

English as a Foreign Language in Egypt and South Korea: A Comparative Study Through the Lens of the Bray–Thomas Cube

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Abstract

This comparative study examines English as a Foreign Language (EFL) education in Egypt and South Korea through the Bray and Thomas (1995) Cube framework, which calls for multilevel analysis across geographic/location entities, non-location demographic groups, and aspects of education. The paper traces how each country's EFL policy, teacher preparation, socioeconomic dynamics, and student outcomes have developed from their distinct historical and cultural starting points and where they now converge. Egypt's system carries the weight of a colonial-era curriculum heritage, underfunded public schools, and persistent gaps between policy rhetoric and classroom reality. South Korea, meanwhile, has undergone rapid and heavily state-driven EFL reform since the 1990s, yet continues to struggle with communicative language teaching implementation and a shadow-education sector that deepens inequality. Applying the Bray–Thomas Cube reveals that single-level comparisons miss the complexity of these two contexts: national policy documents tell only part of the story, and the picture shifts when classroom, institutional, and individual dimensions are brought into view. The study identifies shared structural tensions examination pressure, resource disparities, teacher proficiency concerns, and the gap between stated communicative goals and grammar-translation practice while accounting for the sociocultural particularities that shape how these tensions play out differently in Cairo and Seoul. Recommendations address curriculum reform, teacher development, and equity-oriented policy in both contexts.

Keywords: EFL, Egypt, South Korea, Bray–Thomas Cube, comparative education, curriculum policy, communicative language teaching

Introduction

English as a Foreign Language (EFL) sits at the intersection of national identity, economic aspiration, and global participation. How a country frames EFL in its schools reflects broader decisions about who gets access to which futures. Egypt and South Korea represent two societies that have both made EFL a central pillar of educational reform, yet arrived at their current systems through radically different historical, political, and economic trajectories.

Egypt's relationship with English dates to the nineteenth century and carries the marks of colonial-era priorities (Latif, 2016). South Korea's intensive EFL reform is more recent and was driven largely by a state-led push for global competitiveness from the 1990s onward (Chung & Choi, 2015). Both systems today grapple with the gap between communicative ambitions and examination-driven practice, between national policy mandates and what teachers actually do in classrooms, and between the EFL experiences of advantaged and disadvantaged learners.

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This paper applies the Bray and Thomas (1995) Cube as its organizing analytical framework. The Cube was introduced to challenge the assumption that comparing countries at the national level is sufficient for understanding educational phenomena. Bray and Thomas argued that comparative education must integrate multiple geographic levels (from the world region down to the individual) alongside non-locational demographic groups and the various aspects of education under study. This multilevel lens is particularly well-suited to EFL comparison, where classroom dynamics, institutional structures, regional resource disparities, and national policy can pull in different directions.

The study draws on peer-reviewed research retrieved through the Consensus academic database to examine EFL in Egypt and South Korea across three primary Cube dimensions: (a) geographic and locational levels (national policy, regional and institutional variation, classroom practice); (b) non-locational demographic groups (socioeconomic stratification, gender, rural versus urban populations); and (c) aspects of education (curriculum and policy, teacher preparation, learner outcomes, and the shadow-education sector). The analysis concludes with convergent and divergent findings and a set of recommendations for each system.

Theoretical Framework: The Bray–Thomas Cube

The Bray and Thomas (1995) Cube emerged from a critique that conventional comparative education focused almost exclusively on national-level differences. Bray and Thomas demonstrated that this approach yields “incomplete and unbalanced perspectives” by overlooking variation within countries—across states, districts, schools, classrooms, and individuals (p. 472). Their model arranges analysis along three axes: (a) geographic/locational entities, running from world regions through countries, provinces, districts, schools, and classrooms to individuals; (b) non-locational demographic groups defined by ethnicity, religion, gender, age, or socioeconomic status; and (c) aspects of education, including curriculum, teaching methods, finance, management, and outcomes.

The significance of this framework for EFL research is that it resists the illusion of a singular “Egyptian EFL system” or a singular “Korean EFL system.” What exists in the national curriculum document differs from what a rural schoolteacher does with limited materials, which in turn differs from the experience of a student attending a private language institute after school. Applying the Cube means holding all these levels simultaneously.

The present study applies the Cube’s three axes in the following way. The geographic axis organizes the analysis from national policy through regional and institutional variation to the classroom. The demographic axis attends to socioeconomic stratification and the urban–rural divide that shapes access to EFL in both countries. The aspects axis examines curriculum and policy, teacher education and proficiency, learner motivation and achievement, and the shadow-education sector. Together, these three orientations produce a more complete comparative picture than national-level policy analysis alone would permit.

EFL in Egypt: Historical Context and Current System

Historical Development

English has been taught in Egyptian schools since the 1860s, initially as an optional subject under British colonial influence, but it became compulsory over the following century (Latif, 2016). The colonial inheritance left a lasting imprint: English was linked to elite institutions and social mobility, while the majority of the population learned it in underfunded government schools with large class sizes and limited

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materials. In the decades following independence, successive curriculum reforms attempted to reframe English instruction around communicative goals, but implementation consistently lagged behind stated policy.

National Policy and Curriculum

Contemporary Egyptian EFL policy signals a commitment to communicative English language teaching (CELТ), yet research documents a persistent disconnect between official mandates and classroom practice. Ibrahim and Ibrahim (2017) found that despite ministry-level CELТ policies, most practicing teachers remained largely unaware of CELТ principles and lacked the training to implement them. Their mixed-methods study, drawing on 50 classroom observations, 100 teacher questionnaires, and 10 follow-up interviews, documented that grammar-translation and teacher-centered instruction remained the dominant modes of delivery.

Reform efforts have also targeted teacher education programs. Badawi (2019) developed a proposed internationalized curriculum for Egyptian preservice EFL teachers, finding that 73.9% of EFL majors were dissatisfied with existing preparation programs for failing to meet national and international standards. Badawi's document analysis identified seven curriculum standards that an internationalized program would need to address, drawing on frameworks from the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, Australian professional standards, and UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Teacher Preparation and Proficiency

Teacher quality is a recurrent concern in Egyptian EFL research. Mekheimer (2025) investigated challenges facing EFL teacher trainees in Egyptian faculties of education, finding significant difficulties with English language proficiency at program entry and with specialized academic language during training. Trainees also reported that curricula were theoretically overloaded and lacked practical application a structural mismatch that Mekheimer argues requires interdisciplinary curriculum reform, improved teaching methodologies, and strengthened cultural competence development.

The picture becomes more complex when inclusive education is considered. Abdallah (2024) documented that Egyptian EFL teacher education programs are currently ill-equipped to prepare teachers for students with special educational needs, a gap that compounds existing inequities in access to quality EFL instruction. Abdallah's proposed framework, developed through interviews with 50 teacher educators from seven Egyptian universities, identifies three components that a reformed program would need to address: pedagogical knowledge for diverse learners, positive teacher attitudes, and integrated ICT tools.

Pronunciation instruction represents a further gap. Abdelreheem (2025) found, through questionnaires with both Egyptian EFL learners and teachers, that pronunciation is systematically underprioritized, with students receiving little exposure to communicative pronunciation activities and both groups reporting that teacher qualifications remain a primary concern. The study recommended TEFL qualification requirements alongside degrees and the expansion of student-centered pronunciation activities.

Socioeconomic Stratification and Equity

When the demographic axis of the Bray–Thomas Cube is brought to bear, Egypt's EFL landscape reveals sharp stratification. Private language schools and international schools provide intensive, communicatively oriented English instruction to wealthier families, while public school students contend with overcrowded classrooms, insufficient materials, and teachers stretched across multiple levels. Latif (2016) traces how the establishment of schools with intensive English instruction and the earlier

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introduction of English to primary grades were policy moves that, in practice, often reinforced rather than reduced social stratification.

The Egypt–Indonesia comparison by Nurpitriyani et al. (2022) is instructive here. Their study identified student participation, class size, teacher competency, and curriculum implementation as shared challenges in both countries’ secondary-level EFL, pointing to systemic factors that are difficult to address through curriculum reform alone without accompanying investment in teacher development and infrastructure.

EFL in South Korea: Historical Context and Current System

Historical Development

South Korea’s EFL history took a different trajectory. English instruction became a priority in the post-Korean War period as the country rebuilt its economy with American support, but the decisive shift came in the 1990s when the government moved to replace grammar-translation and audiolingual methods with communicative language teaching. The 6th National Curriculum (1994) and the 7th National Curriculum (1998) introduced CLT, task-based learning, and learner-centered instruction; subsequent revisions in 2006, 2009, and 2015 extended and refined these approaches (Ahn, 2011; Chang, 2019).

Chung and Choi (2015) situate these reforms within a broader national discourse in which English proficiency became equated with individual competitiveness and national economic standing. The symbolic weight placed on English gave rise not only to extensive public school reform but to a sprawling private tutoring sector.

National Policy and Curriculum

Korean EFL policy is unusually detailed and frequently revised, which has generated what Shin (2020) calls “reform fatigue” among teachers. The Teaching English in English (TEE) policy, analyzed by Lee (2018) through discourse analysis of policy documents and teacher interviews, reflects ideologies of globalization and neoliberalism in which English proficiency serves economic rather than purely communicative ends. Lee found that teachers supported TEE in principle but suspected the policy and its certification process served political and economic agendas more than improved pedagogy. The native-speakerism problem complicates Korean EFL policy further. Jee and Li (2021) documented that South Korean stakeholders continue to favor speakers from specific native English-speaking countries as teachers reflected in the English Program in Korea (EPIK) recruitment criteria—while Korean preservice teacher education programs emphasize American and British linguistic content over authentic language use in global contexts. Rahman and Saputra (2021) reviewed these dynamics in relation to English as an International Language, recommending a reconceptualization of language policy and teacher recruitment to move beyond native-speakerism.

Oh and Kim (2023) conducted a comprehensive analysis of six revisions to Korea’s elementary English curriculum since 1997, finding that while the fundamental emphasis on interest and confidence in early English learning remained stable, content organization, achievement standards, and assessment approaches changed significantly across revisions. The simplification of teaching-learning standards and the shift from grade-specific to grade-group organization reflect ongoing tensions between standardization and flexible implementation.

Communicative Language Teaching: Policy vs. Practice

The implementation gap between CLT policy and classroom reality is the most extensively researched theme in Korean EFL literature. Li (2007), in a widely cited study of secondary school teachers, identified that the perceived difficulties in adopting CLT had their source in fundamental differences between the underlying educational theories of South Korea and Western CLT assumptions. Large class sizes, examination pressure, inadequate teacher preparation, and the disconnect between CLT's premises and the realities of EFL (as distinct from ESL) contexts were identified as the main barriers.

Jin and Yoo (2019) surveyed 52 Seoul middle and high school English teachers and found that CLT remained difficult to adopt more than two decades after its policy introduction. Teachers were aware of CLT's communicative goals but overwhelmingly relied on lecture-based, textbook-centered instruction, driven by the need to prepare students for the College Scholastic Ability Test (CSAT), which prioritizes grammar and reading. Howard and Millar (2008) followed up on Li's original study a decade later and found that the same constraints persisted despite ongoing reforms.

Jeon and Yin (2022) revisited the issue after 26 years of CLT implementation, using a three-round Delphi technique with 36 teachers, and found that the top-ranked issues had changed little since the 1990s. New issues had emerged—including COVID-19-related disruptions but the structural barriers of exam pressure, large classes, and inadequate teacher preparation remained dominant. This finding underscores a recurring pattern: policy documents change, but structural conditions do not.

Teacher Education

Yook (2022) provides the most comprehensive analysis of Korean EFL teacher beliefs and reform implementation, surveying 158 in-service teachers and conducting 10 three-interview cycles with classroom observations. The study found that most teachers held communication-oriented beliefs consistent with MOE reform directions, but their perceptions of specific reform policies were shaped by concerns about practical constraints and it was these perceptions, not beliefs, that most influenced classroom practice. Reform initiatives thus face a two-part challenge: winning teachers' commitment in principle (largely achieved) and addressing the structural conditions that prevent implementation in practice (largely unresolved).

Shin (2020) adds that Korean teachers feel burdened about teaching in English even when they are fluent, partly because they internalize native-speaker norms and partly because CLT methods developed in ESL environments do not translate well to a Korean EFL context where students have limited exposure to English outside the classroom.

Shadow Education and Socioeconomic Stratification

South Korea's hagwon sector private tutoring academies focused heavily on English represents one of the world's most developed shadow-education systems. Zhang and Yamato (2018) document that the hagwon system has been prominent for decades and is closely intertwined with policy discourses about academic achievement and social mobility.

Taylor (2024) found that hagwon attendance significantly enhances academic performance on standardized tests, particularly the CSAT, but also increases student stress, anxiety, and burnout while limiting social participation. The socioeconomic dimension is significant: wealthier families are more likely to afford hagwon services, and Choi and Choi (2016) found that government attempts to limit

hagwon operating hours had no significant effect on hours or resources spent on private tutoring, with demand proving especially inelastic for high school students from higher socioeconomic backgrounds.

Ryu and Lee (2024) used longitudinal data from the Gyeonggi Education Panel Study to show that early exposure to private English tutoring is significantly associated with both initial achievement levels and growth trajectories, and that urban–rural gaps in English achievement are likely to widen over time, partly because the correlation between private tutoring and achievement is stronger in urban areas. Brutt-Griffler and Kim (2022) link this dynamic directly to the CSAT: the testing culture devalues public school English education and drives students toward private lessons, with the result that speaking and writing competences precisely the communicative skills that official curricula prioritize are sacrificed to examination preparation.

Comparative Analysis Through the Bray–Thomas Cube

Geographic/Locational Dimension

At the national level, both Egypt and South Korea articulate EFL policies oriented toward communicative competence, yet both systems produce classroom practice dominated by grammar, translation, and examination preparation. This convergence at the level of stated policy and divergence at the level of enacted practice is a central finding when the Cube’s geographic axis is applied.

Moving down to the regional and institutional level, the two countries diverge sharply. South Korea has a relatively centralized system in which the Ministry of Education directly controls curriculum frameworks; variation occurs mainly between school levels (elementary, middle, high) and between public school instruction and the private hagwon sector. Egypt’s regional variation is starker: urban governorates, particularly Cairo and Alexandria, have access to private language schools, international schools, and teacher professional development resources that are largely absent in rural and Upper Egyptian governorates.

At the classroom level, both systems show teachers adjusting policy mandates to local realities often in ways that policy makers do not intend. Korean teachers interviewed by Li (2007) and Yook (2022) describe navigating the contradiction between CLT expectations and CSAT pressures. Egyptian teachers observed by Ibrahim and Ibrahim (2017) implement CELT-labeled lessons that are structurally teacher-centered and grammar-focused. In Bray and Thomas’s (1995) terms, the classroom level yields information about how policy is “translated” and often transformed in practice.

Non-Locational Demographic Dimension

Socioeconomic status is the non-locational demographic variable with the most consistent explanatory power in both countries. In Egypt, access to quality EFL depends heavily on the ability to pay for private instruction, international school enrollment, or supplementary tutoring. In South Korea, hagwon access is positively correlated with family income, and Ryu and Lee (2024) show that this correlation compounds over time, widening achievement gaps between advantaged and disadvantaged students.

The urban–rural divide overlaps with socioeconomic stratification in both contexts. Egyptian rural schools face teacher shortages, curriculum materials that assume urban contexts, and student populations with limited exposure to English outside school. Korean rural students show lower English achievement trajectories than urban counterparts, partly because private tutoring which has a larger effect on growth is less accessible outside metropolitan areas (Ryu & Lee, 2024).

Gender is a demographic dimension with less direct evidence in the studies reviewed, though Mekheimer (2025) notes that Egyptian teacher education programs enroll predominantly female students whose preparation does not adequately address the practical realities of mixed-gender, mixed-proficiency Egyptian classrooms.

Aspects of Education Dimension

Across curriculum and policy, both systems reveal the gap between policy ambition and structural capacity. Egypt's ministry-level CELT commitment is not matched by the teacher training, classroom resources, or assessment systems needed to make communicative teaching viable (Ibrahim & Ibrahim, 2017). South Korea's repeated curriculum revisions have not resolved the CSAT contradiction: the exam remains the primary driver of instructional decisions at the secondary level (Jeon & Yin, 2022).

Teacher preparation presents a notable structural difference. South Korea has invested more in formal in-service development including international exchange programs and TEE certification—but Yook (2022) and Shin (2020) document that these investments have not closed the gap between belief and practice. Egypt's teacher education programs are, in Badawi's (2019) assessment, structurally misaligned with both national and international standards, with majority dissatisfaction among trainees.

On learner outcomes, both systems produce learners who score better on grammar and reading tasks than on speaking and listening. Korean high school students, shaped by CSAT preparation, develop reading and grammar skills at the expense of communicative competence (Brutt-Griffler & Kim, 2022). Egyptian students face similar constraints, with Abdelreheem (2025) documenting that pronunciation and oral production are systematically underemphasized.

The shadow-education dimension distinguishes the two systems most sharply. South Korea has one of the world's most institutionalized private tutoring sectors, with hagwons representing a formal, heavily commercialized industry. Egypt's private tutoring exists but is less formally institutionalized and more fragmented though its distributional effects on access to quality EFL are structurally similar. In both cases, shadow education amplifies socioeconomic inequalities in EFL outcomes.

Key Convergences and Divergences

Convergences

Several structural tensions cross national boundaries. First, both systems operate under a communicative policy that outpaces teacher readiness and structural conditions. The CLT or CELT mandate exists on paper; the examination system and teacher preparation reality produce grammar-focused classrooms. Second, both systems generate socioeconomic stratification through supplementary private instruction, with wealthier families purchasing the communicative language practice that public schools fail to deliver. Third, teacher professional identity is a shared concern: Korean teachers feel burdened by native-speaker norms they cannot fully embody (Shin, 2020), while Egyptian teachers lack the training to translate policy into practice (Ibrahim & Ibrahim, 2017). Both populations carry the weight of unrealistic top-down expectations.

Divergences

The divergences are equally instructive. South Korea's EFL reform has proceeded from a more economically resourced base, with consistent government investment in teacher development, textbook revision, and evaluation infrastructure—even if outcomes remain disappointing. Egypt's reform operates

against a backdrop of larger class sizes, lower baseline teacher proficiency, more severe infrastructure constraints, and a colonial linguistic history that complicates the cultural ownership of English.

South Korea's shadow-education sector is formally institutionalized, commercially regulated (however imperfectly), and subject to state policy interventions. Egypt's private English instruction is more diffuse, less regulated, and embedded in a broader set of socioeconomic pressures that the state has less capacity to address.

The examination pressure in South Korea is, paradoxically, more singular and therefore more tractable: the CSAT is one instrument, and its reform would restructure incentives across the system. Egypt's assessment landscape is more fragmented across educational stages and institutional types, making systemic change harder to target.

Recommendations

Egypt

Egyptian EFL reform requires simultaneous work at multiple Cube levels. At the national policy level, curriculum frameworks should be realigned with assessment systems so that communicative goals are reflected in examinations rather than undermined by them. At the teacher education level, Mekheimer's (2025) call for interdisciplinary, practice-oriented reform of EFL teacher preparation programs deserves institutional attention; specifically, entry-level language proficiency requirements and practicum hours should be substantially increased. At the regional and institutional level, targeted investment in rural and Upper Egyptian schools is needed to close the resource gap that makes national policy equally nominal for all but practically accessible for few. Regarding the demographic axis, policies that provide quality EFL instruction within the public system—rather than relying on private supplementation—are necessary to prevent further stratification.

South Korea

South Korea's EFL system requires engagement with the CSAT contradiction as the primary structural barrier. Assessment reform that incorporates speaking and writing components would realign teacher and student incentives with communicative learning goals, as proposed by Brutt-Griffler and Kim (2022). Teacher professional development should shift from certification-based models (TEE certification) toward practice-oriented, locally grounded approaches that acknowledge the specific challenges of EFL rather than importing ESL assumptions. The hagwon sector's distributional effects warrant stronger equity-oriented policy: Choi and Choi's (2016) finding that curfew regulations failed to reduce tutoring consumption suggests that supply-side regulation is insufficient. Demand-side interventions—improving the quality and communicative orientation of public school English instruction—offer a more promising route to equity.

Conclusion

Comparing EFL in Egypt and South Korea through the Bray–Thomas Cube produces a richer and more uncomfortable picture than national-level policy comparison alone would permit. Both countries face the same fundamental contradiction: official EFL policy mandates communicative instruction while assessment systems, teacher preparation infrastructure, and socioeconomic stratification push practice in the opposite direction. Yet this shared contradiction is lived differently shaped by colonial history, examination culture, economic development, and the specific institutional forms that private tutoring takes in each society.

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The Cube's insistence on multilevel analysis is vindicated by the Egyptian and Korean cases. National policies look similar; classroom realities differ. Regional disparities within each country matter as much as differences between countries. Non-locational demographics—socioeconomic status above all—determine access to the communicative English instruction that both systems officially promise but structurally withhold from many students.

Meaningful EFL reform in either country will require working across multiple levels simultaneously: revising national curricula, reforming assessment, strengthening teacher preparation, and addressing the socioeconomic conditions that determine who benefits from formal instruction and who must rely on private supplementation. The Bray–Thomas framework does not offer a policy solution, but it prevents the analytical shortcuts that single-level comparisons invite—and in doing so, it keeps the real complexity of the problem in view.

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