

Culture and Technology Use: Cheating with Smartphones in EFL Class

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According to a survey by Tindell and Bohlander (2012) 95% of students bring their phones to class every day, 92% use their phones to text message during class time, and 10% admitted to texting during an exam on at least one occasion. The majority of the students surveyed believe the instructors do not comprehend the extent to which texting and other activities go on in the classroom. The students stated in the survey that such activities are beyond just text messaging, and included accessing the internet for information, going to social networking sites and sending pictures.

The frequency by which students access and utilize their smart phones during class time should be alarming, but somehow it is not. Smart phones have become universally mainstream now that most individuals show no reaction when they see one, even in a classroom.

Cheating the classroom experience

The smart phone for all its good intent has become a tool for enhancing the classroom experience. Whether that is considered a positive or negative is dependent on who one asks; the teacher or the students and how it is being used. There have been numerous examples from around the world of students who have been caught “enhancing” the classroom with smart phone use.

“Another, perhaps even greater, concern relates to academic dishonesty. The media have reported a number of cases of students using cellphones to cheat. For example, 12 students at the University of Maryland were caught cheating during an accounting exam. These students were apparently sent the answers to the multiple-choice exam by students outside the test who were able to access the answer key that was posted online once the test began.”

(Moran, 2008:1)

In an article from The New York Times titled *“Internet Cheating Scandal Shakes Japan Universities”* (Fackler, 2011) the author argued that the enhancing of the classroom experience

with cellphone use has become a very serious situation for universities in Japan.

“At first, the postings on a popular Web site last week seemed innocuous enough: a user soliciting help for answers to a series of difficult math and English questions.

But it later became clear that the questions were taken straight from an entrance exam to prestigious Kyoto University. And they were being posted — and being answered by other users — while the exam was still under way. On Tuesday, the police began a manhunt for one or possibly more users who are believed to have used a single online handle, “aicezuki,” to cheat on exams at Kyoto University and three other top universities. The schools say they suspect test takers used cellphones to post the questions on the site and get the answers while the tests were still in progress.”

(http://www.nytimes.com/2011/03/02/world/asia/02japan.html?_r=0)

In light of the limited number of examples from east to west, it could be argued that the enhancement of the classroom experience with technology such as the smart phone is a relatively world-wide phenomenon.

The EFL classroom

Teachers of English as a foreign language (EFL) have seen their fair share of smart phone use in the classroom. In three of the universities I have worked at here in Japan I have had to leave students in various states of shock and awe when I tell them to put their phones in their bags. In other occasions students have been asked to leave class for using a phone during a test. On one such occasion the student did not realize I was standing right behind him while he pulled his smart phone out from under his legs to start copying down the answers for the test he was taking.

In another example, each student in a class had to do three book reports for the semester. Each did one book report and snapped pictures on their smart phones of the reports, proceeding to send them to each other. With the help of the camera on their phones they created a storehouse of book report pictures they could download or send each other, copy the information into the report form, and hand it into the EFL teacher. It worked well until the teachers started seeing repeated papers with the identical language from different students in different classes. While these may be personal examples, technology being used to cheat in Japanese classes is recognized as a wide spread problem.

“The administration of the prestigious Hitotsubashi University in Tokyo punished 26 students for using mobile phones at examinations. As it turned out, the students used email to obtain answers to the test questions. The lecturers grew extremely suspicious when they discovered similar answers with the same mistakes in dozens of test papers. All of the students suspected of cribbing had to undergo a repeat test, and those 26 students with unsatisfactory results were punished. The incident occurred during an e-commerce exam; about 500 students had to take the examination. The dean of the Tokyo University says that one of the students successfully passed the exam and left the auditorium. Already behind the door, the student started sending emails with the correct answers to the test’s questions to the students who poorly studied for the exam. However, the university’s administration didn’t punish the students; they were just asked to take the exam over.”

[\(http://www.pravdareport.com/news/society/sex/10-12-2002/19016-0/\)](http://www.pravdareport.com/news/society/sex/10-12-2002/19016-0/)

These situations with smart phone use in classrooms could simply be considered cheating: a test is designed to see how much you know or how skilled you are in order to let you move forward in school, the smart phone is not taking the class, the student is. Besides tests however what about every day classroom learning and interactions? Calling it cheating is not a polite way of naming a behavior that may or not be considered wrong by students of various cultural backgrounds. The use of technology in the classroom could be considered an extension of the deeply held cultural traits of the students.

“EFL: It is cultural and the pressure put on us.”

Teachers of EFL often come from native English backgrounds or western cultures that have a much different concept of cheating/enhancing in classrooms than do the students who take the classes. The teacher is of course the final judge in a classroom, and to this end makes the decision concerning how to proceed with what they judge to be cheating, but a step toward understanding the complexities of the behaviors considered cheating would include attempting to understand the different cultural perceptions students have in contrast to their teachers.

Evidence comes from an article by Thompson and Williams (*as cited in Lathrop and Foss*) titled *“But I changed three words! Plagiarism in the ESL classroom.”* The problem identified concerns about EFL students plagiarizing papers and turning them in as their own work. The authors recognized that there was a cultural disconnect between the ways the students perceived their behaviors and how the teachers saw them.

“For many EFL students, learning not to cheat is more than a difficult task; it is a cultural hurdle. In some Asian countries, students are taught to memorize and copy well respected authors and leaders in their societies to show intelligence and good judgment in their writing. This is particularly true of our Chinese students who have frequently defended this difference in class. Korean students, who say their country shares similar ‘customs’, argue that their educational system emphasizes the importance of grades more than the way in which one achieves those grades.”

(Thompson and Williams, 2000:127)

It should come as no surprise that certain aspects of the Chinese and Korean example could be perceived as plagiarism. To directly quote anyone of power, whether it be an author or a scholar, would assuredly be considered plagiarism without including a citation. The conclusion of the article reaffirms that the problems of perception are often times cultural in nature:

“When we began teaching the perils of plagiarism to our EFL students, we found that the typical textbook-type exercises simply did not work. Through journals and class discussions, we learned that it was insufficient to provide students with a list of rules and citation styles in order to show them how not to plagiarize. For many students, the concept was foreign (or ‘American’) a culturally different way of thinking and performing.”

(Lathrop and Foss, 2000:130)

The students understanding of class culture may not adhere to a western teacher’s idea of class culture, and students may superimpose their perceived cheating behaviors because of the pressures put on them by the EFL teacher and the large load of work they get in a language class.

“When EFL teachers encounter behaviors reflecting cultural value differences that they do not recognize, their most likely tendency is to judge those behaviors and to characterize the students who engage in them in terms of their own cultural value system”

(Kuehn, Stanwyck, & Holland, 2012:313)

Regardless of the country of origin, it seems that in most cases cheating behaviors come down to two aspects of school life: first the pressures put on students to succeed and the native cultures of the students and teachers in classrooms where one’s cultural set of ideas or behaviors may not match even a little to another’s set, creating problems with cheating.

In most of the previous examples, in which Western culture came into contact with various other cultures, the Western oriented students or teachers tended to view behaviors that necessitated getting a good grade or doing well in class without putting in the “work”, as cheating. The advent of the smart phone has not helped improved the situation. Individuals from all cultures are pressured to succeed, but the differences in culture can also be paralleled in order to understand why students use smart phones to cheat or their learning experience in class.

Linking technology use and culture.

As was stated by students in their perceptions of cheating/enhancing, culture plays a major role in what is considered cheating, as well who considers certain behaviors as cheating. Without exception, all individuals have culture and it varies from nation to nation. Nonetheless, cultures, like people are patterned, and patterns are shared intrinsically in any culture at the group or individual level.

In Anthropology’s long history it seems there is no one good definition that encompasses all of the nuances of the cultures of the world. For the express intent of trying to understand on a cultural level why students use smart phones for classroom enhancement however a benchmark is needed to understand the situation. So the question that needs to be answered is this: Can a link between technology use in the classroom and culture be found? Srite and Karahanna (2006) believe they have found a correlation in their research article, *“The role of Espoused National Cultural Values in Technology acceptance.”* In the article the researchers contend that individuals espouse national cultural values to differing degrees and in doing so, they treat national cultural values as an individual difference variable. They hypothesized that national cultural values impacts the cultural values of the individual and by extension influences the acceptance or use of technology.

To measure to what degree national cultural values are exhibited they used Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions Theory with the TAM or Technology Acceptance Model. Hofstede’s Definition of culture is most predominately used and his Dimensions Theory is often cited as a way of determining with great accuracy about the norms and values of national culture.

“Culture represents a ‘set of likely reactions of citizens with a common mental programming’ ... reactions need not be found within the same persons, but only statistically more often in the same society”

(Hofstede, 1991:112)

According to this definition, students behaviors were measured based their own set of “likely reactions” because of their common mental programming, or coming from the same culture. With Hofstede’s Theory as a framework they created a survey that they gave to 928 students from 30 different countries to ensure sufficient variance in espoused national cultural values of the students from the various countries. Of the 928 surveys they received, 181 surveys that were usable in the study. They conducted two studies with the surveys. The surveys found one of the dimensions to be most important.

Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty Avoidance explains that cultures come in on two sides of a spectrum: strong uncertainty avoidance and weak uncertainty avoidance. In strong avoidance culture, people feel threatened by unknown situations or uncertain ones. In high avoidance cultures formal rules, predictability and constant structures at nearly all levels of society are required if not necessary. The opposite would be what one would expect, cultures that are more tolerant of unknown situations. The weaker degree of this scale shows more acceptance of different thoughts and ideas. Weak society tends to impose fewer regulations, ambiguity is more accustomed to, and the environment is more free-flowing. (Hofstede, 1980)

The results of the study concluded that uncertainty avoidance from the Cultural Dimensions Theory played a huge role in the effect that national culture has on the acceptance and use of technology by students. Uncertainty avoidance being the most important moderator of the relationship between subjective norms and the intended behavior.

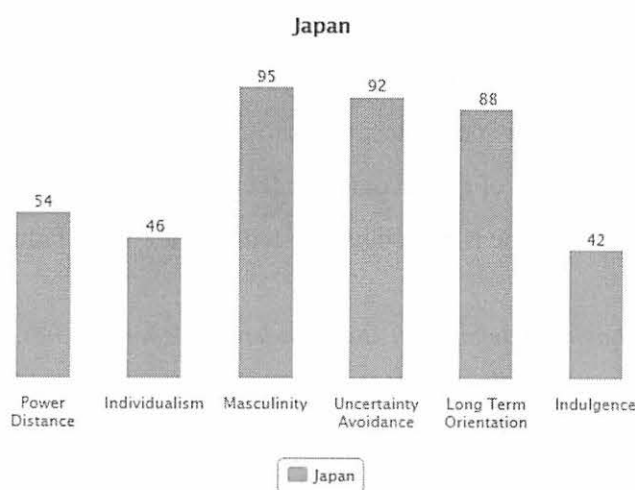
“Uncertainty avoidance was found to have, across both studies, a consistently significant moderating effect on the relationship between subjective norms and behavioral intention to use, such that the relationship was stronger for individuals with high levels of espoused uncertainty avoidance.”

(Srite and Karahanna, 2006:697)

Srite and Kahanna are stating that for adoption and continued use in cultures that rank high in uncertainty avoidance, individuals look to their social networks, such as classmates or workmates for acceptance cues, or if it is acceptable to use technology. “If everyone else is doing it and it lowers my risk, I can too.”

The Japanese EFL classroom

The survey conducted by Srite and Karahanna (2006) was conducted at an American university with students of multiple cultures. Could the research be compared to a homogenous EFL classroom in Japan to try and pinpoint a cultural reason for enhancing/cheating the classroom with technology? At the Hofstede Center website, a listing of more than 70 countries and their scores on the cultural dimensions scale can be found. This is Japan:



(<http://geert-hofstede.com/japan.html>)

From this data it can be rationalized that Japan would most certainly fit within the parameters of the Srite and Karahanna research. With a score of 92 in uncertainty avoidance Japan would be a particularly risk averse culture. Japan fits well into the high end of the uncertainty avoidance scale with the cultures need to have situations pre-planned or even ritualized to the point where everyone knows exactly what is expected of them.

“At 92 Japan is one of the most uncertainty avoiding countries on earth. You could say that in Japan anything you do is prescribed for maximum predictability. From cradle to grave, life is highly ritualized and you have a lot of ceremonies. For example, there is opening and closing ceremonies of every school year which are conducted almost exactly the same way everywhere in Japan. At weddings, funerals and other important social events, what people wear and how people should behave are prescribed in great detail in etiquette books. School teachers and public servants are reluctant to do things without precedence. In corporate Japan, a lot of time and effort is put into feasibility studies and all the risk factors must be worked out before any project can start. Managers ask for all the detailed facts and figures before taking any decision. This high need for Uncertainty Avoidance is one of the reasons

why changes are so difficult to realize in Japan.”

(<http://geert-hofstede.com/japan.html>)

EFL uncertainty avoidance

Japan being high on uncertainty avoidance, it seems logical that they would enhance an EFL classroom with smartphone use. It was stated previously that smartphones have been used in Japan for enhancing classrooms such as in the example of the Kyoto University exam cheating scandal, and personal experience as an EFL teacher at three different universities.

As the research indicates, students from high uncertainty avoidance culture look to peer groups such as classmates for social cues. The social cues indicate the acceptance and use of technology to enhance the classroom as a way of risk avoidance, then it must be learned from the peers of an EFL class that using a smartphone is a good way to reduce the risk of failure.

“The strong influence of peers’ behavior may suggest that academic dishonesty not only is learned from observing the behavior of peers, but that peers’ behavior provides a kind of normative support for cheating. The fact that others are cheating may also suggest that, in such a climate, the non-cheater feels left at a disadvantage. Thus, cheating may come to be viewed as an acceptable way of getting and staying ahead.”

(McCabe & Trevino, 1993:533)

There is a plausible increase for a high risk situation for students due to the difference in potentially low and high levels of uncertainty avoidance, as a result of the gap between the cultures of the teacher and the Japanese students. Where a Western teacher would most likely come from a culture of low uncertainty avoidance, acquiring concepts of autonomy and freedom of speech in classrooms, Japanese students are coming from the high end of uncertainty avoidance, and assume a classroom that is far more structured and mainstreamed in a way that they are used to. Such a situation lends itself nicely to an “us” vs “teacher” dynamic where students perceive themselves as a group working together, and in this case, peers working together to get through a class.

Next, in many cases of EFL classes in Japan students are often unmotivated due to lack of interest in English or they are beginners in English as a foreign language with very little skill.

“Perhaps low mastery motivation in a course increases a student’s risk for cheating in that course and increases the cheater’s tendency to cheat repeatedly. A student who is uninterested

in a course may look for ways to complete the course with the least effort. In addition, high extrinsic motivation may also increase student vulnerability to temptations to cheat. If a student's purposes for taking a course have little to do with the course and more to do with extrinsic goals, such as grades or career opportunities, cheating may serve those goals. In either case, motivations appear to be course specific".

(Jordan, 2001: 243)

In an EFL classroom in which students have low levels of English, stress is put on the students to succeed in what could be considered a cultural clash between what the teacher expects of students, and what the students expect of a teacher. High uncertainty avoidance would be noticeable when the educational culture is rigidly systemized and requires the passing of only a few tests to actually graduate. Students in this situation would easily find a way to neutralize or justify cheating in a classroom.

"The pressure on Japanese students to achieve occupational success is considered intense, and success depends in large part on earning a college degree. The Japanese are also well known for their team and group orientation. If cheating is common and socially supported within the group, then it may be very difficult for a Japanese student to resist the temptation to cheat."

(Diekhoff et al., 1999:344)

All of these factors, cultural disconnect between teachers and students, lack of motivation and the Japanese university system are ripe with high uncertainty avoidance. A student who hates English class, does not understand the teacher or the work well enough to be satisfied with their own performance, who sees or hears of other students successfully using smartphones to get through class would most likely do the same themselves.

"In strong Uncertainty Avoidance countries there is more tolerance of unfairness (Hofstede, 1980). For example, as Uncertainty Avoidance increases, individuals are more likely to believe that the ethical standards are determined by the least ethical competitor"

(Bernardi & Long, 2004:63)

Conclusion

Consequently, if Japanese EFL students are getting the go ahead from everyone in class

because they are unmotivated, there is a lack a level of proficiency to understand, and the system is strict, then an example from The Japan Times titled, “*The dumbing down of Japanese students*” (Kuchikomi, 2010) is conclusive proof that cheating with technology such as smartphones is avoiding uncertainty or risk in the classroom.

“Study itself may be obsolescent in the Internet age. An alternative the Japanese call ‘kopiye’—from ‘copy and paste’—is so much easier. Suppose you have a term paper due yesterday. The professor is getting impatient, and you have not even started. You could drop the course, but you need the credits. What do you do? Stay up all night poring over source material, cudgeling your brains? What for, when you can simply Google the subject of your report and connect to any of numerous websites selling the efforts of past students? Naturally, being no fool, you change the wording here and there, but essentially your work is done; you have made it through one more hurdle on the steep path to adulthood. Probably half of college students nowadays do ‘kopiye,’ Shukan Gendai hears from a regular practitioner of the art.”

(<http://www.japantoday.com/category/kuchikomi/view/the-dumbing-down-of-japanese-students>)

Ultimately the Srite and Kannahara research is accurate because Japanese culture has been studied by way of the cultural dimensions theory (Hofstede, 2003) before. It seems safe to say that with such high levels in uncertainty avoidance, it is not a leap of thought to conclude the use of smartphones in class is based on social cues from other students as well as the ease of use of smartphones. People generally take the path of least resistance to what they want and if they feel pressured, unmotivated or cannot understand the language then the easy path that everyone else takes such as “Kopiye” makes good sense. If so, many students are cheating in an EFL class, and it would then come as no surprise that justification would be a simple task, everyone else is doing it and succeeding, why should I not do it?

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