# Subversion with a Smile

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My presentation at JALT 2017 told a story of my internal struggles as an *eikaiwa* 'teacher'. The reason I have chosen to write 'teacher' in quotations is because I constantly felt like my identity as a professional was called into question both within the setting where I taught and in the larger professional community. In this brief summary, I will describe the main tensions that I encountered in *eikaiwa* teaching, and how I was able to counter some of what I perceived as the dominant beliefs within the industry while also avoiding reprimand or contract termination by the company I worked for.

Although I was perhaps partially aware of a disconnect between my principles and my practice within *eikaiwa* for a number of years before, I couldn't really ascribe a name to this itch. It was really only when I became active in professional development and academic research that this hazy disconnect developed into an inconsolable rift that was intertwined with a sense of responsibility to my students and the way I viewed my own professional identity. The literature I was exposed to through my MA studies further added fuel to this fire and probably contributed to a growing isolation from my 'native-speaker' co-workers who I often saw as well-meaning but were essentially reinforcing many of the issues that I was struggling with at the time (Hooper & Snyder, 2017).

## Why just 'go native'?

The construct of the 'native-speaker' teacher in *eikaiwa* was perhaps the most prominent issue that I struggled with, due in part to *eikaiwa* being a prominent site of native-speakerism (Cater, 2017) and also because of the awkward relationship I had with my own 'native-speaker' status. Feelings of discomfort over native-speakerism really took root during some of my earliest experiences of professional development in Japan. When attending teaching seminars and certificate courses, I would commonly find myself in the minority as one of two or three 'native-speakers' among twenty or thirty Filipino teachers. This imbalance was further brought to the forefront of my mind when, in my position as head teacher and recruiter in one *eikaiwa* school, I found that Filipino or Singaporean teachers were avoided by the school management in favor of untrained, inexperienced (and usually Caucasian) 'native-speakers'. Furthermore, my 'native-speaker' co-workers at the time appeared to be making not even a fraction of the effort to develop their teaching skill that their 'non-native' counterparts were. But in *eikaiwa* maybe that was not the point.

In my attempts to make sense of the world that I was teaching in, I stumbled upon a number of academic works that further complicated the way I viewed my school's native-speakerist tendencies. Rather than framing 'native-speakers' as simple authority figures or mere beneficiaries of privilege, some studies discussed a sense in which they were transformed into sellable products by *eikaiwa* schools (Kubota, 2011) and how, in some regards, their 'native speaker' status actually played into a deprofessionalized and marginalized positioning within ELT in Japan (Rivers & Houghton, 2013). These ideas resonated with my experiences in *eikaiwa* schools. I had become convinced that, even while my professional knowledge and skills developed, I was essentially perceived as inhabiting the same role that my co-workers had accepted – a marketable piece of foreign realia.

Partly as a result of this growing aversion to the 'native speaker'-centric approach to classes in my school, I sought ways to draw more focus towards attainable role-models to which my students could truly relate. I felt the prevalent model in my school often disempowered learners by juxtaposing teachers' 'native' proficiency with theirs, thus reinforcing an identity based upon deficiency as 'non-native speakers'. I was fortunate enough to have been enrolled in a module in my



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MA course taught by Tim Murphey. Tim had been explaining to us how he had been using 'near-peer role models – proficient speakers similar in some way (age, culture, background, etc.) to the learners themselves – in order to motivate his students (Murphey, 1998). This immediately sounded like something that could challenge the *eikaiwa* status quo while also feasible to implement without raising too many eyebrows from the school's management. I recorded six videos of students and Japanese staff members who shared their experiences as language learners and their advice to others looking to become proficient speakers. After showing the videos to several classes, the students gave me written feedback on what value, if any, they saw in the videos and if their beliefs about language learning had changed after hearing from the near-peer role models. The feedback was overwhelmingly positive with some students appearing to question the validity of 'native' proficiency as a learning goal and others gaining practical tips for developing their English from relatable people who had 'walked the walk' (Hooper, 2016).

## Business vs. education

Arguably the most significant factor distinguishing *eikaiwa* schools from most formal educational contexts in Japan is the fact that they are fundamentally profit-focused enterprises. This is not to say, of course, that educational and business interests are inconsolable, but I found that this tug-of-war between business and education created tensions that strongly influenced my teaching beliefs and practice. This divergence of interests has also been examined by Bossaer (2003) where certain business practices implemented by Japanese *eikaiwa* managers such as lax hiring policies and a perceived lack of concern with teacher training were perceived by foreign instructors to be at odds with their image of what an educational establishment should be. In my case too, hiring practices and professional development in *eikaiwa* became pivotal in the way that I conceived my teaching role and my responsibility to my students. In my former position as a recruiter within our school, I was all too aware of the race-centric, devil-may-care manner in which the management selected new teachers and knew the likelihood of motivated learners being short-changed if they left their development in the hands of the company. However, I was not really in a position where I could inform students of my concerns directly for fear of them letting it slip to my bosses. Therefore, I decided to try and frame this issue in a more positive fashion.

I began spending time in each class introducing resources (graded readers, YouTube channels, diary writing, flashcard software, etc.) that learners could utilize to develop their English outside of class without needing to rely on the school. Generally, rather than explicitly raising my concerns about quality control and ethical issues in *eikaiwa*, I stressed the importance of independent learning as a result of Japan being an EFL context with few opportunities for engagement with the target language. As most of the resources I introduced were either free or self-provided, the school had no grounds to object as I was simply giving their customers extra services and keeping them happy. What I was actually attempting to do was chip away at students' reliance on an organization that I felt cared very little about the quality of the product they were providing. However, one thing I learned from this endeavor that I unfortunately felt limited its effectiveness was the importance of constant support for students' independent learning. When I started introducing out-of-class resources, I hoped that it would simply cut the 'umbilical cord' that tied them to the school, allowing them to continue developing regardless of the teacher they received. Although I received a great deal of positive feedback about the out-of-class learning, another key theme that emerged was that most of the students stated that it was the feedback, encouragement and consultation they received that sustained their efforts. Rather than the resources themselves, the value of teacher-student relations and the enthusiasm that the teacher had appeared to be the defining factors in whether their independent engagement in language learning would be long-lasting or transient. This meant that my efforts to 'save' students from the 'tourist teacher' were perhaps in vain. On a more positive note, however, it reaffirmed the value of interpersonal relations in our classrooms and the teacher's role as a potential catalyst for motivating learners.

I hope this short reflection has succeeded in raising two encouraging points. First, that even in a context marked by various institutional constraints that may challenge teachers' self-image and students' growth, if approached carefully, there are ways in which we can take small steps to challenge the norm while also ensuring that our employment is not put in jeopardy. Although there may be times where we question the value of what we do or even the validity of our own professional status, awareness of the tensions that exist in our workplace and a desire to ensure our students don't suffer

because of them, make small victories possible translating into significant changes in their learning. The second reassuring point that came out of my experiences was finding that *eikaiwa* schools, despite being stigmatized and under-represented in the field (Lowe, 2015; MacNeill, 2004), are a viable setting for action research. These grass-roots projects can be conducted by teachers aiming to both develop professionally and enact positive change in their classrooms.

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