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## **THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC EFFECTS ON COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE TEACHING IN TAIWAN HIGH SCHOOLS**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*The socio-economic reality in Taiwan, to a large extent, does not lend itself to an effective communicative language teaching within an EFL (Teaching English as Foreign Language) setting. This is due to an ever-present collective identity and an economy that is export-reliant. This paper seeks to examine how these two parameters hinder the effective teaching of a language that has become a tool for international communication. The traditional, teacher-fronted approach that stresses prescriptive grammar, vocabulary building, phonics, and idiomatic expressions oftentimes out of a meaningful context, is still prevalent. The rote and lecturing have supremacy over critical thinking to ensure obedience, a key ingredient in social harmony and economic prowess. Individualism is not encouraged lest it create social conflicts and economic disturbance.*

**Key words:** TEFL, Taiwan, Socio-economic, collectivism, communicative

## **Introduction**

In a broad sense, collectivism assigns much more credence to the group than to the individual, it promotes obedience, intellectual dependence, face-saving, and passivity, and it could even negatively affect a person's self-esteem. Individualism, on the other hand, is known to place the welfare of the individual above that of the group; individuals are encouraged to have a voice, express their thoughts without fear of repercussions. Respect is based rather on a person's contributions to society than on the amount of grey hair on their heads. Education is expected to give a voice to individuals because individualism is the springboard for freedom of expression be the medium of instruction in the mother tongue or in the target language. Taiwan, falls into what we would term Confucian collectivism – with individualistic tendencies inborn or acquired.

Despite the major democratic feats that Taiwan has achieved since the lifting of the Martial Law in 1987, the educational system--still reeling under rigid official guidelines –continues to draw many of its principles from collectivist, and to some extent, militaristic traditions. This runs counter to the philosophical principles of education that are expected to promote individualistic identities.

At issue here is the teaching of English as Foreign Language, in which language is stripped of its essence as the substance is wrested from it in the sense that the advancement of intellectual independence and the freedom of expression are disrupted to give way to a more collectivist approach, an approach that spawns intellectual inertia and ignores independent thinking for the sake of social “harmony” and economic growth.

Collectivism, to a large extent, contributes to the stifling of independent thinking—one of the main pillars behind communicative competence. The Confucian tradition has given the

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teacher, a figure of authority, near absolute power. Therefore, a teacher-fronted approach in which the teacher becomes the guardian of a hierarchal structure that ensures obedience and discipline, keeps social discord and social conflicts at bay. Within this socio-cultural framework – as mentioned earlier --it would virtually be a mission impossible to teach student the type of English used in real life. Students inadvertently learn that language is not tool for communication, but a tool for faring well in achievement exams, exams that often target memory rather than intellect. As the rote is the base for this evaluation, the teacher remains the main source of knowledge, hence the dependency and passivity of the learner and the authority of the teacher, a dynamic that makes creative linguistic and semantic production minimal and mediocre. Exams remain all written and largely mechanical; therefore, neither the teacher nor the learner would make efforts to hone communicative skills, and this problem is further exacerbated by the fact that the motivation is instrumental rather than intrinsic.

Furthermore, consciously or unconsciously, to preserve a cultural identity that ensures a collective mind-set, as soon as the student is ushered into the learning of English, he or she is placed in a comfort zone in which English is taught in Chinese. This has minimal benefits because teaching English in L1 is an invitation to thinking in the mother tongue, and linguistic interference – with a few occasional transfers – settles in making language a blunt tool. This in addition to he fact that he learner would notmake much of an effort as he or she is aware that the translation is readily available. In fact what makes matters worse is the fact that the little English that the learner is exposed to is usually meaningless and artificially delivered.

For an individual whose mother tongue is not English, a certain level of independent thinking is required. When a student is required to regurgitate, he or she ceases to actively listen, which hinders analytical thinking and ultimately prevents the creation of meaningful responses worth of a decent discourse. In a system in which collectivism prevails, the voice of the learner is severely stifled, and the promotion of rote learning is encouraged because the

latter promotes passivity as well as dependency on the authority, something that would be needed once these individuals enter the job market, particularly in an export-reliant economy such as that of Taiwan.

An export-reliant economy requires a hardworking, competitive, efficient, enduring, disciplined and obedient workforce; and this cannot really be achieved by creating an independent thinker because this independent and creative thinker could pose a threat to this type of economy. Individuals of this caliber could protest harsh working conditions, especially those that pay meagerly.

In this paper, we will examine the factors relating to collectivism and the economic system and how they contribute to hindering the promotion of communicative English language teaching and learning in Taiwan in Taiwan high schools.

### **The stringent demands of high school**

Before we delve into how the stringent demand of high school affect learning, it is worth pointing out that the first year of high school tellingly coincides with the start of adolescence, a period in which students become more curious and rebellious as they undergo physiological as well and cognitive and moral changes. Curiosity and rebelliousness, which are a normal stage in an individual's development, would pose a threat to authorities and parents alike: As these young individuals become curious about sex and controlled substance, the threat of teen pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases as well as the abuse of and the ultimate addiction to controlled substance are— in the eyes of parents and educational authorities, a clear and present danger that has to be nipped in the bud, and to achieve this goal, the young learners are loaded with so much laborious schoolwork to keep them from engaging in such nefarious habits. The average high school student clocks in about 50 hours of school related work each week. Even the winter and summer vacations do not spare these students

from the laborious and mindless school work as they are robbed of a significant part of these days of rest and leisure.

This laborious work serves socio-economic purposes: First, parents do not need to worry where their teenage children are; thus, they can focus on their work and put in more work hours if necessary. Second, public safety is safeguarded as these young rebellious students are off the streets all day long including most weekends, which obviously does not warrant any significant public presence of law enforcement. Third, the ubiquitous cram schools keep adolescents busy and create jobs and hence tax revenue.

In the face of these long and tedious hours, the learner cannot go beyond preparing for the frequent quizzes that test the knowledge of vocabulary and prescriptive grammar rules (rather than skills-based knowledge.) Students then do not have the time or the will to further improve useful language skills. And even if they could, they would not want to learn anything that is not on the test. Parents and schools and ultimately employers want to see scores—high scores. The symbol of success lies not in the process of learning, but rather on that magical one hundred out of a hundred. Acquiring skills that are not evaluated would then defeat the purpose. Since independent thinking is not encouraged, it would be hard for learner to think that they can create knowledge; that knowledge can only come from teachers and textbooks. The teacher then becomes the ultimate knowledge keeper and dispenser.

### **Militaristic-type dynamics**

To ensure the ruled obeyed the ruler, amilitaristic type hierarchy is spawned: the young are required to treat those older than them with oftentimes undeserved deference, an important component in collectivism. Adolescence is a period of rebelliousness and curiosity, something that should be considered as a natural process in a person's cognitive development, is rather seen as a threat to social fabric that is already fragile. Up until recently it is not uncommon to

see a small military unit at full view stationed at institutions of higher learning to reinforce discipline and control to ensure the welfare of the group has precedence over that of the individual.

The Taiwan educational system – like those of Japan and South Korea -- quells rebelliousness and chokes curiosity by overburdening adolescents with extra work so that they would be prevented from causing social conflicts and engaging in controlled substances and sex, something that could lead to diseases and teen pregnancy. There is no denying that such an approach does have its merit. However, when it comes to learning, the interference in the natural process of adolescence hinders learning --in this case the learning of English. Acquiring the English language and the cultural value systems that are inherently attached to it necessitates a high level of creativity and a voice. A learner whose curiosity is stifled is very likely to suffer deficiency in creative thinking. A learner who is taught to be silent is a learner that is taught how not to think, and when a learner does not think, this learner cannot actively listen. He or she will learn to answer but not to respond. In addition to this blockage, the student is burdened with an unwarranted excessive burden of too many laborious and oftentimes mindless homework assignments resulting in sleep deprivation.

This burden leaves no room for recreational activities that can in fact improve the health of young individuals. The average high school student spends about 10 hours between regular school and cram schools, and many of these students sleep an average of seven hours per night, well below the required 9 hours or so, particularly now that the hand-held tech devices have invaded the lives of these youngsters.

For a person to maximize the benefits of learning a language, sufficient time is necessary. The students are only allowed enough time to memorize, but no time to reflect and analyze a language that is meant for meaningful communication, but not a mere tool for mechanical exams that celebrate memory rather than thinking. Very few students have time for reading

English books (bridged or original). The excessive prescriptive grammar rules and lexical items that high school students are required to memorize but not necessarily understand and functionally use do a great disservice to learning. A little smart work would have more benefits than too much hard work. Memorized knowledge is bound for oblivion.

### **Rote Learning**

Another characteristic of collectivism is rote learning. From elementary school all the way to high school and even in college, students are generally expected to memorize materials, which in some cases are irrelevant, meaningless, unnatural and purposeless. Rote learning is a tool for the authority to stay in control as the teacher, a figure of authority, remains the main source of “knowledge”, while the student become a passive recipient rather than an empowered participant. If a student were taught to analyze, he or she would be taught to contest, protest and revolt, threatening to put a fissure into the social fabric that thrives on the silence-is-golden dogma. Further, a passive learner is very likely to become dependent, hence obedient, a key element in an economy that is heavily export-reliant, an economy that frowns upon conflict. A silent voice leaves very little room for resistance to allow for blind deference and allegiance to authority. From elementary school, pupils are taught spelling, phonics, grammar, pronunciation and a litany of lexical items, mostly out of context, as if these were the pillars of acquiring a foreign language meant for communication. Spelling, phonics, grammar, pronunciation and idiomatic expressions and vocabulary words can in no way shape or form help the learner meaningfully speak English, especially when the teacher showers the students with excessive praise for having spelled “apple” correctly, or for stating that “bananas are yellow” or “Jimmy is a boy and Gina is a girl.” This no doubt contributes to academic failure: It is not uncommon for English teachers to encourage their students to use outstanding grammar structures and idiomatic expressions in their essays as if the message lies within these grand structures: “I

burned the night oil in as much as I had a big test the next morning. Thus, I was weary. On the contrary, I couldn't sleep." Even the teachers have come to believe that the power of English resides within its disintegrated form.

Let us now look at how this could have baneful effects. When little children are asked to repeat "This is a house", "this is a car" and so on, we see no harm when in fact such utterances hinder rather than promote learning. In real life, we might say: "This is for you, "this is my friend", "this is my new cellphone". These utterances would be acceptable. However, how often in life are we going to say, "this is a house" and "this is a watch?" We might say: "This is a beautiful house", or "this is a cheap watch." Of course, a real estate agent might say: "This is *the* kitchen", but not "this is a kitchen". The point here is why should we teach something that can never be used in real life and that can damage active thinking? Why keep repeating: "I like coffee" when in fact, we don't? When it comes to grammar, when teaching the verb "to be" for instance, we might teach things like "Are you a boy?" to which the learner answers: "Yes, I am a boy" (and to which the teacher sometimes responds by saying: "You are so smart!") may help build self-confidence, but it sets the tone for logical mishaps. If the student were empowered and answered this mindless question by saying: "This morning I was!" the praise would certainly be warranted and deserved. In fact, the teacher should never have asked that question. How about teaching the verb "to be" by coming up with meaningful and useful questions such as: "Are you ok", "are you tired", are you hungry"? and so on.

Very few students can compose a decent piece of writing, and this is attributable in part to how exercises and assessment tools are designed. Consider this exercise testing wh questions

1. *What is your pet's name?*
2. *How many fingers do you have?*
3. *Which is more expensive a car or a bus?*
4. *How often do you take a shower?*

5. *Who lives in your house?*

Not only are these questions meaningless, they bear no hallmarks of connectivity and coherence, which renders the exercises useless and futile to say the least. Being exposed to daily dosage of this mediocrity would entail disorientation and incoherence. How about a little ingenuity?

1. *What is your name?*
2. *Where do you live?*
3. *What time do you usually get up?*
4. *How do you get to school?*
5. *How long does it take you to get to school?*
6. *What are your favorite subjects and why?*
7. *What are your least favorite subjects and why?*

This may not be the best exercise in the world, but the learner could unconsciously develop a sense of connectivity and coherence, which could have positive effects on the learning process. Of course, the teacher could provide some simple connectors, such as “but”, “so” and maybe even “however” and “therefore” as long as they contribute to breaking the message across, not simply to make a composition sound “grand.” The teacher focuses more on the form rather on the content, and this is achieved through the easiest manner possible.

### **Teaching English in Chinese**

It is not uncommon for English teachers in Taiwan to teach English in Chinese. There is no doubt that those individuals who are very proficient in English are unlikely to be drawn to teaching. But even those who have a decent mastery of the language often resort to Chinese

because it is convenient and exams do not require analytical ability, nor do they require any meaningful oral production. But what does that have to do with socio-economic parameters?

Using the mother tongue at 60 to 90 percent of the time would no doubt contribute to the preservation of the culture. Learners who are exposed to more Chinese than they are to English think in the mother language, thus preserving that cultural identity that shuns revolution and ushers in peace. Thinking in the mother language would not help the learner produce a language that is devoid of interference. Students are exposed to English from elementary school and sometimes earlier, but after 10 years of learning, the average individual can barely form a correct sentence as evidenced by the fact that a visit to the post office or a bank would leave many a foreign customer frustrated at the lack of communication in a language for which many years and many dollars have been spent.

Of course, there would be no harm in resorting to the mother language when a concept is not easy for the learner to comprehend. In fact, it would be rather beneficial if the cultural system attached to the language promotes individualism, in which the person has a voice and an opinion. And if the L1 and L2 share certain cognates, it would be more advantageous and could even expedite learning. But this is not the case in Chinese and similar languages for that matter.

Preserving that cultural identity consciously or unconsciously ensure “smooth” relationships at the workplace as the employee is expected to adopt the cultural norms of obedience and allegiance ensuring economic production is not disturbed. Breaking that norm could incur shame and discomfort.

### **Face-saving and Indirect Communication**

As is the case in collectivist societies, saving face is very important: Because the group is much more important than the individual, losing face is analogous to committing a sin.

Shame takes precedence over guilt, as cheating can be justified but being caught cheating cannot. Students cannot afford to make mistakes lest they incur the anger of the powers that be. Therefore, why take the risk when the chance of becoming an object of ridicule are ever present? Learning a language requires a certain level of risk-taking; learning a language requires a certain level of confidence and that can be achieved if making a mistake is considered a part of the learning process. Many teachers concentrate more on accuracy rather than fluency, which could deal a blow to a learner. If a student who made a mistake were gently corrected and encouraged to repeat the corrected utterance, he or she is likely to speak again and again, helping build self-esteem, and ultimately encourage risk-taking and learning. Without that level of self-confidence, the learner would certainly prefer to be safe than sorry. Face-saving may give way to more indirect communication both at the social and economic levels. And this of course would not help promote the acquisition of communicative skills, especially in a foreign language such as English.

Learners in many collectivist societies are not prepared to voice their concerns directly even when the concern is legitimate and carries no offence; instead they are trained to beat around the bush, something that would stand in the way of intelligent and meaningful communicative competency. In individualistic societies, disagreeing with others' opinions are in fact encouraged as they are viewed as a healthy exchange of views. In collectivist societies, however, voicing one's concerns or disagreeing with figures of authorities, especially in public is considered the cardinal sin whose punishment could result in social suicide. In such a setting, it would be rash to believe that teaching language communicative skills to such learners can be achieved

## **Conclusion**

Individualism is the basis for freedom and independent thinking, while collectivism is

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restrictive and stands in the way of critical thinking and natural processing of thoughts.

When a learner is asked to memorize in so that he or she would meet the demands of collectivism, a guarantor of unity, peace and harmony -- albeit artificial and susceptible to disintegration – he or she is asked to cease listening and thinking as they are not required for mindless English quizzes – quizzes that target memory rather than analytical thinking. Ask a male student if he was aboy, and he would answer in the affirmative without ever giving the question the slightest thought that it is inane—and rightly so because it comes from the master who cannot be questioned about the veracity and/or the semantic value of the question or the statement.

In a collectivist society with an export-reliant economy, the educational system in general, and the teaching of English in particular, seek to produce individuals that are hardworking, enduring, obedient, efficient, disciplined and intellectually passive—that is in the sense that they do not protest when maltreated. These elements do serve the group but not the individual, and once the individual loses his or her voice, the tools and channels of communication are dealt a major blow and learning consequently suffers.

While attempting to preserve the cultural identity and large parts of the collectivist tradition, the individual's voice is stifled, which sends communicative competence into a vicious spin that continues to spawn disintegrated language.

It would be rash to believe that reforming the teaching of English in Taiwan without addressing the issues discussed above would yield any significant results. In fact, addressing these issues will have to involve other disciplines as well. Otherwise, the benefits would still remain insignificant.

Improving the teaching of English as a medium of communication would have to consider the following: First, we should include a component of spoken English in assessment tools. But this component would need to focus on meaningfulness, relevance and natural

delivery of materials taught. Fluency rather than accuracy should take center stage. By so doing, teachers and learners alike would have to develop strategies to fare better in communicative skills. Second, efforts would have to be made to teach English in English; basic communicative skills do not require outstanding proficiency in the target language. Once the basic skills are acquired, the learners would not need as much training. Third, class time should be reduced to allow for rest and better acquisition of language communicative skills. Instead of memorizing endless lists of vocabulary words and idiomatic expressions, every effort should be made to encourage more extensive reading of thought-provoking materials, reading that should be tested occasionally. Fourth, the discipline of philosophy should be included in the curriculum starting in the 11<sup>th</sup> and 12<sup>th</sup> grades to help learners develop critical thinking, a key element in communicative competence. This course should not concern itself only with a simple knowledge of dates and quotes, however. It should involve analytical skills that would better help learners not only to improve English communication skills, but to prepare them for college and ultimately for life. Finally, the authorities need to understand that introducing English at an earlier age would not rob children of their cultural identities, nor would it affect their mastery of the mother tongue. In fact, it would enrich them linguistically and culturally, and it would help them develop two different systems. People can be exposed to more than one language, and they can master both and code-switch effortlessly.

Rethinking and redesigning curricula that would improve English communication skills may be a colossal task, but this would still improve global perspectives and economic competitiveness, while retaining socio-cultural traits of the society in question.

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