

English Language Learning and the Concept of Autonomy

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1.0 Autonomy: "Not Held in High Esteem"?

Several times in Jeremy F. Jones's *ELT Journal* article, "Self-access and Culture: Retreating from Autonomy," the author asserts that the "... concept of autonomy is laden with cultural values, particularly those of the West," and that in some cultures, specifically East Asian, "autonomy is not held in high esteem" (1995: 228). The question, "Should we take autonomy as our guiding principle in designing" [self-access facilities]?, is

... of some consequence because ... to make autonomy an undiluted educational objective in a culture where it has no traditional place is to be guilty at least

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of cultural insensitivity (p 229).

Because he believes there is a "... danger in assuming that autonomy is an inter-culturally valid objective" (p. 233), Jones, who spent one year in Cambodia (1993-94) as an Education Adviser at the Foreign Languages Center of Phnom Penh University, insists that teaching methodologies in general and self-access centers in particular must accommodate both the culture and the learning styles of Cambodian students. Therefore, a culturally sensitive EFL pedagogy, especially one based on the principles of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT),¹⁾ requires adaptation to the "... conventional way Cambodians learn and are taught" (p. 229), which has been described as follows:

The teacher's relation to his student, like so many relationships in Cambodian society, is lopsided. The teacher, like the parents, bestows, transmits, and commands. The student, like the child, receives, accepts, and obeys. Nothing changes in the transmission process, except perhaps the ignorance of the student (Chandler 1983: 88).

Thus, the predominant Cambodian learning style can be classified as, among other things, "... dependent and authority-oriented" and, according to Jones, not very promising as a "basis for the development of self-access and autonomy" (p. 229). Granted, autonomy is not an "all-or-nothing" concept (Holec 1984: 2); it can be introduced by degrees (Dickinson 1987: 13). Nevertheless, Jones has "... doubts about the applicability of the notion [of autonomy] in an educational setting such as Phnom Penh University's English program" because

.. no matter what guise autonomy may take, it remains a Western idea, and may come upon the traditions and conventions of Cambodian education with

1) Learner-centeredness, self-directed learning, autonomy, and self-access, among others, are concepts and buzzwords often used in discussions concerning the rationale for Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and the "Communicative Approach" (Gremmo and Riley 1995: 153)

the force of ideological imposition, promoting a type of behavior that conflicts with the national culture at a deep level (p. 23).²⁾

Finally, Jones asks if it is really worth the effort in preparing a syllabus or self-access center to set autonomy as a pedagogic goal (p. 230): "Is there not, to make the point more rhetorical, a danger of teaching autonomy instead of language?"

Recent research has found that *Self-Access Language Learning* (SALL) is a successful method both pedagogically and economically (Cotterall 1995) because learners who accept responsibility for their learning are more likely to achieve their learning goals (Knowles 1975: 14):

... there is convincing evidence that people who take the initiative in learning, learn more things and learn better than do people who sit at the feet of teachers, passively waiting to be taught.

Thus, good language learners are those who take responsibility for their own learning situations (Rubin 1975; Naiman *et al.* 1978). But if, as Jeremy F. Jones insists, the concept of autonomy is culturally biased, serious questions will have to be addressed by ESL and especially EFL teachers who teach East Asian students. Jones, however, is not the only educator who has questioned the appropriateness of autonomous learning as a pedagogical goal in non-Western, especially East Asian contexts I have not, however, read of any educator who has gone as far as the one witnessed at a conference on applied linguistics held at this college, Soong Sil University, in October 1996. One of the participants, Choe Yong-jae, a professor who teaches TESL/TEFL at Dongguk University in Seoul, bemoaned (1997: 86)

... how futile the blind adoption of foreign ideas and techniques is. No

2) "The concept of autonomy is central to Western liberal thought" (Benson and Voller 1997: 36)

imported theories or methods have been fully *successful in Korean classrooms* simply because their cultural backgrounds have not been *compatible with Korean culture*. For example, *the reticence of the students gets in the way of new ideas and techniques* (italics added).

Nevertheless, Choe's phrase the "*reticence of the students gets in the way*" will serve as reference point and recurring theme in the following literature review of seven recent studies that from various perspectives deal with the issue of East Asian culture, the appropriateness or otherwise of "imported theories or methods" of language learning in East Asian contexts, and the "stereotype" of the "Passive East Asian Language Learner."

1. William Littlewood, "Defining and Developing Autonomy in East Asian Contexts," *Applied Linguistics*, 20/1, 1999, pp. 71-94.

Littlewood, a professor at the Hong Kong Baptist University, warns against harboring "dangerous" stereotypic notions of "Passive East Asian Learners" which, "if misused, may make teachers less rather than more sensitive to the dispositions and needs of individual students" (pp. 71, 83). Littlewood notes that "... [a]utonomy in language learning is sometimes presented as a Western concept unsuited to contexts, such as those in East Asia, which have different educational traditions" (p. 71), but, in disagreement with Jones, insists that "this view is unfounded" (p. 89). Littlewood then attempts to "search for" a culture-free definition of autonomy, the details of which will not concern us here. Of relevance, however, is his discussion of various "unfounded" cultural stereotypes of East Asian learners, which will be summarized below (pp. 84-86):

Littlewood presents three hypotheses and 10 predictions, five of which are concerned with some of the pedagogic issues raised by Jones in his article:

Hypothesis 1: East Asian learners see themselves as interdependent with other students. This hypothesis suggests that, because of the importance attached to the interdependent self in East Asian culture, learners will have a strong tendency to form strong cohesive groups within the class. We may therefore predict that....

Prediction 3. East Asian students will be concerned to maintain harmony within their groups. They may therefore be reluctant to engage in "argumentative" discussion, in which opposing ideas are confronted and *examined critically in order to test and clarify them.*

Prediction 4: In the open classroom, East Asian students will be reluctant to "stand out" by expressing their views or raising questions, particularly if this might be perceived as expressing public disagreement. This is the experience commended on by many teachers, both with a Western background ... and with an East Asian background....

Hypothesis 2: East Asian learners are strongly aware of status differences in the classroom. According to this hypothesis, East Asian students are likely to have a clear sense of differences in power and authority between themselves and the teacher, so that we may predict.

Prediction 5 East Asian students will perceive the teacher as an authority figure whose superior knowledge and control over classroom learning events should not be questioned. ..

Prediction 6 East Asian students will see knowledge as something to be transmitted by the teacher rather than discovered by the learners. They will therefore find it normal to engage in modes of learning which are teacher-centered and in which they receive knowledge rather than interpret it.. .

Hypothesis 3: East Asian students are ambitious to achieve and prepared to

put a lot of effort into their learning. If we put students' level of motivation and discipline together with the other tendencies mentioned, we might predict that

Prediction 10 A high level of achievement motivation combined with a strong awareness of group expectations might lead East Asian students to be very concerned to perform well and correctly in what they do in class. The studies by Chan (1995) and Littlewood and Liu (1996) indicate that students are eager not only to gain greater fluency in English but also to have their mistakes corrected by the teacher. This concern for correctness may often of course be an inhibiting factor in classroom discourse. Thus learners frequently explain their reticence in class as being due to fear of making mistakes or fear of ridicule....

Littlewood then proposes five generalizations about autonomy in East Asian contexts and how the concept itself "... might develop in the context of second or foreign language learning" (pp. 87-88). His fourth proposal is also apparently in conflict with Jones's assertion mentioned above that Cambodian culture and the concept of autonomy are incompatible, viz.:

Proposal 4: East Asian students have the same capacity for autonomy as *other* learners. Studies of intercultural differences lead us to predict that, when viewed as groups, East Asian students and Western students will have different attitudes towards some aspects of autonomy ... However, all the evidence mentioned in this article supports the view that, at the individual level, there are no intrinsic differences that make students in one group either less, or more, capable of developing whatever forms of autonomy are seen as appropriate to language learning. The crucial factors which underlie whatever differences might be perceived are cultural and educational traditions, past experiences and the contexts in which learning takes place.

Littlewood then uses the 10 predictions as a basis for a 10-item questionnaire that he administered to 50 first-year tertiary-level students studying English in Hong Kong.³⁾ For example, the students were asked to answer the following question: "In the classroom I see the teacher as an authority figure." As can be seen in Table 1, below, 40 percent disagreed, whereas only 18 percent agreed, and not one student strongly agreed:

Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Mean Agreement (5=high)
0%	18%	42%	40%	0%	2.78%

Table 1: Testing the Predictions with 50 Hong Kong Chinese Students (1999: 90)

These results, Littlewood warns, should make us "... skeptical of generalizations about how 'East Asian learners' perceive their classroom world" (p. 89). They are not "intrinsically different from others" (p. 88). "[I]f similar results were obtained with a randomly chosen group of *Western* students, we would probably feel no great cause for surprise" (p. 89). Thus, stereotypes about "Passive East Asian Learners" are "dangerous" because they

... distort reality in important ways (notably by exaggerating differences between groups and making differences between individuals) ... and cannot serve as a firm basis for organizing a learner-oriented pedagogy (p. 89).

2. Judy Ho and David Crookhall, "Breaking with Chinese Cultural Traditions: Learner Autonomy in English Language Teaching," *System*, Vol. 23, No. 2, 1995, pp. 235-243.

The authors acknowledge from the outset that "certain cultural traits (such as the Chinese concern with face) ... may be an obstacle to the promotion of

3) Littlewood admitted that "such a small sample has no statistical significance and none is being claimed" (1999: 89)

autonomy, especially in the more traditional organization of some classrooms" (p. 235). For one thing, the rigid "relational hierarchy" in Confucian culture results in, among other things, the Chinese students' tendency to view the teacher as an authority figure, the "all-nurturing, all-benevolent, all-knowing teacher" (p. 240). One might "even draw the conclusion that it is impossible for Chinese students to learn to exercise responsibility for their learning in the classroom" (p. 237). However, "... although certain cultural traits may make autonomy difficult to achieve, other cultural traits actually facilitate its attainment under certain circumstances" (p. 241). For example, Chinese students and East Asian students in general are highly "achievement oriented," and are usually under intense pressure to achieve educationally (Ho 1986); most study very hard even though the parent or teacher is not physically present. This behavior "actually constitute[s an act] of autonomy" (p. 241).

3. Ngar-Fun Liu and William Littlewood, "Why Do Many Students Appear Reluctant to Participate in Classroom Learning Discourse?" *System*, Vol. 25, No. 3, 1995, pp. 371-384.

After a brief description of the "stereotype" of the "Passive East Asian Learner," the authors ask, "What is the cause of this perceived reticence in the classroom?" They cite various scholars, such as Flowerdew and Miller (1995: 358), who speculate that this "negative attitude to participation has some to do with local and academic cultures the students dwell in" (see Appendix A for a convenient and self-explanatory summary of East Asian and Western values). But Liu and Littlewood claim that "[o]ur surveys in Hong Kong offer strong evidence that the idea of the passive learner is largely a myth" (p. 372). Contrary to the stereotypic students portrayed by Flowerdew and Miller, Hong Kong students show a "positive attitude towards participation in classroom discourse" (p. 372). Granted they don't actually participate in class, but "[i]f students do show reluctance to speak English in class, our results show that it is not because they do not want to" (p. 374). Why then this reluctance to speak? Scollon and Scollon (1994: 17) argue that the

Confucian teacher-student relationship does not encourage student questioning in class because "questions might be thought of as saying that the teacher had not taught well because there were still unanswered questions." Liu and Littlewood counter by informing their readers that the Chinese ideograph for knowledge is made up of two characters, "learn" + "ask" (which in turn is made up of "gate" + "mouth," the etymology of which, unfortunately, is uncertain).

Thus, the authors find Scollon and Scollon's "Confucianism" explanation for East Asian learners' reluctance to participate in classroom "dubious." Liu and Littlewood's explanation: East Asian learners are reluctant to speak English not because they don't want to, or that they are passive, per se, but because they haven't had sufficient opportunities to practice speaking English. Lie and Littlewood's solution: "Before students enter university, they need to experience more opportunities to develop active skills in oral English and to use those skills in active learning roles in the classroom" (p. 381).

4. Greg Ellis, "How Culturally Appropriate is the Communicative Approach?" *ELT Journal*, 50/3, 1996, pp. 213-218.

Ellis, who once lectured on EFL methodology at the University of Education in Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam, asks: Is the communicative approach culturally specific? Is it based on "universal generalizations about educational practices that transcend individual cultures?" (p. 213). He answers these questions by denying the universal relevance and application of the communicative approach to language teaching for the following reason: it inevitably results in cultural conflicts in East Asian cultures because it is predominately a "Western language teaching approach" (p. 213). For the communicative approach to be made suitable in Asian contexts, however, it "needs to be both culturally attuned and culturally accepted" (p. 213). Ellis cites Orton (1990: 2), who discovered that for her methodology course to be accepted in China "it required not only a change in behavior on the part of her Chinese participants, but also a change in their orientation...."

On reflection it seemed that for the Chinese to adopt the approach proposed, they would not only have to do more of, better and perhaps a little differently, what they had always done, but they would also have to make radical changes to some of their basic beliefs, values and consequent ways of acting (quoted in Ellis 1996 213).

Ellis insists EFL teachers must "mediate," that is, they must filter the CLT approach to "make it appropriate to the local cultural norms, and to re-define the teacher-student relationship in keeping with the cultural norms embedded in the method itself" (p 213). For example, the CLT approach emphasizes meaning rather than form; in collectivist societies of Asia, all of which are more or less teacher-centered, there is a "reverential attitude towards the mastery of individual forms, for example, the aesthetic value attached to the Chinese ideographs" (p. 215).

5. Ryuko Kubota, "Japanese Culture Constructed by Discourses: Implications for Applied Linguistics Research and ELT," *TESOL Quarterly*, Vol. 33, No. 1, 1999, pp. 9-35.

Kubota, an assistant professor in the School of Education / Curriculum in Asian Studies, at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, USA, observes that recent applied linguistics literature tends to

create a cultural dichotomy between the East and the West, constructing fixed, apolitical, and essentialized cultural representations such as groupism, harmony, and deemphasis on critical thinking and self-expression to depict Japanese culture (p. 9).

Echoing much of Said's argument in *Orientalism* (1978) concerning the "dichotomizing *us* versus *them*" tendency "common" among Western scholars, Kubota questions the impartiality of applied linguists who frequently portray East Asian culture as one that generally values collectivism (see Appendix B for Hofstede's

(1991: 53) ranking of 50 countries based on their "Individualism Index Values [IDV]"), discourages individual self-expression, creativity, innovation, and critical thinking, and promotes memorization, repetition, and drilling (i.e., "conserving knowledge" as opposed to "extending knowledge" -- Ballard and Clanchy 1991), whereas Western culture is usually portrayed as displaying the opposite characteristics. Kubota is skeptical of these "taken-for-granted cultural labels" because they

... parallel the constructed Other in colonial discourse... I ... argue that the cultural dichotomy promoted in the applied linguistics literature is constructed by discourse that reflects and creates particular power relations in which the dominant group defines the subordinate group as the exotic Other.... Labels that symbolize a cultural dichotomy serve to create and perpetuate, rather than reflect, cultural differences. This construction of Otherness is part of the colonial discourse (pp. 9, 11, 16).

Finally, she questions Atkinson's claim (1997) that critical thinking is a cultural practice, and that the culturally specific values underlying the notion of critical thinking are incompatible with East Asian cultural values because critical thinking presupposes individualism, autonomy, self-expression, and learning by using language. She counters by arguing that a "certain culture is not a monolithic, fixed, neutral, or objective category," and that recent studies suggest that this stereotype about East Asian learners is "clearly out of date":

Recent educational research shows that the Japanese preschool and elementary school curriculum does promote creativity, original thinking, and self-expression in its cultural contexts (pp. 11-13, 23).⁴⁾

4) Kubota cites 9 studies that "give evidence" that Japanese students are in fact creative.

6. Song Mi-jeong, "A Study on Common Factors Affecting Asian Students' English Oral Interaction," *English Teaching*, No. 49, 1994, pp. 191-219.

Song, a professor of TESL/TEFL at Seoul National University, cites "strong empirical evidence" that indicates the East Asian student's⁵⁾ cultural background is "strongly related to his or her level of participation in the ESL classroom." Song undertook her pilot study because of growing concern, as expressed by researchers such as Sato (1982), Pica, *et al.* (1987), Chaudron 1988, and Tsui (1993), about the "... Asian students' reticence to interact in the EFL/ESL classroom" (p. 192). Song's study "... confirmed the claims by many ESL teachers and researches that Asian students were not active users of English in the ESL classroom.... In general, they were 'quiet' and 'reticent'" (p. 193). But her research, which provided empirical evidence for the existence of cultural influence on the level of class participation in ESL classrooms, was also an attempt to ascertain the cultural determinants for the East Asian students' classroom reticence. Why do most East Asian students, as I have heard described vividly by a colleague, "sit like bumps on logs" in EFL/ESL classrooms? Song writes that

.. determining the reasons for the students' passiveness in speaking in the ESL classroom will enhance awareness on the part of both students and ESL/EFL teachers as to how to increase the level of participation in the language classroom and eventually as to how to improve speaking skills (p. 194).

Song investigated several linguistic, cultural, social, and psychological factors which "... contribute to the Asian students' reticence" in the ESL classroom (p. 194), but several factors that she studied are relevant concerning the pedagogical issue of whether or not learner-centered approaches such as self-access centers are culturally suitable for Korean language learners:

5) Specifically Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese students

a. Lack of Discussion Skills (a linguistic factor). Discussion skills in public "... are of little importance and even discouraged in Asian countries" (p. 201; see also Kitao and Kitao 1985; Meloni 1987). When the East Asian students participating in the study were asked what kind of classes they disliked, almost unanimously they expressed "hatred" for debate and discussion activities (p. 201). One participant said:

I don't have enough discussion skills. I don't know how to debate. Sometimes I am too polite and too soft in the discussion. I don't know how to interrupt others when I want to say [something]... (Japanese Student 3).

b. Different Classroom Participation Patterns (a cultural factor). East Asian students "... [are] more dependent upon teachers for opportunities to talk" (p. 202). One participant said:

When I have something to say, I usually wait until the other students and teacher finish, then I raise my hand or sometimes look at the teacher to show that I want to say something ... [I]f the teacher does not see me raise my hand or does not give any sign, I just give up speaking (Japanese Student 3).

c. Perfectionism⁶⁾ and Intolerance of Ambiguity (psychological factors). "Perfectionism" is defined as a psychological inclination to try to save face⁷⁾ by not making mistakes in front of others (p. 204). The following two responses illustrate the Asian students' characteristic face-saving demeanor:

6) Perfectionism in varying degrees can be found in people in every culture, of course, but what is distinctive about Asian perfectionism is that the trait infuses the *entire* culture, and has profound pedagogical ramifications concerning second language learning

7) "The Confucian legacy of consideration for others and concern for proper human relationships," Yum (1996: 82) writes, "has led to the development of communication patterns that preserve one another's face. Indirect communication helps to prevent the embarrassment of rejection by the other person or disagreement among partners, leaving the relationship and each other's face intact."

I am afraid to make mistakes. I am conscious of other Japanese students when I speak. I feel very embarrassed if I make mistakes (Japanese Student 4).

I cannot speak English without making any mistakes. It's very embarrassing to make mistakes in class or in public (Korean Student 5).

"Intolerance of Ambiguity" is defined as a psychological state characterized by frustration resulting from an inability to express oneself in the target language (p. 205). The following response illustrates this psychological debilitation:

I cannot say in English exactly what I can say in Korea.... I cannot express myself fully (Korean Student 4).

Research indicates that individuals who are intolerant of ambiguity are likely to experience language-learning problems (Ely 1995).

The pedagogic implications of her findings is that if teachers are serious about helping students try to diminish the East Asian students' culturally-induced second language learning "disability," "... they need to have a clear understanding of their cultural, social, and psychological states..." (p. 208). Song goes on to make eight practical recommendations based on her findings (e.g., "The students should be given many listening exercises" (p. 209), the specifics of which will not concern us here. What does interest us is her conclusion:

It should be noted ... that the recommendations given here are not based on a judgment that the socio-cultural characteristics and psychological value systems governing general learning in Japan, Korea, and Taiwan are "undesirable" or "bad." These traits are what distinguish the Japanese, Korean, and Taiwanese students from others. Rather, these recommendations are based on the assumption that if such traits hinder their acquiring oral skills in English, the students must be made aware of such effects and encouraged to be what Rubin (1975) calls a "good second language learner" (p. 211).

7. Amy B.M. Tsui, "Reticence and Anxiety in Second Language Learning," in Bailey and Nunan (eds.), *Voices from the Language Classroom*, 1993, Cambridge University Press, pp. 145-167.

In the final study I will review concerning the effect of Asia's Confucian culture on East Asian students' classroom behavior, Tsui, a professor at Hong Kong University, investigated the so-called "Maxim of Modesty." Generally, a Chinese student, and this is true, of course, for a Korean or Japanese student as well, deliberately strives *not* to show that she or he is better than the other students in the classroom. Modesty, defined as "reserve or propriety in speech ... or behavior," is a deeply rooted cultural trait among Asians. Wong (1984, cited in Tsui 1993: 157) found there are four "rules" that govern the use of English among Hong Kong high school students:

1. You should not demonstrate verbal success in English in front of your peers;
2. You should hesitate and show difficulty in arriving at an answer;
3. You should not answer the teacher voluntarily or enthusiastically in English; and
4. You should not speak fluent English.

Indeed, it is a widespread phenomenon in Hong Kong schools that students who know the answer will not take the initiative and answer the question until they are asked by the teacher to do so. Thus, Wu (1991) observes in his analysis of classroom data that "when students are called upon to respond, they may prefer to hesitate and give short answers where possible so that they do not give their peers the impression that they are showing off" (quoted in Tsui 1993: 157-58). Tsui also offers several practical recommendations to EFL teachers to help them "deflect" the influence of Confucian culture on the classroom behavior of their Asian students. In one of her recommendations she strongly advocates group work as a means of putting the teacher in the background, thereby, *inter alia*, lowering the student's anxiety levels (pp. 162-163).

Noteworthy is that Tsui's explanation for the East Asian students' classroom reticence on the surface seems to contradict Song's observations mentioned above. Are Asian students reluctant to engage in classroom talk 1) because they are afraid to make mistakes, or 2) because they are unwilling to show off their knowledge in front of their classmates? Paradoxically, *both* responses are operative, sometimes simultaneously in the same student! EFL teachers in Korea who advocate communicative approaches have their work cut out for them.

In Section 1.0, I briefly reviewed seven recent articles that from various perspectives deal with the issue of East Asian culture, the appropriateness or otherwise of "imported theories or methods" of language learning in East Asian contexts, and the stereotype of the "Passive East Asian Language Learner." Despite Littlewood, Liu, and Kubota's insistence that this stereotype is both dangerous and a myth, and that presumably Jones's "retreat from autonomy" approach is therefore misguided, the impression one gains from Jones, Ho, Crookhall, Ellis, Song, and Tsui's explanations is that East Asian learners are indeed passive, and this is due to the profound influence of Confucianism on their cultures. In Section 2.0, below, I will elaborate on some of the points made in the articles reviewed above, going into some detail regarding the influence of Confucianism on East Asian culture, in particular relating to language learning. Then I will examine whether or not the East Asian and specifically Korean cultural heritage is malleable enough to thereby cast doubt Jones's insistence that certain EFL practices, specifically effective ones such as self-access centers, must be modified due to cultural constraints.

2.0 Confucianism: East Asia's Growing Disenchantment?

"I transmit, but I do not create."

-- Confucius

Jones, as well as several of the authors of the articles discussed above

(Littlewood, Crookhall, and Greg Ellis), displays one of the attributes of what ELT methodologists call a "good language teacher" (Richards and Lockhart 1994), especially one teaching in an East Asian EFL context: viz., cultural sensitivity to East Asian students' learning styles, and a cognizance of the necessity of adapting or adjusting her or his teaching methodologies due to East Asian cultural constraints. "Maybe our most important task as ESL/EFL teachers," Nelson argues (1995: 17), "is to learn about the particular pedagogy of our students' home cultures." But does not Jones's "retreat from autonomy," culturally sensitive though it may be, also represent a retreat from the current emphasis in ESL/EFL on communicative competence and Communicative Language Teaching (CLT), which has arguably become the most widely used approach in ESL and some EFL countries? Nunan (1991: 279) describes the first feature of CLT as "[a]n emphasis on learning to communicate through interaction in the target language." In Finocchiaro and Brumfit's comparison (1983: 91-93) of the 14th feature of the Audiolingual Method and Communicative Language Teaching, in the former, "Linguistic competence is the desired goal," in the latter, "Communicative competence is the desired goal" (i.e., the ability to use the linguistic system effectively and appropriately)." But what if CLT and its goal of communicative competence are indeed incompatible with East Asian culture, an issue addressed in several of the articles discussed in Section 1.0, above, and also by Holland and Shortall (1997: 53), who note Asians themselves are somewhat pessimistic regarding the suitability of CLT in East Asian contexts:

It has been suggested ... that the kind of learner-centered approach suggested by advocates of Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) is *best suited to the Western societies* where it originated. My own contacts with Japanese and Chinese teachers, for example, suggest that, while they admire CLT methods, they often feel that such approaches are *inappropriate for their own teaching environments* because

- * language learning is often exam-oriented;
- * learners expect learning to be teacher-led;

- * learning is seen to involve the imparting of knowledge by the teacher;
- * other teachers will frown on CLT approaches as lacking seriousness and commitment (*italics added*).

Consequently, efforts to introduce CLT into East Asian EFL contexts such as Korea and Cambodia have had a low rate of success (Brindley and Hood 1990). Thus, Ellis (1996: 213) writes,

... for the communicative approach to be made suitable for Asian conditions, it needs to be both culturally attuned and culturally accepted

I have lived in Korea for twenty-eight years, taught English in Korean universities for twenty-two years, and been married to a Korean for the same number of years, and this much is certain: Korea is still a profoundly Confucian country, arguably the most Confucian of all Far Eastern nations, more Confucian than the Cambodia Jeremy F. Jones lived in for one year, 1993-94. Below is a sample of observations expressed by Korean scholars about the legacy of Confucianism in contemporary Korean culture:

- * Confucianism ... is one of the chief factors that has determined traditional Korean patterns of thought and action (Park 1979: xvi).
- * The influence of Confucianism on Korea's traditional culture was, needless to say, both profound and pervasive... Confucianism as a moral and ethical principle seems still widely subscribed to by the population of South Korea (Kihl 1994 37)
- * Confucianism was said to be the key with which to open the mind and consciousness of the average Korean, so it is where one ought to be looking for the source of Korean national identity (Yum 1987 85).
- * The basic concepts and codes of Confucian ethics run deep in the thinking of the Korean people. The Confucian way governs most interpersonal interaction (Park 1979 219)

* Since the thought and behavior patterns of the Koreans one hundred years ago do not seem to have undergone any fundamental changes, it may be possible to speak of national character. Thus, it is plausible that the Confucian behavioral norms are still valid in this society (Kim 1991: 217).

Yet recently, especially following the devastating economic collapse of the East Asian economies in 1997, and it should be noted that most of the seven articles reviewed in Section 1.0, above, were written before this date, a heated debate among East Asians *themselves* has erupted about whether or not Confucianism, or at least the prevailing interpretation of it, has outlived its usefulness and is in need of substantial reform or outright eradication. One of the most fascinating recent disputes: Prof. Kim Kyung-il of Sangmyung University, in an impassioned broadside against Confucianism entitled, *Confucius Must Die if the Nation is to Live* (May 1999), argues that after 600 years of oppression under the thumb of Confucianism it is high time for Koreans to issue a declaration of independence from this Chinese import. Three months later Prof. Choi Byung-chul of Songkyunghan University responded with a equally impassioned counterattack against Prof. Kim's "Western-tainted" opinions about Confucianism in a book entitled, *Confucius Must Live if the Nation is to Live* (August 1999). Prof. Choi's diatribe is chock full of non sequiturs, notably in Chapter 4 where he claims, "Western culture is war culture," and "Western political theory is based on the principle of brute force." Perhaps he has forgotten that Korean history books claim the "Land of the Morning Calm" has been invaded by marauding armies almost 1,000 times, the vast majority of which were Chinese.

In 1994, just three years before the East Asian economies began toppling like dominoes, a provocative interview appeared in the influential quarterly *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 1994: 109-126) entitled, "Culture is Destiny: A Conversation with Lee Kuan Yew." The dominant theme throughout the "Senior Minister's" conversation with Managing Editor Fareed Zakaria was culture. "Lee returned again and again," Zakaria writes,

... to his views on the importance of culture and the differences between Confucianism and Western values. In this respect, Lee is very much part of a trend Culture is in. From business consultants to military strategists, people talk about culture as the deepest and most determinative aspect of human life (p. 125).

Lee elaborated on the "Confucius Hypothesis" (i.e., the "Asian miracle," the staggering economic growth and relative political stability of the Far East, was directly attributable to Confucian values) when Zakaria posed the following question to the "Senior Minister":⁸⁾

FZ: In East Asian countries ... the government frowns upon an open and free wheeling intellectual climate Leaving aside any kind of human rights questions this raises, does it create a productivity problem?

LKY Intellectually that sounds like a reasonable conclusion, but I'm not sure things will work out this way The Japanese, for instance, have not been all that disadvantaged in creating new products... East Asians, who all share a tradition of strict discipline, respect for the teacher, no talking back to the teacher and rote learning, must make sure that there is this random intellectual search for new technologies and products. In any case, in a world where electronic communications are instantaneous, I do not see anyone lagging behind

Famous last words! The much-vaunted "Asian miracle" has become the "Asian malady," and although there have been some slight signs of recovery, the region's economies are still precarious, despite huge infusions of IMF loans and other assistance. Fingers of blame have been pointed, many at the same Confucian values

8) Mr. Lee, the Cambridge-educated lawyer and founding father of Singapore, sent his son also to the same university, thereby carrying on a virtual tradition among vociferous proponents of "Asian values". viz., the tendency to send their offspring off to Western universities For example, three of the five children of Malaysian Prime Minister Dr. Mahathir Mohamed earned degrees in England, America or both

that were once touted as the cause of the "Asian miracle" itself: viz., the Confucian stress on personal relationships leads inexorably to cronyism, on attachment to the family to nepotism, and on education to learning by rote.

Last year, soon after the demoralizing collapse of East Asian economies, Kishore Mahbubani, currently Singapore ambassador to the United Nations, wrote *Can Asians Think?* (1998). Nowhere in the book does he actually answer the question, but his main argument is that, while acknowledging Asian faults such as corruption and nepotism, "the West" has no right to tell Asians how to run their affairs. Because of their cultural differences, to force democracy, human rights, and a free press with missionary zeal on Asian governments is a "colossal mistake." This echoes what his mentor Lee Kuan Yew said in his interview in *Foreign Affairs* mentioned above:

It is not my business to tell people what's wrong with their system. It is my business to tell people not to **foist their system indiscriminately** on societies in which it will not work (boldface added, p. 110).

Recall Jones's assertion in Section 1.0, above, that to "... make autonomy an undiluted educational objective in a culture where it has no traditional place is to be guilty at least of cultural insensitivity" (1995: 229). Would not an EFL teacher who insists on imposing certain "undiluted" teaching methodologies on East Asian students be guilty "foisting his system indiscriminately on societies in which it will not work"? Bex warns against the foisting of hegemonic Anglo-American culture on the world by the EFL industry" (Bex 1994: 62). Holly (1990) and Phillipson (1992) see a new colonialism emerging through the marketing and promotion of English by Western Capitalism for economic ends, thereby undermining native cultures.⁹⁾ But many East Asians themselves have become increasingly disenchanted with Confucianism and its cultural heritage, and regard English as a necessary tool,

9) One is reminded of the anecdote of then U.S. Vice-President Dan Quayle who publicly urged thousands of young Americans to join the Peace Corps and go to newly "liberated" eastern Europe to teach thirsty Hungarians, Rumanians, etc., the English language

not a colonial straitjacket.¹⁰⁾

Sin-Ming Shaw, a visiting Chinese history scholar at Harvard University, in two recent *TIME* Magazine articles ("It's True. Asians Can't Think," May 31, 1999, and "Future Perfect: The next century can be Asia's if it abandons its Confucian ways and embraces the wisdom of democracy and capitalism," Aug. 23, 1999), argues that "[u]ntil it abandons its twisted Confucianism, the region will trail the West":

It is ingrained in the Asian psyche that "correct" answers always exist and are to be found in books or from authorities. Teachers dispense truth, parents are always right and political leaders know better.. .

Questioning authority, especially in public, is disrespectful, un-Asian, un-Confucian. It is time to deconstruct Confucius. He said many things. Some emphasized order above all on filial piety, never disobey. Others were democratic without the trust of the people, no government can stand....

The twisted Confucian philosophy passed on by generations has played a damnable role in denting Asian creative thinking. U.S.-trained physicist Woo Chia-wei, president of the Hong Kong University of Science and Technology, believes the Confucian stress on order is a major obstacle to creative thinking that has sometimes affected even his own instincts.... Order for the sake of

10) Koichi Kato, on most short lists of future Japanese prime ministers (he is expected to challenge Prime Minister Keizo Obuchi this fall), in a recent interview in *Newsweek* magazine ("Politics Abhors a Vacuum?," August 30, 1999, p. 52), strongly criticized the methods used to teach and learn English in Japan. He speaks English and Mandarin fluently, attended graduate school at Harvard University (East Asian studies), where "he says he learned the importance of stating his opinions." *Newsweek's* Hideko Takayama asked what he thought about Japan's English education, an answer which applies equally to Korea and other Asian contexts.

At Japanese high schools and universities, students are required to read T.S. Eliot or Somerset Maugham. Yet they cannot shop in English in New York or express their opinions at international conferences. English is needed for international financial dealings. We should consider English as a tool of communication or a tool to use the Internet. We need radical reform of our English education (boldface added)

order is the opposite of creative thinking.

Contrast this with what the Confucianist Lee Kuan Yew said in the *Foreign Affairs* interview mentioned above:

The expansion of the right of the individual to behave or misbehave as he pleases has come at the expense of orderly society. In the East the main object is to have a well-ordered society so that everybody can have maximum enjoyment of his freedoms. This freedom can only exist in an ordered state and not in a natural state of contention and anarchy (boldface added; p 111)

In the meantime, Asian countries, Singapore and Malaysia included, are not taking any chances. Rote learning is now out, curricula that emphasize creativity are in. A recent *NEWSWEEK* magazine cover story, entitled, "Now, Please THINK: As Americans Embrace Testing, Asians Pursue Creativity" (Sept. 6, 1999), chronicled the veritable flood of educational reforms that are now sweeping through East Asia. Reform-minded Asian educators and even government officials are well aware Asia's over-stressed and over-tested students, in classrooms where the authoritarian approach still reigns, are "ill equipped for the Information Age, where thinking and creativity hold a premium" (p. 38).

It's the makings of a revolution. Until recently, Singapore embraced the discipline-oriented, Confucian approach to governing its people and educating its children. Like a nanny, the government preached about everything from who should have children to how often to flush the toilet. Teachers lectured students on the right answer to every question. There was little room for debate. But two years ago Singapore's leaders saw a crisis heading their way though Singaporeans were becoming proficient at manufacturing high-tech goods, few people seemed to know how to even think about creating new technologies. Senior Minister Lee Kuan Yew worried that lack of creativity would prevent the country from joining the Information Age. He launched a reform program and, without even a hint of irony, instructed schools to start being more creative (pp. 41-42).

Due to these educational reforms the stereotype of the "Passive East Asian Language Learner" may someday be a thing of the past, though of course such change will not happen overnight. As a direct result of the traumatic IMF crisis, East Asians are well aware of the inadequacies of some aspects of their cultural heritage, of the incompatibility of much of Confucianism with the demands of the Information Age. Eventually East Asian conceptions of "good teachers" and "good students," as described by Torkelson (1995: 135), below, will remain merely a quaint memory:

In China (and in many Asian countries) the "good teacher" is an authoritative truth-giver who lectures to the students, controlling the information students receive and expecting that information to be given back on tests. One student called this "duck-feeding": like the Peking duck, students are force-fed to make them more knowledgeable. He went on to say, "In an exam, the students are expected to throw back all the professor's [words]... In our long tradition, the professors are always held up as somebody, almost like a saint." The "good-learner" is the student who listens well, who respects authority, who does not question the teacher; the student observes the teacher as a model in the teacher-centered classroom...

As mentioned above, I have lived in Korea since 1972, when I came to the Far East as an English teacher and health worker in the U.S. Peace Corps. During this time I have witnessed profound changes in Korea, first economic, then political, and now educational: Korea was once one of the world's poorest countries, Korea was once one of the world's most brutal dictatorships, and Korea once had one of the world's most stifling, teacher-centered educational systems. The current President of Korea, Kim Dae-jung, who was once arrested, tried for sedition, and sentenced to death by hanging, wrote a rebuttal to the Lee Kuan Yew interview in *Foreign Affairs*, entitled, "Culture is Destiny: The Myth of Asia's Anti-Democratic Values" (*Foreign Affairs*, November/December 1994: 189-194). In the article President Kim argued that without educational reforms there cannot be political reforms, and

without political reforms, namely democratic reforms, there cannot be economic reforms:

Such doubts have been raised mainly by Asia's authoritarian leaders, Lee being the most articulate among them. They have long maintained that cultural differences make the Western concept of democracy and human rights inapplicable to East Asia. I am optimistic for several reasons. The Asian economies are moving from a capital- and labor-intensive industrial phase into an information- and technology-intensive one. Many experts have acknowledged that this new economic world order requires guaranteed freedom of information and creativity. These things are possible only in a democratic society. Thus Asia has no practical alternative to democracy; it is a matter of survival in an age of intensifying global economic competition (pp. 189-193).

To Kim, democracy and East Asian culture were not necessarily incompatible, provided the "twisted Confucianism" mentioned by Shaw, above, is removed. "Culture is not necessarily our destiny" (p. 194), Kim concluded. From voting behavior to classroom behavior, East Asia and especially Korea are in the throes of major changes. Culture is clearly not immutable; culture is changeable, malleable. Cultural determinism is as dubious a concept as linguistic determinism, as exemplified in the largely discredited Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis. As Kim Dae-jung remarked in his article, "Nothing in human history is permanent" (p. 190), neither a nation's political system nor its educational practices, nor the classroom behavior of its language learners.

As mentioned at the beginning of Section 2.0, a good language teacher is, among other things, respectful of the overall culture of his or her students. But there are certain things in a particular culture that hinder the attainment of EFL pedagogic goals. The "Passive East Asian Learner" is not a stereotype; it is a reality. It is not due to a lack of opportunities to participate in class because of large class sizes, Liu and Littlewood's argument (1995) notwithstanding; it is

primarily the result of the influence of Confucianism. In the Information Age it has become a distinct "cultural disadvantage," pure and simple, and East Asians reformers are now hard at work trying to eradicate it because of the realization that, to quote the Russian polymath Lev Vygotsky, a teacher throughout his life, who once wrote:

[the] ... passivity of the student is the greatest sin from a scientific point of view, since it relies on the false principle that the teacher is everything and the pupil nothing (1975 165).

Why then should *EFL teachers, Western or otherwise*, strive to retreat from language learning methods that are practical, economical, and effective? Paradoxically won't we *EFL teachers in East Asia* become good language teachers who, if we accept Ellis's recommendation (1996: 213), by "culturally attuning" our approaches end up churning out bad language learners? Thus, we language teachers who work in East Asian countries are doing our students a disservice by retreating from autonomy, from tried and tested learner-centered methodologies, which are universal and not regional or solely Western pedagogical values, just as democracy and human rights are now recognized as universal political values. Even North Korea self-styles itself the "Democratic People's Republic of Korea," the DPRK. Of course, there isn't an ounce of democracy there, yet, but who would ever have imaged that South Korea could have changed so dramatically, as exemplified in the recent election Kim Dae-jung, "Asia's Nelson Mandela"? Educational trends and reforms in East Asia are moving inexorably toward communicative and autonomous perspectives, something *EFL teachers* should strongly encourage, not retreat from. After all, it was Confucius himself who once said: "If you give a man a fish you can feed him for one day, but if you teach him how to fish you can feed him for a lifetime." What could be a more apropos description of autonomous learning than this?

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Appendix A

1. Confucian and Western Educational Values Contrasted

Confucian Values	Western Values
1. the teacher is highly respected;	1. the teacher is valued as a guide and facilitator;
2. the teacher must never be questioned;	2. the teacher is open to challenge;
3. students are motivated by family pressure to excel;	3. students are motivated by a desire for individual development;
4. positive value is placed on effacement and silence; and	4. positive value is placed on self-expression of ideas; and
5. emphasis is placed on group orientation to learning.	5. emphasis is placed on individual development and creativity in learning.

Source. Adapted from Flowerdew and Miller (1995: 348)

2. Comparison Between the North American and the East Asian Orientations to Interpersonal Relationship Patterns

East Asian Orientations	North American Orientations
1. Particularistic Particular rules and interaction patterns are applied depending upon the relationship and context	1. Universalistic General and objective rules are applied across diverse relationships and context
2. Long-term and asymmetrical reciprocity	2. Short-term and symmetrical reciprocity or contractual reciprocity
3. Sharp distinction between in-group and out-group members	3. In-group and out-group distinction is not as sharp
4. Informal intermediaries Personally known intermediaries Frequently utilized for diverse relationships	4. Contractual intermediaries Professional intermediaries Utilized only for specific purposes
5. Personal and public relationships often overlap	5. Personal and public relationships are often separate

Source: Yum (1996: 78)

Appendix B

Perhaps the most frequently cited dichotomy East versus West is collectivism versus individuality. Hofstede (1991: 53) ranked 50 countries based on their Individualism Index Values (IDV). East Asia's so-called four tigers, are indicated in the table as boldface: **Hong Kong (37/25)**, **Singapore (39/41/20)**, **South Korea (43/18)**, and **Taiwan (44/17)**.

Score Rank	Country	IDV Score
1	USA	91
2	Australia	90
3	Great Britain	89
4/5	Canada	80
4/5	Netherlands	80
6	New Zealand	79
	...	
22/23	Japan	46
22/23	Argentina	46
	...	
37	Hong Kong	25
38	Chile	23
39/41	West Africa	20
39/41	Singapore	20
39/41	Thailand	20
42	Salvador	19
43	South Korea	18
44	Taiwan	17

Source: Hofstede (1991: 53)

Abstract

English Language Learning and the Concept of Autonomy

Tom Jernstad

The purpose of this paper is to examine Jeremy F. Jones's assertion in a recent *ELT Journal* article (1995) that the concept of autonomy, specifically in connection with self-access centers, is "laden with Western values" and therefore must be modified due to local cultural constraints. Jones's "retreat from autonomy" creates a considerable dilemma for a "good language learner," defined by Jones as one who "takes as much responsibility as possible for his or her own learning, and self-access is the most valid test of this responsibility." This paper will critique Jones's approach, namely his "retreat from autonomy," and argue that a "good EFL teacher" in an East Asian country need not be reluctant about advocating effective, economical, and learner-centered EFL teaching methodologies even though they may seem to clash with the indigenous culture.