Why ALTs and JTEs Misunderstand One Another
An Analysis Based on Hofstede's Four Dimensions of Culture

Tony Brown

Introduction

The JET Program, established in 1987, aims at promoting mutual understanding between Japan and other countries through cultural and educational exchange. Participants are drawn from 40 countries, 90% of whom are employed as Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) in High Schools and Junior High Schools throughout Japan. With currently 5,649 JET ALTs (CLAIR 2003 : 3), it is the largest educational exchange programme in the world. Furthermore, as English Language Teaching becomes more prevalent in Primary Schools, ALTs are likely to become an even more important piece of the educational puzzle.

The importance of the JET Program for the Ministry of Education's goal of cultivating "Japanese with English abilities" (MEXT: 2003) is clear, including the introduction of more flexible contracts and allowing those deemed sufficiently experienced to teach alone in class. Moreover, the Ministry states, "Through the JET program and systems such as the special part-time instructor system, the placement of ALTs in elementary schools with the experiences of teaching at junior and senior high schools will be promoted."

Despite this commitment to the future of the JET Program on the part of the Ministry of Education, it cannot be said that the programme so far has been a total success. The Guardian (2003) recently reported that several municipal education boards, including Tokyo, Osaka, Saitama and Yokohama, are recruiting fewer and fewer of their assistant teachers from the JET Program, preferring instead to employ teachers who are already resident in Japan. One of the reasons given for this shift is the fact that new ALTs, just arrived in Japan, experience huge cultural problems. Moreover, Japanese Teachers of English often have difficulties communicating with their foreign assistants, and helping them fit into the school environment. The behaviour of the ALT can often seem inappropriate, and the ALTs themselves may be frustrated with a system which they neither understand nor respect.

The reasons for many of the problems are, of course, linguistic. Most ALTs arrive with little or no knowledge of Japanese, and many JTEs have had little opportunity to use English outside of the

classroom. Furthermore, many assistants have had no previous teaching experience, making their effectiveness in the classroom, unless carefully handled, more than a little suspect. A less clearly understood problem, however, and one which may be just as important, is the cultural baggage that ALTs bring with them from their home countries. Arriving with beliefs and assumptions that she or he regards as universal, the ALT is often at odds with a system which seems simply wrong. Indeed, ET Hall (1977 : 2) states that "Any Westerner who was raised outside the Far East, and claims he really understands and can communicate with either the Chinese or the Japanese, is deluding himself". Similarly, the Japanese staff, faced with behaviour on the part of the ALT which they are unable to understand, may write it off as perverse and antisocial. This paper is an attempt to set those behaviours in context, looking at cultural differences between Japan and the English-speaking countries from which most ALTs are drawn, in the hope that a better understanding of why problems arise may lead to a lessening of tensions and offer solutions to some of those problems. For this paper I will use as a framework the four dimensions of culture postulated by Geert Hofstede.

Hofstede is considered by many to be the father of cross-cultural studies. His mammoth Hermes study, involving 88,000 respondents working in over fifty different countries is the sort of sample that most academics could only dream about. Indeed it has spawned its own branch of academic study, leading to a number of smaller scale replications which have largely confirmed his own conclusions, together with extensions and refinements to his own four dimensions. In his more recent work, Cultures and Organisations (Hofstede 1994), he has taken on board some of these later findings, as well as including sections relating specifically to educational organisations.. It is largely upon this work that the present discussion will be focused.

In order to give some structure to the analysis, I shall look at each of Hofstede's "Four dimensions of culture" separately. These four dimensions are Individualism - Group Orientation, Power Distance (large or small), Masculinity - Femininity, and Uncertainty Avoidance. In each case I shall indicate the scores obtained for Japan and each of the five countries which supply most participants as ALTs on the JET Program, and attempt to outline some of the cultural clashes which might derive from the differences.

Where do ALTs Come from?

The United States and Britain between them are the source of three quarters of all ALTs currently working in Japanese schools, followed by Canada, Australia and New Zealand, as shown in figure 1 (source: CLAIR 2003). The remaining 4% are largely from Ireland, South Africa, and a few countries where English is not the first language.
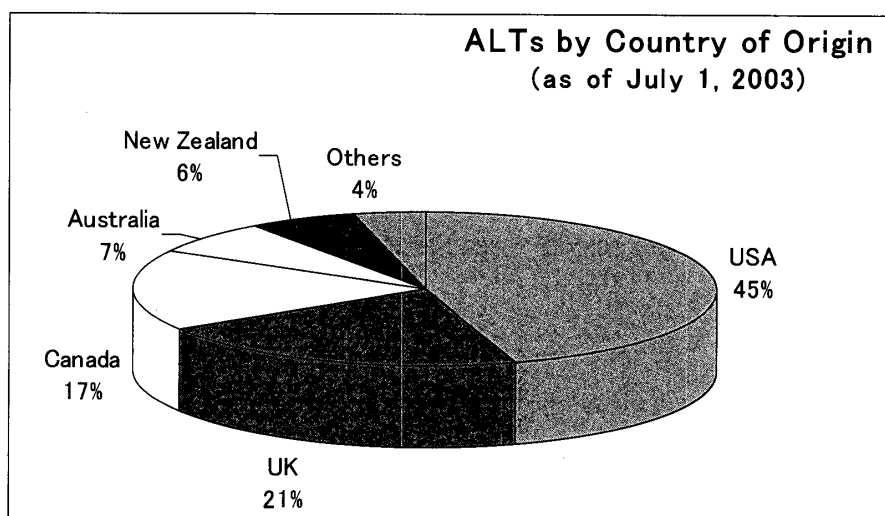
ALTs by Country of Origin
(as of July 1, 2003)

New Zealand 6%
Others 4%
Australia 7%
USA 45%
Canada 17%
UK 21%

Figure 1

What is Culture?

It is worthwhile defining what we mean by culture. There are as many definitions of culture as there are writers on the subject, and it is unlikely that a universally-accepted definition will ever be agreed on. Below, however, are some often cited descriptions:

◆ "Culture refers to the cumulative deposit of knowledge, experience, beliefs, values, attitudes, meanings, hierarchies, religion, notions of time, roles, spatial relations, concepts of the universe, and material objects and possessions acquired by a group of people in the course of generations through individual and group striving." (Samovar and Porter 1994).

◆ "Culture: learned and shared human patterns or models for living; day- to-day living patterns. These patterns and models pervade all aspects of human social interaction. Culture is mankind's primary adaptive mechanism"(Damen 1987:367).

◆ "Culture...consists in those patterns relative to behaviour and the products of human action which may be inherited, that is, passed on from generation to generation independently of the biological genes"(Parson 1949: 8).

◆ "Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another."(Hofstede 1984: 33).

It is worth noting that all of these definitions describe what is often referred to as "culture" (with a lower-case c), as opposed to "Culture", which more often is used to describe so-called "high culture", referring to classical music, art and literature, and "popular culture", usually describing popular music, TV, movies, comic books, and so on. These are all interesting, and popular

culture, in particular, is likely to be of interest to students, and a good source of motivation. This type of culture is rarely a problem. We expect those coming from abroad to have different interests and tastes from our own. We also are not surprised if they have problems with, for example chopsticks and bathrooms. ALTs arriving in Japan expect to have difficulties adapting to the food, the language and the climate. However, the deeper, and often hidden, aspects of culture described below, can — if not properly understood — lead to much greater misunderstanding and friction.

Individualism

People in a highly individualist society such as Britain and the USA emphasise the importance of personal time, freedom, and challenge at work. Japan leans a little further towards the collectivist end as shown in figure 2 (source: Hofstede, 1980), where training and physical conditions at work are seen as important. Nakamura (1964 : 413) posits the theory that Japanese group identity stems from having given up a nomadic life in the early stages, and coming together into rice-growing units, in which co-operation and harmony were vital for success. Whatever the historical reasons, there is no doubt that the concept of the group and the importance of belonging are key elements of Japanese culture. The relationship of the temporary, or even peripatetic ALT to the permanent group of the school staff room may be ambiguous, leading one young foreign teacher to complain that "…most of the people I know who are teaching at schools are unhappy with the isolation that they suffer. It seems that if you are a foreigner, you are always on the outside." People from English-speaking cultures tend to join groups easily, and in an ad hoc fashion, leaving them just as easily when the need arises. The difficulty of becoming an "insider" in Japan can lead to frustration, incomprehension or even depression.
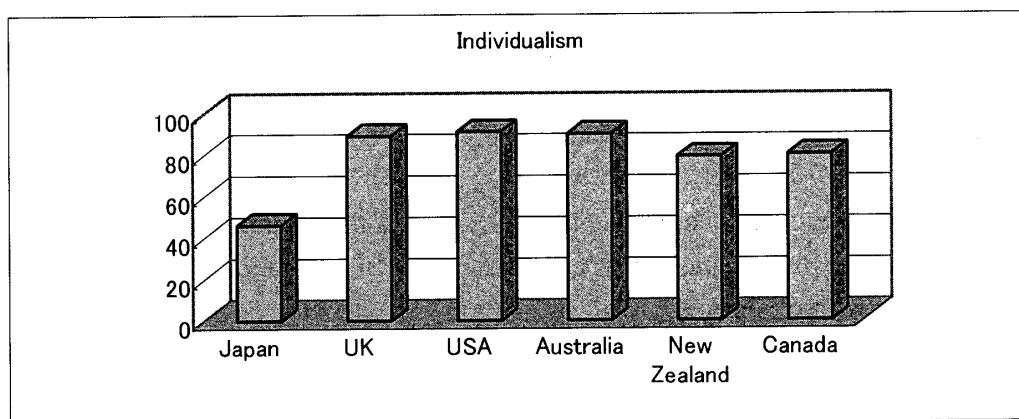

Figure 2

This sense of frustration may well be compounded by the performance of students in the classroom. Students from individualist English-speaking countries tend to be far more willing to express a personal opinion on a subject than students in a group-oriented society, and to speak

out in class. Hofstede (1994: 62) states that "...to the student who perceives himself to be part of a group, it is illogical to speak up without being sanctioned by the group to do so." An illustration of this is described by Naotsuka & Sakamoto (1981 : 111) who relate the story of a foreign teacher at a Japanese women's university who was teaching in an extremely hot classroom. He excused himself for taking off his jacket, then asked a student at the front if it was OK to open the window. He expected the student to immediately say "yes", but she was silent. He asked again, and again she was silent, so he continued the lesson with the window closed. A Japanese colleague, hearing him complain about the incident, asked the girl in question. Her response is a perfect example of Hofstede's view on the importance of consensus: "Although I understood perfectly what our teacher had said, and wanted the window to be opened, I was unable to say "Yes" because I was not a representative of our class."

Large power distance countries (see below) tend to be more collectivist. There is also, apparently, a tendency for collectivist cultures to be high context that is, information tends to be transmitted by context and subtle signals, rather than explicit written or verbal messages, as described by Hall (1977) The implications for ALTs from a low-context environment operating in a high-context situation will be discussed in a later paper.

Power Distance

Power distance refers the level of inequality (for example, in society and the workplace), which is tolerated. Figure 3 (source: Hofstede, 1980) reveals that people from Britain, North America and Australia all expect a fairly high level of equality, with New Zealanders showing a particular aversion for uneven distribution of power. Japan's power distance score is significantly higher. Indeed, Nakamura (1964:426) points out that "...high esteem for the social hierarchy is one of the characteristic features of Japanese cluture (sic)"
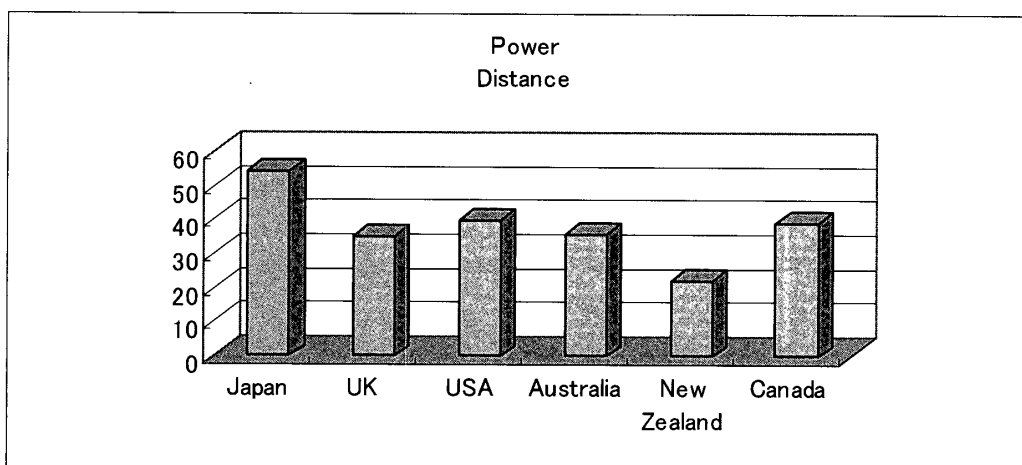

Figure 3

In Japan the concept of power distance is reflected most dramatically in language, where superiors and inferiors will speak to one another using entirely different language. This difference is far more striking than in the tu/vous, tu/lei, tu/vd. forms found in Latin countries, and is also seen in the depth of the bow which is executed as a greeting. This is in marked contrast to the degree of familiarity which normally exists between British office workers and their line managers, or lecturers and students, and linguistically in the fact that there are far fewer differences in the way one speaks to one's social peers, inferiors, and superiors. Where differences of lexis, structure and register do exist in the English language, they tend to reflect vertical than horizontal distance between the speakers.

Typically, in a Japanese school, a headmaster will expect deference from teachers, older teachers will expect the same from their juniors, as well as their students, and younger students will show respect to their sempai. To the unsuspecting ALT this all looks like a rigid formality, hardly conducive to the learning styles to which they are accustomed. Attempts to break through this structure, however, are unlikely to be successful, and may well lead to an exacerbation of feelings of isolation.

Masculinity - Femininity

In strongly masculine cultures, money, possessions and progress are seen as important, as opposed to relationships. Men are expected to be tough and ambitious, while women should be gentle. In a feminine culture, both men and women tend to be tender and relationship-oriented.
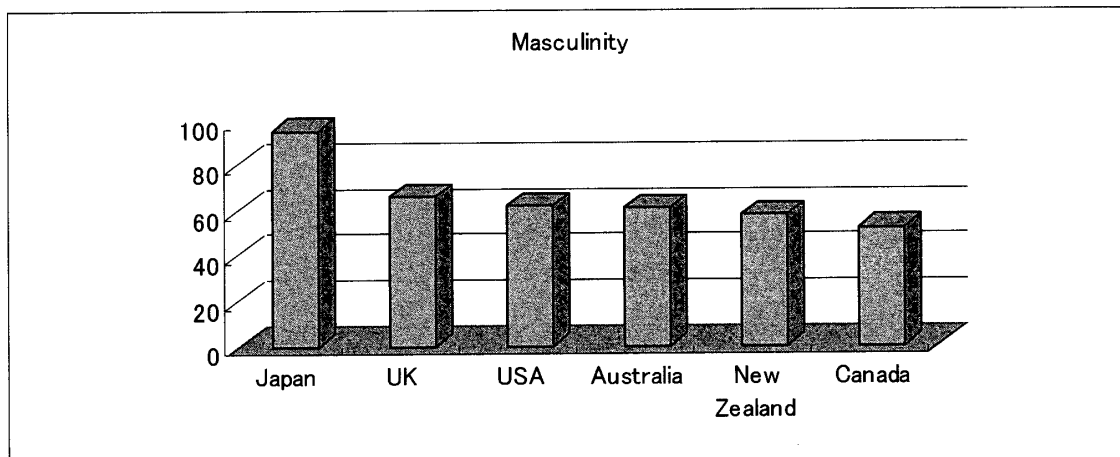

Figure 4

Japan stands out head and shoulders above the rest - not only in this selection, but also in the whole 50 countries in the Hermes study — as easily the most masculine, though Britain and the USA are both in the top fifth. It is reflected most vividly in Japanese society by the position of women in the workforce. Japan's fabled lifetime employment, for example, does not extend to female employees, even university-educated ones, who are expected to 'retire' when they reach

marrying age of around 25. Hall & Hall (1987: 86) reported that in 1983 women accounted for 35% of the salaried workforce, but only 6% of the workforce. We might expect this figure to have risen, but last year the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (2003) published a figure unchanged from 20 years ago.

In a strongly masculine culture, work tends to be come first, often at the expense of spending time with one's family. An illustration of this in Japan is the reluctance to take all available paid holiday. One Japanese teacher commented, "...a lot of foreign teachers (especially Americans and Europeans) try to take full annual paid leave just because they have the right to do so. However, such practice is not common among Japanese and we usually end up leaving much of the leave untaken." To most ALTs the idea of leaving paid holiday unused is sheer anathema, and a commonly-asked question about the JET contract is how the length of annual leave might be extended. Similarly, many ALTs will see no reason to stay at school beyond the hours stipulated in their contract, much to the dismay of their Japanese colleagues, who feel obliged to stay long into the evening, and to come in at weekends. Again this can be a source of tension.

Uncertainty Avoidance

Countries with a high uncertainty-avoiding culture tend to have a large number of laws and rules by which ones' actions are governed. Countries with low uncertainty avoidance have a tendency to be moderate, tolerant, and international. Figure 5 (source: Hofstede, 1980) reveals that Japanese society is, on the whole, far less tolerant of uncertainty than that of English-speaking countries, especially the UK.
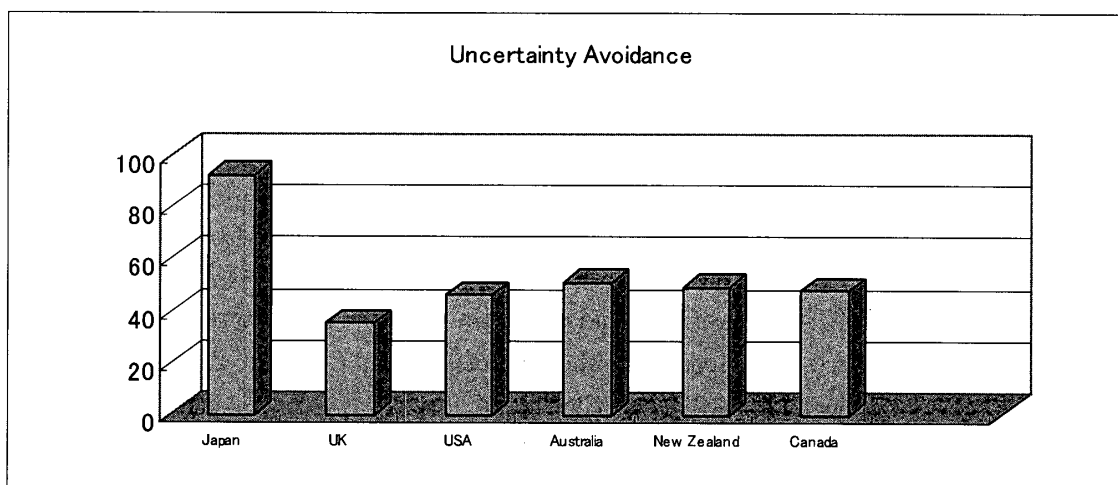

Figure 5

Hofstede (1994 : 119) reports that students from high uncertainty-avoiding cultures, such as Japan, expect their teachers to have all the answers. An ALT who nonchalantly answers "I don't know" to a students question may cause confusion in the classroom, and even undermine her or

his own authority. What is more, the more open-ended style of classroom activity popular in the West may not go down well with Japanese students, unless it is carefully prepared.

Conclusion

In the end, it is the ALTs who will have to adapt and fit in with the teaching and working environment in which they find themselves, not the other way round. Nevertheless, JTEs, as well as the recruiting authorities have a role to play in the minimizing of cultural problems. Orientation for new members of the JET Program, and new Japanese teachers of English needs to go beyond the obvious differences in culture. A greater understanding of the fundamental differences in values can help demystify what at first seems inexplicable behaviour on both sides.

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