

Gairaigo: Japanese EFL Learners' Hidden Vocabulary

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Reference Data

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Japanese is a language that accepts a great number of foreign words (known as *gairaigo*) into its lexicon, and in modern times these words come predominantly from English. However, despite containing a base of thousands of common English words, the study and use of this latent vocabulary to benefit EFL learners has not been fully realized. This paper describes an exploratory study of a short course given to a university EFL class in Japan, which was intended to explore ways to activate learners' English-*gairaigo* vocabulary. Students received lessons in recognition of English-based *gairaigo*, differences between English and *gairaigo*, and were encouraged to explore their own knowledge and use of *gairaigo*. Pre and post testing suggested a positive correlation between the course and improvements in some English-*gairaigo* abilities, and survey results indicated students' enthusiastic response to acquiring a skill they felt was useful in their English studies.

日本語は外来語を大量に受け入れる言語であり、なかでも現代では主に英語由来の語が多い。しかし、何千もの一般的な英語の単語が基であるにもかかわらず、EFL学生に役立つこの潜在的な語彙に関する積極的な研究と使用は十分に実施されていない。本論は日本の大学のEFLクラスを対象に、学生が英語由来の語彙を活性化する方法を探ることを目的とした短期講座について論じた。学生は、英語由来の外来語を認識し、英語と外来語の違いを見分ける授業を受け、自分自身で外来語の知識と使用方法を探求することが促された。事前と事後のテストでは、本講座と英語・外来語能力の向上との間に正の相関関係があることが示唆され、また調査結果において、英語学習に役立つスキルの習得に対する学生の熱心な反応が示された。

Japanese, like English, has long been a language accustomed to borrowing. Its first written form was imported from China in the form of *kanji*, the Chinese logographic writing system. From *kanji*, the *kana* syllabaries of *hiragana* and *katakana* were derived in order to

both aid in literacy and graft a foreign writing system onto the Japanese language. Over time, these two syllabaries became distinct, with *hiragana* used mostly with Japanese words for grammatical purposes, and *katakana* used primarily to represent words of foreign origin which came into the language after the importation of Chinese *kanji*.

English followed a somewhat similar course, with an imported writing system and a vocabulary significantly augmented by contact with foreign cultures. These two languages would later meet and exchange in a major way, particularly in the latter half of the 20th century.

Gairaigo

In Japanese, this encounter is codified into the language structure of *gairaigo* (外来語), the name for *katakana* transliterations of foreign words. Though in its early stages *gairaigo* originated from a number of languages, in the post-war era new *gairaigo* words have come primarily from English. A 1964 survey by the Japanese Language Research Institute found that about 10% of words used in everyday Japanese conversation are *gairaigo*, with 90% of these coming from English (cited in Loveday, 1986).

In terms of overall proportion of vocabulary, a survey of dictionary word distributions found that in 1891, *gairaigo* accounted for 551 terms, or 1.4% of the overall content, and by 1989 this number had increased to 13,300 terms, or 9.95% of the overall content (Tomoda, 1999, p. 234). These are incredible figures, particularly when taking into account the vast linguistic divide between Japanese and European languages such as English, and the short time frame in which these terms were adopted. According to Japanese loanwords researcher Frank Daulton (2008), "The principal engine of word generation in contemporary Japanese is borrowing from English...today's Japanese are living in the generation of *gairaigo*, witnessing a revolution of words" (p. 40). Indeed, any casual perusal of a Japanese publication or TV show will inevitably turn up dozens of *gairaigo* terms, with new words coming into the language almost daily.

Included among the English-*gairaigo* terms are many of the most frequently used English words. Daulton (2008, p. 83) identified 1,356 word families corresponding to *gairaigo* loanwords in Nation's (2004) British National Corpus 3000 list, a nearly 50% coverage, with the highest level of correspondence (54.8%) occurring at the first 1000 level, which represents the most frequently used words. Running Daulton's terms through a cross-check of the New General Service List (Browne, 2013), created by Browne, Culligan, and Phillips, uncovered a 76% cumulative coverage of tokens found within the list. There is evidently a high correspondence between words that are deemed crucial for English communication and English-based *gairaigo*.

Cognates and Language Learning

And so, with such a vast store of ready-to-use, basic vocabulary at hand, it seems only logical that teachers of English in Japan would draw upon this resource in their classes. Yet herein lies one of the great mysteries of Japanese EFL education: the subject of *gairaigo* and its connection with English is rarely, if ever, mentioned in most Japanese EFL contexts. According to Daulton, most Japanese teachers of English avoid explicitly teaching about or discussing the topic of *gairaigo* (2011, p. 8). There are a number of reasons for this. From a societal point of view, as Tomoda (2005, para. 8) explains, the "...increase in katakana words has received widespread comment and there have been calls for limits to be placed on the use of these words." Indeed, an editorial from *The Japan Times* decries that "the torrential influx of foreign words into the Japanese language...has happened at such a rate that many Japanese are now unable to fully understand each other" (Otake, 2007, para. 2). In research circles as well, *gairaigo* is often disparaged; according to Hardgave (2005), a number of researchers, "view *gairaigo* as a hindrance in their TEFL efforts" (p. 153). All of this of course has an effect on classrooms, in which, as mentioned, the subject of *gairaigo* is rarely dealt with, and on rare occasions when it is mentioned, it is often only to warn students of its potential problems (see Daulton, 2011).

Despite this, research into cognates and second language acquisition has consistently shown them to be of tremendous benefit to learners of a variety of second languages (Hancin-Bhatt & Nagy, 1994; Ringbom, 2007; White & Horst, 2012), including Japanese learners of English (Allen, 2018; Uchida, 2001). Nation, in his psycholinguistic explanation of aspects of word knowledge, states that "Words which have a similar form to first language words will have a lighter learning burden than words containing unfamiliar sounds and unfamiliar combinations of sounds." (2013, p. 70). A word like party therefore, with its phonologically similar *gairaigo* equivalent *paatii*, should be much easier for students to grasp than words like thigh or shrub which have no *gairaigo*

counterpart. Thus, contrary to the current state of affairs, teachers having foreknowledge of English-*gairaigo* terms and including them in class could present an advantage to EFL students in Japan, as Stubbe, Hoke, and O'Sullivan (2013) have noted.

The following exploratory research project was designed to explore the explicit instruction of English-*gairaigo*, and its potential effect on students' vocabulary abilities and their motivation for further English-*gairaigo* study.

Research Questions

The research questions for this project were as follows:

- RQ1. What effect does studying *gairaigo* have upon students' vocabulary comprehension, particularly in relation to English-based *gairaigo* words not taught in the classroom?
- RQ2. Are students interested in the subject of *gairaigo*, and do they feel motivated to study it?

Method

For this project, a brief course was developed to promote students' awareness of the *gairaigo* and English connection, and their facility in using this connection to help expand their vocabulary base and abilities; pre and post testing was conducted to determine what, if any, effect the course had on students' vocabulary abilities pertaining to English-*gairaigo* words, including recognition of these words and knowledge of their formal and structural similarities and differences with English; and a survey was conducted in class to determine student interest in the subject.

Participants

The study was conducted with a first-year English class at a Japanese university. The class consisted of 16 students majoring in Economics, all of lower intermediate English ability, with a CEF level ranging from A2 to B1. The class met four times a week, for 45 minutes. Thirteen of the students took part in the survey after the course. All the participants gave informed, written consent, and the project was cleared with the university's institutional review board. In addition, all participants were informed that they would remain anonymous throughout the research process, and that their responses would not influence their course grade.

The Gairaigo Course

The class went through a week-long course of four 45-minute lessons on the subject of *gairaigo*. The lessons were designed to raise students' awareness of English-based *gairaigo*, to familiarize them with common errors associated with moving between *gairaigo* and English, and to encourage interest in the subject. Using Daulton's highly informative book *Japan's Built-in Lexicon of English-based Loanwords* (2008) as a framework, main areas of instruction were selected. These included teaching students the common errors mentioned above, as well as strategies for using *gairaigo* headwords to expand English vocabulary (for example by using the English-*gairaigo* headword *ansaa* to create the forms answering and answered).

Day 1

On the first day, in addition to introducing the topic of *gairaigo*, students were taught about *shortening*, the Japanese tendency to abbreviate many *gairaigo* words to their shortest comprehensible form (e.g. *paso-kon* in place of personal computer). According to Daulton (2008), "...shortening simplifies the pronunciation of loanwords and facilitates their integration into Japanese" (p. 18). Yet this same ease of use in Japanese can lead to confusion or even incomprehension if employed in English, hence the need to address the issue. Following instruction, students were given a worksheet to do in class (see Appendix A), in which they were asked to circle shortened *gairaigo* (referred to as mini-*gairaigo* on the worksheet), after which they were enjoined by the teacher to write in the full English equivalent. Finally, students engaged in conversation practice which involved using shortened *gairaigo* in a comprehensible English form and were given homework on the day's topic.

Day 2

On day two, students were taught about the semantic change and shift that frequently occurs when words are taken from English and transformed into *gairaigo*. As Daulton (2008) writes, "English words inevitably acquire...meanings culture-specific to Japan" (p. 20). Hence *aisu* (ice) refers to ice cream, *meeru* (mail) refers to email, and the peculiar *beebii-kaa* (baby car) means stroller. Students were also taught about the related topic of grammatical transformation between English and *gairaigo*; for example, the necessity, when communicating in English, of omitting the final 's' in 'shoes' when referring to a singular subject, as opposed to the *gairaigo* word *shuuzu* (shoes) which, in keeping with Japanese grammar, does not change according to whether a subject is singular or plural.

In order to introduce and explain the topic to students, a slideshow was created, including pictures of common *gairaigo* false cognates alongside their English equivalents (see Appendix B). After instruction, students were once again asked to do worksheets, participated in conversation practice using *gairaigo* words with semantic change and grammatical transformation in English, and were given a homework assignment dealing with the day's topics.

Day 3

During day three of the course, students were introduced to the idea of using *gairaigo* headwords, and the prefixes and suffixes associated with them, to expand their English vocabulary. Starting with homework examples of *gairaigo* words brought in by students, some of the most common English prefixes and suffixes were taught. As an example, the word *shokku* (shock) brought in by a student was used as a headword to create the words shocking and shocked. After, students were given a worksheet (See Appendix C) in which they needed to transform a *gairaigo* word into English, and then add appropriate suffixes and prefixes to form new words. The *gairaigo* words used on the worksheet were all taken from the first 1000 of the list of common loanwords corresponding to the BNC (Nation, 2004), found in the appendix to Daulton's book (2008, pp. 133-156). Students also took part in several class games related to the day's topic. As homework, students were asked to write answers to the following questions: "Do you often use *gairaigo* when you speak Japanese? Why or why not? What is your favorite *gairaigo* word?" This was in keeping with one of the stated objectives of the course, to raise students' awareness of English based *gairaigo*. Although given the earlier mentioned frequency of *gairaigo* within Japanese communication, it is unlikely that students would reply they rarely or never use *gairaigo* (though cases of this have been noted; see Daulton, 2011), the question was nevertheless intended to make students consciously reflect upon this usage.

Day 4

The final day of the course began with students sharing their homework writing in groups (sample response: "Yes I do, because it is natural for me and easy to use. I like *donmai*"). Students then took part in a series of games intended to help them review what they had learned about *gairaigo* during the week. Finally, students were thanked for their participation in the course.

As a note, throughout the course, efforts were made to simplify linguistic terminology for students in a way that would make it both comprehensible and practical. As an

example, shortened and back-clipped words were referred to as “mini-*gairaigo*,” while headwords and the prefixes and suffixes associated with them were known collectively as the “word family.”

Testing

Pre and post tests, each with differing test items, were given to students in the class. The pre test was given in the lesson preceding the *gairaigo* course, and the post test was given in the lesson immediately after the completion of the course. The test was divided into three different sections, with each section designed to test a different English-*gairaigo* related skill. Specifically, the test was designed to ascertain if students could apply the general principles they learned about English-*gairaigo* words during the course onto unfamiliar terms not covered during the course.

Section one of the test contained questions to test students' ability to recognize shortened and back-clipped *gairaigo*; an example of this encountered during the class was the *gairaigo* term *basuke* (short for basketball), and an example from the test was the word grotesque (shortened to *guro* in *gairaigo*), a word not taught during the course. Section two contained questions intended to test students' ability to form new word forms based on *gairaigo* headwords; in class this included the headword-derived term answering, from the *gairaigo* base word *ansaa*, and on the test the word renter, from the *gairaigo* base *rento*. Finally, section three included questions intended to test students' ability to recognize semantic change and false cognates; an in-class example of this was the word cunning (*kanningu*) which has the meaning of cheating in *gairaigo*, and from the test the phrase one piece (*wanpiisu*) which is used in *gairaigo* to refer to a dress. Each section of the test also contained a number of distractor questions, unrelated to the topic of *gairaigo*, in order to avoid students guessing the subject of the test (though admittedly this may have been less effective on the test taken after the course). This was deemed necessary in order to get a more accurate representation of how well students recognized and used English-based *gairaigo* under normal conditions. Likewise, the title of the test was kept general, and students were not informed of the specific skills they were being tested on.

The first two sections of the test were graded using a simple correct/incorrect criteria, with correct answers receiving a score of one and incorrect answers a score of zero. The third section of the test however had a sliding scale applied. This was done to determine whether students showed progress in their comprehension, moving from the Japanese false cognate definition of the word (with a corresponding score of 1), to either a more neutral definition (score of 2) or the correct definition (score of 3). As an example, on the

test students were given the word front, which has the false cognate *furonto* in *gairaigo*, along with three possible definitions A, B and C, and then asked to choose the correct English definition. If the students chose A hotel reception (in *gairaigo* the term *furonto* has this linguistically narrowed sense), they received a score of 1. If they chose the more neutral answer B to move up, they received a 2, and if they chose the correct answer C the most forward part, they received a 3.

Many of the items on the test were taken from the first 1000 of the list of common loanwords corresponding to the BNC (Nation, 2004), found in the appendix to Daulton's book (2008, pp. 133-156), as this was determined to be the level best corresponding to students' English abilities. An exception to this were the semantically shifted *gairaigo* and false cognate forms included in the test which, due to their limited and rather idiosyncratic nature, could not be correlated with any existing vocabulary lists. An example of this taken from the test is the term high tension, which in the English sense of electricity represents a rather technical, advanced level of vocabulary, whereas the *gairaigo* word *tenshon* is used to refer to a high level of excitement and is much more common.

Care was also taken to avoid terms from the first test appearing on the second, as well as to avoid too many terms taught during the *gairaigo* course appearing on the second test (which could result in simply testing students' retention of words from the course, rather than if they had gained new skill sets relating to *gairaigo*).

Survey

Students were given a Likert scale survey of five statements, in English with Japanese translations, and asked to indicate their level of agreement with each, in order to ascertain their interest in the subject of *gairaigo*, and how useful they felt its study could be in improving their English skills. One statement included a reversed pair (a positive and negative statement on the same subject) in order to check for reliability of responses (Paulhus, 1991). A free response section was included for any further student comments.

Results

Comparing pre and post test results for the class, the overall mean score improved by 4.5 points, or 9% (M: 29.9, SD: 2.1 to M: 34.4, SD: 4.6), indicating a statistically significant result under a paired samples T test ($p < .05$). This is sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis for this experiment, in this case being that test scores would show no change after the intervention of the *gairaigo* course.

Upon closer examination however, we can see that this was due to a significant increase in scores on the third section of the test, which dealt with false cognates and semantic change between *gairaigo* and English. Looking at sections 1 and 2, we can see that the mean of student scores actually decreased slightly (see Table 1).

Table 1
Pre and Post-Gairaigo Course Test Results

Sections	Pre-Test Mean and Standard Deviation	Post-Test Mean / Standard Deviation
Section 1 (shortened <i>gairaigo</i>)	M: 6.9 (out of 10 possible) SD: 1.2	M: 6.7 (out of 10 possible) SD: 1.9
Section 2 (<i>gairaigo</i> headwords)	M: 7 (out of 10 possible) SD: 1.4	M: 5.8 (out of 10 possible) SD: 1.5
Section 3 (<i>gairaigo</i> semantic change/false cognates)	M: 16 (out of 30 possible) SD: 1.5	M: 21.9 (out of 30 possible) SD: 3.2
Overall	M: 29.9 (out of 50 possible) SD: 2.1	M: 34.4 SD: 4.6

Turning to the results of the class survey, we notice a decidedly positive response from students towards the study of *gairaigo*, with 9 out of 13 respondents indicating that they either agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I enjoy learning about *gairaigo*” (see Table 2). At the same time, no students replied that they strongly agreed with statement 4, the same statement in reverse.

Interestingly, students indicated even more strongly that they believed the study of *gairaigo* improved their English, with 6 of the respondents strongly agreeing with the second statement, and another 3 agreeing. There would seem to be a “good for me” effect at play here whereby some students, regardless of their enthusiasm for studying *gairaigo*, nevertheless believe it is useful for improving their language skills.

Statement 3, “The worksheets and powerpoints on *gairaigo* were helpful and enjoyable,” received the most positive responses of all, with 10 respondents selecting

either strong agreement or agreement, indicating that students appreciated the materials that were prepared for the class,

Finally, we can discern a positive outlook towards further *gairaigo* study in the responses to the fifth statement. Over 50% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement “I would like to learn more about *gairaigo*” This could bode well for a potentially longer course on the subject, or more regular inclusion of *gairaigo* in curriculums.

Table 2
Post-Gairaigo Course Test Results

Statement	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither or N/A	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. I enjoy learning about <i>gairaigo</i> . 私は、外来語を学ぶのが楽しいです。	1	8	4	0	0
2. Learning about <i>gairaigo</i> helps me improve my English. 外来語を学ぶことは、私の英語力向上の助けになります。	6	3	4	0	0
3. The worksheets and powerpoints on <i>gairaigo</i> were helpful and enjoyable. 外来語のワークシートとパワーポイントは、役に立ったし、楽しかったです。	3	7	3	0	0
4. Learning about <i>gairaigo</i> is not interesting. 私は、外来語を学ぶのが楽しくないです	0	2	5	5	1
5. I would like to learn more about <i>gairaigo</i> . 私はもっと外来語を学びたいです。	1	6	6	0	0

Discussion

In responding to the first research question posed for this project, it would appear that the study of English-based *gairaigo* has a significant effect on students' vocabulary abilities related to semantically shifted and false cognate *gairaigo*, though the same cannot be said about the ability to recognize shortened and back-clipped *gairaigo*, or to form new word forms based on *gairaigo* headwords. It was interesting to note that progress in recognizing semantically shifted and false cognate *gairaigo* accounted for the overall improvement in student test scores. In fact, when comparing individual student scores between the two tests, it was found that every student improved in this area, often quite dramatically. These results are particularly noteworthy because, as was previously stated, terms on this portion of the test were not all taken from the first 1000 of the list of common loanwords corresponding to the BNC (Nation, 2004), found in the appendix to Daulton's book (2008, pp. 133-156), and therefore often represented a more advanced level of vocabulary than terms found in the first 1000 of the BNC.

One possible explanation for this result is that recognizing semantic change and false cognates were the easiest skill sets for students to grasp, especially within the limited time frame of the course. This may suggest a relatively quick and effective method of instruction for teachers. Further research in this area could help to verify this.

Conversely, the slightly lower scores in sections 1 and 2 on the second test may indicate that these skills take longer to acquire, demanding more detailed instruction within the framework of a longer course. Moreover, it could be argued that the ability to form words with affixes is a skill set quite distinct from English-*gairaigo* recognition.

Finally, in regard to the second research question, results from the survey seem to indicate that students are both interested in *gairaigo* and motivated to study it. As noted, students seemed to feel particularly strongly that the study of English-based *gairaigo* benefited their overall English ability. Many students also expressed interest in continued study of the subject, beyond the confines of a week-long course.

Conclusion

Gairaigo plays a substantial role in Japanese communication and shows no signs of going away anytime soon. On the contrary, the pace of English loanword growth in Japanese seems to be accelerating, as is demonstrated by the recent influx of pandemic-related vocabulary. Words like cluster and lockdown, previously unknown to all but the most diligent student of English, are now commonplace.

As this study has sought to demonstrate, the explosion in English-based *gairaigo* can positively contribute to the classroom. Though as an exploratory study this research was admittedly limited in both size (16 participants, 13 survey respondents) and scope (a week-long course, with all participants taken from the same major at the same institution), it nevertheless led to some promising results. Though the survey given after the course was also limited in size (5 questions, with only one reversed pair), the strength of the responses may suggest that, for students, the inclusion of *gairaigo* in the class represents an interesting and useful technique to increase English vocabulary. For teachers as well, *gairaigo* could help to make classes more dynamic by connecting lessons to the evolution of language happening throughout Japan.

This study did not touch upon the issues of pronunciation and oral communication in regard to English-based *gairaigo*, though as these are a major focus of contemporary Japanese EFL instruction, they could provide a promising avenue for future research. In addition, delayed testing was not carried out, which might have helped to determine any potential long-term retention and benefits of studying *gairaigo*, and this represents one further possibility for future research.

English-based *gairaigo* is one of the primary ways Japanese students encounter English outside of class, and given current trends (Daulton, 2008; Tomoda, 2005), its use is likely to become more prominent in the years to come. It is time that English courses in Japan both reflect and benefit from this.

Bio Data

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Appendix A

Shortened Gairaigo Worksheet

Worksheet 1

Some of these words are mini (shortened) versions of English words. Which ones? Circle all the mini Gairaigo words.

バリアフリー _____	タバコ _____
リアル _____	ビル _____
トレパン _____	スピーク _____
バスケ _____	パーティー・ピー _____
クリエート _____	コンバイン _____
パート _____	エアライン _____
スイミング _____	アメフ _____
スマオ _____	ポケモン _____
リピート _____	シャツ _____
パワハラ _____	マイクロバス _____

Appendix B

Example False Cognate Slide



Appendix C

Gairaigo Affixes Worksheet

These Gairaigo have all become *maigo* (lost children)! Help them *re*-unite with their families.
 First, change the *Gairaiigo* into the English word. Then, add the correct prefix or suffix to fill in the family.

Example

プレー	_____play_____	_____player_____	_____played_____
		_____replay_____	_____playing_____

アンサー	_____	_____	_____
		_____	_____

カウント	_____	_____	_____
		_____	_____

クラシック	_____	_____	_____
		_____	_____

リアル	_____	_____	_____
		_____	_____

レコード	_____	_____	_____
		_____	_____