

English in the context of Japanese government expectations of increasing foreign worker numbers

This presentation explores how the government policy can affect foreigners' usage of English in Japan in order to better illustrate how Japanese government expectations of future trends, should be interpreted, based on the assumption that Japanese government language policy expectations imply the direction of future changes in government policy measures.

Foreign worker English use data is approximate. It is based on Japanese government statistics, by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare, regarding the nationalities of foreign workers in Japan, and English language content of compulsory education in these countries.

It can be assumed that government predictions of significant increases in the foreign worker component of the Japanese workforce are an indication of future changes in policy. Due to increased use of English among foreign workers, policy change, regarding English is also to be expected. An examination of government predictions for 2030 and 2040 will show the expected direction of these policy changes.

According to research done by JICA (Japan International Cooperation Agency), Japan's population peaked in 2008 and has declined since then because of its low birth rate to about 125 million as of last year, when the decline represented close to one half of one percent of the population. Besides this, the working-age population is shrinking even quicker due to aging.

More precisely, compared with the 65.3 million working-age people in 2017, it was found that the Health, Labor and Welfare Ministry expects there to be just 60.82 million ethnic Japanese workers in 2025 and only 52.45 million in 2040. The number of male workers in 2040 will fall by 7.11 million from 2017, while the number of working women will decrease by 5.75 million.

According to this research, Japan will need, under the most optimistic scenario, about four times more foreign workers by 2040 to achieve the growth path the government has outlined in its economic forecast. The findings shed light on Japan's growing need for foreign labor to make up for a shrinking population, even as legal restrictions inhibit the entry into Japan of students and workers. The research suggests that Japan must increase the number of foreign workers to 6.74 million by 2040 to maintain a yearly average real annual economic growth of 1.24%. This would represent more than a 300% increase over the 1.72 million foreign workers, who currently make up about 2.5% of the workforce.

In connection with this, it was recognized by JICA that other neighboring countries, like China and South Korea, are also facing population declines which will create competition with Japan in attracting foreign workers. The study assumed that, at the present rate of population decline, Japan would lose more than 10% of its workforce over the next twenty years. It goes without saying that, without a reversal in some of these trends, Japan faces the prospect of lower tax receipts and a declining workforce to support rising healthcare costs for the elderly. However, the Japanese government is not known for creativity with regard to policies that would lead to a reversal of national depopulation trends. It, therefore, seems more likely that attempts will be made to increase the number of foreign workers, instead.

This presentation, thus, seeks to explore how government policy could affect the extent to which the use of English will exist in Japan in the future. For reasons given above, it will focus on what impact an increased foreign workforce could have in Japan. But first, let's review Japan's recent past.

For most of Japan's history since the Meiji Restoration, it has emphasized its homogeneity as a nation, both cultural and linguistic. Moreover, during much of this period, Japanese society only had a relatively small number of foreign residents to deal with at any one time. However, in recent years, for reasons just mentioned, this country has seen a growing number of foreign workers come to Japan in search of jobs. Typically, before the pandemic, workers would come as students of Japanese language schools and would do part time work while studying Japanese. Others took advantage of Japan's political asylum laws which allows people to stay in Japan while their cases are being processed. Then, a job-trainee system was introduced allowing employers to bring unskilled foreign workers to Japan to work at normally below average wages. It was, nevertheless, expected that such individuals would come to Japan with necessary Japanese language skills. This, together with the restrictions of travel during the pandemic, did great damage to the former Japanese language school model that had previously existed. Moreover, after the pandemic, it was found that the job-trainee system did not bring in the number of Asian workers that had been expected of it.

The linguistic background of the foreign workforce in Japan is diverse. The majority of foreign workers in Japan still come from Asian countries, such as China, Vietnam, Nepal, and the Philippines. These workers, especially those who came to Japan before the pandemic, often speak Japanese to some degree, but many, if not most, are not fluent. For many, perhaps most,

such individuals, English and not Japanese is the preferred means of communication with other foreigners who do not speak their mother language. There is also a small but growing number of foreign workers from European and American countries, who typically speak English as their primary language of communication. Also, Africans whose first foreign language is French, are more and more to be seen.

The educational level of the foreign workforce in Japan is diverse. Some foreign workers have university degrees, while others have less education, and may have only completed high school or even elementary school. The educational level of foreign workers often depends on their country of origin. For example, foreign workers from China and Vietnam are more likely to have higher levels of education than foreign workers from the Philippines, but, for historical reasons, Philipinos, no matter what the educational level, generally have fairly high levels of English comprehension ability.

The kinds of jobs that foreign workers are hired to do in Japan vary widely. Some foreign workers are employed in manufacturing jobs, such as in the automotive and electronics industries. Others are employed in service jobs, such as in restaurants, hotels, and hospitals. Others do manual labor in the construction industry. There are also a growing number of foreign workers who are employed in professional jobs, such as in engineering, finance, and medicine. Though the future, in a strict sense, is unknowable until it actually becomes the present, we can, nevertheless, make predictions with varying degrees of certainty, depending on the assumptions we make.

In our case, we will make the assumption that the number of foreign workers in Japan is expected to continue to grow in the future, though not as much as JICA might expect. We agree with JICA in seeing certain factors, such as Japan's rapidly aging population and declining birth

rate, as retaining a certain amount of significance, though we also feel that it will be mitigated, even among white collar workers, by widespread adoption of AI. We also assume that Japanese government efforts to attract more foreign workers to this country will not meet expected levels of success until working conditions and living conditions, generally, are considerably improved. We assume that necessary improvements will take more time than expected for the concerned government officials to gain an institutional awareness of what will be necessary to fully satisfy foreign worker needs.

Nevertheless, the growth of the foreign workforce in Japan, even if smaller than might be currently expected, will have a number of implications for the country. On the positive side, it will help to address Japan's labor shortage, and it will also bring new skills and perspectives to the Japanese workforce. However, until foreign worker needs are fully understood and foreign worker rights fully protected, it will also be a source of rising dissatisfaction of an increasingly larger segment of the total population. It is also important for government policy to ensure that foreign workers are treated fairly and that they have access to the same opportunities as Japanese workers. This, though, is, as history shows, is easier to say, than to carry out in practice.

On the one hand, foreign workers in Japan face a number of challenges which will inevitably encourage a greater use than is currently the case of English in Japan. There are, for one, language barriers. Many foreign workers do not speak Japanese fluently, which can make it difficult to communicate with co-workers, customers, and government officials. This will force more people to use English more often to save the time that would otherwise be needed to teach foreign workers how to better communicate in Japanese. Then, there are cultural differences. Japan has a unique culture that can be difficult for foreigners to understand. This can lead to misunderstandings and problems in the workplace. It would be expected that in many such cases

the use of English, due to its being a second language for all parties concerned, will be used.

Finally, there is the problem of discrimination. Foreign workers in Japan can (and often do) face discrimination from employers, co-workers, and even strangers. This can make it difficult to find a job, get promoted, and feel accepted in Japanese society, and, unfortunately, is a problem for which language offers no solution.

Foreign workers, however, could bring a number of benefits to Japan. For one, foreign workers often have skills and knowledge that are in demand in the Japanese workforce. This can help to address Japan's labor shortage and boost the economy. Also, foreign workers bring new perspectives and ideas to the Japanese workforce. This can help to improve Japanese businesses and make Japan a more diverse society. Furthermore, there are significant indirect contributions to the Japanese economy from having a thriving foreign workforce. They pay taxes to the Japanese government just like Japanese, spend money in the community just like Japanese, and, more importantly, just like native Japanese, their presence creates jobs for all categories of people, just like the native Japanese workforce does.

The Japanese government has a role to play in attracting and supporting foreign workers. For one, the government can do this by making it easier for foreign workers to come to Japan. The government can simplify the visa application process and make it easier for foreign workers to find jobs by providing English and other foreign language counseling for those foreign workers whose Japanese language skills are insufficient. Additionally, the government can (and, most likely, eventually will have to) provide language training and cultural awareness programs taught in a variety of languages. The government, of course, can and should help foreign workers to learn Japanese and understand Japanese culture. But, for many foreign workers, Japanese language immersion programs are not efficient. Rather, using English or some other foreign

language to teach Japanese language and culture, would bring better results faster for many students. Lastly, the government will have an important role in combating discrimination. The government can, of course, pass laws to protect foreign workers from discrimination, but, more importantly, it can and should enforce those laws.

The foreign workforce in Japan is a diverse group of people with a wide range of skills and experiences. They are playing an increasingly important role in the Japanese economy, and they are helping to make Japan a more diversified society. From a government policy perspective, it is important to continue to encourage foreign workers to come to Japan. From the perspective of the foreign worker, it is important that they perceive themselves as being treated fairly. Of course, the foreign workforce in Japan is a complex issue with no easy answers. However, it is an issue that is important to address, as the foreign workforce is playing an increasingly important role in the Japanese economy and society. The future of the foreign workforce in Japan is, in many aspects, unclear. The number of foreign workers in Japan, though, seems certain to continue to grow in the coming years, even though proper treatment cannot be guaranteed over the short to medium term during the next several years. Eventually, though, it seems safe to assume that the Japanese government will eventually take steps to ensure that foreign workers are treated fairly and have access to the same opportunities as Japanese workers.