

Interview with Featured Boston Mentor: Keiko Schlabach



Keiko Schlabach
Founder & Instructor
[English-Empowered](#)

Q1: Currently, you are working as the Founder & Instructor of English-Empowered. How did you get into your current work?

I was originally an ESL teacher at universities in the U.S. I have a master's degree in Teaching English to the Speakers of Other Languages (TESOL). I also have a strong background in course development; I've been writing English learning materials for publishers in Japan, like ETS, IIBC, Z-kai, and Benesse. My turning point came in 2014, when I was asked by an Ibaraki-based translation company to design and teach an online course for Japanese researchers to enhance their presentation skills. Through that opportunity, I worked with many brilliant Japanese researchers and realized many of them struggled to present their research effectively in English--from choosing the key messages to using simple language and adopting engaging presentation styles. I became passionate about helping Japanese researchers communicate their ideas to non-Japanese audiences so they can capitalize on global opportunities. And to pursue that mission, I launched English-Empowered, where I offer online programs to help Japanese professionals boost their confidence and English communication skills.

研究者向けのプレゼン講座の開発・指導をきっかけに、日本人研究者のコミュニケーション力アップの重要性を実感。研究者がグローバルに活躍できるようエンパワーしたい！という想いで起業しました。

Q2: Are you originally from the East Coast? What is your impression of Boston as an ecosystem for startups?

I'm originally from Japan, and didn't know much about Boston outside of its reputation for having a rich history and great universities. What I didn't know was these factors actually make Boston uniquely fitted to be a hub for startups.

First, because of Boston's rich history, people have cultivated a strong sense of community. Bostonians are proud that we live in such a beautiful city with a significant role in history, and at the same time, we feel responsible for doing our part to preserve it as residents. I think this sense of community has laid the groundwork for collaboration and innovation.

Another unique advantage of the Boston startup ecosystem is the pool of amazing talent. Boston has nearly 50 higher education institutes, including some of the most prestigious universities in the world. You will see top talent from Harvard, MIT, and other leading universities playing major roles in the ecosystem by conducting cutting-edge research and promoting entrepreneurial culture. So Boston is where the past meets the future and academia meets the industry. It's truly unique.

過去と未来が入り交じり、アカデミアと産業が融合するボストン
だからこそ、他にはないスタートアップエコシステムが成り立って
いるのだと思います。

Q3: What are you working on at the moment?

I'm currently developing instructional materials for my online coaching program so I can better serve Japanese startups. Before I started working with CIC, I wasn't specifically targeting startups as my clients. But as I've learned more about startups and their journeys, I've become fascinated by their stories and struck by how much impact they can have on people's lives. I've also come to realize that it's particularly important for startups to develop effective communication and presentation skills. I mean, if you don't do well in your pitch, you won't get funding, or you might drive away future partners.

I also have a YouTube channel targeting Japanese professionals who need to use English for work. I focus on useful phrases native English speakers use, which I call "mama phrases." Viewers learn these phrases as they are, "sonomama," so they're "mama" phrases. By building

a repertoire of these phrases, English learners will see dramatic improvement in their fluency, and learning these phrases will help them sound polite, professional, and respectful.

So that is what I am up to now, but I'm always searching for new project ideas and exciting collaboration opportunities.

スタートアップサポートを視野に入れたコーチングビジネスの強化と
研究者・ビジネスパーソン対象の YouTube でのレッスン配信に加え、
常に面白い出会いと機会を探しています！

Q4: How has your experience been mentoring Japanese startups through CIC's partnership on the JETRO Global Acceleration Hub program?

My experience so far has been great! The Global Acceleration Hub (GAH) program offers the kind of support that every Japanese startup would wish for--getting necessary information to enter into the Boston startup ecosystem, receiving mentoring from industry leaders in Boston, and meeting with local investors and partners. The program truly "accelerates" their growth as a startup and process of expanding their global influence. I feel excited and honored to be part of such an important initiative.

As an English communication mentor, I've had the privilege of working with extraordinary scientists from Japan and helping them build positive connections with non-Japanese VCs and partners through an effective pitch and engaging communication. They are so eager to learn; they actively contribute their ideas in the sessions and are open to feedback. We work on things that have an immediate impact on their presentation skills, like what to say to emphasize their key points or how to answer questions clearly. It's nice that the startups can take what we've covered in our session and use them the next day.

Finally, you can't talk about GAH without mentioning Jessy LeClair. She is the face of the CIC Japan Desk and handles everything GAH on the CIC side. She's been extremely helpful in answering my questions, connecting me with other mentors in the program, and providing me with helpful resources. She is incredibly resourceful and insightful, and is always willing to help. I think everyone involved is indebted to Jessy for her leadership.

優秀で学ぶ意欲が高く、積極的に参加してくれるスタートアップとのセッションは、メンターにとっても有意義。練習したスキルを次の日に即使える実践性も◎。

Q5. What do you think are the challenges facing a Japanese startup that is trying to expand its business in the Boston area?

One challenge would be that prestige and reputation in Japan may not be recognized in other markets. For example, attending a prestigious university or being recognized as an expert in the field may not carry the same weight once you are outside the Japanese market. Instead, Boston VCs will want to know what problems you are solving and what solutions you are providing. Startups should shift their focus and emphasize their value proposition so they can appeal to non-Japanese listeners.

Another challenge is communicating these value propositions effectively to non-Japanese investors and partners. If you bring the Japanese presentation style to a meeting with VCs from Boston, they may not see your true value. Japanese startups need to learn to clearly state their message instead of implying it. They have to focus on key takeaways instead of trying to cover as much information as possible. Delivery is also important. VCs want to see passion and confidence that your solution will work. It might be acceptable to read your script in a meeting in Japan, but it would not work in the U.S. If Japanese startups want to build meaningful connections with prospective investors and partners, they will need to make eye contact, show that they care, and engage the audience in the conversation.

So finding the value proposition that resonates with local investors and communicating it clearly are some of the major challenges Japanese startups will need to work on.

日本のスタートアップにとっての課題は、海外の投資家の心に響くバリュープロポジションを見つけ、それをわかりやすい言葉と効果的な非言語で伝えること。

Q6: What advice do you have for Japanese startups that are exploring business opportunities in the Boston area?

My #1 advice is to join local startup accelerator programs like GAH. You can get timely information on local markets and business culture, which might be hard to know if you are on the other side of the globe. And when you are trying to grow your business, networking is super important. If you join a program like GAH, you can network with local startups and even get introduced to VCs and future partners. You will get to work with mentors who can help you move your business forward, like figuring out the right marketing plan and polishing your pitch. And many programs are even free! There is no reason not to take advantage of these opportunities.

Once you've made an appointment with a VC, my advice is, do your research about the VC before you meet with them. It's like a job interview. You wouldn't go into an interview room without knowing anything about the company you are applying for! Visit their website and read their mission statements. See if you and they are striving for the same mission. If you know the individual people you are meeting with, research their background and see if you have anything in common, or if they've made any impressive accomplishments you could comment on. When you touch on these points in the meetings and tailor your presentation to each VC, you will more likely be able to build positive relationships.

So take advantage of every opportunity around you, and make the most of them!

GAHのような素晴らしい機会をどんどん活用すること！
VCとアポイントメントが取れたら、しっかり事前リサーチをして
信頼関係を築いていくのも大切ですね。