Uncertainty Avoidance and the Japanese Classroom

Brien DATZMAN

要　　約

Brown (Principles of Language Learning and Teaching;192)は、 "個人主義"や"集団主義"といった社会の根底にある価値観が、生徒間同士や生徒と教師間の関わり合いに影響を及ぼしているのではないかと主張している。本論文は、日本の教室環境で見られる"uncertainty avoidance "(不確実な状況における行動抑制）が生徒間、あるいは、生徒教師間の関わり合いに対しどのような影響を与えているのか、また、それが教授法にどのように関係しているのか、について考察を行ったものである。先ず、異文化間の相違に関するGeert Hofstedeの４次元モデルのうち、特に、"uncertainty avoidance "をベースに、様々な文化的背景からなるクラスに見られる異質性の定義を試みる。次に、このような定義を踏まえ、どのようにしたら異文化間における学習がより生産的になるかを論じる。

Abstract

Brown (Principles of Language Learning and Teaching:192) suggests various ways in which the values inherent in 'collectivist' and 'individualist' societies might affect student-student and teacher-student interactions. This paper looks at how 'uncertainty avoidance' in a Japanese setting might affect student to student and teacher to student interaction and how this in turn will affect a teachers adopted methodology. The paper first attempts to define some differences of a culturally mixed classroom, in this case an American teacher in a Japanese classroom, based on Geert Hofstede's four dimensional model of cultural differences, specifically that of uncertainty avoidance. This is followed by a discussion of the implications of these differences and how they may be overcome to create a more productive cross-cultural learning environment.

Hofstede's Dimensions

Hofstede(1991:5) defines culture as, "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another". Hofstede further characterizes national cultures based upon four dimensions. These dimensions were first published in his 1980 book, *Culture's Consequences*. These four dimensions are:

1．Power Distance: The extent to which a group accepts inequality of power among its members

2．Uncertainty Avoidance: The extent to which a group is willing to accept ambiguity and take risks.

3．Individualism vs. Collectivism: The extent to which a group prioritizes the individual over the group, and vice versa.

4. <u>Masculinity vs. Femininity</u>: The extent to which a group prioritizes assertiveness and achievement vs. relationships and caring, and vice versa.

This paper will concentrate on the characteristic of uncertainty avoidance and how it manifests itself in the classroom. By taking Hofstede's dimension of uncertainty avoidance and its implications I will show how this information scan be used to benefit the foreign teacher in a Japanese classroom, and in turn the students of that classroom.

Uncertainty Avoidance

Brown(2000:90) defines uncertainty avoidance as,

"The extent to which people within a culture are made nervous by situations which they perceive as unstructured, unclear, or unpredictable, situations which they therefore try to avoid by maintaining strict codes of behavior and a belief in absolute truths"

Learning a foreign language is clearly a situation which one may perceive as unstructured, unclear, and/or unpredictable. This situation is likely to be compounded when the teacher comes from a different culture than the learner or when the instruction is not in the students L1. Hofstede(1986;303) observes that 'teacher/student interaction is deeply rooted in culture and therefore cross cultural learning is fundamentally problematic' Japan scores high on the uncertainty avoidance index(110), while the USA scores low(-81), with high scores representing stronger uncertainty avoidance and low scores representing weaker unc ertainty avoidance. Hofstede provides a table that lists the educational differences between weak and strong uncertainty societies. It must be stated that these are based on extremes when the reality is usually in between. The table is reproduced below

WEAK UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE SOCIETIES

- Students feel comfortable in unstructured learning situations vague objectives, broad assignments, no timetables
- Teachers are allowed to say 'I don't know'
- A good teacher uses plain language
- Students are rewarded for innovative approaches to problem solving
- Teachers are expected to suppress emotions(and so are students)
- Teachers interpret intellectual disagreement as a stimulating exercise

・Teachers seek parents ideas

Strong Uncertainty Avoidance Societies

・Students feel comfortable in structured learning situations: precise objectives, detailed assignments , strict timetables

・Teachers are expected to have all the answers

・A good teacher uses academic language

・Students are rewarded for accuracy in problem solving

・Teachers are allowed to behave emotionally(and so are students)

・Teachers interpret intellectual disagreement as personal disloyalty

・Teachers consider themselves experts who cannot learn anything from lay parents, and parents agree.

Hofstede Elaborated

From Hofstedes definition of uncertainty avoidance and his table of differences we can begin to construct some key areas where it will affect the American teacher in a Japanese EFL classroom There are three main areas that will significantly affect the classroom. The first area is the degree to which the classroom is structured. High uncertainty cultures are seen as having highly structured classes in which students and teachers have clear and separate roles. The classroom has its established routines and schedules and they are not to be changed. Low uncertainty Avoidance cultures classrooms can be seen as having a low, or loose, structure, though this is certainly not true in all cases, characterized by a more balanced relationship between teacher and student and freedom within structure. The second area is the degree to which a classroom is teacher or student centered. In a high uncertainty avoidance culture the teacher is seen as the center of the classroom. The classroom and lesson will be focused on the teacher and the student is expected to follow, without questioning. In a low uncertainty avoidance culture the classroom and lessons are centered on the student and meeting their needs. Teachers will be more likely to consider different students and their abilities in the classroom and be open to various methods of teaching. Students are more likely to have and take advantage of the opportunity to participate in the classroom. The third area is the degree to which the classroom is accuracy oriented or process oriented. By accuracy oriented, it is meant that students are focused on and rewarded for the correct way of doing things., whereas in a process oriented classroom a student might be rewarded for finding a different way. In other words, rewarded for their creativity.

All three areas are inter-related and have a significant effect on one another. Furthermore it can be said that all three of these conditions can and should be seen on a continuum, where one has greater comforter on one side than the other.

Highly Structured Classrooms

Nunan(1999:74) defines highly structured teaching situations "as those in which the teacher is very much in control of the instruction process. In these situations, learners have relatively little power or control over either the content or process of learning". Teachers from strong uncertainty avoidance countries might be required or expected to plan lessons in a more detailed fashion, and to adhere to these plans more rigidly. Students in strong uncertainty avoidance countries might expect a regular and familiar routine to their classes.

In my experience as a teacher in the Japanese school system this structure was clearly evident in many of the classes. In many of the oral communication classes that I was required to teach, with a native Japanese teacher, the preferred lesson plan was of the presentation, practice, and performance(PPP) approach. A common class had the teachers presenting students with a short dialogue that was often translated for the students. Students were then paired up and given a set amount of time to practice and memorize the dialogue. At the end of class a few pairs were then called upon to perform the dialogue in front of the class. Teachers and students were all familiar with this routine, the timetable, and its objectives. This type of lesson can be seen as catering to both the teachers and students needs for routine, timetables, and objectives that are common to high uncertainty avoidance cultures.

Misplaced Focus

Teachers and Students in high uncertainty avoidance cultures are more likely to be focused on the accurate production of the final dialogue than with the different processes that can get them there. This highly structured environment described above, with the objective of an accurate production of a scripted text, has a misplaced focus and creates a fear of speaking in the classroom. Students are concentrated on the final accurate production of a dialogue for fear of having to produce it in front of the classroom. A less structured environment would see a positive learning experience through a variety of activities focusing on the students and the different processes involved in their learning of a second language. As I will show below with some simple changes and additions to this process we might begin to change the classroom structure, or in a sense de-familiarize them with this approach, in a sensitive and culturally aware fashion.

Teacher centered classrooms

In high uncertainty avoidance countries teachers can be seen as the expert and from

them all knowledge will be imparted to the student. Teachers control the knowledge that is brought into the classroom and students are there to receive the knowledge, as passive recipients. This can clearly be seen in the technique employed in many Japanese classrooms. The classroom is teacher fronted and of a lecture style. Students are rarely asked to give any input and the classroom is seen as a place where a student listens, but does not speak (Doyon 2000)..

The notion of the teacher as an expert can often be seen in the Japanese classroom where a native speaker of English is brought in as an assistant teacher to provide a correct model of the language. In many cases the actual duties of this teacher is to speak at designated times during the class, and often from a scripted text. Students in turn are expected to listen and replicate the native speaker's(expert's) speech.

Learner Dependency

This is not considered an ideal environment for the second/foreign language learning classroom where a primary focus should be on the learner. It creates a notion that a language can simply be learned by exposure and memorization. The learner is dependent upon the teacher. Nunan writes, 'Students in such a classroom do not learn how to express their own ideas and to share these ideas by communicating in small groups"(1999: 83). I often noticed this dependency when asking my students a question to which they had no memorized answer. Students in this situation would automatically turn to the other teacher in the room, or a student next to them, instead of trying to answer on their own. Students are dependent on teachers for all knowledge in the classroom. They can be seen as avoiding the situation by turning to the teacher, who has all the answers.

Accuracy oriented

Teachers and students in high uncertainty avoidance classrooms will have a strong focus on accuracy as opposed to processes, or creativity within the process. Teachers might be more inclined to teach towards a test while students will be focused on the accurate reproduction of any material presented to them so that they might pass the test. This is often seen in the Japanese school system where a great emphasis is put on examinations whether it is to get into the right high school or college. This is something that obviously may or may not be in the teacher's control.

Fear of Error

A byproduct of this focus on accuracy is the creation of mistake fearing students. In

Japan students are known to rarely volunteer answers, and sometimes to not answer at all when called upon(Doyon 2000). In some of my own classes, unless there was a specific answer to a question asked of them, many students would simply sit silently until another student was called upon. The case may be that the student was simply too nervous to answer, or too uncertain of the correct answer to risk embarrassment in front of the class. This fear of speaking and making errors will inhibit the learning process. As Brown points out, 'children learning their first language and adults learning a second can really make progress only by learning from their mistakes' (Brown 2000: 217). Students in high uncertainty cultures may not be accustomed to speaking in class and/or may be fearful of producing an incorrect answer.

Implications for Uncertainty Avoidance classroom

There are many factors affecting the teacher student roles in a classroom and these are only magnified in the cross cultural classroom. Wright(Nunan,1999:156) lists two main categories of factors.

1．social/interpersonal factors
2．the nature of the learning tasks and ways that they are dealt with in the classroom.

Nunan(1999:156) describes these two factors as constantly interacting creating an environment that can have either a positive or negative affect on the classroom. For the foreign teacher in the English as a foreign language classroom the effect these factors can have is multiplied due to the inherent cultural traits described above (see Table 1). It must be made clear that the burden of adapting and adjusting should be on the teacher and not the students. It is our job to meet our student's needs.

The classroom traits described above provide a large obstacle to a teacher who wants to base their teaching practices on a more communicative approach. A communicative approach implying a classroom that can be defined as learner centered, meaning students are aware and in control of their own learning processes, and interactive. Our job as teachers is to provide them with the right environment and opportunities to develop and apply these skills.

A New Approach

Before moving into how we can begin to introduce a more communicative based approach it is important to note that students may in fact want to work in this type of classroom, or one based on some other methods, but just don't know how. Students do not

like classes in which they sit passively. I've often had students on the secondary level in Japan complain to me how they are bored with their English classes and then ask what do I have to do to learn English. These are questions and statements that stem from a frustration and lack of satisfaction with current procedures in the classroom. It seems that we are not meeting the learners needs. In fact moving towards a more communicative end of the spectrum is even called for by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology(Monbukagakusho,2003: II.1): In order to be able to "make use of English", it is necessary not only to have a knowledge of grammar and vocabulary but also the ability to use English for the purpose of actual communication. Thus, in English classes, instruction mainly based on grammar and translation or teacher-centered classes are not recommended.

Comfort under a different structure

Physical attributes

By changing the physical structure of the classroom we can begin to disassociate students from the traditional, highly structured classes that are common in high uncertainty avoidance cultures..

A simple change in the design of the classroom so that it is not the traditional teacher fronted room students are accustomed to can provide a new outlet from which to work. A simple moving around of the desks to form small groups and a changing of activities to require face to face pair work or intermingling will create less focus on the teacher. Students in the traditional Japanese classroom described above may have problems adjusting to this new environment, but with detailed instructions at the beginning of a course concerning how to begin and proceed with these sorts of activities we can ease the transition to a new, less traditionally structured, environment.

Giving Information and Power to Students

Research shows that a program in which goals are made explicit leads to higher performances by students than programs in which goals are implicit"(Nunan 192). This statement seems to coincide with the high uncertainty avoidance characteristic of a need for precise objectives. However, students in a Japanese high schools are more than likely not aware of the possible different goals and objectives available in a language classroom. We might then begin a course by providing students with a list of successful second language learner traits to evaluate and discuss in groups or individually. This is a simple activity that provides students with information concerning the skills and tools successful learners

use. It will also give students the opportunity to start an evaluation of their own language competence.

Setting Goals

Using these successful learner traits as a basis you could then begin to discuss goals with students. By discussing and setting out not only the goals of the teacher, but also the students as individuals and the class as a whole we can continue to empower students in their learning processes and lessen their dependency on the teacher. This is an inherently different/foreign objective, creating goals together, for a classroom of students used to a highly structured situation where objectives are laid out for them. To close the gap between these two approaches a teacher should provide the students with a list of goals, such as successful learner traits mentioned above, that they could choose from or use to create their own. In a highly structured context, that of a high uncertainty avoidance culture, it should be remembered that students may not only need concrete ideas about how to reach their goals, but ideas and help in how to create those goals.

Cognitive Exercises

Simple introduction activities to the topic of the lesson's dialogue will help learners to place a heavier emphasis on communication and meaning as opposed to accurate, mistake free, reproduction of the dialogue. Within the prevalent lesson plan described above, PPP (see 3), we can begin to rearrange the structure and objectives of the lesson with activities such as brainstorming, classifying, and predicting. These activities can help direct the learner's attention to the subject and/or meaning of the dialogue. These three techniques, in particular, are prescribed by Alice Omaggio, to help overcome cognitive style problems associated with high uncertainty avoidance cultures, a low tolerance for ambiguity and excessive reflexiveness/caution(Brown 2001: 219). In addition, these activities can help prepare students for what may be to them nontraditional learning activities (Burden 2002). Students accustomed to a highly structured environment may have some difficulties with these sorts of activities on an individual or group level, but I have found these difficulties can be easily negated by detailed explanations and models when they are introduced into the classroom.

An Intrinsic Motivator -Bringing Students Knowledge into the Classroom

By appealing towards learners intrinsic motivations we can begin to create autonomy and self determination in our students. There are many techniques that appeal to the learner's intrinsic motivation. One technique, goal setting, was discussed above. Another is

to bring students knowledge into the classroom. As teacher we must first find out about our students and what their interests are. After finding out your students interests and goals it is important to keep them in mind when planning lessons and to try bringing these things into the classroom whenever possible. In my classes I found that whenever the subject matter turned to the student's interest their attention levels rose and they were more likely to speak and less worried about making errors. Bringing your students interests and experiences into the lesson plans will help to create a meaningful learning process that is not teacher centered.

A Process Oriented Student

Learner Journals

Rather than everything resting on speech test graded mainly on accuracy, a course might put more emphasis on participation in and through various activities. One such strategy would be to have students keep learner journals. As students in a high uncertainty avoidance environment might find this sort of activity ambiguous it would be a good idea, at first, to set clear guidelines for the writing. When doing this in my classrooms I found it useful to provide various models for students to refer to and choose from when writing their own. This also proved to be an invaluable tool for building confidence in students that were less likely to speak up in class even though they may have a high communication competence in English. Through journal feedback they became aware that they did have the skills to communicate. Here, once again, is an activity that can be seen as empowering students to take control and understand their own learning processes

Creating an Affective Climate

As discussed earlier Japanese students seem to be inherently afraid of making errors. This could be due to the focus on examinations, or just a cultural attribute of high uncertainty avoidance cultures. In either case it is an obstacle in the language learning process that cannot be avoided. According to Dufeu the solution to such fears is the creation of an affective climate that builds students self confidence and encourages participation without fear of embarrassment (Brown 2000: 150) . In order to create this kind of climate a teacher should take great care in correcting a student's errors. Doyon(2000) suggests three steps teachers should take in error correction:

1.wait until a certain level of trust has been established between themselves and the student

2 .wait until they feel the student can handle error correction

3 .take less obtrusive routes in their forms of error correction.

It is very important, in dealing with students errors, that teachers practice patience and care to create an atmosphere where students feel free to speak. In a situation where students are rarely encouraged to speak, such as the high avoidance culture, it is important to encourage students to express themselves without fear of embarrassment or failure.

Group Work

Another effective technique that can create an affective climate and give students the chance to speak and interact without fear of embarrassment is group work. Students in the Japanese class are often hesitant to speak for fear of making an error in front of their peers. We might negate this by having students work in small groups, as mentioned many times above, in which they are more likely to interact and communicate without the fear of embarrassment. Students at first may prove hostile to this kind of work, especially in a high avoidance culture where students are conditioned to be under the control of the teacher. Group work could very well be a strange activity for these kinds of students. We must be very careful and creative when implementing group work into this sort of environment (Brown,2001 : 179).

Introduced in small doses at first with clear sets of guidelines, models, and objectives students will begin to feel more comfortable within the group work setting Working in groups will help to alleviate some inhibitions or fears over making mistakes that some students might have as a result of the accuracy oriented classroom.

Conclusion

A classroom that is characterized by students who rarely speak or participate in class, are scared of making mistakes, and have a minimal understanding of the language learning process is not a conducive environment for learning a second language in any culture. It is our jobs as teachers to provide students with the knowledge and opportunity to create an environment conducive to second language learning. In the beginning of this paper I quoted Hofstede as saying that cross cultural learning is fundamentally problematic. While this is true I would also agree that the experience can be either a positive or negative one. Whether the experience is positive or negative depends on the amount of adjustment both sides are willing to make (Cogan 1995). In an EFL context it is important for teachers to remember that the majority of the responsibility for adjustment is on them. The teacher must be aware of and responsive to the students needs.

References

Brown, H.D.(2000). *Principles of Language Learning and Teaching* (4th edn.). New York: Longman

Brown, H.D.(2001). *Teaching by Principles* (2nd edn). New York: Longman

Burden,P.(2002) 'A Cross Sectional Study of Attitudes and Manifestations of Apathy of University Students Towards Studying English'. The Language Teacher, Vol. 23, No. 3. [online] Available at http://www.jalt-publications.org/tlt/articles/2002/03/burden (Accessed 10 January 2007)

Cogan, D.W.(1995). 'Should Foreign Teachers of English Adapt Their Methods to Japanese Patterns of Learning and Classroom Interaction?'. *The Language Teacher*, Vol. 19, No. 1 [Online] Available at http://jalt-publications.org/tlt/files/95/jan/cogan.html (Accessed 13 January 2007)

Doyon, P (2000) 'Shyness in the Japanese EFL class: why is it a problem, what it is, what causes it, and what to do about it". *The Language Teacher*, Vol. 24, No. 1
 [Online] Available at http://www.jalt-publications.org/tlt/articles/2000/01/doyon
 (Accessed 10 January 2007)

Hofstede, G.(1986). 'Cultural Differences in Teaching and Learning'. International Journal of Intercultural Relations, Vol. 10, pp. 301-320

Hofstede, G.(1991)*Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. McGraw Hill

Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [Japan] (2003). 'Action Plan to Cultivate "Japanese with English Abilities". [Online] Available at http://www.mext.go.jp/english/topics /03072801.htm (Accessed 22 January 2007)

Nunan, D. (1999). *Second Language Teaching and Learning*. Boston, Massachusetts: Heinle & Heinle.

Richards, J.C. and Rodgers, T.S.(2001) *Approaches and Methods in Language Teaching.* (2nd edn). Cambridge : Cambridge University Press