Is the Message Getting Through?

An Analysis of Information Accessibility to Support and Services Meant for Foreign Residents With Limited Japanese Proficiency

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Abstract

When referring to gaining proper medical care in Japan, the Council of Local Authorities for International Relations (CLAIR, 2018) website mentioned that foreign residents often need to overcome three additional metaphorical walls when compared to most Japanese residents: a language barrier, an organizational one, and a psychological barrier. However, these three walls/obstacles exist in other aspects of daily life and emergency situations for foreign residents as well. In an effort to lower these walls local international associations, municipal governments, NPOs, and other volunteer organizations provide services, workshops, classes, and information (For example, Nagoya International Center & Aichi Medical Interpreting System). This research is an analysis of the current state of information access in languages beyond Japanese by international centers, branches, municipality websites, and other resources centers focusing on supporting foreign residents and/or those with limited Japanese proficiency within Aichi Prefecture. I based this on the following research questions: (1) What kind of information is made most and least available and to what extent? (2) How easily can the information be found from the home pages? (3) How accurate, up-to-date, and comprehensible is the available information? Data was collected by checking each website and listing what information was available, what was missing for the non-Japanese language versions, and what sites used incomprehensible language or translation software to a point that the information became misleading. I then conclude with recommendations of language and essential information such websites should prioritize on providing and model websites that could be used as a basis of improving the quality of information presented on other locales' websites.

Key words : Electronic Communication, Cultural Studies, Governance, Second Language Studies, Social Issues, Immigration Studies

Introduction

According to the Ministry of Justice (MOJ) (2019a), 2019 Japan saw a 6.6% increase in the number of foreign residents. In fact, Japan's foreign resident population has been increasing for the past eight years straight as can be seen in Table 1 below (MOJ, 2019b). Aichi Prefecture ranked

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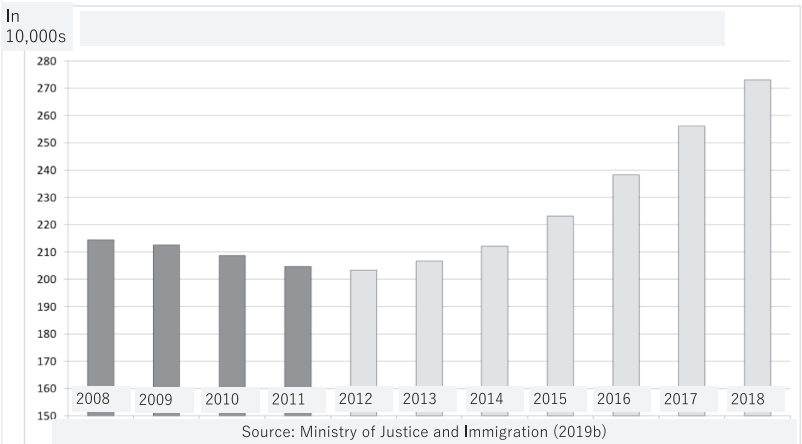
2nd, with a total of 250,952 (MOJ, 2019a). For more details on foreign resident populations in Japan see Figure 1. In December 2018, half of Aichi's foreign residents were citizens from either Brazil, China, The Philippines, or Vietnam (MOJ, 2018). This increase comes with a need to not only find places to learn Japanese for daily life, but for multilingual access to services and information necessary for daily living and in the case of emergencies or national disasters. The first place anyone can search for such information would be the Internet. In Aichi Prefecture, all municipalities have websites. In addition, many international centers and branches have them as well. However, how much of this information can foreign residents access information in their first language?

Table 1 Total Number of Foreign Residents From 2008−2018



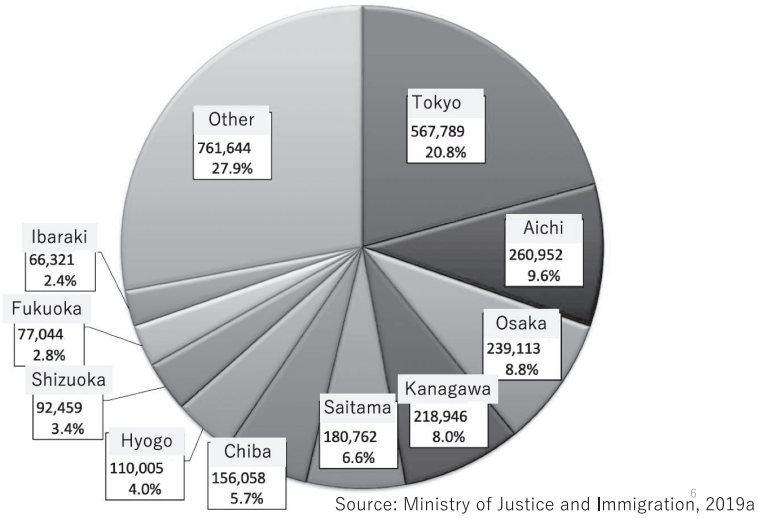


Figure 1 Number of Foreign Residents by Prefecture

Although it is a reasonable request to learn the language of the country if you plan to live there, it takes a long time to acquire language proficiency. In a paper (Jackson & Kaplan, 1999) analyzing language attainment time in the Foreign Service Institute (FSI), it was estimated based on success levels of 50 years of data that approximately two-thirds of students who intensively studied for 1,100 hours were able to gain basic proficiency in a new language if it were similar to their first language. In the same report, the author's reported FSI estimate that to learn a language distant to one's first language, such as Japanese for an English speaker, it would take at least 2,200 hours, and one year of this study would ideally take place while living in a country where the target language is spoken (Jackson & Kaplan, 1999). In the case of Japan's policies for working visas, there is also no such language requirement before entering to work in Japan. This is also the case with the 39,600 approved to enter on the technical intern visa in Aichi which is a 16.7% increase compared to the previous year according to the Organization for Technical Intern Training (OTIT) (2019). There were 18,524 from Vietnam and 10,631 from China, which makes up about 73% of the new technical interns (OTIT, 2019). This appears to be a vulnerable population in Japan when considering that. In the year 2018, 70.1% of technical interns were working in a situation that violated labor laws (Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, 2019). The technical intern visa requires that visa holders learn Japanese upon entering Japan. With this in mind, and that all foreign residents are paying the same taxes as Japanese residents, one could make an ethical argument that information necessary for daily life and in case of emergency be provided by the government in the languages of these visa holders. These residents also should be able to access the same information and participate in the same support available to Japanese residents as they are paying for it with these taxes. For the current study, the researcher attempted to answer the following research questions: (1) What kind of information is made most and least available and to what extent? (2) How easily can the information be found from the homepages? (3) How accurate, up-to-date, and comprehensible is the available information?

Method

To gain insight on the amount of available information available to foreign residents a survey of all the municipality websites within Aichi Prefecture was conducted in February of 2020. At this time a total of 90 websites were viewed, 54 city hall or town hall websites and 36 government funded international association websites. I checked the languages available, focusing on English for quality checks as this would theoretically be the highest quality translation. My rational for choosing English for the quality check is since English is a required subject in public schools in Japan from elementary school, 5th grade. If there is an issue of quality in English, there is a high likelihood, in my opinion, that the other language translations on the website could be problematic as well.

Results and Analysis

To summarize what was found with this check there is a large amount of improvement that can be done in order to make more accessible local information for foreign residents in Aichi prefecture. Figure 2 is a visual summary of language accessibility from the websites.

One problematic issue was datedness of information. The least up to date found was from Tsushima City, with their most up-to-date information being 4 years old. Another website by the Toyokawa International Association used displayed Spanish when clicking on the English option. For the 43 websites that used translation software, one frequent problem occurred with legibility of the English in a table form. This happened frequently for information regarding the times or days of Japanese language classes, and call center hours that had set times or days for specific languages. A specific problem with translation software between a language like English is that oftentimes the Japanese lacked the subject, causing translation software to create a random subject such as "I" when that was not the topic of the text. In order to clarify this please see Appendix A for some screenshots of these websites taken in February 2020 to give examples of some of the above issues.

Conclusion

All in all many of the information access issues located in these pubic websites could be fixed. I would recommend the following solutions: (1) At the very least, add the google translate bar to the website. Other internal translation software (3 other types were used) were nearly incomprehensible (2) Language selection icons should be in the specified language (many sites used "foreign language", "for foreigners", "multilingual" Sites could link to more accessible pages (e.g. Nagoya International Center).
(3) Use of "one stop centers" to translate news information could be translated from top-down, especially for emergency information (4) Set-up template forms for address changes, education enrollment, etc., could also be scanned onto the website and made available at the locations (5)

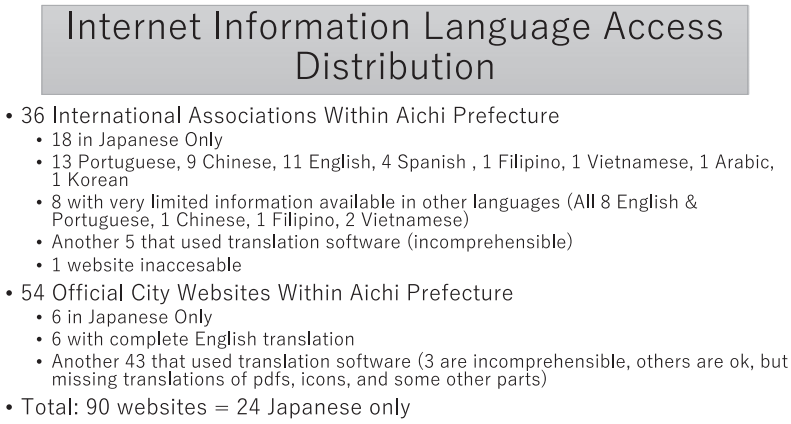


Figure 2

Work visas could require a certain amount of Japanese knowledge and/or required training/course/test for emergency situations procedures (e.g. earthquake safety)

(6) Keep in mind that language is one of many barriers to participating in the local community for foreign residents. More promotion of ways to engage need to be made for them and Japanese people as well.

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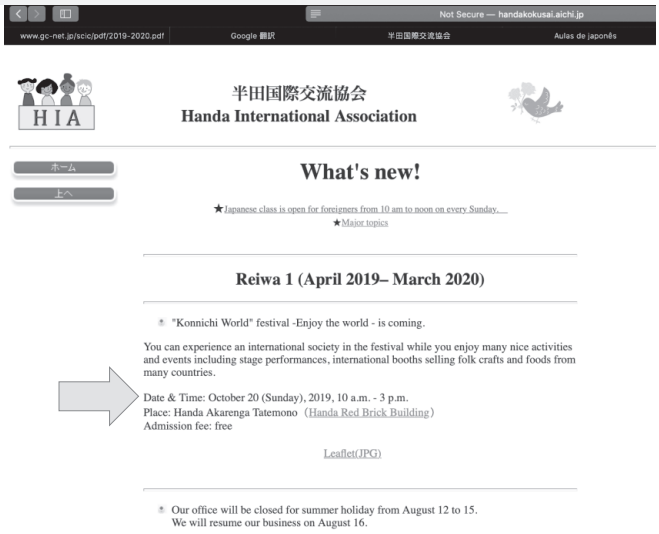
Appendix A

Screenshots from February 2020 of Problematic Access Examples in Municipal Websites

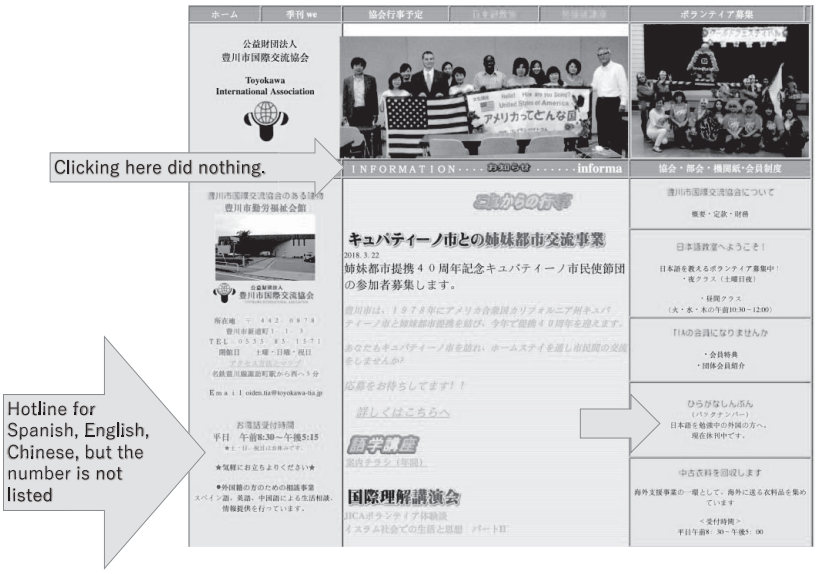
Example 1: Datedness

Japanese only with very out of date information (from 2016)

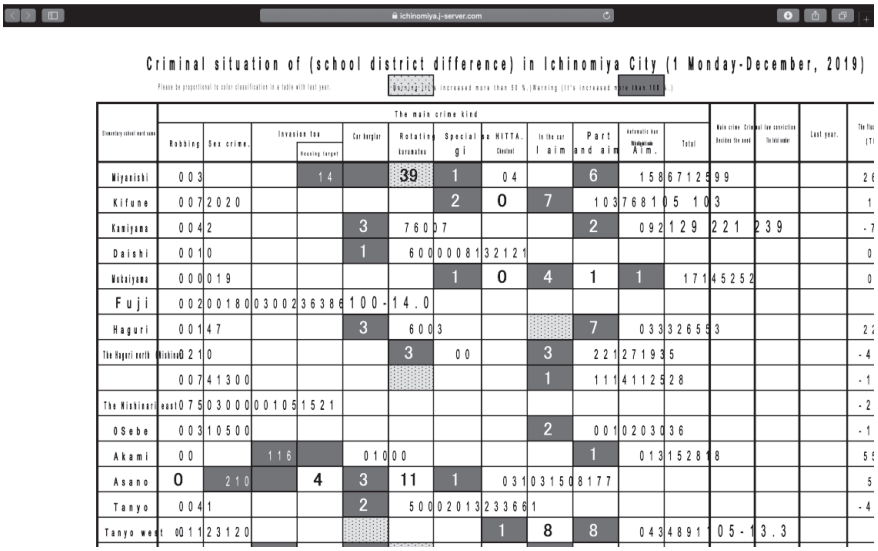
Information that is not up-to-date



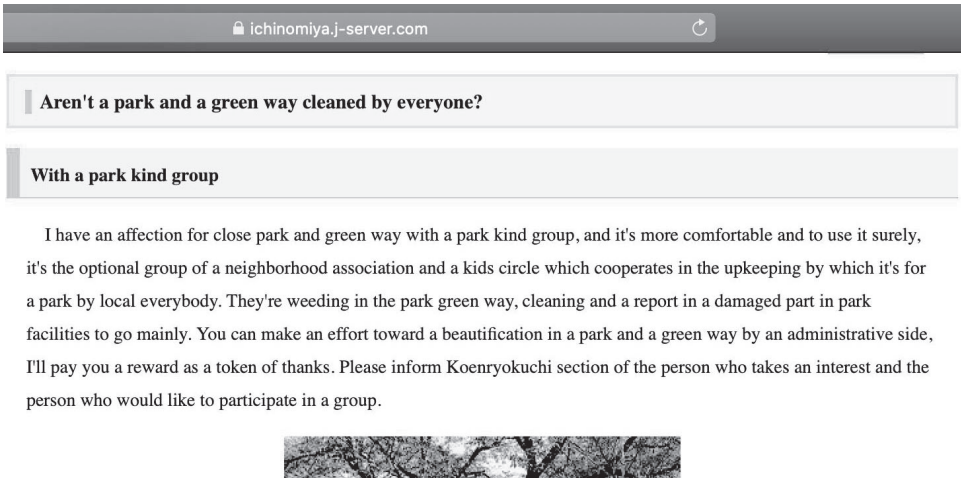
Example 2: Technical issues & information meant for speakers without Japanese Language ability is only available in Japanese.



Example 3: Table legibility issue when clicking on the English option.



Example 4: Unclear Meaning of Translations by Automatic Insertion of Subjects from Subject-less Japanese Text



Example 5: Wrong Language (English option displays Spanish)

Example 6: Misleading Translation “shoot foreigners”