

# English as a bridge in understanding Japanese *gairaigo*

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**Abstract.** In multilingual higher education contexts, English proficiency functions not only as a global lingua franca but also as linguistic capital that shapes the acquisition of additional foreign languages. This study examines the role of English as a bridge in understanding *gairaigo* in Japanese language learning. The study involved 53 students of a Diploma III Japanese Language Program. Data were collected through a *gairaigo* comprehension test, an English proficiency questionnaire, and written responses to open-ended questions. The findings indicate that students with higher English proficiency demonstrate better accuracy in interpreting *gairaigo*, particularly in commonly used loanwords. However, errors frequently occur in words with semantic shifts, such as *manshon* and *service*. Qualitative responses reveal that most students consciously connect katakana words with English vocabulary, although differences in pronunciation often cause confusion. Furthermore, the majority of students reported that understanding meaning is more difficult than reading katakana. These results confirm that English plays a significant role as a linguistic bridge in Japanese language learning and highlight the importance of cross-linguistic awareness in multilingual education.

**Keywords:** English proficiency; *gairaigo*; Japanese language

## 1 Introduction

In multilingual learning environments, interactions between languages play a crucial role in shaping language acquisition. English, as a global lingua franca, frequently serves as a reference system for learners acquiring additional foreign languages. In Japanese language learning, this influence is particularly evident in *gairaigo*.

*Gairaigo* refers to loanwords in the Japanese language that are primarily borrowed from foreign languages, especially English, and are typically written in katakana (Loveday, 1996). These words are widely used in modern Japanese, particularly in domains such as technology, lifestyle, and popular culture. The increasing presence of *gairaigo* reflects not only linguistic borrowing but also cultural and global influences on the Japanese language (Daulton, 2008).

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From a linguistic perspective, *gairaigo* undergo phonological and semantic adaptation when integrated into Japanese. Phonologically, English words are adjusted to fit the Japanese sound system, often resulting in forms that differ significantly from their original pronunciation. Semantically, some loanwords retain their original meanings, while others experience shifts or develop new meanings, commonly referred to as *wasei-eigo* (Hatanaka & Pannell, 2016). These adaptations create both familiarity and complexity for learners.

The presence of *gairaigo* offers potential advantages for learners with English background knowledge. Lexical similarity may facilitate comprehension through positive transfer. However, this similarity can also lead to misunderstanding when learners assume direct equivalence between English and Japanese meanings.

Previous studies have highlighted the significant influence of English on Japanese vocabulary. The dominance of English-based loanwords reflects the global spread of English and its impact on Japanese society (Gapur & Taulia, 2023). Furthermore, learners with English proficiency tend to demonstrate better vocabulary acquisition due to prior exposure and familiarity.

However, research also shows that *gairaigo* may cause confusion due to phonological adaptation and meaning shifts (Hatanaka & Pannell, 2016; Alharaki et al., 2023). Learners often rely on their English knowledge when interpreting loanwords, which may result in both positive and negative transfer.

Despite these findings, the dual role of English as both a facilitating bridge and a source of interference in *gairaigo* comprehension remains underexplored, particularly in Indonesian multilingual contexts. Therefore, this study aims to investigate how English functions as a bridge in understanding Japanese *gairaigo* among university students. This study fills the gap by providing empirical evidence on how English functions dynamically in learners' cognitive processes when interpreting *gairaigo*.

## 2 Method

This section describes the methodological framework employed in this study, including the research design, participants, instruments, and data analysis procedures used to investigate the role of English in understanding Japanese *gairaigo*.

### 2.1 Design

This study employed a descriptive mixed-method approach to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the research problem through a process of triangulation and joint data integration. Mixed-method research combines quantitative and qualitative data to provide a more complete analysis of a phenomenon (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Rather than treating the two data strands as separate, this study employs a convergent mixed-method design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) in which quantitative and qualitative findings are collected concurrently and then systematically merged during interpretation. This triangulation process strengthens the validity of conclusions by cross-checking performance patterns with learners' self-reported strategies. In this study, quantitative data were used to measure students' performance in understanding *gairaigo*, while qualitative data were used to explore students' cognitive strategies and perceptions when interpreting loanwords. This approach allows the researcher to not only identify patterns of performance but also explain the underlying processes behind those patterns. Crucially, integration occurs at the interpretation stage: specific qualitative responses are directly linked to quantitative performance categories to produce a joint display that illuminates how English proficiency

both enables and limits *gairaigo* comprehension. This ensures the study goes beyond parallel reporting and achieves genuine methodological convergence.

## 2.2 Participant

The participants of this study were 53 students enrolled in a Diploma III Japanese Language Program at a university in Indonesia. The participants were selected using a convenience sampling technique, as they were readily accessible to the researcher and had prior exposure to basic Japanese learning, including katakana and *gairaigo*.

Based on their academic level, the participants consisted of 34 first-semester students and 19 second-semester students. This distribution indicates that the majority of participants were in the early stage of Japanese language learning, where foundational knowledge of katakana and vocabulary acquisition is still developing.

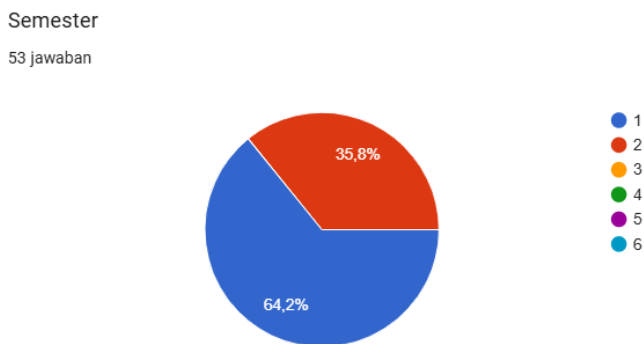


Fig. 1. Semester distribution.

In terms of English learning background, most participants (44 students) had been exposed to English since elementary school. A smaller number of students began learning English in junior high school (5 students) and senior high school (3 students), while one student reported other learning experiences. This suggests that the majority of participants had relatively long exposure to English, which is relevant to the investigation of cross-linguistic influence in *gairaigo* comprehension.

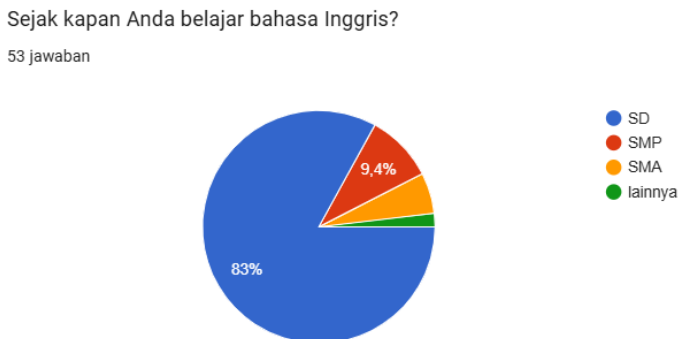


Fig. 2. English learning background.

Furthermore, based on self-reported English proficiency levels, 6 students were categorized as low (below 60), 26 students as intermediate (60–79), and 21 students as high (80–100). This distribution indicates that most participants fall within the intermediate to

high proficiency levels, which provides a relevant basis for examining the influence of English on *gairaigo* comprehension.

Nilai rata-rata mata kuliah Bahasa Inggris

53 jawaban

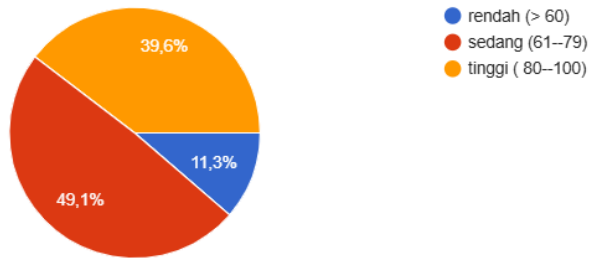


Fig. 3. English proficiency distribution.

Figure 3 shows that most participants fall into the intermediate and high English proficiency categories, indicating that they have adequate linguistic resources to utilize English in understanding *gairaigo*. This condition strengthens the assumption that English does not merely serve as background knowledge, but actively supports learners' comprehension, while also potentially contributing to misinterpretation due to cross-linguistic influence.

## 2.3 Instrument/ Data collection

This study utilized three main instruments to collect data:

### 2.3.1 *Gairaigo* comprehension test

The *gairaigo* comprehension test was designed in a multiple-choice format to measure students' ability to interpret Japanese loanwords. The test included items representing different categories of *gairaigo*, such as: familiar loanwords, phonologically adapted words, and words with semantic shifts. This categorization is important because loanwords may vary in difficulty depending on their level of similarity to English (Daulton, 2008). The test results provide objective data on students' comprehension accuracy. The test consisted of 20 multiple-choice items, with each item presenting a *gairaigo* word written in katakana and four answer options representing possible Indonesian or English equivalent meanings. The items were distributed across three categories: 8 items for familiar loanwords (e.g., コンピューター / konpyūtā, "computer"), 6 items for phonologically adapted words (e.g., ウインドウ / uindou, "window"), and 6 items for words with semantic shifts (e.g., マンション / manshon, meaning a "condominium/apartment unit" rather than the English "mansion"). Content validity was established through expert review by two Japanese language instructors who confirmed the representativeness and appropriateness of the items. Internal consistency

reliability was calculated using the Kuder-Richardson Formula 20 (KR-20), yielding a coefficient of 0.76, which is considered acceptable for classroom-based research instruments.

### 2.3.2 English proficiency questionnaire

An English proficiency questionnaire was used to assess students' self-perceived competence in English. The questionnaire employed a Likert scale to measure aspects such as vocabulary knowledge, reading ability, and confidence in using English. Self-assessment is widely used in language research to capture learners' perceived competence and has been shown to provide useful insights into language ability (Brown, 2001). This data serves as a basis for analyzing the relationship between English proficiency and *gairaigo* comprehension. The questionnaire consisted of 15 items rated on a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree), covering three dimensions: (1) English vocabulary knowledge (5 items, e.g., "I can recognize the meaning of most everyday English words"), (2) English reading ability (5 items, e.g., "I can understand short English texts without using a dictionary"), and (3) confidence in using English (5 items, e.g., "I feel confident using English to understand new words"). The questionnaire was adapted from Oxford's Strategy Inventory for Language Learning (SILL; Oxford, 1990) and from a self-assessment checklist developed by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Proficiency categories were derived from aggregate scores: low (below 60), intermediate (60–79), and high (80–100). The internal consistency of the questionnaire was verified using Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha = 0.81$ ), indicating good reliability.

### 2.3.3 Open-ended questions

Open-ended questions were used to explore students' strategies and thought processes when encountering *gairaigo*. These questions aimed to capture: how students interpret katakana words, whether they rely on English knowledge, and difficulties they experience. This qualitative instrument is essential for understanding cognitive processes that cannot be captured through test scores alone (Creswell, 2014). The instrument comprised four written open-ended questions administered in Indonesian to ensure accessibility: (1) "When you encounter a katakana word you do not know, what is the first thing you do to understand its meaning?"; (2) "Do you use your knowledge of English to help understand Japanese loanwords (*gairaigo*)? Please explain with an example"; (3) "Have you ever assumed a *gairaigo* word meant the same as its English origin, only to find out later that the meaning is different in Japanese? If yes, please give an example"; and (4) "Which do you find more difficult: reading *gairaigo* in katakana or understanding its meaning? Why?" These questions were designed to elicit metacognitive reflection and to directly connect learners' reasoning processes with the performance patterns identified in the *gairaigo* comprehension test, thereby supporting mixed-method triangulation.

## 2.4 Data Analysis

Quantitative data from the *gairaigo* test and English proficiency questionnaire were analyzed descriptively by calculating the percentage of correct answers and identifying patterns of errors. This descriptive analysis allows the researcher to observe general trends without relying on complex statistical procedures. Qualitative data from open-ended responses were analyzed using thematic analysis. The responses were categorized into recurring themes, such as: reliance on English, pronunciation difficulties, and misunderstanding due to semantic

shift. Thematic analysis enables the researcher to interpret patterns in qualitative data and understand learners' cognitive strategies (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

### 3 Results and Discussion

#### 3.1 Results

This section presents the findings of the study based on quantitative and qualitative data. To enhance clarity and facilitate interpretation, the results are summarized in the following tables.

#### 3.2 Discussion

This study set out to investigate whether and how English proficiency functions as a bridge in understanding Japanese *gairaigo*. The findings, as presented in Tables 1- 4, provide strong and consistent evidence that English plays a central role in shaping learners' comprehension processes.

From a quantitative perspective, Table 1 shows that majority of participants possess intermediate to high levels of English proficiency. This indicates that learners have sufficient prior linguistic knowledge that can be activated during the processing of *gairaigo*. This condition is essential, as cross-linguistic influence is more likely to occur when learners have an accessible and developed linguistic system (Ringbom, 2007).

The role of English as a bridge becomes particularly evident in Table 2, where students demonstrate higher accuracy in familiar *gairaigo*. These words share strong similarities with English in both form and meaning, allowing learners to recognize them more easily. This pattern suggests that learners rely on English as a reference system, mapping Japanese katakana forms onto their existing English vocabulary. Through this process, English reduces cognitive effort and facilitates faster comprehension. In this sense, English functions as a lexical and cognitive bridge, enabling learners to access meaning through previously acquired knowledge.

This interpretation is strongly supported by qualitative findings in Table 3. Students explicitly report using English to interpret *gairaigo*, indicating that this process is not only automatic but also strategic. Learners consciously associate katakana words with English equivalents and use them to infer meaning. This confirms that English operates as an active cognitive resource, mediating the relationship between unfamiliar Japanese input and familiar linguistic knowledge.

However, the findings also reveal that this bridging function is not always accurate. As shown in Table 2, students frequently misinterpret *gairaigo* that involve semantic shifts, such as *manshon* and *service*. Instead of understanding these words in their Japanese context, learners tend to rely on their English meanings. Table 3 further confirms that students often assume equivalence between English and Japanese meanings, leading to systematic errors.

This phenomenon reflects negative transfer (Odlin, 1989), but more importantly, it highlights a key insight of this study: the same mechanism that facilitates comprehension also causes misunderstanding. Table 4 clearly illustrates this dual role by integrating quantitative performance patterns with qualitative explanations. Both correct interpretations and incorrect assumptions originate from learners' reliance on English. This indicates that English is not merely influencing comprehension it is structuring the entire meaning-making

process. In other words, English functions as the primary cognitive pathway through which learners access and interpret *gairaigo*.

In addition to semantic factors, phonological adaptation also affects the effectiveness of English as a bridge. As indicated in Tables 2 and 3, students experience difficulty recognizing *gairaigo* due to differences between English pronunciation and their katakana forms. This reflects the phonological restructuring of loanwords in Japanese (Loveday, 1996; Daulton, 2008), which reduces transparency and creates barriers to recognition.

Another important finding is that students perceive understanding meaning as more difficult than reading katakana. This suggests that the main challenge lies not in decoding written forms, but in interpreting meaning. At this stage, English becomes the primary resource for constructing meaning, further reinforcing its role as a bridge at the cognitive level.

These findings should also be understood within the broader context of multilingualism. The participants in this study are multilingual learners who use Indonesian as their first language, English as a previously acquired foreign language, and Japanese as a target language. This multilingual background plays a crucial role in shaping how learners process new linguistic input. English, in this case, functions as an intermediary language that connects prior knowledge with new learning. This supports the view that multilingual competence involves dynamic interaction between languages rather than isolated processing (Odlin, 1989).

Taken together, the findings demonstrate that English functions as a multi-layered bridge in *gairaigo* comprehension. It facilitates recognition through lexical similarity, supports meaning construction through cognitive mapping, and guides interpretation through conscious learning strategies. At the same time, this bridge is not always reliable, as semantic shifts and phonological differences can lead to systematic misinterpretation.

## 4 Conclusion

This study aimed to examine the role of English proficiency as a bridge in understanding Japanese *gairaigo* among multilingual learners. The findings clearly demonstrate that English plays a significant and active role in shaping learners' comprehension processes.

Students with intermediate to high levels of English proficiency show better ability to interpret familiar *gairaigo*, indicating that English facilitates comprehension through lexical similarity and prior knowledge. At the same time, errors in words with semantic shifts reveal that reliance on English can also lead to misunderstanding. These findings confirm that English functions as both a facilitating resource and a source of interference.

Furthermore, qualitative data show that learners consciously use English as a strategy when interpreting katakana words. This indicates that English is not only a background influence but an active cognitive tool in the learning process.

In the context of multilingualism, this study highlights that language learning is shaped by the interaction between multiple linguistic systems. English serves as an intermediary that connects learners' prior knowledge with new Japanese input, reinforcing its role as a bridge in *gairaigo* comprehension.

Therefore, it can be concluded that English plays a crucial role in facilitating, guiding, and shaping the understanding of *gairaigo*, while also requiring careful pedagogical support to prevent misinterpretation. Future research may further explore how instructional strategies can optimize the positive role of English in multilingual language learning contexts.

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