

# Implications of High- and Low-Context Culture for EFL Instruction

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## **[Abstract]**

The concept of high and low context culture is well established and has been studied since Edward T. Hall introduced it in his book, *Beyond Culture* in 1976, with considerable implications for foreign language education. Much of the focus for this concept regarding English as a second language education deals with the impact of high- and low-context culture on students as they attempt to learn a foreign language while at the same time understanding enough of the culture of the target language to communicate successfully with native speakers. This obviously has profound implications for ESL students, as the difficulty they face is immediate: they must simultaneously learn their target language while also trying to assimilate the complexities of a culture which constantly surrounds them. The potential for serious difficulty arising from cultural misunderstandings affects not only their education but also their everyday lives, particularly students from a high-context culture trying to survive in a low-context culture environment. EFL students, on the other hand, do not face the concerns of having to survive in a foreign culture once they leave the classroom. Japanese students emerge from their studies to Japanese society, a culture which they intimately understand. However, the classroom environment in which EFL students find themselves, that isolated pocket of foreign language and culture presided over by their instructor, is not necessarily so straight forward. In Japanese university classrooms, and more and more frequently in high schools, junior high schools and now also elementary schools, students are exposed to native English-speaking teachers. By 2020, all fifth- and sixth-grade Japanese students will be required to study English (Gardner). While this would appear to be an ideal situation for the advancement of Japan in an increasingly international landscape, native language English instructors bring with them their own concepts

of culture and education, which may be at odds with those of their students. This paper will focus on the balance of how much low-context cultural understanding should be included in native-speaking English language instructors' lessons in Japan.

## Definition of Terms

To understand why there are potential breakdowns of communication and misunderstandings between cultures, Edward T. Hall developed the concept of high and low context cultures. For Hall, *context* corresponds to what information is available in a given situation, and how that information defines the way the situation is perceived by those participating in it. Participants may react to an event differently according to their cultural style, which ranges from the way a person “refers to ways of expressing oneself, to communication patterns that are understood to be ‘typical’...” and cultural issues, which “mean certain societal factors, such as the country’s status, history, religion and traditions” (Nishimura, Nevgi and Tella 784).

As defined by Nishimura et al., for high context cultures,

...internal meaning is usually embedded deep in the information, so not everything is explicitly stated in writing or when spoken. In an HC culture, the listener is expected to be able to read “between the lines”, to understand the unsaid, thanks to his or her background knowledge (785).

A prime example of a high-context culture would be Japan, relying on “indirect and digressive communication, use of few words, reliance on contextual cues, avoidance of the use of personal names, respect for long silences, and waiting politely until the other person has stopped speaking before taking turns” (Nishimura, Nevgi and Tella 790). As such, Japanese society may not always seem particularly accessible to a person coming from a low context cultural background. There is a certain level of understanding concerning what can or cannot be said or done that is implicit rather than explicit. As Hall and Hall state,

Japanese... who have extensive information networks among family, friends, colleagues, and clients and who are involved in close personal relationships, are high-context. As a result, for most normal

transactions in daily life they do not require, nor do they expect, much in-depth, background information. This is because they keep themselves informed about everything having to do with the people who are important in their lives. (Hall and Hall 200-201)

This could potentially leave people brought up in low-context cultures feeling excluded and frustrated as the level of “openness” that they would be accustomed to is not to be found.

In low-context cultures, “meanings are explicitly stated through language” (Nishimura, Nevgi and Tella 785). The implication of this being that rather than explanations being implicitly understood through one’s familiarity of cultural norms, as may be the case in Japan, there is more emphasis on unambiguously vocalising what you expect people to know and respond to, or as Nishimura et al. state, “the constant and sometimes never-ending use of words” (785). This directness may be off-putting to a person more accustomed to an unspoken understanding of what is expected of them. In an ESL situation, a high-context culture student may find themselves having immense difficulty at having to explain their actions in a way they are not accustomed to and have difficulty in speaking out in a way they do not feel comfortable with. Unsurprisingly, English speaking countries tend to be closer to low context cultures, as can be seen in the following table devised by Hall and his wife and co-author, Mildred (qtd. in Nishimura, et al. 786):

<b>High Context Cultures</b>
Japan
Arab Countries
Greece
Spain
Italy
England
France
North America
Scandinavian Countries
German-Speaking Countries
<b>Low Context Cultures</b>

It is of interest to note here that Hall considered North American countries (The United States and Canada) to be closer to more purely

low-context cultures than England. It has been observed by students with whom I have spoken as well as in my own personal experience as a British person living in the United States that British culture is generally not as open or vocal as that of America. It can be argued there is a certain level of understanding in British culture of what is appropriate or inappropriate that either does not need to be said or is simply not stated. This also illustrates that although the United States and England may share the same language, it does not mean that they share the same level of low-context culture.

### **Implications for EFL Instruction**

The implications of this slight degree of separation between the USA and the UK are that EFL students may have considerably different experiences when being taught by a native English-speaking teacher from one or the other of those countries, and the teachers themselves would also potentially have a different reaction to the way students behave in their classroom. A study of cultural interference and American EFL instructors in Turkey found,

Participants explained that they had difficulties at the very beginning of the communication with their American instructors because they tried to keep student to teacher boundaries, as familiar in their earlier school life. However, their respectful and distant behaviors were seen in the American instructors' mind as how far students are detached from them, and were left wondering why students did not like them or the classes. In fact, it was the American instructors who had misinterpreted their students' behaviors. (Karakuzu and Irgin 231)

When a teacher comes to Japan, they naturally bring with them their learned set of cultural values. These values would affect not only their view of their students' attitudes towards their instructor (polite distance versus indifference, individualism versus group approval) and their work ethic, but the teacher's experience in the classroom. Frank devised a ten-question quiz to determine whether one more closely aligns with high- or low-context culture. Questions which are most relevant to the idea of EFL education touch on the use of first names for bosses and teachers, direct responses to questions, reliance on words or

non-verbal forms of communication, individual or group approaches for problem solving, and avoidance of conflict (Frank 6). A teacher who more strongly associates with low-context cultures, such as an American, may be at odds with the way education is managed in high-context Japan. Rather than a semi-informal interactive classroom filled with highly responsive students that she would be more accustomed to back in the United States, suddenly she finds herself trying desperately to get her students to answer a question in what she would consider a timely manner without consulting each other first. Frustration may set in, and the teacher forms a negative impression of the students as not caring, too quiet, or lacking ability and desire to learn, while the students grow confused, not knowing what is expected of them as their teacher is not conforming to their past classroom experiences. This leads to the question of how much of their low-context culture should the foreign English teacher bring with them into a classroom of high-context culture students? How much would be useful for students, and how much would be a detriment?

### **The Problem of Low-Context Culture in High-Context Classrooms**

At first glance, the idea of a foreign instructor teaching their native language would appear to be a “win-win” situation for all involved: in the case of English instruction in Japan, the students get the advantage of having a native English speaker modelling pronunciation and natural communication strategies while offering cultural insights and the chance for meaningful intercultural interaction that would simply not be available from book learning. On the other hand, the instructor gets the experience of teaching in an exciting new environment and the opportunity to provide students with a positive foreign role model and have a significant impact in moulding students’ perceptions of English-speaking countries. While this view may be somewhat idealised, it is generally accurate for many teachers’ experiences. It is not, however, always the case. Occasionally, the sense of national and cultural identity a teacher brings with them may have a negative impact, causing a breakdown in intercultural communication (Karakuzu and Irgin 228).

Seppo Tella points out that the idea of politeness is an area that separates high- and low-context cultures: in low-context cultures it is considered normal and polite to posit questions, while the same style of inquiry in high-context cultures may be deemed “too personal or even

offensive” (Nishimura, Nevgi and Tella 785). It is not too difficult to see that a potential conflict would soon arise under such circumstances: the low-context culture instructor would expect their students to ask questions if something being taught is not understood, as the instructor’s cultural background would deem such behaviour as normal. The students, on the other hand, may hesitate to ask such questions, even if they do have problems with a lesson. This could lead to a problem of misinterpretation between teacher and student; teachers would either believe students have no difficulties as they do not ask for further explanation or clarification, or they are simply not capable enough in the target language to be able to ask the question, while the students may grow frustrated that the teacher is not willing to slow down or provide additional information without having to be asked. This misinterpretation is a direct consequence of decoding the situation according to pre-established cultural contexts for each group (Gamsriegler 6). In addition to this, Hall and Hall go on to say,

The speed with which a particular message can be decoded and acted on is an important characteristic of human communication. There are fast and slow messages... A fast message sent to people who are geared to a slow format will usually miss the target. While the content of the wrong-speed message may be understandable, it won’t be received by someone accustomed to or expecting a different speed. (199-200)

In the context of EFL classrooms, this means the teacher and student are effectively working at different speeds due to their divergent cultural backgrounds and expectations. This in turn leads to a certain level of impatience and irritation on behalf of high-context people, in this case the student, concerning the over-abundance of information they are presented with, while low-context people, here the foreign instructor, feel equally concerned by what they perceive to be an insufficient amount of information they are given in return (Hall and Hall 202).

### **The Place of Low-Context Culture in High-Context Classrooms**

Should teachers from low-context cultures be trained to better understand the expectations of high-context culture students before standing in front of a class? The obvious answer must be yes, at least to

a certain degree. To be totally ignorant of this would result in the teacher developing a negative stereotype of the students and their culture. Gamsriegler points out the goals of low-context communication system users are to “explicitly say what they want to convey without beating around the bush” using “the spoken word to make up for what is missing in context”. The high-context communication style, however, would be practically the opposite, “beat[ing] around the bush until their interlocutor decodes the message correctly” (3-4). This scenario would not be conducive to constructive learning. If the teacher were at least partially aware of what to expect, then it would save a large degree of frustration for both parties. The EFL teacher should obviously bear the brunt of this responsibility. Once they understand that high-context cultures do not frequently produce students who act and react in a similar manner to what the teacher may have experienced in teaching in their own culture or from their personal educational experience, then they can teach with greater understanding and in a more productive way.

This, then, raises the question of should low-context communication styles be taught and encouraged in high-context EFL classes? The argument in support of this would be that because of the inextricable relationship between language and culture, in order to become skilled communicators in a target language, learners must make an effort to at least partially adapt to its low- or high-cultural communicative style. This would be a lot to ask in the sense that one must learn to see beyond what has been taught over a lifetime to be considered normal and correct and embrace that which may have been actively discouraged, particularly high-context users adopting low-context communication styles. However, it has been argued that although a certain high- or low-contextual style may be prevalent in a given culture, there are observable traces of the opposite style there as well. Hooker argues that low-context culture can be found in high-context culture societies, such as is common with friends and family, or a high-context society may adopt low-context communication styles due to Western influences and wishing to become more attractive to tourism (Hooker). The language classroom can be seen as a microcosm of the target language’s culture, and as such students could be asked to try using the context style of that culture. In the comparatively safe and controllable environment of the language classroom, such exposure would be of great use to students before they go abroad and experience that culture first-hand.

## Conclusions

Hall's concept of high-context and low-context cultures serves the purpose of differentiating the approaches people around the world take in decoding spoken and unspoken interaction. This directly affects international communication as the very way of perceiving a message would differ between speakers using different cultural contexts. Naturally, it follows that students learning a foreign language which does not originate from the same type of context culture as the one they use will face additional problems outside of the standard grammatical and mechanical. This also applies to the instructor: the way students respond to the teacher's instruction is different enough between high- and low-context cultures to cause confusion and misunderstanding. If a teacher is unaware of these differences it could interfere with how students are given the opportunity to learn and the teacher's perception of their students' abilities.

High- and low-context theory is not without its critics, however. Rather than explain the differences between context types in order to promote better understanding and communication, some believe it is more likely to cause the reinforcement of negative images and lead to miscommunication and misunderstanding (Ryan 232). As with all generalisations, one must be careful to avoid the temptation of believing the theory of high- and low-context culture is one hundred percent accurate for all members of any particular group. As previously discussed, it is possible to find instances of low-context communication in high-context cultures, and vice versa. Negative stereotypes can be rationalised to a degree by high- and low-context culture theory, such as the loud American or the quiet Japanese. However, this is certainly neither a fair nor accurate representation of those national groups as individuals, but rather an uninformed view of how each group may see each other due to precisely the reasons high- and low-context culture theory attempts to explain. However, *as a generalisation*, if an American teacher is to teach in Japan, an advance understanding of how high-context culture communication styles differ from low-context communication styles may help them understand how to better tailor their teaching methods and expectations to avoid difficulties.

As culture and language are so strongly intertwined, differing perceptions of communication should form some part of language



education. A native-speaking teacher can go a long way towards this by implicitly illustrating to students how a different communication context works, but in order to avoid misunderstandings, general ideas of what communication entails in other countries need to be taught explicitly. Wang developed a list of items concerning the differences between high-context and low-context cultures that people who work across cultures should be aware of “to help lessen and even prevent conflicts, and make the communication smoother and easier” (Wang 154), and many of those items are also applicable to educational scenarios. For low-context users, for example, Wang recommends understanding nonverbal messages may be as important as things that are spoken, and for high-context users, “direct questions and observations are... to clarify and advance shared goals” (154). The presentation of a list of ideas may be an excellent starting point, perhaps by initially asking students to generate their own ideas on the topic.

EFL instruction offers a set of challenges to the language student and the language teacher that the ESL environment does not. High- and low-context culture theory is arguably more important for students in an ESL environment, and more important for the native-language instructor in EFL situations. To be aware of the theory of communication styles according to culture is essentially to be forearmed to potential misunderstandings that a standard language textbook may not cover, and make the language learning and teaching experience more rewarding for all involved.

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