

Wasei-Eigo: Comprehension by Native and Non-Native Speakers of English and Awareness by Native Speakers of Japanese

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Abstract

This paper focuses on a portion of the Japanese lexicon that is wasei-eigo. These are words that were adopted from the English language but have different meanings from the original meanings. This paper examines comprehension by both native and non-native English speakers of certain wasei-eigo words. The first research question is whether native and non-native speakers of English comprehend the meanings of some wasei-eigo words (their meanings in Japanese). The second question concerns how aware Japanese speakers are of the origin of the selected wasei-eigo words. The findings suggest that several wasei-eigo words have the possibility of causing miscommunication between Japanese and English speakers.

Introduction

A loan word is a word or phrase whose meaning is borrowed from another language with little or no change (Denham & Lobeck, 2013). Loan words can be found in nearly every language, although native speakers are not always aware of (a) the fact that they are loan words and (b) which language they come from. When learning a foreign language, it is important to be aware of loan words from the target language. If a learner assumes that a loan word is from the target language, but it is in fact from a different language, the learner may have some miscommunication when speaking to people in the target language. It is also possible that the word has a different meaning in the target language than it does in the learner's native language, which could also lead to miscommunication. In the case of the Japanese lexicon, wasei-eigo are words that originate in another language, but their meanings have shifted a great deal from the target language meanings. As of 2000, the Sanseido Katakana dictionary contained around 52,500 foreign word entries, nearly ten percent of the Japanese language currently in use (MacGregor, 2003). With this high percentage of loan words, the potential for miscommunication by Japanese speakers in foreign languages, specifically English, needs to be considered. This paper will focus on different aspects of wasei-eigo in the Japanese language. The first question it aims to address is whether native speakers of English (NSE) and non-native speakers of English (NNSE) comprehend the meanings of select wasei-eigo words. The second question is whether native speakers of Japanese (NSJ) know if the word's meaning is derived from English or a different language. I discuss the implications of the findings and outline how issues related to wasei-eigo could be addressed in an EFL classroom.



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Loan Words in the Japanese Language

Loan words started to be incorporated into the Japanese lexicon sometime in the middle of the sixth century when Chinese ideographs first came to Japan (Tanaka & Tanaka, 1995). These early loan words are no longer commonly referred to as loan words and are known as Sino-Japanese (Irwin, 2011). *Gairaigo* (外来語), when literally translated character by character, means ‘foreign come word,’ and this term can encompass all foreign words adopted into the Japanese language. It is typically used to define foreign words written in the Katakana alphabet. However, older loan words (Sino-Japanese) are written in Kanji (Chinese characters), which are primarily reserved for words of Chinese origin. Japan essentially self-isolated from the world from the middle of the 16th century until the middle of the 19th century (Irwin, 2011). Only Portuguese and Spanish-speaking missionaries and some Dutch traders were allowed during this time; therefore, most of the loan words came from those two languages. Once the country ended its practice of self-isolation in the middle of the 19th century, other languages started to influence the Japanese language as well. Starting in the middle of the 19th century, Russian, German, French, and especially English began to impact the language (Irwin, 2011). Over the last 160 years or so, English has become the dominant language for loan words. Recent research shows that 85% of *gairaigo* used today derives from English (Irwin, 2011). Inside the umbrella term of *gairaigo* is the term *wasei-eigo*, which translates to ‘Japanese-made English.’ These are foreign words, although not always English, that have been “made in Japan.” These are a language class composed of vocabulary that utilizes the Katakana syllabary, thus appearing to look like a foreign loan word. However, these words possess slightly or entirely different meanings from that of the language of origin (Norman, 2012). Therefore, to the inexperienced eye, these words, written in the alphabet for foreign words, are often mistaken as English loan words. However, because their meanings have shifted, when a native speaker of English hears such words, they are often incomprehensible. An example of this is [リンス], pronounced as [rinse] in English. While it is a derivative of the English word *rinse*, the meaning in Japanese (hair conditioner) is different from its English counterpart (to wash lightly by pouring water over).

Although knowledge of English-based loan words in Japanese facilitates aspects of learning English, errors of various sorts originate from false resemblance and can be disruptive to communication (Norman, 2012). The use of *wasei-eigo* meanings by the Japanese when in conversation with NSE can often hinder communication and cause misunderstandings (Norman, 2012). The problem is worsened by the fact that not all loan words from English are *wasei-eigo*, and thus some of the loan words will not hinder communication if inserted into conversation with other speakers of English. From the learner’s perspective, it is difficult to tell when a loan word can and cannot be used with its meaning in Japanese. Therefore, it is essential to research *wasei-eigo* words and consider why they should be addressed in the ESL classroom.

Research Questions

The first research question explores whether NSE and NNSE comprehend the meanings of select *wasei-eigo* words in isolated word lists and sentences with the words in context. The second question concerns how aware NSJ are of the origins of certain *wasei-eigo* words.

Methods

Materials

To collect data, two different electronic surveys were used. The first one was a three-part electronic survey that was given to NSE and NNSE. The first section of this survey was to determine if they were a native speaker of English and if they had any knowledge of Japanese. The second section was a word list with twelve wasei-eigo words in Katakana and the English equivalent pronunciation (see Appendix A). The wasei-eigo words were chosen for their frequency of use in Japanese and for the English translation. There were no academic words chosen, and with only *buffet* (6k), *scarf* (5k), and *outlet* (4k) being outside of the 1k and 2k frequency list in English. The English equivalent (EE) that respondents were given as an option is not an actual translation of the Japanese word. Instead, it is a phonological translation using the standard Latin alphabet without the extra vowels that Japanese requires (See Appendix A). NSE and NNSE respondents were asked to choose if they thought that the wasei-eigo word had the same meaning as the EE or if it had a different meaning. Respondents were given a space to write what they thought the word meant if they believed it differed from the EE meaning. Therefore, the respondents had to decipher what they thought the meaning of the words were without any context. The final section had the wasei-eigo word, again in Katakana and EE, in a sentence that contains only general context but does not give away the meaning of the wasei-eigo word (see Appendix B). The sentences were between 7-15 words. They were constructed to encourage comprehension of the meaning of the wasei-eigo word without explicitly giving away the meaning of the wasei-eigo word. All sentences would be considered natural for a NSE (other native speakers of English confirmed this). Following the sentence, respondents were given four potential answers to choose from. This was done to determine comprehension by NSE and NNSE of the wasei-eigo word in context. The motivation for this test is to gauge whether a NSJ would be understood correctly in English to a NSE or NNSE if they mix in a wasei-eigo word that they believe to be English.

The second survey was a two-part electronic survey that was given to NSJ. In order to find out the possibility of an NSJ mixing in a wasei-eigo word, thinking that it has the same meaning in English, NSJ were asked to respond to a survey with their views on the same twelve wasei-eigo words that the NSE and NNSE responded to in their survey. Instead of asking for the English definition, this survey asked NSJ if the meaning of the wasei-eigo word in Japanese is derived from English or a different language. If an NSJ believes that the meaning is derived from English, the belief is that they are more likely to use it when in conversation with a NSE/NNSE. If they believe that the meaning of the word is derived from another language, it is proposed that they are not as likely to insert the wasei-eigo word into an English sentence when speaking to a native/non-native speaker of English.

Participants

Volunteers in this study were recruited using social media. Participants were thus self-selected volunteers. Those that responded and offered to take the survey were given an anonymous link to reach the survey. Out of the 40 volunteers that asked for the link to the electronic survey for speakers of English, 32 responses were received, which is an 80% response rate. Seven of the 32 respondents marked that they spoke at least a basic level of Japanese, although several of those seven speakers were advanced or native speakers. Since this factor would potentially alter the comprehension of the wasei-eigo words in the survey, the data from these seven speakers were

not included in the final results. As the survey was anonymous and age, race, and sex were not required from the respondents, no demographic data was available to pull conclusions from. If there had been a 100% response rate, it would have been possible to determine demographic data, but it is unknown which of the eight people that received the link did not respond to the survey. From the 25 responses (32 minus the seven with knowledge of Japanese), two different groups were created from the results of the first section of the survey. Group one consisted of NSE with no knowledge of Japanese (20 respondents). Group two consisted of NNSE with no knowledge of Japanese (5 respondents). In a different anonymous electronic survey that was sent out to 35 NSJ, only ten responses were collected. This is only a 28.5% response rate, a dramatic decrease from the NSE/NNSE survey responses.

Data Collection and Analytical Procedure

The electronic surveys that were sent out to participants were created using Google Forms. Participants were given ten days to respond to the survey, after which the survey was set to no longer accept responses. After the surveys were closed, the data was downloaded as a spreadsheet and loaded into Microsoft Excel for analysis. The data from the survey sent to NSE and NNSE was separated into three different groups, NSE with no knowledge of Japanese, NSE with knowledge of Japanese, and NNSE with no knowledge of Japanese. For each of these groups, the answers given were color-coded based on their response. For the word list section (part 2 of the survey), the responses were evaluated as correct, EE, or other. For the words in the context section (part 3 of the survey), the responses were evaluated as correct or incorrect. The responses from the NSJ were color-coded into one of two categories, English-derived, or other-language-derived. All evaluation of survey responses was performed by the researcher.

Findings

English Native and Non-Native Speakers' Comprehension

Respondents were asked to choose if they thought that the Japanese word had the same meaning as the EE pronunciation, or if it had a different meaning. This section reports results from the native speakers of English and then the non-native speakers of English.

The results in this Figure 1 are broken down into three sections, Correct, EE (English Equivalent), and Other, with the last two both being incorrect. A correct answer means the respondent wrote the correct English translation in the provided text box. This shows that when the wasei-eigo word is used without context, the NSE will mis-comprehend its intended meaning by the Japanese speaker most of the time. Eight out of the twelve words had an accuracy rate of 0% (スマート (*smart*), コンセント (*concent*), リンス (*rinse*), シール (*seal*), バイキング (*viking*), トランプ (*trump*), キャッチボール (*catch ball*), サイダー (*cider*)) and the only word that NSE correctly understood with an accuracy rate greater than 15% of the time was キッチン・ペーパー (*kitchen paper*), which translates as “paper towel” in English. Some correct understanding may be possible with three words, クーラー (*cooler*), パンツ (*pants*), and マフラー (*muffler*). Most of the time, the NSE chose the direct EE as the meaning of the wasei-eigo word.

Although NSE had minimal comprehension of the wasei-eigo word list, there is a substantial change when the words are in context. Figure 2 shows the tremendous improvement in comprehension when the wasei-eigo words were put into context. Eight of the words (パンツ

(*pants*), スマート (*smart*), クーラー (*cooler*), コンセント (*concent*), シール (*seal*), トランプ (*trump*), キッチンペーパー (*kitchen paper*), and キャッチボール (*catch ball*) were understood over 60% of the time, while only one (リンス (*rinse*)) remained at an accuracy rate of 0%.

Figure 3 shows that while there is again a minimal comprehension across the board, with eight words at an accuracy rate of 0% (スマート (*smart*), コーラー (*cooler*), コンセント (*concent*), シール (*seal*), バイキング (*viking*), トランプ (*trump*), キャッチボール (*catch ball*), サイダー (*cider*)), there are some differences in the words that were understood correctly. NNSE were able to show some comprehension with リンス (*rinse*) while NSE showed none. On the other hand, NSE were able to show some comprehension with クーラー (*cooler*) while NNSE showed none.

Non-native speakers of English also showed a vast improvement when the words were put into context, but they showed a lower accuracy rate overall (53%) than the NSE (67%), seen in Figure 4. This could be due to the variations in the NNSE first language, which could lead to them not fully understanding the context.

Figure 1
Responses from NSE to the Second Section of the Survey

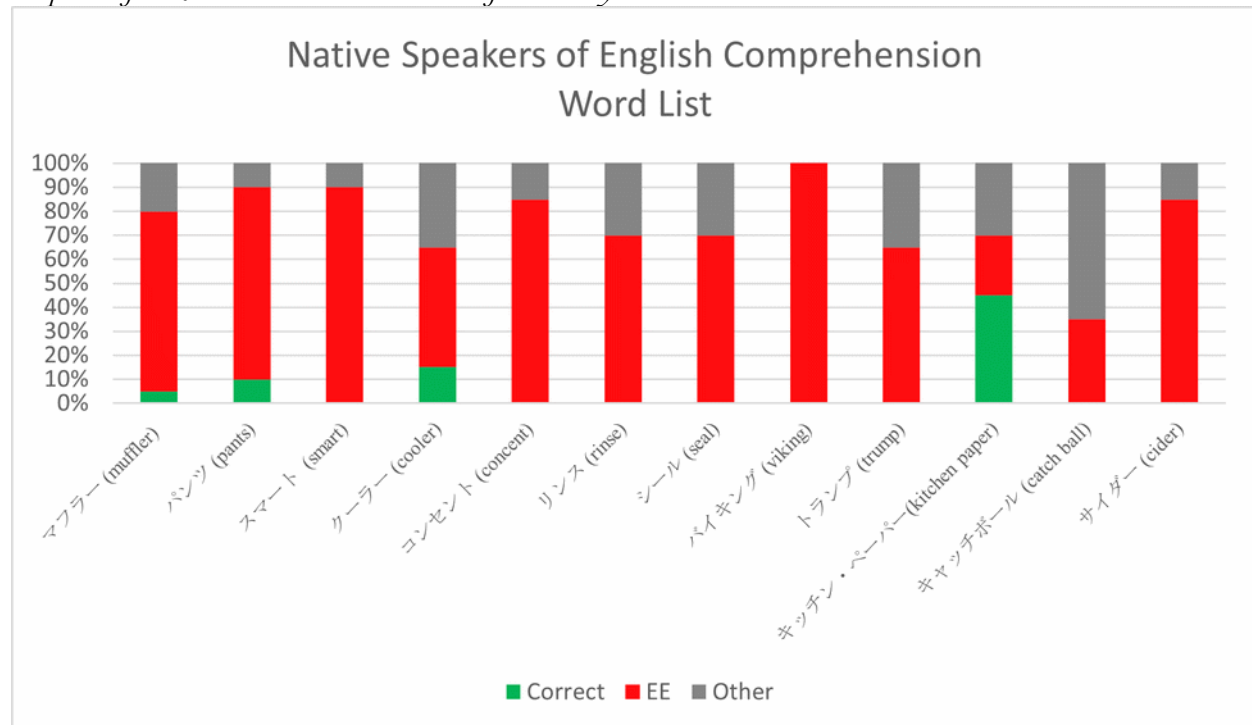


Figure 2
Comprehension by NSE of Wasei-Eigo Words in Context

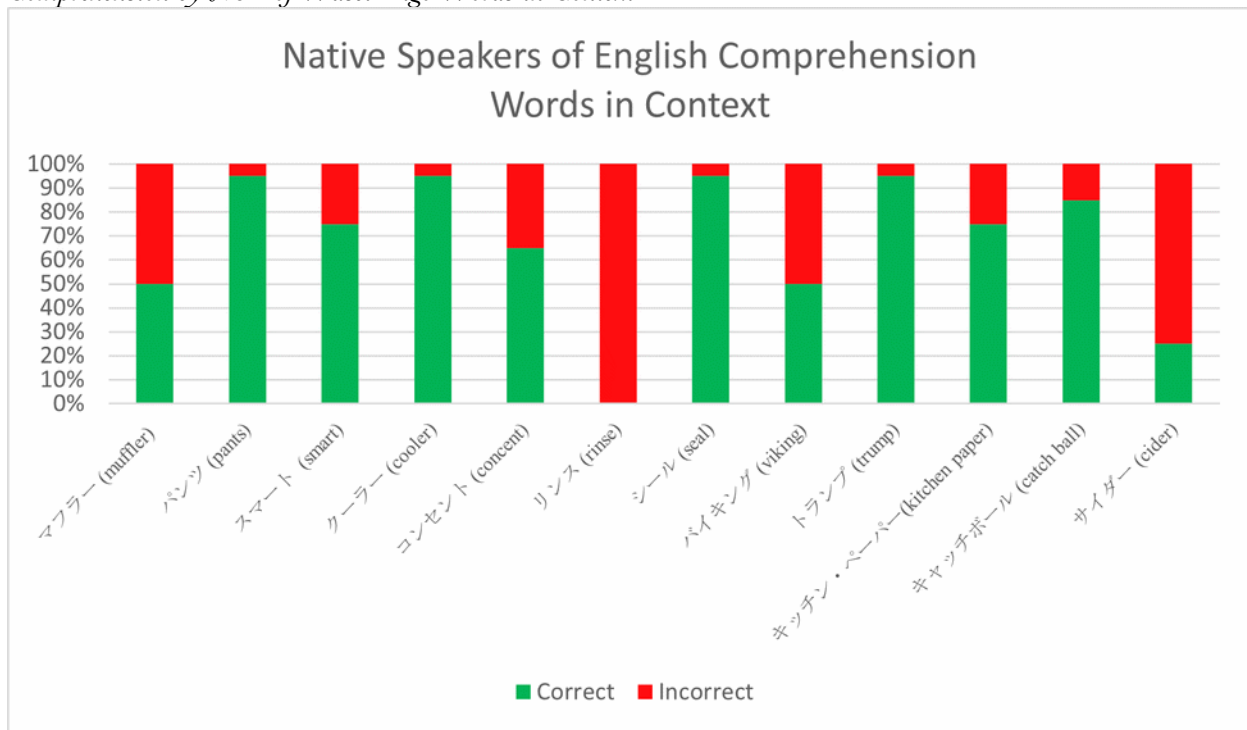


Figure 3
Responses from NSE to the Second Section of the Survey

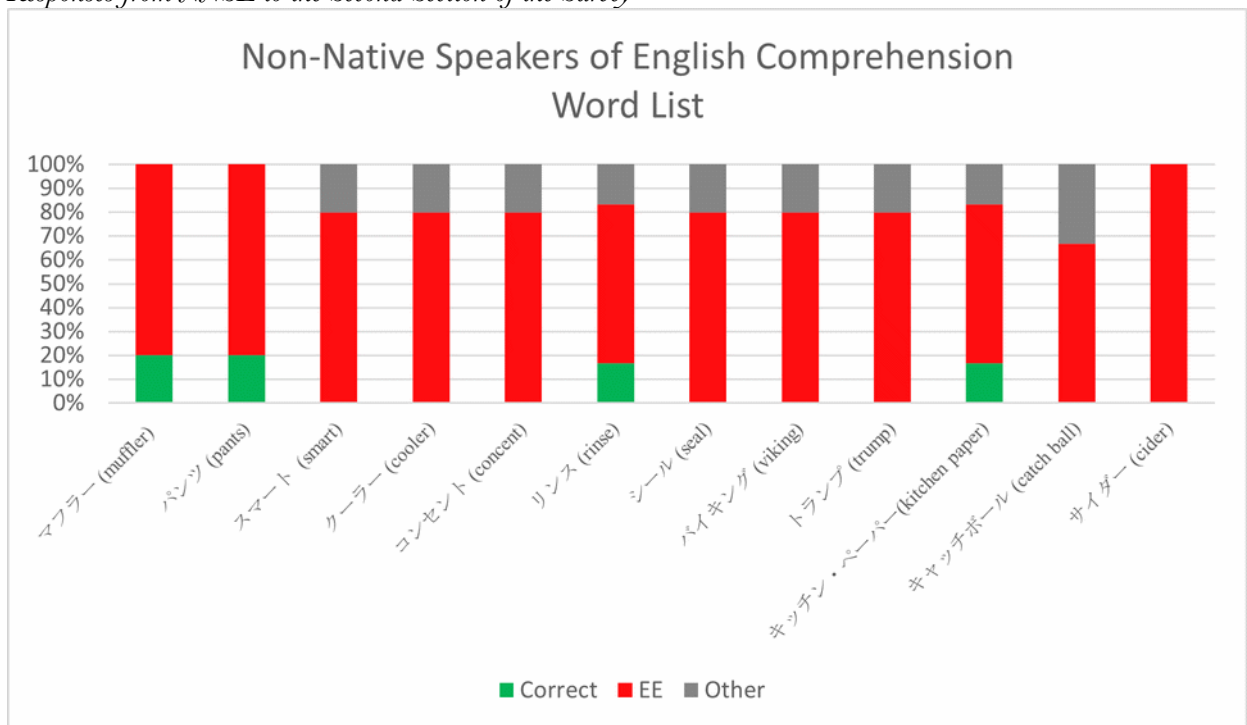
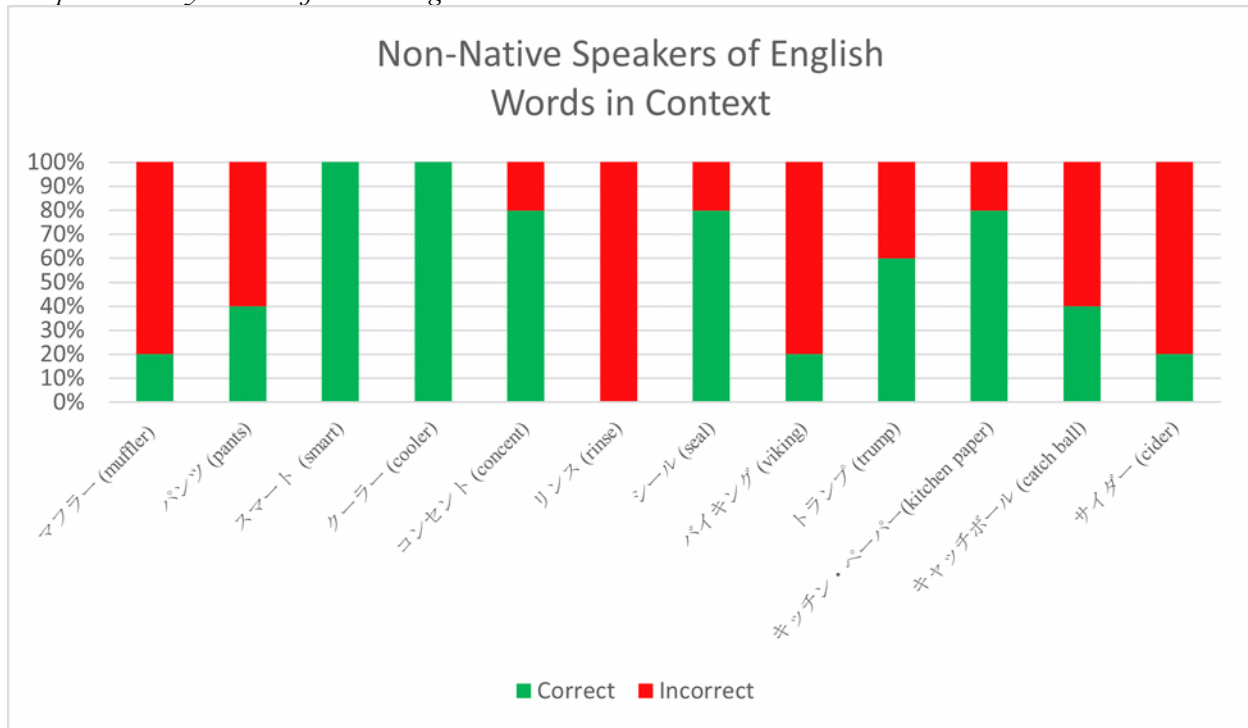


Figure 4
Comprehension by NNSE of Wasei-Eigo Words in Context



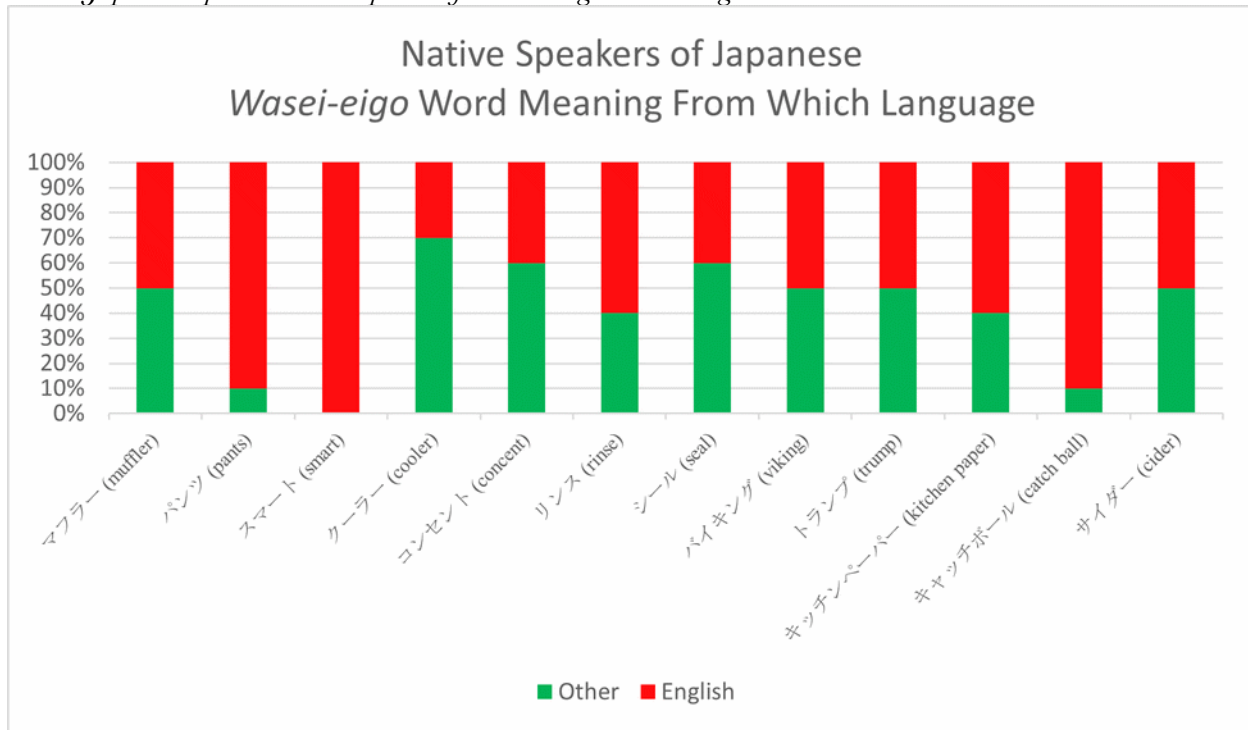
One result that is immediately noticeable is that both NSE and NNSE misunderstood リンス (*rinse*) 100% of the time in context. Both also had a hard time understanding サイダー (*cider*). A puzzling result is that although there was some level of comprehension of the word リンス (*rinse*) by NNSE when the word was out of context in the word list, the comprehension rate goes down to 0% when the word is put into context.

Native Japanese Speaker's Awareness

Native Japanese speakers were asked whether they thought the Japanese meaning of the *gairaigo* word was derived from the English meaning or that of a different foreign language (marked 'other' in the chart). I did not use the terms *wasei-eigo* or *gairaigo* in the survey to reduce any influence on their responses. I asked them to report if they thought the meaning of the Japanese word was derived from English to assess the likelihood of a NSJ inserting one of these words into an English sentence.

As seen in Figure 5, *muffler*, *pants*, *smart*, *rinse*, *viking*, *trump*, *kitchen paper*, *catch ball*, and *cider* are the Japanese words whose meanings were most often thought to be derived from English, with the most likely being *pants* (90%), *smart* (100%), and *catch ball* (90%). There is a high possibility for a NSJ to use a word believed to be of English origin with the *wasei-eigo* meaning in English.

Figure 5
Native Japanese Speakers' Assumptions of Wasei-Eigo Word Origins



The finding that NSJ understanding of where the meaning of wasei-eigo terms comes from is similar to what has been found in other research. On average, the results show that 40% of the time, NSJ believed that the meaning was derived from a language other than English (this is the correct answer as the meaning of the wasei-eigo words are not derived from the English meaning). In a study conducted in 2012, 285 Japanese university students correctly identified wasei-eigo words from a list with an average of 37% accuracy (Norman, 2012). In a different study conducted in 2017, 163 Japanese university students could correctly identify wasei-eigo terms from a list 41% of the time (Goddard, 2017).

Discussion and Conclusion

From the data collected, a few conclusions can be drawn. The findings suggest that there is a high possibility of misunderstanding between NNSE and NSJ. This could be very important because the likelihood of an NSJ interacting with an NNSE of English is potentially greater than an NSJ interacting with an NSE. It can also be said that out of the twelve wasei-eigo words used in this study, *muffler*, *rinse*, *viking*, and *cider* are the most likely to be misunderstood by both NSE and NNSE,¹ all of which show a high potential to be used in an English sentence by an NSJ.

¹ In the case of *muffler*, the English word can mean either (a) “scarf” or (b) “a device to deaden noise,” especially on an automobile ([Merriam-Webster Dictionary](#)), with the second meaning being more commonly used today. The fact that the wasei-eigo word マフラー [maɸɾa:] has only meaning (a) may have led to its low comprehension rates by the NSE and NNSE (at or below 20% when in isolation and at or below 50% when in context).

Even Japanese who are proficient in English may not realize that the pseudo loan words (wasei-eigo) they commonly use are not recognized by native English speakers (Rebuck, 2002). This observation by Rebuck shows that regardless of the level of English proficiency, wasei-eigo needs to be addressed in the classroom. The fact that native speakers rate lexical errors as more disruptive and more serious than grammatical errors is particularly troubling for the Japanese, who tend to worry more about their grammar than production (Johansson, 1978, as cited in Norman, 2012). This is an important fact that teachers need to consider when teaching Japanese students. A focus should be put on incorporating lessons on wasei-eigo to decrease the chances of miscommunication. Teachers should also bring attention to the number of English loan words in the Japanese language. Students may not realize that a lot of the words that they use on a daily basis are derived from English. If they know that a lot of them have the same meaning, just different pronunciations, they will realize how much English they already know. This can act as a significant source of encouragement for students of English, showing them that they have a vast, mostly untapped, resource from which to draw (Olah, 2007). This should be followed with or taught alongside lessons about wasei-eigo words so that students know the difference between intact loan words and wasei-eigo words. One way to address this could be to select some common wasei-eigo words from advertisements or other texts and examine the extent to which their meanings have shifted from the original English words. Further, it is important for Japanese speakers to recognize them as being Japanese creations, which could raise language awareness in the classroom (Rebuck, 2002).

This study has some limitations. One major factor that was not considered when starting to collect data was demographics. As the survey was anonymous, there cannot be any conclusions based on demographics, which may be an important factor to consider in future research. It is possible that age, race, gender, or another demographic feature may give a greater insight into wasei-eigo comprehension. Another factor to consider is that the context that the wasei-eigo words were put into was meant to facilitate comprehension by English speakers. The context in which the wasei-eigo word is put into conversation may be different in real life. Therefore, additional research could be done to determine comprehension of wasei-eigo terms by NSE/NNSE using audio recordings or potentially real-life conversations. In addition, almost all the NSJ in this study responded by saying that they do not speak English. All of the respondents would have taken English courses in school, but none were confident enough to say they could speak it. This could mean that they do not have enough knowledge of English to know that the meanings are different, but an NSJ with a higher level of confidence in the English language might. There is also the possibility that NSJ could believe that the meaning of a wasei-eigo word is derived from English but know the correct usage of the English translation. The number of respondents (25 for NSE/NNSE and 10 NSJ) is also relatively low, and therefore further research is needed to confirm the findings.

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About the author

Joseph Michaloski is an MA TESOL candidate at Hawaii Pacific University. He has worked as an English teacher in Japan and has voluntarily taught English lessons in Guatemala and Myanmar. His research interests are the Japanese language, sociolinguistics, and phonology.

Appendix A

Table 1
Word Collection

Katakana Reading and IPA transcriptions	English Equivalent	English Translation
マフラー [maɸra:]	muffler	scarf
スマート [suma:to]	smart	thin/slim
パンツ [pantɕw]	pants	underpants
クーラー [ku:ra:]	cooler	air-conditioner
コンセント [koũsento]	*concent	outlet
リンス [riũɕw]	rinse	conditioner
シール [ʃi:rw]	seal	sticker
バイキング [baikingw]	viking	buffet
トランプ [torampw]	trump	playing cards
キッチン・ペーパー [kitɕ:impe:pa:]	kitchen paper	paper towel
キャッチボール [k'atɕ:ibo:rw]	catch ball	game of catch
サイダー [saida:]	cider	soda/pop

*The spelling of *concent* was used to resemble the closest direct English translation: *concentric outlet*.

Appendix B
Sentences for Wasei-Eigo Reading

Q = Question Sentence

A = Multiple choice options given (the correct answer is marked with an asterisk)

- 1 Q: It's cold outside, do you have a [muffler マフラー] to wear?
 A: Muffler, Jacket, Scarf*, Beanie
- 2 Q: You look [smart スマート], have you lost weight?
 A: Smart, Slim*, Different, Younger
- 3 Q: It's hot in here, should I turn on the [cooler クーラー]?
 A: Cooler, Fan, Refrigerator, Air Conditioner*
- 4 Q: Is there a [concent コンセント] for my phone charger?
 A: Consent, USB, Outlet*, Cable
- 5 Q: I need to take a shower but I forgot my [rinse リンス], may I borrow yours?
 A: Rinse, Conditioner*, Shampoo, Body Wash
- 6 Q: Did you see the bumper [seal シール] on that car?
 A: Seal, Animal, Sticker*, Advertisement
- 7 Q: I'm very hungry, can we go to a [viking バイキング]?
 A: Viking, Buffet*, Restaurant, Diner
- 8 Q: I spilled my drink, do you have any [kitchen paper キッチン・ペーパー]?
 A: Kitchen Paper, Napkins, Tea Towel, Paper Towel*
- 9 Q: It looks nice outside, would you like to play [catch ball キャッチボール]?
 A: Catch Ball, Catch*, Frisbee, Basketball
- 10 Q: What is your favorite type of [cider サイダー]?
 A: Cider (sweet), Pop/soda*, Cider (alcoholic), Mixed Drink
- 11 Q: What's your favorite [trump トランプ] game to play?
 A: Trump, Cell Phone, Card*, Casino
- 12 Q: Fruit of the loom makes the best [pants パンツ].
 A: Pants, Shorts, Leggings, Underwear*