
Abstract

This chapter looks at the prevailing attitudes and cultural mindsets which have led to the development of the modern educational systems existing throughout the East Asian region. First, the development of Confucian thought, as well as the dissemination of classical Chinese culture throughout the region is described as the foundational philosophy which both unites the region, providing a universal educational culture which transcends national and linguistic boundaries, and also still plays a large role today in modern educational theory and practice in East Asia. The histories of English language teaching in China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong are each briefly surveyed, taking note of how the present-day public educational system's foreign language curricula came to be. Finally, commonalities in educational philosophies are discussed, and the seemingly antithetical nature of East Asian educational philosophy to modern Western pedagogy is illustrated through the case of Hong Kong's Target-oriented Curriculum initiative and the difficulties it encountered in reconciling Western and Eastern educational ideals.

Education is a largely socially defined phenomenon. Cultures decide what is and isn't important to know, placing value on some subjects of knowledge, and dismissing others as trivial, and those designations vary from place to place. To illustrate, let me paraphrase an anecdote I remember reading back when I was an early teenager. In the course of my schoolwork, I came across an account of early English settlers in America who decided, as a matter of Christian duty, they would offer to take in and provide an education for some young boys from a nearby indigenous tribe. The tribesmen accepted the offer, and enthusiastically sent a handful of youngsters who spent some years being taught literacy, science, mathematics, etc. The English settlers considered the boys' learning to be wildly successful, and sent them back to their tribe to show them what they knew. You can imagine the settlers' shock when, instead of the praise and thanks they were

expecting, they received a rather tersely worded response from the tribe complaining that the boys hadn't learned anything. Specifically, the boys had not learned about the local plants and how to use them for medicines. They hadn't learned how to track the various indigenous wildlife. In short, from the vantage point of the natives, the boys hadn't learned any of the knowledge which they valued in their culture, and thus the education they had received was tantamount to nothing at all.

With this in mind, it must be realized that any discussion of English education in East Asia cannot be deracinated from an in-depth understanding of the histories and cultures which shape the understanding of both the role and purpose of education in the region. These cultural philosophies are also the foundation upon which pedagogies must be built, and must be accounted for in any sort of methodological proposals. As such, let's take a look at one of the core educational philosophies which provides some unity in educational outlook across the region.

2.1 Confucian Educational Principles

Before looking at country-specific histories, it's important to look at one of the premier philosophies which has impacted the development of educational thought throughout the region: Confucianism. Contrary to the Western "fortune cookie" ideas of Confucianism simply being a collection of wise saying, it is a comprehensive philosophy for managing both personal and government conduct to maintain social harmony. Its all-encompassing approach has led to its spiritualization, and it has taken on some religious aspects over the centuries. Confucius was a teacher, politician, and philosopher living in the fifth to sixth centuries BCE. His teachings emphasize the principles of "ren" (benevolence), "li" (good manners), "zhong" (loyalty), "shu" (altruism), and "xiao" (filial piety). Taken together, these principles form the foundation of "de" (virtue). In the educational sphere, Confucius deeply impacted the whole East Asian region with his philosophies of the importance of education as a means of maintaining ethical behavior. While he taught a belief in the inherent goodness of man, Confucian philosophy notes that deprivation can lead to moral lapses for which education can be a corrective measure. He also taught that all had equal potential, and the promulgation and broad acceptance of this philosophy led both to a the democratization of education in the form of a kind of public education established during the Han dynasty (China Education Center 2015), as well to the conduction of the Civil Service Exams which provided opportunity for upward mobility for potentially anyone with the talent and ability to endure the course of study and to pass the examinations. As such, this established education as a primary means of social mobility—a philosophy which most East Asians still subscribe to today.

These Confucian ideals form the foundation of a shared pan-East Asian identity which shapes educational philosophy and practice to this day. While the cultural connections between China and Hong Kong and Taiwan—all being populated

primarily by Chinese *Han* peoples—is rather obvious, one must remember that the Japanese and Koreans are different both racially and linguistically. In order for one to make any arguments regarding a unified pedagogical approach for use in different nations/cultures, one first needs to ascertain that there are enough similarities between them to make such a unified approach tenable. One of the core premises of this text is that students, teachers, and educational institutions in East Asia are all so different from their counterparts in the English-speaking West as to necessitate both practical and philosophical modifications of pedagogical practice in L2 instruction in order to maintain effectiveness. If Western and Eastern educational philosophies vary so much, one could completely understand someone from the outside looking in asking whether the sizeable differences between Japanese, Chinese, and Korean cultures (or even the much smaller, but still notable, differences between regions like Taiwan, Hong Kong, and China, which although culturally contiguous, still vary wildly in educational systems¹) would make group comparisons unwieldy. Such critiques are certainly apt, but as it so happens, East Asia does effectively have a group identity, which can be clearly seen in (amongst other culture facets) their approaches to education. Chinese Confucianism spread with the dominant Chinese culture throughout the immediate region, and still heavily impacts the areas discussed in this text. East Asia as a unified cultural entity can most effectively be understood as a region that has historically been under the cultural (and sometimes military) dominance of China. It exported material goods, along with sciences and technologies, and just as importantly, its arts and culture. Surrounding countries picked up the Chinese writing system (which, in the case of Japanese and Korean, was an odd fit given the linguistic dissimilarity between their languages and Chinese, and later prompted both groups to separately embrace other writing systems to complement the Chinese characters—however, the fact that Chinese characters are still used by both groups even today serves to underscore the power and importance ascribed to Chinese cultural transfer), religious systems and moral codes (e.g., in addition to Confucianism, there was Buddhism and Daoism), and even architecture as rulers consciously modeled their own courts on the Chinese imperial throne. Although the indigenous animistic religion *Shinto* remained central to Japanese culture, the *Taika* reforms (646 CE~) consciously reconfigured Japanese bureaucracy in conformity with Chinese norms, including Confucian principles. Buddhism also quickly spread among the peasant class at this time. The *Heian* period (794 CE to 1185 CE) also saw great efforts towards emulating the Chinese court. The Sinification of the Korean peninsula began earlier and was subjected to much more intense efforts, largely due to its perilous position, connected by land to the mighty Chinese state. A conquering invasion into the peninsula by China in the Han Dynasty (about 100 B.C.E.) probably marks the first “official” wave of Sinification. Buddhism, again, was the most popular vehicle for Chinese cultural influence. By the Goryeo dynasty (918–1392), these Chinese influences had become dominant, and the ruling class had emulated the Chinese national civil service examinations

¹Political boundaries certainly can exert a great deal of difference in day-to-day teaching realities.

and even established the *Gukjagam*, a sort of “university” to teach Confucian teachings and literature to Korea’s aspiring intellectuals.

China also had a profound impact on Southeastern Asia, as well; however, the impact there on the development of their modern-day culture is less apparent than was the simultaneous influence they received from Indian cultures. Much of culture in Southeast Asia (e.g., Thailand, Laos, Cambodia, and Burma) can be *roughly* understood in light of its fault line position between two of the world’s largest, most dominant, ancient powers—China and India. Vietnam, it is true, is much more directly culturally connected to China than its Southeast Asian neighbors are, and it is often included with Korea and Japan as an example of a state whose culture and history has to be seen in light of its relationship with China (indeed, Vietnamese culture bears little or no trace of impact by India, and many aspects of Vietnamese culture are highly reminiscent of China). As such, it would not be at all surprising to wonder if Vietnam would merit inclusion in this text—especially as the TEFL market has been growing precipitously over the past decade. While the author did contemplate doing so, ultimately, the decision was made to limit discussion to China, Taiwan, Japan, and Korea (and, to a lesser extent, Hong Kong) because (1) it enabled more regional coherence to the term “East Asia;” and (2) any discussion of education in Vietnam requires delving into issues of extreme poverty and developmental conditions which are sufficiently profound to sometimes override the general principles governing foreign language pedagogical practices which will be argued to be of primary importance for the countries discussed in this text. Thus, the inclusion of Vietnam could introduce exceptions and unique requirements which would distract from the unified arguments being made regarding teaching practices the other countries. While the case of Vietnam is certainly interesting, and it’s quite likely that many of the pedagogical suggestions made in later chapters would also apply there, ultimately the nature of Vietnam’s position as a developing country suggests that any study of TEFL practices there would be better voiced in a separate manuscript.

In summary, while heavy distinctions exist throughout the varied regions and nations of East Asia, there are commonalities which can be ascribed to a shared cultural foundation: namely, Chinese learning and bureaucratic establishments which were promulgated throughout the wider region, largely through the vehicles of Buddhism and Confucian philosophy. The shared writing system enabled shared literature, traditions, and folklore. Thus, much like the bonds of Christianity and Greek mythology and philosophy which provided a semblance of unified culture to the various squabbling kingdoms and principalities which made up medieval Europe (and the parallel continues if one remembers the role that Latin played as a *lingua franca* which enabled communication among the elite throughout the continent), Chinese language, arts, fashions, farming techniques, government bureaucracies, educational systems—in a word, *culture*—created the basis for commonality between peoples across a breathtakingly large region. While one certainly doesn’t want to minimize the distinctiveness of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean populations (and note that there are great differences to be found *within* these populations, as well), most honest observers will note that Chinese, Japanese,

and Korean cultures have vastly more similarity to each other than to, say, African cultures or European ones. This shared cultural background impacts people at various levels. At its simplest level, this shared cultural background helps to explain why popular culture from each region can receive such acclaim in neighboring countries, despite the language gap. For instance, currently K-pop (Korean pop music genres) is enjoying some measure of global success, but nowhere is that more pronounced than in China and Japan. Likewise, the Hong Kong movie industry has diehard fans, not just among ethnic Chinese, but among Japanese and Korean populaces, as well. While not everything popular in one country goes on to succeed regionally, there is a fair amount of cross-pollination which is enabled by the shared cultural endowment. Within the various educational systems which dot the region, this shared heritage becomes apparent, as it yields commonalities across teacher and student populations. While there are differences in systems at both national and regional levels, the activity of *learning* is still so heavily impacted by cultural heritage that one can productively discuss most aspects of L2 pedagogy collectively for most parts of East Asia. Still, in order to understand how the modern educational infrastructure came about, it's worthwhile to take a look at the separate histories of English learning in China, Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Hong Kong.

2.2 The History of English Education in China

Considering the 5000-year-long, continuous history of China, the relative length of time for which English has been a motivating concern in education is a mere blip; however, one can actually trace back documented efforts at foreign language education in China for about 2000 years (Fu 1986, as cited in Hu and Adamson 2012). Most of the early documented efforts concerned the study of regional languages in Southeast Asia, where China conducted a high volume of trade. The study of English, however, was a phenomenon which really can only trace its origins to the nineteenth century as China began trade relationships with both Britain and America (Yang 2000). As religious groups made inroads to China, they set up schools and taught their language in efforts to evangelize the Chinese population. Additionally, after the stunning losses experienced at the hands of British during the Opium War, the study of Western sciences and technologies was seen by many Chinese as the best means to build up their nation and to prevent a repeat of such humiliation in the future. The study of Western languages (including English) was regarded as essential to the effort of understanding the latest scientific discoveries. As Western colleges proliferated in China during the early twentieth century, they brought with them Western teaching techniques and methodologies, and inaugurated the beginning of cross-pollination of language pedagogies between China and the West (You 2009).

With the establishment of the Republic of China (ROC), there were a wide variety of curricular reforms, eventually resulting in English being included among the core subjects taught in secondary schools across China (Hu and Adamson 2012). This

could well be counted as the beginning of the Chinese educational system's long (and sometimes fraught) relationship with English as a subject of study—at least at the national level. While the seeds were planted into the conscience of the broader population—that English was an academic subject on par with math, science, etc.—it would still be easy to overstate the effect of this policy. Especially when compared with the modern educational infrastructure, general education in that era—and English education more so than many subjects—was largely restricted to the coastal, urban population centers. Furthermore, the intermittent fighting with warlords, and especially the Japanese invasion and its aftermath (including the civil war leading to the Communist takeover and subsequent establishment of the People's Republic of China), had a tumultuous effect on the educational sector, often leading to disruptions to both continuity of study and quality of instruction provided during those years (Hu and Adamson 2012). After the establishment of the PRC, due to America and Britain's continued allegiance to the ROC government, English was disfavored politically, and the new government made the decision to mostly discontinue English language teaching at all levels of education throughout China, instead promoting the study of the Russian language (i.e., the language of China's ally who had supported the Communist revolution). In an act of government which, on paper, must have seemed like an ideal solution to post-revolution realities and needs (yet, in practical reality was likely an epic disaster which would be funny if it were not for the human toll involved), the government forced the vast bulk of the nation's English language teachers to undergo a short-term program to turn them into Russian language teachers (Zheng and Davidson 2008).² The results were swift as, by 1957, the active English teachers in secondary schools across the entire expanse of China were numbered a mere 450 (Adamson 2002). While, by the late 1950s, the government had begun to change course, slowly reintroducing English curricula, the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976) subjected foreign language education to another severe, nationwide shock. As one of the basic tenets of the revolution was a rejection of foreign influence, one can well imagine the amount of disruption caused to the English-teaching profession as foreign language books and materials were suddenly illegalized and destroyed, and teachers came under immediate suspicion of corruption by foreign ideas—often leading to them being attacked, publically ridiculed, or even killed. At the outbreak of the Cultural Revolution, English classes were banned—first in practice by the outbreak of violence, and then by official decree. While English classes were reinstated by 1969, it was redesigned to serve revolutionary aims by propagating Maoist and Communist teachings. English textbooks from this period served up translations of Communist slogans and speeches and sayings by Mao (Cheng and Wang 2012). As Yafei Hu relates of her middle school experience during the Cultural Revolution:

²While such bureaucratic incompetence is indeed breathtaking, and I'm sure the program provoked much eye-rolling by Chinese teachers at the time, unfortunately, the early PRC government doesn't have a monopoly on such nonsense, as I've witnessed similar attempts to "use" teachers beyond their area of professional expertise being perpetrated by administrators at both local and regional levels in various countries across the globe.

...the first English sentence that I ever saw, was “Long live Chairman Mao!” Later we learned slogans like, “Let’s wish Chairman Mao a long, long life!”; we repeated this slogan every morning. We also learned to say, “Put down your gun!”, which we were told to say if ever the Russians invaded, and we encountered a Russian soldier. Evidently our teachers thought that Russian soldiers knew English.

(Hu and Hammond 2003)

Deng Xiaoping’s market reforms, starting from the late 1970s, and their resultant increases in foreign commerce, caused a significant increase in positive connotations with English study, and English language teaching professionals’ prestige rose in tandem, again being seen as a “core” subject, such as math and science. Due to English’s role as a medium for global communication and trade, vast numbers of Chinese took to studying English, and increasingly, the emphasis of their study became oral communication, in contrast with the reading and writing focus of previous decades. By the 1990s, it was estimated that over 57 million full-time students and 150 million part-time students were studying English (Zhou 1997). Due to the perceived need for oral communicative skills, the government modified curricular guidelines and goals in 2001 to improve standards in English language learning (Adamson 2004), and also explicitly endorsed task-based learning methodology in EFL education. At the same time, they mandated that English learning be integrated into elementary curricula from the 3rd grade. This was a monumental change from previous practices wherein foreign language education only commenced from the first year of junior high school (grade 7 in the U.S. system), necessitating revision of curricula throughout the K-12 and university systems, as well as suddenly necessitating the accreditation and licensing of legions of elementary English teachers, but the rising numbers of English students made the necessity of such changes apparent. By the early 2000s, over 300 million Chinese were learning English, a figure which had swollen to 400 million by 2010 (He 2010, August 5). The numbers trigger alarm in some academic circles as researchers point out that English proficiency is often being used as a status symbol due to its perceived correlation with educational and professional benefits. The College English Test (CET), a national standardized examination of English proficiency, in recent years has attracted millions of test-takers annually, making it one of the largest mass exams in the world. While the Chinese government has taken some actions to limit the degree of influence of English on the wider culture (Roberts 2014), English remains entrenched as a high-prestige subject of study, and virtual necessity for success in the modern Chinese job market.

2.3 English Education in Japan

Japan’s early history with English is peculiar for the fact that during the height of European colonialist endeavors, Japan was effectively closed off to the world. Due to perceived threats to the established order made by the presence of Spanish and Portuguese traders and missionaries, the Tokugawa shogunate enacted the policy of

sakoku (鎖国: lit. “locked country”) which restricted trade to a few ports, made it illegal for Japanese to leave the country, and made it a capital offense for foreigners to enter Japan (except for the aforementioned officially designated trade spots). This period of limited foreign engagement (which stands in stark contrast to the previous period, wherein Japan invaded Korea from 1592 to 1598, in a first attempt to achieve regional hegemony and to set themselves up as a world power) allowed the shogunate to concentrate efforts on domestic policy, and prevented potential rivals from shoring up power through negotiations with foreign trade partners. Effectively, this period stands out as one of the longest stretches of peace in Japan’s history. While the first recorded contact between the English language and Japan was in 1600 with the arrival of William Adams (upon whom James Clavell based his character John Blackthorne in the novel *Shōgun*), it’s unlikely that his native language made much of any impression on his hosts. It was only after the policy of isolationism was abandoned after Commodore Perry’s 1853 forcible entry into Tokyo Harbor that any attempts at learning English (among other Western languages) truly began. Some, however, claim that the *sakoku* policy is still in effect concerning foreign language learning, noting the contradictory approach of trying to learn language while keeping foreign influences at arm’s length (Inoguchi 1999). It’s only from the Meiji era (1868–1912) that English began to have any discernable impact on Japan. Due to the Meiji reforms, focused on reintegrating Japan into the world and “catching up” on the technological innovations and learning which the nation had missed out on during its self-imposed isolation, Japan was suddenly very open to foreign ideas, technologies, and sciences, and Western languages were ardently studied—mostly from an instrumental viewpoint, as fluency in Western languages allowed Japanese scholars to be able to understand, use, and reverse-engineer Western technological innovations. The Japanese government actively promoted this, both sending scholars abroad and inviting foreign experts to Japan to teach languages and sciences. During this era, a ministry of education was established which brought forth Japan’s first compulsory educational system, and in 1871, English language study was adopted into the national curriculum. Universities put into place an entrance examination system which prominently featured sections testing knowledge of English grammar (these entrance exams continue to be used to this very day, with only very minor modifications—Hagerman 2009). By the 1890s, foreign language education was an ensconced feature of public education throughout the secondary levels, with English becoming the principal foreign language taught (although some high schools did offer French or German). Most of the English language education was being provided by native speakers, who were often Christian missionaries (Iino 2002). Universities and colleges would also often feature content classes taught by foreign experts through the medium of English.

In the early twentieth century, however, attitudes towards English study shifted across the country. After their successes in the (First) Japan-Sino War and the Japan-Russo War, a sense of nationalism flourished across Japan, and some criticism of Western systems and traditions began to seep into the national conversation. This was a stark turn-around from the mad rush to embrace all things Western which had characterized the national mood through the latter quarter of the

nineteenth century. One of the prominent battlefields upon which this nationalism played out was in the foreign language education curriculum. English medium coursework was quickly dropped from universities in favor of classes taught in Japanese. The foreign texts, materials, and instructors were also replaced with Japanese materials and educators (Iino 2002). The focus of learning shifted from that of communication to the purpose of passing entrance examinations which would enable the test-taker to enter elite universities (and thus to ensure financial and social prospects for life). This instrumental focus led to reducing the study of language to the mere memorization of vocabulary and grammar points, with no thoughts toward pronunciation or communicative aspects. In this way, the philosophy of *junken eigo* (English for entrance examinations) took hold of the Japanese populace (Kitao and Kitao 1995, cited in Iino 2002). This sea shift in attitudes concerning language learning can be well illustrated with the following anecdote. In 1922, the Japanese government brought in the linguist Harold Palmer to study and to make recommendations to improve the national English education curriculum and teaching methods. During the course of an exhaustive 14 year study, he criticized the dominant methods of grammar-translation and instead promoted the use of orally focused Direct Methods. He brought forward considerable evidence to the effectiveness of his methodologies in trial studies, yet, in the end, the Ministry of Education effectively ignored all of his advice, and no changes were put into place. The levels of ambivalence towards any communicative goals in foreign language learning are stunning, both in their stark display, and in the degree to which they can still persist among Japanese English learners (and policy makers) today, as many educators will solemnly attest.

The unpopularity of English predictably hit its nadir during the years shortly before and during World War II. Officially, English language study was discouraged in the civilian population due to the language's natural connection to Japan's wartime opponents. Still, immediately following the war, the policy was reversed as prevailing attitudes began to shift, and the entire Japanese school system underwent thorough reorganization (Iino 2002) to the current structure of 6 years of elementary, 3 years of junior high, 3 years of high school, and 4 years of university (the previous system featured a combined secondary school which lasted up to 5 years). English again became a standard subject in the secondary curriculum in a series of reforms enacted in 1947. Its prevalence in junior high curricula led to its adoption as a subject for high school entrance examinations nationwide from 1956 (Iino 2002). English was studied as a subject for 5 h per week throughout junior high and high school until 1981 reforms which lowered the number of hours of study to 3/week during junior high. The JET Program, an initiative to bring in native speakers of English to assist Japanese English teachers in teaching communicative English in public schools was begun in 1987 (see Chap. 1 for a fuller explanation of the program). In the public schools, English studies almost exclusively began upon admission to junior high throughout the twentieth century, and any language study by elementary-aged students almost certainly involved the participation of outside educational providers, such as cram schools. In 2002, however, the Japanese government allowed primary schools to introduce English on a voluntary basis,

which proved sufficiently popular to cause Japan to introduce English studies into the elementary curriculum (starting in fifth grade) since 2011. The elementary English curriculum is limited—only (usually) featuring one lesson per week, and, in principle, is designed to focus on an oral approach, leaving it to junior high instructors to introduce basic literacy skills. Japan's government is currently planning to lower the age of starting English to elementary third grade by 2020. While there is notable apprehension about such moves both within educational circles (i.e., educators who fear the disruption to the system which such an overhaul of curriculum would create) and among the wider populace (e.g., some fear that over-emphasis of English will lead to deterioration of children's Japanese development—especially regarding literacy), the government is mindful of the fact that Japanese students are being left behind by their regional neighbors who begin English study earlier (e.g., from the third grade in Taiwan, China, and South Korea—first grade in Hong Kong), and who spend considerably more time per week engaged in language study. Students in South Korea, for instance, attend English classes for an average of 200 min per week through the course of mandatory education (i.e., the end of junior high school), whereas Japanese students both start much later (with real grammatical focus and reading/writing skills still only commencing from the first grade of junior high school), and only have 135 min of focused English class time per week (*Sekai 25kakoku no gaikokugo kyouiku*, 1999, cited in Iino 2002).

2.4 English Education in South Korea

The roots of English education do not reach as far back in Korea as they do in other regions of East Asia, and have been interrupted several times by invasions and wars. However, what Korea lacks in length of time for the development of English language curricula, it more than makes up for with the urgency and intensity of their approach to the task, as the history of English in Korea inevitably is entangled with the tragic history of twentieth century Korea, and the partitioning of the peninsula into factions engaged in a war that has lasted to this day.

The first recorded attempts of formal English learning in Korea was in 1883, when an English language school was opened by the Joseon government to train translators following the signing of a formal treaty with the United States of America (Kim 2008, April 2). In the wake of the treaty, a steady stream of missionaries, traders, and teachers came, and a number of missionary schools, such as BaeJae Boys High School and the Ewha Girls High School were founded. The development of English language education in Korea encountered serious disruption beginning with Korea becoming a Japanese protectorate in 1905 (Kim-Rivera 2002). When Japan annexed Korea in 1910, English was still a mandatory subject in schools, and in fact, became a focal point of resistance to Japanese imperialism (Collins 2005, cited in Flattery 2007); nevertheless, education was still far from widespread. By the withdrawal of Japanese forces from the peninsula in 1945, it's

estimated that the adult literacy rate was barely 22% (Savada and Shaw 1990). The focus on assimilating Koreans into Japanese culture also caused the educational systems under the Japanese colonial government to overtly emphasize Japanese learning over other languages; Korean language was often outright banned from schools (Lee and Lee 2010).

After the withdrawal of Japanese troops at the conclusion of WWII, the Korean Peninsula was partitioned into separate northern and southern governments, and English immediately vaulted to the status of the premier foreign language of study for most South Koreans due to the establishment of the U.S. Army Military government from 1945 to 1948 (Taie 2015). With the subsequent invasion of the south by the Soviet-backed northern troops in 1950 and the intercession of U.S. troops, the importance of English ability became even more ensconced. The enduring presence of U.S. troops after the armistice signed with North Korea in 1953 meant that the Korean government had great need of people who were proficient in English in order to communicate with the U.S. military government and soldiers (Collins 2005, cited in Flattery 2007). This, combined with increased trade with the U.S. and other nations spurred them to enshrine English study in the 1st national curriculum, developed in 1955. As in the surrounding nations and regions, English was initially exclusively taught at the secondary level; however, as the economic and trade advantages associated with English ability became more apparent, Korea has become a regional trendsetter in providing English language education to younger learners, moving the starting age to the third grade of elementary school back in 1997—4 years before China's moves to start foreign language learning in the elementary grades, and a full 14 years before Japan merely moved the initial learning period back to fifth grade.

Foreign language education in Korea is characterized by shifts in dominant teaching methods which seems to indicate a willingness to innovate in teaching practices which stands in stark contrast to their more conservative neighbors. This relative openness to changes in pedagogy may have stemmed from closer ties to the West (fostered through the military alliance and U.S. troops quartered in South Korea). According to Chang (2009), these swings in popular teaching methodologies have occurred in roughly 10 year blocks since the inception of the national curriculum. During the 1950s, the same grammar-translation method which is dominant throughout East Asia held sway, but in the 1960s, owing to reforms consciously emphasizing communicative ability placed in the national curriculum, audio-lingual methodology was widely adopted nationwide. This communicative trend continued with purposeful de-emphasis of grammar-translation in the 1970s. In the 1980s, the use of audio-visual materials to supplement teaching was highly encouraged, and in the 1990s changes to the curriculum were not limited to methods, but attempted to reorient the entire approach to language learning, with notable shifts such as lifting the goal of fluency over that of accuracy, and in later developments, shifting to a student-centered teaching approach. These curricular pivots certainly seem more in line with concurrent Western educational philosophies than is typically found in regional curricula; however, the actual implementation of the curricular guidelines has faced some problems in Korea. Some Korean

teachers have rightly complained of both cultural disconnects between teacher and student expectations and the curricula (e.g., Shin 2007; Kim 2004), and many others have encountered substantial difficulty in successfully putting theory into action. The ambitious goals and direction of government-sponsored curricula is reflective of the degree to which the Korean populace has embraced English as an important facet of education. With Koreans spending approximately 15 trillion won (\$15.8 billion USD) on learning English each year (Kim 2008, April 2), Korea has been described by many as being in a state of “English fever” (e.g., Kim 2002; Park 2009), with people going to crazy lengths to maximize their opportunity to learn the language.³

2.5 English Education in Taiwan

Taiwan’s educational system still bears some distinctive traces of the Japanese system due to the 50 years of colonial rule there by Japan (ending at the conclusion of WWII). Despite having a majority Chinese-ethnic population, and the political dominance throughout most of the latter half of the twentieth century by Mainlanders of the *Kuomintang* party that fled the Chinese Communist revolution to Taiwan, Japan nevertheless serves as a more useful comparison than does China (PRC) for many matters of educational bureaucracy. The origins of such are straightforward as the preexisting Japanese educational system was largely synthesized with the Chinese one once the *Kuomintang* took over administrative control of the island in 1945. English has been a mandatory secondary school subject since 1949 (Tsai 2010), although it must be noted that compulsory education did not extend past elementary education at the time (thus, English was exclusively studied by those with the skills and resources to attend secondary school). In 1968, the compulsory educational period was extended through junior high school, and in 2014, it was extended through high school. While English language education has been a constant feature of the secondary school system, since the *Kuomintang* arrived in Taiwan, there has been a steady push to provide foreign language course offerings at ever-younger ages during the last three decades. Starting in 1990, the national curricular guidelines were modified to move the beginning of formal English learning from the first year of junior high to the final year of elementary school. The starting point was moved back to elementary fifth grade in 2001, and finally to elementary third grade in 2005. While, to date, the official starting point for formal English study remains at 3rd grade (i.e., when students are roughly 8–9 years old), it must be acknowledged that many Taiwanese children begin formal foreign language education well before that point. The considerable popularity of bilingual and immersion kindergartens and children’s

³Sadly, these lengths even include surgical alteration of the tongue—known as frenectomy—with the hope that it will help them to be able to more accurately pronounce foreign language sounds (Choe 2004, January 18).

course offerings in language schools attest to this fact. As in the rest of the East Asian region, Taiwanese secondary and tertiary markets traditionally focused on L2 literacy development and writing skills in lieu of conversational ability; however, 1999 curricular modifications at the national level encouraged greater emphasis on communicative language learning. While there is still a heavy emphasis placed upon vocabulary memorization and learning grammar patterns in order to pass the critical examinations for high school and university entrance, since the 1990s there has been a steady push for using foreign teachers (as well as sometimes foreign-educated local teachers) to teach oral language skills, often in separate classes or even separate departments designated as “Oral English” or with similar titles.

2.6 English Education in Hong Kong

In considering the formal English education curricula throughout East Asia, Hong Kong must be readily conceded to be the most divergent entity in the region. Its history with the English language, of course, goes back further and features deeper ties to an “inner circle” (Krachu 1991) English-speaking country than do the histories of any of the other regions featured in this text (probably the most analogous country in relative proximity would be the Philippines, which is not covered in this book, but also can trace the relatively high English skill level of its populace to a similar, albeit shorter period of colonization by an English-speaking nation). The story of English in Hong Kong begins in earnest in 1842 when the Treaty of Nanking, in the wake of China’s losses at the hands of Britain in the first Opium War (1839–1842), ceded Hong Kong Island to the British in perpetuity, thus beginning its official history as a crown colony (note: some date the beginning of Hong Kong’s British rule at the 1841 drafting of Convention of Chuenpee; however, while the Convention was approved by the governor of Guangdong province, it was not by the Chinese Daoguang Emperor, so the Treaty of Nanking can be stated to be the first document recognized by both nations which ceded Hong Kong to the British). The British expanded their control to the Kowloon peninsula at the conclusion of the Second Opium War (1856–1860). Upon being declared a British Crown Colony, the “official language” (i.e., the language of all government administration) in Hong Kong was effectively English, despite the fact that the common language of the people living there was Cantonese. Despite the absence of any actual law or ordinance requiring such, English became the exclusive language for all government communications and affairs (Dickinson and Cumming 1996) until 1974 when, due to public pressure to concede legal stature to the true common tongue of Hong Kong, Chinese was given coequal status with English for all government function, and both languages were explicitly defined as the official languages for use in business of state (Lee and Leung 2012). English became the

medium of all school instruction, but this also became a source of public controversy. The establishment of The Government Central School (now known as Queen's College) in 1862 marked the advent of a public education system in Hong Kong, and its headmaster was initially given supervisory duties over all other schools in the Hong Kong territory. The resulting educational system established is largely credited with the introduction of Western-style pedagogy to the Far East. While the introduction of English laws, customs, sciences, and languages certainly played a role in the meteoric rise of Hong Kong to regional and global prominence, the English medium of instruction (MOI) throughout the educational system was a source of considerable consternation to some. Certainly, English proficiency, and the education levels it foretold, served as a marker of class distinctions. Despite the presence of a public educational system, basic education remained noncompulsory in Hong Kong for over a century, and thus English skills were not evenly distributed throughout the populace, as education—particularly secondary education—remained largely exclusive to the economic and social elite in Hong Kong (Zeng 2007). In 1971, the colonial government introduced law to mandate 9 years of universal, publically-funded education, thus for the first time in their colonial history exposing the masses of Hong Kong children to English, and producing the first generation wherein high levels of Chinese–English bilingualism were common (Zeng 2007). There were considerable problems, however, attendant to the sudden expansion of the student base beyond the relatively economically elite. Educators found many children struggling in the English medium coursework, which led many teachers to begin using both Chinese and English in the classroom. Concerned, the government pondered a course of switching the MOI to Chinese in the lower grades, but due to public opposition (from parents who argued that enhanced English ability would better prepare their children for the job market), the final policy allowed the decision of language of instruction to be made at the local-school level (Zeng 2007), which still gave way to the practical result of most elementary schools teaching subject matter in Chinese, and secondary schools continuing to principally use English to teach content courses (Boyle 1995). Still, in stark contrast to the rest of the region, Hong Kong students will usually begin studying English as a required academic subject in the first grade of elementary school (*Sekai 25kakoku no gaikokugo kyouiku*, 1999, cited in Iino 2002). Since Britain returned the Hong Kong colony to China to become a “Special administrative region” of the People's Republic in 1997, the Hong Kong government and educational establishment has announced goals of trying simultaneously to retain the high levels of English ability among their citizens, while also encouraging public schools to emphasize Mandarin language skill development in an attempt to foster deeper and more productive ties to the Mainland, the so-called “biliterate and trilingual” policy (both Cantonese and Mandarin employ the same character system, and formal Chinese writing is based off of Mandarin grammar and norms, so there is no distinction in Cantonese and Mandarin literacy skills).

2.7 Educational Commonalities Across East Asia

Now that we've looked at the individual histories of different countries and regions in East Asia, we have a better understanding of the educational infrastructures and how they approach the task of teaching English as a foreign language in their respective territories. Through this knowledge, one can begin to extract and analyze common themes, problems, and trends in foreign language education. As we approach this task, and especially as we proceed in the coming chapters to analyze traits and practices of both learners (Chap. 3) and instructors (Chap. 4) in East Asia, it is necessary to explicitly state a major caveat—namely, that despite clearly distinguishable group characteristics, it is vitally important to avoid overgeneralization of learners and teachers. Studies of groups will give the researcher a good idea of central tendencies within the group as a whole, but individual differences in attitudes, beliefs, and practices abound, and one must guard oneself from making assumptions about individuals based upon stereotyped cultural features. As Littlewood (1999) argues, such stereotyped views of learners may have the end result of making teachers even *less* sensitive of individual student differences. With that caveat in mind, let's look at some of the trends in the East Asian region.

One of the more overt trends across the region has been an embrace of communicative-based pedagogy by policy makers over the last two to three decades. The governments of both Korea and China (PRC) have made it national policy to enshrine communicative competency as the focus of all public school foreign language programs (Jarvis and Atsilarat 2004). Throughout the region, foreign language classes (mostly English) are a compulsory subject from elementary school (though the grade of beginning instruction varies in each state/region—see the above history sections for details) through high school. Everywhere in East Asia, as well, legions of parents choose to begin their children's foreign language education even earlier by taking advantage of language immersion or bilingual programs in private kindergartens and language schools. The well-attested popularity of English stems from perceptions that high competency in the language will enable the learner to achieve higher attainments in their studies and professional life; however, it is this very popularity which has given rise to social phenomena which are antithetical to the goals of learning the language as an instrument for international communication. Learning has become less focused on communicative capabilities, and more so on the social status attainable through passing examinations. This creates a feedback loop which prompts both teachers and students to view the tests as the main purpose in their studies, and both teaching and study behaviors become constrained by exam content. Throughout East Asia, national and international examinations of English language proficiency (e.g., TOEIC, TOEFL, etc.) are frequently used for both university admissions and for evaluating candidates for plum employment positions (Reed 2002). The fact that high stakes testing carries so much weight for students' futures causes anything that fits outside of the narrow confines of test content to be considered as something of a distraction which will not ultimately benefit learners, and as such, although communicative goals are

often put forward by national legislative bodies and educational bureaucracies, at the front lines of education, such goals have met with serious resistance (Reed 2002). While these countries have been striving for decades to pivot foreign language pedagogy to a more communicative-minded focus (across all four skills), the simple fact is that educational approaches, and the traditions and mindsets accompanying them, are not so easily modified by government decree.

Part of this resistance to change (and one of the key reasons why this can be discussed as a phenomenon which affects the whole of East Asia) is due to their shared history of Confucian influence in education. While the present-day educational establishment is a thoroughly modern entity, (and, hypothetically, if one brought Confucius into the modern day with a time machine, one would certainly not expect him to recognize much about current educational trends and practices), societal consensus on the purpose, goals, and means of education—including the prescribed roles for teachers and students—are all still heavily influenced by Confucian philosophy. Scovel (1983) attempted to explain the prevalent notions, methods, and pedagogies found in East Asian foreign language classrooms as owing to a Neo-Confucian tradition. In this tradition, the goal of getting the correct answer is of vastly greater importance than secondary goals of communication or even comprehension. By this logic, errors are viewed extremely negatively, and avoided as much as possible, in contrast to the prevalent Western view (which is at the foundation of many pedagogical innovations in the last 50 years, such as Communicative Language Teaching, Task-based learning, Community Language Learning, and the Natural Approach) of embracing errors as an opportunity for increased learning. This dismissive view of errors can be seen as a motivating rationale for the heavy emphasis on grammatical accuracy, often at the expense of communicative fluency, throughout the region, and has a profound impact on both teaching and learning behaviors, accordingly (see Chaps. 3 and 4).

There are two major practical conclusions to be found in surveying these common features of East Asian foreign language education. The first is that the region can largely be described as a cohesive whole in discussions of foreign language pedagogy. The second point is that there are historical and social forces at work throughout the region which make East Asia uniquely resistant to the majority of the Western-developed methodological trends, fads, and innovations in foreign language teaching since the middle of the twentieth century. While these methods often explicitly claim universal application, the extreme difficulty of integrating such teaching methods into the East Asian classroom environment has been the subject of both frustration for Asian teachers and confusion for Western theorists. This is the key problem which this text was written to help teachers to overcome: the seeming disconnect between East Asian educational philosophy and practices and their stated educational and curricular goals (which are often directly in line with modern theories and methods).

While one could delve into each region and look at the problems that have arisen as local teachers struggle (and often, ultimately, fail) to implement communicative-focused pedagogy into their classroom practices, it isn't necessary. It would be repetitive—the failures largely stem from the same source: these shared

cultural features which make both students and teachers wary of nontraditional approaches to foreign language teaching. Instead, we're going to briefly examine one just one, but possibly the most illustrative one—Hong Kong. On paper, at least, Hong Kong has every advantage possible for successfully implementing innovative teaching methodologies. Its status as a crown colony has made it, in many ways, a gateway for all sorts of cultural transfer between East Asia and the West. Its history of attempting implementation of Western pedagogies across all subjects is unrivaled in the region, and has certainly enjoyed some successes along the way, but in the field of language teaching, despite the significant advantages Hong Kong has through its history of close connection with Great Britain, teachers and students seem to be bound by the same cultural constraints as are found throughout the rest of the region. As Carless (1999) states, “Hong Kong policy-makers have often looked to Anglo-American countries as a source for educational ideas but frequently innovations have failed to take root in the Hong Kong classroom” (pp. 238–239). For instance, as in much of the region, there have been top-down efforts by the government to encourage Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) methodologies, going so far as to base official syllabi around communicative methods, but such efforts were widely rejected at the school and teacher level as the learner-centered nature of such techniques was antithetical to prevailing attitudes of teacher roles (Evans 1996). There was also bottom-up resistance to pedagogical change stemming from the unfamiliarity and difficulty of implementation. A study measuring the attitudes of Hong Kong educators toward using CLT found that teachers seldom made use of the methodology because it required too much time to prepare activities with insufficient benefit to offset the time spent (Chau and Chung 1987). In 1995, Hong Kong implemented a Target-Oriented Curriculum (TOC) in primary schools, initially to be used for teaching Chinese, English, and math, but with the goal of eventually becoming the dominant pedagogical approach throughout all subjects. The curriculum was primarily constructivist in orientation, with a clear promotion of task-based learning, promotion of learner independence, and criterion-referenced task-based assessment. While some success in inter-teacher cooperation was reported, Carless (1999) synthesizing two major studies on the TOC implementation, notes a long list of problems which ultimately hampered the effectiveness of the curriculum, and which called into question the cultural appropriateness of such a methodology and a philosophy of teaching. While some of these problems such as that of assessment development seem to be more planning problems, many stem from deeply held values towards education. These problems, in many ways, can be seen as emblematic of the issues faced by educators across the region in attempts to implement Western-developed pedagogy in East Asian classrooms. While Chaps. 3 and 4 will delve into much greater detail concerning the mindset and assumptions which both learners and teachers in East Asia approach their respective tasks, we will see many similar themes making this particular study a fascinating microcosm of the issues of educational culture being played out across the broader region.

First, it must be acknowledged that significant cultural barriers to implementing student-centered curricula negatively affected Hong Kong schools' ability to make successful use of the TOC. The shift of the role of teacher from that of the source of knowledge, responsible for its successful transmission, to a guide and facilitator met with serious resistance from both teachers and students. In Hong Kong, it would be unthinkable for a student to critically question, and thus undermine respect for, a teacher. The Confucian ideals of filial piety hold sway, and this downgrading of the teacher's role was contrary to millennia of tradition. Student-centered classrooms place value upon a form of criticism and inquiry which the very *moral system* of Hong Kong's society would view as a complete breakdown of norms of respect. According to Confucian ideas, teachers are automatically afforded respect as a source of wisdom, learning, and moral guidance. Teachers are supposed to be role models, and that respect parallels the respect which children are expected to show to parents, elders, and moral leaders. A reversal of roles or putting teachers and students on an equivalent plane as peers would be to leave a moral vacuum in society. Wong (1994, cited in Carless 1999), argues that education is not only a matter of accruing academic content knowledge, but also (and possibly much more profoundly) inherently involves the acquisition and training of moral character, and that neglecting this role model function in the teaching profession is nothing short of "dangerous and irresponsible" (p. 243).

The fact that the Confucian model of education tasks teachers with disseminating wisdom across generations has predisposed the Hong Kong populace (and indeed, as will be seen later, the entire East Asian population) towards distinct, recognizable sets of learning behaviors. The Confucian mindset does maintain that all learners are capable, given sufficient motivation and hard work. Students' primary responsibility in learning is to listen attentively to teachers' explanations and instructions, and to practice skills as directed in order to gain mastery. This leads to what many Western teachers would characterize as a passive learning style. Teachers, on the other hand, are expected to lecture—a lot. Tsui (1985, cited in Carless 1999) observed two secondary classrooms and found that teachers talked for over 80% of the class time, and didn't observe a single student-initiated question during the time of observation. Learner autonomy is typically seen as low in East Asia (Littlewood 1999), and students are reticent to speak out in class due to expectations of modesty, fears of lack of accuracy, and deference to both teacher and classmates. With these cultural norms, it is unsurprising that the TOC faced considerable difficulty.

Another problem the TOC likely faced was that task-based learning flies in the face of a deeply seated cultural reliance on the authority of textbooks (and an accompanying drive to complete all content therein). Tong (1996) notes that this reliance on textbooks within Chinese culture may trace back directly to early Chinese views of education as being comprised by knowledge of the "Five Classics" and the "Four Books" upon which the imperial civil service exams were based. Task-based learning and student-directed inquiry give too much authority to the students in directing their own learning, and are seemingly antithetical to the value of having a strictly defined criterion for study which is held in common by the

whole populace. It also divests both text and teacher of the authority which, in the eyes of all educational stakeholders in Hong Kong, both were naturally due. The individualized learning which the TOC was actually predicated upon may well seem antithetical to the traditional mindset on education, as well. Confucian heritage regions veer towards whole class learning, and individual learner differences in education have rarely been a focus of attention in East Asia, and much less something to be readily accommodated. Such individualized focus is almost seen as contrary to the goals of education in East Asia (Cheng and Wong 1996).

In sum, the target-oriented curriculum, while ambitious, was largely out of sync with both the learners and the educators tasked with its implementation. It is therefore unsurprising to learn that the primary developers for this curriculum were all from non-Chinese backgrounds (Carless 1997), which, of course, in of itself complicated the successful implementation of the program as it was widely perceived as a Western import. Again, this is not brought up as a specific argument for or against a particular curricular reform in Hong Kong, but rather, to illustrate how curricula and teaching methods which have been mainstream in Western education circles for generations can face significant difficulties and even backlash in East Asia. Hong Kong, in many ways, must be considered the most *ideal* environment in the whole of the region for trying out new methods developed in and for Western classrooms. Their familiarity with Western culture, ideals, and education systems—relative to the rest of East Asia—makes this special administrative region one of the best natural “laboratories” possible for testing different pedagogies, yet, if they faced such serious issues in Hong Kong, what kinds of problems would the rest of the region encounter in trying to upend the educational practices which have been practiced for centuries? This is what to look for in the coming chapters. We have to ask ourselves about the dominant learning behaviors and traits of East Asian students and the common behaviors and methodologies of local teachers. Their beliefs regarding education, teaching practices, and their attitudes towards “foreign” educational methods will all be up for discussion.

2.8 Discussion Questions

- (1) How did Confucian values affect the development of educational practices in East Asia? What core values does Confucianism espouse in education?
- (2) It's asserted herein that Confucianism, and more generally, Chinese culture and traditions, make up the foundations of a shared heritage in East Asia. What are the foundations of your own culture, where do they derive from, and are there other countries/places which have similar foundations? What similarities can you see between your own culture and others who share such a foundation?
- (3) What are some cultural commonalities that transcend national borders in East Asia? Can these similarities outweigh the differences found between nationalities and regions? Why or why not?

- (4) Each of the countries/regions described in this chapter have unique histories regarding the development of their foreign language education systems. Choose one country/region and explain how their history has determined attitudes and policies towards learning English.
- (5) All of the educational bureaucracies (and often national governments) throughout East Asia have recognized that English skills are vital to participation in the modern, globalized economy, and as such, they have tried to change the focus of foreign language education from literacy and grammar to communication. These efforts, however, have met with considerable trouble and resistance at the local level. Why? What are some problems East Asian schools have had in implementing more communicatively focused English curricula?
- (6) In the case of Hong Kong's attempts to implement a target-oriented curriculum in primary schools, how did the originators of the curriculum apparently fail to take local attitudes, knowledge, and sentiments into consideration during the development? How did that impact the implementation?

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