

# Addressing Controversial Issues in Asian Classrooms: A Comparative Analysis of Psychological Safety and Discourse Spaces

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**Abstract:** This paper examines how macro-cultural and institutional frameworks across Asian nations shape classroom discourse ecosystems and psychological safety when introducing contentious topics. Employing literature analysis and a comparative regional perspective, it analyses disparities in classroom discourse spaces in China, Japan, South Korea, and Thailand. Findings reveal that Chinese classrooms exhibit high behavioural participation yet limited agency participation, constrained by traditional authority and face culture; Japan employs historical inquiry to construct emotional buffering mechanisms while expanding inclusivity toward gender and identity issues; South Korea's examination-driven system compels educators to create extracurricular third spaces for critical exploration; Thailand's transnational classrooms rely on explicit inclusivity commitments and intercultural competence to bridge cultural divides. Classroom culture serves as a microcosm of national will and social psychology, undergoing continuous evolution. Educators should respect local cultural logic while drawing on transnational experiences to construct inclusive pedagogical scaffolding, transforming classrooms into substantive communities of divergence that genuinely stimulate students' active participation.

**Keywords:** controversial issues, safe spaces, area studies, classroom teaching

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## 1. Introduction

The process of education and language learning is complex, driven by the interaction of multiple internal and social factors. Modern democratic education has moved beyond basic knowledge transfer, focusing instead on developing learners' civic skills for social progress. Integrating controversial topics into the classroom is now a crucial part of this educational change. Because these subjects naturally involve deep value conflicts and different interpretations, reaching a consensus based solely on factual information is difficult <sup>[1]</sup>.

Discussing these subjects requires psychologically safe spaces to protect learners from feeling marginalized or having their identities diminished during intellectual debates. While Western researchers have widely studied classroom psychological safety, the broader impact of classroom culture in non-Western contexts is still under-researched. Therefore, cross-cultural research is urgently needed to address this theoretical gap <sup>[2]</sup>. This paper takes a regional and national approach, selecting China, Japan, South Korea, and Thailand as comparative cases based on the maximum difference system design <sup>[3]</sup>. Although these four countries share a foundation of Asian collectivism and Confucian values, they differ significantly in their modernization paths, institutional development, and levels of global engagement, together representing the diverse spectrum of Asian educational discourse.

## 2. Theoretical framework

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## **2.1 The fundamental distinction between classroom culture and classroom atmosphere**

In educational research, there is a fundamental difference between classroom culture and classroom atmosphere. Atmosphere simply captures the temporary emotional responses and overall perceptions of those involved in teaching interactions. In contrast, culture represents a deeply rooted system of values and beliefs that remains stable over time. Therefore, analyzing how classroom discourse spaces are constructed requires examining the broader societal values and power structures unique to each country.

## **2.2 Critical reconstruction of psychological safety and discourse space**

In educational sociology, psychological safety refers to a group's shared belief that taking interpersonal risks is safe. However, focusing too much on psychological comfort can hinder the development of critical thinking [4]. Callan [5] addresses this issue by separating “dignity safety”—an ethical environment without stigma—from “intellectual safety”, which means avoiding cognitive conflict. High-quality education should protect learners’ dignity while intentionally challenging their intellectual boundaries. Building on this, Iversen [6] suggests transforming traditional safe spaces into “communities of divergence”, where conflicting viewpoints become valuable opportunities for constructive learning.

## **2.3 Developing Deep Student Engagement**

A secure psychological environment and a supportive classroom culture are fundamental requirements for fostering deeper student involvement. Engagement is a multi-layered concept that includes behavioral, emotional, cognitive, academic, social, and agency-driven dimensions. Across different national cultures, the presence or absence of a supportive environment directly determines whether students stay at the level of basic behavioral engagement—simply following instructions—or advance to agency-based engagement. In this higher stage, students actively challenge existing ideas and provide meaningful feedback to the teaching process.

## **3. China: Authority, face, and ecological reshaping**

Traditional Chinese classrooms generally rely on teacher-centered communication, where educators hold significant academic and evaluative authority [7]. When discussing controversial topics, many teachers prefer direct instruction, delivering fixed knowledge through standardized answers. Influenced by Confucian values that emphasize respecting teachers and scholarship, students are often cautious about questioning established authority [8]. In this collectivist culture, students actively try to avoid losing “face” or facing negative social judgment from public mistakes. As a result, they demonstrate high behavioral participation but limited independent, agency-based engagement.

However, the educational environment of Chinese classrooms is undergoing a significant transformation. Cross-cultural interactions in higher education provide opportunities to move beyond single-perspective teaching models [9]. Recent studies show that educators are building supportive environments based on psychological safety. This approach not only deepens student involvement but also boosts teachers’ professional energy and creativity [10]. This shift indicates that Chinese classrooms are developing more inclusive discussion spaces, making them better suited for exploring complex issues.

## **4. Japan: Risk-averse culture and explorations in inclusion**

Unlike China’s authority-driven classrooms, Japan’s educational culture features a distinctly risk-averse communication model. In social studies, Japanese teachers act as strong gatekeepers of information. When tackling complex and controversial historical topics like World War II, they use inquiry-based learning to create an emotional buffer. By presenting various historical sources and international perspectives, educators step back from being absolute authorities to become facilitators; this allows for objective comparison while protecting students’ dignity and psychological safety [11].

As social structures evolve, classroom discussions in Japan are slowly expanding to include modern identity politics. Recent studies show that language teachers are actively challenging traditional gender norms by using inclusive language and welcoming multiple perspectives when discussing diverse identities, including gender and sexual minorities [12]. This transition indicates that rather than simply avoiding controversy, Japanese educators are now

proactively addressing minority rights and identity issues in their classrooms.

### **5. South Korea: Exam-driven discipline and third spaces**

South Korean classrooms highlight a sharp conflict between democratic educational goals and an exam-centric system. While the national curriculum heavily promotes multicultural education and encourages teachers to help build students' tolerance for diverse cultures <sup>[13]</sup>, actual classroom practice tells a different story. Strict standardized testing, textbook censorship, and administrative control force classroom discussions toward uniformity, reducing complex debates to a practical search for one correct answer <sup>[14]</sup>.

Despite the immense pressure of the mainstream exam system, Korean teachers show strong professional resilience by creating alternative “third spaces” for their students. For example, a study involving Korean female high school students showed that teachers successfully fostered critical literacy by forming extracurricular reading and writing groups. In these spaces, away from exam stress, students participated in deep discussions about gender equality and social justice, showing significant civic empowerment <sup>[15]</sup>.

### **6. Thailand: Local evasion and transnational inclusion**

At the local basic education level, particularly in regions with specific socio-political contexts such as Southern Thailand, educators exhibit heightened caution when addressing historical and political controversies. In environments where psychological safety remains insufficiently established, some educators adopt a pedagogy of avoidance as a self-protective strategy, slowing the pace of controversy exploration within local contexts <sup>[16]</sup>.

In stark contrast, Thailand's international joint degree programmes experience heightened cultural heterogeneity due to transnational student mobility. Empirical research indicates that introducing inclusive discourse as an explicit pedagogical intervention significantly enhances students' psychological safety and cross-cultural engagement <sup>[17]</sup>. Notably, the efficacy of inclusive environments depends not solely on declarations by teaching staff but is also moderated by learners' intercultural competence. Individuals possessing higher intercultural competence more effectively decode cultural differences and establish collaborative relationships, indicating that psychological safety relies on a bidirectional dialogue mechanism between teachers and students' intercultural understanding capabilities.

### **7. Implications for Chinese classroom teaching from an Asian perspective**

Drawing on innovative practices from neighbouring Asian countries and considering endogenous transformations within China's educational ecosystem, Chinese educators may deepen the instructional design of contentious topics through the following dimensions.

#### **7.1 Rethinking the teacher's role in controversial topic instruction**

Introducing contentious topics constitutes a vital pathway for cultivating learners' critical thinking. Based on Wang and Wang <sup>[10]</sup>, Chinese educators should regard fostering psychological safety as an opportunity to renew their professional engagement. Drawing on Callan's framework <sup>[5]</sup>, teachers may precisely distinguish between intellectual safety and dignity safety: encouraging cognitive engagement while rigorously upholding ethical boundaries of mutual respect, thereby mitigating learners' psychological defences against perceived social stigma.

#### **7.2 Building inclusive discourse spaces within and beyond the classroom**

To transcend the dual constraints of conventional classroom pacing and established discursive norms, educators may draw upon South Korean practice by employing interdisciplinary projects to establish extracurricular exploration domains for cultivating critical thinking. Simultaneously, drawing upon practices from Thailand and Japan, explicitly introducing inclusive discourse at the outset of teaching provides legitimacy scaffolding for minority perspectives, thereby rebuilding mutual trust between teachers and students.

#### **7.3 Diversifying classroom interaction to promote deeper student participation**

To enrich classroom interaction layers, educators should strive to elevate student participation from behavioural engagement to proactive agency-based involvement. Teaching methods such as inquiry-based learning, role-playing, and policy simulations may be strategically introduced. This role-disengagement design effectively alleviates learners'

identity burdens, fostering the gradual cultivation of a critical and inclusive community of disagreement within the cultural soil of Chinese classrooms.

## 8. Conclusion

This paper examines the different approaches of four Asian countries in classroom discussions on controversial topics from a macro-comparative perspective. The analysis reveals that the classroom is never a neutral space, but rather a reflection of each nation's historical traditions, institutional arrangements, and social transformations.

The four cases collectively reveal a pattern: institutional pressure cannot entirely dictate classroom practices. Teachers consistently find ways to adapt within their constraints, Japanese educators employ inquiry-based learning to mitigate the emotional tension of historical topics, South Korean teachers carve out spaces for extracurricular discussions amid exam-oriented systems, while international classrooms in Thailand break down cultural barriers through explicit inclusive commitments. This demonstrates that teachers' initiative plays a more significant role in practice than institutional structures. Of course, this initiative has its limits: in contexts with the highest institutional pressure (such as South Korea's highly exam-focused environment), truly in-depth classroom discussions often occur outside formal curricula. It can be said that the tension between institutional constraints and teacher agency is the core issue shared by controversial topic teaching across Asia.

From a theoretical perspective, this comparative analysis further corroborates Callan's distinction between dignity safety and intellectual safety: effective classrooms are those that protect students from humiliation while not avoiding intellectual clashes. Iversen's proposed communities of disagreement is also more practical than the traditionally defined safe space, particularly in environments where cultural consensus has long suppressed diverse voices. It should be noted that this study has certain limitations: this study relies entirely on existing literature rather than primary data, and the depth of research coverage varies across the four countries, with the Thai section particularly requiring more robust empirical research to supplement. Additionally, how individual teacher factors (such as teaching experience, disciplinary background, and values) interact with national institutional environments remains a direction worthy of in-depth exploration. Longitudinal studies tracking specific classrooms would also provide insights difficult to capture through cross-sectional comparisons.

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