

Is ‘Whole-Class Interactive Learning’ a Contradiction in Terms?

Cornelius N. Grove, Ed.D.
Independent ethnologist of education

This paper combines excerpts from the chapter entitled “East Asian Primary Schools, Part I: How Classroom Lessons Are Delivered,” from Grove’s book, *A Mirror for Americans: What the East Asian Experience Tells Us about Teaching Students Who Excel*, published in 2020 by Rowman & Littlefield.

Setting the Stage for Whole-Class Learning

The phrase “whole-class learning” gets some folks perturbed. Most likely, their thinking goes something like this: If all the pupils in a classroom are learning simultaneously, then their teacher must be telling them stuff – in a word, “lecturing,” and that’s bad. To be learning, pupils must be active, engaged, talking, questioning, discovering – and those things just can’t occur when the entire class is under the teacher’s direction.

Suppose it were possible for *both* to be true. It is. In most parts of East Asia...

- Entire classes are routinely being directed by their teachers, *and*...
- The pupils are active, engaged, talking, questioning, and discovering.

When researchers who are closely familiar with East Asian classrooms discuss the most common mode of instruction there, the phrase they often use is “whole-class *interactive* learning.” Let’s find out why they add “interactive.”

It’s no accident that this topic wasn’t introduced earlier. East Asian teaching *occurs within a cultural context*, which was discussed in Chapters 1 through 5. That context sets the stage for this chapter and the next two. Let’s review ten key points from those five preceding chapters:

From Chapter 1:

1. Large class sizes in East Asia help youngsters gain the expectation that teachers can’t respond to all of their personal issues. A child’s unique needs and concerns are of less importance than the well-being and social development of *all* children in the classroom group.
2. Studying how best to learn their language’s written characters familiarizes children with ways of mastering a demanding mental (and muscle-memory) task with rigor, discipline, and perseverance, qualities transferrable to other subjects and endeavors.

From Chapter 2:

3. Group orientation, with its emphasis on empathy, harmony, and shared objectives, is strongly inculcated in preschool classmates. In Japan, a key educational goal is the reduction of children’s individual differences.

From Chapter 3:

4. Preschoolers in Japan learn that there’s a right way to do something (*kata*) that everyone must master. The established process for learning it needs to be applied by the novice with active guidance and unsparing critiques by someone who already has mastered it.
5. Children are taught how to pay attention, how to interact with the teacher during a lesson, how to coordinate with peers, and how to share responsibility with the teacher for the efficient delivery of learning activities.

From Chapter 4:

6. People in East Asia think of “learning” not only in practical terms, but even more so in moral terms. The meaning they give to “good person” includes being a good student, one who studies long and hard.
7. Teachers use the internal logic of their subject matter as the principal driver of how they organize their lessons; they pay little attention to the unique needs, interests, and abilities of their individual pupils.

From Chapter 5:

8. Key characteristics of the East Asian culture of teaching are that teachers are thoroughly grounded in their academic specialties, that much time and thought go into their planning of each day’s lesson, and that teachers collaborate on the best ways to teach each lesson.
9. Teachers concern themselves with the most effective way to present lesson content so that *all* pupils in their class will be able to grasp it, with the proviso that the most able pupils will need to tolerate a slow pace, and the least able will need to apply determined effort.
10. A characteristic that applies to the interpersonal features of the cultures of East Asia is the “senior–junior” relationship pattern. It infuses the teacher–pupil relationship so that twin aspects of any teacher’s role are relating to pupils as (a) a caring pastor *and* (b) a demanding academic coach.

With the stage thus set by that integrated collection of assumptions and values, whole-class *interactive* learning emerges more or less organically.

Teacher, Learners, Knowledge, and Interactivity

Any formal learning situation comprises three key elements: teacher, learners, and knowledge. The role each plays varies from one classroom culture to another. In East Asia, how is each marshaled in support of whole-class *interactive* learning?

The Role of the Teacher in Whole-Class Interactive Learning: Given the cultural context created by the ten assumptions and values that we’ve just reviewed, people in East Asia came to believe that the most appropriate classroom role for teachers is one that probably is best characterized as *directive*.

It’s significant that the best characterization is not “authoritarian,” which implies rigidity, punishment, and emotional coldness. Primary school teachers in East Asia rarely act in an authoritarian manner. Most if not all of their pupils respect them as their pastors and coaches, and as experts who already have mastered the material to be learned. The pupils’ cultures have conditioned them to be receptive – attentive – to experts.¹ They see that their teachers are thoroughly prepared to present the contents of lessons. Consequently, acting in an authoritarian manner is rarely necessary for teachers *within the cultural context of East Asia*.

But that same cultural context makes it appropriate for teachers to be “directive” while presenting lessons in the sense that they *take charge of their pupils’ learning* in two ways:

- *Process management:* Teachers plan and direct the process by which pupils learn. For example, relative to Americans, Chinese teachers give more “regulatory instructions” before a classroom activity, thus proactively directing pupils’ step-by-step learning behavior.²
- *Content management:* Teachers in East Asia know their pupils very well, not only as individuals but also in terms of the group’s current level of progress with the content to be learned. Through experience and collegial collaboration, teachers know the aspects of a lesson that their pupils are

likely to find difficult to grasp. So teachers tweak and refine strategies that will foster their students' understanding.³ The resulting lesson is a complete and coherent experience; like a story, it has an interconnected beginning, middle, and end.⁴

Finally, teachers in East Asia are grounded not only in mastery of their respective academic fields but also in thorough familiarity with their pupils' textbooks. On these bases, they prepare and present each day's lesson.

Textbooks? We've barely mentioned textbooks so far. Textbooks in East Asia are strikingly different from American ones. We'll discuss their contents and appearance in Chapter 8.

The Role of the Pupils in Whole-Class Interactive Learning: Pupils in East Asia begin a lesson expecting activities to occur that are unlike those expected by pupils in the U.S. How they expect to behave, and why, is best described by using an analogy (but one that falls short, as we'll soon see):

The Religious Service Analogy. Imagine that you are attending a service at a church or synagogue. The activities of the service follow a pattern devised by, and proclaim teachings written by, wise elders in the past. The service is led by a religious leader who has prepared it carefully, drawing on years of theological study.

Your role is to watch and listen, appreciating (or not) the wisdom of the elders and the demeanor and oratorical skill of the leader. Most assuredly, *your role is never to interrupt*. You silence your phone, suppress your coughs, and don't even think of jumping in with a question about something you didn't "get." The service is set apart for the contemplation of the wisdom of those long-gone elders and the persuasive appeals of the living leader. This time also belongs to your fellow participants, who (like you?) presumably have come to gain mental or spiritual benefits. All of you show respect for this special time by remaining mentally engaged – and physically quiet. Consider:

- *The knowledge* that is the focus of an East Asian classroom lesson is analogous to the elders' wisdom that's the underlying reason for a religious service.
- *The teacher* in East Asia is analogous to the religious leader who has conscientiously prepared to deliver not only the elders' wisdom but also the entire experience. Like the religious leader, the teacher expects to deliver the experience *for all participants as a group*, not to use this special time to respond to the needs of individuals.
- *The pupils* are analogous to the participants in a religious service. They anticipate that their minds will follow wherever the leader leads, that their role is to participate amenably when expected to do so (such as reciting or chanting texts in unison), and that they must not interfere with the planned proceedings. Yes, they might have questions, new ideas, or even disagreements. Fine. But it's not appropriate to openly express any of them *now*.

Where this Analogy Falls Short. This analogy allows people to continue imagining that teachers in East Asia "lecture" to pupils who are "passive" listeners. That is false.

Pupils taught through "whole-class interactive learning" aren't just watching and listening. That's not possible because *teachers in East Asia frequently pose questions that arouse curiosity or reveal perplexity*, then call for responses from pupils by name (usually, *not* from volunteers).

Two of the leading scholars who studied East Asian primary schools had this to say:

Westerners whom we have accompanied to classrooms in East Asia are shocked by the frequency with which the teacher calls upon students for their opinions or explanation of a problem, then seeks the reaction of other students to what has been suggested.⁵

Two more things: First, classrooms in East Asia (especially Japan) are often described as having a “buzz.” Pupils are expected to confer with each other about the mental challenges coming from their teachers. Second, lessons are *never, ever interrupted* by all-school announcements, lunch-count monitors, or pupils being “pulled out” for special athletic or music practice sessions, or for compensatory instruction. Lessons hold a privileged place in the activities of an East Asian school.⁶

The Role of the Knowledge in Whole-Class Interactive Learning: *The knowledge* refers to whatever is to be learned: e.g., mathematics, reading, science, or history, or even something more skill-based such as art, music, or swimming. In this book we are concerned with how children in various parts of East Asia acquire academic knowledge.

American educators refer constantly to the distinctions separating “teacher-centered” and “child-centered” classrooms. Over the years, my experience with these two terms has been exactly like that of three respected researchers who wrote:

Looking across our interviews with U.S. early childhood educators, we find no instance of “teacher-directed” being used positively or of “child-centered” being used negatively. Indeed, the term “child-centered” functions as a metonym for progressive practice and “teacher-centered” as a metonym for regressive approaches.⁷

What I’ve noticed is that, while Americans vie with each other to praise child-centeredness and denigrate teacher-directiveness, *the knowledge* gets relatively little sustained attention. So the fundamental reason why children come to school is being overshadowed.

What is the role of the knowledge in American classrooms?

It hasn’t been totally forgotten. Rather, our teachers’ efforts to impart it have been driven less by the characteristics of the knowledge, more by the characteristics of the pupils plus a set of ideas about what it takes to engage pupils’ attention.

Whether or not that assessment resonates with you, you now should be able to recognize that the role of “the knowledge” in East Asian primary schools is significantly greater than it is in most American primary schools. This is one of the most important revelations of this book.

A noteworthy finding to emerge from research in this field concerns *interactive time-on-task*. It’s a measure of the percentage of the class period during which teacher and all pupils are united in focusing on the “task” – i.e., the knowledge – via instruction, explanation, and questioning (but not silent reading or seatwork). Drawing on several studies, a comparison was made between schools in the U.S. and China. The interactive time-on-task in China was 81% of class time; in the U.S. it was 44%.⁸

Let’s stop talking in generalizations and percentages. It’s time to visit some East Asian classrooms where academic lessons are underway.

[Immediately following in Chapter 6 are detailed accounts of three primary school lessons in China and Japan: lessons in language, social studies, and reading. The following chapter, Chapter 7, is focused solely on the teaching of mathematics in East Asian primary schools.]

Bibliography

Each of the following seven sources, plus 111 others, have been annotated by Cornelius Grove. These annotations are all available at amirrorforamericans.info/annotated-bibliography/.

- Lan, Xuezhao, Claire C. Ponitz, Kevin F. Miller, Su Li, Kai Cortina, Michelle Perry, & Ge Fang (2009). Keeping their attention: Classroom practices associated with behavioral engagement in first grade mathematics classes in China and the United States. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 24, 198–211.
- Stevenson, Harold W., & James W. Stigler (1992). *The Learning Gap: Why Our Schools Are Failing and What We Can Learn from Japanese and Chinese Education*. Simon & Schuster.
- Stevenson, Harold W., & Shin-ying Lee (1997). The East Asian version of whole-class teaching. *The Challenge of Eastern Asian Education*, W. Cummings & P. Altbach, eds. State University of New York Press, 33–49.
- Stigler, James W., & Harold Stevenson (1991). How Asian teachers polish each lesson to perfection. *American Educator*, 15 (1), 12–21, 43–47.
- Stigler, James W., & James Hiebert (1999). *The Teaching Gap: Best Ideas from the World's Teachers for Improving Education in the Classroom*. The Free Press.
- Teddlie, Charles, & Shujie Liu (2008). Examining teacher effectiveness within differentially effective primary schools in the People's Republic of China. *School Effectiveness and School Improvement*, 19 (4), 387–407.
- Tobin, Joseph, Yeh Hsueh, & Mayumi Karasawa (2009). *Preschools in Three Cultures Revisited*. University of Chicago Press.

¹ This was one of the principal points established in my 2017 book, *The Drive to Learn*. See especially Chapter 6, “Thinking Like a Sociologist.”

² Lan et al. (2009), 198–211. “Regulatory instructions” refers to “teacher organization for instruction that sets the stage for effective classroom functioning, including teacher efforts to preview classroom activities, present instructions about their completion, and provide clear expectations for student behavior” (p. 199). The seven-person research team compared Chinese and American first-grade math classes.

³ Stigler & Stevenson (1991), entire article.

⁴ The point about lessons in East Asia being an experience with a beginning, middle, and end is taken from Stigler & Hiebert (1999), 95–96.

⁵ Stevenson & Lee (1997), 34.

⁶ Tobin et al. (2009), 196. The authors also mention a religious service analogy, but do not develop it in detail.

⁷ *Ibid.*

⁸ Teddlie & Liu (2008), 398. The U.S. data came from “four studies conducted in the USA that included data from some 1,200 classroom observations in approximately 125 schools and 500 different classrooms.” The China data came from classroom observations in eight urban and four rural primary schools in Jilin Province, which is located to the north of North Korea. A measurement tool employed in the research was the Louisiana Components of Effective Teaching (LCET) Summary Form.