

# Teaching in Cultures Averse to Uncertainty

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## Reference Data:

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Different cultural backgrounds can be the source of divergent teacher and student expectations about classroom roles and procedures (Richards & Lockhart, 1996). It would therefore be helpful for teachers to be aware of these differences, to understand the potential problems associated with them, and to know how to adapt to get the best results. Although many will be familiar with cultural variables such as the individualism/collectivism paradigm, another influential characteristic is how comfortable people of a given culture are with the unfamiliar, which Hofstede (1980) labels *Uncertainty Avoidance* (UA). The Japanese typically have higher levels of UA, tending to seek structure and predictability, and often maintaining formalized codes of conduct. This paper offers detailed advice and examples to help teachers from cultures with lower UA, such as Britain, Canada and the United States, to adjust their teaching methodology in order to compliment Japanese university students' preferences.

異なる文化的背景は、クラスルームでの役割や進行において教師と学習者の期待を異なったものにする原因となりうる (Richard & Lockhart, 1996)。それゆえに、教師にとって、それら文化的背景の違いを認識すること、その違いに基づく潜在的な問題を理解すること、最善の結果を得るためにはどのように適応させるのかを知ることは有益なこととなるであろう。多くの人は個人主義や集産主義パラダイムのような、より良く知られた文化的相違については馴染みがあるであろうが、別の大きな特質としてあるのは、ある文化を与えられた人々が、よく知らないものに対してどう感じるかというものである。これは、Hofstede(1980)が「Uncertainty Avoidance(不確実なもの回避) (UA)」と名付けているものである。日本人は特に高いレベルのUAを持ち、体系や予測性を求める傾向がある。そして、しばしば形式化した自分たちの行動規制を有する。この論文では、イギリスやカナダ、アメリカのようなUAの低い文化圏出身の教師に、日本の大学生の好みに合わせ、自分たちの教授方法論を適応させるための詳細なアドバイスや具体例を述べる。

**O**UR CULTURE of origin is transferred from one generation to the next with remarkable efficiency. This social programming dictates how we view the world; it largely determines fundamental phenomena such as values, our sense of right and wrong, and our aesthetic preferences. Although each of us experiences culture individually, generalizations can be made about all individuals from a specific culture and differences between cultures can be identified. In the modern global age, with efficient means of communication and transport accessible to many, people from different cultural backgrounds increasingly come into contact with each other. During such intercultural exchanges, a lack of awareness of cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings and a breakdown in communication. The foreign language classroom is an obvious example of one such inter-cultural interface. As Richards and Lockhart state, the “differences in cultural assumptions about teaching and the



role of the teacher can lead to different expectations on both the teacher's and the learner's part" (1996, p. 107-108). Furthermore, Hofstede asserts that "the burden of adoption in cross-cultural learning situations should be primarily the teacher's" (1986, p. 301). It seems clear that it is the teacher's responsibility to be aware of and adapt to the cultural preferences of his or her students. It follows that furthering understanding of cultural differences, in terms of their origins and influence, will help foreign language teachers to develop strategies to minimize any potential ill effects, which these differences might cause.

### Measuring Culture

In an effort to systematically quantify and account for cross-cultural variation of people's values, Hofstede administered questionnaires to 116,000 employees of International Business Machines (IBM) in branches spanning 40 countries. By comparing mean scores between countries, Hofstede's longitudinal research identified four "cultural dimensions" (1980, 1991). These were labeled: Individualism, Power Distance, Masculinity, and Uncertainty Avoidance. Each dimension can be viewed as a scale running between two "synthetic cultures" which are "extreme manifestations of the value orientations at both ends of that dimension" (Hofstede, Pedersen, & Hofstede, 2002, p. 91). Such extremes are not to be found in the real world however, since by definition they represent cultures obsessive about only one aspect of life. A society is accorded a quantitative value for each of the dimensions and these scores are plotted somewhere along the appropriate scale. These four dimensions form a framework, which enables a better understanding of the complex cultural landscape of a given society.

### Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance (UA) is a measure of how comfortable members of a particular culture are with the unfamiliar and is

the focus of this paper. Hofstede names the two opposing ends of this scale as strong UA and weak UA (1980), but the terms *high* and *low* will be used for the purposes of this study. In societies with a high UA score, such as Japan, it is said that people tend to seek structure and predictability. In contrast, people from cultures with lower UA scores, such as the UK, Ireland, Australia, the USA, Canada and New Zealand, are believed to cope better with ambiguity. An important distinction is that high UA is not simply avoiding all risk, but avoiding risk specifically associated with the unknown (Hofstede, 2002). By focusing on UA, the present study aims to pinpoint the effect of this one cultural variable in Japanese university classes, and discover how native-speaker teachers are adapting to and accommodating these effects.

### This Research

As with all four of Hofstede's cultural variables, UA is measured on a scale from 0 to 100. According to Hofstede's research, there is a considerable difference between the UA levels for many native English-speaking cultures, and that of Japan. As can be seen in Table 1 below, Hofstede's research showed that native English-speaking cultures, such as those listed, typically have lower levels of UA. This is in contrast to Japan which has a UA measure of 92, comparatively much higher.

In his research, Hofstede speculates as to the potential effects of UA in an educational setting. He postulates that teachers from low UA cultures cope well with ambiguity, find rules and formal procedures inhibitive, and have a greater tolerance of diversity. In contrast, according to Hofstede, students from high UA cultures, such as Japan, prefer structure, predictability, and more formal codes of classroom conduct. They also prefer dealing in absolute truths, and clear distinctions. It seems probable that this significant difference of UA levels is exerting an influence in classrooms with native English-speaking teachers and Japanese students.

**Table 1. Japan EFL Classes and UA Differentials  
(adapted from Hofstede 1980, 1991)**

Low UA Cultures (Native Speaker Teachers)		High UA Cultures (Japanese Students)	
British	35	Japanese	92
Irish	35		
Australians	45		
Americans	46		
Canadians	47		
New Zealanders	50		

While Hofstede's observations provide an important starting point, they nevertheless remain rather abstract and of little practical use to teachers. The aim of this qualitative study is to discover specific and practical examples of the impact of low UA teachers working with Japanese students, and to find out how teachers are adapting their teaching methodology to manage any potential disruptive effects of this teacher/student UA differential.

A similar 2009 study also considers the implications of differences in UA between native speaking English teachers working with Japanese university students (Datzman, 2009). A useful discussion of how these issues might be dealt with in practical terms is also included. The findings of the present study add to this work by investigating the steps actually being taken to deal with UA differences by a group of native-speaker university teachers. The results should help native English-speaking teachers working in Japan to fine tune aspects of their approach, and thereby teach more effectively.

## **Methodology**

As already discussed, Hofstede's research points to a significant cultural difference between many native-speaking EFL teachers and their Japanese students in terms of UA, and it is reasonable to assume that this may be exerting its influence in the classroom. The aim of my research was to discover the nature and effects of this influence. Due to the intricate nature of this research question and the likelihood of divergent and detailed answers, face-to-face interviews with teachers were deemed the most effective method of finding out about their approach. For the interviews, I opted for the flexibility associated with a semi-structured format, involving a planned interview framework, but which also allowed interviewees to contribute longer answers and digressions. Mills (2001) describes this kind of interview as one that provides the scope for interviewees to talk at length, go off at a slight tangent, and pursue a theme. Using this framework, the interviewer has the freedom to probe responses further with extensive follow-up questioning (McDonough & McDonough, 1997). Although the present study concentrates on UA issues from the teacher's point of view, it would no doubt be useful in future research to investigate the student's perspective.

I interviewed nine (seven male and two female) native English-speaking EAP teaching colleagues, from two universities in the Tokyo area. All interviewees were either British, American or Canadian nationals with a minimum of five years teaching experience at university level in Japan. All had at least a Master's degree in either Applied Linguistics or TESOL. One week before interviews were scheduled to take place, I sent interviewees reference notes on Hofstede's research, a detailed definition of the UA paradigm along with UA scores for Japan and native English-speaking cultures (see Table 1). I asked teachers to reflect on their own experience of problems relating to UA differentials and how they adjust their approach to account for these differences. Teachers were asked to be ready to discuss

their thoughts on these matters at the interview. Interviews took place over coffee in a relaxed setting while at work. All interviews lasted between 25-40 minutes and were recorded. I wrote up a summary of each interview within a few hours, using the recording and any notes I had made during the session.

The results of this research are to be treated with a degree of caution for a number of reasons. Firstly, the use of nonrandom sampling and small sample size means the data is not necessarily representative. Additionally, cultural characteristics are, of course, immensely complex and any attempt to quantify and describe them runs the risk of criticism for over-simplifying, or worse still, reinforcing cultural stereotypes. Hofstede's work is no-exception in this respect, so the present study is also open to the same criticism. However, the findings of this exploratory research will provide a useful insight into how teachers are adjusting their methods to get the best results when teaching students from a different culture. The ideas put forward by the teachers interviewed should be relevant and readily applicable in a broad range of educational settings in Japan and indeed other high UA cultures.

## Results

An inductive approach was used to analyze the interview data in order to produce a condensed summary of underlying themes. Each idea raised in the data was assigned a notation. For example, SA denoted points relating to student attitudes, and TA for teacher attitudes. The points were then grouped together and subdivided further, again using notation. For example, AF was used to code issues relating to accuracy or fluency preferences. The end result of this process suggested that UA differentials are broadly affecting classrooms in three ways:

1. Accuracy versus Fluency Preferences
2. Student versus Teacher-Centeredness Preferences

### 3. Flexibility versus Formality Preferences

The following sections give a detailed summary of the data, for each of these three effects. Text appearing in speech marks has been quoted directly from interviewees.

#### *Accuracy Versus Fluency*

From the interview data, it seems that teachers from lower UA cultures tend to prioritize fluency and communication, whereas many Japanese students are looking to teachers for correction to improve their accuracy. All nine interviewees raised this issue. Teachers identified a number of resultant problems relating to these divergent expectations of teachers and students. Firstly, a number of respondents expressed feelings of frustration at what they perceived as quiet, shy and unresponsive students. Equally, teachers sometimes noticed that their students seemed puzzled if they receive feedback only on the content of what they are saying, but not on the form.

Teachers also said that many Japanese students simply fail to see any potential for the communicative application of English, and instead approach it solely as a subject of study. Many interviewees emphasized the importance of building a rapport with Japanese students in order to lay emphasis on communicating in English. One teacher, teaching EAP (English for Academic Purposes) on a study-abroad program at Waseda University, said that he invited senior students, who had already studied at a university overseas for a year, to visit his class and give a short talk about their experience. He had his students prepare questions to ask the visiting student in advance of the talk. The teacher said that the motivational effect of these visits was very powerful as it helped reveal the immediate benefits to students of improving their communicative ability in English.

Many teachers also stressed the value of heavily scaffolded preparation stages leading into communicative activities. For

example, giving students plenty of opportunity to think about their ideas on a given topic will usually ensure things run more smoothly, and that speaking activities “get off the ground”. For speaking activities in small groups, some teachers said that after students have been given some thinking time, they then have them discuss their ideas in pairs before getting into groups. The rationale here was that students can formulate their ideas about the topic, practice using the language needed, and build their confidence before actually doing the activity “proper”. Another teacher said that using role-plays worked well as it allowed students to “step out of themselves”. According to the same teacher, assigning roles and opinions “freed students up from the natural Japanese tendency toward consensus”, thus allowing them the freedom to talk more. Another teacher cited task-based methods as being particularly suitable for Japanese students. One other teacher also said that exposure to other, non-standard varieties of English was an effective way to shift students attention away from accuracy and on to communication. The effects of different UA levels in terms of accuracy versus fluency preferences are summarized in Table 2.

### Student Versus Teacher-Centeredness

Another problem area relating to UA identified by all nine teachers interviewed was the differences in preference levels of teacher-centeredness between students and teachers. While most of the teachers saw their role mainly as that of facilitator, they reported that Japanese students typically prefer a more teacher-centered style. Interviewees in the present study cited resultant problems as teacher frustration, stalled speaking activities and student confusion or panic. Most teachers explained that setting realistic goals by breaking down tasks into achievable steps was an effective remedy.

One interviewee said that she uses carefully scaffolded activities to guide her students to the stage that they are able to write

**Table 2. The Effects of UA Differentials:  
Accuracy Versus Fluency**

DIFFERENCES	
Fluency & communication	Accuracy & correction
PROBLEMS	
Teacher frustrated: quiet, shy, unresponsive students	
Students expect feedback relating to form, not content	
Students do not see the communicative applications of English	
SOLUTIONS	
Rapport building	
Visits from post-sabbatical seniors	
Preparation + practice → communicative activities	
Individual → Pairs → Small Groups → Whole Class	
Assign Roles	
TBL	
Exposure to non-standard Englishes	

a 400-word reading journal entry for homework. By breaking down this potentially daunting task into manageable steps she could gradually hand over the initiative to her students. Teachers also stressed the particular importance of providing written or spoken models to students when teaching in Japan. Examples of this kind of modeling mentioned by the interviewees included having a strong pair of students do a speaking activity in front of the whole class, or the teacher modeling a pair activity with a volunteer, with the teacher taking the more challenging role if possible. Another teacher said that giving students “language frames” on the blackboard was “a simple and yet invaluable technique” to get his students talking. He went on to say that he always had his students orally check their own answers for textbook exercises together in small groups or pairs. He said that without the frames, the students would be unable

to do it and “would no doubt revert to looking at each other’s textbooks to check their answers”. The teacher gave this example of language frames during our interview:

A: How about number \_\_\_\_\_ ?

B: I think the answer is \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_ .

A: Me too. / Really? I think the answer is \_\_\_\_\_ because ....

Another teacher, who sets 10-minute free-writing assignments throughout the semester for homework gave an interesting example of the incremental handing-over of initiative. At the start of the semester, students are given a list of 50 free-writing topics and questions. Over the course of the semester, the students are required to do 12 free writing assignments in a special notebook. In class, students work in small groups and take turns to read aloud their free writing to the other members of their group. When finished, the other group members, having listened to their classmate, must choose from the list of topics which free writing question the student wrote about.

Also, teachers again emphasized the importance of preparation time for speaking activities and moving from individual preparation, through pairs and then to small groups or plenary activities if necessary. In general, teachers said that it is possible to change students’ expectations to more student-centered classes, but it must be done gradually to avoid panic or demotivating effects. The effects of different UA levels in terms of student versus teacher-centeredness preferences are summarized in Table 3 below.

**Table 3. The Effects of UA Differentials: Student Versus Teacher-Centeredness**

DIFFERENCES	
T = facilitator not controller	Prefer Teacher-centered Classes
Want active participation	Compulsive note-takers
Want student collaboration	
Encourage critical thinking	
PROBLEMS	
Teacher frustration: Students lacking initiative, shy, uncooperative	
Stalled activities	
Student Confusion / Panic	
SOLUTIONS	
Realistic Goals – break tasks down into achievable steps	
Incremental handover of initiative	
Modeling	
Preparation + practice → communicative activities	
Individual → Pairs → Small Groups → Whole Class	

### **Flexibility Versus Formality**

The final source of potential problems from UA differentials identified in the data was that of the interviewees’ willingness to improvise, be flexible and to deviate from a lesson plan or even syllabus. This was raised by seven of the nine teachers interviewed. The teachers contrasted this with Japanese students’ desire for very clear objectives, measures of achievement and formal codes of conduct in class. Teachers again highlighted teacher frustration as a potential problem, along with student anxiety leading to demotivation. Interviewees mentioned a

variety of ways by which they bring a greater degree of formality and structure to their classes. The first method is to give clear instructions when setting up activities. Of course, this is important when teaching students from any culture, but teachers emphasized that particular attention must be paid to this aspect when teaching Japanese students. Without a good understanding of what is expected of them, Japanese students are unwilling to “muddle through and make the best of it”.

According to some of the teachers interviewed, students are unlikely to attempt an activity if they do not fully understand what they have to do. A number of teachers mentioned checking techniques such as asking students to repeat back instructions, or again having students model an activity. Some teachers pointed out that simply asking whether students understood was not sufficient. One teacher mentioned that having a routine worked very well because “students know what to expect and can become accustomed to a particular teacher’s style”. Additionally, a number of teachers also emphasized the importance of giving students a very clear and detailed syllabus and course schedule, detailing homework assignments and deadlines, assessment criteria, and class rules. Finally, one teacher said that she always writes up the class objectives, stages and homework on the blackboard at the start of class, allowing students to understand the purpose of the class and its direction. The effects of different UA levels in terms of flexibility versus formality preferences are summarized in Table 4 below.

**Table 4. The Effects of UA Differentials:  
Flexibility Versus Formality**

DIFFERENCES	
Improvisation	Transparent activity / class / course objectives, aims and content
Flexibility	Visible measures of achievement
Deviation from lesson plan	Formal codes of class conduct
PROBLEMS	
Teacher frustration: students inflexible	
Anxiety → demotivation	
SOLUTIONS	
Clear Instructions	
Modeling	
Start of course: Detailed syllabus and schedule	
Start of Class: Objectives and H/W on the whiteboard	

### Conclusion

This study has revealed that different levels of UA have a significant effect on what Japanese students and their low UA foreign teachers might expect from classroom interaction. It has also identified how these differences can lead to specific problems and ways in which the teachers interviewed are adapting their approach in a variety of ways in order to deal with such difficulties. The analysis shows that UA differentials impact the classroom in terms of accuracy / fluency preferences, student / teacher-centeredness preferences, and flexibility / formality preferences. Many of the adaptations made by the teachers in this study, for example providing clear models, breaking tasks into more manageable stages, and giving students plenty of

thinking time and preparation time leading into communicative activities, represent increasing the level of scaffolding for students. It seems that by increasing the level of support in this way, student uncertainty and the associated anxiety is reduced. The results of this study indicate that teachers working in high UA environments can help their students by increasing the level of scaffolded support they provide. It is clear that a willingness to understand, accommodate and work with cultural variation is an important quality of effective teachers.

### Bio Data

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