

# Exploring Teacher Demotivation in Eikaiwa Schools in Japan

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Private language (eikaiwa) schools are common in Japan (METI, 2019) and motivation among native speaker English teachers in those schools is important but under-researched. Following Taylor's (2017) exploratory study of the experience of foreign teachers at a national eikaiwa chain, this paper draws upon data collected from interviews with native speaker English teachers at national chains and independent eikaiwa schools in order to further investigate demotivating factors, and attempts to ascertain any difference in the demotivating factors present in different types of eikaiwa school. This paper will also show that teachers' perceptions of five aspects of the working conditions at eikaiwa schools were found to negatively affect their motivation: (a) lack of options for career advancement, (b) inadequate training, (c) difficult relationships with colleagues, (d) the management-teacher relationship, (e) company infringement on personal time. The author will suggest areas for future research.

**E**ikaiwa, or English language conversation, schools comprise a significant portion of the English education market in Japan. A recent estimate valued the industry at \$2,772 million (U.S. Commercial Service, 2015). The prevalence of eikaiwa schools in Japan may be due to the perceived inadequacy of the regular school system in providing opportunities to develop students' communicative competence (Aspinall, 2006). There have been calls for more research into eikaiwa schools because despite their prevalence, existing research is scarce (Nuske, 2014; Hooper, 2016; Taylor, 2017). In particular, eikaiwa school teacher motivation is an under-researched but important topic. The large number of instructors employed and learners engaged in studying at eikaiwa schools nationwide (METI, 2019) mean that the impact on English education in Japan is potentially significant.

This research follows Taylor's (2017) exploratory study of the experience of foreign teachers at a national eikaiwa chain, in which teachers' perceptions of five aspects of the working conditions at a national chain were found to negatively affect their motivation: lack of options for career advancement, inadequate training, difficult relationships with colleagues, the management-teacher relationship, and perceived company infringement on personal time.

The purpose of this study was to further investigate the experience of foreign English teachers at eikaiwa schools in Japan, to learn the extent to which those demotivating factors exist in other eikaiwa schools, and to ascertain any difference in the demotivating factors present in different types of eikaiwa school.

In this paper, I define national chains as companies with branches throughout Japan, and independent schools as "smaller, owner-operated companies" (Nuske, 2014, p. 123).

## Methodology

### Participants

Participants were found through a convenience sample using personal networks and requests posted online. The participants' information is summarised in Table 1. All were native speakers from inner circle countries, and 5 were Caucasian. National chains have been given pseudonyms because some participants worked for the same company, but as there were no instances of any of them working in the same independent school, those institutions have not been given names.

Pseudonym	Gender	Nationality	National chain experience	Independent school experience
Liam	male	Canadian	Yes; National Chain X	Yes; 3 schools (1 as owner)
Mark	male	Australian	Yes; National Chain X	No
Mike	male	American	No	Yes; 2 schools (1 as owner)
Raymond	male	American	Yes; National Chain X	No
Steve	male	South African	Yes; National Chains Y and Z	Yes; 3 schools
Toni	female	Canadian	Yes; National Chain Y	Yes; 1 school

**Table 1: Participants**

### Positionality

I worked as an instructor at National Chain X for almost 2 years (2012-2014) and felt that the issues raised in the previous study reflected the feelings I held by the end of my tenure. This may have impacted upon my interpretation of the data and possibly the interviews themselves in the current study. Additionally, the Caucasian native speaker status of 5 of the 6 participants matched my own, which may have enabled them to relate and respond to me more easily. Furthermore, as participants were drawn from my personal networks, there is a risk that in some cases our prior relationship affected their answers, consciously or not.

## Instrument

Participants were interviewed once each for approximately 1 hour. I opted for interviews instead of surveys because interviews allow deeper discussion of motivation and personal experiences (Richards, 2009). Questions were developed with reference to the demotivating factors that emerged from the previous study, and with the intention of encouraging interviewees to expand on their answers. An interview guide can be seen in Appendix A. Follow-up questions were asked via e-mail and social media to clarify certain points that arose during the interviews.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Data were collected qualitatively from six current eikaiwa teachers through semi-structured Skype interviews, except for one teacher who was interviewed by phone. Face-to-face interviews were impossible due to the geographical locations and work schedules of myself and the participants. The interviews were transcribed and quotations related to the five demotivating factors outlined in the Introduction were drawn from the data by hand. These factors were chosen as they emerged prominently in the previous and current studies.

In the following section I show the findings of the data collection.

## Findings

As in Taylor (2017), data were collated in relation to five areas of interest: (a) lack of options for career advancement, (b) inadequate training, (c) difficult relationships with colleagues, (d) management-teacher relationships, (e) perceived infringement on personal time. As a result of these issues, participants felt a variety of negative emotions that resulted in them not enjoying their work, and in some cases not wanting to continue to work. In this section I will deal with each of these five areas, presenting the data from the interviews.

### Lack of Options for Career Advancement

Teachers believed that their options for career advancement in national chains were severely limited, and that although some opportunities did exist, they were seen as mostly undesirable. In National Chain X, Liam believed that part of the problem was that many teachers would only stay short-term, and often treated the job like a “vacation”. Raymond referred to a colleague who had been at the same chain for more than a decade but had not moved past middle management, which led him to feel that there was “no way...that we could reach any higher position.” Steve and Toni spoke about job openings in various sections of National Chain Y throughout Japan, but Toni explained that she did not pursue them because she “didn’t want to move” and because she thought the salary offered for management positions was not different enough considering the extra responsibilities and workload.

In the independent schools, participants also felt the potential for career advancement was limited, although this may be due to the nature of the schools: in a small business, new positions are unlikely to become available frequently. Toni mentioned possibly becoming a manager if her boss opened more branches, but thought this was unlikely as her boss did not have active expansion plans. Toni saw her other options as remaining in the same position or leaving the school and possibly industry. As school owners, Mike and Liam also had limited options for career advancement, but both professed to be happy with their respective situations. It seems, therefore, that teachers in both types of school perceived a lack of chances for career advancement, and when such chances did exist, they were seen as undesirable. This seemed to be more strongly demotivating for teachers in national chains.

### Inadequate Training

Provisions for training were criticised by teachers in national chains. Raymond described the initial training in National Chain X as “rushed” and insufficient, adding that he did not receive follow-up training as promised. He saw ongoing training as a waste of time. Liam called National Chain X’s training “horrible” and “terrible,” but Mark was slightly more positive, conceding that initial training was “probably helpful.” Raymond was worried that without a background in Education he would have been “intimidated and confused” by initial training. Similar concerns were voiced by Liam and Mark, who believed that their lack of such a background combined with the quality of the training led to their poor performance early in their careers. Such concerns were also mentioned by Steve and Toni when discussing National Chain Y. They felt that initial training left them insufficiently prepared for teaching alone. Steve said that ongoing training in National Chain Z was not beneficial.



Teachers’ experiences of training in independent schools were less negative. Liam recalled a boss who encouraged teachers to attend professional development events, and he felt that “she wanted her teachers to improve.” However, that boss did not offer in-house training. Toni enjoyed a “really efficient” training period at an independent school, but was “disappointed” that it was at a reduced salary. Liam and Toni had prior teaching

experience so the lack of training, while disappointing, did not appear to have a drastic demotivating effect. Mike's first experience in an independent school was that the lack of training led to him and the manager "butting heads all the time." He learnt that "if you don't train [your employees] properly, there's gonna be dissatisfaction." The interviewees felt varying degrees of frustration and dissatisfaction when faced with training programmes in both types of school that they believed were insufficient, low quality, and a waste of their time. They felt that the training programmes did not provide them with the tools to do their job to a high standard. Training seemed, however, to be more of a demotivating factor in national chains than in independent schools.

### Difficult Relationships with Colleagues

Participants in this study enjoyed mostly positive collegial relationships, but all had colleagues with whom they endured negative relationships for various reasons. Having to work with those colleagues caused the participants to feel stressed and less enthusiastic about going to work.



Several interviewees mentioned their frustration with colleagues in national chains who they felt were not pulling their weight. Toni said she had coworkers in National Chain Y who she thought "were not doing a good job" and that she would try to avoid them. Discussing the same chain, Steve used the phrase "taihen [difficult] teachers" to describe those who he felt were more concerned with partying or travelling than doing their job. When talking about his time at National Chain Z, Steve felt "resentful, irritated" and "angered" by colleagues he thought were lazy, which led him to feel "demotivated." In National Chain X, Raymond referred to a personal situation that arose between him and a colleague that made him decide to keep his distance. Mark had problems with two co-workers, one of whom he thought "set out to destroy" him although he didn't know why, and another with whom he stopped talking because of what he considered the colleague's childishness.

Interviewees expressed fewer problems with colleagues at independent schools, perhaps due in part to the fact

that they had fewer colleagues. Problems that did exist revolved around family: Steve had a lazy coworker who was the boss's brother; the administrative worker in the independent school where Toni worked was the boss's son. In both cases, the pre-existing relationship between those others created uncomfortable situations for the interviewees. In the school that he owned, Liam said that he and his co-owner, despite being friends, did not communicate as much as he would have liked due to "hard-headedness" and personality differences. Participants' difficult relationships with colleagues in both types of school caused various negative emotions and made going to work arduous and stressful for them.

### Management-Teacher Relationships

The management-teacher relationship also emerged as a demotivating factor. Participants suggested that strained relationships with management made them feel discriminated against, "stressed", "jaded", underappreciated, and harassed.

Raymond felt that communication with the management in National Chain X was "scarce", while Toni believed that National Chain Y's management "didn't really care" about any of the teachers as people. Toni talked about her direct, non-Japanese manager, who she thought was "biased and sexist" in his decisions about scheduling, but when she complained to him and his manager, she said he made her schedule harder. By the end of her time at the company, she felt she was "giving so much and not getting anything" in return. Mark had experience working in middle management in National Chain X, but even in that position he felt that his fellow managers and superiors did not support him in various situations. This made him feel "jaded," "let down," and "very stressed." He said he often found work "very, very non-enjoyable."

According to the interviewees, relationships with managers in independent eikaiwa schools seemed to be more positive, but there were still some negative experiences. Steve worked in a school where he thought the management style was "very laissez-faire" and that the manager did not appreciate any of his work. Mike talked about a manager who seemed to dislike him asking her for help and recalled an occasion where she spent an hour berating him for it. Liam felt that there was "a lot of micromanaging" at one school, including regular phone calls about what he thought were "pointless complaint[s]" about something that was really unimportant, such as what colour whiteboard marker he used.

The data give several examples of teachers in both types of school feeling let down and not supported by management, and in more than one case the behaviour almost seems to extend to harassment or bullying. Several interviewees explicitly stated that the negative relationship with management was a factor in them no longer wanting to work for that employer and actively seeking new employment.

## Perceived Infringement on Personal Time

The participants in this study also perceived an infringement on their personal time by the national chains and, as in Taylor (2017), travel was a thorny issue for some. Steve and Toni felt that as more experienced teachers during their time at National Chain Y, they were being asked to do more travelling than their less experienced colleagues, which led Steve to feel he was being “used and abused” for his reliability and efficiency. He summarised travel as a “waste of my time, a waste of my effort, my energy, a waste of the company’s resources.” The schedule at national chains also seemed to have a demotivating effect on the interviewees. Toni said the schedule would often “change suddenly” and spoke at length about how angry she was on one occasion when she was told in the morning that instead of working in her home city from 7.30 PM, she had to go to another city to start work at 1.30 PM. Having made plans for the morning and afternoon, she thought the company had “ruined” her day. As a manager at National Chain X, Mark talked about working 12- to 13-hour days and continuing to do a lot of work at home at the weekends. He also described the recent opening of a new branch, before which he and other teachers were asked to give up their free time to build the furniture.



For non-owners in independent schools, there did not seem to be much perception of infringement on personal time by their employers. Toni said that she sometimes found it “very hard to leave” work after class when her boss kept talking. Liam and Mike, as independent school owners, expressed concern about their long working hours and the negative effect that it had on their family life, but those negatives seemed to be outweighed by the positives that having control over their own work held for them.

Participants in this study felt that their employers were infringing on their personal time through travel, short notice schedule changes, and workload. There seemed to be a greater perception of companies doing this in national chains than in independent schools, and the perceived infringement led to feelings of irritation, anger, and being unfairly treated.

## Discussion

Throughout the data there are strong suggestions of negative emotions leading to demotivation caused by each of the five aforementioned factors.

The lack of options for career advancement in both types of eikaiwa school appeared to negatively affect teachers’ motivation and cause frustration. According to Raynor (as cited in Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011), two types of career path exist: open and closed. An open path has options for career advancement, whereas a closed path does not. Pennington (as cited in Kim, Kim & Zhang, 2014) found that the absence of a structure for one’s career can negatively affect motivation. Participants in Taylor (2017) felt that the career path in the national chain in which they worked was closed. Interviewees in the current study felt that the career path in both types of eikaiwa school was closed. The fact that teachers often only stay in eikaiwa schools for a short time may discourage companies from opening the career path. However, the closed career path may deter teachers from staying with their employer or in the industry, which may lead to demotivation.

Training provisions in eikaiwa schools were seen by participants in this study as lacking value. Interviewees in Taylor (2017) regarded training in that national chain as inadequate, while Bossaer (2003) and Nuske (2014) highlighted the brevity of training in national eikaiwa chains. Nuske (2014, p. 108) states that “it is unlikely that sufficient teaching expertise can be cultivated” through such training programmes. If the purpose of training is for teachers to learn, develop and be able to confidently function in the classroom, then the participants in this study suggest that eikaiwa training was unsuccessful. Even teachers who had prior teaching experience in other institutions noted that some training is required when entering a new workplace. The feeling of having one’s time wasted or of being ill-equipped to do one’s job can lead to frustration and demotivation.

Previous literature on teacher motivation shows that relationships with colleagues can have a significant effect (Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011; Nuske, 2014; Oga-Baldwin & Prayer, 2008; Taylor, 2017). The prospect of having to work with difficult colleagues could lead to negative feelings regarding going to work, which in turn could become demotivation. Participants’ complaints about some colleagues suggest that the hiring practices, particularly of national chains, need to be reviewed.

According to Dinham and Scott (2000), leadership can affect motivation. Fives and Alexander (as cited in Dörnyei & Ushioda, 2011) note that leadership is linked to teacher commitment, which in turn is linked to motivation. A negative relationship between managers and teachers can leave teachers feeling unsupported, undervalued, and without loyalty to their employer (Taylor, 2017). Teachers at the national chain in Taylor’s (2017) study were frustrated due to their “perception of the company infringing on and not respecting or valuing their personal time,” which suggested a large power distance, i.e. an unequal distribution of power (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010, p. 61). The interviewees in the current study were frustrated and angered by what they

perceived to be an infringement on their personal time by their employers – evidenced through short notice schedule changes, excessive (in their view) travel, and being treated differently to their colleagues – and the resulting negative effects on their private lives.

While the findings from this study reinforce those of the previous study, they also show that demotivating factors are more widespread, as they seem to be present in more than one national chain and in independent schools to varying extents.

### Limitations

This study is not without limitations. My positionality and prior relationships with some participants may have inadvertently affected the data. Additionally, although between them the six participants had experience in 15 different eikaiwa schools, the sample size is small, so extensive interpretation of the data is not possible. The findings may not be generalisable to the whole eikaiwa industry, which is very broad (Hooper, 2018), but they may be relatable to other people in eikaiwa or in other contexts. Indeed, many of the issues raised by participants in this study have been reported in tertiary education in Japan (Nagatomo, 2015). Despite the limitations, they allow us to see something of the experience of foreign English teachers in eikaiwa schools.

### Conclusion

The data collected in this study showed that foreign teachers in national chain and independent eikaiwa schools appear to be affected by five demotivating factors: (a) lack of options for career advancement, (b) inadequate training, (c) difficult relationships with colleagues, (d) the management-teacher relationship, (e) perceived company infringement on personal time. Despite this study's small scale, the data give a glimpse into the experience of foreign English teachers in eikaiwa schools. The data may be relevant for other teachers, owners, and workers in the eikaiwa industry.

The variety of demotivating factors present in eikaiwa schools, in addition to the number of those schools in Japan, suggests that the experience of teachers in those institutions deserves to be more widely researched. Larger scale studies into demotivating factors in different types of eikaiwa schools, studies incorporating non-native English speaker teachers' experiences, and those including input from eikaiwa school managers would be valuable additions to the body of research on eikaiwa schools. Studies into the motivation of long-term eikaiwa teachers would also be enlightening.

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