

Uncertainty Avoidance in a Japanese Junior High School

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Brown (Principles of Language Learning and Teaching 2000: 192) suggests various ways in which the values inherent in 'collectivist' and 'individualist' societies might affect student-student and teacher-student interactions. Choose from either 'uncertainty avoidance' or 'power distance' and list how your choice of dimension might affect student-student and teacher-student interaction in your work setting. Discuss how the items on your list might affect the methodology you adopt.

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1 Introduction

In the following paper I consider the implications of one of Hofstede's four dimensions of cultural differences (1986) - *uncertainty avoidance* - for my own teaching methodology. I use the term *methodology* in its broadest sense, i.e. *how one teaches* as opposed to *a particular method*, on the assumption that 'the whole concept of separate methods is no longer a central issue in language-teaching practice.' (Brown, 2001: 15) because they 'often serve to conceal the rich variety of classroom language learning and teaching work by offering simple labels for what are always complex and contingent processes.' (Candlin and Mercer, 2001: 5)¹. I discuss procedures specific to the language classroom, but also more universal classroom management skills, as I consider disruptive student behaviour to be the most significant single challenge I face at work.

2 My work setting

I teach at a junior high school in Kyoto, Japan. My students are all female second and third graders, ages 13-16. I teach twelve half-classes of twenty students once a week for 50 minutes. The other halves of these classes are taken by my foreign colleagues. Students attend an additional two lessons a week with Japanese English teachers. To the best of my knowledge, these lessons consist mostly of grammar translation and rote memorisation and so can be expected to do little for students' communicative ability (Brown, 2001: 19). Instead, the focus appears to be on teaching English as a university entrance examination subject. Due to school trips / activities, tests etc. the number of 'normal' English lessons - i.e. lessons in which we follow the textbook-based curriculum - is usually no more than fifteen a year. The foreign teachers' curriculum is based on the 'Connect' series of textbooks (Richards and Barbisan, 2004). This year's curriculum was decided by picking out lessons that we felt had worked relatively well in the past, with the aim of minimising potential classroom management issues. These typically include disinterest, sleeping, failure to be quiet when the teacher is addressing the class, and other disruptive behaviour.

¹ See Richards and Rodgers (2001: 18-35) for a discussion of the terminology *approach* and *method*.

In order to improve classroom management this academic year, I changed my teaching style from relatively jovial and easy-going, to more serious and 'Japanese'. I intuitively felt that by behaving more like the Japanese teachers I might share in the higher levels of discipline which some of them enjoy. Although I made these changes before becoming acquainted with Hofstede's dimensions of culture, their apparent success appears to correlate with some of Hofstede's own suggestions and predictions (see section 4.2).

3 Hofstede's 4-D model of cultural differences

Hofstede defines culture as 'the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one human group from another' (1986: 302). Using as data the answers to 32 values questions, he identifies four indices upon which cultural differences of IBM employees in 40 different countries can be plotted:

Strong / weak power distance

The extent to which an uneven distribution of power between members of society is expected and accepted.

Collectivism / individualism

The extent to which 'people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty.' (Hofstede, 1997: 51)

Masculinity / femininity

The extent to which there is a distinction between the roles that men are expected to play (assertive, ambitious and competitive roles) and the roles that women are expected to play (to 'serve and to care for the non-material quality of life, for children and for the weak.' (Hofstede, 1986: 308)).

Strong / weak uncertainty avoidance (UA)

'the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations.' (Hofstede, 1997: 113)

4 Uncertainty avoidance and classroom interaction

I now consider Hofstede's predicted effects of differences in UA strength between teacher and student on classroom interaction in light of my own experience.

4.1 Hofstede's mutual role expectations

The relevance to the classroom of Hofstede's findings rests on the assumption that 'role patterns and value systems are carried forward from the school to the job and back' (Hofstede, 1986: 306), i.e. the role pairs *employee / boss* and *student / teacher* will share relative values. Hofstede devoted the second stage of his research 'to the validation of the four dimensions on other data collected from other populations so as to show their meaningfulness outside the subsidiaries of this multinational corporation.' (Ibid: 307). However, other studies (Fernandez, 1997) have questioned this 'meaningfulness' (see section 5.2).

In Hofstede's original study, Japan scores seventh of fifty countries in terms of strong UA. In other words, we can say that Japanese feel relatively threatened by uncertainty. New Zealand, Canada, The USA, and Great Britain (countries from which many English teachers working in Japan come from) score from 39-48th on the list. It might then be reasonable to expect that some of the challenges faced by teachers and students in Japan - challenges which I may reasonably be expected to face, regardless of my own particular UA tendencies - can be explained in terms of differing levels of UA, with teachers tending to have relatively weak UA, and students, strong UA.

In a later paper, Hofstede discusses the implications of his four dimensions on classroom interaction, drawing on his original research, personal experience by him and others 'in teaching and trying to learn in ... cross-cultural situations' (1986: 306), and his observations of his own school-age children attending local schools abroad. He intended the following mutual role expectations 'to alert the teachers and the students to the role differences that they *may* encounter.' (ibid: 311). It is helpful to view them as existing at the opposite ends of a cline, with the teacher placed somewhere to the left of the students on this cline:

Fig. 1: mutual role differences:

	WEAK UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE SOCIETIES	STRONG UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE SOCIETIES
(1)	• Students feel comfortable in unstructured learning situations: vague objectives, broad assignments, no timetables	• students feel comfortable in structured learning situations: precise objectives, detailed assignments, strict timetables
(2)	• teachers are allowed to say “I don’t know”	• teachers are expected to have all the answers
(3)	• a good teacher uses plain language	• a good teacher uses academic language
(4)	• students are rewarded to encourage innovative approaches to problem solving	• students are rewarded for accuracy in problem solving
(5)	• teachers are expected to suppress emotions (and so are students)	• teachers are allowed to behave emotionally (and so are students)
(6)	• teachers interpret intellectual disagreement as a stimulating exercise	• teachers interpret intellectual disagreement as personal disloyalty
(7)	• teachers seek parents’ ideas	• teachers consider themselves experts who cannot learn anything from lay parents – and parents agree

Adapted from Hofstede, 1986: 314.

Teacher-student interaction

Hofstede (1986: 316) suggests that, in order to minimize conflicts of culture within the classroom, it is better for the teacher to adapt to the students than the other way round. However, he does not address the TESOL classroom, where, broadly speaking, the goal of teaching is also the means of instruction. If it is true that ‘Together with a foreign language, the teacher acquires a basis of sensitivity for the student’s culture.’ (ibid, 1986: 314), then the reverse should also be true for students.

Based on Hofstede’s mutual role difference expectations (fig. 1), and my belief that students too have to adapt to challenge in the shape of cultural differences, I have formulated the following recommendations for teachers in a work setting like mine. They are intended to minimize students’ perceived UA differences relative to the teacher (the ‘UA gap’), thus allowing the lesson to progress more smoothly, while at the same time facilitating good ESL practice, in particular allowing opportunities for student innovation and risk-taking. Numbering correlates with that of fig. 1.

1. *Give detailed instructions about what you expect students to do, how you expect them to do it, and how long you expect them to take. Set timetables and deadlines. Establish routine in the classroom.* In my experience, Japanese students feel more confident to proceed with activities when uncertainty about the nature of the task is reduced. With a weaker UA group it might be possible to say: “Listen to the following recording. Make notes as you listen, then compare your notes with your partner and see if you can make some sentences in English about what you have just heard...” With my students, I would introduce the activity stage by stage, repeat the instructions several times, and model the sentence-making stage. Timetables and deadlines increase participation, and routine helps reduce students’ uncertainty about the learning process. I recently began using task cycles in my classes, and they appear to provide a useful routine. See Willis and Willis (1996: 17-30) and Richards and Rodgers (2001: 223-243) for an introduction to task based learning.

2. *Prepare for possible student questions before class. Avoid answering ‘I don’t know’.* For example, if a student asks why we say ‘a three-year-old boy’ as opposed to ‘a three-years-old boy’, my response (instead of “I don’t know”) would ideally² be: “As far as I can tell, there is no reasonable explanation of this rule; your question illustrates the fact English can be very idiosyncratic.” Just because the teacher ‘is expected to have all the answers’ does not mean that he / she is necessarily expected to divulge them. If we accept that giving students activities that ‘demand an intelligent and creative response’ (Willis, 1996: 49) is an important part of learning a language, it is better for students to look for their own reason-based answers rather than immediately supplying them with rule-based answers. See Willis and Willis (1996: 63-76) for an introduction to *consciousness raising*.

3. *Do not shy away from using technical language to explain language in the classroom.* My students are comfortable with grammatical terms from their

² My Japanese is not good enough to give anything other than a rough translation of the following explanation.

lessons with Japanese teachers. It therefore makes sense to use these terms where appropriate in my lessons. By using technical language, the teacher also counters the pedagogically unfounded Japanese learner belief that Japanese teachers should teach grammar and foreign teachers should teach conversation, with the two categories being thought as virtually mutually exclusive in terms of teaching method.

- 4 *Pay attention to accuracy, but teach the students that fluency, not accuracy is the goal of some activities.* Assuming that it is important for ‘learners to take calculated risks in attempts to use language’ (Brown, 2001: 63) students must be rewarded for doing so. However, doing so may require adaptation from students. The task cycles I have used in class, with a focus first on fluency, then on accuracy, offer an easy way to control how much time is spent on each aspect of language production.
- 5 *If problems arise with a class or individual student, discuss how you feel about them and be clear about what you would like to be done about it and what the consequences of non-compliance will be.* I have found that being more open at times with how I feel in class, and giving reasons for certain decisions, I have a better relationship with my students. At the beginning of one class, for example, I told my students: “Your behaviour as a class last week was unacceptable. I expressed my displeasure many times and yet you continued to mess around. This saddened me and made it impossible for me to teach you. Because you showed no interest in speaking English last week you will be doing a worksheet today in silence. You must hand it in at the end of class, and it will count towards your end-of-term grade.” Because my action was clearly explained and (I believe) understood to be logical and fair, the students did not resent it. The class’s behaviour improved somewhat after that lesson. Admittedly the situation would have better been avoided in the first place.

Conversely, if I lose my temper in class, I discuss what happened with the students the next lesson, explain why I got angry, apologise, and move swiftly

on. Here, ESL methodology takes second place to more immediate classroom management issues because without discipline, the class cannot proceed.

- 6 *Should an intellectual disagreement occur, and you believe you are correct, argue your point persuasively and decisively.* In my experience, intellectual disagreement is not an issue with students of this age and level.
- 7 *If you have contact with parents, explain that you are focusing on English as a language first, examination subject second.* I do not have direct contact with parents in my workplace. Generally, the involvement of parents in Japan appears to relate to matters of discipline, parent-child relationships and so on. They also seem to be more concerned with outcome (passing entrance exams) than with the means to attain that outcome (methodology and syllabus). Thus it is preferable that they understand the goal of foreign teachers' English lessons (whether they will support this goal is another matter).

The above recommendations and observations raise three areas of interest:

- The necessity for the teacher's use of L1 in the classroom to provide details, goals, objectives, and to facilitate understanding between students and teacher. ('Outer language' (Willis, 1987)). This is particularly true for low-level, poorly motivated students, who have neither the willingness nor ability to patiently try to interpret what the teacher is trying to explain in L2.
- Although the burden of adaptation must be on the teacher, the students also must be encouraged to learn to deal with cultural differences in the classroom. This is particularly true of the ESL classroom, where language is the medium and goal of instruction.
- Simply reducing the UA 'gap' does not necessarily correlate with good ESL teaching, as this may discourage necessary student creativity and innovation (see section 4.4 for more discussion of this point).

4.3 Student-student interaction

For the purposes of this study, students can be assumed to have the same level of UA avoidance, so the question of S-S interaction is essentially still a question of T-S interaction, in that the teacher will, to varying degrees, inform the students how he / she wishes them to interact with each other in English. Recommendations 1 and 4 from section 4.2 are particularly important in making students feel comfortable with tasks, and the willingness to take risks. I have found that, if my instructions are precise and there is a clear objective, group-work proceeds smoothly. However, UA is just one of many influences on student behaviour. Discipline and motivation are also important factors. For example, it is easier for the students to lose concentration and start chatting to their neighbours if they are placed in irregular seating patterns.

4.4 Reducing the 'UA gap': the trade-off

It is possible that in order to be effective as trainers abroad, teachers have to adopt methods which at home [or in virtually all 'teaching' textbooks or training classes] they have learned to consider as outmoded or unpopular (sic): usually much more structured than they were accustomed to... (Hofstede, 1986: 316)

In section 4.2, I suggested that reducing the 'UA gap' does not necessarily correlate with contemporary 'good ESL practice' (see Richards and Rodgers (2001), Willis and Willis (1996), Brown (2001)). If I am right, and differences in UA strength need to be faced by both teachers and students rather than being dealt with quietly by the teacher, it follows that an exploration and even celebration of cultural differences should be an integral part of the ESL learning experience. Hofstede's recommendation that the teacher alone must adapt, while valid from the point of cultural understanding, is not necessarily valid from the point of ESL practice as a whole.

It is also difficult to separate the effects of UA from those of other cultural factors such as learner beliefs:

The communicative approach, where students are required to ... draw on their own resources rather than simply repeating and absorbing language...can

sometimes cause problems if you are teaching learners who have rather set ideas on language and learning, particularly if these differ greatly from your own. (Nunan and Lamb, 1996: 136)

I suspect that learner beliefs, too, should be catered to only from the standpoint of ESL practice as a whole – i.e. reduction of conflicting learner beliefs does not necessarily correlate with good ESL practice. Instead, cultural differences and learner beliefs need to be addressed and discussed directly or indirectly to facilitate the learning process.

An example from my workplace is that of the use of the presentation, practice and production (PPP) model of teaching, which my students have limited experience of from previous classes with foreign teachers. Task based learning is now accepted by most to be a more viable classroom approach than this model (see Willis and Willis, 1996). In terms of UA avoidance alone, it would be best for me to continue with PPP procedures, but my experience has shown me that students can adapt to new teaching and learning methods, and so time spent adapting from one routine to another is worthwhile. It is the responsibility of the teacher to facilitate this process of adaptation and smoothly and as efficiently as possible.

We can say that, as a whole, the Japanese approach to teaching and studying English does not work well in terms of fostering communicative competence, and so, generally, making your classes more *Japanese* (i.e. minimising UA and learner belief gaps) will not *per se* make them more effective. Creating a learning environment that embraces rather than smoothes over cultural differences requires the efforts of learners, teachers, administrators and policy makers. Simply employing foreign teachers, no matter how culturally aware, skilful and committed they are, cannot alone improve the situation significantly.

5 Further discussion

I will now consider other ways in which UA can affect teaching and learning in an ESL environment. I will also address the relevance of Hofstede's dimensions to the contemporary classroom.

5.1 UA outside the classroom

In my work setting, there are occasions when the Japanese English teachers and foreign English teachers disagree on exactly how strict coordination between teachers needs to be. Some Japanese staff demand that the two 20-student halves of each class basically be given the ‘same’ lesson by the foreign teachers, and receive the same handouts and identical homework. I find that such compromise stifles teachers’ individual strengths and reduces adaptability to class needs. However, explanations along the lines of “we are different teachers with different teaching styles and approaches but don’t worry, the kids will have covered the same stuff come exam time” tend to be dismissed as inadequate. The Japanese teachers apparently worry that students will be confused, i.e. there is a proxy fear of uncertainty.

Another issue is that if students have a problem with the class, they tell the Japanese teachers who then tell the foreign staff. I have in the past suggested to the Japanese teachers that the students could approach me directly if they have an issue to discuss that concerns me. This elicited surprise, and the response that students are ‘shy’. Certainly, students are not encouraged by some of the Japanese teachers to approach and enter into a dialogue with the foreign teachers because ultimately, these Japanese teachers seem not to fully trust the foreign teachers. I suspect that this mistrust is combination of strong uncertainty avoidance, other cultural factors, teacher beliefs, and cultural misconceptions, some of which may have a reasonable foundation. Past foreign teachers at my school, for example, have been extremely unprofessional, and there is the more general perception that foreign English teachers, many of whom enter the profession by chance as a means of living abroad are *ergo* not serious about their work. Clearly efforts by ESL teachers to be professional, and assertive (in a culturally appropriate manner) on matters in which they feel qualified to be so, are important in reducing the UA gap in the workplace.

5.2 The relevance of Hofstede’s research to the contemporary classroom

Hofstede’s data came from a study ‘focusing 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 (IRIC), in Atkins, 2001: 1)

Hofstede's original identification of UA was based on the close correlation between employees' answers to the following questions:

1. Job stress (1 to 5)
2. Company rules should not be broken – even when an employee thinks it is in the company's best interest (agreement – 1 to 5)
3. How long do you think you will continue working for IBM?

(Hofstede, 1997: 111-112)

Hofstede assumes that 'all three are expressions of the level of anxiety that exists in a particular society in the face of an uncertain future.' (ibid: 112) i.e. job stress, the desire to respect rules, and to have a long-term career tend to correlate. It seems pertinent to question the relevance of the values of the 'particular society' reflected by Hofstede's findings, i.e. 1960s Japanese IBM employees, to the values of 21st century junior high school girls. Fernandez et al. (1997) suggest that Hofstede's dimensions may be more specific to the IBM group and less applicable to society as a whole than Hofstede thought. They also suggest that the Japanese (in 1997) may have weaker UA than Hofstede's IBM employees. Hofstede notes that Japan has recently 'experienced a shift towards individualism' (2005: 114). It seems unlikely that one dimension of culture could experience a shift without some corresponding change in other cultural indicators, including perhaps UA.

6 Conclusion

I have suggested that it is very difficult to separate UA from other influences on classroom interaction. For example, Hofstede's Collectivism / individualism index (Hofstede, 1986: 312) illuminates study of learner beliefs, his power-distance index (ibid: 313) illuminates T-S interaction, and strong masculinity (ibid: 315) correlates with some classroom tendencies found in Japanese classrooms, for example reluctance to speak out in class. All of the above could be seen also as being influenced by UA factors.

The observation that reducing the UA gap does not necessarily correlate with good ESL practice raises the question of whether high UA students are inherently disadvantaged when it comes to learning a second language, or whether such traits are easily overcome by culturally aware teachers. My experience leads me to believe that the latter is more likely to be true in most cases.

Clearly, a great deal remains to be done to make UA and Hofstede's other dimensions more relevant to today's L2 classroom methodology considerations. A study similar to Hofstede's, using data from high school students would obviously be of more direct relevance than Hofstede's original study.

Despite the above reservations, I have found that an awareness of UA has helped me to address why certain things I have done in the classroom (for example, giving regular homework, setting deadlines etc.) may have helped to improve the learning environment, in particular classroom management. An awareness of UA and other cultural indices can no doubt only be beneficial to teachers. Until student cultural differences are more clearly understood, it is perhaps to be recommended that 'ideal ESL practice' - as expressed by books about ESL teaching or by teachers themselves - should be modified where necessary by cultural considerations in what Hofstede recommended as 'an anthropological approach to teaching' (ibid, 1986: 316).

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