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Testing the Waters: Gauging the Viability of Self-Directed Language Learning in an *Eikaiwa* School

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Abstract

This perspective piece discusses the need for and viability of educators promoting self-directed language learning among adult students in the under-researched private English conversation school (*eikaiwa*) context. In this article I will present some potential contextual constraints to be negotiated as well as highlighting possible fruitful approaches for the fostering of self-directed learning with *eikaiwa* students. By examining existing research on both *eikaiwa* and self-regulation as well as the factors that draw students to these schools, this article describes how teachers can harness prevalent beliefs in *eikaiwa* and direct them into attractive and empowering self-study resources for their learners.

Keywords: *eikaiwa*, self-directed learning, imagined communities, motivation, *akogare*

Although having existed in many variegated forms since early civilization (Hiemstra, 1999), the concept of self-directed learning (SDL) was arguably first popularized and formally defined in 1975 by Malcolm Knowles. He claimed:

“In its broadest meaning, self-directed learning describes a process in which individuals take the initiative, with or without the help of others, in diagnosing their learning needs, formulating learning goals, identifying human and material resources for learning, choosing and implementing appropriate learning strategies, and evaluating learning outcomes.” (Knowles, 1975, p. 18)

SDL was initially associated with adult education programs, with a number of European and North American educational institutions incorporating SDL principles in their open-learning programs (Hiemstra, 1999). Later, due to the clear potential of SDL in the field of language education, the concept of self-directed language learning (SDLL) soon emerged, referring to a situation where responsibility for decision making related to language learning is placed in the hands of the learner. This can be “with or without a variable degree of participation” by an agent (e.g. a teacher) who acts as a “helper in response to requests for information or advice” (Holec, 1996, pp. 89-90). It has been reported in a number of studies that SDLL can offer multiple

benefits to language learners such as increased linguistic knowledge, developed meta-cognitive skills, increased motivation and confidence, as well as a heightened sense of responsibility and independence (Du, 2013; Victori & Lockhart, 1995; Wenden, 1991). Self-directed learning is best viewed as existing on a continuum featuring varying degrees of learner autonomy depending on each individual learning situation. Brockett and Hiemstra (1985) argue that self-directedness should be seen as “a characteristic that exists, to a greater or lesser degree, in all persons and in all learning situations” (p. 11). Both teacher and institution can indeed play important roles in self-directed learning such as encouraging dialogue with learners about their self-study, securing learning resources, negotiating learner goals and views, and offering individualized study options (Hiemstra, 1994).

Eikaiwa and its Challenges

Within Japan, an area of ELT that is largely neglected in studies relating to SDLL and indeed within academic inquiry in general, is the private English conversation school (*eikaiwa*) sector. In terms of the position of conversation schools within Japanese ELT at large, Seargeant (2009) claims that the *eikaiwa* industry is the “most visible context in which the actualities of language learning within Japanese society clash with current trends and recommendations in contemporary TESOL theory”(p.94). Furthermore, *eikaiwa* represents a multi-billion yen industry (Hawley-Nagatomo, 2013; Seargeant, 2009) with schools in every major city in Japan (METI, 2005) that draw students from a wide range of social groups and generations. However, despite the substantial economic and cultural impact of these schools on Japanese ELT and society, to date there remains a relative paucity of research into *eikaiwa* when compared with other educational settings (Lowe, 2015; Makino, 2016a; Hawley-Nagatomo, 2013).

In the area of self-directed language learning in particular, *eikaiwa* represents a unique and challenging pedagogical context. Kubota (2011) challenges the notion of enrolment in *eikaiwa* schools being necessarily based on *investment* (Norton, 2000) where learners demand some kind of tangible return on the time and effort they put into learning such as enhanced cultural capital or socioeconomic status. In her investigation of a number of franchised and community-based *eikaiwa* classes, Kubota postulated that these environments shared more in common with “casual” or “serious” leisure activities (Stebbins, 2007) than the traditionally-held conception of the language classroom as a site of education and intellectual development. This

perspective on *eikaiwa* has been supported by a number of Japan-based studies that characterize this sector of ELT as a casual, often transient, and hobby-like setting (Hawley-Nagatomo, 2013; Makino, 2015; Sugiyama, 2010).

A further issue that arguably sets *eikaiwa* apart from almost every other pedagogical setting in Japan is the respective identity and positionality of teacher and student. While compulsory English education in Japan is arguably still based on traditional, teacher-ruled classrooms, due to the overt commercial nature of most conversation schools, the balance of power in the classroom is firmly weighed in favor of the students or ‘clients’. In an institutional setting perhaps more akin to a service industry, student evaluations of teachers’ teaching methods, behavior, or even physical appearance can have serious consequences in terms of their perceived competence in the eyes of the company and even their job security (Bueno & Caesar, 2003; Currie-Robson, 2015). This means that any misplaced effort by an instructor to urge students to engage in out-of-class study could result in unfavorable feedback from their ‘clients’ and damage their standing within the school. Furthermore, the majority of major chain *eikaiwa* schools do not set homework and have been described by some as having an attitude of “come an hour a week and talk or play games, then buy a textbook on your way out” (Makino, 2016b). Sapunaru-Tamas and Tamas (2012) examined various *eikaiwa* promotional materials and argued that language used in *eikaiwa* advertising promoted the notion that the burden for language learning lies primarily on the instructor and that the industry disseminated a marketing strategy similar in nature to that of fad protein shake diets. This claim is perhaps given more credibility by the recent foray into the *eikaiwa* industry by fitness chain Rizap claiming that they are “committed to showing results in two months” (最短 2 ヶ月で結果にコミットする) (retrieved from <https://www.rizap-english.jp/about/> on January, 2017).

SDLL in *Eikaiwa*

Studies into the promotion of self-directed study in *eikaiwa* are extremely sparse. Brown (2005) focused on learner training and learning strategies within a study that took place in one branch of the nationwide *eikaiwa* chain, NOVA. He found that although the internal textbook syllabus contained “Review Tips” that provided ideas for self-directed home study, this section of the lesson was often neglected by instructors and students. Graded readers and bilingual reading materials were also introduced by the researcher to some students for out-of-class study

and were found to be “fruitful, if only amongst relatively few students” (Brown, 2005, p. 33).

Makino (2016b) reflected on an attempt within a small *eikaiwa* school to introduce an online/blended self-study component to its adult courses. The instructor had set up websites that included printable worksheets, videos, and a customizable dictionary/flashcard program based on vocabulary that was introduced during classes. However, despite a small number of students initially attempting to use the self-access materials, it was found that few learners used the materials for any extended period of time. The instructor determined that this was perhaps due to a lack of tech know-how on the part of the students and partially due to the notion that “if students think they’re at an *eikaiwa*, it’s very hard to convince them that they’re actually in a real class run by people who take education seriously” (Makino, 2016b).

What can we do?

Several studies claim that 'fun' plays a major role in the general perception of what language learning in *eikaiwa* should look like (Kubota, 2011; Makino, 2016a). This perception is reinforced by the dichotomous discourses said to exist in Japan of '*eigo*' (heavily grammar-focused instruction, often for test preparation) and '*eikaiwa*' (communicatively-oriented conversation practice) (Hawley-Nagatomo, 2016; Hiramoto, 2013; McVeigh, 2004). Japanese people who enter *eikaiwa* schools are often attracted by the idea of temporary belonging in "an imagined community of English speakers, which the learners enjoy visiting once every week" (Kubota, 2011, p. 485) rather than an extension of the grammar-heavy *eigo* lessons that they had experienced in their formal education (Hiramoto, 2013). If one also considers the significant power that *eikaiwa* students (or customers) potentially wield over teachers in a service-industry setting (Bueno & Caesar, 2003), a truly enjoyable approach to self-directed language learning that learners will buy into without formal requirements is clearly necessary for any realistic chance of success.

The interaction between interest and the degree to which language learners persist in independent study has recently attracted more attention in the field. Regulation of motivation is viewed as being essential in sustaining independent language learning among learners in distance programs or those who are simply studying outside of the classroom (Mynard & McLoughlin, forthcoming). Although goal setting and monitoring has typically been the focus of studies into motivation regulation, research by McLoughlin and Mynard (2015) highlights the role of

interest, along with goal-orientation in sustaining motivation for independent language learning. The researchers refer to the Self-Regulation of Motivation (SRM) model (Sansone & Thoman, 2005) that is based on both *goals-defined motivation* and *experience-defined motivation*. Experience-defined motivation stems from enjoying and experiencing interest in the learning process and overlaps, to a certain degree, with the established idea of intrinsic motivation. In their longitudinal study of Japanese university students, McLoughlin and Mynard (2015) found that interest or fun, as well as goals, were important in sustaining the independent language learning motivation. These findings were congruent with the SRM model and showed several instances where learners shifted their focus from goal-focused to interest-focused activities in order to boost their motivation whenever it dipped. This research, along with the SRM model, adds weight to the argument for providing self-study materials for *eikaiwa* learners that are enjoyable and that can cater to their individual interests.

An informal survey of approximately 80 adult learners I conducted in a mid-sized *eikaiwa* school in Gunma Prefecture indicated that the majority of students exhibited interest in a range of different self-study approaches. The results of the survey showed, however, that most students displayed more favorable attitudes (*interested* or *very interested*) towards receptive activities (watching TV/movies and listening to the radio – 79.2%, reading easy books – 71.4%, reading easy news articles – 59.7%, and smart phone word card apps – 57.9%) than toward productive activities (writing a diary – 40.3% and recording speaking on a smartphone – 35.1%). The most popular study approach overall was found to be using TV, movies, and radio for learning with 85.5% of students responding positively (*slightly interested* to *very interested*).

Fortunately, due to a wealth of online audio and video resources now available, there are a number of attractive options available to teachers wishing to engage learners in out-of-class study. For example, Apps4EFL (www.apps4efl.com) is a free website featuring a wide range of audio and video study resources as well as gamified vocabulary and grammar study tools. Users have access to over 2400 TED talks, plus a selection of video quizzes based on reports from the BBC and Voice of America. The site also features a function called 'Lyric Learner' that contains a number of short listening quizzes based on popular music videos that learners can access whenever they have a small window of free time. YouTube is another valuable and familiar resource for learners that can be exploited in a variety of ways for SDLL. The BBC, Voice of America, and The British Council regularly upload instructional videos on a variety of topics for

both child and adult learners and there are also a number of independent channels like JenniferESL, Learn British English, and Real English that offer large amounts of regularly updated and varied content. One YouTube channel that may appeal to *eikaiwa* learners in particular is Bilingirl Chika (www.youtube.com/user/cyoshida1231). This site features over 550 bilingual English/Japanese videos that introduce functional English phrases in authentic scenarios such as overseas restaurants and shops, explain colloquial or slang phrases, analyze common Japanese L1 transfer errors, and explain difficult grammar points for Japanese learners. However, it could be argued that the most powerful element of Bilingirl Chika is the presenter herself, a fluent Japanese speaker of English, and the exotic world of English-speaking friends, overseas restaurants, and Hollywood star interviews that permeates her channel. It acts as a realization of the '*akogare*' or longing (Kubota, 2011) towards an exotic imagined community that has been theorized to drive much of the *eikaiwa* industry (Hawley Nagatomo, 2016; Kubota, 2011; Sugiyama, 2010). If teachers are able to tap into students' psychological desire for belonging to this imagined community for the purpose of stimulating SDL, it could be the catalyst for greater learning beyond the classroom.

This brief article aims to offer some insight into the obstacles facing *eikaiwa* teachers who are seeking to promote self-directed learning and some tools that may assist them in negotiating these challenges. Furthermore, it is hoped that continuing the conversation on *eikaiwa*-based pedagogy can contribute to furthering the professional development of teachers in this sometimes overlooked setting. More research on language learning in *eikaiwa* is absolutely necessary in arguably every area of TESOL-related enquiry, but perhaps especially so on the topic of learner development. Due to the openly profit-oriented nature of many *eikaiwa* schools and the misleading claims proliferated through advertising campaigns, I argue that we as educators in Japan have a duty to encourage more grass-roots practitioner research in *eikaiwa* classrooms. In this way, I hope that both teachers and learners can become more stimulated, self-sufficient, and have greater awareness of what tools they need to reach their respective goals.

Notes on the contributor

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