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CAVEAT EMPTOR

Study the school before studying English

By **ERIC JOHNSTON**
Staff writer

OSAKA — Thinking about studying English at a private school chain? If so, proceed with caution and know what you're getting into, say university English professors, teachers union representatives and the English-language schools themselves.

Their comments follow a recent scandal involving Nova Corp., which has cast a spotlight on the business practices of the "eikaiwa" English conversation industry.

Earlier this month, the government slapped the industry's top company with a six-month ban on new customer contracts due to its deceptive practices, including distributing pamphlets that claim students can schedule classes at any time or branch, when in fact there was a shortage of teachers at times of peak demand.

Branches were also allegedly renegeing on contract cooling-off period reimbursements.

Many academics warn that the primary purpose of the schools is not to provide an education but to offer a form of entertainment.

"At best, these chain schools are hit and miss. If they get a good teacher, they're lucky and it's worthwhile attending. If not, then it's a ripoff," said Rube Redfield, a longtime English instructor who teaches at Osaka University of Economics.

"I also tell them that if they find a good teacher, to take his class right away. Good teachers soon leave such places for better places, if they



Private English schools like this Nova outlet in the Yaesu district in Chuo Ward, Tokyo, are easily found all over Japan. SATOKO KAWASAKI PHOTO

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A piece of your mind: YouTube in Japan
Popular video-sharing site YouTube recently launched international channels in nine countries, including Japan. While YouTube has developed into a powerful promotion channel for both professional and amateur content makers, last year a Japanese entertainment group asked YouTube to remove nearly 30,000 files said to contain streamer names.

stay in education at all," he added.

Many potential students are aware some schools are more about entertainment than education, and are more interested in having a good time and meeting new friends than in serious study. But the more naive students also don't always realize that such schools have basically the same kind of mentality toward their customers as one sees in the "water trade."

In Japan, the water trade, or "mizushobai," refers to hostess bars and other forms of adult entertainment business.

The phrase carries the negative image of an industry bent on doing anything to earn quick money.

"I tell my students that the entire eikaiwa industry is a kind of mizushobai industry, and that the motives of those involved, including the customers, should be judged accordingly," said Charles DeWolf, a professor at Keio University in Tokyo.

Such naive students are often lured into conversation schools by fast-talking salespeople who offer pie-in-the-sky promises of language fluency with little effort and within a short period of time, and are often clueless as to how much work is actually involved in becoming fluent.

"If you bought three years of tickets, were at a large school, got to know and choose your teachers, went every day, did all your homework and stayed in the chat room for long periods, your English would improve and it would be value for money. Otherwise, it's not," said Simon Moran of Osaka-based Modern English, a small chain of schools.

Despite the industry's negative image often associated with consumer fraud, however, some efforts are being made to set ethics guidelines.

The Tokyo-based Japan Association for the Promotion of Foreign Language Education is a group of more than 60 large and small foreign-language schools nationwide. Established in 1991, its purpose is to provide member schools with business ethics guidelines and to offer practical advice to those seeking to learn a foreign language.

"We tell potential students to do as much research on schools as possible before they sign up. What's most important for anybody who wants to learn a foreign language is to have a

Before you hand over any money for English lessons, take these tips

University English professors, people working at chain schools, union representatives and former students offer the following advice for people interested in studying English at private-language schools:

- Are you serious about becoming fluent or are you interested in just picking up a few words and phrases? If it's the former, a school may be worthwhile. If it's the latter, decide if your time and money may be better spent elsewhere. Alternatives for the casual learner include Internet lessons, self-study guides or finding either a private tutor or free language exchange partner through a municipal international exchange center.
- Have a strong idea why you want to study at a school, and set fluency goals for yourself. Be prepared to put in the time and effort it takes to reach your goal and create a plan to meet that goal. Otherwise, it's highly likely you will quit halfway through.
- Identify and visit those schools you think are best suited to your goals and personality. Ask to sit in on a lesson that is in progress, as this will give you a better idea of what the school's lessons and classroom atmosphere are really like, as opposed to signing up for a free trial lesson, which may not be representative of how the school works.
- Ask each school why students study there, and determine whether their goals are the same as yours.
- Ask the sales staff what professional qualifications the teachers have. Do they have master's degrees or teaching certificates? How long have they been in Japan? How long have they worked as English teachers? Can they explain things in Japanese if necessary?
- Ask the sales staff about their own English-language speaking abilities, including how long and where they studied.
- Ask to speak to a teacher, one on one.

ries and to develop stronger measures to protect copyrights. Do you think YouTube should impose stricter regulations on uploaded content?

- Yes, through lax regulations, it is profiting from copyrighted content that it does not own.**
- I don't mind the copyright infringements, but YouTube should have stricter regulations regarding mature/violent content.**
- No. Furthermore, content-makers should better utilize YouTube as a promotional tool.**
- No, I think it is fine as is.**

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very clear idea of why they want to study," said Masami Sakurabayashi, the association's director.

"In addition, it's vital that students, especially those who are young and on their own for the first time, understand and appreciate a contract's legal ramifications and the obligations they are entering into. Don't sign anything you don't understand," he warned.

Louis Carlet, deputy general secretary of Tokyo Nambu, one of the largest foreign teachers unions in the country, seconded that advice and added that serious students should not only look at schools but also at the working conditions of the teachers.

"It's generally true that job security equals quality of education," he said.

Despite a general agreement that the vast majority of students are not likely to become extremely fluent by just studying at a private school, some still see educational merit in signing up for lessons.

"Although there are many cons to their operations, private language schools often have classes of only three or four students, as opposed to classes of 40 like I teach now at university," said Nara-based Paul Hackshaw, who teaches at Ryukoku University and Kyoto Women's University.

Students often join an English school to meet and speak with people from a foreign country. But, as many English teachers in both private schools and universities point out, if meeting foreigners and learning English informally is your goal, there can be other, cheaper ways to do so, ranging from participation in international clubs to free language exchange meetings through local international exchange centers.

Thus, in this day and age, and especially if you live in an area of Japan with a modest population of foreigners, English schools are simply another way to learn English, and not necessarily the best or cheapest way. Let the buyer beware.

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