

Gender Concerns in Japan's Skype *Eikaiwa* Industry¹

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In this paper, I draw on accounts from Japanese male learners and Filipina teachers engaged in Skype *eikaiwa* and explore gender concerns within this new educational sector. The data analysis shows that Filipina teachers are often positioned as gendered entities through the men's discursive practices. This trend is similar to the constructions of white male teachers as romanticized commodities in *eikaiwa* schools based on Japanese women's *akogare* (longing/desire) for the West. Yet I suggest that what matters in the Filipino Skype *eikaiwa* industry is not so much the discourse of *akogare* as the Japanese men's feelings of masculinity. I conclude with an argument that given the many existing studies on Japanese male exploitation of Filipinas, the gender concerns within this industry should be discussed further in terms of the historical and economic relations between Japan and the Philippines and the long-established emotional and somatic connections between Japanese men and Filipinas.

本稿ではスカイプ英会話に関わる日本人男性学習者とフィリピン人女性教師の語りに依拠し、この新しい教育部門におけるジェンダー問題を探究する。データを分析したところ、フィリピン人女性教師は、男性の言説実践を通じてしばしばジェンダー化されることが明らかとなった。この傾向は、日本人女性の西洋へのあこがれを土台とし、英会話学校で白人男性教師が理想化された商品として構築される現象と類似している。しかし、フィリピン系スカイプ英会話で重要なのは、あこがれ言説というよりも日本人男性のマスキュリティ意識である。かれらによるフィリピン人女性の搾取にまつわる数多くの先行研究に鑑み、この産業におけるジェンダー問題に関しては、日本・フィリピン間の歴史的・経済的関係および長きにわたり確立されてきた日本人男性・フィリピン人女性間の情緒的・身体的つながりという視点からの議論がさらに必要であることを主張して本稿の結びとする。

Inquiries into gender concerns within Japan's ELT industry have largely centered on the relationship of Japanese women to white male native English-speaking teachers working at franchised *eikaiwa* schools. Drawing on the discourse of *akogare* (longing/desire), the researchers conducting these studies have specifically addressed the ways in which the male teachers are commercialized as romanticized entities for female learners (Appleby, 2014; Bailey, 2006; Kubota, 2011; Nagatomo, 2016; Piller & Takahashi, 2006; Takahashi, 2013). Bailey (2006), for example, analyzed *eikaiwa* promotional materials and found that white males were frequently depicted in the materials as agents who were helping Japanese female learners achieve "transformed selfhood" (p. 109). He further argued that for these women, *eikaiwa* schools were wonderlands or "places (destinations) of promise and wonder, of becoming, of transgression, of unreality" (p. 127). Using interview data from Western male native English-speaking teachers in Japan, Appleby (2014) conversely investigated the identity negotiation processes experienced by the male teachers. The investigation illustrated how "an embodied racialised, romantic and sexual allure [was] implicitly encouraged" (p. 94) in the field of ELT, with masculinity and heterosexuality being unmarked. To sum up, in "*eikaiwa* wonderlands," not only English learning but also the notions of nativeness, whiteness, and masculinity are commodified, and female learners (or consumers) expend their time and money on these commodities (Appleby, 2014; Kubota, 2011; Nagatomo, 2016).

In online English tutoring businesses that often use Skype as the primary communication tool, different gender concerns have emerged. The following photos and texts from a blog written by a Japanese male learner, Kamo, give some idea of this phenomenon. In one of his blog entries, Kamo describes his experiences with a free trial lesson at a Filipino Skype *eikaiwa* provider called *RareJob*, making reference to part of the online teacher introductions:

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Figure 1. Part of RareJob teacher introductions²

Extract 1

Since I [was] shown this webpage, I **almost select[ed] [a teacher] entirely based on [her] face** [. . .]. (emphasis in original)

Extract 2

[. . .] I want to learn while gazing at a young and beautiful lady [. . .].

These extracts, as well as the attractive poses in some of the photos, raise questions such as the following: How do the past studies on *akogare* inform this trend? Does this challenge earlier gender concerns in franchised *eikaiwa* schools or does it merely flip the positions of men and women, with the concerns being basically the same in the end? To pursue these issues, I analyze narrative accounts from both Japanese male learners and Filipina teachers and examine the following research question: How are Filipina teachers constructed through Japanese male learner discussions on Skype *eikaiwa*?

In addressing this question, I seek to identify the similarities and differences between past *akogare* studies and what currently happens in the Skype *eikaiwa* sector.

The Study

Theoretical Paradigm

This paper is located within a tradition of critical language studies that epistemologically draws on “postmodern constructionism including poststructuralist theory” (Kubota & Miller, 2017, p. 133). This theoretical paradigm allows for two significant inquiries based on Foucault’s (1980) idea of knowledge not as *truth* but as *régime of truth* (e.g., Kubota & Miller, 2017; Pennycook, 2007): the power exerted in everyday talks and deeds, and the ideologies constructed within discourses. In this conceptualization, Foucault (1980) stressed that what counts is not whether a certain system of knowledge is true or false, but how it produces the effects of truth; that is, it matters “how [the] effects of truth are produced within discourses which in themselves are neither true nor false” (p. 118). Taking this Foucauldian standpoint, I investigate how daily Japanese male language learner discussions on Skype *eikaiwa* invoke ideological views about Filipina teachers rather than examining whether these views are true or false.

Data

As I aim to explore the ways in which Filipina teachers are ideologically constructed through male learners’ discursive practices, the main data sources are narrative accounts by five Japanese men: Daisuke, Eita, Kamo, Kazutaka, and Osamu. Osamu’s accounts are taken from a 2-hour interview, and the others are extracts from the men’s blog entries (see Table 1, which provides background information on the participants).

Table 1. Japanese Male Learners’ Background Information

No.	Name	Age	Work (Nature of work)	Data source
1	Daisuke	30s	employee (unknown)	blog
2	Eita	unknown	employee (IT)	blog
3	Kamo	unknown	unknown	blog
4	Kazutaka	30s	self-employed (affiliate marketing)	blog
5	Osamu	40s	employee (IT)	interview

As supplementary data, Filipina teachers’ narrative accounts are also included. Participants were solicited through *TrueTrade*, one of the largest Skype *eikaiwa* providers.

TrueTrade was very supportive, offering free access to its online member-only platform, through which I booked and took lessons and during some of the lessons held 50-minute individual interviews with seven female teachers after receiving their consent. In this paper, I use the accounts from three teachers: Laura, May, and Tina. To preserve anonymity, I chose and adopted pseudonyms for all my participants and the provider, but not the four male bloggers; as Daisuke, Eita, Kamo, and Kazutaka are these bloggers' handle names and their entries are open to the public online, I used the names as they are.

Analytical Framework and Procedure

The data analysis is based on critical discourse studies (CDS; e.g., Djonov & Zhao, 2014; Wodak & Meyer, 2016), the purpose of which is to detect the ideologies embedded in texts and other semiotic resources. Because this study specifically focuses on data related to the Japanese male learners' ideological views on the Filipina teachers, interpreting the data through the lens of CDS is useful.

The actual procedure was as follows. First, the Japanese texts were translated into English (interviews with Filipina teachers were conducted in English). Both the English and the original Japanese texts were read in parallel to assess accuracy, capture the key themes (Morris, 2015), and identify "notable quotes" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 195) that vividly conveyed the research participants' viewpoints. Some of the quotes are used in later sections as the participants' "actual words" (Morris, 2015, p. 134) that strongly support the research arguments.

Discursive Constructions of Filipina Teachers as Gendered Entities

I start this section with extracts from Daisuke's and Kazutaka's blog entries. In Extract 3, Daisuke writes about his impressions of Filipina teachers, and in Extract 4, Kazutaka discusses his favorite teachers' good aspects, listing their photos in the original entry (the photos are omitted in the following extracts):

Extract 3

It's surprising that recent Filipina online *eikaiwa* teachers are remarkably cute. Lots of teachers are as cute as a pop idol and as well proportioned as a model, and graduated from prestigious universities in the Philippines [. . .] Even if you've come to like a particular teacher, it's not embarrassing; rather, by making it your motivation to learn *eikaiwa*, you could improve [your English] more and more, I guess. (<http://philipinizer.blog.fc2.com/blog-entry-32.html>)

Extract 4

[She is] a teacher who is far cuter than her photo, vigorous, and kind. I recommend her to those who want to take lessons in a refreshing mood.

[She is] the cutest Filipina teacher I've ever seen. [She is] very interested in Japanese men. [This is] Ms. Kim, [a] cheerful, cute, and vigorous [teacher]. Her lessons lift learners' spirits and motivate them. (<http://have-a-good-time.jp/archives/8615>)

The extracts above have some common characteristics. To begin with, both Daisuke and Kazutaka employ numerous expressions that objectify Filipina teachers' physical appearance and personalities rather than describing their teaching abilities: for example, *remarkably cute, as well proportioned as a model, vigorous, the cutest Filipina teacher I've ever seen, and cheerful*. Moreover, the fact that the two bloggers view their female teachers' physical appearance and personalities as important to their learning motivation is interesting. These discursive constructions of Filipina teachers as gendered entities are also present in Osamu's narrative account, in which he states that he had just become a *TrueTrade* member:

Extract 5

[R: Researcher / O: Osamu] (interviewed on May 26, 2015)

R: Why [have you chosen] *TrueTrade*?

O: *TrueTrade*, you know, the cost, and er . . . my *kohai* [= office junior] is attending it. [. . .] And [he said] (laugh), "There are lots of cute girls," so [I said to myself] (laugh), "Well, I'll just give it a try."

R: Wow. (laugh) Is it that important? Well, well, it's a secondary concern, though.

O: No, no no nope, er . . . I guess [it's] quite important.

R: Important? What? Oh, that just interests [me] (laugh). [. . .] Why [is it] important?

O: Er . . . well, in the first place, er . . . [learning English] is sometimes a bother, isn't it? So I tend to think, "Oh well, it doesn't matter," but I guess, you know, [cute girls] would somehow motivate [me] (laugh).

What is notable about Extract 5 is that Osamu's office junior treats Filipina teachers not as "teachers" but as "girls," as in the original interaction in Japanese, the word *ko* was employed, which refers to a "child" or "girl/young woman" (*Kojien*, 2009). Because of this

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nance, the Japanese word *ko* is rarely used in an admiring way, and particularly not for teachers. Nevertheless, Osamu's office junior calls Filipina teachers *ko* and Osamu has no hesitation repeating it, which resulted in the discursive construction of the teachers as highly gendered objects. During the interview, Osamu also explicitly articulated his preference because at the time, he was about to schedule his first lesson. I asked him how he was going to choose a teacher, and he replied, "Well, absolutely, you know, a woman, like [a] young [woman]. I'll probably select [a teacher] based on her photo, I guess. [. . .] [The photos are] extremely important. Yeah."

This tendency was also mentioned by the Filipina teachers. The teachers were asked the following: "I know this guy who has just become a member of *TrueTrade*. He told me that he was looking forward to talking with a cute, young female teacher. Have you ever encountered male learners like him?" To this question, all seven female teachers gave affirmative responses as exemplified in the extracts by May and Laura (Extracts 6 and 7):

Extract 6

Honestly, I've already encountered students like that. [. . .] Uh, actually, they told me directly, er, that, yes, they, they do appreciate if the teacher, er, would be a beautiful female. [. . .] Some students [say], "Oh, you have a beautiful picture," and then sometimes they'd express, er . . . I, I encountered, er . . . a few already who were to, to actually meet in person if they visit the Philippines. (interviewed on July 29, 2015)

Extract 7

I have this one student. [. . .] He is an advanced speaker and he is a businessman. And he always book[s] my lesson and he tell[s] me, "Oh, Laura, looking forward to talk[ing] to you. I really miss you, Miss Laura. Ahahahaha." (interviewed on August 5, 2015)

The next extract by Tina likewise confirms that Japanese male learners tend to select a female teacher based not only on her physical appearance, personality, and age but also on her marital status. In reference to her photo on the Skype icon, Tina said,

Extract 8

[. . .] I remember, a few years back, when I was still single, then, yeah, of course, I put a profile picture and in the picture it's only me because I was single (laugh) and then I remember a few of them [= my students] would say, "Oh, you're beautiful," "you look

good." [. . .] But now that I've been married for 2 years, so I usually put [a] family picture. [. . .] So that makes my students know I am married and I have a family. (interviewed on August 14, 2015)

Although it is not possible to generalize this trend, it was found that the photos displayed on the webpages of Filipino Skype *eikaiwa* providers (and occasionally the teachers' Skype icons) were important when the learners were deciding to book lessons. The data also suggest that for a certain type of Japanese man, chatting with the female teacher one chooses based on her attributes is enjoyable.

Relationship to Past *Akogare* Studies

The Japanese male learners' tendency explored in the previous section is similar to the mindset of females who want to learn *eikaiwa* from white male native English-speaking teachers. However, as discussed, in most studies on the women who eagerly attend *eikaiwa* schools, the discourse of *akogare* is almost always observed (Appleby, 2014; Bailey, 2006; Kubota, 2011; Nagatomo, 2016; Piller & Takahashi, 2006; Takahashi, 2013). On the other hand, when explaining their engagement with Filipino Skype *eikaiwa*, the male learners did not adopt the term *akogare*. Although it is obvious that these men have a strong desire to learn English from Filipina teachers, this desire does not appear to have the respect that is attached to the term *akogare*. Rather, their romantic passion for the teachers stem from the men's feelings of masculinity and the Filipina teachers' apparent femininity. Two further extracts are given to support this argument. In the first (Extract 9), Osamu talks about the dissimilarities between Western women and Filipinas, and in the second (Extract 10) from Eita's blog entry, he implies that he is in favor of Filipina teachers' feminine traits as they help Japanese men escape from their tough daily lives:

Extract 9

[A chance to encounter,] you know, soft white women is fifty-fifty, isn't it? [. . .] They are like self-assertive, too. You know, [communication with them] starts by [us] being "passive." [. . .] Asian [women], and you know, er . . . since people in the Philippines are all Christians, er . . . their personality or humanity is, er, remarkably affectionate, isn't it? And their smiles are also affectionate, so [. . .] this, er, works for Japanese men as pleasure, I guess. (interviewed on May 26, 2015)

Extract 10

Filipinas are good with their words

They often say to me, “You are so amazing,” which makes me embarrassed, but actually I feel very happy in my mind. [. . .] In Japan, many people feel it very hard to be in love with someone. [This is] because they’re too concerned about what others think to communicate their true feelings. [. . .] Honestly, it’s oppressive to always have to control my own feelings. If you feel the same way as me, have a try at talking with a Filipina; you’ll forget everyday constraint. (emphasis in original; <http://learn-create.info/archives/175>)

These extracts suggest that what matters in the Skype *eikaiwa* sector is the Japanese male learners’ wish to perform their masculinity in front of women and/or escape from their daily problems by getting in touch with the Filipina teachers’ femininity, which is viewed by the learners (and especially by Osamu) as a virtue that Western women may not possess. To put it differently, the Japanese men’s discursive constructions of the Filipina teachers as “feminine girls” who allow the men to be masculine foster the commodification and consumption of Skype *eikaiwa*.

Conclusion

In this paper, I concentrated on several narrative accounts from Japanese male learners of English and Filipina teachers engaged in Filipino Skype *eikaiwa* to examine gender concerns within this new educational industry. The critical analysis of the Japanese men’s discussions about Skype *eikaiwa* lessons indicated that they saw the Filipina teachers as gendered entities in a similar manner to what has been found in studies on franchised *eikaiwa* schools, which tended to construct white male native English-speaking teachers as romanticized or sexualized commodities for Japanese female learners. However, the analysis also revealed that the discourse of *akogare*, which depicted the women’s mindset in these traditional *eikaiwa* schools, was not applicable to the Japanese male learners as it was the feelings of masculinity and the Filipina teachers’ femininity that were more focused on in the learners’ discursive practices.

Thus, the growth of this Filipino Skype *eikaiwa* has given rise to these new gender concerns, which are significantly different from those in franchised *eikaiwa* schools. Yet taking into consideration many gender studies on the exploitation of Filipinas by Japanese men, my discussion of these gendered constructions of female teachers in this paper is not novel. Existing gender studies have reported on various forms of exploitation

such as sex tours to the Philippines (e.g., Suzuki, 2007; Tyner, 1996), Filipino pubs in Japan (e.g., Allison, 1994; Faier, 2007), and arranged international marriages between a Japanese man (especially in the countryside) and a Filipina (e.g., Satake, 2008). In all three contexts, the Filipinas have been commodified and treated as sexualized or fantasized entities. In other words, Japan can easily serve as a contact zone in which Filipinas are physically and morally objectified based on their sexuality and/or femininity, which could be seen to be related to the economic disparities between Japan and the Philippines—and between Japanese men and Filipinas. Given this reality, the gender concerns arising in the Skype *eikaiwa* sector should be discussed further in terms of the historical and economic relationships between these two countries and the long-established emotional and somatic connections between Japanese men and Filipinas. Future studies therefore need to investigate what is going on within the Filipino Skype *eikaiwa* industry from interdisciplinary perspectives. Such transboundary investigations would contribute not only to the field of ELT but also to disciplines such as anthropological studies, cultural studies, postcolonial studies, and sociology.

Notes

1. This paper is an adaptation of a paper that first appeared in *Journal of Sociolinguistics*. Reference data: Tajima, M. (2018). Gendered constructions of Filipina teachers in Japan’s Skype English conversation industry. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 22, 100-117. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josl.12272>
2. The source of Figure 1 is Kamo’s blog (<https://minhyo.jp/hobosute/630/>). To protect privacy, the photos have been manipulated.

Bio Data

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