Lessons to be learned: Unpacking eikaiwa school adult courses and higher educational EFL classrooms with regard to Japanese adult learners

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The difficulties adult learners go through in a higher education EFL context in Japan, and the significance of the adult learner population in eikaiwa, or English conversation, schools is a ripe area for discussion and research. Higher educational TEFL professionals in Japan are finding that adult learners are challenging many of their assumptions about classroom interaction, learning expectations, and student-teacher relationships. Indeed, how best to assimilate these students has been an often-frustrating experience for higher education in Japan. Yet eikaiwa schools in Japan feature courses for adult learners, amongst their other offerings to children and secondary school-aged students, and have captured what is turning out to be an important segment of L2 learners in Japan overlooked by much EFL research in Japan. This paper will propose that eikaiwa schools and EFL in higher education could offer each other much in addressing the issues of adult learners' needs and interests.

日本の高等教育におけるEFLのクラスで、大人の生徒たちが経験する様々な問題と、英会話教室に通う大人の生徒が非常に多いという事実は、議論と調査の格好の対象である。日本で教えているTEFL専門の英語教師の経験では、大人の生徒は英語を習う時に、様々な心配をしている。クラスでのやり取りや、受講効果、生徒と先生の関係など、どれも英語クラスに通う際、大事なポイントとなる事柄だ。それにも関わらず、日本の英会話教室は、偶然にせよ、最初から大人を対象に作られているにせよ、彼らの要求にうまく応じて大勢の大人を教えている。日本のL2生徒全体を見ると、大人の生徒は大事なセグメントなのだ。ところが、日本のこのような状況について、EFLの調査があまり行われていないのが現状だ。大人の生徒たちの要求や興味に応えるために、高等教育におけるEFLと英会話教室が、互いに協力し合えるのではないかというのが、このレポートの提案である。

Eikaiwa schools and higher educational EFL in Japan

Japanese adult learners of English currently enjoy wider opportunities for L2 study and development thanks to two major vehicles of EFL in Japan - the profusion of courses for adults in *eikaiwa*, or English conversation, schools throughout the country, and the expansion of Japanese college and university EFL programs to include learners beyond the traditional late teens/early twenties demographic. Yet these two teaching and learning contexts are seen to be completely different worlds, often at opposite ends with respect to teacher training and professionalism, and learning effectiveness for students.

The gap between these EFL contexts seems to explicitly show the advantages higher education EFL enjoys over adult courses in eikaiwa schools in terms of breadth and depth of research, training and insight in teaching and learning issues. Yet while colleges and universities in Japan have seen an explosion of adult learners in their classrooms, they have had great difficulty in assimilating this influx into their overall student population, even given more liberal policies in recent years that have opened up higher education to non-traditionally aged learners (Kelly, 2004). Such a difficulty is all the more keenly felt in EFL; indeed, such courses are marked out from other courses of study in that the L2 itself is both the vehicle and object of instruction (Long, 1983). Given the well-known and often-notorious reticence of some younger Japanese in college and university L2 classrooms to engage in communication, the entry of comparatively older learners may constrain some all the more. L2 communication thus becomes difficult, if not impossible, and some TEFL professionals may be unable to find ways around the impasse that can come about in such situations.

Under scrutiny, the gap between higher education EFL and adult eikaiwa courses implies an advantage the latter may have with their learners. Indeed, it has been my considered and sustained observation for some time that the best teachers in eikaiwa schools have had great success in responding to the interests and meeting the needs of adult learners in their classrooms. Furthermore, they have done so from a human fund drawn from practically every adult age group and walk of life: housewives, company workers, career-changers, those that have returned from *ryugaku* (overseas study) stints, along with others who come to these schools out of pure interest in the L2.

Two questions thus come to mind. For one, if teachers in eikaiwa schools have in fact had success with blending differing ages and backgrounds within their classrooms, how could they have achieved such results within a context that has a less-than-stellar reputation within EFL in Japan? For another, how could it be possible for some TEFL professionals, working within a context that reflects the most expansive training and the highest reputation, to still miss the mark or even fail outright with the adult learners they may have?

It is clear that adult learners present a different challenge to EFL professionals than that of traditionally aged college and university students. Due in part to this challenge, I shall draw on aspects of andragogy, the theory of adult learning as pioneered by the American educator Malcolm Knowles, for the purpose of showing how I believe it fits with the structure of adult courses in eikaiwa schools, and how they in turn respond to the motives by which adult learners come to their L2 learning in general. Such a positioning of EFL

may reveal a fuller range of what it means within a wider scope of Japanese adult learners' lives beyond solely that of L2 learners in higher education.

Knowles' andragogy

Knowles (1973) gives us a picture of adult learners and their learning characteristics. More specifically, he discerns within their learning style a level of self-direction tied into a component of self-validity. He believes that

> (a) Andragogy assumes that the point at which an individual achieves a self-concept of essential self-direction is the point at which he psychologically becomes adult. A very critical thing happens when this occurs: the individual develops a deep psychological need to be perceived by others as being self-directing. Thus, when he finds himself in a situation where he is not allowed to be self-directing, he experiences a tension between that situation and his self-concept. His reaction is bound to be tainted with resentment and resistance (p.45).

The roots of Knowles' andragogy can be found in the thinking of such 20th century educational philosophers as John Dewey, and humanistic psychologists such as Abraham Maslow and Carl Rogers. Yet the evolution of his thinking about adult learning over time struggled with the relative paucity of material about it as distinct from pedagogy in his day. For some time he saw pedagogy and andragogy as opposites (Knowles, 1970). He later recognized that both operated along a sliding scale as he found orientations of different learning approaches for different tasks (Knowles, 1980). Yet within the core of his overall theory and consistent throughout his thinking is a sense of adult life experience that distinguishes adult learning from that of children. "To a child, experience is something that happens to him; to an adult, his experience is *who he is*" (italics from the original) (pg. 46).

The insights that EFL in higher education in Japan offer us about its learners notwithstanding, one must consider that the narrow student population in colleges and universities comes to its learning with largely circumscribed life experience, and perhaps only a nascent conception of an adult self. Yet adult learners come to the classroom with a far greater level of these aspects, and lend further credence to Knowles' insights about them. Perhaps because of this facet, eikaiwa school adult courses deal with a more mature segment of language learners in the literal sense, and by doing so possess a more multifarious range of what English as an L2 is in Japan given the greater diversity of age and backgrounds.

Yet there is no question that eikaiwa schools, even with a plethora of adult learners, have something of a credibility problem within the TEFL establishment, and which may form an unfortunate, self-reinforcing stereotype.

The stereotypical face of eikaiwa schools

Very little appears to have been written or researched about eikaiwa schools in general, much less those with adult learners, in EFL journals in Japan; indeed, whatever may have been written or researched about adult learners in EFL contexts tend mostly to focus on the learners themselves

rather than their context. As a result, much of what EFL on the professional level knows about eikaiwa schools, and admittedly much of the following, is more in the realm of supposition than reality; yet, an account even in supposition can reveal much, and guide us in how to separate fact from fiction.

So to begin with, when we imagine the stereotypical face of eikaiwa schools, we see marketing gimmicks, fun, easy lessons for students in mostly small classes, and few or even no responsibilities placed on learners. We also see superficial attempts at intercultural communication, and in what are purported to be conversation classrooms, a perpetuation of grammar-translation methodology with a layer of communication activities to keep up learner interest. Most notoriously, we picture poorly trained teachers, or in many cases, untrained native-speakers hired for their marketing appeal rather than for any substantive experience. That such schools have admittedly done little to redress such an image reinforces even more the widespread belief that their interests lie in commercial ends rather than in quality of L2 instruction or learning.

This is the downside of eikaiwa schools, and one that, at its worst, reinforces their perceived dubiousness. Compounding this further as well is the tendency towards commercially oriented management, and lack of professionalism or long-term career interest on the part of many involved in such schools. There is no question that at least some eikaiwa schools are run solely as moneymaking ventures by those who are not and have never been TEFL professionals, nor have any interest in becoming as such, and who stock their classrooms mainly with native-speakers uninterested in the long-term development required of those seriously dedicated to the profession. These facets make the commercialism of such schools and the relative lack of professionalism of those involved inseparable from one another, and give eikaiwa schools a bad name.

The standard image of higher education EFL

A much different picture emerges when many think of EFL in colleges and universities in Japan: what comes to mind are courses made up of challenging content that learners bear the responsibility for, guided by TEFL professionals who have at least a graduate degree in TESOL or applied linguistics, if not a doctorate. Furthermore, there appears to be an aim for substantive intercultural communication and the inculcation of critical thinking and independent study within learners. Many also imagine these professionals striving to keep up with the latest research findings, and contributing their own research as well. It is not for nothing that those engaged in TEFL on the higher educational level make up the majority of conferees and presenters at the JALT national and regional conferences, as well as the contributors to the JALT publications and other professional journals, both in Japan and elsewhere in Asia.

Seen in these terms, college and university EFL has a breadth and depth that brokers no comparison with any other context, for there seems to be nothing that could compare with what it has to offer. Yet just how true are these stereotypes and images of both contexts? Sorting through fact and fiction when it comes to assessing adult courses in eikaiwa schools and higher educational EFL is not for the purpose of seeing where one context looks good over

another that looks bad. Rather, it is to assess both contexts for what they are, and to see where they may learn from one another and what each could do better within their aims and methodologies.

Appearance versus reality with both EFL contexts

I propose that we face both contexts squarely. Are there eikaiwa schools that reinforce the bad image they have? Certainly, yes. Are all the teachers in them unworthy of the name? Certainly not. Are there institutions within EFL in higher education in Japan that have professionals actively seeking to improve English-language education in the country? Certainly, yes. Are all who teach EFL within such institutions dedicated to the profession in terms of research and publication? Certainly not. Are learners across the board getting the most out of what each context strives for? Overall, some are - and some are not.

I shall reverse the order of these contexts and first assess some facts about college and university EFL. It deals with a relatively narrower student population in age group, social background, and language-learning purpose – students in their late teens or early twenties, with some variation for age and purpose in terms of graduate, postgraduate, professional and/or terminal degree studies, ESP, and like areas. As such, there is something of a captive audience from which data can be collected and research undertaken, unhampered by commerce. It is also necessary to consider that research, presenting and publishing is something of an obligation for TEFL professionals, tenured and untenured alike. While the most professionally minded consider this part of their chosen field and not merely an appendage to their teaching, there is no question that their research can often come about as much from strain as from dedication given the time and effort required for it.

Allow me also to present one fact within eikaiwa schools that cannot be denied as well: that there are dedicated, trained teachers within their midst. While such teachers are sometimes hampered from teaching to the full by the factors already enumerated with such schools, and conspire against them from conducting research from within their teaching context, some find ways to teach to their maximum effectiveness. Their students, as also previously mentioned, represent all ages, come from all walks of life, and represent a wider stratum of EFL within the communicative space of L2 Japanese learners.

Indeed, such facts within eikaiwa schools and higher educational EFL reveal that teachers in both face constraints of similar degrees, even where the natures of their constraints differ. For those in higher education, employment opportunities have constricted somewhat over time as more and more colleges and universities in Japan are demanding doctoral-level credentials; even at that, the possibility of tenure-track positions—rare to begin with—has diminished even further. As such, eikaiwa schools are receiving trained, serious teachers in their ranks, especially with master's-level credentials, that perhaps a decade ago would have found full-time college and university positions.

Things thus become more level when we see that both EFL contexts possess their issues and shortcomings. But seeing where their problems lie spurs one to see what they must have, and what they must do well.

What teachers do in both contexts

Beyond research, methodologies, materials and what we find from them, the raw material of classrooms nonetheless remain the same and the strengths and weaknesses of both contexts are measured as such: how well teachers interact with students, and what they are able to draw from them. The best TEFL professionals in on the college and university level, and the best teachers in eikaiwa schools, succeed where they connect with their learners. Furthermore, they achieve what they have from knowing what their students' needs and interests are, and involving them in a common learning enterprise.

Such a notion of how learners are positioned in the minds of teachers is nothing new, yet with the myriad of competing methodologies and barrage of materials on the EFL market in Japan, learners themselves often get lost in the shuffle. Stevick (1980), for example, points out that classroom interaction is the true measure of success for L2 learning, while Thornbury & Meddings (2001) argue that overdependence on external materials obscure learners as the sources of language. On this point, the latter have argued for, in Thornbury's words, a "leanness and rigor" that eschews most materials, save for what is available in the classroom itself or for what learners themselves bring, in order to bring the learner back to the focus of language teaching.

All things becoming equal, the more one probes below the surface then, it is necessary to ask who the learners are in both contexts, and under what circumstances they come to their L2 learning.

Differences between learners in both contexts

Much has been written about Japanese college and university students and their learning styles, particularly in light of the rigorous background of preparation they have undergone in high school for university entrance exams. Anderson (1993) characterizes Japanese students in terms of passivity, hesitation, and an over-reliance on group-consciousness, while Doyon (2003) perhaps best summed up a typical view many educators have about such a background, and indirectly about the learners themselves, where he says that

> […] one can expect an educational system that offers students very little choice or control over their own learning (or lives) to, in effect, teach these very students to become helpless and powerless – or in other words, to give them an it-can't-be-helped mentality (key concepts section, para.5)

By contrast, adult learning situations such as courses in eikaiwa schools may be providing a more plausible model as a whole for adult EFL learners to position their learning to themselves. These may be making room for their life experiences as an aspect of classroom and course character to a degree greater than what college or university classrooms are currently providing.

Knowles' andragogy thus fits well within an overall approach to adult learners in eikaiwa schools, even where the interests and orientation of such schools admittedly lie in commercial ends. Whether by default or design, adult courses in eikaiwa schools have captured an important EFL learning base ripe for research and analysis. Nonetheless,

there may be objections to the course structure of eikaiwa schools, as well as to Knowles' andragogy as a theory of adult learning, as models for a better integration of adult learners into the higher education EFL classroom.

Eikaiwa schools and Knowles' andragogy as models for adult L2 learning: some objections and responses

Eikaiwa school adult classes tend to be small – sometimes with only a handful of students, and are usually structured to allow anybody to enter – or leave – a given course at any time. In addition, it can be said that the structure of eikaiwa schools is such that it easy for teachers to succeed with their adult students. Many of the classes focus primarily on English conversation and are often open-ended, with rather skeletal course aims and syllabi, and with some classes even having no syllabi at all; such classes indeed are purely for learner interest, serving to maintain and build upon L2 skills.

More pointedly, the often-justified complaints against the excessive commercialism of a number of these schools, as previously mentioned, negate them as models for many serious teachers and institutions. As I have also shown, there are many who will reasonably claim that eikaiwa schools cannot match what TEFL in higher education can bring to bear in such areas as training, knowledge and insight into language teaching and learning – crucial in the difference between the most and least effective language study programs.

Likewise, there have been a number of objections to Knowles' andragogy itself as a basis for a learning theory for adults (Blake & Mouton, 1984, Davenport, 1990, Tennent, 1996). Indeed, one objection I could raise has to do with its possible North American-centric bias. Do Japanese adult learners perceive learning as their North American counterparts do? Do they orientate to their learning in the same way and to the same degree? Do they wish to be recognized as being autonomous in their learning within a culture that tends to downplay the autonomy of the individual?

Such objections are not to be dismissed. Yet for professionals in college and university EFL who are experiencing difficulties in the assimilation of non-traditional adult learners, I will claim that Knowles' andragogy, as problematical as it still may be, can still provide a basis for assessing where adult learners differ from their traditionally-aged counterparts. At the very least, adult learners come to higher education with a different, and often more fully formed agenda. To quote Knowles once more:

> The adult […] comes into an educational activity largely because he is experiencing some inadequacy in coping with current life problems. He wants to apply tomorrow what he learns today, so his time perspective is one of immediacy of application. Therefore, he enters into his education with a problem-centered orientation to learning (Knowles, 1973).

Such an insight begins to make sense when we consider why many Japanese adult learners are coming to the L2 not only in eikaiwa schools, but also the higher educational classroom.

EFL for adults in Japanese economic and social changes

The burst of the Japanese bubble economy in the wake of the stock market crash of 1988 rent great changes in the fabric of the job market in the 1990s, and such effects have only intensified over time. Millions of workers have lost their jobs, and many have had no choice but to change careers, which has often involved retraining of some sort, or a bolstering of credentials for the sake of retention. Even more so, English has increasingly become a factor in such re-tooling. TOEIC scores, for one, have become crucial as a hiring and retaining factor for many employers for some time; In the early 1990s, test scores of 450 or so had already become an accepted hiring standard across the board in the wake of the bubble, with scores of 500 or more called for from domestic engineers (Gilfert, 1996). As such, the call for TOEIC preparation courses in particular, and EFL courses in general, has been out for some time and promises only to increase, making the demand for a TEFL response in higher education and eikaiwa schools all the stronger.

On these terms then, EFL in both higher education and eikaiwa school adult courses in Japan has a common justification for itself and applicability to Japanese adult learners who approach L2 study as necessary for job promotion or career change. The response of EFL to such a state of affairs must seek the integration of adults and their learning orientation better, as well as the effective blend of differing age groups of learners in ways that would enable all learners to meet their personal aims and fulfill the goals of courses in both the higher education and eikaiwa school classrooms. Yet such solutions must come from the recognition of commonalities across generational differences of learners.

Where younger and older adult learners may meet

From their learning characteristics and motives for returning to the classroom then, we can see how Japanese adult L2 learners differ from Japanese college and university-age students. But what could they have in common through their differences? For one, they are products of the same educational system, with all its attendant responsibilities and expectations. In addition, their compulsory English study in secondary school has not changed drastically over the years, despite the moves towards more communicative content over the last decade within the EFL curricula as set on the Japanese educational policy-making level.

There is yet another factor intrinsic to both types of learners however, whether they are conscious of it or not. Regardless of age and level of life experience, I believe they desire something new or different at their respective stages of life, and they seek to position learning to themselves in some way. Perhaps the key difference between adult learners and their younger counterparts comes from a *conscious* decision to position their learning to their lives and to draw from their background of experience; as such, Knowles' statement that for adults, experience is "who one *is*," might be extended to mean that learning as well becomes "who one *is*." Yet when we see that the only area of major difference comes on the level of experience - as significant as it is – we can still see that older and younger learners of EFL in Japan share much on a deep but visible level.

Therefore, where learners meet in their ontological and existential characteristics may also be where TEFL in both contexts could meet in their approaches to these learners. If we can accept this notion, we might see what both contexts could offer each other.

What higher educational TEFL and eikaiwa schools could offer each other

College and university TEFL is, as I have mentioned, unmatched in overall training and research know-how; it could offer valuable guidance to committed eikaiwa school teachers who may wish to conduct research in adult L2 learning in order to learn how to better meet their learning needs, and the findings of such research can be shared equally. In a similar manner methodologies based on research in areas such as vocabulary acquisition and spoken grammar – critical for communicative development - need to be shared with serious eikaiwa schools; such schools deal, as their name suggests, with communication and require the findings of such research to strengthen their efforts in communicative development.

Eikaiwa schools, on the other hand, could offer EFL in higher education insights into what their adult learners experience in their L2 acquisition. Furthermore, their most creative teachers could offer much to their colleges and universities counterparts about how to manage classrooms where adult learners are with traditionally-aged learners, especially where difficulties of interaction may be present.

Overall, both EFL contexts have a common theme and purpose, and on a unified level, are tasked with common goals and human resources.

Conclusions

Adult learners make up an important area of EFL learning in Japan, yet are still underrepresented in much of the research undertaken in colleges and universities, where the resources and expertise for such research mostly can be found. At the same time adult learners are entering higher education in increasing numbers, and many institutions are still uncertain as to how to best assimilate them. Yet eikaiwa schools with adult learners often do not take interest in research of them, or perhaps lack the resources and/or expertise to do so. It is my conviction that a partnership of expertise and research between higher educational EFL programs and the best eikaiwa schools can do much to solve the problems in serving such learners and their attributes better.

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