

# Academia, Angst, and Identity: Reflections on *Eikaiwa* and Teacher Training

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The role of formal training and academic research in the professional development of teachers and the extent to which it guides their classroom practice is an ongoing source of debate within the field of language education. Freeman and Johnson (1998) identified a significant gap existing between what researchers or teacher training programs deem to be effective for language learning and the realities of a highly contextualised classroom setting shaped by local and institutional tensions. Conversely, a number of research studies (Borg, 1998b; Rankin & Becker, 2006) have demonstrated ways, such as raising awareness of correction techniques or exposing teachers to inductive teaching methods, that formal teacher training and knowledge of relevant research can indeed shape the approach teachers adopt in addressing ground level classroom issues.

An area of Japanese English language teaching that arguably lies in almost complete isolation from research findings and professional training programs is the English conversation school (called *Eikaiwa* in Japanese) industry. *Eikaiwa* schools sprawl the entirety of Japan and despite being a three billion dollar a year industry (U.S. Commercial service, 2015), often lack sound hiring policies or basic training for teaching staff (Bossaer, 2003). *Eikaiwa* schools offer one of the few opportunities for Japanese English language learners to maintain contact with English post-university and, despite this, schools are often more interested in hiring what they deem to be physically (or racially) appealing foreign staff rather than being concerned with the pedagogical value of classes (Bailey, 2007; Kubota, 2011). There is a marked lack of research available on the private English school sector (Lowe, 2014), suggesting the need for an increased focus on what is actually happening in *eikaiwa* schools.

This narrative article follows my journey through my MA TESOL program and looks at how the formal training I received influenced my practice and led to a sense of belonging within a community of teachers. What I experienced during this time reshaped my self-conceptualization as a teacher and led me to define my role within *eikaiwa* as a catalyst for change rather than simply a commodified entity within an institution not much concerned with pedagogical value.

## The Role of Formal Training and Research

The debate over the value of formal training and research in informing classroom level pedagogical practice remains, to date, unresolved. Addressing the effectiveness of formal teacher training, Freeman and Johnson (1998) claim that much of what goes on in standard teacher preparation fails to utilize the inherent value of real teacher perspectives, experiences, and the sociocultural settings in which they are formed. Furthermore, they postulate that, as Second Language Acquisition (SLA) research is often not easily applied to language classrooms, the value of such theoretical knowledge may be of limited value in both teacher development and practice.

Several other studies in teacher development have, however, suggested teacher training and an awareness of SLA theory can have a beneficial effect on both teachers' beliefs and how they translate into practice. In a study conducted in a German as a foreign language classroom, Rankin and Becker (2006) reported that the participant teacher, following exposure to research articles on corrective feedback in tandem with reflective practice, was found to adapt and utilize ideas from formal studies in his own teaching. Borg (1998b) also found, in a study of a native speaker teacher's approach to grammar teaching in an English as a Foreign Language context, that formal training played a significant role in constructing and solidifying his beliefs on student-centered inductive teaching.

In her article on the role of TESOL academic research, Ur (2012) has offered a compromise between the two positions. While conceding that many researchers have extremely limited experience in pedagogy, thus calling for caution when applying findings to the classroom, she also supports the notion of research exposing teachers to new ideas. The article concludes that if research is evaluated through the lens of practical experience and contextual awareness, it can indeed be of value to the classroom. This perspective highlights the notion that although we should not throw the baby out with the bathwater and totally disregard the pedagogical value of research, teachers need to carefully evaluate, based on their experience and professional skills, the degree to which an academic study has practical merit.

## Eikaiwa Schools

Far from being primarily an educational institution, in a study on the ideology and motivations lying behind the *eikaiwa* school model, Kubota (2011) presents the business as being based on “leisure and consumption”. Rather than for the purposes of language acquisition, many students regarded *eikaiwa* classes purely as a hobby or a form of escapism through the act of spending time in close proximity to foreign instructors. Kubota also found that the type of foreigner that was promoted by the company and preferred by customers was based on a narrow, clearly defined image – Caucasian and generally male. This deeply engrained image, still prevalent in modern *eikaiwa* schools, was highlighted in detail by Bailey (2007). Through a qualitative investigation of English conversation school students, Bailey investigated how desire, gender, and race shape the expectations and everyday realities within this setting. Bailey found that eroticism between Caucasian men and Japanese women, the interaction of gender and power, and the promotion of Occidentalism including the “ideal” foreign man were key components of the *eikaiwa* experience. As was found in Kubota’s research, concerns related to pedagogical standards or SLA did not strongly feature.

Born, in part, from the markedly non-academic nature of many conversation schools, an often controversial and low grade image surrounds the *eikaiwa* industry in Japan. In an article for the Japan Times, McNeill (2004) draws parallels between modern *eikaiwa* and the fast food industry, in that both industries currently feature high turnover rates, low salaries, demanding schedules, and a lack of social security benefits. Mirroring Kubota’s findings, this article also defines the conversation lessons as “a cheap and trendy pastime”. In a study investigating varying perspectives on professionalism in *eikaiwa*, Bossaer (2003) conducted interviews with both Japanese managers and foreign teachers from five different conversation schools in Hokkaido, Japan. The study found that poor hiring policies, a lack of support for professional development, and a reluctance to involve teachers in decision making were major concerns for foreign staff whereas the Japanese managers stated that they wanted the foreign teachers to give more consideration to business concerns rather than pedagogical issues.

The research currently available centered on the world of *eikaiwa* suggests fractured and tempestuous relationships, both between foreign and Japanese standpoints as well as between overlapping spheres of education and entertainment.

## Starting Out

Having just been released from the unrelenting production line format of a major chain *eikaiwa* company, my new local *eikaiwa* position seemed like heaven. I had a relaxed dress code, a leisurely schedule and the ability to once again flex my creative muscles in lesson planning. Add to this a new apartment, time for long-neglected hobbies and new co-workers, it felt like a new start. Having been marked as a popular instructor in my previous school and a reliable Assistant Language Teacher in public school before that, I was

full of confidence in that I knew what I was doing in the ESL (or whatever acronym I thought I knew the meaning of) game and that I could float along on autopilot whilst enjoying the good life. And I was right. Every week, I would turn on my best “kind foreigner” routine and attempt to engage students in broken English conversation in any way I could. All of this whilst making sure that I didn’t push them too hard because, in the world of *eikaiwa*, the customer is always right. This was cemented by frequent reassurances from the Japanese staff that I was indeed “*ninki*” (popular) and my lessons were “*tanoshii*” (fun). That sounded great. I was an exemplary employee.

But was I a good teacher? If I really looked at myself, my lessons, and, most importantly, my students, I could not shake an awkward feeling that had been festering under the surface since my earliest experiences in Japan as a fresh-faced ALT; the students aren’t really improving. Of course, the easy schedule and marked lack of concern from the company about this issue helped to temporarily distract me from this sense of unease but I could never shake it completely, especially as I saw students continuing to hand over envelopes full of cash for tuition fees every month.

After about a year of floating along in the school, two new workers were thrust upon us that together dragged these uncomfortable feelings to the surface and forced me to address what lay behind them. They were M, a young woman who though, only still in her early 20s, had already received her MA TESOL from a prestigious school and J, a young man, a few years younger than me, who had also graduated from a leading MA TESOL program in the U.S. These two teachers emanated ambition, drive and passion, and I immediately felt dethroned and threatened. They did not belong in our school. Their ambition and qualifications seemed alien and ill-fitting in the world of English teaching I had experienced in the years up to that point. I had never met anyone like them before and as I listened to their conversations, full of alien-sounding acronyms and terms, I felt as if I was getting a glimpse into a world that had previously been hidden from me.

As the weeks and months went on, my fear and dented pride morphed into a fascination that both M and J fostered by offering me books and articles to check out that I hoped would allow me more access to their conversations and ideas. Although the material was initially often impenetrable and exhausting, I kept going and, together with discussions in the teachers’ office, I was able to flesh out some basic principles that repeatedly popped up. What I also came to realize was that some of these principles were deeply at odds with what I and the school in general were doing for our students. The festering feeling that had remained beneath the surface for years had developed into something that I could no longer ignore.

## Lashing Out

Through a desire to develop both my teaching ability and theoretical knowledge, I started to work on gaining a variety of different qualifications through teaching groups based in Tokyo and through online resources. These experiences had a profound effect on how I was able to utilize my class time

effectively and increased the degree to which I was able to interact with M and J, my two adopted *senpai* (a Japanese word for an upperclassman or upperclasswoman). However, exposure to SLA theory and methodological discussion also opened a Pandora's box for me in terms of the way I viewed the *eikaiwa* and my role within it. I began to be confronted with points of view that implied that a lot of the policies within the school were actually detrimental to learning and that the lack of assessment or any formal curriculum highlighted a lack of concern for linguistic development. Furthermore, the realization that the school had minimal interest in either the qualifications that I was attempting to get or the achievements that my *senpai* had already struggled to make slowly but surely edged me towards a mindset where I grew to resent almost everything that *eikaiwa* stood for. I saw my school's administration as con artists, duping students out of money, luring them into class with white faces and descriptions of teachers that resembled dating website profiles whilst lying to them about how they would become fluent speakers by sitting in class for an hour a week.

Following a chat with one of the presenters of a TESOL course in Tokyo, I applied to enter the MA TESOL program at Kanda University of International Studies. This was to be a decision that was to have a far reaching effect on how I looked at my own position as a teacher and as a member of the English language teaching community in Japan. The modules that I took in this course were very practical in focus and exposed me to an even wider and richer range of perspectives on what we should be focusing on in language teaching. An important point that was introduced to us early in the program was how, in the post method era, we should be able to choose what elements of instruction work for us and combine them as we see fit as teachers with our own "sense of plausibility" (Prabhu, 1990). Plausibility refers to a true belief in that what we are doing in class is causing learning to happen. The freedom and flexibility that the notion of plausibility gives teachers, in spite of whatever methodology is fashionable at any one time, appealed to me a great deal and remained in my mind throughout my MA classes.

Despite the enormous amount of positive experiences I was having in my MA program, I was still, however, unable to shake off the contempt I began to feel towards *eikaiwa*. This was eventually heightened even further as, through my background reading, I became more and more engrossed in critical pedagogy literature and started searching out as much information as I could on analysis of the *eikaiwa* industry, native-speakerism, and racism in Japan. This literature served to confirm everything I was feeling and with every article I read, I felt a kind of puerile cathartic satisfaction, like I was getting back at, in some small way, what I viewed to be an immoral enterprise.

## Leveling Out

My trips down from Tochigi to the graduate school in Tokyo became a kind of sanctuary for me, a place where I could step out of the edutainment production line and catch my breath for long enough to reinvigorate my passion for teaching and gain some perspective on what I was doing week in, week out. As my courses progressed, it seemed as if the volume of my own angsty anti-*eikaiwa* one-man band was being softened and was giving way to something more productive and deeper than self-obsessed teenage snarling.

Through conversations with both my classmates and professors, my eyes were slowly opened to the plethora of struggles faced daily by teachers in junior high, high school, and university and the way that their creativity and passion often allowed them to overcome even the most rigid obstacles standing before them. On the other hand, I also heard stories of seemingly impossible institutional barriers suffocating both teachers and students. This sharing of teacher stories and the efforts by our professors to adapt the concepts we were studying to each of our individual contexts allowed me to understand that my frustrations and complaints were by no means only existent in *eikaiwa*. This fostered a real sense of camaraderie with people I saw as "real teachers", something that, in my self-assigned outsider status, I had never really felt beforehand. This feeling of belonging to a community of teachers spurred me to move past the problems of *eikaiwa* and seek to bring about positive change to both my classroom and the wider sphere of the conversation school industry.

One idea that stuck with me during my time in graduate school originated from the highly respected scholar and educator, Leo Van Lier, who said: "Reform thus occurs from the bottom up, one pedagogical action at a time" (Van Lier, 1996, p158). When I first heard these words, I thought it was a nice idea but did not really consider it deeply. It was not until I started putting the pieces together in terms of developing my own teacher beliefs, working together with my peers, and working towards positivity that I was able to truly appreciate and feel empowered by what Van Lier was saying. In this sense, my formal training, the community I have adopted and the wealth of perspectives I have been exposed to has flipped my conception of what it means to be a teacher on its head. Had I not made that step and committed myself to the MA, I believe that the energy and drive that had existed within me as I nervously sat in my application interview in Kanda almost two years ago would now have been replaced with tired acceptance of the seemingly unalterable. Furthermore, the knowledge and ideas that I have developed through my training and my interest in formal research have led to a great many developments in my everyday teaching. These include the introduction of an extensive reading program, the construction of a monthly newsletter where students share written work, an increased focus on transcribing my lessons and teaching reflectively, attempts to foster student autonomy through the use of mobile assisted language learning, and the use of awareness raising activities designed to encourage students to view non-native speakers of English as role models. Without exposure to new ideas through research and training, none of this would have existed.

Do I still believe *eikaiwa* to be a racist, deeply exploitative and educationally ineffective institution? Unfortunately, yes. But I no longer think that it has to be. As I move from being a devalued "foreign worker" to becoming a member within a community of "real

teachers”, I feel a responsibility to raise awareness of the issues existing in the sphere within which I work. I would like to see all teachers interested in transforming *eikaiwa* basing their suggestions for change on research as well as what we can feasibly enact within our own particular contexts. Through an informed and measured approach, I hope that we can go some way to challenge the status quo and make the transformation of *eikaiwa* a work in progress.

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