

EFL and the Japanese Art of "English Conversation"

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### Abstract

In letters and other passages written for a colleague in EFL, I raise the question: what's so special about teaching English in Japan? I recall a significant conversation from amongst my experiences as teacher in the community centres and “culture centres” of Japan, where members of numerous study-groups may gather to practise such traditional disciplines as the tea ceremony and ikebana, as well as activities like karaoke, various forms of dance, sushi-making and Conversational English (known in Japanese as *eikaiwa*). If all of these occupations may be gathered under the heading *shumi*, I suggest a carefully nuanced understanding of this term, beginning, but only beginning, with its popular translation as “hobby”. At the heart of this understanding, for some, lies the “way of the soul” outlined in each of the core traditional *shumi*, especially as indicated in the *-do* of kendo, judo, *sado* (“tea ceremony”), *kado* (“ikebana”), and *bushido* (“way of the warrior”), even Shinto, the “way of the gods”. For many, argues my US-born colleague, *eikaiwa*, as *shumi*, is really just a hobby, a pastime.

*Eikaiwa*

Perhaps, to many I passed in the streets every day, I was always coming from a foreign land, and never arriving in Japan. Nevertheless, I begin: it was late in the *hanami* season<sup>1</sup> when I first arrived in Japan.

On the first day, I made my start by learning one particular word, having come to Japan without really knowing anything about the Japanese language, much less about people who spoke it. Having got in late the night before and taken a room in the Hotel Oahu, I was now waiting out front for a couple of outbound teachers from the school where I was to work. Sally and Gord. It was their last weekend in Akita. They pulled up with a Japanese friend, Yoshi, in his car, yelling out the window: “Hey, *gaijin!*” This, I learnt, meant “foreigner” or “outsider”. This was difficult to take in as deeply significant at the time but, at least in Akita, it seemed to be a basic element in the consciousness of the foreign nationals I met, be they tourists, backpackers, assistant language teachers, *eikaiwa* teachers, businesspeople, academics, expats, whatever—they were all quite recognizable in the street, and all, knowingly, *gaijin*. I hopped in the car, and off we went to get set up for an evening *hanami* barbecue.

Watson (2008, p. 124) writes of *eikaiwa* teaching as “not something I’d dreamed of doing but something to do while I dream, some way to make a living”. “I also wanted”, he maintains, “to look around Japan, absorb some of it, drink it in (literally and figuratively), learn something different, flirt with Zen, talk with people, check out the ladies, frolic in the neon nighttime establishments” (Watson, 2008, p. 124). Such, too, was my own frame of mind, to some extent, as I started waking up in the morning, looking

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<sup>1</sup> This is the time of year, around April, when the beloved cherry trees of Japan are blossoming.

around the room, and saying to myself, “right, I’m in Japan. Better watch out for the door-lintel as I go out to the kitchen for my morning coffee.”

Sometime in the first month, a friend brought me to a place called, simply enough, The English Café. I remember the stained-wood interior, the Hawaiian bartender named Kirk and the Bass Pale Ale he was pouring—the first I’d had. Perhaps such a setting couldn’t help me to believe it, but here I was, in the relatively small city of Akita, capital of the Japan Sea-side prefecture of the same name, in the Tohoku region of northern Honshu.

By this time, I’m sure, I’d heard the term *eikaiwa* (I was working for a place known as *Jack’s Eikaiwa*), but when an older local man approached me at the bar to give me his business-card and say, “Please teach me English Conversation”, I felt hard-put to make out what he meant by thus framing things in English.

The formal yet direct phrasing sounded foreign to me.

I could understand being asked to teach him English; however, the seemingly extraneous “Conversation” left me wondering if I was really understanding what I was hearing.

The man left directly after making his request. Mystified, I turned to my companion, who explained that “English Conversation” was the going translation for *Eikaiwa*, and that *Eikaiwa* was also the Japanese equivalent of the English term “EFL”. Until then, I’d thought it only meant “English school, as in Jack’s English School”. Here, in the proposed subject of English Conversation, was a new piece of “Japanese English”, which would, at least in this word, *eikaiwa*, prove to come up often: jumping out of an overheard but otherwise comfortably unintelligible conversation taking place somewhere

over my shoulder in the Café Christmas; permeating, naturally, much of the conversation I had at Jack's.

To this day, *eikaiwa* nevertheless remains a mystery to me, except in its currency as the local name for the kind of teaching industry in which I was engaged. I carry abundant stories of *eikaiwa*, and I mean to explore them now that I'm back in Canada for a time. This I will do as I keep in touch with a US-born colleague of mine from Japan, who has by this time spent more than half his life living in that country, and whom I'm addressing as Zenmai.

20 April 2009

Thank you, Dear Zenmai,  
for agreeing to take up this conversation. Let me begin by asking you whether you would say that *eikaiwa* is a way of life, or a way of living in Japan, or would you say that it's just a Japanese way of distinguishing communicative (*kaiwa*-based) language instruction from the grammar-translation method which prevailed for so long in the teaching of English (understood as *Eigo*, English Language) in Japan?

The sense of mystery about *eikaiwa* is really my starting-point in this study. After working in it for over seven years, the first question I've raised for myself is "what *is* this stuff called *eikaiwa*?" Perhaps my question belies some sense of an ineffable, or unspeakable, mystery, since, if we can't say what *eikaiwa* really means, then how

can we teach it? If it weren't also an unspeakable secret to some, that fundamentally, perhaps, their work as teachers is only meant, in the words of my American-born boss at Blitz Language Centre, to consist in "conversating" (whatever he meant by that) with Japanese people in English, then I suppose I shouldn't be surprised to look back and find that I've almost never had a really frank conversation with another teacher on this subject.

So it was about this time of year (and now eight years have passed) since I first arrived in Akita. I understand that the *hanami* season has come and gone already in Sendai for this year, but here in the farm's old orchard the lone little cherry tree is still only budding, those buds just now taking on a reddish hue, distinguishing themselves from the rest of the early growth. Looking forward to the blossoms, then, as also to your next letter, I remain, sincerely,

—C-Mac.

24 April

Many thanks, Zenmai,  
for your thoughtful response. I read much in your letter that will most likely guide our discussion by the light of saying *eikaiwa* is like anything, really: like anything that may be bought or sold as educational content, educational

product, in today's marketplace. Yet teaching and learning, you seem to say, may go on despite commercial appeal. So, at least as long as there's money to be made in education (and not necessarily on the same timeline with that factor), there will be those teaching and learning *eikaiwa*.

It is interesting, I think, that you use the expression "two sides of one coin" to describe teaching and learning: two signs of the value of what is exchanged. I think you're basically right to equate the exchange of teaching and learning *eikaiwa* with the value of being "international". I remember a student of mine, herself a teacher at a *youchien*,<sup>2</sup> uttering a sentence that surprised me. She suggested that I (who, when asked about my travels before reaching Japan, was relating that I had spent a year and a bit in France and Germany as a younger person) was really *international*. Images of Austin Powers came to mind.

A sense of the international is also behind the JET Programme, whose mandate lies, according to Andorf (2002, pp. 166-167), with the impressions formed in the schoolchildren who meet foreign teachers—"that Japan will become more outward-looking with time" and that Japanese people might become less "ignorant of people and cultures outside Japan".

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<sup>2</sup> —usually referred to in (Japanese-) English as "kindergarten".

Andorf (2002, p. 167) makes the very good point, at length of her reckoning of what it means to be international, that “prejudice is not only a Japanese vice”—though it may seem to be so in the discourse of those who go to teach in Japan, who may at times feel so much like *gaijin* that they will commit the fallacy of concluding that “the Japanese are badly prejudiced”. Such an address to the problem of prejudice, perhaps, is the full reach of the international perspective, and yet, you’re right, it is a key selling-point for *eikaiwa*.

26 April

I’ve just watched *The Barbarian and the Geisha* (Frenke & Huston, 1958), the John Wayne movie you mentioned. In fact there is no explicit treatment of the “barbarian” theme to speak of here, though I am aware of the *sonno(o) jo(o)i* drive behind the Meiji Restoration, which envisaged, in reaction to the advent of (John Wayne as) Townsend Harris and others, not only revering the emperor but also expelling the barbarians. I’m aware, also, that the director’s cut was quite different from the final movie, supposedly closer to a Japanese narrative and possibly treating the barbarian theme. I laughed when Harris looked at the run-down house he’d been given as first Consul General, on behalf of the US, at Shimoda—he looked around and said “Home; sweet home.” His

appeal to the sho(o)gunate, reaching out a neighbourly hand and stressing the common good, is an interesting image to bear in mind as I also accept your invitation to see in it "America the new colonial power". Such, perhaps, is the kind of Americanization portrayed as the way of progress for Japan, in what I stress is a movie made in 1958, at length of an American-led occupation under MacArthur (the first foreign occupation in Japanese history) and a Korean War in which Japan had been used as a strategic launching-pad.

Let's go back to somewhere near your own origins, shall, we? The Waldorf-Astoria hotel, in New York. There is also a community in Queen's, apparently, called Astoria; like the hotel, it owes its name to the Astor family. Old John Jacob Astor himself, America's first multi-millionaire, trading in furs, land and opium, established a fort in Oregon in 1810, a few years after Lewis and Clark had spent a winter waiting near the same place, hoping that a ship would come and bring them back to the east.

Fort Astoria was then, you say, the birthplace of Ranald MacDonald (yes, a retrospective namesake), who is now remembered as the first teacher of English in Japan. Born of a Scottish fur-trader with Hudson Bay and of a member of the Chinook people, the boy MacDonald chanced to meet the

shipwrecked Otokichi and a couple of other Japanese sailors, who seem to have left with him the impression that the aboriginal side of his heritage had its own origin and heritage, going way back, possibly to Japan. In 1848, MacDonald got dropped off by an American whaling ship, pretended to be shipwrecked on the small island of Rishiri, off Hokkaido; was captured by Ainu people, handed over to the Daimyo, and remanded to the Dutch of Dejima, near Nagasaki, who were at that time the only operators of western trade with Japan; he stayed for some ten months, and taught English to fourteen samurai, including Einosuke Moriyama, the renowned student of the Dutch and English languages who would go on to negotiate, with others including Admiral Perry, the opening of Japan to the western world.

Jump a couple of years from said opening, and we're back at the arrival of Townsend Harris, the barbarian whose geisha, Okichi, is also much storied. If you go to Shimoda today, apparently you can find a temple-museum commemorating her times with Harris. Of course the movie told me nothing of this, but the story goes that Okichi's true love was for a man named Tsurumatsu, that she was separated from him for the good of Japan when Harris arrived in need of a maid, that the lovers were reunited after his departure and until

Tsurumatsu's untimely death, which preceded Okichi's by just a few years (they say that in her last days she was pretty much overtaken with the drink, and that she finally drowned herself in a river).

So much for an early history of teaching English in Japan. Looking forward to your next letter,

—C-Mac.

### *Shumi*

One of the groups I taught in the last couple of years before leaving Japan was an extraordinarily *genki*<sup>3</sup> group of septuagenarians who called themselves the Samurai. We'd meet at the Wakabayashi community centre. I didn't see them more than once every couple of months at first, and it seemed difficult, spending a couple of hours amongst these chatty people, to keep the dialogue from slipping, sometimes at great length, into Japanese. To feel like a really effective teacher of English seemed practically out of the question, yet when I try to get my head around Bakhtin's ideas of heteroglossia and carnival, I remember the Samurai. Interestingly, perhaps, Andorf's (2002, p. 162) reading of the local *matsuri* (festivals) she attended hinges on observing her students *outside* of their classrooms, as participants in wider town events; for me, I think, the Samurai were themselves a town event. One Saturday morning last year they treated me to a dialogue in which we discovered the following.

*Eikaiwa* has its place in a group of more or less widely recognized and accepted Japanese hobbies, or *shumi*. Many of the same people who practise *eikaiwa* have also

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<sup>3</sup> —or energetic, or enthusiastic, or indeed “vigorous”, as they themselves put it when meeting me for the first time.

practised more traditional Japanese disciplines like the tea ceremony, ikebana, or *shodo*. When karate as well as fishing can clearly be seen on the same continuum of traditions old and new, the word "hobby" fails to accurately represent the character of these free-time occupations, which are understood to become ways of the soul for those who engage in them. Indeed, such devotion to one art, one activity in which the participant may become a master, remains central to Japanese recreational life and is a great legacy when compared to the usual sense of the English word "hobby".

Watson (2008, p. 108) defines the "conversational school" as "a for-profit entity that employs teachers of spoken English, teachers who had come mostly from English-speaking countries". *Eikaiwa* is "'real', practical English, aimed at practical communication" as distinct from (even imagined as opposite to) a textbook's "*John hit the ball into the woods and no one was able to find it*" (Watson, 2008, p. 129). The certified EFL teacher, full of buzzwords on teaching techniques, would find her career run ashore on this rocky coast if she did not lower the sail of "intellectual imperialism: one mode of knowing and living spread over the earth" (Watson, 2008, p. 113). Such a teacher will often find herself giving up on, or at least somehow modulating, theories of teaching designed with English-speaking societal contexts in mind; hopefully this is a process which leads to a deeper and more personal sense of what it means to be teacher or, as she will so often be addressed, *sensei*.

Coming back to the topic of *shumi*, but still walking the road with Watson, the *eikaiwa no sensei* is likely to find that what *eikaiwa* students really want is novelty, and not novelty in styles of learning or some other element of EFL *tekhne*: simple diversion, perhaps an entertaining insight on her life in their country (the pronouns are weighted here

to suggest the kind of division many teachers experience when looked upon as native-speaking edutainers), perhaps a bit of an escape from busy (and, one might assume, boring) Japanese lives, a sense, perhaps, of liberation, or a way of keeping active, of studying something, polishing and improving, gaining merit. This seems to be where my Samurai group would come in, to deliver the narrative of the *shumi*, and it's where Watson goes next as well, noting especially that he, too, was there for diversion, as perhaps many would like to be anywhere.<sup>4</sup> “There we were”, says Watson:

housewives young, middle age, or older, retired businessmen, grandmothers and grandfathers, a college kid here and there, a few college professors. Some actually did have some degree of interest in English and pursued English study as they would another hobby. Some were there after having taken ceramics for a few years or had been in water colors before; then on to conversational English. What was frustratingly obvious to me is that few of those who came to my classes were willing to put forth the effort needed—and it is a significant effort—to attain fluency or anything like it. (Watson, 2008, pp. 120-121)

Ultimately, the question may be (and again I quote Watson, 2008, p. 124): “If we’re not going to try to be *good* at it then what are we doing?”

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<sup>4</sup> (Is *eikaiwa* teaching a kind of professional diversion? I remember thinking, as a new teacher, that it was something I could just try out for awhile. I was rather non-committal in my first year or so, and especially about *eikaiwa*, thinking there must be something else that I could teach — like a “real” English class. When my one-year contract came up for renewal for the first time, I felt somewhat more aware of what that commitment would entail, contractually and in terms of how it would actually look. I moved up to Sendai to see what I could learn by working in a larger school.)

## References

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