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## School Owners SIG newsletter

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### Meet the SO SIG officers

#### Coordinator – Ryan Hagglund

At the School Owners' SIG AGM in November I became the coordinator. I first came to Japan in 1998 on the JET Program and have spent my entire time enjoying the wonderful nature of Yamagata Prefecture. After obtaining my MA in TEFL/TESL from the University of Birmingham and an MAT and Oregon State teaching certification from Willamette University I took over MY English School (<http://myeigo.com/>) in Higashine, Yamagata in 2008. Since then we have grown to seven schools in Yamagata and Kansai. I truly believe that we all benefit when the level of quality in the English conversation school industry improves and want to work to help others—and myself—better educate our students and compete with the larger chains. In addition to MY English School I also teach at Yamagata University. You

can reach me at [rhagglund@myeigo.com](mailto:rhagglund@myeigo.com).

#### Membership Chair – Paul Moritoshi

Hello SO SIG members. I came to Japan in 1996 and spent three years as an ALT. In 2002, I graduated with an MA in TEF/SL from the University of Birmingham (UK), which led to a part-time university position that same year. Since then I've taught at various universities and a junior college, mainly in Okayama city. I'm currently pursuing a doctoral degree in Applied Linguistics with Aston University (UK) in the area of Project-Based Language Learning. I'm actively involved in various areas of JALT and am also the Associate Editor for *OnCUE Journals* Professional Development section. In 2013 I started a *kojin jigyou gaisha* called P.A.S. Communication which provides both foreign language instruction and support services in a range of foreign languages. I'm now an Associate Professor at

Chugoku Gakuen University. I also enjoy presenting on a range of EFL-related issues.

#### Treasurer– Mark Makino

Hello fellow school owners. My name is Mark Makino and I've lived in Japan for 11 years now, 10 of those years running my own *eikaiwa* school in Fujinomiya, near Mt. Fuji, which fans of UNESCO may have heard of. I have a M.A. in Applied Linguistics with Merit (which is not as good as Distinction) at the University of Leicester in 2014, writing my thesis on Japanese and native-speaking English teachers in the *eikaiwa* industry. The M.A. facilitated my hiring as a part-time teacher at Tokai University. In addition to my position at the School Owners SIG, I am President of the Shizuoka JALT Chapter, which means I get to see both sides of JALT's thrilling expense reporting process. I spend the time I have between the above activities reading and playing the guitar.

### Check us out at the 2015 PanSIG, May 16 & May 17

- Mark Makino will be presenting the paper "Principled *Eikaiwa*" on Sunday, May 17<sup>th</sup> in Room 409 at 2:00pm.
- Please attend the debate and SIG AGM at JALT National in the fall.



**Debate: Should *eikaiwas* charge entrance fees? YES! Ryan Hagglund MY English School**

**“An entry fee can portray an image of quality.”**

There are many opinions on entry fees for English conversation schools. I am firmly in favor of them.

My school is called MY English School and we charge an entry fee for all families that join. We do this for several reasons, which I will list and comment on below:

- 1.) Students leaving soon after joining a lesson can be a major distraction. Requiring students to make a relatively small payment before joining helps ensure they are serious.
- 2.) Students tend to stay longer. While a different industry, my parents run a Curves fitness franchise in America. Curves has stopped emphasizing no-signup-fee marketing campaign because they found that new members paying even a small signup fee stayed longer than those who didn't. Similar to the reason above it mentally creates a sense of commitment.
- 3.) An entry fee can act as an

insurance policy. For schools like ours that do automatic bank withdrawals for monthly payments, the first withdrawal can often happen several weeks, a month, or longer after the student has begun attending. If the first withdrawal isn't successful and the student leaves, you still have the entrance fee to show for your efforts.

- 4.) An entry fee can portray an image of quality. By having a barrier to school entry, you are less likely to appear desperate. This is one reason we never waive our entry fee---we don't want to look cheap in the eyes of the market. We want to promote the feeling that there is a cost to joining and an image of better quality.

There are assuredly many other reasons for charging an entry fee that I have neglected here. It is a policy we are very happy with and will continue.

**Debate: Should *eikaiwas* charge entrance fees? NO! Rob Olson Rob's English**

**“Look, the storied days of English conversation teaching are over.”**

Most papers that take a side on a debate make an attempt to be fair. The tone is professional, objective and considerate.

This will not be one of those papers.

I am against the practice of private English conversation schools charging entrance fees to new students.

Look, the storied days of English conversation teaching are over; if you are in private *eikaiwa* now it is most likely because you are a damn good teacher and you care about your students. If you were in it only for the money you would have left the business when NOVA went belly up.

You're not, though, and you didn't and this is why entrance fees can be bad business. Let's take a concise look at some reasons why.

- 1.) **Entrance fees are just a way of fleecing students.** Seriously, why are they needed? Does it really take more money to enter a new

student's name into a computer or to put a profile sheet into a folder?

- 2.) **Entrance fees reek of a lack of transparency.** If you're going to hit your students with an entrance fee, what other unspoken costs are lurking around the corner? Book fees? Heating fees?

- 3.) **Entrance fees constipate the enrollment process.** One way I have distinguished myself in Tomakomai is by not having an entrance fee; you can observe two classes then you give me your personal details and---wham!---you are one of my students.

I'll close with a tip of the Stetson to my fellow private English school teachers; we do it for the buzz not the bucks. Unfortunately, we sometimes are viewed unskilled labor who are here to make money while we travel around the world. I believe charging entrance fees contributes to this image.

## Report: Principled Eikaiwa Mark Makino President, JALT Shizuoka Chapter

### Introduction

Most of us would agree that to some extent, *eikaiwa* deserves its bad reputation. Everybody knows somebody in this industry who was just in it for the social scene, or for a gap year before their MBA starts, or because they needed an excuse to come to the land whence *One Piece* came. One may also read accounts like Kubota (2011a) or Bailey (2007) and come to the conclusion that *eikaiwa* is only slightly more serious an academic endeavor than being able to properly pronounce “bruschetta”.

Although many would also agree that mandatory English education in Japan isn't worth the paper it's translated on, *eikaiwa* is seen as somehow crasser because it is private enterprise, and appears to operate on an essentializing ideology that boils the world outside Japan down to first-world white men. While one could justifiably argue that mandatory English education lets down its captive population in a much more far-reaching and much more tragic way, even greenhorn JETs may feel superior to *eikaiwa* workers, who have been compared to professional male hosts (Kelsky, 2001) or fast food workers (Appleby, 2013).

Although I have just stated that English in mandatory education deserves far more scrutiny and criticism than *eikaiwa*, it is true that commercial concerns are a potential source of conflicts of interest at *eikaiwa* more than at other milieus, as students (or their parents) are customers as well as learners. *Eikaiwa*, unlike most other providers of English education in Japan, cannot take student enrolment or attendance for granted, and must advertise and appeal to people with pre-existing notions of English, “foreigners”, and what proper education looks like. Teachers and owners at *eikaiwa* schools must bend to the socio-political climate and to principles of marketing or lose income.

What I would like to propose here is a set of values that can help redeem our industry, or at least separate those of us who wish to be separated from the worst examples of *eikaiwa* excess. In echo of Dörnyei's (2009) *principled CLT* (Communicative Language Teaching), I will call this *principled eikaiwa*, and hope that it forms an outline of how we as *eikaiwa* teachers and owners can succeed in business while not surrendering our sense of responsibility as educators.

I should point out that I am not arguing from a place of particular strength here; my own school at which I am a teacher and owner certainly does not put all of these ideas into practice. I simply mean to establish a set of points that *eikaiwa* workers and owners can agree have some value in distinguishing the ideal form of the type of

service we provide from what an *eikaiwa* unmoored entirely from educational objectives would look like. I will separate these points into two categories, advertising and pedagogy.

## Advertising

The web sites of *eikaiwa* can sometimes read like catalogs of alternative medicine supplements and homeopathic cures, where the thinnest tissue of support from a quasi-academic source 60 years ago is introduced as airtight proof of the efficacy of some method or technique, and scientific-sounding language is freely reappropriated for entirely different or nonexistent phenomena. Hence the discussion of English and Japanese “wavelengths” in Seiha’s promotional materials (Seiha Network Co., Ltd., 2012), and the claim without any evidence that the ability to distinguish new sounds has its apex at birth and bottoms out at 12 years old (ibid). Other sites, with an assuredness not commensurate to the proof offered, make claims about the unique learning opportunities afforded by the infant brain and the benefits of learning from native speakers (NSs). Now there is undoubtedly a significant portion of language teachers who believe these claims to varying degrees, but that is not the issue for *principled eikaiwa*. Rather, the issue is how to present these beliefs with an appropriate level of certitude, so we are not simply pushing people’s panic buttons in an effort to sell them a product.

I am not in a qualified nor do I have the space here to argue each of the claims that *eikaiwa* promote themselves with. I will take up one though, because it is one of the most common in *eikaiwa* promotional materials and will probably only become more so as elementary schools’ *foreign language activities* encroaches more on *eikaiwa*’s formerly monopolized demographic of young learners. That is the Critical Period Hypothesis (CPH), which has strong support when applied to L1 learners (Jones, 1995) and some support as well for people moving to L2-speaking societies (Patkowski, 1980). References to CPH, although usually not by that name, can be found on numerous *eikaiwa* websites, presented as if extensive age effects research had been done on Japanese toddlers. The aforementioned Seiha (Seiha Network Co., Ltd., n.d.), former goliath NOVA (n.d.) and Amity (Amity Corporation n.d., a, b) all have promoted themselves this way. Young learners in *eikaiwa* are not feral children learning their L1 at a late age and are generally not immigrants to BANA countries. I know of no studies done on age effects in L2 learners taking weekly one-hour classes, and until some intrepid researcher manages to put that question in researchable terms, it is unethical for most *eikaiwa* to include reference to CPH in their sales pitches.

I believe the same rule of thumb, “err on the side of caution when presenting SLA issues in advertising” applies equally well to the benefits of learning from NSs, the career benefits of learning English (Kubota, 2011b) or

reducing xenophobia by exposing students to “foreigners”. *Eikaiwa* may also mislead customers if they present language learning only as a result of having weekly fun conversations. This downplaying of what may be termed “traditional” teaching has been seen in advertising (Bailey, 2006) and in the classroom (Kubota, 2011a), and is the topic of the following section.

### **Pedagogy**

It would be hugely presumptuous for me to prescribe or proscribe teaching practices in general here; there is justification in SLA literature for a wide range of practices. I do mean to highlight teaching practices in *eikaiwa* that may reflect prioritizing of factors other than education. I am also assuming for this section that increased English skill (however it is defined) is the primary educational goal of *eikaiwa*, not producing international citizens (Kubota and McKay, 2009) or building critical thinking skills in general. That assumption hides a further assumption, that the what *eikaiwa* provide is education rather than entertainment, or as Kubota calls it, “casual leisure” (2011a, p. 475). How to classify the type of service that *eikaiwa* furnish is at the heart of the problem; there are no educational recommendations to make if *eikaiwa* consider themselves something other than schools.

The most glaring compromise in educational quality made at *eikaiwa* is scheduling. The approach taken at some chains, whereby students choose their lesson times and teachers, seems to prioritize a cafeteria-like experience over consistency in lessons or teachers. I believe though, if we ignore standard practice in *eikaiwa* and instead look at the recommendations (or rather, the assumptions) made in SLA research, the problem of scheduling in *eikaiwa* begins to look like an industry-wide one. To take an extreme case first, many *eikaiwa* adopt breezy 30- or 40-minute-per-week schedules for young learners, a pace which has been criticized as unproductive or even demotivating (Lightbown and Spada, 2006). For adults as well, one lesson per week invites the perception that learning a language takes roughly as much effort as watching an episode of *SMAPxSMAP*. The theoretical underpinnings for the most commonly embraced ELT methods heavily favor quantities of input (Krashen, 1982), interaction (Long, 1996), or abundant practice in skill-building approaches (Kumaravadivelu, 2006). Much like the *yakudoku* (grammar-translation) method (Hino, 1988) practised in junior high and high schools, very infrequent input or interaction is not supported by SLA research as conducive to learning.

While the problem of lackadaisical scheduling is a profound one in the *eikaiwa* industry, it is also one whose most obvious solution would be a business disaster. Requiring students to attend classes at least three hours a week would conflict not only with students’ expectations but also likely their work, school, family, *juku*,

*bukatsu*, *zangyō*, *enkai* or *sābisu zangyō* schedules, and result in their quitting. I propose however that at the very least students should have the same instructor every week and some continuity to lessons, and instructors should make clear that in order to improve students will need some additional study outside of the classroom. Assigned homework, shared messageboards, wikis or other social media, or a class library are all possible ways to achieve this well within the reach of *eikaiwa* schools. Weekly chats with no extracurricular (or indeed curricular) demands placed on the student are a type of service that *eikaiwa* should avoid if they want to be seen as proper schools.

Another seductive yet self-defeating point is the avoidance of explicit teaching methods. *Eikaiwa* owners and teachers may justify eschewing more didactic approaches by pointing out that most English learners in Japan have had far too much of that kind of approach already in junior high school and high school (Guest, 2000) or university (Nagatomo, 2012). However, banishing grammatical explanation, translation, and explicit negative feedback from the classroom ultimately serves to uphold an unhealthy dichotomy that has formed between *grammar* and *communication*, *study* and *acquisition*, and *accuracy* and *fluency*, not to mention removes a slew of potentially useful activities and approaches from a teacher's repertoire. Explicit teaching, nowadays often called *focus on form* (Long, 1991) has been rehabilitated in recent years after a long period of unfashionableness, as have both judicious use of translation (Folse, 2004) and negative feedback (Ellis, 2006) as part of a communicative approach. In proposing that *eikaiwa* do something other than their namesake implies, I am again presuming that interested parties want *eikaiwa* to be fully fledged educational institutions rather than just fillers of the gaps in practical skills left by mandatory English classes.

There are numerous points of pedagogy that teachers can and do argue the efficacy of. Again, the point of this article is not to bring other *eikaiwa* teachers over to any one particular way of teaching. There are some practices, though, that show the commercial side of this industry a bit too clearly. It may be worth identifying the places where *eikaiwa* compromise education in favor of saleability the most, and examining how we can lessen the friction between teaching well and making a living.

## **Conclusions**

There is a tendency in this industry to justify practices by referring to other, worse examples of *eikaiwa* excess and saying, "at least we don't do *that*". NOVA used to be our point of reference; now GABA seems to hold that title (McCrostie, 2014). Readers of this article are presumably interested in being not only successful *eikaiwa* teachers, but successful teachers in every sense. If this article does its job, then the industry in which we work will

be a bit closer to rehabilitation in the eyes of the public, other educators, and ourselves. If not, at least we can take pride in the fact that we're not GABA.

*Mark Makino is an eikaiwa teacher/owner. He recently completed his Master's in Applied Linguistics at the University of Leicester without ever having set foot in England. He resides in Fujinomiya, Shizuoka Prefecture and can be reached at [mark.makino@gmail.com](mailto:mark.makino@gmail.com).*

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