

Applications of Approach:

Observations of Second Language Teaching  
Strategies and Uncertainty Avoidance in a South  
Korean ESL University Classroom

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## **1.0 The Assignment**

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.

## **2.0 Introduction**

Once, a Korean student of mine told me that in historical Korean society, the three most respected individuals were the king, the father and the teacher. When I heard this, I was dismayed, since much of my limited experience as a new teacher showed me that Korean students could be quite disrespectful of their teachers. They were at times stolid and reticent, reluctant to speak or to follow instructions. They frequently ignored my questions and refused to complete homework assignments. Somehow, through trial and error, I have found the arguments necessary to convince my students to follow my lead, though, at times, this requires a good deal of what I consider to be arm-twisting but to my students is characterized as “good teaching”. At the back of my mind, I was already aware that Korea has a different culture from my native Canada, yet I could not adequately process what that truly meant to teach Koreans English in a culturally-minded way.

As I pondered my goals as a teacher, it became clear that I must not only teach the language, but also the reasons behind what is done or said, by whom, and why; critically, however, I began to consider the fact that I must also teach students how to respond to me. Unknowingly, I touched on Geert Hofstede’s uncertainty avoidance category, responding to my own students’ need for structure in classroom settings as well as the situation of having me as their teacher:

the teacher and the learner, as experienced members of the classroom community in a particular society, bring with them their own perceptions of what constitutes language teaching, language learning, and learning outcomes, and their own prescriptions about what their classroom roles ought to be.

(Kumaravadivelu, 1991: 99)

This paper will focus on an examination of how uncertainty avoidance has affected interaction within my classroom at Korea Polytechnic University (KPU) in South Korea, and how I have shifted my teaching approach to help students attain greater language-learning success. The following section will discuss some literature current in the field of ESL as it pertains to my language teaching situation, while section 4.0 shall describe in greater detail my teaching situation at KPU.

### **3.0 Literature Review**

To understand the learning and teaching situation within my KPU classroom, especially as it pertains to uncertainty avoidance, the following section will touch on a few ideas present in current theories and ideas regarding culture, ESL instruction and language learning, motivation and Hofstede's 4-D model of cultural dynamics.

#### **3.1 Language Learning**

Language learning can appear as a puzzle in which both the language learner and teacher—as scientists engaged in puzzle-solving—try to discover the pieces and fit them together (see Kuhn, 1970 in Brown, 2007: 4). While Kuhn's analogy suggests a stable system, to take it a step further, the puzzle pieces keep changing. Theories, methodologies and approaches come into being or become discredited; new vocabulary and structures enter language or disappear as antiquated; while students and teachers themselves change, learning new strategies for dividing, disseminating and absorbing information or turning away from older methods. Furthermore, cultures of both teacher and learner affect the process through “collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another” (Hofstede, 1986: 302; see below).

Definitions of learning focus on the learner rather than the medium of learning: it is “a change in an individual caused by experience” (Slavin, *ibid*: 7). Various methods of learning, whether behavioral, constructivist or structural linguistic have the same goal in mind, but express the final outcome in different means. The quarter-century cyclical pattern of “changing winds and shifting sands” (Marckwardt, 1972, *ibid*: 17) frequently sees the emergence of a new methodology for language teaching—usually by presenting the pre-existing material to be

learned in a repackaged format for better absorption by the learner (Richards and Rogers, 2008: 15; see also Brown, 2007 and Johnson, 2004).

### **3.2 Motivating Language Learning**

There is more to learning than simply the absorption of materiel and its presentation. The learner him- or herself is critical, and his or her attitudes towards the subject matter, theme, classmates, teacher, educational system and a host of other elements influence the learner on the success spectrum (see Brown, 2007 and Johnson, 2004). Significant among language learners where an L2 language is frequently used as a screening device preventing access to better employment opportunity—as in the case of South Korea—is a sense of demoralization, which may be experienced as a kind of hegemony perpetuated by the culturally less dominant second language (Phillipson, 2008). Some L2 teaching methodologies—such as Grammar Translation—seen as tedious and inextricable to master, build upon this demoralization. Rarely do teachers have the flexibility to deal with each potential inhibiting factor preventing every learner from succeeding. Time, the most critical resource, is short, as is political will and funding to institute more “advanced” systems of second language training—this is not to say that teachers should not try to resolve issues. Instead, it is useful to advocate for a system which could effectively provide the greatest good for the greatest number. Such a system could, in effect, motivate students towards language learning success by mitigating negating factors (Dörnyei, 2007). Whereas Dörnyei suggests goal setting and other learner-oriented activities moving students toward creating the reality of their learning situation, he also suggests bridging the gap between L2 learners and their L2 teacher since the learner and teacher will, in many cases, be from different cultures (ibid, 55).

The cultural and social milieu cannot be separated from the context of second language learning (Brown, 2007: 169). The learner is a participant in the creation of culture within the second language learning context, providing learners with opportunities for active participation within the second language for future, deeper second language engagement (Johnson, 2004: 176). For Johnson, the unique voices second language learners possess “may serve as catalysts for the progress and growth of the target language culture”, a situation she considers to be beneficial for both native and non-native speaker alike since

becoming an active participant may contribute to the native speaker's and the nonnative speaker's cognitive growth and to the coconstruction of the native speaker's self and the nonnative speaker's self.

(ibid, 176)

Working with second language learners and teachers to observe and even to develop culture within the classroom is not a new idea. Language is a means to create one's reality. Wilhelm von Humboldt (1767-1835) considered language as a shaper of a person's worldview (*Weltanschauung*). Language is much more valuable to the language learner than merely the acoustic shape by which thoughts are transmitted; it creates ideas within the mental activities of the user in addition to being the instrument for expressing those ideas (Whorf, in Brown, 2007: 211):

The background linguistic system (in other words, the grammar) of each language is not merely a reproducing instrument for voicing ideas but rather is itself the shaper of ideas, the program and guide for the individual's mental activity for his analysis of impressions, for his synthesis of his mental stock in trade....We dissect nature along lines laid down by our native languages....We cut nature up, organize it into concepts, and ascribe significance as we do, largely because we are parties to an agreement to organize it in this way—an agreement that holds through our speech community and is codified in the patterns of our language.

While the *Whorfian Hypothesis* identifies what we can do within our native language, second language learners attempt to do the same with their imperfect second language, albeit in different ways and with different tools, processes and expectations. Lacking the means to express or to understand L1 systems of expressions in an L2 might lead to learner and teacher frustration and a mismatch of cultural identification within the L2. L2 learners might, therefore, fall back upon tried and true language and learning strategies of their L1; teachers, conversely—as has often been my unfortunate case—can often find themselves becoming more aggressive than the learners are used to and so generate a wall of discontent. In the Korean context, according to Hofstede (see below), this may lead to uncertainty avoidance—the propensity of individuals to avoid what is unusual, unstructured or unknown. Frequently, to relieve the risk of perceived utter failure in their L2 communication, my students tend to fall silent or to begin speaking in their L1—both key indicators of uncertainty avoidance.

Following principles which value student culture has resulted in some researchers taking a highly principled approach to inter-cultural second language teaching (De Capua and Wintergerst's *Crossing Cultures in the Language Classroom*; *ibid*, 213). In the same mode, Brown articulates a series of questions which can be used to generate culturally-sensitive lessons, but realizes some activities point towards some methodologies and away from others. Questions such as these, which realize the status of the learner not as absorber of language principles but as central to its success appear to meet Phillipson's requirement for language pedagogy professionalism (Phillipson, 2008, 13). Attempting to provide evidence of professionalism, methodologies and approaches such as Communicative Language Teaching, process as content, special remedial classes which seek to remodel and re-socialize students and "authentic" materials for teaching have garnered criticism. The learner's situation is often unrecognized and professionalism flags when consideration of ideological messages inherent in language learning situations are ignored, students of language are stigmatized as "deficient", and "authentic" materials are not regarded in light of their cultural appropriateness (see Richards, 1984; Brumfit, 1985; Krasnick (1986) and Prodromou 1988, *ibid*: 14).

Social elements within language learners' fields of experience may contribute to students' lack of language success, and failure of teachers to address these issues may exacerbate the situation. Failing to explore cultural and political aspects of language learning is akin to assimilation over empowerment (Pennycook, *ibid*: 15). Where a second language is necessary for educational and career success—as English is within Korea—that language will have social stratification (Phillipson, *ibid*: 25). This affords teachers of English in Korea significant, albeit obscure, power in classrooms. The challenge for successful language teaching is to mitigate this imbalance by shifting teachers away from their traditional role as English-speaking fountainheads (*ibid*, 25) and into facilitators of language points and intercultural exploration—negotiation of meaning (Richards and Renandya, 101). Negotiation of meaning is a key feature of my classrooms, as I work closely with my students to inductively problem-solve language gaps.

### **3.3 Teachers' and Learners' Beliefs**

The primary goal of teachers has been to prepare students to enter a particular cultural stratosphere at a point where they are deemed mature enough to do so by the values inherent in a

particular society. Teachers' actions and reactions within the classroom boundaries are determined by what they bring to the classroom—their knowledge and beliefs (Richards and Lockhart, 29). Likewise, what learners believe about language learning is influenced by what they feel about learning, the cultural values infusing the learning process and the prevalent social and cultural attitudes towards the first and second language (ibid, 52). Learner beliefs about what and how teachers should teach as well as how teachers believe learners should learn is equally culturally shaped. Teachers working with students by training learning strategies and reflection on the learning process can lead to a greater sensitivity to the learning process, potentially avoiding and transcending disparities between teacher, learner and subject material (Nunan, in Richards and Renandya: 143).

### **3.4 Language Teaching Methodologies and Approaches**

Language teaching methodologies have passed through several cycles (for a complete discussion of these, see Brown, 2007; Richards and Rogers, 2008; and Johnson, 2004). Each methodology has, in its time, enjoyed peak popularity to wane under political, social and economic pressure for replacement methodologies. With each new method brought forward and discredited, it appears the ESL field has grown increasingly suspicious of methodology headed by a particular “guru” (Richards and Rogers, 2008: 15). Perhaps the reasoning lies in the fact that developers of language methods view learners as somehow deficient and problem-ridden and that each method is a prescription to be applied universally. Content, roles of teachers and learners as well as teaching procedures and techniques are specified in a method (ibid, 245).

Approaches, likewise providing systems of beliefs and theoretical underpinnings, are better considered as flexible and interpretable to a particular learning and teaching situation. Current approaches such as task based learning, communicative approaches and learner-centered teaching purport to be humanistic, self-regulated and self-reflective (Nunan, 1999: 5). In order for these kinds of systems of learning and teaching to take place, however, language teachers and learners must be able to form common links for the negotiation of meaning. Language learning and teaching through methodologies appears concise, precisely orchestrated; approaches, however, may be characterized in Galtung's vernacular about social science: “analysis, exploration [of language] means entering something messy with messy tools—probably the only way of doing it” (Galtung, 1988: 151; in Phillipson, 3). In the following discussion of my own



KPU teaching approach, I focus upon a communicative approach which seeks to lower students' L2 conversation inhibitions and raise confidence by allowing students to work through partner discussion to uncover what is best for them to learn—a usually messy, but highly effective approach. This will be further explored in section 4.1, below.

### **3.5 Hofstede's 4-D Model of Cultural Differences**

There are differences between cultures in how people interact, and, as education demands interaction, conventions for inter-personal relations cannot be divorced from the process (Hofstede, 1986). These rules of engagement are necessary to ensure a level of efficiency in transmitting and receiving data interactively, infusing the roles and informing the interactions of the family, school, workplace and community. Hofstede's 4-D model of cultural differences highlights four dimensions of cultural interaction, suggesting that any particular social group scoring at opposing ends of a cline in any of the dimensions will, for that dimension, appear at odds or opposed in some way. This is not to say that inter-cultural adjustments within these dimensions do not occur for a particular mix of cultural groups (as with a Canadian teacher and a set of Korean students); nor does this imply that cultures dimensionally opposed are either unable or disinclined to work cooperatively. Rather, Hofstede's dimensions posit reasons for perceived differences and provide a means to address any particular dimensional imbalance between culturally distinct groups or individuals (Brown, 2007:201).

### **3.6 Hofstede's 4 Dimensions**

Hofstede (1980) observed cultural differences can be expressed in terms of the following 4 dimensions:

1. Individualism
2. Power Distance
3. Uncertainty Avoidance
4. Masculinity

*Individualism* opposes *collectivism*—individuals seek his or her own interests as well as those of his or her close or immediate family; those in collectivist cultures value relationships through

birth as well as later in-groupings such as classmates or organization, protecting its members' interests in return for protection (Hofstede, 1986). *Power distance* is a measure of the inequality an individual is willing to accept as a norm in a culture (ibid)—“All societies are unequal, but some are more unequal than others”—(Hofstede, 1980). *Uncertainty avoidance* is characterized by the experience of anxiety in situations considered unstructured, unclear or unpredictable, leading to strictly codified avoidance (Hofstede, 1986). Strongly uncertainty-avoidant cultures are, Hofstede suggests, aggressive, emotional, compulsive, security-seeking and intolerant; weakly uncertainty-avoidant cultures are, conversely, contemplative, less aggressive, unemotional, relaxed, accepting of personal risk and relatively tolerant (ibid). Finally, *masculinity* as a measure is indicative of the roles men are to play within society. Strongly masculine cultures are those which expect men to be assertive, ambitious and competitive, to strive for material success and to respect that which is big, strong and fast (ibid). Conversely, feminine cultures may eschew these masculine traits to respect the small, weak and slow, focusing instead on interpersonal relationships.

While it appears all four of the aforementioned dimensions are equally important in describing cultural interactions, my observations of my KPU classes takes on Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance as a guide to student-student and teacher-student communication. Table 1 shows Hofstede's view of the contrast between weakly uncertainty-avoidant and strongly uncertainty-avoidant societies (ie: cultures).

**Table 1: Differences in Teacher/ Student and Student/ Student Interaction Related to the Uncertainty Avoidance Dimension**

Weak Uncertainty Avoidance Societies	Strong Uncertainty Avoidance Societies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>students feel comfortable in unstructured learning situations: vague objectives, broad assignments, no timetables</li> <li>teachers are allowed to say “I don’t know”</li> <li>a good teacher uses plain language</li> <li>students are rewarded for innovative approaches to problem solving</li> <li>teachers are expected to suppress emotions</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>students feel comfortable in structured learning situations: precise objectives, detailed assignments, strict timetables</li> <li>teachers are expected to have all the answers</li> <li>a good teacher uses academic language</li> <li>students are rewarded for accuracy in problem solving</li> <li>teachers are allowed to behave</li> </ul>

(and so are students) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• teachers interpret intellectual disagreement as a stimulating exercise</li> <li>• teachers seek parents' ideas</li> </ul>	emotionally (and so are students) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• teachers interpret intellectual disagreement as disloyalty</li> <li>• teachers consider themselves experts who cannot learn anything from lay parents—and parents agree</li> </ul>
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*Source:* Hofstede, 1986, p. 314

#### 4.0 My Teaching Situation

As a Canadian teaching English in South Korea, I have been interested in what became apparent within my first few classes as a distinct lack of confidence in my students' approaches to English language learning, a situation which I now suspect is related to Hofstede's dimension of uncertainty avoidance. From a list of 50 countries ranked on the uncertainty avoidance dimension, Canada is 42<sup>nd</sup>, holding a score of -72, which is distinctly weak compared with South Korea's rank of 17<sup>th</sup> and relatively strong score of 81 (Hofstede, 1991: 13). The higher the score, the greater is the uncertainty avoidance trait within the respective country.

I currently teach in Korea Polytechnic University, approximately 50 kilometers outside of Seoul. The school is an engineering-based university where English language training is mandatory: students are required to live within the "English dormitory" for one full semester and study within the English classes taught by my four native English speaking colleagues, several Korean English teachers, and I. The classes are "English for Communication" classes, and students are placed into classes levelled 1 through 6 based on their TOEIC scores:

Level	Toeic Score
1	Below 400
2	400-500
3	500-600
4	600-650
5	650-700
6	Above 700

The Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) is one of the largest tests worldwide (Kim, 2005) which tests students on their ability to answer multiple-choice questions in English by assigning a score out of 990; critically, however, the TOEIC does not focus on language production (ie: written or verbalized communication) (Digital Chosun Ilbo, 2005). A later “TOEIC Speaking” test purports to test L2 language speakers ability, but this test is not used for KPU’s communication classes. Instead, KPU students are initially levelled based upon their prior TOEIC scores (which students must obtain off campus) and given a 5-minute spoken test.

The classes are situated within the dormitory building, and, while part of the university, are properly termed a *hagwon*—or institute. This has implications for students, many of whom have spent much of their free time prior to university, studying mathematics, science and English extracurricularly in similar institutes. It has further implications for the teachers, who are not required to submit to the formal exam process as does the rest of the university. For most students, hagwons are not “real” teaching situations and less attention is typically afforded these kinds of studies. Korea Polytechnic University reinforces this perception by awarding a maximum of 2 credits for successful completion: student anxiety is further compounded by the university’s insistence that students spend 6 hours in class where their higher-credit major courses are afforded less hours in class. KPU students’ final grades are calculated primarily on written and speaking tests with a 70-30 percentile split.

The curriculum of the classroom is relaxed with a communicative aim—that is, students are expected to develop their basic communication skills whether spoken or written. Teachers are given the freedom and flexibility to teach the course as deemed fit, but are provided with coursebooks which students are expected to purchase and use within class—many students purchase previous texts with answers already filled into the activities. The textbook for my level 4 and 5 classes, books 2 and 3 from Stempleski’s *World Link* series (Thomson, Canada, 2005), respectively is thematically organized with a loose grammatic structure.

Classrooms are small (see image 3 and 4, below), allowing a maximum of 15 – 20 students, and are equipped with whiteboards and desks. This arrangement limits the kind of activities one might attempt as many gap-fill activities, for instance, relying on knowledge gaps can easily and inadvertently be ruined by proximity to neighboring pairs of students. Physical movement within such a space is difficult. Other rooms are, however, available though contested by other

teachers on a first-come-first-served basis. Larger rooms, called English Cafés (see image 1, below), equipped with couches, televisions and dvd players and round-table style media centers (see image 2, below) with numerous computers and an overhead computer projector are also available. Use of these rooms is permissible for classes given advance notice.

**Images 1 through 4: Korea Polytechnic University's English Teaching and Learning Spaces**



There are two final dimensions of my teaching situation which cannot be overlooked: first, many, if not nearly all students spent a great amount of time studying for the annual Korea-wide college entrance exam—in Korea this is an 8-hour exam which includes English. An old paradigm which still infuses student thinking is that highschool is the time to study and once students are in university the hard study is over. That is, students are apathetic towards their university studies, preferring to focus instead on the social opportunities available. Few professors fail students for either non-participation or non-attendance. This is important since, in my own experience, my own non-participation and non-attendance in university was met with chagrin from my classmates and my professors, and, continuing, could have resulted in serious social consequences including expulsion from classes or university. Second, Korean students are highly conscious of age and their particular major. When asked to list some potential topics one especially unmotivated class would like to discuss, one highly reticent student wrote he felt uncomfortable talking to people older, younger or of a different major than himself. This is, of course, a single and extreme situation, but this construct has been suggested so numerous by former employers, colleagues and students as to feel culturally pervasive. In this class situation,

however, students are of a mix of ages given their choice of when to perform compulsory military service (for men) and when to complete the KPU English requirement.

Second, many students consider their proximity to Seoul universities as a measure of their scholastic aptitude. I was surprised to learn my own colleagues—including the department head—felt this to be true and even reinforce this by engaging students with a pseudo Korean-English interlanguage as well as a relaxation of Western norms for classroom expectations (in the case of Western teachers). In practice, however, the difference between Seoul students I have taught and my KPU students has not been one of English ability, but of active involvement—Seoul students of English tend to be more willing to become involved in English studies. Granted, however, my Seoul students ranged from university freshmen through the ranks of working and retired engineers, artists, housewives and business people, the greater proportion of which were students within their third or fourth year of university.

#### **4.1 Uncertainty Avoidance in My Classrooms and Teaching Methodologies**

Like many teachers, I tend not to use a particular kind of lesson plan in my classroom setting. I use the textbook required and supplement to focus on particular skills which I find students are lacking, such as paragraph writing. I also look intensely at what students do during the class to identify pertinent teaching moments. This lends a kind of structure-less atmosphere, one which is more spontaneous, complete and less restrictive than a planned lesson might otherwise be (Richards and Lockhart, 2009: 82). It is my belief that this will further accustom students to the reality that English in most situations requires a high degree of improvisation rather than rigid structure (ie: formality). Hofstede, as stated earlier, notes that members of strong uncertainty avoidance cultures feel comfortable in structured learning situations. Though my students appear in good spirits, teacher-fronted IRF lectures (Van Lier, in Candlin and Mercer, 2001: 95; Thornbury, 1996) of grammar points or vocabulary are met with stony silence with few or no answers given except by a few extroverted students. As a Canadian teacher, I may have misinterpreted student silence as discomfort. Canadian teachers ask students questions and expect answers; Korean students, however, do not expect teachers to ask them questions.

Giving students activities which are task-based in nature is likewise met with silence and little activity. Since students may feel task-based activities are unstructured compared to the kinds of activities and lessons they've experienced in the past, they may feel these lessons are

not structured, and thus lead to uncertainty. Educating students, as Nunan suggests (1999), to learn how to learn, improves matters in task-based and related methods of instruction to some degree; students appear to understand that these kinds of activities have some point. However, to my own way of thinking, it appears the students do not appear to value these kinds of activities enough to warrant greater effort. Since this then appears as an effort issue, I feel obliged, in many instances, to motivate students with a brief discussion of intrinsic and extrinsic goals (Dörnyei, 2007) as well as discussion of intercultural differences between western and Korean teachers, both of which have the appearance of further de-motivating, rather than motivating the students.

At the start of my university contract, my colleagues and I discussed our difficulty encouraging student-student and student-teacher discussion. To forestall at least half of this sort of issue with my own students, after the first few sessions, I changed the seating orientation of the classroom (see images 3 and 4, above). Initially, tables were side-by-side with two seats per table. I noted students had a propensity to keep their bodies facing forward and refused to focus upon their partners. Conversations soon diminished upon initiation. Also, with the only access to students through the aisle or facing the entire class in a teacher-fronted class lecture, it was difficult to reach both students in student pairs and give each adequate face time. Given student proclivity to avoid contact with the teacher, this meant the seats nearest the wall were filled first. Late arriving students who could not take up a seat near the wall preferred to sit singly at other tables. Requests to have these students pair up with other students likewise arranged was obliged at best reluctantly and at worst passive-aggressively. When the classroom orientation was shifted, students were unable to take up positions where they could avoid communication with one another. Seated in the round, students had to see someone speaking in English and had a greater chance of being spoken to by another in English. This arrangement also gave me greater access to the conversations for monitoring and mentoring by providing equal proximity.

Once in this orientation, it became obvious that many if not all students had little or no experience initiating and maintaining a conversation. Silence was still the norm, and it became necessary to train students to have face-to-face conversations by maintaining eye contact and asking follow-up questions. Once beyond the initial moments of awkwardness each day, students have become adept at entering and maintaining conversations and classes have grown steadily more boisterous—in essence, students have learned to see structure in the learning

situation and to expect discussion as the norm. They are still reluctant, however, to allow for instruction of new material—students will wait to speak until one student takes the initiative; invariably, this student begins with a structure well known to all—“Hi, how are you?”—prompting giggles and guffaws throughout. This has prompted me to allow conversations to develop as they will with a looser structure, listening, instead, for teaching points for partnered students and the class and for opportunities to request students to elaborate on what they are talking about (see Long, 1976; Porter, 1983; Pica et al, 1987; and Ellis, 1988; in Nunan, 1999: 54). This kind of conversation appears to coincide with what students value—opportunities for social contact with other students in their learning environment.

### **5.0 Potential Criticisms of Uncertainty Avoidance and other Metrics**

Some important ideas need to be taken into consideration when applying Hofstede’s 4-D model to the ESL setting. Social inquiries into human behavior and institutions is not neutral (Cameron et al in Jaworski, 2006, 132; and Phillipson, 2008). In fact, Hofstede’s inquiry may be considered as an approach to discovering ways to cope with unmanageable employees within the IBM culture. This has implications for employees ranging from norm-setting to retraining and even expulsion. Should these be pursued in an ESL setting, damaging effects may occur during the training of new non-native language users. In addition, questionnaires are not as flexible as interviews, and the question of how respondents are interpreting a question are not easy to address (Henerson et al, 1987: 29). The kind of response by one kind of respondent—say, IBM employees—may not match the same kind of response given by another kind of respondent—like Korean university students, or Korean artists. IBM employees are professionals within the corporate and engineering and support staff fields. There are likely to be few artists, historians, bank managers or politicians amongst these individuals. In short, Hofstede’s model is based upon a circumscribed segment of culture, yet the results are generalized across each individual culture as if these groups were part of the original questionnaire. There may be a danger of over-generalizing these results and so stereotyping cultures and nationalities by “helping to construct particular people as targets for social control and [influencing] the form the control will take” (Cameron et al, *ibid*).

Furthermore, country classifications within the dimensions Hofstede outlined in 1980 have been shown to have shifted after 25 years (Fernandez, 1997). Some countries, such as the United



States, which were shown as weakly uncertainty-avoidant in 1980, have shifted to be strongly uncertainty-avoidant 25 years later. Conversely, some strongly uncertainty-avoidant cultures such as Japan have shifted towards weak-uncertainty avoidance. Fernandez et al suggest in the case of Japan that the shift may have occurred as a result of greater economic strength. It may also be true that the influence of non-Japanese second language teachers may have played a role. Given that Japanese uncertainty avoidance has reversed, it may also be that Korea's level of uncertainty avoidance has likewise reversed and effects which are considered to be a result of uncertainty avoidance may, in fact, be mislabeled and inappropriately handled.

There may be other factors affecting student behavior in my English classes which may appear as highly uncertainty avoidant. Students may be apathetic towards their learning situation, failing to complete homework assignments and, thus, making the decision to refrain from participation, expressing both exhaustion and a kind of autonomy (Digital Chosun Ilbo, 2009a). Student anecdotal evidence seems to support this hypothesis: their university training is the first period of time students have lived away from their parents, and many see the experience as freeing—especially since non-participation, quoted anecdotally above, brings little penalty. Another factor may be student disagreement with the socially-decreed need for L2 training, and while a requirement of KPU for graduation, students may take a resistant approach to the class. This seems to follow from the stress students are under to achieve high TOEIC scores for employment opportunities. Furthermore, students may take a conservative approach to my classes based upon a perceived threat to their own L1 that English appears to take in South Korea (Phillipson, 2008: 53): English is everywhere, on signs, billboards, in classrooms and on televisions; it is one of the subjects most studied in *hagwons*, at a significant cost to family budgets and time (Digital Chosun Ilbo, 2009a, 2009b, 2009c; Statistics Korea, 2009), but promising security to those who study it. Certainly, many within South Korea feel the pressure of the *cultural synchronization* English may bring with it into their culture, where “Centre cultural products serve as models or the Periphery, and many aspects of local cultural creativity and social inventiveness, evolved over centuries, are thrown into confusion or destroyed” (ibid, 61). Further study is required to obtain a fuller view of the L2 situation in South Korea and into the affect uncertainty avoidance truly plays in L2 classrooms at the university level.

## 6.0 Conclusion

Uncertainty avoidance may play a factor in student-student and teacher-student L2 classroom interactions. If it is, then teachers of English as a foreign or second language have a duty to their students to provide not only the structures of the language but also the cultural implications of its use. It is important to consider the cultural values of the student, yet there must be room for creating an inter-culture within the classroom to better prepare the students for the language's use in real-life settings without compromising their values. This may be the duty of L2 English teachers in a particular country. In Korea, as student anecdotal evidence claims, L2 English teachers follow the culturally defined teaching method of “the teacher teaches and the students listen.” There is little or no opportunity for students to practice what they learn or to explore the second culture in the language. Students are not exposed to native English teaching methods until they meet their first *hagwon* or university L1 English teacher. This may be changing in Korea, however; perhaps the few students who appear to be extroverts in my classes are really students taught by L1 English teachers, and these teachers may have had enlightening effects upon my students in terms of teacher expectations. To assist my students farther, I must make greater strides into creating the inter-culture within the classroom rather by exploring my students' deeply held customs and helping to move my students—in English language use—closer towards the expectations that English language users would have in real-life situations.

## 7.0 References

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