

The advantages and disadvantages faced by housewife English teachers in the cottage industry *Eikaiwa* business

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The *eikaiwa* [conversation] business in Japan is a multi-billion dollar industry, and yet very little empirical research has been conducted on its teachers or its students. An online survey focusing on the pedagogical and personal issues of one group of *eikaiwa* teachers (foreign women who are married to Japanese men) was constructed and distributed. Results from the 31 respondents indicate an ongoing overlapping struggle with their teaching in balancing their families' personal and financial needs, their relationships with their students, and the gendered constraints imposed upon them by Japanese society. The paper ends with a call for more research of all *eikaiwa* teachers in more *eikaiwa* contexts.

日本における英会話産業は今や数十億ドル産業だが、それに携わる教師や生徒についての実証的な研究はこれまでほとんど行われていない。本論では、英会話学校の教師（いずれも日本人男性と結婚している外国人女性）を対象に、教育に関する問題および個人的な問題についてのオンライン調査を実施した。31名の教師より得た回答から、彼女らがそれぞれの家庭の問題や経済的な問題、生徒たちとの関係、そして日本社会が課している女性特有の制約といった複数の問題とバランスを取りながら、教育活動を行うことに常に苦勞している現状が明らかになった。最後に、本論は、今後より多くの英会話学校の教師について、さらに多くの研究が行われる必要性を喚起する。

EFL research in Japan generally focuses on issues surrounding formal education, but there is scant attention paid to *eikaiwa* [conversation] schools, the students, or the teachers, even though this is a multi-billion yen business with more than 30,000 full- and part-time teachers, of whom nearly 15,000 are non-Japanese (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, 2005). Looking at issues that surround *eikaiwa* teaching is important if we want to understand English language learning in the Japanese context, not only because *eikaiwa* supplements formal English instruction for students, but because it is also seen by many as a consumptive activity to support a casual hobby for either “pleasure and enjoyment,” or as a serious “lifelong hobby driven by intellectual curiosity” (Kubota, 2001, p. 475).

One reason why there is little research conducted in the *eikaiwa* context may be because most *eikaiwa* teachers are not academics engaging in and writing up empirical research. Bueno and Caesar (2003), in their introduction to their collection of essays of English teachers' personal experiences, explain that the difficulty they had in collecting essays from teachers in various teaching contexts was because “the people who teach below the college level, for the most part cannot write.... they are younger, their training is poor, their time is usually brief, and their motivations have more to do with adventure and travel than commitment to the classroom” (p. 15). Although it is true that youth and temporary residential status may describe many *eikaiwa* teachers, it is important to acknowledge that not all are young, impermanent, or undedicated. In fact, numerous *eikaiwa* teachers, for various reasons, have made Japan their permanent home and *eikaiwa* teaching their career.

To better understand language learning and language education in Japan, issues concerning all *eikaiwa* teachers need to be examined. This exploratory study, however, first focuses on one particular group: foreign women married to Japanese men. Because of gendered expectations of women in Japan, particularly of housewives and mothers, these women's experiences may be somewhat different from other groups of *eikaiwa* teachers. The question that guided this study, therefore, was: What are the advantages and disadvantages for these women teaching English conversation in their homes and their local communities?

The participants, data collection, and data analysis

An Internet questionnaire was constructed on Survey Monkey, which included twenty questions designed to obtain biographical data and to elicit formation about the women's current English teaching situations (see Appendix). A request was made for respondents who teach English in their homes or in their local communities in two popular e-groups for foreign women married to Japanese men.

Thirty-one women responded to the questionnaire. They come from the USA (9), Canada (7), Great Britain (6), Australia (3), Germany (2), New Zealand (1), Poland (1), Scotland (1), and the Philippines (1). The participants range in age from 28 to 62 and live in 21 prefectures throughout Japan. Nearly all have bachelor degrees in various subjects such as anthropology, law, literature, social welfare, history, nursing, library science, and TESOL. Two have MAs (TESOL and English literature), two have PhDs (Veterinarian Science and Biochemistry), and one is currently enrolled in a doctoral program. Teaching experience ranges from less than five years to more than thirty years. They teach between one to thirty classes per week; their students range in age from preschool to retirees; and they teach in places such as their own homes, community centers, students' homes, language schools, company offices, and coffee shops.

The answers to each question were uploaded to a qualitative data analysis software (NVivo), and coded into two categories that NVivo calls "free nodes" and "tree nodes" that can be conceptually linked to other nodes (see Bazeley, 2007). I organized the data into two free nodes (advantages and disadvantages) and to numerous tree nodes to examine recurring themes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Due to space limitations, the discussion that follows focuses on only three themes that

emerged from the tree nodes: flexibility, relationships with students, and money.

Discussion

Flexibility

The most commonly cited advantage of *eikaiwa* teaching was the flexibility it offered in balancing work and family lives. This was particularly true for those those with small children when teaching privately to babies, children, and their mothers. Lessons are held at times and in places that are mutually convenient. Sometimes students' mothers babysit while they teach, and sometimes the participants' children join in the lessons. This arrangement enables teachers like Amy and Liz to work without worrying about childcare. Women with older children also schedule their teaching around their families' needs and limit their number of classes. Karen, for example, says that she tries not to work too much or she feels that she is neglecting her children.

Another advantage of private teaching (as opposed to working for an *eikaiwa* school) is the opportunity to develop tailor-made curriculum according to individual pedagogical styles. Linda says:

No commute! No bosses! I can make the rules to suit both me and my students. Flexibility (to a point) if there is a family crisis. I like being able to tailor classes to each group of students and not feel bound by a curriculum that is time-based.

Private teaching also enables the women to select students, unlike teachers at conversation schools who generally teach whoever enrolls in the program. Anna, for example, chooses to teach only women and children. Although Jenny has not turned anyone away yet, she likes having the option to "terminate classes without having to go through the channels of a regular company, nor just grin and bear it" when children repeatedly misbehave.

There is, however, something of a downside to the flexibility that private *eikaiwa* teaching offers. Scheduling lessons around a family's convenience could result in a loss of income and a loss of opportunity because many English learners want to study during what could be called "*eikaiwa* prime time": evenings and weekends. Nevertheless, most participants reported cutting down or eliminating weekend classes to spend this time with their families. Ellen says the "evening hours are the hardest part about English teaching work for mothers, so I've pretty much vetoed late-afternoon and early-evening lessons in exchange for a more relaxing evening routine with the kids." She

wants more daytime classes, but as noted by other women, they are not always easy to find. Ellen feels that her decision not to teach at night has eliminated her chances to obtain full-time work in *juku* (cram schools) or in companies.

Several participants find difficulty in balancing teaching and family, especially those who operate *eikaiwa* businesses and teach many classes per week. Anna, for example, has approximately 100 students attending the language school she runs from her home. Although she takes weekends and school holidays off, maintaining a dual identity as a teacher and as a parent is not easy, as her comment below illustrates:

I feel that my children missed out on a lot when they were younger, as they'd come home from school and have to be quiet, and were not able to talk about their day with me till much later in the evening. I had to be very strict with them about loud noise and in particular sibling fights in the next room. They were punished severely for the smallest infraction because I found that if I let a bit of squabbling go, it escalated quickly. I feel that I was too hard on them but it was the stress of having mothers in the classroom listening to my kids punching and screaming at each other in the next room.

Another struggle exists for women who are solely in charge of their businesses. Kathy, who rents an apartment to use as a classroom, has insufficient student enrollment to warrant hiring another teacher. She must always be available to teach, even if ill, because she cannot afford to cancel classes. Amy, whose teaching partner left Japan after the March 11 earthquake, is concerned about not having a back-up teacher for the same reason. Although Anna has an office assistant and a tax accountant to assist with paperwork, she complains:

I can't escape from work—it's always there in the next room, waiting for me. Nobody to hide behind. The work must be done and it must be done by me, which makes taking any time off at all hard.

Furthermore, preparing appropriate teaching materials for private lessons is, according to Claudia, Jenny and Maria, time consuming. Mindy and Anna worry about maintaining consistent and high-quality English lessons without interaction with other teachers. Mindy reports:

It's hard to stay self-motivated and maintain or further [my] own education. To be honest, I

don't think I am. While I don't think it makes my lessons or teaching skills bad, I do think that it means I'm not doing the best possible job that I can.

Relationships with students

The second theme concerns the positive and negative aspects of the teacher-student relationship. Conversation teaching often creates blurred lines between teachers and students. Friendships develop where personal stories are exchanged, meals are shared, alcohol is drunk, and events are celebrated. Annie formed a book discussion group with her students, and Mary has learned "the most amazing things" from her class of retirees, such as "double rainbows, flying pumpkins, *mukade* [poisonous caterpillars] medicine, the name of any kind of flower you can possibly imagine, cheap restaurants, daggers disguised as hair ornaments." Pamela's lessons with two students who have been coming to her for 15 years are "more talking than teaching." As Becky puts it, her lessons are like a gathering of friends, but with the bonus of getting paid.

However friendly the student-teacher relationship may be, money does exchange hands. If the financial line is crossed, tensions can and do develop. For example, Mary's friends and neighbors are sometimes relaxed about paying lesson fees on time, and she dislikes it when they ask for discounts for missed classes. One of Tracy's adult students, also a friend, changed to a different (and more expensive) class but didn't understand why she should pay more. Additionally, English lessons occur during pre-established times, unlike time spent with friends, which is generally more fluid. Students like to linger after a lesson, but the teachers, especially those who teach at home, do not like this, and as Maria complained, "It's difficult to send students away after the lesson is over."

It is important to note that not all private students become friends. Some teachers feel they are being taken advantage of. Anna, for example, disliked that some of her students felt free to call her any time, and Jenny felt that her privacy was invaded when mothers wandered freely about her home while she taught their children.

Finally, nearly all the participants felt that students displayed rudeness and demonstrated a lack of respect toward them as friends and as teachers when they suddenly cancelled, failed to attend, or quit classes altogether with no explanation.

Money

The third theme discussed in this paper concerns the positive and negative attitudes toward *eikaiwa* income. Some participants felt grateful for the money, especially if they had been trained in fields where finding related employment would be difficult. Anna explained, "It's the best income that I could make with my qualifications in my area of Japan."

Women without financial necessity to work, or women who receive a steady income elsewhere (such as from secondary or tertiary institutions), expressed satisfaction with their *eikaiwa* "pocket money." For some, however, *eikaiwa* income initially earmarked for "treats" began to supplement their families' living expenses. Anticipated *eikaiwa* income has even led to home mortgages being taken out and children being enrolled in private schools.

Unfortunately, maintaining a steady *eikaiwa* income to support fixed expenses is difficult because of the unreliability and unpredictability of the *eikaiwa* profession. English students often move on to "learn" something else, so recruiting new students is essential. However, according to several participants, there is competition from a surplus of *eikaiwa* teachers who are willing to teach for less. This has made Kathy consider leaving the *eikaiwa* business altogether because she currently has no personal income after expenses are deducted. Anna, whose income is carefully calculated into her family's mortgage payments, also worries: "There is little financial security. Nothing to stop everyone deciding to quit tomorrow or go somewhere else if a newer, cuter school opens nearby."

Because of the difficulty in maintaining a steady income, several women expressed preference for working for *eikaiwa* schools. However, Sandy complains she is sometimes treated as a "disposable" commodity, and Liz feels that her school underpays her. Schools can only afford to hire teachers *if* they have students, so teachers like Pamela (who is dispatched to companies for three-month contracts) constantly worry about contract renewal.

Additionally, as Carol discovered, it is difficult to obtain work in *eikaiwa* schools after having taught at home while raising children:

Although I am qualified and have taught for many years, albeit mostly at my house, a young interviewer asked me 'You're really just a home-maker, aren't you?' He made it obvious he didn't really consider me a serious candidate for the position, although I had

taught for a similar organization for many years about ten years previously.

Finally, a real financial concern for some of these women is the necessity to earn enough, but not *too much*. In Japan, a dependent wife of a salaried worker is entitled to earn up to 1.3 million yen per year and still be eligible for social benefits. Exceeding this limit results in a substantial financial loss and creates an obligation to pay for one's own insurance, pension, and taxes. Thus, to make financial independence worthwhile, annual income must exceed three million yen. Although some of the women in this study were apparently able to earn this amount, the instability of *eikaiwa* teaching makes becoming financially independent risky.

Conclusion

This is the first of a series of studies that I hope to conduct with *eikaiwa* teachers in Japan. Although the current study focused on only one particular group of teachers, I believe that the issues that emerged from this study may resonate with all current and former *eikaiwa* teachers. For teachers who make their living through *eikaiwa* teaching, particularly those who permanently reside in Japan, the financial instability of this profession may be a constant source of worry. Even if a great amount of time, money, and energy is invested into recruiting and maintaining students, there is no guarantee of a consistent and steady source of income. How, then, does this influence the student-teacher relationship as described earlier, and how does this influence the quality of *eikaiwa* lessons that teachers hope to give and that students hope to receive?

Female *eikaiwa* teachers' experiences may be somewhat different from their male counterparts, especially those who must balance family life with teaching. It is unlikely (although certainly not inconceivable) that a male teacher would bring his children to his lessons or organize his teaching schedule around his family's dinner hour. Therefore, further investigation is warranted to determine how prevalent gendered attitudes in Japan shape issues surrounding *eikaiwa*, which may not only influence how students and teachers interact with each other, but also student preference for a male or female teacher (e.g., Bailey, 2007).

The necessity of limiting one's income to maintain tax dependency status may not be a consideration to those who are not married to Japanese salaried workers, but it is to women like

the participants in this study. If it is perceived that married *eikaiwa* teachers teach only as a “hobby” or for “pocket money,” how do these attitudes determine the teachers’ and their students’ attitudes toward English language learning?

This study touched on issues surrounding what I have called “the cottage industry *eikaiwa* business.” Clearly more qualitative and quantitative investigation into all types of *eikaiwa* teachers—both Japanese and non-Japanese—and the conditions surrounding all *eikaiwa* teaching contexts is warranted. Not all language learning is related to entrance exams or to advancing oneself in business, as Kubota (2011) argues. Language learning as a hobby has long been one approach taken by many Japanese language learners. Future areas of inquiry of these teachers could include in-depth interviews and classroom observations to gain insight into how individual *eikaiwa* teachers teach and how they interact with their students. Questionnaire surveys distributed to a greater number of teachers could uncover reasons why these teachers are in Japan, what their level of education and experience is, and how they carry out language teaching in their various teaching contexts. It would also be interesting to survey and interview *eikaiwa* students to determine the impact of *eikaiwa* on their language learning. Such investigation into this type of language pedagogy is necessary to broaden our understanding of how English is taught and learned in Japan.

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Appendix

1. Are you currently married to or in a long-term relationship with a Japanese national, or have you ever been married to or in a long-term relationship with a Japanese national?
2. What is your nationality?
3. How old are you?
4. What prefecture do you live in?
5. How many years have you been teaching English in Japan?
6. On average, how many classes per week do you teach?
7. How many students do you currently have?
8. Where do you teach?
9. What kind of students do you teach?
10. Please describe your educational background.
11. Please describe your current teaching situation.
12. What do you think are the “pros” of your English teaching situation? What do you like about it?
13. What do you think are the “cons” of your English teaching situation? What do you dislike about it?
14. Do you have any comments about your relationships with your students?
15. Do you have any comments about the income you earn from language teaching?
16. How has your English teaching situation changed over time? If so, in what ways? How have you adapted to the changes?
17. Do you have, or have you ever had a student that you could consider to be a “successful” English learner? If so, please describe that students and what you think happened to make that student successful.
18. How do you balance your English teaching with your family and private life?
19. If you could change anything about your current teaching situation, what would you change?
20. If you have any comments or thoughts about teaching English, please write freely here.

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