These assumptions influence interactions within the classroom, as summarized in Table 1.

4.2   Discussion of impact on my personal methodology

Since the culture dimensions affect my methodology as pervasively as living in Japan affects my lifestyle in general, my discussion is best restricted to the descriptions presented in Table 1. In this section I will address the source of student and teacher misunderstanding and its impact on the methodology I adopt. After covering specific problems, in section 5 I will conclude with some general observations I apply to any cross-cultural situation in which I find myself. I follow the order used in Table 1, above. I first consider Japanese student expectations, e.g. high uncertainty avoidance, then native teacher expectations, e.g. low uncertainty avoidance, finishing with methodological implications.

4.2.1   Structured vs. Unstructured Learning

Japanese students expect their teacher to control the structure of the lesson according to the textbook used for the course. They wait in the classroom ready to learn with books opened and expect their teacher to take the helm and impart information unto them. As experts, teachers should expect perfection, giving concrete examples of correct expressions then monitoring student behavior to ensure compliance with the teacher's standards. To these students, meandering conversation with little objective proof of learning seems a waste of time and classroom resources.

Native teachers and communicative language courses (designed by native teachers), consider a natural flow of conversation superior to teacher speaks/students answer lessons. They teach through the

process of language, rather than considering language the object of discussion. To them, Japanese students sitting rigidly in their desks waiting for the teacher to begin seem terribly square and threatening.

Many strategies can be used to effectively remedy this culture bump. The key is for the EFL teacher to remember that, as a visitor to another culture, it is their responsibility to adapt, at least initially. Sudden teacher demands meet resistance, especially in a setting where communication is already hindered by language barriers. Therefore, it is important to meet student expectations in the initial stages of the class then introduce interactive strategies gradually. Strong modeling of appropriate behavior for an interactive activity helps the students understand teacher expectations and perform well on the task. I also try to use similarly formed activities and situations, such as telephone calls, allowing long-term students to become familiar with the format of classroom activities. With familiarity comes a greater willingness to experiment with language in the context of the activity.

4.2.2   Teacher as Expert or Fellow Learner

Students in Japan assume their teacher is an expert in the field being taught. In EFL, they expect their teacher to know and be able to explain the mechanics of English. Grammar is a set of rules and equations applied to create and evaluate correct classroom discourse. Japanese students think it important to acquire grammatical rules so they can mimic native speakers' speech patterns. When a teacher admits they don't understand a rule students are often confused and frustrated. If their teacher, the expert, doesn't understand, then how can they ever master the lesson content?

I have often heard colleagues remark, "I don't like teaching Shigeru. He always asks difficult questions." I feel the internal sigh of resignation myself when students flip to the grammar section of their book and ask usage questions regarding the day's expressions. As stated in 3.2.1, native teachers want to use language as the medium of instruction, but are often reluctant to consider it the object of discussion. Their priority is the process of learning, not consideration of rules and definitions. Grammar books abound, are far more concise regarding rules of usage, and can be consulted outside of class. Therefore discussion of grammar in the conversation classroom is out-of-place and intimidating, because many teachers don't understand more advanced rules themselves.

Rather than alienate students who have legitimate questions and concerns, or conclude particular students are bad because of the nature of questions they ask, it is important to understand the cultural dichotomy. In my experience I have discovered many students are happy to wait for an explanation, giving me time to reflect and consult colleagues. General rules that fit the context can also be offered, though their relativity should be mentioned.

4.2.3   Burden of Comprehension

In the Japanese classroom students are reluctant to ask questions, even when they don't understand their teacher. The burden of comprehension lies with them, and it is culturally rude to interrupt the teacher. Many times when the teacher in the EFL classroom opens the floor to questions, as Jiang (2001, 384) observed, "students always say 'no' even when they do have questions". The ambiguity of not understanding the teacher is preferable to admitting incomprehension.

Coming from a low uncertainty context, native teachers expect students to ask questions when they don't understand. Student comprehension is the burden of the teacher, and students must ask for clarification when they don't understand. In cases where students don't understand, the teacher can cover the point again using more accessible language and explanations. When native speaking teachers in Japan introduce an activity, hear no questions regarding instructions, and realize students don't understand directions only after the activity is under way, they are frustrated nobody asked for clarification before the task started.

As always with culture bumps, there are many methods for compensating for this difficulty. Many times I have asked students to perform a first-listening activity contrary to the directions in their books, have modeled the task, asked students to model the task then started the tape only to discover half the class complying with instructions and the other half performing the activity in their book. In these situations getting frustrated only adds to student confusion, because they are following the directions in their text. Instead of being angry that students didn't ask for clarification, it has proven more effective to rewind the tape and restart the instruction process, allowing students who successfully followed my directions to explain the task to their peers.

4.2.4   Process vs. Fact in Problem Solving

Students in Japan consider the classroom a venue for the one-way exchange of factual information. Teachers teach and students learn. In the EFL classroom a teacher evaluates the success of students according to how well they converse, and students expect structured activities with clear goals and defined expressions in which to interact, knowing the structure ensures greater probability of conversational success. As Jiang (2001, 384) observed, "activities such as storytelling are sometimes regarded as a waste of time."

Teachers from low uncertainty avoidance cultures consider the classroom a place for dynamic instruction, where students add their opinions to the issue at hand. The structure revolves around the process of discussion and definition, avoiding clearly defined goals and expressions. When asking students what they did over the weekend, students are likely to consult their neighbor regarding sentence structure before they answer, which is frustrating for a native speaker. Someone should know what they did over the weekend without having to ask their neighbor.

In the EFL classroom students are there to learn, so they consider teacher questions a means of evaluating their performance and efficiency, rather than a means of lowering affective filters and beginning what their teacher considers healthy discussion. I have found that explaining my motives for choosing a particular activity allows my students to understand the purpose of the task at hand and apply themselves to it more effectively. As I teach EFL, explaining that the first five minutes of class, devoted to small talk, helps students switch into English and get comfortable allows my students to view the small talk as a classroom tool and not evaluate the activity negatively.

4.2.5   Teacher vs. Student Opinion

As an expert, the teacher is thought to have a better formed and justified opinion than students in Japanese classrooms. Therefore student opinion is reserved, and teachers present their opinions in class. Discussion during class doesn't bring teacher beliefs into question. Students expect their teacher to tell them what is important and how to think about and argue an issue. As a result, Japanese students are often frustrated when asked what they think in the EFL classroom, as their teacher's responsibility is to define bounds of discussion.

In Western classrooms the teacher is expected to elicit student opinions and use those as a basis for classroom discussion. The teacher's personal opinion is subordinated and often considered irrelevant to the course. "I already know what I think, I want to know what *you* think," is an oft-repeated expression in American classrooms. So, during discussions native teachers are often frustrated that their students won't express their opinions regarding current event topics.

Addressing this bump, I have found that considering the merits and demerits of opposing stances on, say, whaling, and listing student ideas on the board has often been effective. After completing the listing process, assigning positions to students, either for or against, is a simple way to facilitate debate in the classroom.

4.2.6   Agree vs. Disagree

Students in Japanese classrooms, as has been previously illustrated, consider it rude to dissent from their teacher. This means that often, when an opinion or suggestion is offered, it is followed by a wave of agreement. "Let's go to a movie tonight." Then "All right", "Sure", "Okay" and the discussion is ended. Perhaps it is no coincidence that agreement is often less linguistically challenging.

The native teacher, however, expects student dissention as least occasionally. "I don't like any movies out, let's play tennis" might be expected. Since in the low uncertainty avoidance classroom dissent is expected, native teachers often assume students have no opinions or desires of their own.

In fact, students do have their own opinions, but subordinate them to the classroom and their teacher's opinion. Yet a necessary part of language concerns the expression of agreement, disagreement,

and opinion, and effective speakers aren't only proficient in conventions of agreement. Addressing this is can be as simple as requiring students to disagree, using teacher authority as a tool to force student use of vocabulary beyond just agreement.

4.2.7   Teacher vs. Student Oriented Classrooms

Japanese students use the EFL classroom to address grammar concerns, and often use textbooks as a focus for their studies. Generally, the textbook offers a point of grammar, then vocabulary and expressions that incorporate the grammar, followed by activities that encourage application and practice of the rule, perhaps through an information gap. Students expect to follow the textbook in class, studying the grammar for the day's lesson and its situational application. They are often confused when prompted to supply subjects for the day's lesson, as this has been predetermined by their text.

Native teachers in the same classrooms realize there are several paths that lead to the same grammar goal. In a lesson concerning the use of comparatives and superlatives, the possible subjects are nearly infinite. In such lessons I have discussed cars, shopping, and restaurants, to name a few. Teachers from low uncertainty avoidance cultures consider the book's models restrictive and are interested in incorporating student concerns into the lesson.

With the advent of communicative learning theory and techniques, the more traditional teacher-centered classroom has been increasingly frowned upon, and the student-oriented classroom lauded (Brown 2000). Yet when allowing students to choose the course of their lessons, I have often encountered silence and confusion. Just because students are not accustomed to wielding authority in the classroom doesn't make student-centered classrooms less desirable or student interests unimportant. The challenge is for the teacher to effectively compensate for the cultural context. Often, during the five minute warm-up section of my lesson, I chose elements that my students provide for use later in the lesson. For example, if my students talk about shopping, in the comparatives/superlatives lesson mentioned above the classroom activities would involve shopping for clothes and not the subjects introduced by the textbook.

5   Conclusion

In the reading I've done over the course of the last six months I've found a general theme written between the lines that assists me immensely inside and outside the classroom. This theme is that the greater awareness a teacher has of the classroom environment the more effectively that teacher can assist students in learning. More broadly, the greater awareness a person has of their environment the more effectively they can function in life. Considering this, Hofstede's categories help people better understand themselves and those they interact with, raising awareness and effectiveness. As Hofstede emphasized, his scales are not an expression of right and wrong, but of differences. And as Edge (1996, 13), stated "when underlying values are expressed, I am in a better position to become aware of myself, and to see that self in the light cast by the

responses of others." This awareness is dependent upon free expression of the differences between cultures, and a conscious attempt to address conflicts the differences bring about. Awareness of uncertainty avoidance allows teachers to see students as rational beings making rational choices according to their cultural standards, and is the first part of bridging student and teacher expectations and stereotypes. The next step is to address difficulties in communication and develop strategies to function more effectively. This process is a positive one of development and understanding rather than a negative one of evaluation and categorizing, and ultimately leads to healthier classrooms and more effective learning.

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Footnotes

1 Bond analyzed results produced by Ng (1982) in a statistical form equivalent to Hofstede's analysis, which lead to comparable data. For more information about the analysis of Ng, please consult Hofstede's 1991 book, cited in References.