**ARTICLE**

# Exploring TESOL Pedagogies in Japan: An Autoethnographic Study of Eikaiwa Teaching Practices

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## ABSTRACT

With eikaiwa (English conversation schools) playing a crucial role in Japan's English education landscape, the pedagogical methods used in eikaiwa have received relatively little attention. Thus, utilizing the three-dimensional framework of temporality, sociality, and spatiality, this autoethnographic study explored and documented the teaching practices used and adopted by one of the researchers as a TESOL teacher at eikaiwa schools in Japan. The findings reveal a transition from grammar-focused instruction to student-centered, interactive approaches, influenced by communicative language teaching, task-based learning, and translanguaging strategies. It concludes that factors like social dynamics, institutional constraints, and physical environments shape teaching practices and dynamics in eikaiwa settings. These factors influence teachers to either withdraw or transition from the dominance of grammatical formalism to more student-centered, responsive, and contextualized approaches to learning, as demonstrated by the participant. Moreover, the study points out how the commercial environment in eikaiwa often leads to a conflict between educational purpose and commercial gain but believes that these types of constraints can be the ones that can also drive pedagogical innovations. Lastly, it highlights the role of spatial design in improving classroom and learning interactions that may be relevant beyond eikaiwa settings. While findings may be applicable beyond eikaiwa settings, the study acknowledges its limitations in terms of generalizability across Japan's eikaiwa institutions. Further studies are needed to shed light on

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the overall circumstances of eikaiwa teachers in Japan. Implications suggest the need for greater pedagogical autonomy and professional development in private language teaching settings.

*Keywords:* Eikaiwa; TESOL, Teaching English in Japan; Autoethnography; Japan

# 1. Introduction

In recent years, the demand for English proficiency has skyrocketed due to its role as a global language for economics, scientific sectors, governance, digital communication, and even education [1]. Facilitating linguistic and cultural exchanges requires teachers of English to speakers of other languages (TESOL) to navigate a variety of educational situations and adjust to the demands of their students [2]. Examining teaching methods in particular locations offers important insights into successful language instruction globally, even as TESOL techniques and practices continue to develop.

To compete in the global stage, governments, organizations, and people across Asia emphasize English fluency. English language instruction is highly funded in Asian nations like South Korea [3], China [4], and Saudi Arabia [5], to name a few, which frequently include immersion learning, after-school activities, and individual coaching. Despite these initiatives, several obstacles affect the efficacy of TESOL techniques throughout the region, including learner motivation, traditional educational institutions, and cultural views toward English [6].

The popularity of English education in Japan is demonstrated by the fact that it is widely used in classrooms, colleges, and private language schools called eikaiwa, or English conversation schools. These schools serve a broad demographic, from children to working adults, and even third-age learners, offering instruction aimed at developing conversational spectrum skills for real-life scenarios [7–9]. In contrast, eikaiwa teaching environments can differ in significant ways from traditional classrooms, creating a host of challenges like diverse motivations among learners, shorter lessons, and a primary focus on communicative competence over formal grammar [10,11]. These elements have made it crucial to create and modify TESOL experiences based on Japan's unique cultural and educational environment.

Locally, one of the researchers' teaching works in Aichi Prefecture has pointed out both the possibilities and limits of the eikaiwa system. His experiences as a TESOL teacher have introduced him to a wide spectrum of learner profiles – from eager children emanating with enthusiasm to reserved adults and motivated third-age learners, all of whom enter the classroom with their own expectations. This diversity has challenged him to try different teaching techniques and navigate cultural subtleties such as the importance of politeness and group harmony. However, the general pedagogies he was familiar with did not completely address the learners' specific needs, and his practices were reflected upon and refined through these experiences. It foreshadowed the writing path this study would take.

There have been many studies of English language teaching and learning in Japan [12,13], but most have focused either on formal school contexts or large-scale cultural patterns [14–17]. With eikaiwa schools playing an important part in Japan's English education landscape, pedagogical methods used in eikaiwa have received relatively little attention. This study addresses a significant gap by presenting a research-based, autoethnographic account of TESOL practices in eikaiwa settings that aims to provide a contextualized perspective on the complexities related to this specific practice and how the challenges caused by these complexities can be transformed into opportunities.

Therefore, this study aimed to explore and document the teaching practices used and adopted by one of the researchers as a TESOL teacher at eikaiwa schools in Japan. By utilizing autoethnography, it is intended to provide a personal yet critical analysis of teaching practices, shedding light on the interplay between cultural expectations, learner needs, and instructional strategies. This autoethnographic investigation is informed by relevant theories such as behaviorist influence, critical pedagogy, interactional sociolinguistics, and teacher agency. The implications of this research extend to educators, policymakers, and curriculum developers seeking to enhance the effectiveness of English language education in Japan, particularly within private language institutions.

# 2. Materials and Methods

## 2.1. Research Design

The author utilized an autoethnographic research approach to examine and evaluate participant experience as a TESOL teacher working in eikaiwa schools of Japan. The qualitative research method of autoethnography allows researchers to critically analyze their own experiences in a larger social and cultural context, melding life story with cultural analysis [18]. This methodology is suitable for this study because it allows both critical analysis of instructional methods in eikaiwa settings and personal insights from the participant, which is very introspective. Autoethnography is also a suitable approach for this study because it combines a critical analysis of instructional methods in eikaiwa settings with the participant's personal insights, which are highly introspective. The chosen method aligns with the study's purpose to illuminate the interplay between individual teaching experiences and the cultural dynamics of Japan's language education system.

## 2.2. Participant

Being the only subject and participant in this study, the researchers were limited to the accounts of one of them as a TESOL teacher hired in several eikaiwa schools in Aichi Prefecture, Japan. Having a view from the inside provides a granular and authentic exploration of the pedagogical approaches, classroom management strategies, and curriculum development practices that he utilized and modified. The study provides an in-depth understanding of the specific challenges and opportunities for growth within the eikaiwa context by situating itself firmly within the personal site of the author.

## 2.3. Instrument

The main data source for this study was the participant's reflective journal, which he produced to record his teaching practices, classroom observations, and critical reflections throughout his teaching career in Japan from 2019 to 2025. As a repository of rich, detailed data, the journal provided a background of daily factual realities of eikaiwa teaching and broader phenomenological observations on this context's pedagogical and cultural spaces. The reflective journal was used appropriately to ensure both consistency and depth of data collection, allowing the authors to examine themes and patterns across different teaching contexts.

## 2.4. Data Collection Procedure

This study utilized data from a systematic review of the participant's reflective journal entries from April 2020 to March 2024. The data collection was done in three phases. In the first phase, the researchers went through the journal entries from March 2020 to April 2024. The entries were read several times to be familiar with the teaching practices, classroom observations, and critical reflections. In the second phase, initial coding was done to select entries that could qualify as part of the raw data. The selected entries were then lifted and encoded in a word processor to be ready for the next phase. In the third phase, the raw data were re-examined, refined, and categorized under temporality, sociality, and spatiality. The categorized data were narrated in the result section using the third person and used as the basis for discussion.

## 2.5. Data Analysis

The three-dimensional framework of temporality, sociality, and spatiality guided the data analysis process [19]. Temporality analyzes how the participant's teaching practices have developed over time, specifically looking at how past experiences have shaped current approaches and future goals. Sociality goes into what it means to be a person and how personal experiences, interacting socially with others, and what society expects all play out in what is eikaiwa. The spatiality emphasizes the surroundings of eikaiwa schools in terms of the leisure, environmental, or institutional settings, investigating how the environment influences pedagogical practices. This approach is especially appropriate for autoethnography because it enables a comprehensive and multidimensional examination of the data while situating personal narratives within larger cultural and institutional patterns.

## 2.6. Data Trustworthiness

To demonstrate the trustworthiness of the data, different strategies were applied including triangulation, member checking, reflexivity, and epoche or bracketing [20]. Triangulation is a method of checking data across multiple journal entries and teaching contexts to provide evidence of consistent patterns and themes. The data source of the lifted data was confirmed through member checking by going back to journal entries. Reflexivity, the critical reflection of researchers' biases and assumptions, was embedded throughout the research process and enhanced the study's validity and reliability. For instance, the two researchers conducted separate cross-checking of the data sources. Since one of the authors wrote the journal entries, he might have been overfamiliar with the data causing him to overlook some important details. To overcome this, the other author conducted the cross-examination and validation. The epoche or bracketing technique has reinforced the validity and reliability of the data because the researchers exercised suspension or set aside their own preconceptions, biases, and assumptions for them to improve comprehension of the content as it reveals in consciousness.

## 2.7. Ethical Consideration

The ethics of the research were maintained according to the widely accepted guidelines. The researchers employed transparency and honesty in documenting and analyzing the experiences of the participant. All references to particular institutions, students, or colleagues in this article have been disguised with the use of pseudonyms, to protect their confidentiality. The reflective journal entries were also reviewed, with a consideration of maintaining respect for all people involved and ensuring ethical standards of integrity and respect in the study.

# 3. Results

## 3.1. Temporality: Evolution of Pedagogical Practices

The temporal aspect of the study revealed how much the participant's teaching methods had evolved with time, shaped by his past experiences, present challenges, and future aspirations. As such, his initial approach to eikaiwa teaching was theoretical, with only a vague idea of the Japanese educational system, especially in the eikaiwa context. He was dependent on grammar-laden exercises and pre-planned lesson plans, much of which were at odds with the conversational focus of eikaiwa schools. He recalled, for example, developing an extensive lecture on verb tenses in the first few months, including written exercises and grammatical explanations. But midway through the lesson, he noticed that some students were losing interest and struggling to connect the exercises to their conversational goals. "When can we talk more?" was even one student's comment. This moment made him realize that his lessons needed modification to better address the communication needs of his students.

Gradually, he learned a more participatory and student-centered approach through trial and error. Role-plays started to populate his courses, which allowed students to practice real-world dialogues in realistic situations. In one particularly successful lesson, students acted out store clerks and customers in a shopping simulation. Many learners were hesitant at first, but as the exercise progressed, they opened up to asking questions like "Is it OK I try this on?" and Do you have this in another size?" The session ended in laughter and spontaneous exchanges that felt genuinely communicative.

Another critical moment was when he presented a cultural exchange activity in which he explained common holiday customs in his home country and the students talked about indigenous Japanese celebrations like Setsubun and Tanabata. Besides promoting meaningful dialogue, this also showed that cultural topics could serve as a springboard for the use of language. He began to trust his ability to devise classes that struck an appropriate balance between communicative fluency and linguistic accuracy, and his journals reflected this confidence. For instance, in a class on travel vocabulary, he suggested a role-play situation in which students would have to plan a trip abroad — buying tickets and discussing itineraries. The task, which spurred a lively discussion and a fair amount of witty repartee, illustrates the point that contextualized work tends to stick better and keep students engaged.

In his current teaching methods, flexibility and student needs awareness are highly valued, which is driven by ongoing reflections regarding the nature of being most

effective in different contexts. For instance, he has created ways to reach shy students by making the classroom welcoming and nonjudgmental. In one instance, the teacher introduced a NO WRONG ANSWERS" concept and used EFFUSIVE POSITIVE FEEDBACK so that a student who once was too shy to verbalize her ideas shared what she did over the weekend in a small-group discussion. This meant that during speaking exercises the loud students worked alongside quieter ones, which encouraged teamwork and eased some of the anxiety around communication. These innovations stressed the importance of providing students with a safe space and environment in which to voice their opinions. Similarly, the teacher soon engaged in storytelling practices where students shared experiences, whether a story from their childhood or recent trips, which were participatory and made them feel like they were participating in real conversations.

He aims to employ more creative ways to use digital tools to improve student engagement and outcomes in eikaiwa. For example, to widen conversation beyond the classroom, he plans to explore the use of smartphone apps and other AI-fueled tools for vocabulary instruction and online discussion forums for adult learners. Motivated by the way that he uses this practice in his own life, he also wants to incorporate reflective journaling for junior high school and high school students to help them track their growth and identify weak areas. To recreate some of the more engaging dialogue encounters, he will also experiment with interactive multimedia tools, such as virtual reality scenarios. These long-term goals show commitment to continued improvement as an instructor and constantly searching for new methods in responding to the needs of the modern eikaiwa students.

## 3.2. Sociality: Interplay Between Personal, Social, and Cultural Dynamics

The social dimension of the study highlights the complex interplay of cultural practices in the context of an eikaiwa environment along with the participant's own experiences with social practices. Reconciling the different expectations that parents, supervisors, and students had of him, which at times clashed with his own pedagogical beliefs, was among his first challenges as an eikaiwa teacher. For example, many parents and adult learners prioritized preparing for standardized tests such as the TOEIC or Eiken, anticipating an orderly, test-oriented approach. However, lesson planning has often led to friction because conversational fluency is so often prioritized in eikaiwa lessons. In one instance, he said, a student's mom requested additional grammar drills, saying conversation-based activities were "not serious learning." To remedy this, he implemented a holistic approach including communicative tasks such as timed stories or guided dialogues to provide grammatical reinforcement, so that the student and parent felt that their needs were being met.

His interactions with students and other employees profoundly shaped how he taught. Seasoned practitioners provided insight into classroom management and culturally relevant practices, especially when it comes to student engagement. Once, a senior colleague advised him to give novice students who did not want to speak a "silent period"; previously, he had viewed this as a sign of little engagement. Teaching in this way, he witnessed students who initially hardly spoke emerge as active members of his classroom, where turn-taking and listening were encouraged. One example of this was an older student whom he hardly heard participate in her first few classes. He encouraged her to write out her answers before speaking them out loud, instead of applying pressure. She progressed from one-word responses to entire sentences, and by the end of the term, she was speaking up in group discussions and telling personal anecdotes with confidence.

Talking more deeply with students also revealed that they studied English for a wide range of reasons, from hobbies to professional goals. One of his students, a salaryman, was a beginner in English, but he was motivated by his desire to see Broadway musicals without subtitles. Recognizing that he had an excitement for the material, he tailored classes that used lyric analysis and musical scripts, which deepened his understanding while also keeping him engaged with the material. A former student who liked going abroad felt that regular exercises in a textbook were dull, in which case he made role plays around traveling to help her practice real-life situations, from ordering food to checking into hotels. These encounters further reaffirmed the need to better tailor teaching strategies to students' natural motivations.

The cultural emphasis on politeness, social harmony,

and deference to authority influenced dramatically how he interacted in the classroom. Many Japanese students were wary of voicing opinions or challenging concepts for fear of disrupting a unity that underpins learning, the opposite of Western classrooms, where debate and confrontation are regularly contemplated. He had to change his feedback approach in a way that he was not discriminatory while still contributing to the fact that he wanted to keep face, so he used positive reinforcement and correction. Instead of saying, "That's wrong," he might gently encourage a student to repeat their answer by themselves, but say it the right way. He also emphasized the importance of nonverbal cues in a conversation, the timing of pauses, and nods. One of the more memorable lessons was an advanced class discussion of ethnic differences in communication styles. Students experimented with softening phrases such as "I see your point, but I also think…" to express multiple opinions in English while they worked through how much disagreement made them uncomfortable. Not only did this exercise increase their language skills, but it also provided them with perspective on how to communicate.

### 3.2.1. Code-Switching as a Special Teaching Strategy

One of his most useful social strategies in the eikaiwa context is his strategic code-switching between Japanese and English. Using Japanese sporadically in certain situations helped, even though the goal was immersion in English. Below are some of the reasons why he used strategic code-switching: making abstract concepts easier to digest; building rapport and reducing anxiety; promoting engagement via comprehension checks; explaining cultural nuances in language use; and easing transitions in activities.

Instead of seeing code-switching as an obstacle to maintain an English-only space, these experiences allowed him to see code-switching as an effective scaffolding technique that opened up understanding, lowered fear and increased student engagement. By meticulously using Japanese, he was able to foster a more inclusive and productive learning environment.

Overall, his experiences reflected in the eikaiwa context showed him the combination of cross-cultural understanding and positive teaching practices. To create a nurturing and stimulating learning environment, he contin-

uously improved his methods, whether it was by adjusting to the needs of the students, scooping up tips from more experienced colleagues, or negotiating social expectations. The significance of culturally responsive instruction in eikaiwa contexts has been reaffirmed, and his comprehension of the social complexity in language learning has grown as a result of these findings.

### 3.3. Spatiality: Impact of Environment and Institutional Context

The participant's instructional methods were significantly shaped by the spatial aspect of eikaiwa teaching. Eikaiwa schools, unlike regular classes, usually include smaller classes with fewer students to have a better chance of one-on-one or small-group interactions. Teachers and students can interact closely in such small spaces, but in order to maximize involvement given the physical limitations, innovative teaching techniques are also needed.

### 3.3.1. Navigating Small Classrooms and Spatial Constraints

He soon discovered that the small classroom size in eikaiwa classrooms affected his teaching methods. At one school, his classroom had simply a round table and three chairs and was no bigger than a small office. He started off using worksheets and textbook-based exercises, but the lack of room for mobility resulted in sessions that were sluggish and students who were not interested in learning. He adjusted by adding more interactive and conversational activities that needed less physical movement after realizing this.

For example, he substituted "stand-up storytelling" for conventional board-based grammar exercises, in which students would alternately narrate a brief story while utilizing target language structures. The session was more vibrant despite the small space since participants stood and used gestures while speaking. In another case, he had students roll a "conversation cube," a tiny foam die with prompts written on both sides, to come up with discussion ideas. Despite the space constraints, these changes made the learning process more interesting.

He introduced station-based learning for advanced students in a somewhat larger space, which was one of the

most significant adjustments he made. He arranged many "learning stations" in different parts of the room, each devoted to a certain ability (for example, one corner held idiom flashcards, another a listening challenge, and a third a pronunciation instruction), rather than having students sit through the entire class. By moving around the stations in pairs, students were able to engage with various resources in a way that broke up the monotony of learning in a limited space.

### 3.3.2. Institutional Expectations and the Commercial Nature of Eikaiwa

Since Eikaiwa schools are in a very business-oriented environment, student satisfaction is a priority number one. This makes retention a primary institutional objective, as Eikaiwa students (or their parents) are paying customers, in contrast to public schools, which are compulsory. This reality affected the participant's experience with lesson planning because lessons needed to be educational as well as engaging.

In the first few months, he struggled to keep this balance. One of many examples is a comprehensive grammar class he made for a group of working professionals preparing for the TOEIC. He focused on practice tests and grammar exercises because, he thought, he expected a structured approach. Still, one student said politely at the end of class: "I thought we were going to be speaking more today." It was at this turning point that he discovered that students, who were focused on tests, were seeking lectures that were not only educational, but also useful and interesting.

Hence, in order to solve this, he started using real-world simulations and gamified review sessions that were consistent with educational integrity and institutional goals." He initiated "Business English Role-Play Days," for example, and asked students to practice responding to hypothetical interview questions, negotiating contracts or resolving customer complaints instead of more traditional test prep exercises. These simulated real work scenarios, making the training engaging and practical.

Institutional expectations were significantly more in favor of 'edutainment' with regard to younger students. To keep high retention rates, one eikaiwa encouraged him to share sessions that involved interactive technology, story-

telling, and songs. He found, interactive storytelling with movement to be a particularly effective technique. For example, when they performed "Goldilocks and the Three Bears," the children walked to different parts of the room as they described big, medium, and small objects. Not only did this keep students entertained through experiential learning, but it also reinforced their vocabulary.

### 3.3.3. Classroom Layout and Its Influence on Interaction

In addition to their physical dimensions, the actual configuration of eikaiwa classrooms also influenced teacher-student relations and student participation. Students in traditional Japanese classrooms are accustomed to a teacher-centered teaching method, where desks are lined up in rows, facing the front. In contrast, due to open seating/round table arrangements, eikaiwa classes tend to foster more conversational styles of engagement.

This was found to work well for adult learners, who tended to feel more at ease discussing topics in a café format. One memorable lesson that focused on cultural taboos was greatly improved due to the informal arrangement of sitting, which enabled the students to speak more freely on that topic. But things occasionally became difficult in children's classes; some kids would fidget or wander off, and because there was no designated sitting arrangement, there were discipline issues. To manage this, he invented a formal "speaking chair" in which every student had to sit while it was their opportunity to express their thoughts. It gave the versatile space a sense of form.

"Another spatial adjustment he made was the placement of the whiteboard. In one classroom, with only a single whiteboard for explanations, it was behind the students and difficult to use. He replaced writing with color-coded sentence-building exercises and flash-card-based grammar prompts that students could maneuver in front of them instead of staring blankly at the board. Besides solving the spatial problem, the switch made learning more tactile and fun.

### 3.3.4. Adapting to Non-Traditional Learning Spaces

Not all Eikaiwa classes took place in the assigned

classrooms. Some required more flexibility because they were held in home-style settings, cafés, or corporate offices. In one of the participant's corporate classes, the students were seated around a long table that is usually used for business meetings in a conference room. Because the atmosphere was so formal, students were initially reluctant to become involved in conversations and lessons. To solve this, he implemented "coffee break chats," wherein students walked around and engaged in spontaneous conversation for five minutes before returning to their assigned tasks. This small adjustment turned the lessons into lively conversations.

In a private eikaiwa session at the owner's house, space was even more limited. Sometimes, all you had was a small kitchen table. He taught with home furnishings as his utensils, so commonplace items became the body of vocabulary and grammar classes. One prepositions lesson, for instance, necessitated physically placing a cup "on," "under" or "next to" a plate, in order to make abstract tangible and real.

The spatial component of Eikaiwa teaching required continual adaptation both to institutional standards and to physical space. In eikaiwa, the commercial side of the enterprise means balancing entertaining without sacrificing academic depth whereas smaller classes will require more participatory and movement-friendly activities. Also, the settings that were not exactly classrooms challenged the members to think creatively, using real objects in space and yet informal seating arrangements to stimulate engagement.

Finally, with these spatial adaptations, not only did the participant develop a responsive and adaptable teaching style, but they also kept lessons dynamic, successful, and aligned with both institutional objectives and student needs.

# 4. Discussion

The results of this study highlight how English language teaching (ELT) in the eikaiwa environment is dynamic and ever-changing, reflecting both cultural responsiveness and pedagogical changes. The participant's experiences are consistent with current theories in language acquisition and TESOL, especially those that emphasize learner-centered instruction, communicative competence, and sociocultural factors.

## 4.1. Temporality: Evolution of Pedagogical Practices

As a supportive reflection of Krashen's Input Hypothesis [21,22], which proposes that the process of language learning occurs only when learners are exposed to comprehensible input in meaningful situations, the participant shifted from teaching a structured approach based on grammar to one embracing more interactive, student-centered elements. This reliance on explicit grammar instruction and preplanned lesson plans created a gap between the educational approach and the students' communicative demands. This concurs with Vygotsky's Interactionist theory [23], which highlights the importance of meaningful interaction for language acquisition. The shift toward role-plays and contextualized discussions led to improvements in fluency and comprehension as opportunities for meaning negotiation arose.

Furthermore, the participant's implementation of TBL strategies, such as cultural exchange conversations and shopping simulations, corresponds with the Task-Based Language Teaching framework by Willis [24]. This technique lends itself to the argument that meaningful, goal-oriented assignments that encourage real-world communication, such as writing for an audience, will yield greater student investment and language performance.

Learning as a socially mediated act is also aligned with Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory that shapes the participant's teaching strategies [25]. The shift away from boring grammar drills towards conversation and peer work suggests a growing awareness of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), the area of knowledge in which learners receive targeted assistance on the way to becoming effective language users. The idea that language acquisition is inextricably interdependent with social situations is made more rigorous with the incorporation of peer interactions and scaffolded learning activities [26].

Other recent studies support this shift towards task-based and communicative approaches. Focus-on-form methods [27] are most effective in communicative contexts where grammar comes up reactively amidst meaningful interaction instead of through decontextualized drills. In addition, while group work and the role of peer interaction

in second language acquisition were emphasized, Aubrey seems to offer an articulate framework with participant accounts that demonstrate deeper student engagement and other heightened conversational abilities in acknowledging through group projects [28].

The change in the participant's pedagogy aligns with Complex Dynamic Systems Theory which describes language development as a complex and adaptive process constantly being influenced by multiple, interdependent components [29,30]. The participant's experience is representative of iterative, context-sensitive strategies in which instructional strategies were iteratively refined based on student needs and classroom dynamics. This flexibility is vital, given the increasingly demanding TESOL landscapes in which rigid approaches often fail to meet the diverse learner profiles and communication goals [31].

Together, these theoretical and empirical arguments demonstrate significant evidence in the research on second language acquisition for the participant's shift from an organized, grammar-based approach to an interactive, student- centered approach. The participant arranged instructional strategies with communicative and sociocultural learning theories, supporting the implementation of a more productive, interesting learning environment, which led to enhanced student motivation and language competence.

## 4.2. Sociality: Interplay Between Personal, Social, and Cultural Dynamics

Influenced by Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory [25], which emphasizes social interaction and cultural context, the social contact dimension manifests in the participants teaching journey. The participant's evolving pedagogical practices were shaped by his interactions with students, colleagues, and institutional actors. The notion that new learners have a "silent period" is particularly congruous with Krashen's Affective Filter Hypothesis [21], which reasoned that language learning could be diminished by anxiety and fear of failure. The participant therefore created an encouraging and nonjudgmental environment for language development during class.

In addition, a change in instructional methods to meet students' intrinsic motivations also supports Dornyei's Motivational Theories in Second Language Acquisition [32]. By designing classes that were based around their hobbies

like Broadway musicals and travel situations, the participant was able to use the individual objectives of students to keep them engaged in the learning experience and improve learning outcomes. This aligns with the concept of the L2 Motivational Self System" which suggests that language learners are more likely to persist in their study if they can envision future benefits and personal value in the endeavor [33,34].

This philosophy of teaching also mirrors the Communities of Practice framework [35,36], which posits that participation in a social group is one of the main ingredients in learning. By having students work in cooperative learning activities such as role-plays and peer dialogues, the participant fostered a collaborative learning environment. This method underscores the social nature of language acquisition whereby students acquire linguistic skills through meaningful dialogue with their teachers and other students.

The participant shared that he responds to students' needs and cultural background by attempting to customize classes, leading to greater interest in learning English. The students, particularly adults, disclosing their learning motivations and immediate goals aligns with the personal investment theory of motivation in second language acquisition [37].

### 4.2.1. Code-Switching as a Special Teaching Strategy

The participant's intentional use of code-switching to create an anchor with the students and to make abstract concepts more concrete, less stressful, and more understandable is supported by Cook's Multicompetence Theory [38]. While many traditional ELT approaches promote an English-only environment [39], research has shown that the learners' L1 can serve as a scaffold when acquiring the L2 [40,41]. The use of L1 code-switching by the participant shows how the pedagogical purpose and L1 can help the learner increase confidence, engagement, and knowledge, such as using L1 to explain grammatical structure or check understanding during a lesson, or to help the learner switch from one activity to another.

Recent studies corroborate the benefits that code-switching can bring in ELT contexts [42–44], which include the notion that purposeful use of L1 can engender linguistic security and encourage learners to take risks in their own communication. This reinforces the Output Hypothesis [45,46],

which states that language production is essential for learning. Therefore, the selective use of L1 in this experience promoted students' understanding, orientation, and use of English in communicative contexts while enabling them to participate more meaningfully in English-language production without suffering undue cognitive overload.

The participant's strategy is also aligned with the theory of Translanguaging [47], promoting fluency in multiple languages as an instrument to make use of the learners' entire linguistic repertoire. By adding a native language piece to the teaching-learning processes, the participant promoted multilingual identities, contributing to self-efficacy and fluency in English.

## 4.3. Spatiality: Impact of Environment and Institutional Context

The physical and institutional constraints of eikaiwa teaching influenced the participant's instructional strategies, consistent with the principles of behaviorism [48]. The small, intimate classroom spaces required flexible teaching styles and interactive methods like "stand-up storytelling," as well as learning stations. Both strategies were supported by behaviorist principles applied to language learning as an interactive system, where the learning environment is viewed as a whole in which all aspects–space, materials, feedback, reinforcement, reward system, and interactions among students– work together to inform the learning experience.

The participant's recognition of the commercialization of eikaiwa schools is also in line with Critical Pedagogy [49,50], which argues that language education should closely examine the power dynamic. Unlike public school teachers, eikaiwa teachers work for businesses, where student satisfaction and keeping students in the program shape their pedagogical choices. The participant's ability to mix institutional requirements with good methods of teaching stems from grasping the importance of a teacher to have an intermediate stance, not one that follows rigidly either side in a market-driven education economy.

### 4.3.1. Spatial Design and Learner Engagement

The key role spatial design plays in engagement and learning outcomes is supported by Interactional Sociolinguistics [51], which explains how spatial situation mediates communication [52]. The participant's interventions regarding classroom dynamics, through the use of flexible seating arrangements and movement-based activities, are in accordance with research conducted by Jin and Peng that shows how dynamic class layouts stimulate active learning and interaction [53].

Furthermore, the principles of Group Dynamics demonstrated in the study of Hirata and Asai in the language classroom propose that different arrangements of space may enhance or dampen motivation and participation [54]. As demonstrated by Pranena [55], the organization of classroom space, like seating arrangements, creates particular learning affordances; here, the participant optimized the smaller spaces to encourage peer interaction and collaborative learning activities.

### 4.3.2. The Influence of Institutional Policies on Teacher Agency

Such limitations determined by institutional policies, including, but not limited to, fixed curricula and customer-oriented teaching expectations, echo the framework of Teacher Agency [56]. The participant's skillful maneuvering within these constraints is emblematic of adaptive expertise [57], as teachers adjust their practice and engage in learning within the organizational confines in order to achieve better learning.

The work of Mydin et al. extends the understanding of the situation in that the role of the institutional or organizational setting also instills mental constructs toward students [58], as well as determines modes of teaching (how teaching is enacted in practice). The participant's reflections on adjusting to these frameworks while honoring pedagogical integrity demonstrate the tension between institutional requirements and instructional best practices.

The experiences of the participant illustrate how the interplay of spatial constraints, institutional expectations, and pedagogical adaptation manifests against the backdrop of eikaiwa teaching. This discussion of behaviorist influence, critical pedagogy, Interactional Sociolinguistics, and Teacher Agency integrates principles across all of these approaches to highlight an ongoing, complex interplay among aspects of physical space, policies at the institutional level,

and methods for language teaching. This study also resonates with other recent studies [27,28,31,33,34,42–44,49,50,53,55,58], which consistently demonstrate that language learning experiences are significantly influenced by the physical space and the institutional structure of the classrooms, emphasizing a need for adaptability to the local teaching contexts.

Lastly, it contributes to the body of knowledge, specifically in the narrative of English education in Japan, with eikaiwa institutions at the periphery of the overall landscape of Japan's global education. Educators and curriculum designers in Japan and beyond may find useful insights in this study, situated at the midst of the ongoing discussion and debate regarding pedagogical strategies in TESOL.

# 5. Conclusions

With an autoethnographic lens, this study investigated the changing nature of English language teaching within Japan's eikaiwa (private conversation schools) context. Factors like social dynamics, institutional constraints, and physical environments shape teaching practices and dynamics in eikaiwa settings. These factors influence teachers to either withdraw or transition from the dominance of grammatical formalism to more student-centered, responsive, and contextualized approaches to learning, as demonstrated by the participant. Teaching is a dynamic social practice in which identity, culture, and motivation are considered essential factors in how social and cultural contexts and structures impact teachers' practices and which promote and inhibit their service to students. It is a reminder of the teacher's ethical obligation to cultivate empowering and inclusive environments. Moreover, the study points out how the commercial environment in eikaiwa often leads to a conflict between educational purpose and commercial gain but believes that these types of constraints can be the ones that can also drive pedagogical innovations. Lastly, it highlights the role of spatial design in improving classroom and learning interactions that may be relevant beyond eikaiwa settings.

## 5.1. Limitations and Implications

While findings may be applicable beyond eikaiwa settings, the study acknowledges its limitations in terms of generalizability across Japan's eikaiwa institutions. Further studies are needed to shed light on the overall circumstances of eikaiwa teachers in Japan. Nonetheless, the findings from the study speak beyond the context of eikaiwa and imply that language education has to be flexible. Teacher training should equip educators to tailor approaches to actual classroom situations. When designing or evaluating ELT materials, however, learner-centered approaches that honor students' identities and cultures are paramount. Further studies exploring the long-term impacts of adaptive teaching on student achievement and differences between ELT practices between eikaiwa and public educational institutions could further illuminate the ways in which institutional structures influence the adaptability of teachers. Another field of study would be to compare the role of spatiality in ELT under different cultural and educational conditions. This research could provide useful perspectives for planners of language learning environments that are genuinely effective. Lastly, the findings highlight that teaching is a reflective, dynamic process, where educators not only promote learning but also play an active role in shaping transformative educational experiences.

# Author Contributions

Conceptualization, D.B.S.J. and M.G.; methodology, D.B.S.J. and M.G.; formal analysis, D.B.S.J. and M.G.; investigation, D.B.S.J.; resources, D.B.S.J.; data curation, D.B.S.J.; writing—original draft preparation, D.B.S.J.; writing—review and editing, D.B.S.J. and M.G.; visualization, D.B.S.J. and M.G.; supervision, D.B.S.J. and M.G.; project administration, D.B.S.J. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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# Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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