



The Power of Perceptions: A Look At Professionalism in Private Language Schools in Japan

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Abstract

The level of professionalism within the field of English language teaching in *eikaiwas* (private language schools) in Japan has often been questioned, both by teachers themselves and the Japanese managers who hire them. In fact, there appears to be much confusion on the part of both groups about the term “professionalism” and what it means to be an ELT professional. This lack of agreement between teachers and managers concerning professionalism in ELT has caused problems within the ELT industry in Japan. This study sought to determine the causes of disparity between the two groups. The viewpoints of two Japanese managers and three teachers on the subject of professionalism and motivational concerns in ELT in Japan formed the basis of this study. The interviews indicate that both groups (teachers and managers) are at odds concerning the concept of *professionalism* and about teaching English in general.

理解する力：日本における ELT のプロフェッショナリズム

日本には、数多くの英語学校が存在し、そこでは多数の外国人が教師として雇用されている。しかしながら、英会話（民間の語学学校）における英語教育が、どの程度プロフェッショナルであるかについては、教師と雇用者（日本人経営者）の両方から問題視されている。実際、「プロフェッショナル」という言葉や、ELT のプロとは何か、という点については、両方で理解が大きく異なっているように思われる。この様に、ELT におけるプロフェッショナリズムについて、教師と経営者の理解が一致していないために、日本の ELT 業界では問題が生じている。本論文は、両者の間に何故このような相違が生じるのかを調査したものである。日本における ELT のプロフェッショナリズム及びモチベーションに関して、2人の日本人経営者と3人の教師の見解を

基にした。行ったインタビューからは、両者(教師と経営者)には、プロフェッショナリズム及び英語教育全般について、考え方に相違があることが伺える。

Background Information

In the book, *Teach English in Japan*, (Wordell and Gorsuch, 1992), Des Aulier lists ten grievances he feels underscores problems teachers face within the private ELT industry in Japan (p.8). The following is an abbreviated list illustrating some of these grievances:

- 1. Don't ask what the company can do for you, but what you can do for the company.*
- 2. Don't exercise any creative teaching initiative without authorization from the business management.*
- 3. Don't worry too much about teaching (no one is concerned that you were a physical education major); just be popular with the students.*
- 4. Remember: Your Japanese bosses know best about English teaching-and almost everything else.*

Though Des Aulier's list is rather sardonic and exudes an *us/them* mentality, many of the grievances directed at management can be attributed to legitimate concerns. Similarly, if given the chance, Japanese managers, could in all probability, produce their own list of legitimate grievances directed towards teachers. This disparity in viewpoints between ELT teachers and their managers demands further investigation to seek out the root of discontent that exists between the two sides. It has been suggested that many of the problems found in language schools can be attributed to culture conflicts within the organizations. By cultures, I am referring to Handy's description of an organization's set of beliefs and values; of how it exercises authority, controls its employees, carries out its aims, organizes its work, etc. (1993, p. 182). It also refers to sub-groups (i.e. teachers) and their characteristics (i.e. beliefs and values) within an organization. Problems ensue when an organization possessing two or more distinct cultures (i.e. task culture – preferred by teachers with pedagogical agendas, and power

or role cultures – preferred by administration/managerial players (Charles, 1993, p. 11)) fails to blend aspects of one culture with the other, (through mutual understanding of each other's viewpoints) (White, et al, 1991, p. 19).

Professionalism In ELT

The question of professionalism in ELT has been the subject of discussion worldwide (Gurr, p.6), and recommendations for improving the status of ELT have been called for (Clayton, 1989; Pennington, 1992; Widdowson, 1992). In his article on professionalism in ELT, Gurr argues for widespread professionalisation through “greater attention to the management functions of communication and staff development” (1995, p.6). He goes on to say that managers should re-evaluate and/or re-define their organizational structures to ensure a positive contribution is being made towards enhancing professionalism:

ELT managers can support the process of professionalization among teachers by providing the opportunities for teachers to assume wider decision-making power and responsibility. The key to wider professionalization lies in providing teachers with the authority to guide their own professional development. The role of ELT managers in this process is to provide for wider communication across organizations and to prioritize staff development as a management function (p. 9).

In his book *Understanding Organizations* Handy states that an organizational culture is a reflection of the people who work within the organization, that “the length and height of their career aspirations, their status in society, degree of mobility, and level of education” influence the structure of the company (p.182). If we are to go along with this assumption, we begin to realize the problems that can accrue as a result of perceptual differences concerning professionalism as a whole. Consider the following widespread generalizations, regarding the *eikaiwa* business in Japan: a) most of the private language schools readily employ unqualified foreigners to teach English b) many foreign English language teachers consider ELT a pseudo-profession at best (or have just come for the money) making it difficult to tackle such issues as teacher-development and professionalism. c) few schools provide adequate training to inexperienced teachers in ELT methodology and basic language

teaching skills d) many English language schools want teachers to place a priority on care of students, with teaching a distant second e) many *eikaiwa* teachers are committed for the short term and may not want autonomy or decision-making powers.

The Study

Context

The participants in the study consisted of two Japanese managers and three foreign teachers from five different language schools (see Appendix A for a brief biography of the participants). All the schools are large (i.e. over 1000 students enrolled) and located in Sapporo. Responses were elicited using an oral interview method (See Appendix B), with each interview lasting anywhere from 30 minutes to 2 hours. I chose to use a flexible questioning format, allowing respondents to introduce and explore relevant topics (and also allowing me to develop “unanticipated lines of enquiry” (Weir and Roberts, 1994, p.143)) and later provided structure to the responses through content analysis (Cohen, 1986, p.35). The interviews were conducted in Sapporo, Japan, and all the participants consented to going on record (either recorded or written). The two Japanese managers were interviewed in Japanese and the responses were later translated into English. I was able to record one of the Japanese interviews on audiotape, but the other Japanese manager preferred to have his responses written down, as it made him more comfortable. I was able to record and transcribe all the interviews with the three foreign teachers.

Data Collection

Although the small number of participants prevents generalizing of the data I believe most of the information reported in the study reflects the concerns and assumptions of many in the ELT industry in Japan. Thus, I feel it is up to the reader to weigh the quality of the data against their own experiences in ELT in Japan.

Interview with Two Japanese Managers

The following excerpts are from interviews conducted in Sapporo. They have been translated from Japanese to English. The comments are in response to basic questions revolving around concepts of professionalism, and English teaching in

general, in Japan (See Appendix B). Though heavily edited due to length constraints, I tried to include comments I felt represented the greatest disparity between the two groups (teachers and managers).

Manager # 1 Foreign teachers often feel an *eikaiwa* is not school but rather a business; that we (management) aren't concerned with education. It's difficult for many foreigners to understand Japanese business practices because they aren't familiar with our culture. For example, some teachers get angry when we point out the need for friendliness and enjoyment in the classroom. They have a different idea of how students (and we) see teachers. In Japanese junior and senior high schools teachers are not just expected to teach the subject material but to serve as counselors, concerned with each student's well being. Teaching and counseling are equally important.... As for the question about hiring qualified teachers, to be honest, we've had difficulty finding professional teachers. When we do interview qualified teachers they usually want to work part-time to supplement their other sources of income (from high schools and colleges).... It's hard to keep qualified teachers because they want a lot of moneyYes, teachers sometimes want to have more responsibilities and make decisions but the problem we've had in the past is they don't stay long enough at the school. After 1 or 2 years teachers leave and the new teachers want to do things 'their' way.... Students don't like it when the system and teaching staff keep changing.

Manager # 2 Some foreigners are serious about teaching, but many are here just to make money. They don't want to work hard even though they are paid a lot of money compared to other Japanese employees. Many teachers aren't team oriented and feel the school is trying to control them. In the past we hired real teachers but they were very hard to handle. They wanted to change everything; the curriculum, the number of students in the class, the working hours, and so on. ...I don't think it's so important to have a teaching license. The most important thing is to have a caring attitude. Teachers should try to improve themselves...'trying', is the most important thing.... It is very expensive to train teachers. We can't spend the time really necessary because we are a private school.... My experience has been that

teachers aren't aware of what students need; some qualified teachers are skilled (they have good techniques) but they are not good at giving each student what they need...students want English that is useful for them, specifically. Basically, we'd like the teachers to focus on teaching and not think about sales. Sometimes teachers complain that we (the managers) don't include them in the business side of the company. We don't like to tell teachers a lot about the organization because teachers move from school to school frequently, and, as it is a business, we don't want other schools to know how we operate.

Interview with Three Foreign Teachers

Teacher #1 From a business point of view, Japanese language schools are part of the service, not education industry.... Often teachers are made to feel that they are a necessary evil of the enterprise, and are given little feedback on their teaching and/or very little information regarding the company and its organization. Moreover, if teachers are made to feel that they are easily replaceable, and if their level of professionalism toward teaching is not recognized, it is also likely to result in low morale and ill feelings toward management. An example of this is the industry's employment criteria for selecting its teachers. Although many schools contend that they wish to provide the best possible lessons for their students, they are willing to turn away qualified older teachers in favor of young non-qualified people to maintain an image of youthfulness. Furthermore, most schools do not seem to actively seek trained teachers, often relying on their 3 -days to 1-week training programs to transform graduates of other fields into suitable language teachers. To improve the work environment at my present school, the management needs to raise its expectations of the foreign staff; the teaching staff needs to be encouraged to be actively involved in suggesting ways to improve the teaching and student services of the school...In addition, the school needs to actively employ more appropriately qualified teachers. This is not to say that all employees need to be teacher-trained. Rather the more suitably trained professionals they can gather, the more professional the overall teaching will become.

Teacher #2 A comment I often hear from teachers is “they don’t care ‘what’ I teach, only ‘how’ I teach”, in other words friendliness is the most important thing. The whole idea of professionalism is confusing over here. All I get day in and day out are speeches about professionalism – for example, the importance of presentable attire, the importance of friendly hellos, the importance of developing suitable material. Another problem is that they ask me to train but they don’t give me the time. They usually give me one day to train a teacher. It’s also very difficult to get good teachers. The management just doesn’t know anything about education. On the other hand, when it comes right down to it, most foreigners don’t know anymore about teaching English than the students they’re teaching.... The boss [Japanese president of the school] doesn’t like the teachers to discuss work problems in the teachers’ meetings because he thinks it will lead to more problems [negativity]. Any problems should go through me and then be passed on to him. The president makes most of the decisions and my job is to make the teachers understand his decision.

Teacher #3 When I first got to Japan I knew nothing about teaching English. I just assumed I would pick it up gradually. Only when I started teaching did I realize how difficult teaching a language was. Many of my friends back home have written to me about the possibility of teaching English in Japan for a year or two. Before I came to Japan I was told not to worry too much about teaching skills because the Japanese managers didn’t care so much about the quality. I think this is a misconception people have about teaching in Japan. I tell anyone who plans to teach in Japan that they should get some training in EFL before they arrive. That way they’ll feel they are actually contributing something.

A summation of major points has been presented in the previous section (i.e. excerpts from the interviews) and thus, a summary of the results is unnecessary.

Discussion

The interviews suggest that both teachers and managers have perspectives on teaching and professionalism the other is not aware of. Thus, it seems vital for both groups to acknowledge

each other's aims and objectives, and to share perspectives on teaching and professionalism. The following list of recommendations, while not exhaustive, could perhaps be a starting point for better mutual understanding between the two groups:

1. The term "professionalism" really has to be qualified before one starts a new teaching job. When teachers are being interviewed for a teaching position they should ask questions that give them an idea of how the school perceives and tries to achieve professionalism.
2. Managers should find out what interviewees think about professionalism. They should ask potential teachers how they would carry out their responsibilities if hired?
3. If ELT is going to have any kind of credibility as a recognized profession, managers have to make some serious changes in hiring policies. It is in their best interest to hire as many qualified teachers as possible.
4. Teachers without proper ELT qualifications should, (must) strive to improve themselves professionally. It would do well to remember Gurr's words when he says, "professionalism is co-terminous with professional development" (p.6).
5. Teachers must realize that pedagogical issues are not the only concern. There is no separating business and education when it comes to fulfilling students' needs.
6. Managers should involve teachers in the school's marketing scheme in order to make them feel they are part of a "professional team".
7. Teachers must demonstrate commitment to quality teaching. They should ask managers for time to observe other teachers' classes, go to JALT conferences or hold small teaching-training seminars in their own school. They should not expect to be paid for every hour devoted to upgrading themselves. Managers should be aware that some teachers are trying hard to improve themselves and praise these individuals both privately and publicly.
8. Managers should include teachers and their pedagogical concerns into the overall business plans.

Conclusion

This paper argued that problems within the private English language school sector revolve around perceptual differences both groups (teachers and Japanese managers) have of what professionalism means in the ELT industry. Data collected from interviews with two Japanese managers and three English language teachers seem to support this supposition. Though the comments from the two managers and three teachers in this study cannot pretend to be comprehensive, the interviews indicate that there are serious problems afflicting the ELT industry in Japan and that *professionalism* is as foreign a concept to managers and teachers in Japan, as English is to the students being taught.

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Appendix A

Teachers and Managers Interviewed for the article

Managers

Manager #1: Male, mid-thirties. Has been a senior manager in a large private language school for 9 years.

Manager #2: Male, late thirties. Has been a junior manager in a large private language school for 10 years.

Teachers

Teacher #1: Male, early thirties. Has taught in three medium to large-size private language schools in Japan. Currently teaches at a college full-time. Has accumulated a total of 6 years teaching in Japan. Has a background in education (Australia).

Teacher #2: Male, late-thirties. Has been a teacher and head-teacher for the past 10 years. Has a background in engineering (Canada).

Teacher #3: Male, early thirties. Has been teaching in a private language school for 2 years. Has a background in Chinese language studies (Australia).

Appendix B

Interview Schedule Used For Teachers

Question 1 – Do you have any problems at your current school? If yes, please elaborate.

- Question 2 – How much did you know about the school you currently work for before you were employed there? Where did you get your information? How useful or accurate was the information?
- Question 3 – What questions did you ask the interviewer (manager) before you were hired?
- Question 4 – What do you know about Japanese language schools from a business point of view? What about before you started your first teaching job in a private language school?
- Question 5 – Do you think an understanding of Japanese business practices in the ELT industry would help you do your job better or at least make it easier to work in the language school environment? Why or why not?
- Question 6 – What advice would you give management at the school you currently work at (i.e. How could they make the work environment better? – If you had the power to make any changes in your school what would you change?)?

Interview Schedule Used For Managers (translated from Japanese)

- Question 1 – Have you encountered any problems involving teachers and management (or other) in your school? If so, what kind of problems have you encountered?
- Question 2 – Do you sometimes find it difficult to work with teachers? If so, why?
- Question 3 – How do you feel about the fact that many of the teachers don't possess ELT credentials in Japan? Is it a problem?
- Question 4 – What seems to be the biggest problem foreign teachers have or face in Japan (as it applies to the ELT industry).
- Question 5 - How could some of the problems between Japanese managers and foreign teachers be solved?