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## Comprehensibility of *wasei eigo* among native speakers teaching English as a foreign language in Japan

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### Abstract

This paper focused on analyzing the comprehensibility of *wasei eigo* or the Japanese-made English among native English speakers who are teaching English as a foreign language in Japan. Though these words are loanwords from English, they mean differently from the original words or expressions they are derived from. The first research question determined the *wasei eigo* words or expressions understood by the NSE EFL teachers in Japan. The second and third research questions examined which *wasei eigo* word is the most understood and the least understood by the respondents. To answer these questions, a descriptive survey was used in this study. Purposive sampling was also used to gather the needed data from 20 native English speakers who are working as EFL teachers in Japan. The results show that some of the *wasei eigo* words are understood by the native English speakers who are teaching in Japan. However, further studies could be conducted to find out the effects of *wasei eigo* in the EFL teaching and learning in Japan.

**Keywords:** Wasei eigo; English language; English as a foreign language; Japanese English

### 1. Introduction

Britannica Encyclopedia (2023) defines language as a system of conventional spoken, manual, or written symbols by means of which human beings as members of a social group and participants in its culture, express themselves. The functions of language include communication, the expression of identity, play, imaginative expression, and emotional release. Taking this description of a language, its most important function is for communication. The people of one area and of one group speak one language, which may or may not be the same as what the people in the neighboring region do. That is why language borrowing occurs. Language borrowing happens when two language communities develop cultural contact (Kemmer, 2019). Though the two communities decide to adopt words from the other language into their native language, the borrowing of words may not always be of an equal distribution. One group may adopt more words and use them in their own language than what the other group may get from their counterpart. This happens when speakers of one language find a word in the other language to describe something they do not have a word for. These words are referred to as loan words or loanwords.

Michaloski (2021) claimed that loan words can be found in nearly every language. Take English as an Example. Former Merriam Webster lexicographer Kory Stamper revealed that English is made up of loan words from about 350 other languages, comprising about 80 percent of the words used in the English language. The languages with the most influence are French, Latin, and German, with Greek or Latin comprising about 60 percent of all the borrowed words (Dictionary.com, 2015).

The most popular loanwords, as a result of cultural contact, often describe food, entertainment, the arts, including scholarly or specialized fields like science and medicine. Most of these loaned words are actually part of the material

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culture of the group of their origin (Dictionary.com, 2018). As physical and linguistic exchanges also take place with cultural exchange, the borrowing culture adopts the names of the popular objects that already have their names in the original language instead of creating new names for these objects in their own language.

The problem, however, begins when native speakers are not always aware that these words are loan words and that they do not know the country or regions of origin. This is when miscommunication takes place especially when the learner tries to speak with people in the target language. The learner, being unaware of the origin of the loanwords, might be wanting to say a different thing, but the loaned words might have a different meaning in the original or native language of its origin (Michalowski, 2021).

In the case of the Japanese language, only around 33 percent of the currently used words are of Japanese origin, while 49 percent are borrowed from the Chinese language (Ebeid, 2016). The high percentage of Chinese originated words could be traced back to history as Japanese scholars were sent to China to study then went back home to develop their own educational system, which is heavily influenced by the Chinese language and can be seen up to these days. The remaining 18 percent of the words used in the Japanese language are loanwords from other languages (Ebeid, 2016). In the 2000 edition of the Sanseido Dictionary, 52,500 foreign words were listed (MacGregor, 2003). This includes those words of mixed origins and the Japan-made pseudo-English words more popularly known as *wasei eigo*.

### 1.1. Background of the Study

In response to the increasing international exchange of goods, services, and information in the 1980s, Japan started the internationalization of education by promoting various programs including foreign language education, having English as the focus language (Ishikida, 2005). Starting as a subject of study in the junior and senior high schools until 2020, English has been included as a basic subject in the fifth and sixth grade of elementary schools. Third and fourth grades have it as an additional subject with no weight in the academic evaluation of the students.

In her study, Ishikida (2005) claimed that although Japanese students spend six years of English studies in middle school and high school, the Japanese people still have a reputation of being poor English speakers. This could be attributed to the emphasis of English language education in the country being on reading and writing, while neglecting spoken proficiency.

Realizing the importance of improving the spoken or conversation skills of the students, the government organized the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program in 1987 that aimed to promote internationalization in Japan's local communities by helping to improve foreign language education and developing international exchange at the community level (JET Programme, n.d.). As of 2022, more than 5,700 native English speakers from 50 countries are participating in the program and have been assisting Japanese teachers of English in the elementary, junior high, and senior high schools with their classes, preparing teaching materials, and involving in extracurricular activities to encourage students to study and use English.

Tsunekawa (2019), however, lamented in his article that Japanese is full of *wasei eigo* that are not actually used in English. This is one reason why many Japanese people cannot speak English. Japanese people use these words every day thinking these words mean the same in English.

This researcher, himself, is one of the participants of the JET Program who works as an ALT or assistant language teacher and is able to personally observe how not only the Japanese students but also the other school faculty and staff use *wasei eigo* in speaking with the foreign language teacher or even among themselves. During English classes, there are instances when students say English words, but these words mean differently from what they originally mean in English. Unfortunately, the students and even some Japanese who are proficient in English may not realize that the words they are using, though these are actual English words, are not recognized by native English speakers (Rebuck, 2002). These observations show that *wasei eigo* need further consideration and studies to establish their acceptability in standard English.

For these aforementioned scenarios, this study is conceived to determine if native English speakers teaching EFL (NSE EFL teachers) in Japan understand *wasei eigo*, and, if so, the *wasei eigo* words that are most understood and least understood.

## 1.2. Statement of the Problem

This study aimed to determine the comprehensibility of *wasei eigo* or Japan-made pseudo-English to native English speakers teaching English as a foreign language (NSE EFL teachers) in Japan.

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following questions:

- How many *wasei eigo* words do NSE EFL teachers in Japan understand?
- Which *wasei eigo* word is understood the most by the NSE EFL teachers in Japan?
- Which *wasei eigo* word is least understood by the NSE EFL teachers in Japan?

## 1.3. Review of Related Literature

This section offers summaries of some literature sources pertinent to the nature of this study.

In his study, Michaloski (2021) sought to answer (1) whether native speakers of English (NSE) and non-native speakers of English (NNSE) comprehend the meanings of select *wasei eigo* words. He also tried to find out (2) whether the native speakers of Japanese (NSJ) know if the *wasei eigo* words' meaning is derived from English or other languages. His study found out that there is a high possibility of misunderstanding between NNSE and NSJ because it is these two that are more likely to interact as compared to NSE and NSJ interaction.

As a result, Michaloski suggested that teachers should underscore the English loan words used in the Japanese language for students to realize how much English they already know, thus serving as a source of encouragement in studying the language. He also cited Rebeck (2002) claiming the importance for Japanese speakers to recognize those loanwords as being Japanese-made English.

Though Michaloski's study and this study both aim to find out if NSEs can understand *wasei eigo* or not, this study focuses on NSEs teaching English in Japan. Thus, the context of this current study is more focused on the common *wasei eigo* encountered in the school setting.

Hatanaka and Pannell (2016) conducted a similar study involving NSJs and NSEs and sought to find out if their respondents understand the meanings of *wasei eigo* and what attitude do NSJs and NSEs have toward the Japanese-made English. Results of their study showed that many English speakers do not understand the use or the meaning of some *wasei eigo* words or expressions when used in most English-speaking contexts. This, however, could be attributed to the type of instrument used in their study. Unlike in Michaloski's study, Hatanaka and Pannell (2016) did not give context to the *wasei eigo* they used in their research instrument. Instead, the researchers let the respondents guess the meanings of the *wasei eigo* words without context of how these words are used in a sentence. As a result, all the NSJ respondents were able to identify the meanings of all the given *wasei eigo* words, while four of the six given *wasei eigo* words were not understood by at least one NSE.

In their conclusion, Hatanaka and Pannell (2016) stated that using the *wasei eigo* words when communicating with other English-speaking people outside Japan might result to an unsuccessful communication. Add that these *wasei eigo* words are invented in Japan to the findings of Hatanaka and Pannell's study, as also affirmed by Michaloski's study, that even the NSJs are not aware that *wasei eigo* words are not used outside of Japan. They felt the need for educators in Japan to explicitly guide their students to understanding the nature of *wasei eigo* and the other concept in the Japanese English called *gairaigo* or those words that originated in other countries outside Japan and China.

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## 2. Methodology

### 2.1. Research Design

This study used a descriptive survey in research in finding out if *wasei eigo* or Japanese-made English is understood by native English speakers who are teaching English as a foreign language in Japan (referred to in this study as NES EFL teachers). Descriptive Survey method enables researchers to gather a large amount of data from a heterogeneous audience or participants.

The survey questionnaire type is more convenient and more accessible by a larger number of participants. Although the participants of this study are not large in number, the nature of the study requires gathering data through statements

arranged in the form of questionnaires. Moreover, though more samples can be reached by this type, researchers can still control who is to be included in the sample.

## 2.2. Participants

This study used purposive sampling involving 20 native English speakers who are working as English as foreign language (NES EFL) teachers at elementary schools, junior high schools, senior high schools, and English conversation schools in Japan. They all come from different English-speaking countries, including the United States, Ireland, Canada, Jamaica, Trinidad and Tobago, Singapore, and the Philippines. Prior to coming to Japan to work as EFL teachers, 17 of the respondents have previous studies on the Japanese language, while 3 do not.

It is noted that Filipinos are considered NES under the Japan Exchange and Teaching (JET) Program; thus, they also qualify as respondents of this study. Since its inclusion in the program in 2014, the Philippines has been sending a dramatically increasing number of participants, with Filipinos now comprise the fifth largest participation in the program, following the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, and Australia. As of October 2022, there are 215 Filipino JET ALTs and 3 coordinators for international relations currently employed in various cities and prefectures all over Japan (JET Programme, n.d.).

## 2.3. Data Collection

To gather the needed data, the researcher conducted a simple survey to native English speakers in Japan who are teaching English as a foreign language at elementary schools, junior high schools, senior high schools, or English conversation schools. Because of its convenience, an online survey questionnaire through Google Forms that consisted of 10 Yes-No questions was given to the respondents. The questionnaire had two parts: the first part asked for the profiles of the respondents, which include name (optional), nationality, and previous Japanese language studies; the second part consisted of ten sentences with *wasei eigo*, which the respondents determined whether they understood or not. The answers were tabulated and a simple frequency count was used to analyze the results of this study.

## 2.4. Data Analysis

This study's data analysis procedures included a few simple steps. First, the responses were collected and tabulated. Because this study used a simple survey, the frequency of responses was determined and ranked accordingly. The researcher then identified the most understood and the least understood *wasei eigo* word or expressions.

Finally, based on the research questions, the researcher interpreted the data analysis results and drew conclusions and recommendations. The findings were discussed in relation to previous studies on *wasei eigo*.

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## 3. Results and discussion

The respondents were purposively chosen to answer the simple survey questionnaire to determine if they understand some *wasei eigo* words or expressions. The 20 participants from native English-speaking countries are teaching English as a foreign language in Japan. Eight of the NES EFL teacher respondents are from the Philippines, four from Jamaica, two each from Canada and the United States of America, and one each from Ireland, Singapore, the United Kingdom, and Trinidad and Tobago. An important fact to note about the respondents is that 17 of them have had previous formal Japanese language studies, while 3 said they did not have one.

Table 1 shows the number of respondents who can understand the *wasei eigo* word or expression given. Based on the results of the survey, 19 of the respondents can understand the *wasei eigo* word *salaryman*, which means "male office worker". *Salaryman* is the *wasei eigo* that the NES EFL teachers understand the most. *Mansion*, which means "condominium unit", is the second most understood *wasei eigo* word or expression with 16 NES EFL teachers saying they understand it.

It can also be gleaned from the table that 8 out of the 10 *wasei eigo* words used are understood by 10 or more of the respondents. This could be because the NES EFL teachers have heard of these words in their classrooms or workplaces.

In a related study, Michaloski (2021) found out that *smart* is the most understood *wasei eigo* by his native speakers of English respondents. The *wasei eigo smart*, along with *cooler* (not used in this study), is understood by all his respondents when used in context. Meanwhile, in the same study, *seal*, along with *consent* and *kitchen paper* (both are not used in this study), 80% of his respondents could understand this *wasei eigo* when used in context. In contrary,

*smart* is understood by only 11 out of the 20 respondents in this study, while *seal* is one of the least understood *wasei eigo*.

**Table 1** Wasei eigo words that the respondents understand

Wasei Eigo	Yes	Rank
1. mansion	16	2
2. salaryman	19	1
3. high tension	14	3.5
4. seal	9	9
5. baby car	13	5
6. pants	14	3.5
7. Y-shirt	4	10
8. viking	10	7.5
9. cunning	10	7.5
10. smart	11	6

**Table 2** Wasei eigo words that the respondents do not understand

Wasei Eigo	Yes	Rank
1. mansion	4	9
2. salaryman	1	10
3. high tension	6	7.5
4. seal	11	2
5. baby car	7	6
6. pants	6	7.5
7. Y-shirt	16	1
8. viking	10	3.5
9. cunning	10	3.5
10. smart	9	5

Table 2 shows which *wasei eigo* words or expressions the respondents do not understand. 16 out of the 20 NES EFL teachers do not understand *Y-shirt* or the Japanese-made English word for “dress shirt”. The perceived meaning of some of the respondents to this *wasei eigo* include a V-neck shirt, a racerback, and a tank top. Coming as the second least understood *wasei eigo* is *seal* or “sticker” with 11 respondents saying they do not understand it other than the standard English meaning. Two of the respondents think that a *seal* is something that students use to close or wrap things up, which is similar to the meaning of the word in standard English.

Looking at the table, it can be observed that 4 of the 10 *wasei eigo* words are not understood by 10 or more, that is 50% or more, of the NES EFL teachers. The words *viking* (meaning a buffet) and *cunning* (meaning cheating) are the two other words that are least understood by the respondents. Both are not understood by 10 out of 20 or 50% of the NES EFL teachers who participated in this study.

In Michaloski’s study, the least understood *wasei eigo* is *rinse* (meaning conditioner) but is not included in this study. However, *viking* is the second least understood *wasei eigo* by his NSE respondents, with only 20% understanding it. In this study, 10 out of 20 or 50% of the NES EFL teachers do not understand this Japanese-made English word.

#### 4. Conclusion

Based on the results of the survey, majority of the NES EFL teachers who participated in the survey could understand some of the *wasei eigo* words. From the data collected, it could be concluded that the native English speakers teaching English as a foreign language in Japan could engage in an English conversation with Japanese students and teachers even if the NSJ students and teachers will be using *wasei eigo* or Japanese-made English words or expressions.

This study, however, has some limitations. In choosing the respondents, some factors were not considered. One factor is the length of stay of the NES EFL teachers in Japan. As some respondents have been in the country for several years now, they may have already familiarized themselves with the meanings of the *wasei eigo* words. In the same manner, previous Japanese language studies by the respondents could have also affected the results. If the respondents have had studied Japanese before, they may have already encountered *wasei eigo* somewhere at some point in their lessons.

It is, therefore, recommended that these aforementioned factors be also considered in choosing the respondents for future studies as this. The possibility of including length of stay or service teaching in Japan and previous Japanese language studies in the criteria in choosing the respondents or participants of the study could also affect the results. Likewise, related researches could also be done using audio or video recording of actual classroom situations where *wasei eigo* is used. Though this might entail a longer period of the conduct of the study, it can be a great opportunity for future researchers to observe how *wasei eigo* is used and could affect EFL teaching-learning in a Japanese classroom.

Furthermore, due to the limitations of this study, it is also recommended for future studies to delve into the effects of *wasei eigo* in the EFL learning of Japanese students and in the EFL teaching of native English speakers in Japan. To do so, a more in-depth study and analysis of factors including age, nationality, period of stay in Japan, and previous Japanese studies and Japanese language ability of the respondents.

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#### Compliance with ethical standards

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##### *Disclosure of conflict of interest*

All authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest.

##### *Statement of ethical approval*

The present research work does not contain any studies performed on animal or human subjects by any of the authors.

##### *Statement of informed consent*

Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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