

COMPARISON OF JAPANESE LANGUAGE ASSESSMENT CRITERIA OF A STEM AND A NON-STEM UNIVERSITY IN THE UK

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Abstract: *This study compares a STEM and a non-STEM British university's Japanese marking criteria using two cultural concepts as a framework. There are movements in language teaching to focus on teaching specific purposes. The findings show that the two types of assessment criteria, simple and detailed assessment criteria exist, which were under the influence of these two cultural concepts. Language teachers who use simple assessment criteria grade students' work more objectively using quantitative method, whereas those who use detailed assessment criteria grade more subjectively. Language teachers who use detailed assessment criteria may have less workload marking and grading than those who use simple assessment. However, the grading quality of those who use detailed assessment criteria may not be as consistent as that of those who use simple assessment. In addition, the emphasis on either creativity or accuracy is related to simple or detailed assessment criteria. It is recommended to incorporate some aspects of simple assessment criteria to improve the consistency of the grading if an institution uses detailed assessment. If an institution uses simple assessment criteria, it is recommended to incorporate the clarity aspect of detailed assessment criteria.*

Keywords: Culture; detailed assessment criteria; higher education; Japanese language teaching; simple assessment criteria.

1. Introduction and Background

Does language assessment through the Institution-Wide Language Programmes (IWLP) provide students similar teaching and learning experiences studying in the UK? Institutions use different textbooks, different assessment modes and criteria and different cohort of students. The researcher taught Japanese at a STEM university in London and then moved to a non-STEM university in the South of England. It was found difficult to simply transfer the similar teaching approach used at a STEM university to a Non-STEM university, although Japanese are taught in the same context of IWLP. The influential factors which present difficulty in transferring the same teaching approach may be considered for assessment criteria and pedagogical or educational culture. So this study is guided by the following two Research Questions (RQs):

1. How different are the two assessment criteria? Is the assessment of students' work a subjective or objective process?
2. What kind of cultural influence can we observe from the two assessment criteria?

2. Framework for the study

Hofstede et al.'s (2010) Uncertainty Avoidance dimension and Hall's (1976) high-and low-context culture became the framework for this study.

2.1. Strong vs. Weak Uncertainty Avoidance culture

Hofstede et al.'s (2010) cultural taxonomy is introduced as this concept explains the relationship between pedagogy and culture. Among Hofstede et al.'s (2010) cultural taxonomy, uncertainty avoidance culture is related to this study. Hofstede et al.'s (2010) define uncertainty avoidance as 'the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations' (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 191). High Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) scoring countries need predictability and low UAI scoring nations are not concerned about unknown situations. The characteristics of Hofstede et al.'s (2010) strong uncertainty avoidance cultures are:

'students are comfortable with structured learning situations and concerned with right answers, precision and punctuality come naturally and fear of ambiguous situation and unfamiliar risks' (Hofstede, 1991, p. 125) and 'they [students] are expected to be rewarded for accuracy' (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 205).

Correct/right answer, precision, punctuality and accuracy are pedagogies of strong uncertainty avoidance culture. Students who are familiar with this educational culture are comfortable with one correct answer system and accuracy. In institutions where accuracy is valued and emphasised rather than creativity in language teaching and learning context, higher marks are given to students who use studied vocabulary and grammar correctly. Students are rewarded for the correct use of the taught vocabulary and grammar and are not expected to use vocabulary and grammar they have not been taught so they do not encounter uncertainty which contributes to a strong uncertainty avoidance educational culture.

On the other hand, those who prefer a Weak Uncertainty Avoidance culture are:

'comfortable with open-ended learning situations and concerned with good discussion. Precision and punctuality have to be learned and they are comfortable in ambiguous situation and with unfamiliar risks' (Hofstede, 1991, p. 125) and 'they (students) are expected to be rewarded for originality' (Hofstede et al., 2010, p. 205).

Open-ended learning and open-ended questions are Weak Uncertainty Avoidance cultures, which value and reward originality and creativity. Weak Uncertainty Avoidance cultures prefer 'creativity/originality' and taking 'unfamiliar risks' (Hofstede, 1991, p. 125). Students who use vocabulary and grammar which they have never used before are considered 'taking risk' by language teachers in a Weak Uncertainty Avoidance cultures. Students who are familiar with weak uncertainty avoidance cultures are comfortable with unknown situations and taking risks by including various advanced vocabulary and grammar which they have

never been taught which is beyond their level. Institutions which value and emphasise creativity rather than accuracy, students' errors are tolerated. The tolerance of errors is associated with weak uncertainty avoidance culture. Institutions which value creativity overlook the basics.

To summarise, accuracy is the pedagogy of a strong Uncertainty Avoidance culture and creativity represents the pedagogy of weak Uncertainty Avoidance culture. The emphasis on either creativity or accuracy is an influential factor for students to focus on their assessment.

2.2. Writing/communication style and culture

Hall's (1976) high- and low-context culture is the second concept as it explains the relationship between the preferred writing/communication style and culture. Hall (1976, p. 79) defines 'high-context (HC) communication as 'very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message' and 'HC cultures tend to use indirect, non-confrontational, and vague language, relying on the listener's or reader's ability to grasp the meaning from the context' (Hall, 1976, p. 84).

Not only Hall (1976), but also Charnock (2010) points out that: 'Confucian-heritage writers show respect for their readers by presenting material without spelling out its relevance and allowing the reader to draw inference from it' (Charnock, 2010). The producer of written assessment criteria at a STEM University is Japanese and that of a non-STEM University is British. According to Hall & Hall (1990), Japan is listed as one of HC context culture countries and England is not as high as Japan. Hall (1976) and Charnock's (2010) 'indirect and vague language' may be justified by Kaplan's (1966) analysis of thought pattern. Kaplan (1966) asserts that 'logic which is the basis of rhetoric, is evolved out of culture, is not universal' and analyses the writing of five different languages (English, Romance, Russian, Oriental and Semitic). Related to this study, Kaplan (1966) describes Oriental writing as 'turning and turning in a widening gyre' (Kaplan, 1966, p. 17) and summarises 'the approach of indirection' (Kaplan, 1966, p. 17). It is hypothesised that the assessment criteria produced by the Japanese is likely to have Japanese HC context cultural influence and use indirect and vague languages.

Varner & Beamer's (2005) suggests that Hall's HC context culture has close link to collectivist as follows:

'Information belongs to the group, not the individual. That way, individuals are linked together into a collective... In group-oriented cultures, what is known by one member of a group is known by all members of the group' (Varner & Beamer, 2005, p. 241).

It is also hypothesised that assessment criteria is shared with all the members of the group, which makes the standardisation of grading quality consistent across Japanese team in the group-oriented culture.

On the other hand, 'in low-context cultures, the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code' (Hall, 1976, p. 91) and 'low context cultures tend to use a more direct, confrontational, and explicit approach to ensure that the listener receives the message exactly as it was sent' (Hall, 1976, p. 84). Charnock (2010) also points out that 'in Anglo-Western academic culture, the writer is responsible for direct and explicit construction of meaning' (Charnock, 2010). English paragraph is 'never digressive' (Kaplan, 1966, p. 14) and 'the flow of ideas occurs in straight-line from opening to the last sentence' (Kaplan, 1966, p. 14). Kaplan's (1966)

analysis of English writing matches with the ‘direct and explicit’ approach claimed by Hall (1976) and Charnock (2010). It is hypothesised that the writing style of assessment criteria made by the British at a non-STEM uses direct and explicit language and low-context cultural influences. Low-context culture’s close link to Individualist culture is shown as follows: ‘in individual culture, what is known by one individual is not automatically the property of the group’ (Varner & Beamer, 2005, p. 241) and ‘information is owned by the individual and shared judiciously when the individual will benefit’ (Varner & Beamer, 2005, p. 241) in the low-context cultures.

As the information is not shared in the individualist British culture, there is a difficulty to achieve consistent grading standard from all language teaching staff using assessment criteria produced by the British. However, the differences may be tolerated and accepted in British educational culture.

It is claimed that low-context culture is result-oriented (Varner & Beamer, 2005) and values ‘activity that achieves goals’ (Varner & Beamer, 2005, p. 239). Varner & Beamer (2005) give an example of low-context culture’s result-oriented culture as a detailed job description. The idea of detailed job description may be transferable to apply to assessment criteria. Considering that job description in low-context culture including the UK is detailed (i.e. listing the applicants their specific expecting requirements in writing), assessment criteria may also reflect similar characteristics (i.e. listing an expected outcome of what students should achieve). It is hypothesised that the assessment criteria may also be detailed in British educational culture and that of high context culture may be simple, which is referred simple assessment criteria in this paper.

3. Methodology

3.1. Data Collection

Japanese language summative assessment’s marking schemes were collected from two British universities: one from a British STEM university in London during 2016/2017 which also includes Medical students. This is referred ‘University A’. Another from a non-STEM university in the South East of England during 2017/18. This is referred ‘University B’. Both of them use convenient samples as the researcher was also a teacher at these universities.

Both marking schemes are from the beginner’s level. The Japanese exam tests three skills in the final exam at both universities, that is, grammar, reading and writing. Marking schemes for written section was chosen as writing mark scheme could show large difference depending on institutions. University B’s assessment criteria is written in English, which is freely available to anyone including students through the University’s Virtual Learning Environment (VLE). University A’s marking scheme was written in Japanese and is only available to Japanese language teachers who are involved with marking and grading. This marking scheme was written in Japanese and the researcher translated them into English for comparative purposes. University A’s assessment criteria is not available to students.

3.2. Data analysis

Data analysis is focused on three categorisations of the assessment criteria. They

are: 1) the criteria to be assessed (e.g. range, accuracy, purpose, content and structure, etc.). These criteria are referred to as 'Categorisation 1' in this paper; 2) the scoring criteria or scoring guide which ranges from 0 to 100%. This is named as 'Categorisations'; and 3) descriptions on how Categorisations 1 and 2 are related. This is called 'Categorisation 3' in Figures 1) and this is shown where Categorization 1 and 2 meet which describes the details of assessed criteria.

These three categorisations were chosen because they are the most commonly used by the majority of language teachers. When teachers award students' language accuracy, they usually give higher scores for accurate use of vocabulary and grammar while low marks for inaccurate vocabulary and grammar use. In awarding students marks, language teachers refer to the following three categorisations. Each institution usually sets its own Categorisation 3 which is often based on Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) descriptor. These three categorisations are compared to find similarities and differences in the following section.

Figure 1: Summary of 3 categorisations

| | | |
|------------------|------------------|---|
| | | Assessed area (e.g. accuracy, content, structure etc.) |
| | | Categorisation 1 |
| Scoring criteria | Categorisation 2 | Categorisation 3 |

4. Findings and discussion

This section discusses 1) Categorisation 1 (assessed criteria) 2) Categorisation 2 (scoring guide) and 3) Categorisation 3 (descriptions) of University A and B's assessment criteria. The tables allow the comparison of the similarity and differences easily.

4.1. Categorisation 1 (assessed criteria)

Table 1 summarises University A's and University B's assessed criteria.

| University A | University B |
|---|--|
| 1) Grammar & Structure No definition given | 1) Structure & Coherence 'organisation within the text, sequence and balance' |
| 2) Content & Organisation No definition given | 2) Content 'choice & use of information', 'research' and 'understanding' |
| 3) Spelling No definition given | 3) Accuracy 'precision & control of grammar & vocabulary' |
| 4) Vocabulary No definition given | 4) Range 'breadth of use of grammar & vocabulary' and 'risk-taking' |
| | 5) Purpose 'focus on the task', 'planning, organisation & collaboration' and 'effective communication' |

Table 1

University A has four categories and University B has five. It is difficult to compare these categories named differently, especially, for example, University A uses a combined category called 'Grammar & Vocabulary', whereas University B uses a combined category called 'Structure & Coherence'. However, it is not impossible to compare them as comparable factors are identified as follows:

University A's 'grammar/structure' and University B's 'range' will be comparable.
University A's 'Content & organisation' and University B's 'content' will be comparable.

University A's 'Spelling' and University B's 'Accuracy' will be comparable.
University A's 'Grammar & Structure' and University B's 'Structure & Coherence' will be comparable.

4.2. Categorisation 2 (scoring criteria and guide)

Table 2 summarises University A's and University B's scoring criteria and guide.

| University A | | University B |
|--|--------|--------------------------|
| Exceptionally good. Very rare to give over 80%, (it is possible to give over 80% but only in rarely circumstances). | 80+% | Excellent |
| Excellent. It is beyond expected average. | 70-79% | Very competent |
| The average is 65%, which is expected that of the students achieve to be a satisfactory level (when students achieved the satisfactory). Between 60 and 64 % is what is called average. Between 66 and 69 % is above average. The majority of students may be awarded between 66 and 69 %. | 60-69% | Competent |
| This is below average. These students need to work harder. | 50-59% | Quite competent |
| 40-40% is still a pass mark, but these students need to improve significantly. | 40-49% | Adequate |
| If there are any students who are applicable to this case, please consult the coordinator. | 20-39% | Needs more preparation |
| | 0-19% | Insufficient preparation |

Table 2

University B's scoring criteria appear simpler than that of University A's. The differences between University A and B are found between 60-69% in University

A's, which differentiates the average students into three categories: above average, average and below average. University A does not differentiate two bands below 30% while University B does. University A's comments such as 'it is possible to give over 80%, but in rare circumstances' or 'If there are any students who are applicable to this case (30s), please consult the coordinator' indirectly instruct the language teachers not to use them, which indicates Japanese high context culture.

4.3. Description of Categorisation 3

Categorisation 3 describes how the scores are awarded based on both universities' Categorisation 1. We will look at: 1) Vocabulary/Range; 2) Content & Organisation/Content; 3) Spelling/Accuracy; 4) Grammar & Structure/Structure & Coherence in this order.

1) Vocabulary/Range

Table 3 summarises University A's vocabulary and University B's range

| University A: Vocabulary | | University B: Range |
|--|--------|---|
| Please check if the students use various studied vocabulary from L1-8. (Family terms, occupation, age, nationality, place and item names, verbs, adjectives and adverbs, time expression, katakana words). | 80+% | Rich range of relevant vocabulary and structure. |
| | 70-79% | Wide range of relevant vocabulary and structure. |
| | 60-69% | Good range of relevant vocabulary. Appropriate structures used. |
| | 50-59% | Quite good choice of vocabulary but gaps occur. Appropriate structures used with some success. |
| | 40-49% | Vocabulary is sufficient to task but narrow. Restricted use of structures. |
| | 20-39% | Limited range insufficient to task. |
| | 0-19% | Insufficient. |

Table 3

University A

University A calls this category 'Vocabulary' and this instruction represents simple assessment criteria. The only instruction is 'Please check if students use various learned vocabulary from L1-8'. It is less descriptive but its strength is the specific description written for specifically for this level.

University B

University B calls this category 'range' which is defined: 'breath of use of Grammar & Vocabulary; and 'risk-taking'. As mentioned earlier, the use of word 'risk-taking' demonstrates weak Uncertainty Avoidance culture, which is valued in British educational cultural influence.

Unlike University A's description, University B provides a description of seven categories (80+, 70+, 60-69, 50-59, 40-49, 20-39, 0-19%) consistently, which is a

strength. It is applicable to any languages and is easy to follow for language teachers. However, since the assessment criteria are used to apply to all languages, its description is generic and interpretation may tend to be subjective depending on the languages and teacher. This point may present difficulty in standardising the quality of grading across all languages.

2) Content & Organisation/Content

Table 4 summarises University A's content/organisation and University B's content.

| University A: Content/Organisation | | University B: Content |
|---|--------|---|
| The content is rich and interesting? At this level, students have limited vocabulary and grammar so the rich and interesting content may not be apparent. But those who use various learnt vocabulary and grammar points are usually rich and interesting enough. In other words, those who have a few mistakes but do not include various learnt vocabulary and grammar points are not so rich and interesting in content. | 80+% | Content is highly appropriate, detailed and informative. Thorough treatment of the topic. |
| | 70-79% | Content is appropriate and informative. Detailed treatment of the topic. |
| | 60-69% | Content is appropriate. Good treatment of the topic. |
| | 50-59% | Significant points are communicated. Some information may be irrelevant or repeated. |
| | 40-49% | Some basic, relevant information is communicated. Frequent repetitions may occur. |
| | 20-39% | Insufficient information. |
| | 0-19% | No meaningful information is presented. |

Table 4

University A

University A has a combined category which is called 'Content & Organisation'. The instruction 'At this level, student have limited vocabulary and grammar so the rich and interesting content may not be apparent. But those who use various learnt vocabulary and grammar points are usually rich and interesting enough' indicates the link and duplication among 'Content', 'Grammar' and 'Vocabulary'. The instruction below also implies the correlation between mark and the number of learnt 'Vocabulary' and 'Grammar'. The higher the score of 'Grammar' and 'Vocabulary', the higher the score of 'Content' is:

'In other words, those who use various learnt vocabulary and grammar points are usually rich and interesting enough. In other words, those who have a few mistakes but do not include various learned vocabulary and grammar points are not so rich and interesting in content.'

University B

University B calls this category 'Content' which is defined: 'Choice & Use of

information'; 'Research' and 'Understanding'. Unlike University A, it consistently provides information across all of the seven categories, which is a strength. As the assessment criteria are used to apply to all languages, the description is generic. Interpretation may tend to be subjective depending on the language and teachers, which may present difficulty in standardising the quality of grading across all languages.

3) Spelling/Accuracy

Table 5 summarises University A's spelling and University B's accuracy.

| University A: Spelling | | University B: Accuracy |
|--|--------|---|
| | 80+% | High level of accuracy in formulation (e.g. verb forms; common agreement) Excellent spelling and punctuation. |
| There are hardly any mistakes. | 70-79% | Overall impression of accuracy; minor inaccuracies may occur. Errors may occur when complex structures are attempted. Very good spelling and punctuation. |
| There are mistakes but is acceptable, this is considered to be average. | 60-69% | Occasional errors. Intended meaning is apparent. Good spelling and punctuation. |
| You can see quite a few mistakes. This is considered to be below average. | 50-59% | Frequent minor errors. Intended meaning is generally apparent. Spelling and punctuation is fair. |
| There are many mistakes and students do not understand that basic grammar and writing rules. | 40-49% | Frequent major and minor errors. Overall meaning is apparent but may at times be obscured. Punctuation is limited. |
| | 20-39% | Major errors impede communication. Punctuation is extremely limited. |
| | 0-19% | Insufficient. |

Table 5

University A

University A calls this category 'spelling' which provides the description of only four bands (70+, 60-69, 50-59, and 40-49). This criteria also represents an example of University A's simple assessment criteria. The only description is the instruction 'Please check if students use various learned vocabulary from L1-8'.

University B

University B calls this category 'accuracy' which is defined: 'precision & control of grammar & vocabulary'. Unlike University A's description, it provides descriptions of seven categories (80+, 70+, 60-69, 50-59, 40-49, 20-39, 0-19%) consistently, which is a strength. However, as the assessment criteria are used to apply all languages, the description is generic and interpretation may tend to be subjective

depending on language and teachers, which may present difficulty in standardising the quality of grading across all languages.

4) Grammar & Structure/Structure & Coherence

Table 6 summarises University A's Grammar & Structure and University B's Structure & Coherence.

| University A: Grammar & Structure | | University B: Structure & Coherence |
|--|--------|---|
| Please check if the students have used studied grammar correctly and included various grammar points. You may also include particle mistakes in this category. Please write down all the correct grammar underneath the grid papers. By doing so, you will see how many grammar points students used and the variety of their usages. This also helps the second markers to mark. | 80+% | Information is clear, well-ordered and developed. |
| | 70-79% | Information is developed, ordered and clear. |
| | 60-69% | Overall, information is clearly presented. |
| | 50-59% | Some order may be evident but is inconsistent. |
| | 40-49% | Information lacks order. |
| | 20-39% | Disorganised and illogical. |
| | 0-19% | None. |

Table 6

University A names this category 'Grammar & Structure'. It is specifically written for the beginner's level and provides a list of relevant learnt vocabulary and grammar structures (i.e. 'name, affiliation, nationality and age', are the details of what students should include in their self-introduction) for writing their self-introduction.

University A is focused on correct grammar as it says 'Please check if students have used studied grammar correctly...' The instruction continues on 'plus point' and emphasis on 'correctness'. This implies the control in detail and the correct answers, which is preferred in a strong Uncertainty Avoidance culture.

'Grammar & Structure' description also gives specific instruction to language teachers as follows:

'write down all grammar points which are used correctly at the bottom of grid papers...it is helpful for the second markers to underline in red where students used incorrect grammar, but you don't have to correct them as students do not see these scripts'.

The coordinator asks indirectly all colleagues to take the same procedure as the coordinator, which shows HC culture. By asking language teacher to take the same procedure as the coordinator makes the quality of grading/marketing consistent and standardised. This indicates collectivist culture:

'individuals are linked together into a collective... In group-oriented cultures, what is known by one member of a group is known by all members of the group' (Varner & Beamer, 2005, p. 241).

The below instruction which says first marker's awarded marks will be checked by a second marker indirectly instruct language teachers to prepare to justify their awarded marks, which show HC culture:

'write down all grammar points which are used correctly at the bottom of grid papers. By doing so, you will see how many grammar points students used and the variety of their usages. This also helps the second markers to mark.'

It is surmised that University A started using quantitative method for justification purposes. In order to justify their marks, this is how each Japanese language teachers do involving three stages:

- 1) The first marker has to count how many grammar and vocabulary mistakes are in each student's essay writing and record the number to justify their marks awarded;
- 2) Taking into account the numbers of the highest (Maximum) and the lowest (Minimum) students' number of mistakes, the average number of mistakes is determined by the first marker;
- 3) Based on the maximum, minimum and average number of mistakes, the benchmark is created by the first marker.

From these three stages, it is possible to say that the simple assessment criteria are not very subjective as descriptive statistics are used. To make descriptive statistics, each teacher has to find out Maximum, Minimum and Average to create their own benchmark. Unfortunately, the benchmark alters every time writing assignments are marked and graded. As University A sets six essay writing assignments in a year, it takes up a large amount of the teachers' time for grading in addition to their teaching and marking.

University B

University B calls this category 'Structure & Coherence' which is defined: 'organisation within the text: logic; sequence; balance'. Providing information consistently on all categories except 0-19% band is strength. The descriptions of the scoring guide of University B seem to be generic to apply to any level and language. This description may be written for advanced as the 'information' for beginners' level may not be suitable. The first markers may find it difficult to differentiate the descriptions, for example, among 'information is clear', 'information is developed, ordered and clear' and 'information is clearly presented'. This could be why grading may tend to become subjective.

5. Conclusions

A brief review of the RQs will enable to summarise as the key conclusions of this study. The conclusions consider answering the following three questions in the study:

1. What kind of cultural influence can we observe from two assessment criteria?

The cultural influences are analysed from following three dimensions: a) high vs. low context culture, individualist vs. collectivist culture and c) strong vs. weak Uncertainty Avoidance culture. University A's assessment criteria have both high-context and collectivist cultural influences as well as emphasis on accuracy which is preferred in the strong uncertainty avoidance cultures. University B's assessment criteria have both low-context and individualist cultural influences as well as emphasis on creativity which is preferred in weak Uncertainty Avoidance culture.

2. How different are the two assessment criteria? Is assessment of students' work subjectively or objectively?

Categorisation 3 was the most different among the three. University B's assessment criteria provide more consistent and detailed descriptions (names detailed assessment criteria) in categorization 3, whereas those of University A's are simple (named simple criteria) overall compared to University B.

It was concluded that University A's detailed assessment criteria may be easier for language teachers to award students' marks than using that of University B's simple assessment criteria. In addition, University B's detailed assessment criteria are easier to justify students' awarded marks to the second markers and external markers than using simple assessment criteria.

The strength of detailed assessment criteria is the clarity of the standard to anyone involved with the assessment including students, teachers and institutions as well as second markers and external examiners. Furthermore, detailed assessment criteria are not as time-consuming to grade students' marks for the first marker as they do not need to create the benchmark. The weakness of detailed assessment criteria is subjective element, which could affect the quality of assessment.

The weakness of simple assessment criteria could be time-consuming, creating additional work for the first markers. In this study, teachers at University A use the quantitative method to justify their awarded marks to the second and external markers, which allows to assess objectively. However, the strength of the simple assessment criteria is the quality of the assessments among all colleagues, making grading more standardised and consistent.

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