

The Eikaiwa Phenomenon in Japan or the Three-Day Magic Formula : between Marketing and Language Acquisition

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Abstract:

This paper is an attempt to look into the social mechanisms that underlie a defining phenomenon in Japanese society: the desire (seldom fulfilled) to become proficient in English. This trend led, during Japan's economic boom of the 1980's, to the appearance of numerous English conversation schools, which in turn became profitable businesses for their owners, but less profitable investments for the students. Despite organizational and financial efforts, Japanese learners on average still have a long way to go until they reach the desired ability to speak English fluently. Our paper analyzes the English conversation school phenomenon in contemporary Japanese society, where these schools remain customer-oriented, merchant-like units focused on offering the best type of service, which does not always translate into efficient education. By discussing the current trends in marketing and advertising these schools, we hope to prove that they do not constitute educational institutions, and that their customer-students are attracted by the apparent facility with which they can acquire proficiency. Thus, a vicious circle is created: the students require comfort (that is, good service) and are not prepared to make an effort towards learning, while the schools provide that comfort, but are not willing to invest in real education materials and methods. This, in our opinion, is the flaw that turns the goal of learning a foreign language into an elusive, modern-day Holy Grail.

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a) Introduction

Connecting a business enterprise with the learning process may seem far-fetched at first, as the common view is that making money and education are not (or should not, in principle) be related. However, it does not take too close a look at things to see that Ivy League universities also have the highest tuition fees, publishing houses that print textbooks never go out of business, and neither do various private schools that prepare students for the next educational level. Education is a very profitable business, one which has been around for millennia and will not disappear soon: from the poor village teacher gathering children under a tree in the public square and teaching them letters in exchange for chickens and eggs, to the multimillion corporations selling books, notebooks, calculators and so on, they all have the same purpose—to exchange learning for a living, be it in a mud house or in a palace.

This paper is concerned with the language schools in Japan and the discrepancy between what they advertise and what they really offer. While publicity is an omnipresent and understandable tool in promoting one's business, we shall see how marketing has managed to influence the way of thinking of language learners and has them hope for a magical way of acquiring language competency in a matter of weeks or days.

b) Eikaiwa-language schools in Japan

Eikaiwa is a Japanese word meaning "English conversation" and has become the general term used to designate language schools in Japan. Although most major language schools offer courses in other languages besides English, it is English that remains the main goal of learners and the main target for companies that provide courses. An article published by OhmyNews in June 2007 states that "an estimated 1 million Japanese are learning English making the country the most lucrative haven for the English-teaching business." (Sianturi: 2007) In 2002, the foreign-language education industry was estimated at approximately 670 billion yen. (Otake: 2004)

Now, in 2011, the situation has not changed much despite the international economical crisis that has started to affect Japan too, but it was during the "bubble economy¹⁾" period that the *eikaiwa* business truly started to flourish. The demand of the market was so high, that all the qualifications a non-Japanese individual needed in order to obtain an English-teaching job was to speak English and to look "Western". Most conversation schools advertised the fact that their teachers were all native speakers of English (and to be honest, they were, as the majority of teachers came from the United States, Australia, New Zealand or Canada), but their "native" quality was a

superficial one: looks, attitude and language spoken. Even a peculiar accent was not necessarily viewed as a flaw, since the greater part of the students would not be able to distinguish between the various types of pronunciation. As Rudy Ronald Sianturi correctly notes, "In most teaching-job advertisements, for instance, the employers will state that only native speakers will be hired. And with the native speakers they usually mean only the whites. Other non-European native speakers may easily be excluded. Even in some cases, there are advertisements running specific racial signatures such as blonde hair or blue eyes." (Sianturi: 2007)

Sianturi also summarizes one of the facts that lies at the foundation of this so-called educational structure: the companies (because they are rather companies than educational institutions) cater to the desires of the customers: "It is commonly known that parents are willing to buy English course packages as long as their children get a chance to talk with or listen to a foreigner. This is confirmed to me during several long discussions by a top recruiter of a big dispatch company with branches in major cities. The company deploys English instructors at both institutional and non-degree English schools. The recruiter disclosed that his company, in order to satisfy parents' demands, turns down qualified applicants despite proven teaching records for the less qualified ones simply because the latter look "western." The company even refuses to employ Japanese English instructors as the children do not find them amusing." (Sianturi: 2007)

Schematically, the situation would look like this:

customers (people who want to learn English)
+
preconceived ideas related to language acquisition (such as "all foreigners speak English", "close contact to a foreigner leads to language acquisition" etc.)
⇒
eikaiwa (a company which provides its customers with the services they need).

We did not use the word "services" here accidentally: this is exactly what one of the major English conversation schools advertises on its website and on trains in Japan (Kansai area): "saabisu" (service).

c) Between customer "service" and language acquisition

In March 2010, on many trains of the Osaka City Subway Midousuji Line, one could often see a poster²⁾ showing a man in a business suit, carrying a briefcase and looking at a window displaying the word "service" in huge characters. The poster advertises an English conversation school, Gaba, which has become the next great name in the

industry after the collapse of the well-known NOVA, and which offers "man-to-man" (individual) lessons. In this poster, the word "service" (サービス, saabisu) appears five times, not including the big letters which take up half the poster, accompanied by the word "progress" (only twice). The words "learning", "education" or "method" do not appear at all. What the company boasts are individual lessons viewed as "special service" for the customers, and designed to guarantee progress³⁾.



In the 1990's, five groups, NOVA, GEOS, AEON, ECC and Berlitz took up 25% of the market, their sales in 1998 summing up 80 billion of the total of 670 billion made by the foreign-language education industry, which definitely makes them worthy of analysis, both from an educational and from a sociological point of view. The last four still exist, although sales seem to have decreased considerably, but the real mammoth, NOVA, filed for bankruptcy in 2007, after months when the workers' salaries had been withheld. For the purpose of this analysis, we shall try to give a concise explanation of what happened to NOVA.

There are many aspects of the NOVA "story", which can be considered emblematic for a social phenomenon that has spanned over decades in Japan and which is not extinct yet: lawsuits, discrimination against foreigners, customer abuse, poor employee treatment and the list could continue, but what interests us here is the educational aspect. Considering the historical period when the NOVA incident took place, most of the debates regarding NOVA took place online, so in this case (and also because we were witnesses in real time) we consider Wikipedia to be a reliable source, so we shall quote its version of the NOVA story: NOVA was the largest English conversation school in Japan

until its widely publicized collapse in October 2007. Before its bankruptcy, Nova employed approximately 15,000 people across a group of companies that supported the operations of and extended out from the "Intercultural Network" of its language schools. The scope of its business operations reached its peak in February 2007 following a rapid expansion of its chain to 924 Nova branches plus a Multimedia Center located in Osaka.

Nova, already notorious for its overpriced lesson packages, and more recently plagued by lawsuits and negative publicity, began to decline in earnest almost immediately after the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry placed a six-month ban against soliciting new long-term contracts from students on the company on 13 June 2007. The impending financial crisis facing Nova related to a rapid increase in refund claims, significant drops in sales figures, and deterioration of its reputation, came to the fore in September 2007 when Nova began to delay payment of wages and bonuses to staff. The NAMBU Foreign Workers Caucus in Tokyo estimated that up to 3,000 staff had not received their salaries on time. A solution for Nova's failure to pay wages was promised by 19 October in a fax sent to branch schools. On 23 October the Osaka Labor Standards office accepted a demand by unionized Nova instructors to investigate criminal charges against Nova President and founder, Nozomu Sahashi, over delayed and unpaid wages⁴⁾.

This may seem a mere example of bad business, which leads to the question as to why this is significant in terms of language education. We believe that as long as this is a representative phenomenon in Japan, it offers numerous clues related to the Japanese learners' attitude towards foreign-language acquisition. NOVA was a school that required its students to buy long-term lesson packages, up to two or three years, which meant that some of them (young company employees, for example, who were still paying back student loans) had to take on additional loans in order to pay for their English conversation classes. We had such students in our private classes, and one of them told us that he had been unsatisfied with the lesson level at NOVA, but could not afford to quit, as he had already paid for two years in advance. While the honesty of the company is more than questionable, the issue is what actually determined the customers to comply with such a policy.

By analyzing what the company itself advertises and through discussion with former NOVA students, we have come to the following conclusions. One, aggressive publicity made NOVA a major brand name in Japan, and that seemed a warranty for success. In other words, if you go to a good school, you are bound to become a good student. Second, accessibility and flexibility. After having paid the huge two-year lesson plan, students were (theoretically, at least) able to choose when to have a lesson, and the

lesson time could be changed according to their schedule (in real life, that did not always happen, because the school could inform the students that no teacher was available at the time of their choice). Also, the NOVA catch-phrase, well-known all over Japan, was *ekimae ryuugaku* (駅前留学), "study abroad near the train station". In other words, contact with a foreign national was the equivalent of studying abroad, with the additional advantage of convenience: NOVA schools were located near train stations, thus becoming the Starbucks of English conversation schools, convenience and prompt service being their key operative words. Unfortunately, these words do not relate in any way to educational efficiency and progress.

Following the scandal which led to its collapse, NOVA was taken over by another group and revived, its current website boasting different offers, more adapted to the requirements of the 21st century market.

An advertisement poster for NOVA⁵⁾, publicly displayed in November 2010, shows the four major reasons for choosing NOVA: 1. "Native teachers and small numbers of students per class"; 2. "Overwhelming freedom!"; 3. "Overwhelming conversation content!"; 4. "Safety: monthly payments only!" Besides the "native teacher" item (and that is debatable, since working at an English conversation school does not require any kind of professional qualification), there is nothing even remotely related to education in this introduction to a "school". We consider the native "teacher" element debatable because the only pre-requisite for obtaining employment to NOVA or a similar school was to have English as a first language and to possess a college degree in any field. Teaching qualifications were not necessary, and that is probably why the Japanese Government did not acknowledge such employees as "teachers", the visa under which they work in Japan being not "Instructor" (for teachers in secondary schools) or "Professor" (for teachers in institutions of higher education), but "Specialist in humanities/ International Services⁶⁾."

d) The "native" teacher, learning support and flexible lessons

Regarding this "native teacher" idiosyncrasy, Sianturi notes:

Arguably, this association with the "native speaker" as the only effective teacher of English may have an effect on the student's skills acquisition. Instead of learning how the language works in practice, they at times end up mimicking. In my own encounters with the average Japanese, they find it almost painfully difficult to express themselves in English despite many years of learning the language. I supposed it would be easy, for instance, to ask for directions once I lost my way back home since I saw English schools at every corner. Unfortunately, most of the Japanese I approached could not answer my simple questions. Some even literally

ran away once they heard me utter English words. (Sianturi: 2007)

This opinion is doubtlessly biased, but it still holds some truth: mimicking is not an efficient way of learning a foreign language. Let us remember the famous "My Fair Lady" (the movie has more power of suggestion than the original play by George Bernard Shaw) and consider which of the characters we would like to imitate in speaking or whom we would choose as a teacher for our children. After all, they were all native speakers of English.

On the other hand, modeling does have an important role in foreign-language acquisition: students need a model for pronunciation, intonation and even grammar patterns and sentence structure. The importance of modeling is widely discussed by Hirokazu Osako, a Japanese expert in international education, in his book on international schools *Kono kuni no mirai wo tsukuru gakkou: Nihongata no kokusai gakkou no kanousei (The Potential of Japanese International Schools: Schools that Build the Future of This Country)*, but his study is centered on learners who are continuously exposed to the foreign language, in an environment shaped by educational professionals, while the conversation schools which represent the subject of this analysis offer weekly one-hour lessons conducted by people who, at best, learn how to become professionals after years of activity in the field.

One might think that the Japanese people interested in improving their English abilities (and we say improving because all Japanese secondary and high schools, be they public or private, include English in their compulsory curriculum, so the majority of Japanese nationals over the age of 18 have studied English for at least six years) have learned their lesson after the NOVA experience, yet the advertisements currently on display in trains or buses show otherwise. GABA, the new brand name specialized in individual ("man-to-man") lessons, focuses on "service". According to the school website, the four reasons that make GABA the right choice are:

1. Individual ("man-to-man") lessons: "the eyes of the other are absent". This may be a slogan which appeals to the Japanese psyche, where the concept of shame has deep roots. The Japanese are known as a shy people, and the idea of being embarrassed in front of the others may be a strong deterrent from using a foreign language, especially one they are not fully comfortable with, in public.
2. The presence of a Japanese counselor. Not being able to communicate with your instructor may be a source of anxiety, of course, and thus the presence of a Japanese counselor becomes an advantage. The disadvantage, however, lies in the reality that the "counselor" is not an individual qualified in the fields of psychology or education, but simply a Japanese native speaker who is able to translate from and into English, thus communicating the student's wishes to the teacher.

3. Students choose and evaluate their teachers.



Another GABA poster shows a girl under a thought bubble which reads: "Changing the teacher is not something that I can do, I'm not brave enough", and GABA insists that there is no need to be reserved at the school and you should choose the teacher that better suits your purposes. The question is: what purposes are we addressing here?

Since the teacher evaluation system is present in many universities as well, this principle may suggest professionalism and honesty. However, in many cases, the evaluation is based on the teacher's level of personal appeal rather than on educational quality.

We shall insist on this aspect a little longer, as it is suggestive of another aspect of Japanese society: the fear of being categorized as different, or even worse, abnormal. That is why psychiatrists, psychologists and therapists are commonly avoided, their role being traditionally played by the middle-aged female owner of a bar. In a conservative Japanese society, workers from all strata would go to bars once their work has ended and share their troubles with the bar owner. A similar function was fulfilled by hostesses and various other employees in the "water business", that is, all establishments selling drinks and entertainment. However, this type of therapy was only available to men, and even on the conservative Japanese employment stage women have begun to play an increasingly important role. So where could they go and give vent to frustration? To English conversation schools, a place that is entirely appropriate for a lady and where a woman can discuss about her troubles with a foreigner and a stranger, thus eliminating the fear of being judged by her peers. Evidently, this situation was not limited only to female students, male students finding conversation schools much cheaper than bars, and thus a better choice. School owners were obviously aware of the situation, and some tried to discourage teacher-

student interaction outside the school (NOVA included a clause in the teachers' contracts that forbid them to meet the students socially; the Osaka Bar Association, however, saw this as an infringement on the teachers' rights and called upon the company to eliminate the clause from their contracts⁷⁾), yet to the present, the situation has not changed much.

4. GABA supports your English language learning 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. GABA boasts continuous online learning support, through personalized pages where students find additional vocabulary and phrases, as well as advice from the teachers. A laudable principle in itself, this warranty does not differ at all from what companies that provide a completely different type of services offer. The computer company Dell, for example, offers a similar online service for its customers, and this is not a singular example.

e) Marketing and education

What we would like to emphasize here is not that these conversation schools are "bad", but the fact that what they offer is not education. They do target people who are interested in learning a foreign language, yet their approach is far from academic; on the contrary, they focus on the commercial aspect of the situation and advertise services that are not necessarily associated with a learning environment. And what they advertise, besides a comfortable environment (that can be found just as well in a spa or a restaurant) is the warranty of success. For the past two years, GABA has been displaying a series of posters that target people who are aware of the situation in most conversation schools and who do not trust them as an ideal educational environment.

One of them shows a man laughing-something that people do sometimes in order to mask their feelings, especially in relation to linguistic incomprehension-and his thought bubble reads: "Ah, I don't understand a thing!" But GABA offers the solution to this communication impediment: individual lessons, where teachers help you understand, at your own pace. For the first time, the educational aspect is addressed: the teachers are qualified professionals, and the textbooks are especially designed for individual lessons. This is just the introduction and the saga continues.

This time the guy appears deep in thought and the bubble says: "I would go to this school if they could guarantee progress."





And the school does. In orange: "We definitely guarantee progress." "If you are not convinced, you can always change your teacher" (in other words, it is not your fault, nor is it the teacher's, it just happened that the two of you were not a good match) In smaller characters, in order not to frighten the students: "Of course, you must make an effort." This appears to be rather an afterthought, the fine print at the end of the contract which provides a loophole for the company in case the customer is not satisfied with its services. It is worth mentioning here that this publicity campaign was extremely well designed: the posters discussed here did not appear at once, but one after the other, at certain time intervals, in order to have the greatest possible impact on the viewers. I do not know how many of the train passengers were aware of it, but I am sure I was not the only one to note that the posters were linked together and actually told a story, which culminated with the final success—a young woman, bliss showing clearly on her face:

"I understood!"

"At GABA, progress is fast."



f) Conclusions

Although the target audience is different, we must say that these posters reminded us of another one, which advertised diet protein shakes: an attractive young woman in a bathing suit (the goal and the ideal flaunted in front of depressed and overweight women), with the magic formula available:

"With the DHC protein diet, you can lose 6 kg in 2 months!"

It is human nature to want fast results with a minimum of effort in everything that we do, yet language acquisition (just like dieting) is not possible without individual effort. Unfortunately, this is exactly what Japanese language learners seem to overlook when they look for the most efficient way to learn English. We cannot assert that conversation schools are the only guilty part, although their owners and managers do take advantage of this social phenomenon for material gains. Nevertheless, the students make a conscious choice when they decide to attend such a school and we do know cases when progress, real progress in language acquisition became a fact. Students who learn to benefit from the teachers' knowledge, even when that knowledge is not imparted in the most pedagogical way, and who are willing to make an effort towards learning will definitely obtain results, thus disproving the theory according to which Japanese people are somehow at a natural disadvantage when it comes to learning a foreign language. It is the other students, those who believe that it is possible to learn English through the simple process of attending a conversation school (the same way it is possible to lose weight without changing any of your dietary habits, if only you keep drinking a certain foul smelling shake) who support this theory.

Efficient marketing strategy? By all means. Real education? Not quite.

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- 1) "Bubble economy" is the term generally used to designate the boom of the late 1980s and early 1990s, which was driven by a bubble caused by speculative fever in real estate and stocks. More details can be found in Christopher Wood's book *The Bubble Economy: Japan's Extraordinary Speculative Boom of the '80s And the Dramatic Bust of the '90s* (Equinox Pub, 2005).
- 2) All the photos depicting posters have been taken by the authors in March 2010, on trains in Kansai area, mainly the subway Midousuji Line and Hankyu Line.
- 3) Authors' translation from Japanese.
- 4) [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nova_\(eikaiwa\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nova_(eikaiwa)) (retrieved on November 3rd, 2010)
- 5) Images and detailed information are available on the NOVA website: www.nova.ne.jp
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