

# Teaching Across the Cultural Divide

## Hofstede's Uncertainty Avoidance Dimension and its Implications for the Language Learning Classroom

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### Introduction

Interaction between students and teachers is an 'archetypal human phenomenon' and 'deeply rooted in the culture of a society' according to Geert Hofstede (1986). Hofstede asserts that 'cross-cultural learning situations are fundamentally problematic for both parties' (*ibid*). It is with the inherently difficult nature of 'cross-cultural learning situations' that this paper is concerned.

This paper focuses mainly on how Hofstede's research of cultural identities applies to language learning. The paper is comprised of three main sections. The first section examines Hofstede's research into cultural identities and provides a brief outline of the four main cultural dimensions that were identified and defined in its course.

The second section of the paper considers how one of Hofstede's four cultural dimensions: Uncertainty Avoidance (UA), might influence the approach of a native English speaking teacher in a

Japanese learning environment. Discussion of Japanese cultural traits and typical interaction patterns will be provided. The characteristics of weak and strong UA cultures will be listed and each item will be analyzed in terms of how likely it is to influence teacher-student interaction.

The final part of the paper attempts to assess the role that culture plays in language learning scenarios. It is argued that language and culture are closely and perhaps even inextricably linked, and that a skilled instructor will have a good understanding of both their own and their students' cultures. The necessity for cultural adjustment on either the teacher's or the student's part will depend on a number of factors.

### Hofstede and Uncertainty Avoidance

Geert Hofstede is perhaps best known for his Cultural Dimensions theory (Hofstede, 1980). Drawing on the findings of surveys conducted among employees of IBM subsidiaries working in 65 countries around the globe, Hofstede claimed to have identified four main dimensions of cultural difference.

Before advancing to discussion of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions, it is necessary to clarify what Hofstede does in fact mean by 'culture'. Jones cites that there are over 160 definitions of the word 'culture' (2007), highlighting the ambiguity of the term. It is thus important to understand how Hofstede interprets the term before his findings can

be analysed. For Hofstede, culture is a concept that transcends the individual: ‘Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another’ (1980). It should be noted that when Hofstede talks of ‘human groups’, he is in fact referring to entire nations. Essentially, Hofstede believes that his findings demonstrate that people from a given country share a mindset that distinguishes them from the people of any other nation.

A brief explanation of Hofstede’s four cultural dimensions is provided in the following subsections.

## Hofstede’s Four Cultural Dimensions

### **Individualism versus Collectivism (IDV)**

This dimension quantifies the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. Self reliance is contrasted with group dependency in this dimension. Individualists fend for themselves and take responsibility for their own actions. Collectivists enjoy protection provided by the groups to which they belong and in return, they are extremely loyal. This dimension has obvious implications for the dynamics of class organization and the design of activities and tasks.

### **Masculinity versus Femininity (MAS)**

MAS identifies the differences in how men and women are regarded by a culture and the roles they are subsequently expected to fulfill. Broadly speaking, masculinity is characterized by assertiveness whereas femininity is associated with modesty and compassion.

Predominantly masculine cultures polarize the roles of men and women, with men characterized as ‘assertive’ and ‘controlling’ (Hofstede, 1986). Feminine cultures exhibit ‘overlapping social roles for the sexes’ (*ibid*).

### **Power Distance (PD)**

In any culture, the distribution of power is unequal. The Power Distance dimension measures the extent to which people accept and expect that power is unequally distributed. In the classroom, this dimension is likely to affect the teacher-student relationship and, to a lesser extent, the group dynamics of a class.

### **Uncertainty Avoidance (UA)**

UA assesses the degree to which a society will tolerate uncertainty and ambiguity. Essentially, it gauges the level of comfort of people when placed in an unfamiliar or unstructured situation.

*Table 1* shows Japan to have a very high uncertainty avoidance score (92 – world rank 7). In stark contrast, the UK scores very low in terms of uncertainty avoidance (35), with only five surveyed countries in the world returning a lower score. Generally speaking, these scores would tend to imply that the Japanese are relatively reluctant to take initiative or make decisions for themselves and require detailed guidelines and instructions when performing tasks. Britons on the other hand are likely to feel comparatively at ease in unstructured situations and unfazed by ambiguity.

Table 1:

Country	PD	IDV	MAS	UA score	UA Ranking
Greece	60	35	57	112	1
Portugal	63	27	31	104	2
Guatemala	95	6	37	101	3
Uruguay	61	36	38	100	4
Belgium	65	75	54	94	5
El Salvador	66	19	40	94	5
Poland	68	60	64	93	6
<b>Japan</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>46</b>	<b>95</b>	<b>92</b>	<b>7</b>
Peru	64	16	42	87	8
Argentina	49	46	56	86	9
Malaysia	104	26	50	36	37
Ireland	28	70	68	35	38
<b>United Kingdom</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>89</b>	<b>66</b>	<b>35</b>	<b>38</b>
Hong Kong	68	25	57	29	39
Sweden	31	71	5	29	39
Denmark	18	74	16	23	40
Jamaica	45	39	68	13	41
Singapore	74	20	48	8	42

Source:

<http://www.clearlycultural.com/geert-hofstede-cultural-dimensions/uncertainty-avoidance-index>

## Hofstede's Research applied to Education

Initially, Hofstede's research was conducted to provide insight to international business managerial practices (1980). Six years later,

Hofstede wrote an article which applied these findings to the fields of teaching and learning (1986). In this article, Hofstede describes how the four dimensions are likely to affect student-student and student-teacher interaction. Unfortunately, Hofstede supplements his earlier research findings with his own and others' 'personal experiences... in teaching and trying to learn in different cross-cultural situations' (1986) and his own 'experiences as a parent of school-age children attending local schools abroad' (*ibid*). These anecdotal forms of evidence lack the credibility of the 'empirical' (1980) nature of the original IBM survey findings.

Hofstede notes that unlike the PD and IDV dimensions, a country's UA score is not related to its economic development level. This is of particular relevance to this paper as Japan and the UK (also the USA, Canada, Australia) are alike in terms of economic power. *Table 2* shows the characteristics of high and low UA cultures. Cautionary comments such as 'the situation in many countries and schools probably lies somewhere in between these extremes', reveals an understandable attempt by Hofstede to avoid being accused of sweeping generalization and/or stereotyping.

Table 2:

Differences in Teacher/ Student and Student/ Student Interaction Related to the Uncertainty Avoidance	
Dimension	
Weak Uncertainty Avoidance Societies	Strong Uncertainty Avoidance Societies
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
Teachers are allowed to say "I don't know"	Teachers are expected to have all the answers
A good teacher uses plain language	A good teacher uses academic language
Students are rewarded for innovative approaches to problem solving	Students are rewarded for accuracy in problem solving
Teachers/ Students are expected to suppress emotions	Teachers/ Students are allowed to behave emotionally
Teachers interpret intellectual disagreements as a stimulating exercise	Teachers interpret intellectual disagreements as personal disloyalty
Teachers seek parents' ideas	Teachers consider themselves experts who cannot learn anything from lay parents – and parents agree

Source: (Hofstede, 1986)

## Japan as a High Uncertainty Avoidance Culture

Takanashi (2004) explains that Japan's highly competitive university entrance process, which tests applicants' knowledge of written English, forces school teachers to teach using the Grammar Translation method: despite the Education Ministry's express wish to see more communicative teaching approaches employed. Hofstede's article seems to offer an additional explanation for the prevalence of the Grammar Translation method in Japan. Translation-based tasks offer 'precise objectives', students can be 'rewarded for accuracy' and teachers are in a position to offer the 'answers'. In other words, Grammar Translation-based learning is ideally suited to a learning culture that seeks to avoid uncertainty wherever possible.

As the following excerpt from Kerr's Dogs and Demons illustrates, ample evidence of a Japanese tendency to explicitly state instructions can be found outside of the classroom.

Loudspeakers are fitted into every new escalator in public places, with tapes advising people on the most rudimentary behavior. The escalators at the Kyoto railroad station say, "When getting on the escalator please hold the belt and stay behind the yellow line. For those with children, please hold their hands stand in the middle of the step. If you are wearing boots or thin shoes, they can get caught in the cracks, so please take extra care. It is dangerous to put your head or hands beyond the belt." There is an announcement at Narita Airport that reminds you to keep walking after getting off the escalator, and at the platform for trains to downtown Tokyo, a taped voice alerts passengers, "Your ticket is valid for the train and car shown on the ticket." (Kerr, 309)

Instructions are abundant in Japan and often detailed to a level that surprises foreign visitors. It is difficult to state with any certainty however whether this tendency is the result of a wish to avoid uncertainty or a means of evading liability for accidents and injuries.

Since this paper is primarily concerned with classroom interaction, it is perhaps useful to consider how Japanese people interact with one another on an everyday basis. There are two terms that are central to an understanding of how the Japanese communicate: *Honne and*

*Tatemae*.

### ***Honne***

*Honne* represents one's true feelings and desires. These feelings are often in conflict with what is expected from society, elders and superiors. For this reason, *Honne* is rarely revealed and usually only to close friends or relatives. (Doi, 1973)

### ***Tatemae***

*Tatemae* is roughly translated as 'façade' and represents what is regarded as culturally acceptable and appropriate expression. Many aspects of Japanese daily life are heavily ritualized and *Tatemae* complements this lifestyle. *Tatemae* is often juxtaposed with *Honne* (Doi, 1973)

Hofstede's claim that high uncertainty avoidance cultures allow teachers and students to 'behave emotionally', seems to directly contradict the Japanese notions of *Honne* and *Tatemae*. Regrettably, Hofstede does not adequately explain how he arrived at this or indeed most of the other conclusions he makes about high uncertainty avoidance cultures.

### **'Monster Parents'**

'Teachers consider themselves experts who cannot learn anything from lay parents – and parents agree' (Hofstede, 1986)

Hofstede insists that culture is not something that changes with time. Therefore, if Japan is found to be a high uncertainty avoidance culture, it should always be so. It is true that traditionally teachers in Japan were held in high esteem. The term *sensei* is an honorific form of address and implies respect for that person's knowledge or skill. However, in the past five years, the emergence and increase of what are known as 'monster parents' in Japan has been the focus of much media attention. These parents question the knowledge, authority and ability of their children's teachers. In extreme cases, such parents will demand the resignation of teachers and even resort to physical violence to express their dissatisfaction.

### Teaching English to a High Uncertainty Avoidance Culture

Setting aside the question as whether or not Japan really is a high uncertainty avoidance culture, the following section provides a discussion of measures that teachers can take to facilitate meaningful and effective interaction in the classroom of a high uncertainty culture.

Much of what a native speaking English teacher hopes for their students to achieve may contrast strongly with the students' own expectations based on their experiences in other lessons. Arguably, the main aim of a 'communicative' lesson is to foster the ability to speak freely, express ideas and opinions (Dobinson, 2001). It is understandable that students may feel uncomfortable when asked to speak freely and openly. Building relationships with students that are

based on trust and mutual respect will help to create an atmosphere where such freedom of expression is possible.

‘Students feel comfortable in structured learning situations: precise objectives, detailed assignments, strict timetables’ (Hofstede, 1986)

At junior and senior high level, students are not only under considerable pressure to study for and pass entrance examinations but also are adolescents. Adolescence can be a difficult stage of life. Faced with a new and unfamiliar situation, adolescents are likely to respond cautiously; if not negatively. For this reason, performing formalities of the lesson such as the attendance-check and greetings in the same manner as Japanese colleagues is a recommended practice. Likewise, seating arrangements should remain the same as other classes except where pair-work or group activities require alternative arrangements.

A sure way of minimizing uncertainty is to have clear learning objectives. This is of course begins with having a carefully planned syllabus in place. Once this groundwork has been laid, each lesson can begin with a statement of its learning objective. Students then know what it is they are expected to achieve and can maintain focus and motivation with this element of uncertainty having been eliminated. The lesson objective can be presented either verbally or written on the board. When time permits, it is also worth restating the lesson objective at the end of class to consolidate what has been

studied.

When teaching to classes of low level fluency and especially younger students with short attention spans, it is advisable to have several activities planned for any given lesson. These activities can be designed to focus on any particular language skill such as pronunciation or question formation. Class management and discipline issues can arise however if the transition from one activity to another is not clearly signaled. A number of methods can be employed to achieve this. During some activities, the use of music may be appropriate. Stopping the music is a clear signal to students that the activity has finished or that their attention is required. In other activities, a timer can be used. When the timer sounds, this signifies the end of the activity. At other times, simpler methods such as requesting that students look to the front of the classroom are sufficient in bringing closure to activities. Whichever method is chosen, clear signaling of the start and end of activities is appreciated and reassuring.

“Students are rewarded for accuracy in problem solving.”  
(Hofstede, 1986)

Because Grammar-Translation forms the backbone of English education in Japan, students are conditioned to believe that there is always a correct answer and for any given word there is one correct translation. In regular lessons, it is not uncommon for students to be penalized for failing to construct ‘full’ sentences. In my lessons, I do not administer such penalties. The truth is native speakers

rarely speak in what Japanese teachers regard as ‘correct’ and ‘full’ sentences. Students who are able to communicate their intended meaning should be acknowledged for doing so. To cater to students’ expectation of rewards for accuracy, activities such as spelling tests or listening for specific information (e.g. phone numbers, addresses) can be incorporated into lesson plans. Spelling tests are also culturally educational as they represent a common element of English lessons in British schools. Similarly, an American style ‘Spelling Bee’ activity would have the same result.

### Teacher Uncertainty

Hofstede’s findings would seem to suggest that the Japanese students have a much stronger desire to avoid uncertainty than a teacher from a Western country. Grundy (2000) suggests that it may in fact be the teacher’s desire to avoid uncertainty that determines the structure their lessons. Grundy cites teaching methodologies such as audiolingualism and PPP as examples of teachers trying to minimize their uncertainty in the classroom. By controlling not only what language is used but also when and how it is used, teachers using the afore-mentioned methodologies are taking deliberate steps to eliminate the possibility of unforeseen eventualities.

Concerned with cultures as wholes, it is beyond the scope of Hofstede’s research to consider how an individual’s behavior alters when placed in a foreign culture. In their native environment, Britons may well exhibit a high tolerance for uncertainty. However,

placed in a foreign classroom with foreign students it seems likely that a British teacher's own desire to avoid uncertainty will strongly influence the interaction that takes place. In Grundy's opinion, this influence is negative and leads to syllabi that are 'unrealistically goal directed' and teaching that is 'conservative and ineffective'. If Grundy's speculation is accurate, then it seems reasonable to theorize that, with time, such teachers will attain a greater level of certainty and understanding of their students' abilities. Furthermore, these teachers will come to accept the culture of their students (Schumann, 1976). As this happens, in turn their teaching approach will become less rigid and more learner-centered.

## Conclusion

Having lived in Japan for over a decade, it becomes increasingly difficult to compare its culture with that of my homeland. Many aspects of Japanese culture I now take for granted and my memory of British culture is gradually fading. In any case, I am generally cautious of stereotypes and generalizations. However, I do believe that cultural definitions such as Hofstede's have some value as a cautionary guide to teachers preparing to teach students from an unfamiliar culture. Ultimately though, it is important for teachers to form their own opinions as to which approach works best with their students.

In the course of writing this paper, I experienced difficulty in finding literature relating Hofstede's research to EFL. Much of the academic

work tends to be focused on ESL learning environments (Kubota 1999, Littlewood 2000). This is understandable as teachers of ESL students are unlikely to have direct experience or in-depth knowledge of their students' cultures. Whilst this may be so, teachers in EFL classes experience unique problems and would arguably stand to benefit from academic attention.

Language is closely linked to culture and fostering cultural understanding is likely to facilitate improved linguistic ability. As Kubota cautions however, one should not view the students' own culture and language as 'problematic and limiting' (1999). Both teacher and student should appreciate cross-cultural diversity; though creating the conditions for this to occur is a fine balancing act.

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