Too Close for Comfort: Eikaiwa and Stigma in Japanese ELT

By Daniel Hooper

Private English conversation (*eikaiwa*) schools cover the entirety of Japan employing thousands of teachers and representing a multibillion-yen industry (METI, 2017). These schools lie outside of formal educational institutions and are often viewed as an entry-level position for new teachers (Kubota, 2011; Nagatomo, 2016). In this article, I wish to examine eikaiwa's stigmatized position in our field and explore some of the pejorative images that are attached to this sector. I think at this point it is important to clarify what I do not intend to say. Firstly, I have no intention of claiming that the eikaiwa industry is not deeply troubling in many ways – eikaiwa schools are often exploitative and the way that many schools handle issues of race, native-speakerism, and gender is a major concern (Appleby, 2013; Kubota, 2011). Secondly, this should not by any means be interpreted as an attack on secondary or tertiary education. I currently feel satisfied and well-supported in my position as a university lecturer and believe that I am providing a worthwhile educational experience to my students. I merely hope that through this article I can foster a more nuanced take on eikaiwa teaching and relate my own discoveries on some problematic issues running through our entire field.

At this stage, I feel that it is necessary to clarify my claim that eikaiwa is stigmatized in Japan. Rather than relying purely on anecdote and relating derogatory comments I have heard (and made) about eikaiwa, it is important that we also look to popular culture and formal research in order to get a more well-rounded take on this topic.

As I mentioned previously, eikaiwa is seen as an entry-level job with few qualifications required and, as such, is regarded as the "bottom rung" of a hierarchically structured field (Nagatomo, 2016). Furthermore, while Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) in secondary education are largely comparable in terms of qualifications and teaching experience, some argue that eikaiwa is "seen as crasser because it is private enterprise" (Makino, 2015, p.3). Also, in popular culture a number of negative stereotypes ascribed to eikaiwa teachers exist that ensure they remain deprofessionalized and on the periphery. One enduring image known by many in the expatriate community is the "Charisma Man" (Rodney & Garscadden, 2002). Originally from a satirical comic strip, this image of the unprofessional, unqualified Caucasian male eikaiwa teacher, largely playing games in class and more concerned about sexual escapades with Japanese women than teaching, is arguably central to the prevailing view of eikaiwa (Appleby, 2013; Bailey, 2007).

In reality the sexualization of Caucasian male teachers is often promoted by the eikaiwa schools themselves (Bailey, 2007; Kubota, 2011), and this can have a demotivational effect on teachers as they feel they have been deprofessionalized and reduced to "language

hosts" or "entertainers" (Appleby, 2013; Hooper & Snyder, 2017).

Another prevalent negative stereotype leveled at eikaiwa teachers is that their role is more akin to a fast food restaurant worker than an educator. This comparison is also alluded to in the "Charisma Man" comic in Figure 1 as the male applicant with his unskilled fast food experience beats out the professionally trained female educators for the eikaiwa position. Eikaiwa is therefore positioned as a setting where teachers are not only unskilled but, in fact, low-skilled workers (defined purely by race, nationality, or gender) are actually viewed as preferable to trained or experienced teachers.

Figure 1. Charisma Man applying for eikaiwa work (Rodney & Garscadden, 2002) (Retrieved from http://www.charismaman.com/CMweb_4.98.jpg)

In McNeill's (2004) Japan Times article, he raises the idea of eikaiwa being an example of George Ritzer's (2000) concept of "McDonaldization" because he claims that many schools produce a low quality product within a highly-controlled system manned by unskilled easily replaceable labor. In this view of eikaiwa, teachers are reduced to the role of pedagogical "burger flippers" teaching lessons that are "about as nutritious as a bag of salty fries" (McNeill, 2004). This pejorative eikaiwa/fast food analogy has caught on with books such as *English to Go* (Currie-Robson, 2015) (see Figure 2) railing against "McEnglish" and online message boards referring to teachers as "Eikaiwa Mcmonkeys (sic)" (Reddit).

Perhaps unsurprisingly, eikaiwa has received scant attention in academia (Nagatomo, 2013, 2016) with most of the studies that do exist on the context focusing on eikaiwa schools as "socio-cultural curiosities rather than educational institutions" (Makino, 2016, p. 4). From my own research on former eikaiwa teachers who had transitioned into university teaching, some participants revealed their own awareness of a professional stigma in the field attached to eikaiwa. One teacher admitted that he saw eikaiwa as a "black cloud"

over his resumé whereas another teacher stated that: "I think that kind of, um, stereotype or something about eikaiwa, um, in some ways makes it difficult to say, to put your hand up with vigour, "Yes, I did the eikaiwa thing" (Hooper, 2017).

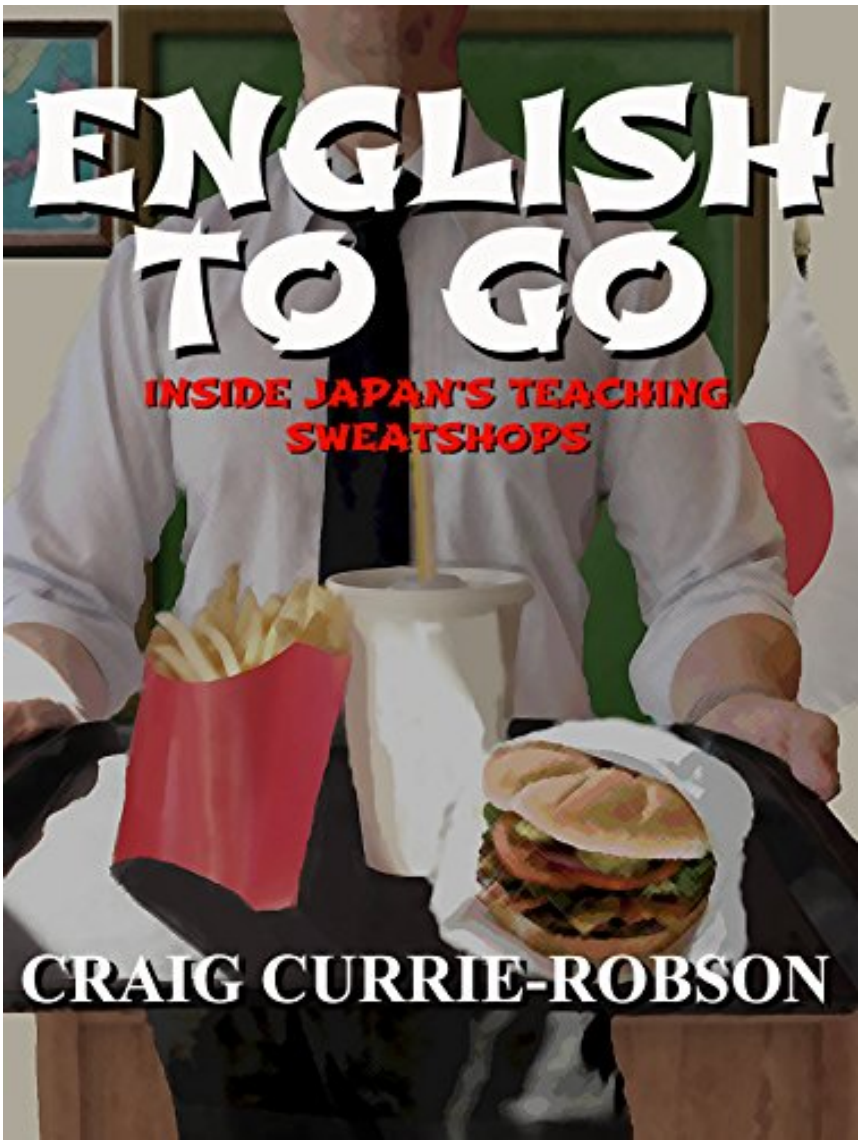

Figure 2: Eikaiwa as "McEnglish" (Currie-Robson, 2015)

In essence then, we have two dominant themes that permeate stereotypes of eikaiwa: 1) the notion of eikaiwa teachers being tokenistic – entertainers or hosts rather than authoritative teachers and 2) a conflict existing between commercial and educational interests – eikaiwa selling a product in response to market forces. I will argue that both of these points when applied to eikaiwa are problematic and by no means limited to the eikaiwa industry. Furthermore I will show how we are able to observe evidence of these issues in many sectors of Japanese ELT and even in the "holy grail" (Nagatomo, 2015) of university education.

My first issue regarding the stigmatization of eikaiwa can be addressed with a

simple question: What do we mean by eikaiwa? When one attempts to answer this question, they may think of the huge chain eikaiwa companies such as NOVA, Aeon, or Gaba. Indeed, these schools are perhaps responsible for a lot of eikaiwa's notoriety in Japan and represent the part of the industry most deeply embedded in the public consciousness. However, eikaiwa is a far more varied sector than that and incorporates small family-owned businesses, the cottage eikaiwa industry (Nagatomo, 2013), online eikaiwa, and amateur eikaiwa classes held in public venues like community centers (Makino, 2016). Each of these categories of eikaiwa have their own differences in terms of hiring practices, teaching methodology, standardization, and target students (Makino, 2016), and one could also expect to encounter a significant degree of diversity between individual schools in each category. If this is, in fact, the case, how can one assume that eikaiwa neatly fits the "McEnglish" mold of the chain eikaiwa companies? From my own personal experiences having worked both in NOVA and in a smaller family-run eikaiwa school, the differences in terms of hiring practices, teacher autonomy, and teachers' qualifications/experience were dramatic. Rather than a slew of "Charisma Men", some teachers in the smaller school actually possessed Master's degrees in TESOL and others were regularly presenting at domestic ELT conferences. Makino (2016) claims that an insufficient understanding of what eikaiwa really is has led to it being seen as "pedagogically unimportant" and that this in turn has led to a gap in what we know about eikaiwa classroom practices. An additional point to be considered is that some eikaiwa schools are now outsourcing teachers and courses to secondary schools and universities (Breaden, 2016). This means that the boundary between eikaiwa and what is seen as "real" teaching is more blurred than ever.

It is the growing indistinctness of the boundaries between eikaiwa and other formal educational contexts that is the basis for my other point of contention with the stigmatization of eikaiwa. I was actually guilty of this myself in the past. When I worked in eikaiwa, I too thought that university teaching was the "holy grail" of English teaching and almost the antithesis of the deprofessionalization I was experiencing at the time. It wasn't until I began to do research into the lives of other university English teachers in Japan that I realized that many of the problems ascribed to eikaiwa don't stop at the university gates. As I mentioned before, two themes tied to the stigmatization of eikaiwa are 1) teacher as entertainer/host and 2) business vs. education. Through my reading on university English teaching I found a number of articles that examined the way in which university teachers feel they are viewed by both their institution and their students (Nagatomo, 2015; Whitsed & Wright, 2011). Nagatomo (2015) found that some university teachers felt they were viewed as replaceable foreign "warm bodies" by their institutions and that the misogynist and sexualized discourse of the "Charisma Man" was still very much alive and well in their workplaces. In a study into the lives of adjunct foreign English language teachers in university, Whitsed and Wright (2011) discovered that many of their participants believed they were still being commodified on the basis of race and physical appearance in order to create an international atmosphere for the university. One participant claimed:

> They needed a white face and I was a good one... They need the face for the brochure, for when they do the recruiting session for the parents when they bring their kids. They don't give the face any power but they need [it]. (Whitsed & Wright, 2011, p.38)

This leads into the second theme of business vs. education. Due to the crisis of declining student numbers, Nagatomo (2016) claims that university education has become "a buyer's market" (p.50) where the exoticism of foreign teachers is used as a tokenistic hook to draw in more students. Also, the increased power that students wield as "customers" has led to an increase in feelings of deprofessionalization in foreign university teachers on fixed-term contracts as they feel it necessary to keep their "customers" happy (Burrows, 2007). As I'm sure you have realized by now, this is all very familiar to the eikaiwa teacher in me.

As I have previously stated, this article is not an attempt to justify every facet of eikaiwa teaching, nor is it designed to delegitimize teaching in formal contexts. I have merely tried to show how eikaiwa is not a mere pejorative stereotype and is actually potentially just as representative of ELT in Japan as any other context. I feel it is important that we examine the intersection of ideology and pedagogy that takes place in different eikaiwa schools and look at what we can learn from other contexts. Even though we may feel we are "above" eikaiwa, it might be that "McEnglish" is closer to us than we would like to imagine.

References

Appleby, R. (2013). Desire in translation: White masculinity and TESOL. *TESOL Quarterly, 47*(1), 122-147.

Bailey, K. (2007). Akogare, ideology, and 'charisma man' mythology: Reflections on ethnographic research in English language schools in Japan. *Gender, Place & Culture, 14*(5), 585-608. https://doi.org/10.1080/09663690701562438

Breaden, J. (2016). Education and training for the intercultural competence of Japanese university graduates: Policy, practice, and markets in informal education. In K. Okano (Ed.), *Nonformal education and civil society in Japan* (pp.133-154). Abingdon, Oxon: New York, NY: Routledge.

Burrows, C. (2007). The effect of limited-term contracts on teaching standards at tertiary-level education in Japan. *OnCUE Journal, 1*(1), 64-73.

Currie-Robson, C. (2015). *English to go: Inside Japan's English teaching sweatshops*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

Hooper, D. (2017, November). *From "McEnglish" to "the holy grail": Eikaiwa and university*

through the eyes of educators. Paper presented at JALT2017: Language teaching in a global age, Tsukuba, Japan, November 18, 2017.

Hooper, D., & Snyder, W. (2017). Becoming a "real" teacher: A case study of professional development in eikaiwa. *The European Journal of Applied Linguistics and TEFL, 6*(2), 183–201.

iza_kaiser. (2015, February 6th). *Do you lie about your job? – The stigma against teaching English in Japan [Msg 49]*. Message posted to https://www.reddit.com/r/japan/comments/2uygp0/do_you_lie_about_your_job_the_stigma_against/

Kubota, R. (2011a). Learning a foreign language as leisure and consumption: Enjoyment, desire, and the business of eikaiwa. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism, 14*(4), 473–488.

Makino, M. (2015). Principled eikaiwa. *JALT School Owners SIG Newsletter, 1*, 3–8.

Makino, M. (2016). A taxonomy of eikaiwa schools. *JALT School Owners SIG Newsletter, 3*, 4–11.

McNeill, D. (2004) McEnglish for the masses. *The Japan Times,* February 24, 2004, accessed October 15, 2017. https://www.japantimes.co.jp/community/2004/02/24/issues/mcenglish-for-the-masses/#.Wtr4XlhublU

METI (Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry). (2017). *Preliminary report on the current survey of commerce.* Retrieved from http://www.meti.go.jp/english/statistics/index.html

Nagatomo, D. H. (2013). The advantages and disadvantages faced by housewife English teachers in the cottage industry eikaiwa business. *The Language Teacher 37*(1), 3–7.

Nagatomo, D. H. (2015). In the ivory tower and out of the loop: Racialized and gendered identities of university EFL teachers in Japan. In Y. L. Cheung, S. B. Said, & K. Park (Eds.), *Advances and current trends in language teacher identity research* (pp. 124–137). New York: Routledge.

Nagatomo, D. H. (2016). *Identity, gender and teaching English in Japan.* Bristol: Multilingual Matters.

Ritzer, G. (2000). *The McDonaldization of society* (New Century ed.). Thousand Oaks, California: Pine Forge Press.

Rodney, L. and Garscadden, N. (2002). *Charisma man: The complete collection*. Tokyo: AKNG Press.

Whitsed, C., & Wright, P. (2011). Perspectives from within: Adjunct, foreign, English-language teachers in the internationalization of Japanese universities. *Journal of Research in International Education, 10*(1), 28-45.

Author bio: Daniel Hooper has taught in Japan for 12 years and is a lecturer at Kanda University of International Studies. His research interests are learner/teacher identity, native-speakerism, and the eikaiwa industry.