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Krishan KUSABA

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草場 クリシャン

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Abstract

The research on students of their post-English placement test attitudes has not been extensively explored; therefore, this paper aims to explore student's attitudes towards placement test results. It also aims to gain an insight into how these results have influenced their general attitudes towards their studies within their assigned classes. 65 students responded to a questionnaire, using a Likert scale, that questioned their attitudes towards each of the classes for the four skills and grammar that they were placed into and whether they were content with their placement. The outcome of the research was that the surveyed population were content overall with their assigned classes, felt motivated to study and had positive feelings towards their classes and studies. However, it also highlighted that the number of those who agreed with their assigned class levels for receptive skills was much larger than those for productive skills. This means that slight amendments may need to be made to the testing process.

概要

これまで、英語のプレイスメントテストに対する学習者の意識を扱った研究はあまりなされてこなかった。本論文は、プレイスメントテストの結果に対する学習者の反応を調べることを目的としたものである。また、本論文では、指定されたクラスにおいてプレイスメントテストの結果が一般的学習態度にどのような影響を与えたかについても考察を行う。調査にはリッカート尺度が用いられ、65名の生徒に対して、指定された4技能のためのクラスと文法のためのクラスそれぞれにおいて、どのような態度で授業に臨んでいるか、また、プレイスメントテストそのものをどの程度満足しているか、の質問がなされた。調査の結果、概して、学生がプレイスメントテストによるクラス指定に満足しており、それぞれのクラスや勉強内容を好意的に捉え、意欲的に取り組んでいることが明らかになった。しかしながら、同時に、プレイスメントテストによるクラス指定の満足度は産出中心の授業より理解中心の授業においてかなり高く、プレイスメントテストに若干の修正が必要となってくることが浮き彫りとなった。

Keywords: Placement testing, English Language Education, Student Attitudes

キーワード：プレイスメントテスト、英語教育、学習者の態度

Introduction

Placement testing is a complex yet necessary function in language education. Davies et al. (1999) describe it as a form of assessment with the intended purpose *'to provide information which will help place students in appropriate classes'* (p 145). They also further this by describing that the tests themselves have the potential to serve an additional function where teachers can use the data from placement testing as a diagnostic tool, with regards to specific students, *'to inform their course planning'* (ibid). They may not be as accurate down to the points based system of TOEFL or the bands of IELTS, and even though there are always a few individuals who may be misplaced during a round of testing, the overall impact of such tests are usually reliable when aligning students to a level of language study that best complements their linguistic needs.

Like all tests, not limited to language tests, reliability and validity are key component behind them. In the event of a test lacking reliability, its consistency and dependability are removed and hence the test is invalid. Reliability is primarily concerned with the practice that if the same test is implemented with multiple students on different occasions, these being the same students or those that are matched at similar levels, then similar results should be generated (Brown, 2004, p 20; McNamara, 2000). Therefore, a test needs to accurately test what it sets out to test. Davis et al. (1999) defines test validity as *'the extent to which it succeeds in providing an accurate concrete representation of an abstract concept'* (p 221). In the context of English language placement testing, if multiple students with similar language proficiency take the test, it is expected that they will be placed into the same levels. Should this fail to occur, then both the reliability and validity of a test are called into question, and the test would be unfair and unusable.

Empirical data about the reliability or validity of a placement test can be a great asset to an institution. However, the attitudes of those who have undergone the test and have been placed into a class that reflects their ability can also act as a check of test validity and reliability, due to student's hesitation report a problem should they feel that they were inaccurately placed.

Background

The educational climate of the teaching of English in Japanese schools has, in decades past, primarily focused on receptive skills with some attention been giving to writing (Negishi, 2009). The communicative features of language study, namely speaking, have until recently taken a backseat in English language education. This has resulted in the communicative aptitude of Japanese schools students being criticised as being very low, even though the average student has progressed through a six year period of mandatory English language study as a core subject in the school curriculum (Ruegg, 2009). In recent years the Japanese government has implemented countermeasures, such as raising the language requirements for English teachers and considerably increasing the number of foreigners from English-speaking countries to work as assistant language teachers in the Japanese school system. The Ministry of Education has placed a greater level of

effort into the awareness of English communicative skills and made it an essential element within their framework (Iwai, 2009). With the Olympics coming to Japan in 2020, communication has become an essential part of English language education; however, as with all new initiatives the implementation is slow, especially with teachers already set in their ways. This means that students entering into universities in Japan to study English come from very mixed backgrounds of English education, which may possibly impact their class placement and higher education studies.

Students entering into an English as a foreign/second language programme at university in Japan are usually placed into classes that focus on the four skills of language, reading, listening, speaking, and writing, and often also have to sit a grammar test. The majority of students have already had some experience in taking a proficiency tests, such as Eiken or TOEIC, and, even though these can give a representation of their overall language ability, it is still prudent to probe each language skill, and place them into a skills class that matches their ability in order to help develop that specific skill. The placement test currently used by the department is split into three components, with all scoring positioned against the levels designed by the Council of Europe's CEFR levels (Hawkins & Filipovic, 2012; Council Of Europe, 2014; North, 2014).

The first component is a computer-based English language test that assesses their reading, grammar, and listening skills. The second is an interview-based test with a native English speaking staff member who checks a student's spoken competence and comprehension in a conversation. The final part is a written test, where they are given a choice of two essay-style questions, and they have to select one and write about it. The student's written ability, task completion, and sentence and paragraph structure, among several other items, are examined.

As with all tests there are limitations, specifically with speaking-based exams. Speaking is almost always evaluated in the form of a one-on-one interview and performance can really be altered by the observer's paradox (Labov, 1972; Wei, 1994; Campbell, 2010). Fortunately, the majority of students taking the test have already had experience, with English spoken interviews, albeit limited and in a highly structured format, as in most schools it is an English language studies requirement to undertake the Japanese Eiken (English proficiency) exams. Care is also always taken to ensure that the test is administered fairly, and in the exact same way for all participants. Another limitation, as previously mentioned with regards to the school system, is that communicative English may prove to be a weakness with a number of students due to the receptive skill focus in school English education. This means that their receptive skill confidence may surpass their communicative confidence leading to an imbalance of attitudes towards their class placements.

Aims and Hypothesis

This paper does not aim to critique the placement test itself, but aims to look at the opinions of those who have taken the test and been placed in classes because of it. Therefore, the following research questions have

been proposed:

1. Based on the students' responses, did the students feel well represented with regards to their levels for reading, grammar, listening, conversation and composition? In short, did they feel that they were accurately placed?
2. What impact did being placed in the classes have on their overall motivation and attitudes towards their studies?

It is hypothesised that the tests will have accurately placed the majority of students into levels that reflect their language ability, and the students have a positive attitude towards their placement. In addition, their motivation and attitudes towards their studies is hypothesised to be overall positive and that the test will have served its purpose by accurately placing them.

Data Collection Procedures

For the data collection component of the research, multiple procedures were considered with the main two being interviews and questionnaires. Interviews were discounted as a method for data collection for multiple reasons, namely the factor of time and the difficulty in implementing a Likert-type scale with questions relating to attitude (Dörnyei, 2007). Even though the questionnaires were delivered randomly to students throughout the department, no final-year students were surveyed as the majority of them were away doing research for their graduation dissertations or at seminars for career planning during the data collection period. Therefore, first to third-year students were surveyed with the majority of these being first and second-year students, mainly because the first years had experienced the placement test only a few months prior, and the second years had themselves completed their first academic year in the classes in which they were placed. Although some had moved levels since they had taken the test over a year prior to the questionnaire being implemented, they were asked to reflect on their experiences after their initial placement.

A total of 87 questionnaires were delivered to students throughout the foreign languages department. Out of these 9 were never returned and 78 were received; however, 13 of these were unusable for analysis as entire sections of the questionnaires were either absent, had multiple questions that were double checked, or were returned blank. Therefore, the total sample size that was used for analysis in this research was 65 questionnaires. Among those who responded to the questionnaire, there were 20 males and 45 females; thus making up around 30 percent and 70 percent respectively of the surveyed population. The number of students registered in modern English came in at 56 and the number registered as international communications (where they study French, German, Korean, or Chinese as well as English) students was 9. As for the number of participants per university year, there were 30 first-year, 26 second-year, and 9 third-

year students who responded. Although it does not reflect the whole population of the more than 500 students in the department, it could be used to give a general idea of the students' attitudes towards the English language placement test. The first four questions were general questions about their gender, university year, language focus, and the level that they were placed into after taking the placement test (See appendix). The next section was arranged into 5 blocks of questions, each organised into sets of 8 questions each which enquired about their attitudes towards their class placement in each language skill with these being reading, grammar, listening, conversation and composition respectively, for a total of 45 questions (questions 5-44). The final 12 questions (questions 45-56) were related to their overall attitudes towards their class placement and their English language studies.

Although student's attitudes towards different items were asked, questions that relate to their correct placement in each language skill, overall attitudes towards placement, and their feelings towards study were favoured. In the analysis of data for questionnaires there are multiple ways that the data can be interpreted. The major concern for this paper is to look at the overall number of students and how they feel about various aspects of their class placement. Questionnaire data was coded into using SPSS statistics software version 24 by IBM, as this program is extremely efficient at data-checking analysis compared with other software platforms such as Excel.

Findings and evaluation

For all data sets expressed in this section, strongly agree and agree have been combined to represent the overall opinions for "agree", and the same has been implemented with "strongly disagree" and "disagree". This first group of items examined were the student's attitudes towards their class placement for each of the four skills and grammar:

Table 1: Number and percentage of students and their attitudes towards their placement in each class.

Class	No. of students <u>agree</u> with their placement		No. of students that <u>disagree</u> with their placement		No. of students that <u>neither agree nor disagree</u> with placement	
	No. of Students	Percentage	No. of Students	Percentage	No. of Students	Percentage
Reading	53	81.6%	4	6.2%	8	12.3%
Grammar	48	73.8%	6	9.2%	11	16.9%
Listening	57	87.7%	3	4.6%	5	7.7%
Conversation	44	67.7%	10	15.4%	11	16.9%
Composition	45	69.2%	8	12.3%	12	18.5%
Average	49.4	76.0%	6.2	9.54%	9.4	14.46%

The table shows that overall student population agrees with their class placement level. The weakest of the five is conversation with 44 students agreeing that they were correctly placed, and it holds the largest number of those who disagree with around the same number who were neutral. Listening and reading turned out to be the most accurate data sets with agreement of class placement standing at more than 80% and a disagreement of less than 7% for both.

Table 2: Number and percentage of students and their overall attitudes towards their class placement.

Overall Attitudes	No. of students who are <u>happy</u> with their placements		No. of students who are <u>unhappy</u> with their placements		No. of students that <u>neither</u> happy nor unhappy with their placements	
	No. of Students	Percentage	No. of Students	Percentage	No. of Students	Percentage
Totals	51	78.5%	5	7.7%	9	13.8%

The overall attitudes of students towards their class placements were positive, meaning that out of the 65 participants, 51 of them were happy with the results. However, the results also show that this number is still only just over three quarters of the total surveyed population, which ideally needs to be much higher. Therefore, the effectiveness of the placement tests needs to be re-evaluated and amended so as to increase the accuracy of placing students in the right levels.

Table 3: Number and percentage of students and their overall motivation because of their class placement.

Motivation overall	No. of students who <u>feel</u> motivated because of their class placement		No. of students who <u>do not</u> feel motivated because of their class placement		No. of students who are <u>neither</u> motivated nor demotivated	
	No. of Students	Percentage	No. of Students	Percentage	No. of Students	Percentage
Totals:	44	67.7%	7	10.8%	14	21.5%

The above table shows that around two thirds of the students feel motivated due to their class placement, a number that is close to the number of students who were happy with their class placement; with less than a quarter of students feeling neither motivated nor demotivated. The low number of students who did not feel motivated added to the reliability of the placement test meaning that students were accurately placed in classes that suited their levels and could benefit their learning.

Table 4: Number and percentage of students who felt their class placements will strengthen their English ability.

Overall Attitudes	No. of students who <u>feel</u> that their English ability will strengthen		No. of students who <u>do not</u> feel their English ability will strengthen		No. of students who feel their English ability will remain unchanged	
	No. of Students	Percentage	No. of Students	Percentage	No. of Students	Percentage
Totals	53	81.5%	0	0%	12	18.5%

Linked to the content in the previous table, this table, although not directly stated, also examined the students' motivation of their studies. A large majority of the students feel that their English ability will strengthen as a result of their class placement, despite previous tables showing slightly lower numbers with happiness and motivation. Even though there were students who had negative attitudes in previous tables, no one believed that their English would *not* improve as a result of their class placement. This continues the trend shown in the previous tables that the placement test exhibited a good level of accuracy and validity.

Conclusions

The use of Likert scaling in questionnaires cannot guarantee to give a perfectly accurate representation of

people's attitudes towards something; however it is a useful tool to gaining an insight into what they perceive. This questionnaire has shown that, overall, the students surveyed in the data felt happy with their placement, and as a result their classes have had a positive influence on their studies, both with their attitudes towards their motivation, and the belief that their assigned classes will strength their English ability. This can therefore lead to the conclusion that the placement tests used to assign students to classes, specifically the reading and listening results, are reliable in determining skill levels and placing students into the relevant class. The lower results found only on the conversation and composition sections could be attributed to what was mentioned about the English language educational climate as outlined in the introduction section of this paper; language education focused on only certain skill sets. It may also be that students overestimated their abilities and were upset about their placement, and thus scored their responses as disagreeing.

In conclusion, despite the lower than expected results of certain sections, the questionnaire has shown that the majority of students are content with their overall class placements, and that the placement testing was successful. However, it also showed that the process is not as accurate as it could be, meaning that the test components should be re-examined. This research has also demonstrated that looking at students' attitudes towards placement testing also acts as a kind of feedback for the tests themselves; therefore it may be prudent for institutions to implement questionnaires in order to check students' thoughts, as well as to highlight any weakness within the testing system that could be amended to better serve future students.

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Appendix

**2017 Level Placement Questionnaire on student's attitudes towards
Level placement and Learning**

Thank you very much for agreeing to take part in questionnaire about language skills and English studies. Any information that you provide will remain confidential and anonymous throughout my research. Therefore, your name or student number should **NOT** be written down. Should you not wish to participate, please do not write anything and hand in this questionnaire with everyone else.

英語の能力と英語の勉強についてのアンケートの参加に同意して頂きありがとうございます。提供された情報は私の研究を通して、匿名の機密保持されますので、お名前や学生番号を絶対に記載しないで下さい。参加したくない場合は、何も書かずにそのままの状態での皆さんと一緒にアンケートを提出して下さい。

Thank you very much. ありがとうございます。

Krishan Kumar クリシャン・クマー

- Please tick (☑) only one box for each question. 各質問に一つのボックスのみチェック(☑)して下さい。
- Please answer all questions by yourself. These are your thoughts. このアンケートは自分の考えでありますので、自分で全ての質問に回答して下さい。

Section 1: General Information

1. What gender are you? 性別は?

Male	男性	<input type="checkbox"/>
Female	女性	<input type="checkbox"/>

2. What year are you in? 何年生?

1 st Year	1年生	<input type="checkbox"/>	3 rd Year	3年生	<input type="checkbox"/>
2 nd Year	2年生	<input type="checkbox"/>	4 th Year	4年生	<input type="checkbox"/>

3. What is your main focus of language study? 言語の専攻は?

Modern English Studies 現代英語	<input type="checkbox"/>	International Communications 国際コミュニケーション	<input type="checkbox"/>
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4. What English classes were you placed into when you started university?
大学に入学した時、どのレベルの英語のクラスに配置されましたか?

4.1 Reading	Reading 1	<input type="checkbox"/>	Reading 4	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Reading 2	<input type="checkbox"/>	Reading 5	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Reading 3	<input type="checkbox"/>		
4.2 Grammar	Grammar 1	<input type="checkbox"/>	Grammar 4	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Grammar 2	<input type="checkbox"/>	Grammar 5	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Grammar 3	<input type="checkbox"/>		
4.3 Listening	Listening 1	<input type="checkbox"/>	Listening 4	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Listening 2	<input type="checkbox"/>	Listening 5	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Listening 3	<input type="checkbox"/>		
4.4 Conversation	Conversation 1	<input type="checkbox"/>	Conversation 3	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Conversation 2	<input type="checkbox"/>	Conversation 4	<input type="checkbox"/>
4.5 Composition	Composition 1	<input type="checkbox"/>	Composition 4	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Composition 2	<input type="checkbox"/>	Composition 5	<input type="checkbox"/>
	Composition 3	<input type="checkbox"/>		

Section 2: Attitudes towards Level placement

Please answer the following questions about your opinions on language levels.

言語レベルのあなたの意見について下記の質問に答えて下さい。

There are 5 options per question: 一つの質問につき、5つの選択肢があります。

- | | |
|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 = I strongly disagree • 2 = I disagree • 3 = I neither agree nor disagree • 4 = I agree • 5 = I strongly agree | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 1 = 全く思わない • 2 = 思わない • 3 = どちらとも言えない • 4 = 思う • 5 = とても強く思う |
|--|--|

Questions 5 – 44 Attitudes towards each Level Placement	1	2	3	4	5
Example: I think it is important to study hard.					✓
例：一生懸命勉強をするのが大事なことだと思う					
~~~Reading~~~	1	2	3	4	5
5. I think that I was placed in the correct reading class. 私はリーディングの授業のクラス分けが正しかったと思う。					
6. I think that I was <i>not</i> placed in the correct reading class. 私はリーディングの授業のクラス分けは正しくなかったと思う。					
7. I feel that the reading class content is too <i>easy</i> . リーディング授業の内容は簡単すぎると思う。					
8. I feel that the reading class content is <i>just right</i> . リーディング授業の内容はちょうどいいと思う。					
9. I feel that the reading class content is too <i>difficult</i> . リーディング授業の内容は難しすぎると思う。					
10. I believe that I should move <i>up</i> a reading level. リーディング授業で上のレベルに上がるべきだと思う					
11. I believe that I should <i>stay in</i> my current reading level. リーディング授業で現在と同じレベルにとどまるべきだと思う。					
12. I believe that I should move <i>down</i> a reading level. リーディング授業で下のレベルに下がるべきだと思う。					
~~~Grammar~~~	1	2	3	4	5
13. I think that I was placed in the correct grammar class. 私は英文法の授業のクラス分けが正しかったと思う。					
14. I think that I was <i>not</i> placed in the correct grammar class. 私は英文法の授業のクラス分けは正しくなかったと思う。					
15. I feel that the grammar class content is too <i>easy</i> . 英文法授業の内容は簡単すぎると思う。					
16. I feel that the grammar class content is <i>just right</i> . 英文法授業の内容はちょうどいいと思う。					
17. I feel that the grammar class content is too <i>difficult</i> . 英文法授業の内容は難しすぎると思う。					
18. I believe that I should move <i>up</i> a grammar level. 英文法授業で上のレベルに上がるべきだと思う					
19. I believe that I should <i>stay in</i> my current grammar level. 英文法授業で現在と同じレベルにとどまるべきだと思う。					
20. I believe that I should move <i>down</i> a grammar level. 英文法授業で下のレベルに下がるべきだと思う。					
~~~Listening~~~	1	2	3	4	5
21. I think that I was placed in the correct listening class. 私はリスニングの授業のクラス分けが正しかったと思う。					
22. I think that I was <i>not</i> placed in the correct listening class. 私はリスニングの授業のクラス分けは正しくなかったと思う。					
23. I feel that the listening class content is too <i>easy</i> . リスニング授業の内容は簡単すぎると思う。					
24. I feel that the listening class content is <i>just right</i> . リスニング授業の内容はちょうどいいと思う。					
25. I feel that the listening class content is too <i>difficult</i> . リスニング授業の内容は難しすぎると思う。					
26. I believe that I should move <i>up</i> a listening level. リスニング授業で上のレベルに上がるべきだと思う					
27. I believe that I should <i>stay in</i> my current listening level.					

リスニング授業で現在と同じレベルにとどまるべきだと思う。					
28. I believe that I should move <i>down</i> a listening level. リスニング授業で下のレベルに下がるべきだと思う。					
<b>~~~Conversation~~~</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
29. I think that I was placed in the correct conversation class. 私はスピーキングの授業のクラス分けが正しかったと思う。					
30. I think that I was <i>not</i> placed in the correct conversation class. 私はスピーキングの授業のクラス分けは正しくなかったと思う。					
31. I feel that the conversation class content is <i>too easy</i> . スピーキング授業の内容は簡単すぎると思う。					
32. I feel that the conversation class content is <i>just right</i> . スピーキング授業の内容はちょうどいいと思う。					
	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
33. I feel that the conversation class content is <i>too difficult</i> . スピーキング授業の内容は難しすぎると思う					
34. I believe that I should move <i>up</i> a conversation level. スピーキング授業で上のレベルに上がるべきだと思う。					
35. I believe that I should <i>stay in</i> my current conversation level. スピーキング授業で現在と同じレベルにとどまるべきだと思う。					
36. I believe that I should move <i>down</i> a conversation level. スピーキング授業で下のレベルに下がるべきだと思う。					
<b>~~~Composition~~~</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
37. I think that I was placed in the correct composition class. 私はライティング授業のクラス分けが正しかったと思う。					
38. I think that I was <i>not</i> placed in the correct composition class. 私はライティングの授業のクラス分けは正しくなかったと思う。					
39. I feel that the composition class content is <i>too easy</i> . ライティング授業の内容は簡単すぎると思う。					
40. I feel that the composition class content is <i>just right</i> . ライティング授業の内容はちょうどいいと思う。					
41. I feel that the composition class content is <i>too difficult</i> . ライティング授業の内容は難しすぎると思う。					
42. I believe that I should move <i>up</i> a composition level. ライティング授業で上のレベルに上がるべきだと思う					
43. I believe that I should <i>stay in</i> my current composition level. ライティング授業で現在と同じレベルにとどまるべきだと思う。					
44. I believe that I should move <i>down</i> a composition level. ライティング授業で下のレベルに下がるべきだと思う。					

<b>Questions 45 – 56 General attitudes towards placed classes</b>	<b>1</b>	<b>2</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>4</b>	<b>5</b>
45. In general, I am happy with my class placement results in the programme. 一般的に私は授業のプレースメントテストクラスの結果に満足している。					
46. In general, I am <i>not</i> happy with my class placement results in the programme. 一般的に私は授業のプレースメントテストクラスの結果に不満だ。					
47. Being placed in these classes has made me feel <i>good</i> about my studies. これらのクラス分けにより、私の勉強に対する気分が上がった。					
48. Being placed in these classes has made me feel <i>bad</i> about my studies. これらのクラス分けにより、私の勉強についての気分が下がった。					
49. I feel <i>demotivated</i> because of my class placement. 今のクラス分けに失望的である。					
50. I feel <i>motivated</i> because of my class placement. 今のクラス分けによって気合が入っている。					
51. I feel that being placed in these levels will <i>strengthen</i> my English ability. これらのレベルの授業のクラス分けによって、私の英語能力が強化されると思う。					
52. I feel that being placed in these levels will <i>weaken</i> my English ability. これらのレベルの授業のクラス分けによって、私の英語能力が弱化すると思う。					
53. Because of the placement results, I think that I <i>have to work harder</i> outside of class to improve my ability. クラス分けの結果により、私は自分の能力を向上させるために授業以外でもっと勉強しなければならないと思う。					
54. Because of the placement results, I think that I <i>do not have work harder</i> outside of class to improve my ability.					

クラス分けの結果により、自分の能力向上のために授業以外でもっと勉強しなくて良いと思う。					
55. I feel that being placed in these classes has made me want to participate <i>more</i> in class. これらのレベルへの クラス分けの結果により、授業にもっと参加したいと思うようになった。					
56. I feel that being placed in these classes has made me want to participate <i>less</i> in class. これらのレベルへの クラス分けの結果により、授業中に参加したくないと感じる。					

**This concludes the questionnaire. Thank you very much for your time and cooperation.**

アンケートは終わりです。お時間とご協力ありがとうございました。

