

The Relevance of Hofstede's Uncertainty Avoidance

ホーフステッドの不確実性の回避について

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Keywords : Hofstede, uncertainty avoidance, cultural impact

Abstract : This article looks at the relevance of Hofstede's dimension of uncertainty avoidance as it pertains to language education in Japan. The article considers the main factors of the dimension and assesses their application and accuracy as to the influence of cultural identity on classroom learning. Furthermore, suggestions are made which need to be incorporated into any communicative learning environment in Japan in order to maximize learner participation and achieve improvements in language proficiency. The approaches and strategies are required in order to overcome communication barriers unique to a country such as Japan, which scored highly on Hofstede's uncertainty avoidance index, meaning that it is a country whose people feel uncomfortable in, and therefore avoid, unpredictable situations.

1. Introduction

When teachers go and teach in foreign cultures, problems of communication and even conflict can arise due to a variety of reasons - one of these is because people from different cultures react differently to various situations. Hofstede in his 1968-1972 survey of cultural values was able to define these dimensions of culture and quantify countries accordingly. The four dimensions are: uncertainty avoidance, individualism-collectivism; power distance; and masculinity-femininity.

This paper examines one of Hofstede's dimensions; uncertainty avoidance, and the concepts it incorporates. It examines what affects it has on teacher-student and student-student interaction and lists differences and relates how much this impacts on the author's individual teaching methodology. Furthermore, it then goes on to suggest teaching strategies that can be adopted in order to overcome interaction barriers that arise as a result of uncertainty avoidance. Finally, it shows that

although uncertainty avoidance does affect teacher-student and student-student interaction, with adequate preparation and awareness any negative affects can be overcome through the adoption of relevant activities.

2. Hofstede's Theory

The cultural basis of the teacher-student relationship tends to make cross-cultural learning situations fundamentally problematic for both parties (Hofstede, 1986: 303). As a result, any differences may be viewed negatively, resulting in a negative assessment being reached. Due to this possibility of negative opinion forming, it is apparent that culture is highly important in the learning of a second language (Brown, 1994: 165). With this in mind Hofstede, who in his survey attempted to compare different cultures and cultural characteristics in an attempt to bridge cultural gaps, maintains that being able to compare different country's culture offers a basis to bridge cultural gaps. This is due to the fact

that:

Teaching to a student or student body with a cognitive profile different from what the teacher is accustomed to is evidently problematic

(Hofstede, 1986: 305)

To be able to do this, Hofstede defined cultural dimensions according to opposing extremes, with culture scored on a scale between the extremes. A culture score is significant when contrasted with the score of another culture along the scale. However, he observed that while culture ratings do not predict specific attributes, they do indicate tendencies to consider certain characteristics more desirable than others. They are tools for bridging understanding gaps and anticipating culture barriers. This is not to deny that there are other factors affecting interaction (e.g. age, proficiency, socio-cultural factors) but it is only as a means to quantify cultural factors so that comparisons with different countries can be made.

3. Critique of Hofstede

Despite the extensive and thorough nature of Hofstede's survey, it has been criticized on several fronts. Hofstede's aim of producing a quantitative survey that enabled direct comparison of different cultures is misplaced due to the nature of the survey. To use so few responses in an over-generalized way (less than 100 in some countries) is seen as unrepresentative thereby affecting validity. The validity is further questioned because the respondents formed a very limited group (i.e. they were middle class, multi-national IBM workers) and it excluded other social groups such as the retired, students and the unemployed (Sweeney, 2002: 91). In fact, not all the factors that have been put forward regarding student behavior and interaction are actually founded in cultural aspects. Adding to this is the lack of data from developing countries and the fact that there appear to be wide variances in the scores in ways that cannot be accounted for. On a more general note the ability to describe culture

in numbers has been questioned and without any real considerations for variable or mitigating factors- especially using a questionnaire based on business and not exclusively aimed at measuring culture. (Skutsch, 2003)

4. Uncertainty avoidance

The following list, that has been compiled according to uncertainty avoidance and includes elements which have been personally observed, also includes elements which are similar to those included on Hofstede's individualist-collectivist list - a list which Japan also ranks high on. The similarities between the two lists include: risk-taking; the teacher's role, and harmony. The following list includes the factors that have the most significant affect on interaction within the classroom.

Societies with high	Societies with low
<u>Uncertainty Avoidance</u>	<u>Uncertainty Avoidance</u>
• Teacher status	• Teacher is also a learner
• No risk taking	• Risk taking
• Learning expectations	• Flexible learning
• Passive participation	• Active participation

4.1. Teacher Status

In Japanese society the teacher has status that is respected and elevated. The fact that teachers, doctors etc are all referred to by the same title (sensei) illustrates the high regard in which they are held. This, coupled with Japanese people's general tendency to obey people in authority, means that despite not being Japanese but due to my profession, I am able to enjoy a status that automatically commands respect. As a result however, the students have a reluctance to engage, interact and fully question the teacher due to this perceived status.

4.2. Risk Taking

In a society that values harmony and group feelings, trying to inspire some kind of rigorous

challenge or competitive interaction can prove difficult. It is not in a Japanese person's nature to challenge or question someone aggressively, even if they know them to be incorrect. Therefore, activities such as discussions, that call for active involvement can appear very passive.

4.3. Expectations

Generally, Japanese students are not accustomed to using their own initiative while studying and they lack the ability to study independently because throughout most of their schooling they are evaluated through tests, where memorization is more important than creativity and other skills (e.g. problem solving). This is evident in class as students quickly complete speaking exercises, as opposed to using the tasks as a means to communicate and develop their speaking ability. Japanese students' expectations about how to study English are based on their own experiences of junior high school and high school. They expect a similar teaching style - i.e. translation method, rote learning etc where students are instructed and expected to follow the teacher.

As a result when they encounter a communicative class they can have trouble adapting and understanding what is expected of them. They expect reliance on the teacher rather than self-reliance and are not used to independent, creative, autonomous learning. They have expectations of what 'appropriate' behavior is and apply it to their new situation. They also have expectations about what will happen in the classroom and how different things will be done and who will do what, again based on their own previous experiences of learning. If these expectations remain unfulfilled they may result in 'hotspots', (Linde 80 in D. Wood 1996) where students notice discrepancies between expectations and what is actually happening in the classroom (Woods 96). These discrepancies have to be avoided otherwise it can lead to student frustration and other consequences that affect the attitude and motivation of the students.

4.4. Active Participation

Students who feel uncomfortable in unstructured situations and who are painfully aware of their limitations and worry about their ability to use the language, are usually less willing to engage in either classroom practice or in real world communication. Shyness and inhibition can stand in the way of progress in speaking a foreign language. They can also prevent a person from taking risks or seizing opportunities to practice and learn (Rubin and Thompson, 1994: 7). Also, due to the difference of the language styles, Japanese generally don't know how to fully question, as the Japanese language is less interactive than English.

5. The Impact on Interaction

The numerous problems students encounter when they learn a second language have been well documented by many writers. There are students who experience certain psychological blocks and other inhibiting affects (Brown, 1994: 173), feeling of alienation (Stevik in Brown p73 1976), anger and frustration (Brown, 1994: 174), expected communication problems (Tarone,40). From my own experience, these are feelings which affect many Japanese students, especially those participating in group classes where there is the extra pressure from the other members. In addition, there seems to be a general reluctance to attempt new vocabulary or structures. This could be due to a lack of internalization, or using Hofstede's dimension, due to cultural factors. From my own observations, Japanese students appear to prefer using phrases, which they are comfortable with and easily produced. Such usage, although grammatically correct, shows a lack of ambition to use more appropriate and varied expressions. This could also be due to other reasons including the fear of making a mistake which can prevent a learner from adopting an open-mind, active and creative approach to language learning (Rubin and Thompson, 1982: 7). As a result, students' rate of improvement is affected, as speakers who are

unafraid to use the new language and feel at ease in foreign language situations are more likely to learn from their experiences (Rubin and Thompson, 1982: 7). For Hofstede this would mean that the students are adopting uncertainty avoidance, but it could also be a period of internalization taking place. And once it has been 'learnt' the students are then able to make use of this language and then make the next step at progressing.

6. Methodology

The author's Context

I am teaching full-time at a private Japanese foreign language university. I teach mainly communicative classes to students of all grades who are divided according to their entrance exam score to ensure that the level of the students is approximately the same. As the students have elected an English course, most of them are clearly motivated to study and apply themselves. The teachers have the freedom to choose their preferred textbooks from the set list provided by the university and are also free to teach according to their preferred style.

Various activities are available as a solution to address the variety of factors, which are encompassed in uncertainty avoidance. These are strategies, activities or techniques students need to use to improve their progress in apprehending, internalizing and using English when they encounter communication problems (Oxford, 1990: 235). Strategies have been described as a set of steps, which enable the student to improve their learning abilities (The Eng Teacher volXX, 1991). The strategies teach students how to learn and understand what makes students un/successful. Students need to take charge, organize, practice, memore, guess, and accept uncertainty (Rubin, 1987: 99). If the students can learn some of these, then to some extent the cultural barriers that arise can be overcome. It is therefore important to make students aware of such techniques at the beginning of the course.

As mentioned the strategies help students

develop abilities to overcome the lack of an available route to the communication goal. They are based on information from a variety of sources: the L1 code, the inter-language codes, discourse rules, and nonlinguistic features (Faerch and Kasper, 1983: 32). A communication phase allows the student to reach their goal (Corder, 1983: 27) however all such strategies involve some risk to the speaker who must extend the available resource (Bialystok, 1990: 28).

Students should be made to realize that in order to be able to progress they must adopt such kinds of learning techniques to help them improve. It has been noted that good language learners develop and use these strategies for coping with difficulties in communicating among language students (Brown, 1994). This is a means of coping with the emotional and motivational problems that accompany second language learning. In order for all students to be aware, the teacher should cultivate positive attitudes towards the language and the society and culture it represents. Students that are able to learn these strategies are able to exercise greater control over learning (Griffiths Oxford et al 1990). Therefore the teacher should take responsibility for fostering autonomy through student training to raise their awareness and encourage students to become more involved and responsible, which will help develop and strengthen their strategies. Thus teachers can help turn such an experience into one of increased cultural and self-awareness by assisting the students and themselves through greater cooperation and teamwork (The English Language in ELT).

Also, to be effective teachers sometimes have to try and adopt methods which they would not use in their home country because they are perceived as automated, improper or too structured (Hofstede, 1986: 316). For the teacher it means taking one-step back from one's values and beliefs, which is far from easy. But in a society with high uncertainty avoidance, such methods are not only expected but also the most effective, otherwise the teacher is likely to encounter situations, for example where the students are unwilling to answer questions or volunteer any information. The students themselves

will also have to overcome reluctance to engage the teacher due to a perceived teacher status.

The reason that these methods play a more significant role in uncertainty avoidance countries is due to the fact that the teachers role is more of a factor in helping students progress through their development stages of language learning (Brown, 1994: 174). However, some teachers unable or unwilling to adopt such methods will find it difficult to assume such a prominent role. In order to facilitate this role, teachers must possess knowledge about the students, their goals, motivations and language learning strategies. The teacher must provide a wide range of learning activities in order to meet their needs and expectations (Lang Learn Stat in For Learning 2000). Once a range of possible strategies has been obtained, the teacher will be able to provide an environment which should enable students to identify those strategies that work best for them. When the teacher has identified the learning strategy that could benefit the learner they can develop and/or use the technique that is compatible with that learning strategy. Any strategy if successfully adopted and assuming responsibility for his/her own learning is more likely to help. (Eng teacher vol XX (1991).

However, learners could feel alienation in the process of learning a second language; alienation from people in their home country, the target culture, and from themselves. In teaching an "alien" language teachers need to be sensitive to the fragility of using techniques that promote cultural understanding, therefore they should not expect learners to deny the anger, frustration, the helplessness and homelessness they feel. Those are real feelings and they need to be openly expressed. To smother these feelings may delay and actually prevent progress. So these strategies are an attempt to overcome this problem that the student encounters. For example feeling uncomfortable in unstructured situations may manifest itself as taking a longer time to process what is expected. Or a reluctance to fully participate in the lesson (e.g. answer questions, volunteer information etc) or a general restriction and limiting of the students'

answers due to uncertainty. It may also be due to the student's perception of the teacher's status. Also worries about accuracy may make students feel reluctant to take a risk or venture an opinion.

7. My Methodology and Uncertainty Avoidance

Teacher's Status

For second language acquisition it is important for students to be able to approach teachers to help them overcome any difficulties. If the students perceive the teacher as a distant authority then they are unlikely to approach or even have contact with the teacher. To overcome this teachers need to actively participate in the activities and games in class. When students see that the teacher is not just there to 'teach' but also interact, then students gain the confidence and also understand that to interact fully with the teacher is an expected and beneficial exercise.

Risk-taking

As mentioned, students tend to use the same vocabulary and structures as they don't want to make mistakes or stand out (i.e. lose face) Due to worries about accuracy students may feel reluctance to take a risk and venture a question. The speaker can scale strategies in terms of their inducement of risk-taking, but all strategies involve some risk. The scale of the risk-taking indicates the extent to which the speaker is risking communicative failure (Bialystok, 1990: 30). In order to facilitate and lessen the risk, activities that promote group work tend to reduce the students apprehension while at the same time building confidence. As long as students have a general guideline or format of what the teacher is expecting, they will feel more assured and confident than if they were expected to study completely independently. It is also important to make the students aware that there are always risks that cannot be completely avoided merely reduced.

Expectation

To avoid student frustration, teachers should give an explicit outline of the course, stating

the 'rules' expected in class, as students do not share the same understanding of what ought to compromise 'proper classroom behavior'. Also the teacher needs to ensure that the exercises are appropriate for the students. Students who do not freely interact will need controlled exercises (e.g. using the practice stage of the Communicative Method) and not free conversation or discussion, which would be unsuitable and ineffective. Students also have to contribute and they need to be coached what to do and what the teacher expects from them personally.

Participation

Activities are useful for developing pragmatic awareness and opportunities for communicative practice, such as role-playing. The use of role-play in ESL classrooms is useful as a means of helping students to overcome cultural "fatigue"; role-playing promotes the process of cross-cultural dialogue while at the same time it promotes opportunities for oral communication. "There is a much greater role attributed to interactive features such as turn-taking, questioning and answering, negotiation of meaning, and feedback" (Chaudron, 1988: 10). The background of this lies in the fact that "second language learning is a highly interactive process" (Richard and Lockheart, 1994: 138) and the quality of this interaction is thought to have a considerable influence on learning (Ellis, 1985: 138). Research has shown that the conscious use of such strategies is related to language achievement and proficiency (Oxford et al Rubin and Thompson, 1993).

8. Conclusion

This paper attempted to look at some of the details and consequences highlighted in cultural differences by Hofstede. His conclusion that different cultures and behavior can be compared appears a rather generalized theory especially seen as the data is based on such a selected number of respondents. Hofstede uses this information to predict how certain interactions will take place depending on the 'position' of that country. He uses this to also

generalize about how it will affect the interaction between students and teachers. This report has tried to show that although the cultural aspects do influence interaction, they are not the only factors. It has also tried to explain that when teachers are aware of these factors, there are measures and actions which they can take to reduce their affect.

It goes on to show that there are other significant factors, which also affect the relationship in the classroom. These other factors are much less quantifiable but still just as significant. Teachers must also be aware of these as they affect the relationship significantly and must be acknowledged. This is not only for the benefits of the class as a whole but also for the individual student benefits. If students are made aware of the most effective techniques then they will also be able to benefit and improve linguistically. So the onus of responsibility must be on the teacher to recognize and to be aware of factors affecting the success of the class. Once the teacher is aware and understands the reasons, then they will be able to adjust their methodology to overcome perceived barriers.

Teachers also should be sensitive and perceptive to the unique situation in order to help students advance. Students may have their own agenda or may react in ways which are not what the teacher expected, producing events that were different from the teacher's prediction or expectation. Once a range of possible strategies has been obtained the teacher would be able to provide an environment which would enable students to identify those strategies that work best for them. (The English Teacher vol XX, 1991)

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