

Foreign Resident Voices on Information Access

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to investigate the current level of accessibility to public information and public services intended to facilitate foreign residents with limited-Japanese proficiency. This paper provides a summary and comparative analysis of the initial findings of survey of 90 websites and the responses of 38 English-speaking foreign residents' online questionnaire. The analysis focused on the of multilingual availability and quality of international centers and local municipalities information meant for foreign residents compared to where the respondents' reported how they obtain information for daily life, public support services, their level of trust of the information, and how they would prefer to access this information.

Keywords: integration studies, public information access, volunteers, Japanese as a second language

Who Has Access to Public Information?

In an analysis of the progress to access to information and support for foreigners in the case of a disaster published nine years after the Great East Japan Earthquake of 2011, Makuta (2020) outlined four major obstacles which continue to prevent access. These were (1) a language barrier, (2) a bias barrier, (3) a policy barrier, and (4) a culture barrier. The language used in emergency announcements, signage to evacuation locations and rules of the evacuation shelters in the most affected prefectures of the Great East Japan Earthquake had kanji heavy, confusing terminology. An underlying bias was reported against residents of Chinese nationality. With the additional from the disaster, some Chinese foreign residents were told to move to different evacuation shelters. One policy barrier occurred in the process of reissuing passports. The earthquake and resulting tsunami caused the destruction or loss of many passports. Many foreign residents I wanted to return to their country of citizenship however could not return due to this even without a place to stay. In addition, for those whose visa was near expiration, they were forced to overstay their visa. This occurred since they were awaiting the replacement of their lost passports and could not stay or leave the

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country. A cultural barrier due to lack of knowledge about disaster procedures. A questionnaire which asked foreign residents affected by this disaster if their home country had tsunamis or earthquakes resulted in an 80% negative response. In this same questionnaire less than half of the respondents indicated that they were aware of the support available to them such as clean water, shelter, and meals being available to them at their local schools or community centers after the earthquake (Makuta, 2020). However, natural disaster support is not the only area with additional barriers that could be life threatening.

Medical Treatment

In June of 2017, the Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare conducted a survey of 1,710 major emergency medical hospitals regarding the usage of medical interpreters and communication quality with patients (Ministry of Health, Labour, and Welfare, 2017). Of these hospitals, 12.7% ($n = 218$) responded that they had utilized medical interpreting services of which 85.3% ($n = 186$) were satisfied with the interpreting quality. These same hospitals reported having issues communicating with non-Japanese patients due to language barriers at 1,378 hospitals (65.3%). Of these 26% of these hospitals reported that they continued the care using Japanese with these patients who most likely did not understand them.

Foreign Residents in Japan

From 2011 through 2018 the number of foreign residents continued to increase annually (Ministry of Justice, Immigration Services of Japan, 2019). Then between 2019 and 2020 there was a 1.6% decrease, from 2,933,137 to 2,885,904 foreign residents (Ministry of Justice, Immigration Services of Japan, 2020); most likely due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Table 1 Number of Foreign Residents by Visa Status: Changes Between 2019 and 2020

Visa Status	Number	Percentage	Change
Permanent Resident	800,872	27.8%	+1%
Technical Intern Training	402,422	13.9%	-2.1%
Special Permanent Resident	309,282	10.7%	-1%
Engineer/Specialist in Humanities/International Services	288,995	10%	+6.2%
Students	280,273	9.7%	-18.9%

Source: Ministry of Justice, Immigration Services of Japan, 2020

As can be seen in Table 1, the greatest change was a decrease in student visa holders which previously accounted for about one-third of foreign residents. This was greatly reduced to slightly less than one-tenth. This means that a much larger number of foreign residents in Japan are focused on working-related visas instead of study.

Studying Japanese

In 2001, the Agency of Cultural Affairs, part of the Japanese government, conducted their most recent survey on foreign residents' impressions on their Japanese levels, the importance of learning Japanese, and other aspects of confidence in communicating in Japanese. Survey participants

consisted of 581 foreign residents who were 16 years of age or older and currently attending Japanese language classes in Japan. The survey was conducted in Japanese (Agency of Cultural Affairs, Government of Japan, 2001). Table 2 shows the percent of respondents who reported in the affirmative when asked if their current level of Japanese was enough to communicate their needs in daily life situations below.

Table 2 Respondents Who Reported Acquiring the Necessary Japanese Levels by Situation

Situation	Overall	< One Year	< Two Years	Over Two Years
Explain my symptoms/condition to a doctor	63.7%	56.2%	78.1%	88.8%
Asking questions and negotiating at government offices	50.6%	43.2%	63.5%	76.3%
Reading notices from schools, government offices, etc.	48.9%	43.2%	56.3%	71.3%
Writing a resume	37.5%	33.5%	45.8%	47.5%
Reading work-related documents	28.7%	25.4%	36.5%	40%

Note: data from Agency of Cultural Affairs, Government of Japan, 2001 (Translation by author)

There are a few issues with this survey if one considers generalizing it to the entire foreign resident population. First, the data is twenty years old at the time of this paper. Second, the survey was conducted in Japanese which excludes many Japanese language learners. This could skew the results to imply that the language barrier for Japanese residents is not so drastic. Also, it is unclear how long respondents had studied Japanese before coming to Japan and what kind of Japanese language institution where they were studying was not identified (e.g., university, volunteer class). This dated information is one reason for focusing on surveying foreign residents to gain a better idea of the current situation of limited Japanese proficiency levels and ease of access to public information and services in the current study.

According to Tanaka (2018), in a 2008 survey conducted by the Ministry of Cultural Affairs in 2008, 40% of the residents with limited-Japanese proficiency who were studying Japanese did so at voluntary organizations or community centers. In addition, of the 2,100 locations that provided some form of Japanese language education 41% of the teachers reported that they were doing this as part of their job, leaving the remaining 59% as volunteers.

The purpose of this study was to clarify if and why there is lack of information access to public information and support services meant to assist residents with limited-Japanese proficiency. Then from this find potential ways to improve the quality and access to public information for daily life and in the case of natural disasters and emergencies by asking the preference of foreign resident respondents. The current study focuses on the following objectives: (1) To understand the status of support and organizations for people with limited Japanese language skills (2) To identify effective ways of communicating information so that as many people as possible can access it (3) To identify ways to improve the quality of information and services.

Method

I used two methods of data collection. The first was a survey of the 90 websites in Aichi prefecture by government organizations. These consisted of the municipal hall websites ($n = 54$)

where public information is made available for the locality to Japanese residents and international association websites ($n = 36$) whose purpose is to connect Japanese residents with foreign residents along with assist foreign residents with integration into Japanese society. The rationale for selecting Aichi Prefecture is because it has the second largest number of foreign residents and the number of recently arrived foreign residents has been increasing at a fast rate for Japan. This means that the likelihood that these foreign residents require more assistance in adapting to living in Japan is higher.

The second method was a 45-item online questionnaire on Google forms ($n = 38$) conducted from September 2020 to March 2021. Participants were gathered via snowball sampling through requests by email, SNS, research groups, and conferences where English speaking foreign residents joined since the questionnaire is written in English. The rationale for using English is because since English is a required subject in public schools from the elementary school level and widespread, more information and services are likely to be available in English when compared to other languages used by foreign residents in Japan. In addition, most English speakers in Japan work in education with more workplace support compared to other foreign residents. If this group of people have trouble accessing information and services within their local communities, it is probably even more challenging for other members of the community with limited-Japanese proficiency. This turned out to be the case if one considers the amount of information available in English found in Aichi Prefecture's municipal and international association websites (See the results section of this paper for more details).

Participants

Table 3 shows the self-identified language level for the 38 respondents to the information access questionnaire.

Table 3 Respondents Self-Reported Japanese Levels at Arrival and at Present

Level	At Arrival	Now	Shortest Residence (years)	Longest Residence (years)
None	15	0	X	X
< N5	2	4	1.5	19
N5	16	9	.5	5
N4	1	8	1	30
N3	3	4	5	12
N2	1	10	1.5	21
N1	0	3	2	7
Total	38			

As can be seen from Table 3, all but 6 of the 38 respondents arrived in Japan with none or very little Japanese (N4 or below). To self-report levels, descriptions of what each level means was added to the options of the questionnaire.

Results

Municipal and International Association Website Survey

Of the 36 International Association websites within Aichi Prefecture, 18 disseminated information solely in Japanese. Thirteen websites had Portuguese, 9 Chinese, 11 English, 4 Spanish, 1 Filipino, 1 Vietnamese, 1 Arabic, and 1 had Korean. Eight other websites has very limited information available such as the heading or main tabs changing languages, while the content remained in Japanese. Of these 8, the language options included English and Portuguese for all 8, 1 with Chinese, 1 with Filipino, and 2 with Vietnamese options. Five other websites used an in-house translation software which create incompressible translations.

Of the 54 official municipal websites within Aichi Prefecture, 6 were monolingual in Japanese, 6 had complete English translations, another 43 used translation software (3 are incomprehensible, others are ok, but missing translations of pdfs, icons, and some other parts).

Online Information Access Questionnaire

Table 4 shows the type of information that respondents reported to be easy to find.

Table 4 Information That Respondents Reported to Be Easy to Access

29	visa rules & regulations	16	hospital related	8	earthquake evacuation procedures for your neighborhood	4	notices from your neighborhood association
18	phone & internet billing/set-up	13	current status of state of emergencies (covid-19, missile attacks)	7	work-related information (union/ labor laws)	3	legal advice
17	typhoon procedures warnings	11	driving rules & regulations	6	insurance/pension	2	educational information (enrolling children, etc.)
17	bank related	11	utilities billing/ cancelling/set-up	5	tax billing procedures/ reimbursement/ overpay	2	community interpreting for medical situations
16	apartment hunting	11	community events/ open classes/ volunteer/events	4	earthquake practice drills for your neighborhood	1	women's shelters/ children's shelters

Note. The number indicate how many respondents selected this category as easy to access information.

As can be noted from Table 4, A large amount of information that is available in Japanese on most municipal websites is not easily accessible to the respondents. The most accessible category is located on the upper left of Table 4 and continues from most to least assessable category. Visa rules and regulations are not available on municipal websites but instead on immigration website. However, where respondents found the most useful public information can be seen in Table 5 below.

Table 5 Most Useful Information Access Points

People who already knew about Japan	24	Youtube vloggers living in Japan	7
Expat websites	17	coworkers	4
SNS (e.g. Facebook)	13	Local municipal/prefectural/ward office websites	3
Google Maps	9	Other expats in my neighborhood	1
International Association Websites (e.g. NIC)	8	NAGMAG	1
Books about Japan	7		

Table 5 shows that for respondents, access to a large majority of the most useful information were all from secondary sources instead of primary sources of information. However, 26 respondents then reported that they would prefer that this information be available on local municipal websites and municipal information desks.

Twenty-two of the 38 respondents answered in the affirmative to taking Japanese language classes taught by volunteers in Japan. Of these, 22, for 11 of them, it was their first time to study Japanese. 20 of the 22 selected the option that their goal for taking the class was in order to communicate their needs and function in daily life situations of which only 5 reported that they were satisfied with the class.

Discussion

The survey of 90 websites shows that depending on the locality, access to information in languages other than Japanese is limited or in the case of 24 of the 90 websites in Aichi prefecture non-existent. Yet, with freeware such as google translate and deepl, this is an issue that can at least be partially resolved easily. Another simple solution to increasing the ease of access to information would be consistency in label the language options of websites. Instead of using English as the medium for options, labelling each option by language name in the optional language as done with the Ministry websites is one idea to improve.

If a municipality does not have enough budget or know how to update their website with language options, they could create a useful link section to a website such as the Nagoya International Center which has daily living guides in multiple languages and interpreting services. Another idea would be to utilize the newly established “One Stop Centers” to translate news and other timely information such as events or precautions due to natural disasters or emergencies. Another option could be creating and maintaining hub sites which are linked to all local municipality and international association sites which could be maintained with professional full-time translators could help streamline the access to information and services. A final idea is to revise the work visa regulations to require certifying a certain level of Japanese in order to gain approval. Many questionnaire respondents from the part two data collection arrived with almost no knowledge of Japanese. This could cause serious trouble with the current state of multilingual information available in the case of a disaster or emergency.

Although most respondents improved their Japanese levels while residing in Japan, most public

information available in Japanese is NOT easily accessible for most respondents. Respondents indicated finding the most useful information was done by other people who already knew about Japan (24), expat websites (17), and SNS networks (13) (all are not public information primary sources). This could lead to a delay in accessing important information and unintentional misinformation. Most respondents want the information in the same location as the Japanese language version public information—municipal websites & information desks. This would facilitate information access.

Regarding the ease of joining Japanese language classes led by volunteers, 22 of 38 (59%) accessed volunteer Japanese language classes. However, with the current number of respondents, more research in this direction would be necessary to confirm the ease of joining a class. With the current number of responses, most reported (15 out of 22) being neutral (8) to unsatisfied (7) with the quality of the language classes for their learning goal (mainly to learn Japanese to better function in daily life ($n = 20$)). It is the author's opinion as an educator that not satisfying the need of functioning in daily life shows a need for more training and organization to improve the volunteer classes. Once again, the number of respondents is lacking to make any statistically significant conclusions.

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