

## Educational Policies related to English Language Teaching in Asia: Case Studies of 5 Countries

Patrica Patanaporn\* Teeradet Chuenpraphanusorn\* Prakrit Bhulapatna\*  
Suan Dusit University\*

### Abstract

In the 21st century, English is used worldwide; therefore, it plays a key role in improving each country's development, competitiveness, and increasing cooperation with one another. Fluent English users have better job opportunities, more chances to explore the world further, and the more people they can communicate with, the more business opportunities they gain, resulting in a better economic status and prosperity. The governments of five selected countries namely, China (Hong Kong), Japan, Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand have seen this significant factor and are trying to raise their citizens' English proficiency. Each has launched interesting policies. After the implementation, some policies faced too many obstacles and some have shown bright future. In this paper, each country's background, policies related to English teaching, problems, and some possible solutions will be discussed. All of the countries' common problems are: a lack of competent native English teachers, limited budget for policy implementation, and the conflict between the outdated grammar-translation approach of teaching and learning and the modern communicative language in daily life. These problems are not rooted in classrooms but the whole system; therefore, to achieve each country's national plan or follow its roadmap, each government needs to understand its country's context and establish a government organization which deeply understands the situations, both from local and international perspectives, to manage this particular aspect effectively.

**Keywords:** Educational Policy, English Language Teaching, English teacher

### Introduction

The globalization and the advancement of technology in the 21st century have strongly influenced communication worldwide. English has become the international digital communication language because English is used in most of the content on websites. The English-literate can access more resources and contact more people online. Thus, English learning and teaching are more important than in the past. To be able to compete in the world stage, each country needs to focus on English proficiency of its citizens. However, there are some challenges each is facing. In Thailand, English learning has been started at the kindergarten level and has been a mandatory subject since then, yet Thai people, on average, are still struggling to communicate in English. In China (Hong Kong), Japan, Taiwan, and Korea,

the starting point of English teaching had been moved from secondary level to primary level so they are all facing the shortage of competent English teachers, especially native speakers.

As the educational system in each country has its mission to develop students to cope with the 21st century which consists of various disruptions, English literacy is vitally needed to allow students to step up for global citizenships. Thus, this paper will present English teaching policies, current situations and problems, and some possible solutions to improve English language learning in 5 different countries; namely China (Hong Kong), Japan, Republic of South Korea, Taiwan, and Thailand.

### **World's Trend about English Language Teaching**

Living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century world, it is needed to have 21<sup>st</sup> century learning skills. Many scholars in education agree that they are more important now than in the past, which are critical thinking, communication, collaboration and creativity (Robert, 2015).

1. Critical thinking means to be able to reason, to use systems thinking, to make judgments and decisions, and to solve problems effectively.
2. Communication means to be able to communicate clearly by using oral, written, and non-verbal communication skills to express thoughts and ideas effectively.
3. Collaboration means to be able to work effectively and respectfully with diverse teams, exercise flexibility and willingness to be helpful in making necessary compromises to accomplish a common goal, and assume shared responsibility for collaborative work and value the individual contributions made by each team member.
4. Creativity means to be able to think and work creatively with others by using a wide range of idea creation techniques to elaborate, refine, analyze, and evaluate their own ideas to improve creative efforts, and view failure as an opportunity to learn.

(Partnership Forum for 21st-Century Skills, 2015)

Moreover, Partnership for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Learning stated about key subjects and 21<sup>st</sup> century theme that mastery of these key subjects is essential for all students in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. English, reading or language arts is the first key subject mentioned in the list. Thus, it is clearly shown that English language learning is very important at present.

Next, the government policies related to English teaching, some problems, and possible solutions in each selected country will be discussed.

### **China (Hong Kong)'s Policies about English Teaching and Challenges**

Among all five selected countries, students in China (Hong Kong) seemed to have the highest English proficiency as the territory used to be colonized by Britain; therefore, back then English was used in schools and the medium of instruction. Even though its citizens use the native Cantonese in daily life, English has been primarily confined to professional communications. However, only about a year after the transfer of sovereignty over Hong Kong from Britain to China in 1997, the first stage of a controversial language policy from Hong

Kong's Education Department was introduced and implemented which changed the role of the English and Chinese language in the territory's secondary level of education. Chinese has been a compulsory language as the medium of instruction all over the territory since then. (Evans, 2000)

The first stage of a controversial language policy from Hong Kong's Education Department mentioned above had caused Hong Kong's students English proficiency downturns. About a decade after that the Hong Kong Government introduced the 'Fine-tuning Medium of Instruction (MOI) policy' in 2010 to raise students' English proficiency to uplift their competitiveness in the globalization. (Poon & Lau, 2016) This new policy allows each school to choose the language of instruction freely; therefore, many schools have turned back to English as the medium of instruction (EMI).

Regarding native English-speaking teachers (NETs), a government unit called the Education and Manpower Bureau is responsible for recruiting and funding. After the recruitment, NETs sign their contracts with schools; therefore, their workloads, salary, fringe benefits, for example, are different, depending on the schools they are working for. Most of the NETs teach oral English lessons which are provided every week and the oral English exams are conducted each semester. (ITS Education Asia, 2022)

It is surely known that NETs' presence is very useful and recommended in every local school as it is beneficial to Hong Kong students. However, most of the NETs in governmental schools are also coping with various challenges. First, teaching only oral English is somewhat boring. They need to add more interesting activities in their work, such as drama, debate, etc. Second, they need an authentic English language environment at work. Third, the cultural difference is also a strong factor in their workplace.

### **Japan's Policies about English Teaching and Challenges**

Japan is one of the long-history countries which hold on to its pride of cultural heritage, therefore, the Japanese speak Japanese in daily life and it is their official language. However, the new generation students' English proficiency needs to be focused to increase their competitiveness in the 21st century. It is clearly seen that the government has been trying to improve the situation by setting up various government organizations related to the language policy. Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) is the most important organization with wide responsibilities including formulating education policies, setting curriculum standards, and approving university entrance exams. Since 1989, there had been various policies related to English proficiency's improvement, such as "The Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities" in 2003, the implementation of "Foreign Language Activities" in elementary schools in 2011, the "Global 30" Project in higher education to promote English-medium learning in 2009. (Glasgow & Paller, 2016) Also, The Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR) promotes the use of English and other foreign languages. Besides, the NHK radio and TV play a key role in life-long education in a standard

English language usage model, as well as dispersing English educational programs. (Hagerman 2009)

According to Glasgow (2014), in Japan, the role of English in the educational system is expanding for purposes of national development and economic global competitiveness. The government has been focusing on promoting English and policy about teaching English since 2003. Problems related to English teaching in schools were widely discussed, such as insufficient learning hours, teachers' outdated teaching techniques, incompetent teachers, and oversized classes. (Hagerman 2009). Moreover, there are many interesting points about teaching English in Japan. The most talked-about issue is 'the target-language only policy' which means English is established as the main or sole instructional medium of the language classroom. The Japanese government has launched national foreign language curriculum for Japanese senior high schools, announced in 2008 and in effect since 2013, which includes a provision requiring English classes to be conducted in English. So, native English teachers are preferred. Thus, the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) was established to recruit more native English-speaking teachers to Japan. It aims to attract freshly-graduated native English speakers to start an English teaching career, in every level of education, throughout Japan. This policy has various effects on Japanese teachers of English. First, they see this policy as a centrally-driven, top-down method, formulated at the macro-level. Thus, the implementation is quite rare because this policy does not match with their personal belief. They think English grammar explanation is more understandable if it is taught in Japanese, especially for university entrance examination preparation. Second, by this policy, foreign teachers are valued more than Japanese teachers of English subjects even though, in some cases, Japanese ones have more experience; thus, their professionalism has been devalued. Also, many have noticed that students' English proficiency has not improved as expected.

### **Republic of South Korea's Policies about English Teaching and Challenges**

South Korea is one of the countries which experienced difficulties caused by colonization and wars. Those challenges affected people's patriotism, pride, determination, and perspectives towards other countries. Therefore, their perspective about learning other languages has been tied with their own nationalism and economic status. It is said the policies about learning foreign languages are influenced by their national unity and economic development. (Widyastuti, 2019) English has been identified to be the major foreign language since 1945; however, the English literacy rate of its citizens is not yet at the satisfactory level. (Widyastuti, 2019) English has been mainly exposed to the rich and it is rarely used in the Korean society. According to Samsung Economic Research Institute, South Korea is the most-obsessed with studying and exam, resulting in huge income for private tutoring centers (hagwons). They spend the highest budget per capita on English education than any other

country in the world. (Shelton, 2015) English has become a symbol of success and socio-economic status of an individual.

Since English learning is easily affordable for the rich, there is a wide social divide among citizens. As seen to be a key to Korea's future global success, the government tries to push and distribute English learning to everyone by launching two major English policies namely "Reinforcing Foreign Language Education" (1995) and "Reinforcing Globalization Education" (1997) stated that English is a compulsory subject from middle school to high school. (Chung & Choi, 2016) Also, in 2008, the 'English Education Roadmap' was launched which was expected to provide a clear picture about the following five year policies related to English teaching; however, a week later, it failed to be implemented due to costliness and a shortage of skillful teachers. The President announced it would be postponed to the distant future; therefore, it is clearly seen that uncertainty and inconsistent policy made English educators' work even harder.

As mentioned before, South Korea is a society of exam-obsessed students so the English learning has been focusing on grammar and translation. The 'Communicative Language Teaching' (CLT) is needed to equipped students more with communication skills. However, there are some challenges such as the English-speaking fluency of Korean teachers of English, students' submissiveness and lack of participation in speaking classes, budget and funding, oversized classes, and, the most importantly, the grammar-based exam pattern. (Shelton, 2015)

In 1995, the Ministry of Education launched an 'Education Reform' and established the English Program in Korea (EPIK), a joint operation between the Korea National University of Education (KNUE) and the National Institute for International Education Development (NIIED), hoping to magnetize freshly-graduated native English speakers to schools all over the country, resulting the improvement of teachers' and students' English communication skills and the entire English educational system. Also, it can yield better mutually cultural understanding. (Shelton, 2015). However, some factors need to be of concern such as their lack of teaching knowledge and experience, or even their deep understanding of their native language and how to teach it. Therefore, their main roles at schools are not about teaching but only assisting the Korean teachers of English and providing speaking sessions. The EPIK has been trying to improve the situations by providing intensive training sessions and seminars. All EPIK prospective teachers need to complete online programs about being a teacher and how to develop their teaching skills prior to their migrating to work in South Korea. (Shelton, 2015) Other challenges are yet to be solved as various policies have been downscaled or unimplemented. Some educators see them as a 'high-cost but low-efficiency' scheme. Also, in order to improve English communication skills, the grammar-based approach needs to be faded out.

### Taiwan's Policies about English Teaching and Challenges

The Taiwanese government has established many policies related to English education since the 1950s (Tsai, 2010); however, due to various challenges, English proficiency of the Taiwanese is not yet at the satisfactory level the government has aimed for. In the 21st century, globalization is being focused on by the government as a tool of the country's development. Globalization is the growing interdependence of the world's economies, cultures, and populations, brought about by cross-border trade in goods and services, technology, and flows of investment, people, and information (Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2018) has a vital role on Taiwan's policies about English language learning management. In fact, Taiwan sees the importance of exposing itself to the world as it helps to drive the prosperity of the country and raise its international status. (Rigby, 2021) On the other hand, globalization also fosters stronger competition among the world's citizens; therefore, to accomplish the leading position in the world, Taiwan has concluded that English skills need to be improved urgently. Thus, Taiwan has recently launched various policies to uplift its citizens' English skill as it focuses on their development in the globalization and its competitiveness in the global market. Its citizens are also aware of the importance of English as it can increase their job opportunities, chances to be successful in their career, and enhance their international connections with foreign business partners. (Tsai, 2010; Rigby, 2021)

According to Rigby, 2021, in 2018, Taiwan announced an eye-catching policy towards being a bilingual nation by the year 2030. A vast amount of planning and management is needed to achieve the goal. The old policies in the 20th century focused mainly on reading and writing, grammar-based approach for academic and professional purposes. Then, in 2001, there was an introduction of the Nine-year Joint Curriculum by the Ministry of Education of Taiwan to reform its English education, moving the starting of English classes for students from middle school level (grade 7) to elementary level. The learning approach was also adjusted from grammar-translation, teacher-centered approach to be more focus on communicative language in real life situations. (Tsai, 2010)

Moreover, in 2002, another interesting policy called "Challenge 2008" was announced as a 6-year roadmap for the leaping economic growth. It also contained some measures related to the promotion of English language, expanding to adult education and lifelong learning outside schools, such as service workers in tourism industry, police officers, and government officers who-often interact with English speakers. The measures main purposes were to improve the citizens' overall English proficiency and to create English-friendly environment in the country by producing bilingual signs on the road, TV and radio programs. Furthermore, in 2018, Taiwan continued its pathway to achieve the goal of being bilingual nation by launching the '2030 Bilingual Nation Policy' to provide more and better English learning platforms, media resources, and bilingual education. (Rigby, 2021)

According to Rigby (2021), like other countries mentioned above, Taiwan has faced some challenges in these initiative plans. There was a lack of English teachers, and the government could not supply enough all over the country. In fact, parents and students have seen the importance of English; therefore, to increase their knowledge and skills in English language, they seek extra classes from private tutoring institutions. Also, parents start English classes for their children at private ones earlier than at schools, hoping to enhance chances for their children. However, some academic scholars see some drawbacks. By doing so, students might be forced to study too much and it might affect their performance in the main subjects at school. Moreover, there is some concern about dissolving of the Taiwan's ideologies, uniqueness, and culture.

### **Thailand's Policies about English Teaching and Challenges**

For Thailand, throughout the past century, English has typically been implemented in education policy, in fact, if it is looked at in the curriculum, English has had a prime status as a foreign language but there has not been a policy about English specifically. (Baker and Jarunthawatchai, 2017). The National Education Act in 1999 was considered as the most significant educational reform in recent times but English was not actually mentioned in it. On the other hand, the Act and the following 2002 curriculum had a substantial impact of English language policy and teaching in Thailand as it became a compulsory subject required for degree completion and it remains the most commonly taught foreign language in schools and universities.

Later on, there was a new National Language policy which stated English as 'the principal language of commerce' because of the increasing importance of ASEAN and AEC in Thailand. The year 2012 was the year that Thai government declared as the 'English Speaking Year'; however, there was neither an increase of the use of English among the people nor the English proficiency levels of Thais significantly. Furthermore, in order to improve Thais' proficiency levels of English, the Commission of Higher Education announced a policy to upgrade English language standards in Higher Education in April 2016, demanding each university to improve English language proficiency levels of students by focusing on 1) university's policy on English language, 2) English language teaching, and 3) assessment of students' English language proficiency.

According to Office of Basic Education Commission (OBEC), there are many policies, which have been announced this year (2017), about English teaching improvement. The minister of education has announced the new policies would stress the ability of learners to communicate and research for further knowledge, resulting in the increasing of personal development and national competitiveness. The expansion and increasing of English program classrooms have been focused upon. (Hengsadeeikul et al, 2014; Tanielian, 2014). The quality of teaching and the English program management development are the key factors of this policy. Thai students are expected to be able to speak out because most Thai students are

shy and submissive. The instructional methods will be reviewed. The quality of teachers will be standardized. Technology will be used in teaching. All of above will be actively supported by the government. (Office of Basic Education Commission, 2017)

There have also been some movements in Thailand about English teaching improvement led by the OBEC, such as the increase of English periods, the collaborative teaching of Thai teachers and foreign teachers. Moreover, the Thai teachers of English subjects are tested according to the Common European Framework of Reference for Language (CEFR) standards for the English proficiency then the data was used to plan the intensive courses for them. In addition, socio-economic context and cultural factors are considered. English teachers are encouraged to apply them into teaching contents. (Office of the Education Council, 2016) However, there are some challenges in Thailand's English teaching by foreign teachers. (Laopongharn & Sercombe, 2009; Foley, 2005; Wannachotphawate, 2015). Firstly, one of the biggest complaints is the class sizes. Teaching in any subject is always more successful with smaller classes. The ability to undertake a true student-centered learning approach is dictated by the time you can give each student. It seems impossible to do so with the average number of students in each classroom at about 50.

Secondly, there are numerous stories about how a school often seems to be divided between the foreign staff and the Thai staff. While understandable on some levels especially when it comes to the language barrier, it is important for foreign teachers to believe they have the support of other teachers and the administration. However, Thais' fear and inability of Speaking English makes foreign teachers not feel the support.

Thirdly, the assessment and evaluation system in Thai education is not very strict. Even though, theoretically, teachers can fail students, they are not encouraged to do so. In other words, by all means, teachers have to help students to pass the subject. Even if a student truly fails, a teacher is expected and often pressured by the school to let the student do 'extra' work which allows them to pass or improve their grades. This differs greatly from all western countries and maybe more importantly, every ASEAN country. This was exasperated by the beginning of the AEC in 2015 putting Thai students at a distinct disadvantage versus other students within the AEC. (Hayes, 2010).

Regarding the effect of Thai culture and inter-cultural aspect, there are differences between Thai culture and western culture and this flares up often when it comes to education, the treatment of students and even the treatment of teachers by the students. Besides the no-fail policy, the two most prevalent issues are the grading scale and the deference that is shown to teachers by the students which is tied to a part of Thai culture which is avoiding conflict and leads to inquisitive students. Most foreign teachers agree that students here are more well-behaved and respectful towards their teachers. (Hayes, 2009). Unfortunately, this high level of respect seems to have manifested itself into the students, making it more difficult to learn, as they fear asking questions of their teachers and appear to have been brought up



explicitly being discouraged from doing it. This fear is multiplied when it comes to learning English when being taught by foreign teachers.

## Analysis

According to much of the research mentioned above, similar problems also occur in all five countries. Although, they experience a lack of competent native English teachers, these countries prefer Native English teachers to their local teachers, resulting in a division among native and non-native teachers. In Taiwan, English is the only compulsory foreign language taught in any levels of their educational system. In China (Hong Kong) and Republic of South Korea, English is the most valuable foreign language to students and is the major second language to be learnt in the nation's language policy. Thus, native English teachers are strongly needed in these countries. They are expected to be able to teach professionally, to train the local ones how to teach, and to set the assessment and evaluation system. However, not many native teachers are capable of doing so. In fact, high-quality native English teachers who are professionals in teaching are very hard to find and they require quite high salary and other benefits. So, recruiting high-quality native English teachers is one of the main problems in many countries.

From research (Prapphal, 2008; Wang & Lin, 2013; Tan, 2016; Luxin, 2016), the information about English teaching policies, especially related to teachers, can be analyzed as in the table below.

Country	Program related to recruiting native English speakers	Purpose of English teaching by native speakers	Role of native speaking teachers
China (Hong Kong)	Native English-speaking Teacher Scheme (NET Scheme) by the Education and Manpower Bureau	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● to improve the English-speaking ability of students</li> <li>● to produce more competent local English teachers</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● teach</li> <li>● develop curriculum and teaching materials</li> <li>● support the locals' professional development</li> <li>● be work partners with the local</li> </ul>
Japan	Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● No sole aim for improving students' proficiency</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● assist Japanese teachers in classroom and professional development</li> </ul>

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● to promote international relationships</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● conduct team teaching with the local teachers</li> </ul>
Republic of South Korea	English Program in Korea (EPIK)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● to improve the English speaking ability of students and teachers</li> <li>● to develop cultural exchanges</li> <li>● to reform English teaching methodologies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● conduct English conversation classes for local teachers and students</li> <li>● prepare and develop learning materials</li> <li>● joint teaching with the local teachers</li> </ul>
Taiwan	Taiwan Foreign English Teacher Program (TFETP)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● upgrading the English proficiency of the people</li> <li>● to reach out to the world</li> <li>● to boost Taiwan's competitiveness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● teach</li> <li>● conduct team teaching</li> <li>● compile teaching materials</li> <li>● train the local teachers</li> </ul>
Thailand	N/A	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● to improve the English-speaking ability of students</li> <li>● to boost Thailand's competitiveness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● teach</li> <li>● develop teaching materials</li> <li>● support the locals' professional development</li> </ul>

Table1: Information about English teaching policy in each country

From the information mentioned above, most of the native speakers' tasks related to English teaching are to teach and/or conduct team teaching, and to support the local teachers' professional development.

## Conclusion

It is vital for the government of each country to realize the root of the problems and the issues about English teaching and recruiting professional native English teachers. There are also many challenges for the teachers too. They have to know how to teach well, understand the socio-cultural factors, socio-political factors, and the local context in order to be effective. The deep and clear information must be derived from the real problems and fact so the government can set the right policies to solve problems effectively and the right goal for the future development.

## Recommendation for English Education Improvement

All of mentioned above has shown that a vast amount of improvement can be done to improve the situation in each country. Some recommendations are as following:

1. Set up and / or manage a government unit which is responsible for recruiting, training, and following up on foreign teachers; thereby, the standard of English education will be effectively uplifted, in compliance of each country's national plan or roadmap. In the case of Thailand, unfortunately, there is no government organization for this matter. The Ministry of Education should set up an organization responsible for English native teacher recruitment and professional development with clear criteria for recruiting them. (Wiley & García, 2016). At present, there is only an organization called 'English Institute' (สถาบันภาษาอังกฤษ) under the umbrella of the Ministry of Education. The English Institute has many tasks regarding English teaching within the entire country but recruitment and professional development are not strongly focused on enough.

2. The class sizes of English subjects should be reduced. The most suitable number of students in each class is 25-30. In order to do so, more competent teachers should be recruited to provide more classes to allocate students into so the average number of students in each class will be lower.

3. Collaborative teaching should be practiced more. The local and the native can always learn from each other and help develop the curriculum, teaching materials, and the assessment and evaluation methods (Wall, 2008). This will also reduce the problem about division or discrimination among the local and the native speakers. Moreover, they can mutually learn about cultural differences and intercultural communication.

4. Teaching and learning approaches should be adjusted. Instead of too much focusing on grammar-based approach and exams, students need to be taught more communicative language in daily life. Also, the no-fail policy should be demolished. Students should face the truth to know if they are good enough or they need to study harder to get good grades. They will be better prepared for the real world and the competitiveness on the global scale in the future.

5. Cultural factors should be more concerned about as it is a life-long learning topic. At present, the native English teachers must attend a course about the target country's culture and get a certificate to be eligible to teach in that particular country; however, a short course is not enough for understanding various cultural perspective and different social behaviors. In fact, local teachers should be exposed more to international perspectives, different beliefs and cultures, in order to create mutual understanding.

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