

Perspectives on EMI among English Teachers at a Japanese Science University

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ABSTRACT: *Through the design and implementation of a survey, this paper has sought to better understand perceptions among educators in Japan concerning the readiness and necessity of English-taught programs in Japanese higher education institutions. The researchers surveyed both domestic and international teachers at a private science university in Japan and found that educators believe some struggles exist for Japanese students in English-taught classes. These struggles, specifically regarding cultural differences in teaching and learning styles, might hinder Japanese students' acclimation to English-taught courses. The respondents also felt that English-taught programs were necessary and benefitted both international and domestic students.*

KEYWORDS: English as a medium of instruction, international students, japanese higher education, passive learning

INTRODUCTION

The motivation for this study stems from a concern regarding the enrolment numbers of international students (IS) at the Japanese science university where the participants surveyed (n=20) teach as members of the English group within the liberal arts department. Theoretically, the lack of IS could be the result of an absence of programs that adequately accommodate global English-speaking students, such as English as a medium of Instruction (EMI). The term EMI, as sourced from Deardon (2014) is described as content courses being taught in English rather than the national language of the country.

The Japanese government has supported several policy initiatives to promote internationalization such as the 300,000 International Students Plan, Go Global Japan, Top Global University Plan, and Global 30 (Ota, 2018; Rose & McKinley, 2018). According to

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the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sport, Science, and Technology (MEXT) website, Global 30 commends thirteen core universities that “have been implementing a variety of approaches to internationalize academic systems and campuses such as developing degree programs conducted in English and enriching international student support” (Global 30 Project).

The survey used for this research focuses on English-teaching staff perceptions regarding internationalization efforts as well as the perceived ability of Japanese universities to accommodate IS. The research questions this paper seeks to address are:

- 1.) How do Japanese higher education institution (JHEI) educators perceive the readiness of domestic students for EMI programs?
- 2.) How do JHEI educators perceive the necessity for English degree programs?

LITERATURE

EMI has seen growth both in conceptualization and practice over the past few decades in Japan, as well as other non-English speaking countries (Bradford, 2019; Brown & Bradford, 2014; Dearden, 2014; Yuan, 2023). As EMI is inherently an international phenomenon its description and application across multiple countries is varied, unclear, and unstandardized (Bradford, 2019; Brown & Bradford, 2014; Dearden, 2014; Yuan, 2023). While various similar definitions exist for EMI (Orfan, 2023) (see Macaro et al., 2018; Pecorari & Malmström, 2018; Richards & Pun, 2021) we will adhere to the definition offered by Dearden (2014): “The use of the English language to teach academic subjects in countries or jurisdictions where the first language (L1) of the majority of the population is not English” (p 4). This definition creates some distinction from other similar pedagogies including both content and language-centered learning (CLIL) and content-based instruction (CBI) (Brown & Bradford, 2014; Deardon 2014, Macaro et al., 2018).

In Europe, regular use of the term EMI began around the time the Bologna Declaration was signed in 1999, with the intent to standardize higher education in Europe (Bagni et al., 2021; Brown & Bradford, 2014). Japan’s use of EMI can be traced back to the late 19th century. The Imperial University (later known as Tokyo University) was mainly made up of visiting academics and many of these teachers lectured solely in English (Kuwamura, 2017). Courses were predominantly taught in English, French, or German (depending on the lecturer’s native language) as schools were ill-equipped to teach in the national language (Kuwamura, 2017). Japan’s longest-running EMI program was started by Jesuits at Sophia University in 1913 (Martinez, 2016). In the 1980s government-supported EMI programs began spreading at national universities. These were motivated by the desire to attract students from abroad (MEXT, 2005, as cited in Kuwamura, 2017).

The turn of the century has seen a trend in Japan toward internationalization and globalization that has influenced the adoption of EMI (Enders, 2004; Yonezawa, 2020). The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) recognizes the importance of readiness and competence in global skills, stating “Japanese universities are strongly expected to work on internationalizing their education and research environments” (2021, p13). The government has made efforts to internationalize JHEI in the form of multiple policies and initiatives. These policies may have been focused on changing JHEI from an inward focus to an outward one (Nagashima, 2021). These concepts, initiatives, and policies include the Global 30 project which endeavored to attract more international students (Yonezawa, 2014), the Global Jinzai which sought to create more internationally-minded Japanese people (Yonezawa, 2014), and the Top Global University Project which encouraged universities to be more globally competitive by “employing international researchers and enhancing the English language proficiency of students and staff” (Yonezawa, 2019, p. 22). These policies and initiatives indicate a desire to internationalize JHEI.

There are many benefits of EMI, including the development of skills, international perspectives, cultural comprehension, and overall global aptitude (Tsui, 2020). Being immersed in an English classroom can lead to more comfort in English-speaking working atmospheres after graduation (Kuwamura, 2017). Yonezawa (2020) points out that since demographics have shifted to where there are fewer young people in Japan, the domestic job market does not promote a sense of competition comparable to international counterparts. This situation makes “competition-oriented learning” (p.50) a lower priority for Japanese students. Therefore, they are less prepared for competing for positions in global businesses that are being filled by young workers from neighboring Asian nations such as China, South Korea, Malaysia, and Singapore. It can be assumed that the growing use of EMI in JHEI can help to close that gap through not only raising skills and cultural competence but also developing a global mindset, that includes the awareness of competition in international professions.

However, the internationalization of JHEI may have its detractors. In the post-war era, the now controversial idea of *Nihonjinron* “theories of the Japanese” (Sugimoto, 1999, p. 81) was propagated across multiple levels of society in Japan, resulting in millions of books sold under hundreds of titles examining the depth and exceptionality of being Japanese (Sugimoto, 1999). This idea centered around Japan as unique on the global stage and incorporated an almost inseparable idea of nation, ethnicity, and culture (Nagashima, 2021; Sugimoto, 1999). There is concern that the growing use of EMI may lower the sense of importance both for the culture and language of Japan (Gu, 2019; Phan, 2013). Perhaps further to this point, Brown (2014) suggests that EMI courses may be seen in a negative light. As one teacher participant in his study reported regarded the increase in EMI courses,

“I think people would be upset if they thought it [this university] was turning into a foreign university” (Brown, 2014, p. 57). This perhaps suggests a potential fear that JHEIs are becoming too Westernized.

There are also pragmatic concerns of practice. Yuan (2023) points out that many educators do not self-identify as EMI teachers, but rather as ones involved with their academic focus for research. Teachers who are non-native English speakers may encounter difficulties in adapting the curriculum and materials for EMI. Translating complex concepts and technical terminology can prove challenging, potentially impacting the quality of teaching and students' understanding of the subject matter (Doiz et al., 2013). Furthermore, Bradford (2019) states that both students and instructors voice concerns and dissatisfaction with language levels in the classroom, and how it affects the quality of learning the target material. Bradford provides accounts from Japanese professors discussing their perspective of being told to use EMI in their class. One such teacher expressed their reaction when asked to use EMI: “You are not telling me to do an English section of my class, you’re telling me to create a whole new class in another language, my second language” (p. 713).

In the context of Japanese universities, there are benefits and setbacks associated with EMI. On one hand, the utilization of EMI can contribute to the development of global skills and increase employment prospects which could be especially useful to increase the competitiveness of young Japanese students (Kuwamura, 2017; Tsui, 2020). Internationalization may also improve a Japanese HEI’s international ranking by demonstrating the global attractiveness of the institution and in turn attracting more students (McAleer et al., 2019). On the other hand, research suggests some obstacles such as language barriers, teacher identification issues, and teachers having to adjust their curricula (Bradford, 2019; Doiz et al., 2013; Yuan, 2023).

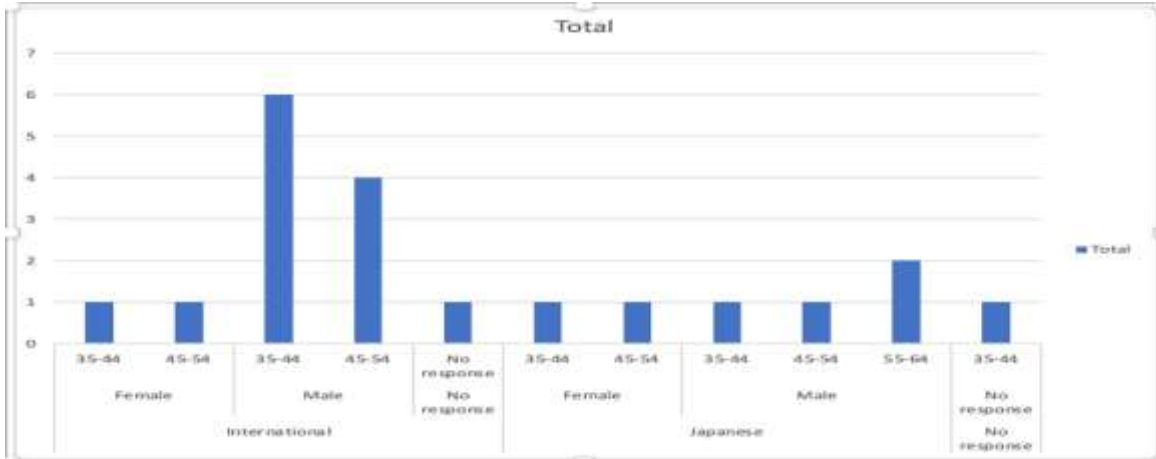
METHODOLOGY

To measure teacher perceptions regarding general impressions of EMI and sense of EMI necessity, we designed a qualitative Likert-style survey to measure these specific qualia. Two external auditors reviewed the survey for face validity. These reviewers helped us with the wording used to define EMI in the introduction of the survey. They also suggested revisions to some of the questions to ensure a universal understanding by the respondents.

Purposive sampling (Etikan et al, 2016) was employed in order to target English teachers at this institution. A link to the online survey was e-mailed to 20 participants (n=20) using the campus-wide Outlook 365 system. As Table 1 illustrates, a majority of respondents were male (70%) and international (65%). The reason for the gender discrepancy is perhaps

the result of the predominance of male professors employed by this science institution, particularly among the adjunct staff.

Table 1 Respondent demographic data including age, gender, and nationality



The reason for the larger number of international respondents perhaps reflects a greater English-speaking population among international staff members, or a greater degree of interaction among English-speaking staff, and the researcher. The response rate for this survey was high (86.9%). After initially e-mailing a survey link to potential respondents, a follow-up e-mail was sent several days later to remind respondents that their participation was very much appreciated.

FINDINGS

Before administering this survey and during the analysis process, we were primarily focused on how the data would address the research questions. In this section of the paper, we will attempt to explicate the findings based on the questions they address. We will discuss the findings in two sections: Perceptions of EMI Readiness, and Perceptions of EMI Necessity. Consulting Appendix A, you can see the survey items related to domestic student EMI readiness were 1, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, and 13. The survey items related to EMI necessity were 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 8, 14, and 15. An exhaustive analysis of the data is beyond the scope of this paper, so we will discuss the data where the mean score was above 3.95, suggesting consensus.

Perceptions of EMI Readiness

Survey item 11 read “The style of teaching in Japan is different from the West.” Among the Japanese and international staff, there was a general agreement regarding this phenomenon (M=4.25).

Table 2 and Figure 1 show that only one respondent disagreed with this item, while the majority (75%) either agreed or strongly agreed.

Table 2 Responses distributed by nationality

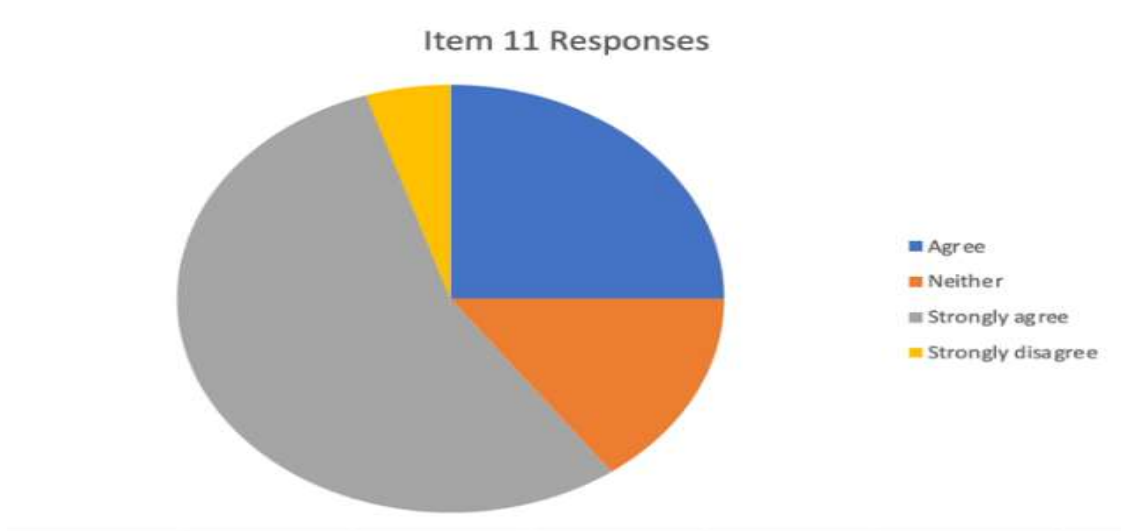
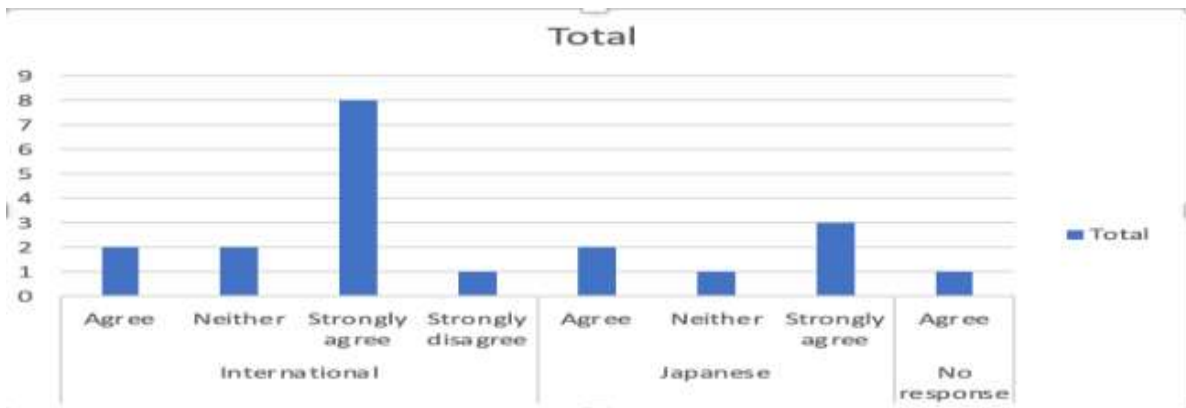


Figure 1 Visual representation of distribution

The response to this question is interesting when considering the relatively strong agreement ($M=3.95$) of item 13, which reads “When giving an opinion, domestic students (DS) seldom disagree with the teacher or peers.” This belief was greater expressed by international respondents ($M=4.15$) as compared to their Japanese counterparts ($M=3.33$). The ability to discuss opinions freely is an essential skill as EMI classes tend to favor discussion-based style lessons (Bradford, 2013; Tsuneyoshi, 2005). This suggests a perceived stylistic difference in teaching and learning approaches that might be a hindrance to EMI implementation.

Perceptions of EMI Necessity

Considering teacher perceptions of EMI necessity, there was some agreement in survey question 8 which read, “Some international students struggle trying to take classes in Japanese.” The agreement was stronger among Japanese respondents ($M=3.83$) as compared to international respondents ($M=3.23$). Presumably, Japanese teachers have more experience teaching classes using the Japanese language, while the international staff’s lack of experience might have prompted them to choose “neither agree nor disagree.” Japanese teacher perceptions regarding linguistic struggles international students face in Japanese-taught courses may point to the necessity for English-based alternatives.

Question 14 read, “EMI classes involving a mix of Japanese and international students would be beneficial for international students.” It is assumed the perceived benefit for international students would be integration rather than segregation of international students within the Japanese academic community. Kondo (2005) suggests that segregation of IS, resulting from Japanese apprehension to take EMI courses, might be a hurdle to successful EMI implementation. As can be seen in Figure 2, there was a strong agreement by both domestic and international teachers with respect to questions 14 ($M=4.4$) and 15 ($M=4.7$). This suggests that from the perspectives of the respondents, integration is preferable to segregation.

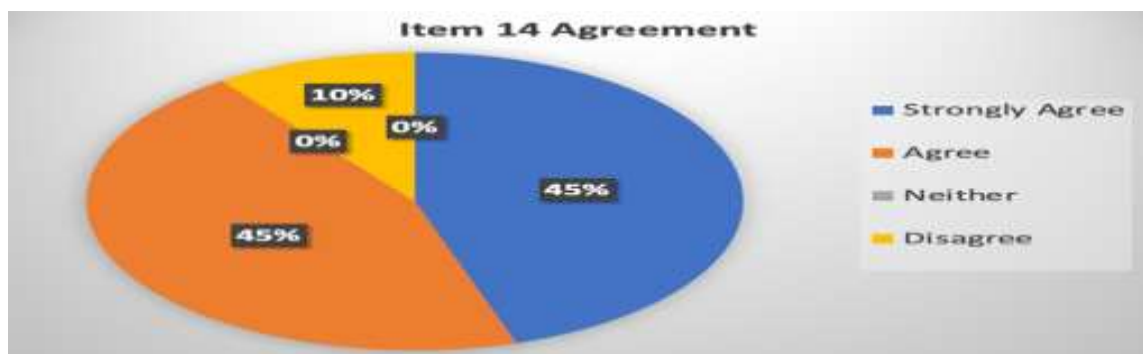


Figure 2 *Mixed EMI classes benefit IS*

Question 15 (Figure 3) which read, “EMI classes involving a mix of Japanese and international students would be beneficial for Japanese students”, showed unanimous agreement. It is assumed that this strong agreement stems from the belief that exposure to IS would benefit DS through English language exposure and intercultural relations. Aizawa (2020) concurs by suggesting that EMI exposure benefits Japanese learners regarding language ability and confidence.



Figure 3 *Mixed EMI classes benefit Japanese students*

DISCUSSION

The results of this survey indicate that the English teachers involved in this study, regardless of cultural background, perceive a difference in learning/teaching styles between Japan and the West. They also indicate that Japanese students are perhaps reluctant to disagree with teachers or peers. This is in line with Bradford (2013) who suggests that Japanese students expect to learn in a passive manner that does not involve questioning their teachers. This style of learning is markedly different from the Western style of teaching which encourages critical thinking skills and class discussions (Bradford, 2013). It is possible that exposure to the Western style of discussion-based classes may increase Japanese readiness for EMI courses. Perhaps courses designed to foster critical thinking skills, particularly courses that encourage disagreement when appropriate, may increase Japanese students' EMI readiness.

Additionally, the survey suggests that some IS may be struggling in classes taught in Japanese. This problem could be remedied by the addition of EMI courses that accommodate the learners' linguistic needs. This comports with the findings of Rakhshandehroo (2017) who found that Iranian students in Japan wished to study in English, rather than Japanese. The participants in the study (Rakhshandehroo, 2017) were surprised to find a lack of English despite being told beforehand that they would not need Japanese language skills to succeed at the university.

Finally, the survey results suggest that teachers feel both IS and DS would benefit from non-segregated EMI classes; integrating both IS and DS. This benefit, presumably, would arise from student exposure to cultural and linguistic differences. Despite this possible benefit, Morita's (2012) survey results found that EMI classes in Japanese universities tend to be segregated to IS, without a strong domestic student presence. More consideration needs to be given regarding how to better integrate IS and DS in EMI courses in such settings.

Implications to Research and Practice

This research suggests that more institutional procedures must be considered to better prepare DS for EMI and English-taught programs. JHEI respondents agreed that the style of teaching in Japan is very different from the West. More concerning is that respondents felt students in Japan are reluctant to give opinions that contradict their peers or teacher. The research presented in this paper suggests that English-taught courses favor discussion-based learning. This environment presumably makes expressing one's individuality and opinions essential.

More research is needed regarding the mechanisms that can better prepare DS, Japanese institutions and IS for EMI and English-taught programs in Japanese higher education. Despite problems Japanese students may face acclimating to EMI courses, there was a consensus among respondents regarding the necessity for English-taught courses at the science university where they teach. Responses to the survey questions, particularly among Japanese educators, suggest that IS struggle to learn in Japanese-taught courses. There is also a unanimous consensus that EMI courses involving a mix of DS and IS would benefit Japanese students, presumably through the exchange of language and cultural values. There was also a consensus that the exchange would benefit IS as well. Such agreement on these positive aspects supports the need for further examination leading to the effective implementation of EMI programs at this and other similar universities.

CONCLUSION

This paper examined perceptions regarding EMI held by teachers at a prominent Japanese university. The findings suggest that teachers perceive Western styles of education as being significantly different from Eastern styles. In particular, when giving an opinion, Japanese students may feel compelled to agree with their peers and teachers. Considering English courses typically involve discussion-based approaches to learning (Bradford, 2013), this preference to agree may present challenges for discussion-based classes.

Teachers in this study also indicated that international students may struggle to study in classes primarily taught in Japanese. This may point to a need for courses taught in alternative languages, such as English. Teachers suggested that courses taught in English would benefit both domestic and international students presumably through multicultural and multilinguistic exposure.

Future Research

The findings in this paper could be better understood through future research involving several qualitative tools. Semi-structured interviews, for example, could lead to a clearer picture of the phenomenon being addressed in the survey. The findings suggest that Japanese students may be reluctant to give their opinions, but does not explain why this proclivity exists. It is not known if the reluctance to give opinions is the result of societal pressures. Teachers also indicated that EMI classes could benefit all student stakeholders, but it is not known how this benefits manifests. It is assumed by the researchers that these perceived benefits arise through multicultural and multilingual exposure. Surveys paired with semistructured interviews could elucidate the perception among teachers regarding EMI benefits.

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Appendix A

Educator Perspectives on English-Language Instruction and Internationalization

Research questions:

How do JHEI educators perceive the readiness of domestic students for EMI education?

How do JHEI educators perceive the necessity for EMI?

Research Goal: This survey will be given to both Japanese and international English teachers. The goal is to understand teacher perspectives regarding Internationalization in Japanese Higher Education and English as a Medium of Instruction (EMI).

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Introduction: Below you will find 15 statements regarding English as a Medium of Instruction, or “EMI”, and internationalization of Japanese universities. EMI is essentially content courses being taught in English rather than the national language of the country. Internationalization briefly has to do with the number of international students and staff, and how the university accommodates these members. These statements relate to Tokyo University of Science (TUS). Please indicate the degree to which you agree with the statement. 5 being a strong agreement, and 1 being a strong disagreement.

Answers Choices

5	–	strongly	agree		
4	–		agree		
3	–	neither	agree	nor	disagree
2	–		disagree		
1	– strongly disagree				

Questions

1. The international student population at TUS is small.
2. International students, for the most part, have an academically appropriate level of English.
3. International undergraduate students at TUS have an academically appropriate level of Japanese.

4. International graduate students at TUS have an academically appropriate level of Japanese.
5. International undergraduates must have Japanese language skills.
6. International graduate students must have Japanese language skills.
7. Information given to students (memos, e-mails, letters, websites) is often both in Japanese and English.
8. Some international students struggle trying to take classes in Japanese.
9. If EMI classes were available, Japanese students would be afraid to join.
10. Japanese students are ready to take EMI classes.
11. The style of teaching in Japan is different from the West.
12. Japanese students prefer lectures to discussion-type classes.
13. When giving an opinion, Japanese students seldom disagree with the teacher or peers.
14. EMI classes involving a mix of Japanese and international students would be beneficial for international students.
15. EMI classes involving a mix of Japanese and international students would be beneficial for Japanese students.

Demographic Questions

The following are questions about your demographic position. Please select “Prefer not to answer” if you are uncomfortable answering.

Age

- (1) 21-29
- (2) 30-39
- (3) 40-49
- (4) 50-59
- (5) 60-69
- (7) 70 or older
- (0) Prefer not to answer

Nationality

- (1) Japanese
- (2) International
- (0) Prefer not to answer

What is the gender you identify as?

- (1) Male
- (2) Female
- (3) Other
- (0) Prefer not to answer

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Thank you for your time. Please feel free to contact me if you have questions about the survey, your participation, or the results.