

Building a Community, Providing a Service, and Reaching the Lonely: Eikaiwa Schools Do More Than Just Teach English

Catherine Takasugi
Aoyama Gakuin University

Catherine Takasugi (she/her) is a part-time university lecturer at Aoyama Gakuin University and Daito University. She is also a full-time doctoral candidate at the University of Calgary in Canada. The interrelationship of school refusal in Japan for biethnic families, neurodiversity, and sense of belonging at school, is the area that she is currently researching. Prior to returning to teaching at the university level she owned and managed an *eikaiwa* that, with cooperation and in partnership with other women in the community, she built into a thriving business. Weaving her family's needs around the growing business was a liberating yet challenging experience.

This article summarizes Catherine Takasugi's contribution to the JALT 2023 LLL-SIG Forum entitled Language Schools' Contributions to Lifelong Learning. It was conducted as a panel discussion coordinated by Joseph Dias, with two other guest speakers Amy Cordell Long and Lesley Ito.

Maple Leaf English School served a Saitama community successfully for 14 years. It evolved from a once a week kitchen table classroom to 5 days a week creative yet effective and structured language program. While the school reached roughly 100 students in its peak, COVID-19, changing family needs, and personal burnout led to its closure in 2021. The school was primarily focused on language acquisition; however, the multitude of spin-off learnings and benefits for the community, teachers, and clients were also substantial.

Maple Leaf English School (2008-2021): A timeline and description

In 2008, Melanie Bruce Nakamoto and I extended our friendship and became business partners as we opened a humble home-based *eikaiwa*. Both of us were mothers to young children, so childcare needs and low risk financial decisions were priority in embarking on this venture. While one of us taught at the kitchen table, the other minded the little ones in the adjacent (physically separate) living room. At first, there were only two classes on a Thursday evening with a total of 7 students. It was a small business with low overhead, but the

language program was sound, the atmosphere was friendly, and the location was accessible. Within the first year, 6 adult learners joined the *eikaiwa* and the income, which was split 50/50 after expenses, became more than just pocket change. Our philosophy, the educational curriculum and goals, and the teaching expertise were foundationally solid from the outset- these factors naturally paved the way for slow and steady success. Additionally, having young children ourselves allowed for legitimate access to kindergartens, young children's playgroups and activities, and general community events. People were naturally curious about us: two Canadian women, married to Japanese men, raising biethnic children, living locally and participating in festivals and other community events. This resulted in advertising being accomplished exclusively by reputation and word of mouth. By the third year, in addition to retaining the original students, their younger siblings had joined, two classes had been established at a local kindergarten, and a local *shukaijo* (community hall) was now being rented for weekly parent and baby classes. The growth was significant, and the client loyalty was astounding. March 2011 brought an earthquake and the end to our partnership. Melanie returned home to Canada and I, by default, inherited the business in its entirety. As can be surmised, this had significant economic benefits for me, but suddenly I became much busier. My business and educational sounding board was lost, but what was deeply missed was someone to share, point out, and witness the successes and conversely help me shrug off the disappointments, mistakes, and challenges. On a practical level, losing my business partner brought a whole host of logistical challenges, for example if I (or my children) fell ill and I needed to cancel/reschedule classes. Suddenly there was less cushion for the unexpected. Not only had the teaching load doubled but so had the administrative tasks, the communications with students, the decision making, and the material buying and creating. For me, running the business together with a partner far outweighed the economic benefit of managing it solo.

From 2011 until 2019 I was the sole owner of Maple Leaf English School. At its peak there were classes being held at 5 locations, up to 100 students enrolled, and three part-time employees. I hired

neighbors, university students, and friends to keep my own children safe and fed when I worked, and I also trained two assistant teachers, one of whom eventually took over certain administrative/communication tasks as well. It was a lucrative business that was shaped around my family's changing needs over the years. However, family abroad was gently tugging me home, and perhaps, in retrospect, my enthusiasm for teaching English to children was waning. I enjoyed the income, the social security of the community of parents I had brought together, and the flexibility of the work, but I no longer enjoyed certain aspects of the work and found that running a business, *eikaiwa* or otherwise, is an endeavor that commands more time, energy, and attention than ever imagined. The work never feels done, there is *always* more to do. For me, burnout was on the horizon. In 2019, in answer to my Canadian family's needs, I decided to return to Canada for 8 months with my children. The *eikaiwa* was left in state of pause, one of my assistant teachers took over some classes, while other classes experienced a complete hiatus of lessons. I was not sure whether I would still have a business when I returned, but I was willing to take that chance. Over that period of time, the business did not particularly thrive, but it did survive.

Upon my return to Japan in August 2019, classes started up as usual and I invited the assistant teacher who had maintained the fort while I was gone, to become my full business partner. We had fewer classes than when I had left as some students had found other language learning opportunities while I was away. But it was a pleasure to be working with someone again, someone with skills, interest, and drive, and who could manage the business when I was unavailable for whatever reason. Soon after, our partnership hit its first major speedbump when COVID-19 hit. The beauty of Maple Leaf English School was in the personal care we took with each student, the creative hands-on approach to teaching language and culture, and the genuine affection we felt and showed our students. We quickly found that Zoom lessons were unable to provide that same level of fun, hands-on element, or creativity that was usually promoted in our face-to-face lessons. By late Spring, some classes sporadically resumed in our *shukaijo* classroom, with windows open, tables spaced

apart, and masks on. The energy and enthusiasm (for teachers and students) were noticeably dimmed as we needed to stay physically distanced, were constantly concerned about teaching tools and their sanitization, and the need to cancel and reschedule lessons at the hint of a fever. It became clear by the end of 2020 that many aspects of our lives needed attention, including our own growing children, and Maple Leaf English School was closed in February of 2021.

Direct Connections to Lifelong Learning

There are three areas that Maple Leaf English School can be directly connected with lifelong learning: 1) My personal growth as a business owner, 2) Community extensions, and 3) Life stages of clients.

- 1) Starting a business in my mid-30s was exciting and demanded that I quickly develop entrepreneurial skills and acquire a business sense. Knowing the market and establishing policies that aligned with our work style and educational philosophy was part of the learning process. My Japanese language skills quickly improved as I negotiated classroom rent and relayed expectations to new clients. I learned how to register a small business, minimize taxes, and set up automatic payment from clients. Eventually, I learned how to effectively train my assistants to support me in the classroom. From the outset to the closure of the business I felt I was learning, deciding, evaluating, and improving in countless areas. While there were times where the business sailed forward smoothly, there were exponentially more intense learning spurts which characterize the *eikaiwa* business experience for me.
- 2) The assistants that were hired in the *eikaiwa* were all local community members and gained skills in teaching English, classroom management, and client communication. The women who brought their children to my classes often expressed their frustration at being unable to work in meaningful fair-paying employment while raising their young children. As I needed help and they wanted work, all assistants were motivated to learn the

tasks, exceed expectations, and contribute their unique skills for the betterment of the *eikaiwa*. It was a privilege to work with these women and Maple Leaf English School greatly benefitted from their contributions.

- 3) The students of Maple Leaf English extended in age from under one year old to older than 70 years old with the majority ranging from 4 to 12 years old. The parent and young child classes had as strong community sense where mothers came together to support each other and commiserate, to share resources and stave off loneliness. The oldest learners also used their language lessons to feel connected with others and train their brains to hold their memories. Learning English was the stated goal for all age groups, but the secondary and tertiary reasons for staying with Maple Leaf English School and the outcomes of the language classes were extensively varied.

Advice, Learnings, Mistakes

Developing an *eikaiwa* from the ground up was exciting but certainly not easy. If I had to offer snippets of advice they would be:

- a) Don't be afraid to start.
- b) Teachers are the face of your product. Train them, retain them, pay and treat them well.
- c) It takes time to grow your client base, open new classes after your initial ones fill up. Potential clients will tempt you to spread yourself to meet their available time slots; however, remember that you are the boss and condensing your work/commute/set up/clean up time is efficient working policy.
- d) Think through and then commit to your policies for make-up lessons, payment schedules, changing classes, and quitting.
- e) Consider your location carefully. I cannot stress this point enough. Think about competition (nearby *eikaiwas* or *jukus*), priority of academic achievement in the area, general wealth (or lack thereof) in the community, access, parking, safety, price of rental property, and your commute. If you set up a business in your own community expect to meet your students in your local

supermarket in your private time. Mostly this is fine, but when you are in your sweatpants, exhausted, and with a sick child in your arms the tension in your attitude translates to a less than genuine smile. Remember, you always represent your business.

- f) Know what you can risk financially. I ran my business without a permanent location for 14 years. This translated as exceptionally low financial risk with excellent returns, but high inconvenience.
- g) If you have a business partner, splitting everything 50/50 can be problematic when you genuinely disagree on something. Shifting the balance slightly to 45/55 or even 49/51 can alleviate some unnecessary conflict.
- h) The biggest mistake I made was ME becoming the product. Students and parents wanted me as the primary teacher for their child. To avoid this pitfall, periodically switch teachers for the classes so that students hear various accents and are exposed to different teaching styles. Explain this as an advantage when describing your *eikaiwa* to potential clients.

Conclusion

In terms of personal income, flexibility, relationships, and unforeseen community benefits Maple Leaf English School was a successful *eikaiwa*. It was never intended to be a mega-business. It was designed to work around the needs of my family and set up as a secondary household income. The business unexpectedly became my social support network; my students' parents knew who I was, when I was sick, when my life hit rocky patches, and when there were milestones to celebrate. The economic spinoffs went far beyond me, the rental fees filtered back into the community in upgrades in the park equipment, newly installed air conditioners and tatami mats in the *shukaijo*, and new festival paraphernalia for the community. The families, my assistants, and I, we were learning together, sharing knowledge, boosting spirits, and raising children. I would not hesitate to do it all again.