

Translanguaging and it's Possible Application in English Language Education in Japan

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Methods of teaching English as a foreign language are constantly changing and evolving. Old methods are replaced by new ones that are better for both students and teachers alike. On relatively new idea on teaching English is the concept of translanguaging. This paper will have a preliminary look at the linguistic concept of translanguaging and its application in the teaching of English as a foreign language (EFL) and the possible applications in English education in Japan. Data obtained from a survey answered by 270 1st, 2nd and 3rd year university and junior college students, on their thoughts on Japanese language usage by teachers in English classes will be analysed with the aim of combining any insights with future studies to look at if a translanguaging teaching method could improve English language education in Japan.

Key Words: [Translanguaging] [English as a Foreign Language]

(Received September 24, 2021)

1. Introduction

With English being the dominant international language in the world, EFL classrooms are an everyday feature across Japan, the rest of Asia and throughout much of the globe. While there are many different theories and approaches to teaching English as a 2nd language, the most common feature almost certainly involves the idea of getting students to use as much of the target language, English as possible. The concept of 'all English classrooms/experiences' is a big selling point in Japan and is the standard governmental educational procedure across junior and senior high schools, universities and junior colleges, along with the various other types of English language classes around the country. These 'all English classrooms' are propped up by English textbooks, activities down all in English and native English speakers as teachers or assistant teachers, aimed at encouraging, or possibly forcing' students to use only English, whilst simultaneously banning the use of any Japanese. If Japanese is utilized in these classes, it is primarily for straight translation from or to English for a vocabulary list or some sort of reading passage.

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However, all these approaches somehow fail to materialize Japan as a multilingual country. In fact, the country is far behind its Asian counterparts, and is often one of the lowest ranked developed countries in English proficiency¹. There are many thoughts behind the reasons for this, with a big one being that English is taught with the main goal of passing a university entrance examination. This has the effect of making learners afraid of using English in fear of making mistakes, and reduces it to a skill to simply be memorised rather than an active language/ way of communication.

I have often encountered this kind of thinking in my classes. Students are afraid to use the English they do know because it might not be 100% correct and the prospect of a class conducted entirely in English often places a lot of stress on them, especially for those at a lower level. Searching for a way to encourage these students whilst also getting them to see learning English as a more active process, rather than just straight memorisation, is what brought me to the concept of translanguaging.

2. Translanguaging

The initial groundwork of the idea now known as translanguaging began in Wales in the 1980s with the work of an educator by the name of Cen Williams. His approach saw the purposeful encouragement of students to switch between two languages L1 & L2, in their case English and Welsh, when doing activities within the classroom. So they would read or listen to something in one language (input) and then turn around and write or discuss it in the other (output). The idea here being that this would not only strengthen the students' language ability in L2, but also give them a proper understanding of how to use it.² This concept was further built and expanded upon over the next decades and has now grown to encompass ideas on not only pure language education but also dynamic multilingualism, language as a social construct, plus cultural and social identity.

A prominent researcher on translanguaging, Ofelia García, stated

“Translanguaging is the act performed by bilinguals of accessing different linguistic features or various modes of what are described as autonomous languages, in order to maximize communicative potential.”³

As a concept, this viewpoint focuses on the internal processes of bilingual people who have been learning multiple languages from birth and how their way of communication transcends the traditional ideas of using named languages, i.e. English, French, Japanese. They use different parts of different languages and combine them to communicate.

As a teaching pedagogy, the basic idea of translanguaging is that students should not be forced to only use L2, but should be free to use L1 when needed to accommodate communication. This idea is what sets it apart from the traditional use of L1 and L2

activities in a classroom setting, such as the previously mentioned straight translation of an English reading passage into Japanese, as the two languages are still treated as separate entities and have very limited interaction with each other. As mentioned above, translanguaging encourages an interaction between languages in the classroom when doing activities such as planning a presentation in L1 then presenting it in L2. This may help students who feel nervous or cannot understand as they can help each other. This does not require teachers to understand the language the students are using, rather to just control and assess their English output.⁴ Conversely, any proficiency the teacher has with that language could be used to either give instructions, provide examples, explain concepts and just generally converse with the students. This last point may also help lessen any fears or apprehensions students may have, helping to strengthen student teacher bonds and encourage students to actually use the target language more often. Learning another language can be a very difficult prospect, especially for those who are not really studying it out of choice. This is often the case for many students in Japan, where the education system has fostered the notion inside people's heads that English = exams. So, using a translanguaging method could help to alleviate these issues and support both students and language learning.

It is probably safe to say that many EFL classes in Japan already practice some form of translanguaging even if they are labelled as 'all English'. Is it time then for an official change to a type of translanguaging method, moving away from the often rigid nature of the current system and into one that is more supportive? A much more in-depth look at translanguaging will be needed for future studies.

3. Methodology

This study set out to be a very basic look at student's general opinions on their English education classes and their thoughts on the use of Japanese by their teachers, with the goal of providing an initial insight into how some form of translanguaging may be implemented in the future.

4. Participants

A total of 270 1st, 2nd and 3rd year university and junior college students answered an 8 question online survey. All were native Japanese speakers and have been studying English in one form or another since at least junior high school, an average of 7 - 8 years. The participants were from 6 different major fields of study, with a small majority being English language. Presently they have at least one English language/content class per week, with a mix of both Japanese and foreign teachers.

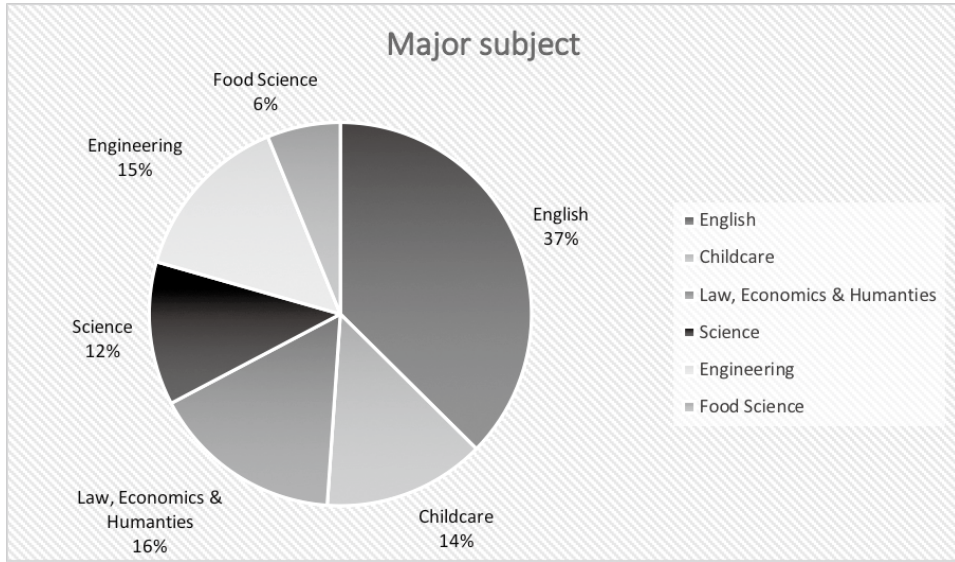


Figure 1. Major Subjects

5. Results

Questions

The first 2 questions were aimed at ascertaining the students general feelings towards their

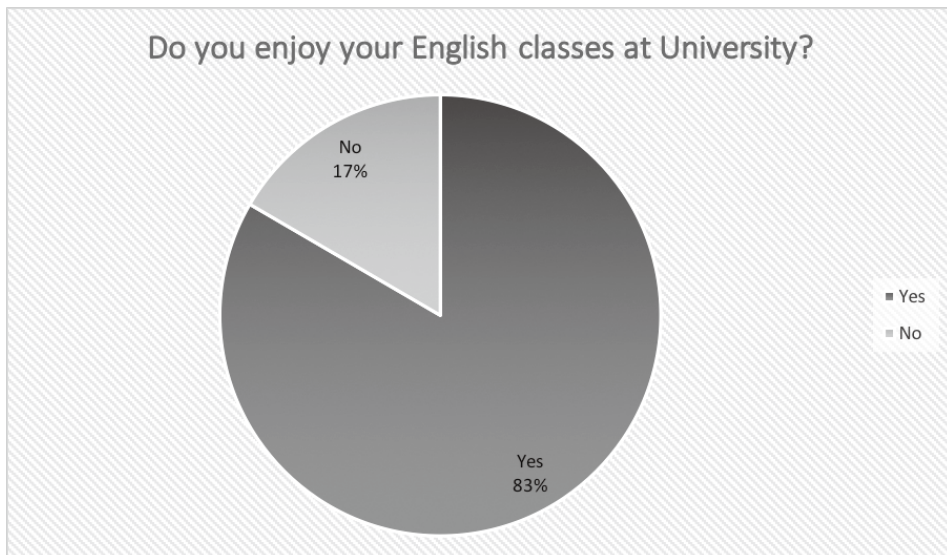


Figure 1.1 Question 1

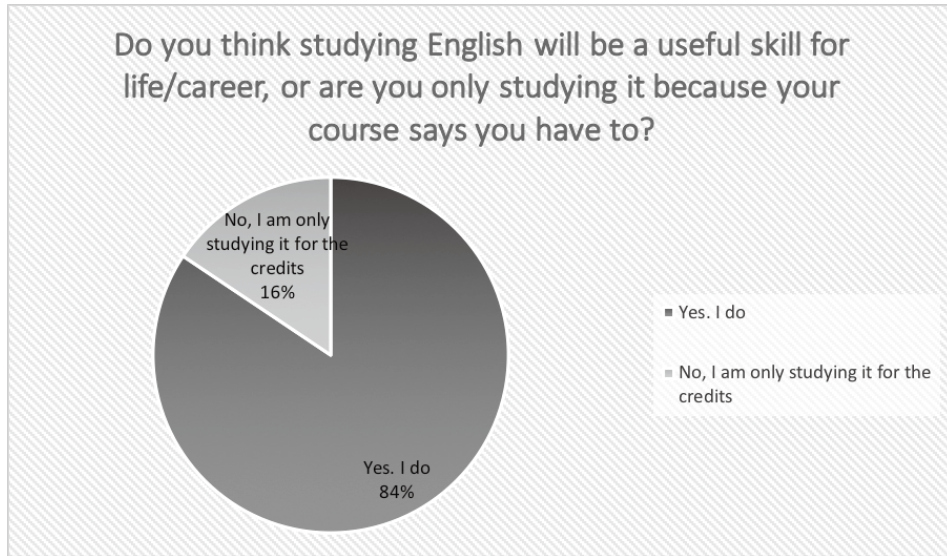


Figure 1.2 Question 2

English classes.

It can be seen here that the majority of students do enjoy their English classes and do believe that it will be a useful skill in the future. However, there is still a significant number who feel the opposite. Looking at the more detailed results, 99% of these students were, unsurprisingly, from non-English majors, specifically Childcare, Food Science and Engineering. In questions to these students conducted apart from the main survey, most stated that they found the classes either too hard or felt they were a waste of time and had no real world use for them, which is ironic when considering that there is a high probability that they will be required to use English in their future field of work. This sentiment can clearly be seen in the fact that the number of students who dislike English and those who only study it because they have to is almost the same. Would a change of teaching system and an adoption of a translanguaging type of approach encourage these students to change their opinion about language learning? Further study focused on these types of students will be needed in the future to answer this question.

Questions on Japanese Usage in the Classroom

The remainder of the questions focused on students' thoughts on Japanese usage by their teachers in their English classes.

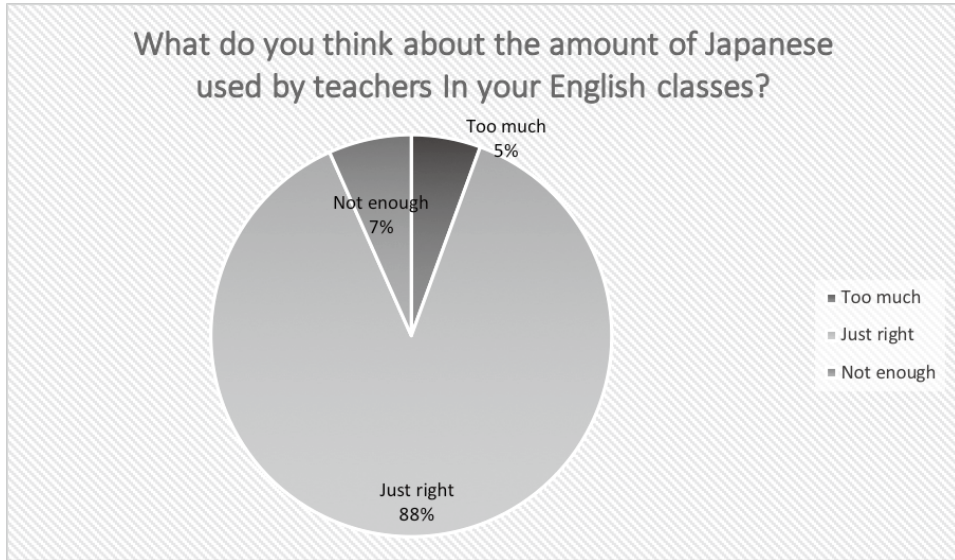


Figure 1.3 Question 3

Here a clear majority, 88%, of students are happy with the amount of Japanese used by their teachers in their English classes. Only 7% believed it was not enough and even fewer thought Japanese was used too much (5%). Those who believed Japanese was used too much were mostly from English majors, with another small amount from the sciences, and it is quite probable that these students have a high level of English skill. Conversely, those who believed English was not used enough were non English majors, and mostly the same students who already stated that they disliked these classes.

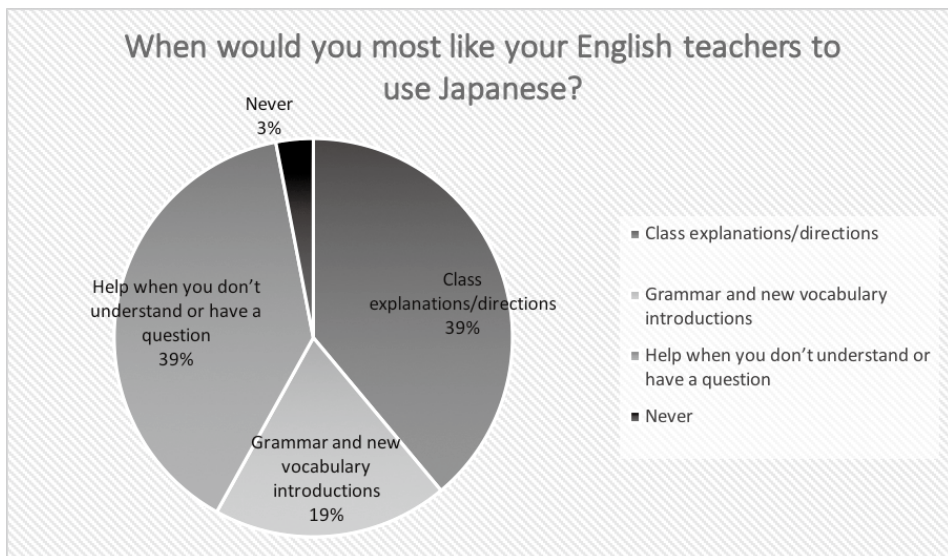


Figure 1.4 Question 4

Question 4 followed on from the previous question and asked students the times when they would most like their teachers to use Japanese. Class explanations and help when they don't understand gained the most responses here with 39% each. While grammar and vocabulary introductions were lower at 19%. These issues may very well end up becoming questions when students do not understand anyway. However, this may also point to the fact that students want to try to understand themselves before getting an explicit explanation, perhaps already employing a level of translanguaging by discussing in Japanese. Only a small percentage, 3%, believed that Japanese is completely unnecessary, again perhaps those students at a much higher English level.

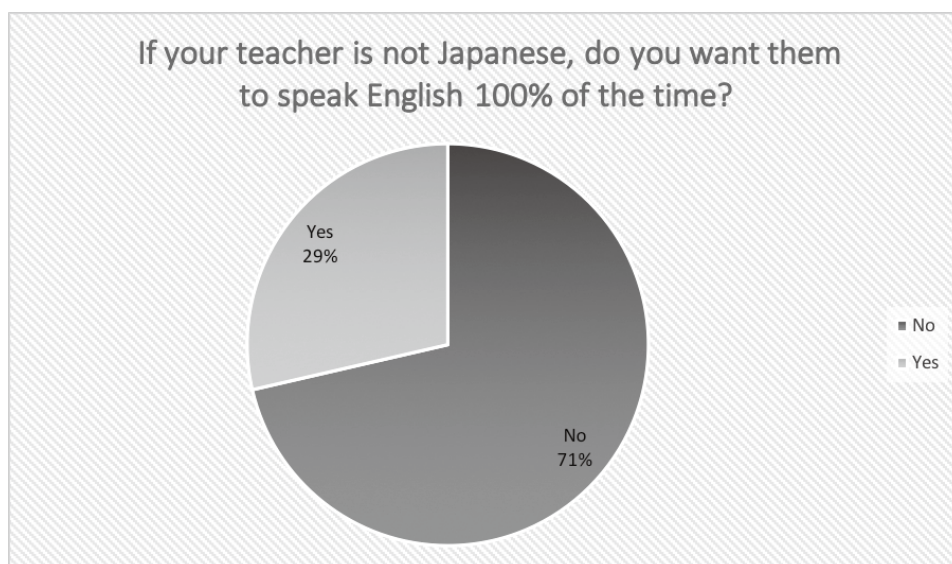


Figure 1.5 Question 5

It is reasonable to believe that Japanese English language teachers do use a certain amount of their own language even in an 'all English' classroom. However, it is probably rarer for a non-Japanese or teacher who is an English native speaker to use Japanese in the classroom due to their inability to speak the language or stricter adherence to the ideals of an all English environment. Question 4 was aimed at ascertaining what students thought about Japanese language use by non-Japanese teachers. 71% responded 'No', matching up with the sentiments in the previous question, with most of these wanting help in those areas. However, 29% responded that yes they did wish their non-Japanese teachers to exclusively use English in the classroom. This number seems at odds with the previous question's results with only 3% stating that they never wanted their teachers to use Japanese within class. However, in further questioning outside the main survey, many of those that responded with no, still wanted class instruction and answer to their questions in Japanese and did consider that a 'real' part of the class itself. A smaller percentage responded that they wished to make the most of being with a native English speaker and immerse themselves in the language as much as possible. However, the fact still remains that the majority of students still want Japanese to be used in the class regardless of what country their teacher is from.

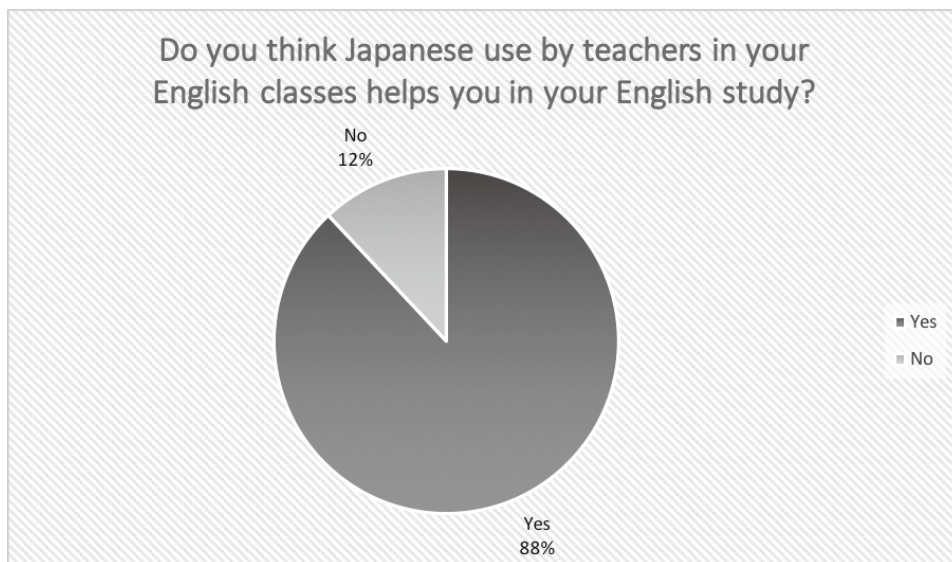


Figure 1.6 Question 6

Question number 6 asked the simple question: Do you think Japanese use by teachers in your English classes helps you in your English study? And the majority of students, 88%, answered with a yes. The 12% who answered no were surprisingly not entirely English majors, with engineering and literature students also believing that Japanese did not help them with their English learning.

The final question in the survey, question 7, asked reasons for the students' yes or no response in question 6.

Reasons for 'yes' were almost entirely focused around students' belief that using Japanese helps them understand the difficult parts of English, such as grammar, word meaning and nuance. This matches with the results of question 4. Many students also stated that they believed it would help them keep up with the flow of class as they have experienced times where they have been confused about a certain point/explanation in English and the class went on without them understanding, leading to a snowball effect which compounded the problem. These students stated that they believed an explanation in Japanese would have helped to avoid this.

Reasons given by students who answered 'no' included the fact that they believed all English classes would boost their listening abilities, that if there was something that confused them that it was up to them to either look it up and try to understand it themselves and also that they believed an immersive English experience would be useful practice for going overseas. Others also stated that if they knew the teacher would speak in Japanese that they would become too complacent and use it too much themselves. This point of student's relying too heavily on their L1 is a definite issue surrounding the translanguaging approach. Indeed personal experience has shown that once a student is aware that their teacher can use and understand Japanese, a number of them will rely more upon that to communicate, rather than try to converse in English. However, whether this is actually detrimental or not to their learning must be looked at in the future.

Conclusion

This study set out to obtain some basic data on students' thoughts on Japanese language usage by teachers in English classes, with the aim of combining with future studies to look at the possible introduction of a translanguaging teaching method. The results show that the majority of university aged students do enjoy their English classes and feel that the skills they learn there will be important for their future. However, they dislike the 'all English' approach that is the government mandated standard. Almost all students expressed the wish for their teachers' to use a certain amount of Japanese, mostly regardless of teacher nationality, in the classroom for instructions and/or the answering of questions. They believe that this will help them understand English better. The results also showed

that this use of Japanese by teachers is most likely standard practice already. Showing that the practicalities of keeping a class moving smoothly without leaving students behind often outweighs the ideals of an 'all English' classroom. So does this indicate that there is a need to move away from this idea to a more translanguaging based approach to teaching EFL in Japan? With the results from this limited survey it is too early to say. More information must be sought from the point of view of teachers, student's views on their own use of Japanese in the classroom and also to find out if both would be even receptive to a change of this nature.

- 1 <https://www.ef.com/wwen/epi/>
- 2 Gwyn Lewis, Bryn Jones & Colin Baker (2012) *Translanguaging: origins and development from school to street and beyond*, Educational Research and Evaluation
- 3 García O., Wei L. (2014) *Translanguaging and Education*. In: *Translanguaging: Language, Bilingualism and Education*. Palgrave Pivot, London
- 4 Turnbull B. (2018) *Is There a Potential for a Translanguaging Approach to English Education in Japan? Perspectives of Tertiary Learners and Teachers*. <https://jalt-publications.org/sites/default/files/pdf-article/jj2018b-art2.pdf>

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- <https://www.ef.com/wwen/epi/>

Appendix A. Questionnaire

Your major subject, あなたの専門は何ですか?

1. Do you enjoy your English classes at University? 大学の英語の授業が好きですか?
a. Yes はい b. No いいえ

2. Do you think studying English will be an useful skill for life/career, or are you only

studying it because your course says you have to? あなたが英語を勉強しているのは英語があなたの人生やキャリアにおいて役に立つと思うからですか?それとも単位取得のためですか?

- a. Yes, I do 自分の人生やキャリアに役立つと思うから
- b. No, I am only studying it for the credits 単位を取らなければいけないため

3. What do you think about the amount of Japanese used by teachers In your English classes? あなたの受けている英語の授業について、授業者(教員)の使用する日本語の量をどう思いますか?

- a. Too much 使いすぎている
- b. Just right ちょうどいい
- c. Not enough 足りない

4. When would you like your English teachers to use Japanese? どのような場面で教員に日本語を使用して欲しいと感じますか?

- a. Class explanations/directions 授業での説明や指示の場面
- b. Grammar and new vocabulary introductions 文法や単語の説明の場面
- c. Help when you don't understand or have a question わからない点や質問があるとき
- d. Never 使う必要はない

5. If your teacher is not Japanese, do you want them to English 100% of the time? 授業者(教員)が日本人ではない場合、授業はオールイングリッシュ(日本語を一切使用しない)であることを希望しますか?

- a. Yes はい
- b. No いいえ

6. Do you think Japanese use by teachers in your English classes helps you in your English study? 英語の授業で教員が日本語を使用することについて、それはあなたの英語学習の手助けになると感じますか?

- a. Yes はい
- b. No いいえ

Please give reasons for your answer in question 6. above. 上記についてその理由を教えてください。

