

# Observations from the First Eight Months in Japan; Eikaiwa schools, Native English Speakers, Student Motivations, Role of the Teacher and Bilingualism in the Classroom

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As communicated by the title, this article will examine a range of issues based upon personal observations from my first eight months in Japan. I will approach the entitled topics from the perspective of a Tokyo based Conversation language Instructor in the main (comprising 6 months of observations), but also from the perspective of a newly hired university instructor (representing the final 2 months of observation). It will be important that readers be aware of this timescale as the observations made of Eikaiwa schools: the nature of native English speaking teachers, student motivations, teacher roles and bilingualism in the classroom are applicable in equal measure to the Japanese university scene.

There are limitations to observations made after a mere eight month period and I would like to express the fact that such observations are based upon my very personal experiences within this time. I hope, however, that my observations may be of interest to the reader and that my recollections of instructing English in this time to a wide variety of students may be of value.

My observations will concern:

- Eikaiwa schools; their uniqueness to Asia and what they offer to the student.
- Native English speakers as teachers and the unreliability of this term as an indicator of professional ability.

- The fact that all university graduates are not created equal.
- Intrinsic and extrinsic student motivation and the bearing of these on student progress.
- The role of the teacher as ‘facilitator’ and ‘motivator.’
- The value of early-stage bilingualism in the classroom.

### Eikaiwa Schools

Eikaiwa schools or ‘English Conversation Schools’ are a common sight in Japanese cities. They are made up of businesses keen to maximize turnover and profit which cater to a wide variety of students, from kindergarten age through to retirees, encompassing schoolchildren of all ages, university students, businessmen, housewives and older learners with plenty of time to devote to a hobby. Both employ native English speakers, some of whom are of dubious worth as educators (I will expand upon this statement later). Eikaiwa teachers are expected to be itinerant and flexible with regards to travel around cities, particularly in metropolitan areas such as Tokyo.

Importantly, unlike other markets in Asia, the Japanese English language market appears to have tired of English somewhat (relative to the 1980s), though there remains a sustained base level of interest in English as an economically necessary skill to have in the age of exponential globalization and the increasing spread of English as a world language. This stands in contrast to the immense hunger for English language tuition in other Asian countries such as China and South Korea.

We will for the sake of convenience concentrate on the Japanese eikaiwa system as it is one in which I worked for some time, but I have no doubt that any points I make about the system in Japan apply in a similar way to the Asian English language educational system in general.

But what I would like to propose in the following section is that English Conversation Schools are, conceptually, something unique to Asia

and Japan in particular.

### Uniqueness of Eikaiwa Schools to Japan

When I first came to Japan and began working in the eikaiwa industry it occurred to me that the concept of 'English conversation' was not used in the study of foreign languages in the UK, rather one referred to 'French class' or 'German class' or 'Latin class' not to 'French conversation' 'German conversation' etc. Indeed conversing was assumed to occupy a high place on the list of priorities associated with learning a foreign language, and naturally so given the inherent need and inbuilt capacity of the human species for communication and spoken language in particular.

This leads naturally to the question:

*What are the origins of this specialized industry that has seen the rise (and fall) of some large English conversation chain schools?*

The answer, I think, is that it reflects the historic emphasis that the Japanese education system has placed upon developing the skills of written translation at the expense of communicative English and a rush by the large conversation schools to fill this gap and meet the demands of a legion of students (of all ages) who feel that their ability to understand and make themselves understood in English is lacking.

In essence the large number of corporate English conversation schools in Japan represents what remains of a 'rush' to cash in on the huge demand for the English language seen in Japan in past years. Indeed it seems to me that some of the largest eikaiwa chain schools have over-extended themselves in the expansionist years of the 80s and 90s and have come to take the demand for English language tuition for granted.

In the drive to meet the high demand for English teachers it is my

belief that many companies started lowering their recruitment standards and teacher salaries in an attempt to secure net higher profits. What perhaps was not expected was the ability of students to see through such changes and to boycott schools which were offering a lowered standard of service - the recent problems faced by a well-known eikaiwa school perhaps reflects mistakes made by the industry in recent years which has resulted in a more substantial proportion of dissatisfied and disillusioned students.

### What do Eikaiwa Schools Offer?

To students; interaction with a native English speaker, in one-to one or small group situations, company made textbooks or sometimes use of external texts. The system of each school differs depending upon the company, but most schools insist that a student commit themselves for a minimum period of time and pay any fees in advance of the commencement of lessons. Some companies offer chat-rooms where students can socialize in an informal setting where there is usually at least one native English speaker present, others offer organized trips abroad especially for school children and others offer ultra-modern computer assisted environments in which to learn English. But the key attraction of these schools is their ability to offer a chance to communicate and interact with a native English speaker.

But what does it mean to be a native English-speaking teacher in Japan? I think that the answer to this question is quite simple - very little!

After all, the requirements of most eikaiwa schools hiring from outside Japan go something like this: that their teachers were born and educated in a native English speaking country. Examples include the UK, America, Canada, Australia, South Africa and New Zealand and so on, this is the first requirement.

The second requirement is that such individuals are university

graduates; and the third requirement is that applicants for a work visa should have no criminal convictions...

But is this enough? It is my observation that in most cases, no, this is insufficient, especially given the extremely heterogeneous nature of the university system in English speaking countries.

### **University graduates are not Created Equal**

Let us examine the hierarchical nature of the university system in the UK (and truths that apply to the UK can be made to apply to the other native English speaking countries who have similar league table systems).

There are a number of criteria by which one can measure the quality of a higher education institutes in the UK and I would like to present three of these to you. By comparing the performance of institutes we may come to some conclusion as to the 'quality' of the institutes considered:

- 1) Entrance requirements and selection method
- 2) Drop-out rates (non-completion of university course)
- 3) Graduate prospects following graduation

If we follow these criteria through, one finds a huge disparity in what we might call the 'quality' of the institution.

Prestigious universities in the UK have tough entrance requirements to the extent that getting an interview for a place is something of an achievement in itself; furthermore, their selection method tend to be rigorous, usually involving several elements such as face to face interviews with tutors, the submission of written work and entrance exams. Application forms will be thoroughly screened and personal references chased up and verified; and an offer made will be

'conditional' - that is to say dependent upon the candidate achieving good results in their pre-university examinations. This then also tests the candidates ability to perform under pressure as students hopeful of attending the university of their dream find themselves having to perform to an A grade standard in all of their exams with the knowledge that should they not perform as expected then, quite probably, the offer to study at the dream university might be revoked.

Certainly leading institutes such as Oxford and Cambridge are fairly strict in applying this principal; certainly it is extremely rare to find students studying at those places who didn't achieve at least an AAB score in their Advanced level exams (the exams students take prior to admission to university).

Such universities, unsurprisingly, also have very low drop-out rates (Oxford and Cambridge around the 1% mark).

As for the third criteria the majority of graduates at leading universities go on to successful careers and a bright future, proceed to post-graduate professional training courses or continue their university studies with a view to becoming academic professionals. So much for the universities at the top of the league tables.

But then one must consider the whole spectrum of institutions that exist in the UK university system right down to those whose performance with regard to our three criteria are less than impressive. Please remember that a degree from any UK university is considered a good enough qualification for working as an English teacher in Japan. Without naming names there are some UK universities whose performance on our three criteria are something as follows:

- 1) Entrance requirements - minimal. In extreme cases 2 grade Es may be sufficient to be offered a place (contrast this to the AAB minimum requirement of the top universities!) and this could be an offer made over the phone following the completion of the national university entrance forms known as UCAS (via the 'clearing

system') Many less prestigious universities in the UK do not interview candidates and do not ask for the submission of written work.

- 2) Drop-out rates - some universities have an alarmingly high drop-out rate (or non-completion rate). Some are as high as 35% and rates in the 20 percents are not uncommon.
- 3) Graduate prospects - again show a wide variety of post-graduation prospects with some graduates finding it hard to find suitable employment.

So the point to be drawn is that the term 'university graduate' is a very general category and is, in my opinion, an unsuitable stand-alone standard for ensuring the quality of English teachers in Japan. Having pointed out the differences between some UK universities I would like to point out that the majority of institutions offer, in my opinion, worthwhile courses staffed by conscientious academic staff; it is my intention to simply do some 'consciousness-raising' with regard to the limitations of the eikaiwa industry in asking only for 'graduates.'

Indeed, one of my first observations was the immense variety of native English speaking individuals who are recruited by the eikaiwa industry to work as teachers in Japan; indeed, the type of teacher a student received seemed due to pure luck - if students were lucky they would find themselves being taught by an individual with teaching experience, a good knowledge of the English language and a dedicated work ethic. An unlucky student might find themselves in the company of a teacher who was fresh from any university, had no teaching experience and whose job was low on the list of priorities. Indeed there were a proportion of new teachers who quickly decided that teaching in Japan was not for them and would head back home after a short time. So how would I suggest practical solutions to this problem?

## Suggested Solutions

Very few of the large eikaiwa schools actually demand a formal teaching qualification; some prefer it, but are willing to take teachers who are merely the holders of degrees from native English speaking countries. It would seem to me an obvious step in the right direction to make the possession of a teaching certificate mandatory for the purposes of applying for a Japanese work visa.

This would ensure that teachers in Japan had at least a basic knowledge and understanding of English grammar and teaching methodology. After all, being a native speaker says nothing about your 'language awareness.' It is only through actively studying the rules that govern your own language that one can gain an understanding of how to go about teaching a language thoroughly and effectively. This is so much more the case with people from my generation and younger who had very little education in the workings of the English language aside from learning how to spell and punctuate properly (and even then with mixed success); as native speakers, the rules were swiftly internalized as children and quickly lost to conscious thought - hence the need for training as adults should one wish to teach their own language.

### Practical measures

There are two obvious ways of achieving my suggestion. Both are achievable through current infrastructures. They are as follows:

- 1) Individuals from native English speaking countries interested in teaching abroad need to have an internationally recognized level of teaching certification*

Such courses available are intense practical courses such as the CELTA



(Cambridge Certificate of English Language Teaching to Adults). The possession of such qualifications indicates a practical level of ability from new teachers. Such courses are not easy and require that an aspiring teacher display an adequate level of English language awareness in fields such as grammar and phonetics, as well as having passed observed assessments where an independent assessor sits in on classes of students at different levels. I myself undertook such a course in 2005 and there were several students out of a class of 15 or so who did not pass the course, even though they had paid the 1000-pound fee for the privilege of attending it. The downside is that such courses are expensive with the possible result that fewer would be eligible to apply for overseas teaching jobs. This could, however, be viewed as a pro, a demonstration on the part of the would-be-teacher that they were serious about teaching English abroad. Current turnover rates in eikaiwa schools are rather high; the requirement to have a CELTA or comparative certificate would, I believe cut-down on the drop-out rate, which would compensate for the reduction in numbers of applicants for teaching positions abroad. The maxim 'quality over quantity' would seem to apply well in this situation and of course English language companies in Japan would be expected to increase the starting salaries of individuals possessed of these qualifications, somewhat offsetting the initial outlay of student fees that undertaking such courses would entail.

## *2) University Exchange Schemes, involving an ESL perspective.*

Undergoing an ESL course is a good way of preparing for teaching English in Japan, but I think that this is an even better alternative and I am very pleased to say that Beppu University itself participates in such a scheme.

Such schemes involve Japanese university students traveling to the UK (or any native English speaking country) to study English for a period of time as part of their degree; the reverse of this is of course that British

students (or Americans, Australians, New Zealanders, Canadians etc) from overseas universities coming to Japan to study how to teach English for a set period of time as part of their degrees. The beauty of this arrangement is that some of the expense borne by students is subsidized by the existence of the exchange element. It is a cost effective way for students from either country to be immersed in a different culture; Japanese English majors return with significantly improved communicative English and British students return to the UK with an understanding and some experience of how to teach the English language. A certificate awarded to British returnees would stand in place of alternative qualifications such as the CELTA and enable them to travel to Japan after graduating to take up jobs in the English language sector should they so wish it. Again having experienced Japan they would be far less likely to 'drop-out' having been prepared for the experience of living abroad from their exchange experience. As to the cons, there are none that I can see! As a result I feel that Beppu university acts as a fine example of pushing to improve the quality of English language education in Japan and the education of its English majors in communicative English and I hope that more universities will take steps to implement such programmes with English speaking countries as soon as possible. And of course there are other universities who have some very worthwhile exchanges set up with such overseas institutions; I believe that the more of this that goes the better.

### **Student Progress**

Another observation that I made was the greater than usual discrepancy in the progress made by different students attending the same or similar classes. During my time working at an Eikaiwa school I had a broad range of students all of whom studied with me in similar situations. Approximately 50 % of my students had classes in a 1 to 1

context and the rest worked in small groups no larger than 5 students; in this way I was able to gauge student progress fairly accurately and compare the different rates of progress that were forthcoming.

I would like to postulate a hypothesis (kindly suggested by Yoshie-sensei) at this point and go about answering it in terms of my experience during my first six months of working at a Tokyo eikaiwa. The hypothesis is as follows:

*'Is it reasonable to expect English conversation schools to be responsible for the progress of their students in learning communicative English?'*

I would like to restate that there were some students who made quite impressive progress in their English language ability whilst studying with me on a 1 hr per week basis for six months; these individuals are evidence that the materials with which we were given (as provided by the language school - student textbook, teacher's book, tapes, extra materials for younger learners) had the potential to be effective learning tools. The fact that there were a proportion of students who benefited from my lessons also indicated, to my relief, that my teaching methods were at least somewhat effective! But what of those students who, to my eye, made little or next to no progress whatsoever, even after some 25 hours of one-to one tuition over a six-month period?

It is my belief that student who made the least progress tended to place absolute responsibility for their learning in the hands of the eikaiwa school and their teachers. In a sense they had belief in the hypothesis put forward, a hypothesis that I believe to be unreasonable and totally unrealistic.

In other words it was my observation that the students who made the most progress were those who placed responsibility for their progress in learning communicative English in their own hands. They were under no illusions; they understood that the only person who could ensure that

they improved were themselves. This will lead us to an examination of student motivation, which lies at the core of the successful language learner.

### **Student Motivation**

Learning is an active process, motivation the trigger for this (defined as: 'a need or desire causing a person to act').

Motivations fall into two theoretical and polemical camps - intrinsic and extrinsic. Of course in real life individuals these categories are far from watertight and experience varying degrees of overlap. However, there is little doubt from my observations that these types of motivation exist; we will now examine them in a little more detail.

Intrinsic motivation comes from internal psychological needs and desires; reward for the activity is in the activity itself, such students tend to be active learners and take charge of their own learning.

Extrinsic motivation is stimulated by outside rewards or goals. Examples would include money, promotion, high grades and entry to university. Extrinsic motivation is often created from the desire not to fail.

### **Too Many Students are Intrinsically Motivated**

This is one of my most important observations and is necessarily a barrier to effective language acquisition. But why is it that so many Japanese language learners are extrinsically motivated? I firmly believe that it is due to the fact that such importance is placed upon the taking and passing of written English Language examinations in the Japanese Middle and High school systems.

As a consequence of this emphasis upon exams student motivation

tends to become extrinsic, increasingly so as students mature and thoughts turn to securing university places at well-respected and prestigious institutions.

Students, therefore, tend to become 'performance orientated' and passive; as an extension of this over-reliance upon the native speaker teacher - it is my observation that such students were among those who made little to no progress.

This phenomenon is partly due, I think, to the advertising style of many of the eikaiwa chain schools who tend to encourage the idea that simply spending time with a native speaker of English will result in improvements in English. This is plainly not the case, especially in the case of low-level students.

Another of my observations is that the key to making progress in the study of English is consistent and directed self-study and the genuine enjoyment of English rather than trying to pass exams or get a better job.

So if a student can be expected to improve only in the event of studying independently for the majority of his/her time, then what is the role of the language teacher; indeed is the occupation of language instructor actually a redundant one?

### **Role of the Teacher**

I have no desire to convince anyone that my current profession is an obsolete one that can be dispensed with in exchange for students studying more on their own!

However, I have come firmly to believe in my time spent in Japan that the role of a language teacher is not so much as an educator per se as a facilitator, encourager and supporter of language learning.

As much as I would like to, I can take only a smaller proportion of credit for the progress made by those students I taught whilst working in

the eikaiwa industry in Tokyo. They did it themselves, by studying at home on a regular basis. So what was my role in their improvement? We will now examine this question; please be aware that the role I played I believe to be the role that native English language teachers should play when partnered with students in the learning process: The diligent teacher's roles should be as follows:

*1) Be available to explain grammatical points and correct errors.*

The active, independent learner should be encouraged to produce as much spoken English as possible and should do so mindful of the fact that it is fine to make mistakes, the teacher should be alert to errors and correct them sensitively.

*2) Model correct pronunciation, word stress and intonation.*

This is a key role of the native English speaker, for these elements of communicative English are difficult to get from a textbook. Listening cassettes offer support and guidance for the independent learner (and I highly recommend them), but lack the versatility and flexibility of a real-life teacher. For this reason teachers ought to be confident in their modeling ability and ideally have an accent that doesn't deviate too far from the standard version (this is a slightly controversial statement and shouldn't be taken as a statement supportive of the superiority of the standard form in any way).

*3) Foster a positive learning environment by establishing rapport, addressing students as individuals and ensuring that the environment is an unpressured one.*

Studies of learning environments have established that high stress situations severely obstruct the learning process by creating a sort of 'static' interference, which drowns out signals between the brain neurons so vital to the learning of new information. I remember a Latin teacher of mine with whom my classmates and I studied between the

ages of 8 and 10; his approach created the kind of 'pressured' and high-stress environment that is so obstructive to the learning process. It was not uncommon for students to be reduced to tears when unable to translate a particular piece of Latin into English; the teacher (who also functioned as the school rugby and football instructor) would grow increasingly angry, sometimes ripping boy's work to shreds when especially provoked by what he deemed to be incompetence. Needless to say, very little useful learning of that ancient language went on in those classes. I hasten to add that in his capacity as sports coach he was more successful - his character seemed better suited to the violence and competitiveness of the school playing fields..

And yet, the goal of fostering a supportive learning environment is not always easy to achieve. In Japan, in particular, I have noticed that students especially in the early stages of a new degree or new semester or in the company of a new instructor tend to be fairly reserved and reluctant to make mistakes in front of their peers and teachers - this brings us once again to the first of the roles a teacher should fulfill - to encourage communication and make clear that mistakes are a good thing, part of the creative process of acquiring a new language.

Practical tasks such as guided pair/group work are effective in encouraging students to work together co-operatively and overcome some of the shyness factors often seen in learners of English. Furthermore, an itinerant teacher can wander about the class, listening, correcting, offering advice and establishing some personal rapport with small groups of students; this I feel is important in bigger lecture groups where it is all too easy to become distanced from students - such distance may be fine when lecturing purely academic subjects in your native tongue to other native speakers, but in language instruction a more practical, involved and personalized approach is, in my opinion, much more effective.

#### 4) *Selection of learning materials.*

One of the good things about what I saw of the eikaiwa industry in Tokyo was that many of the learning materials were specifically tailored for Japanese English language learners and focused upon speaking and listening. Teacher's notes were very accessible and easy to use, requiring little time to prepare - this was just as well given that it was not unusual for an eikaiwa teacher to have 6 hours of lesson in any single day, many of which in blocks of 3 hours or more. In the absence of dedicated in-house texts then the language instructor should seek materials that are interesting on their own right; choosing modern, relevant topics encourages student engagement with the lesson content and facilitates the production of the target language. This requires the good teacher to engage with Japanese culture at least to some extent, in order, if nothing else, to gain insights into the sorts of things that university age students might be interested in and liable to respond to.

#### 5) Finally in this section I would like to add that a fundamental role of the English teacher is to *maximize student-talking time.*

Whilst training in the UK as an English instructor we were told that we should aim for a ratio of 20% teacher talking time, 80% student talking time and were penalized for straying too far from these guidelines. In the UK and when teaching European and South American English learners, I found this ratio challenging to achieve, but achievable nonetheless. In Japan, this guideline is impractical and needs to be adjusted to a target of around 50-50 STT and TTT. The justification behind maximized STT is still a good one - namely that it is the students who need the practice in speaking English, not the teacher, but in Japan there seems to be more of an expectation that the lecturer do most of the talking and the students remain silent, perhaps taking notes. This, I believe is again due to the nature of the educational system in Japan which seems to encourage individual study, translation and memorization for the sake of passing exams and gaining entrance to university. Moving the ratio in favour of



STT is one which I try to pursue; I find that presenting a language form, modeling a language form, drilling that form and then setting up a student centred activity in pairs or small groups tends to work well. Students then become involved, are more stimulated and more likely to have a go at speaking in realistic situation that might prove useful in real-life situations should they find themselves needing to converse with a native speaker of English.

### **Bilingualism in the Classroom**

This is an important observation I have made during my time so far in Japan and it concerns the place of bilingualism in the classroom. I will start by laying my cards on the table and stating that I believe that many eikaiwa schools and educational institutes more generally make a mistake when insisting upon a monolingual or English only learning environment when dealing with complete beginners or very low level students, or children.

Low level students, whether they be adults or children, I am convinced, get more out of studying with a bi-lingual teacher unafraid of using Japanese to facilitate the comprehension of English - to explain words, concepts and of course to point out comparatives between the mother language and language of study.

I would like to stress that the use of bilingualism I feel becomes less justifiable as the student's level in the target language improves; once a student has a base understanding of English then it becomes increasingly valuable to be immersed in an English only environment for the duration of classes.

The basic class structure that I would use if opening my own language school, would be as follows:

For absolute beginners and low level students then consistent self-study and contact with a bilingual teacher would be undertaken. Once

that student has shown improvement and only then, should he/she be invited to 'graduate' to classes involving monolingual native speakers of English or bi-linguists using English only in class.

### Example from Experience

Whilst working as a supply teacher in the UK I found myself called to a school to take French classes for the day. The students usually had a native French-speaking teacher who enforced the 'French only in class rule' and had been sitting through classes for two years already. I supposed that their level would be pre-intermediate stage as a result of this - was I right? Absolutely not! Most of the students were struggling with even the most basic French language principles such as the differences between positive and negative statements, masculine and feminine word forms and the formation of the past tense. Most students were entirely unaware of the commonalities between French and English. So in one day I was able to enlighten them as to some of these points, by simply using the textbook and my own very limited knowledge of French and by applying what I knew of bilingual teaching methodology.

Of course I mustn't be too hard on the French teacher in question (whom I never met) because as we have already discussed, the motivation of the students may not have been high - and this is one of the most important factors in whether an individual proceeds successfully along the road to second language acquisition or not. I suspect that the British students I have mentioned were entirely extrinsically motivated (by the requirement to pass exams) and had little intrinsic interest in learning French which, as we have discussed, is unlikely to lead to success in learning a foreign language in a communicative way.

To end on a positive note with reference to this example, I found that

in explaining one or two basic French grammatical facts to the students in clear, concise and comparative terms, the students experienced the thrill of finally understanding something that had seemed to them confusing, alien and completely inaccessible. I sensed that there was the potential in some of those students to become successful language learners if they were only approached with a sympathetic learning methodology free of the dogmatic 'immersion rule' which should be applied later once the students had worked out the fundamentals of the language being taught.

### Conclusions

*Observation 1:* Eikaiwa schools in Japan, indeed educational institutes in general, cannot be held responsible to any large extent for the language progress of their students, as learning will only occur in the presence of independent student motivation and self-study. Student motivation should be intrinsic in nature; if extrinsic motivations exist (as they so often do with regard to exams, entrance to university, salary increases, promotion etc) then they should be secondary to the intrinsic motivation, which is the pursuit of learning for learning's sake.

*Observation 2:* Eikaiwa schools should be encouraged to hire new teachers with some form of recognizable teaching certification (as do the vast majority of Japanese universities). This may require legislation being passed by the Japanese government. The present requirement of merely needing to be a graduate from an English speaking country is, from my observations, inadequate to ensure good standards in the industry.

*Observation 3:* The role of the English language instructor in Japan is a supportive and inspirational one. Good teachers should have an infectious enthusiasm for the subject, attempt to create an unpressured yet

motivated learning environment and be confident in the grammatical and pronunciation issues of English, as well as be dedicated to locating and deploying interesting content based learning materials. They should always aim to maximize student-talking time wherever possible.

*Observation 4:* Bilingualism in the classroom should be encouraged with beginners and low-level students. Only upon reaching a level capable of benefiting from exposure to a native English speaker should students be allowed to 'graduate' to such monolingual classes.

#### Applicability to You

Motivational points made in this article are particularly applicable to students at the university level as well as eikaiwa attendees. I would like to end by suggesting an approach to English language learning and learning in general which is one that I certainly try to encourage:

*Learning should not only be a means to an end, but an end in itself. Examinations can therefore be viewed as opportunities to show what you have learned, rather than simply as obstacles to be negotiated.*

I hope that you might be able to put this philosophy into effect...

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