Japanese Language Learning and Employment Opportunities for Foreign Residents: Focusing on a Russian-speaking Community in Japan

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Keywords: Russian-speaking migrants, Japanese language, learning sites, employment

This paper presents the findings of a research carried out in Japan between April 2015 and March 2016. The research consisted of an online survey (N = 184) targeting Russian-speaking migrants from post-Soviet countries in Japan and a series of in-depth interviews in Tokyo, Osaka, Kyoto, and Kumamoto¹. This abstract outlines the extent to which Russian-speaking migrants utilize the resources available for learning Japanese, offers insights into the language skills of the migrant population already settled in Japan and highlights the relation between the migrants' employment status and their Japanese language skills.

According to statistics released by the Japan Ministry of Justice in 2015, there are 7973 Russians living in Japan, the third largest population of European migrants after the UK and France (倉田 2016). The Russian-speaking population is, in fact, larger, seeing that the share of ethnic Russians, as well as those who speak Russian as their second language among the migrants from post-Soviet countries, number close to 14000 people in Japan. To generalize, the majority of the samples were from a female wave of migration that consisted of young long-term stayers, predominantly from Russia (72.8%). As such, this survey is a microcosm of the population of post-Soviet migrants in Japan who possess comparable demographic characteristics. Additionally, it is important to highlight that 82% of the respondents arrived to Japan as university graduates at undergraduate or postgraduate levels. According to the OECD report ("Education at a Glance", 2016), Russia has the second highest share of adults with tertiary education, whereas the employment rate of tertiary-educated adults stood at 83% in 2015, revealing a work-oriented nature of this population.

Gottlieb (2012) states that in Japan, adult migrants can learn Japanese at night schools (for students over 15 years old with unfinished compulsory education), take independently organized classes for foreigners by regional administrations, or attend volunteer classrooms. She highlights that the majority of the initiatives to teach Japanese to foreigners are undertaken locally and argues that their expansion into the national level is the most urgent language policy issue that Japan faces in order to make Japanese literacy for foreigners a truly reachable target. There has been a development since Gottlieb published her research. In 2015, the Japan Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare assigned the Japan International Cooperation Center (JICE) to organize the "Training Course for Promoting Stable Employment of Foreign Residents." However, it is too early to make a comprehensive assessment of this new system. Moreover, there are commercial language schools that are occasionally utilized by migrants and language classes at universities for those enrolled in tertiary education in Japan.

During the course of the interviews, Japanese language emerged as a resonating topic for the

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¹ The project was funded by Sasakawa Scientific Research Grant, Japan Science Society.

participants in terms of its systematic acquisition amidst socio-economic and emotional constraints. Considering the difficulties that were voiced by the interviewees, it is even more important that when migrants learn the language, their expectations for achieving literacy are met. The online survey respondents studied the language in Japan at language schools (the highest percentage), at universities, privately and in volunteer or free-of-charge classes organized by regional administrations. The respondents were asked to self-determine their Japanese language proficiency against the parameters of speaking, understanding, reading, and writing ("unable to use," "can use with limitations," "can use in everyday life," "can use in academic settings," and "can use in professional settings"). It became clear that depending on the site of learning the levels of confidence varied across parameters and settings. Although the "professional settings" category implies different connotations and language skill sets for various segments of labour market, it is striking that certain groups had significantly low numbers of respondents who self-determined as confident in Japanese in a working environment. For instance, those who primarily studied at Japanese language schools had a low percentage of respondents confident in "reading and writing" in professional settings, followed by those who learned with volunteers or at free-of-charge classes. These findings provide important background information when assessed in conjunction with data on the employment situation of each group. Those who learned with volunteers or at free-of-charge classes had the highest unemployment rate, whereas those who studied at Japanese language schools had a considerably lower percentage of fulltime regular work compared to those who studied at Japanese universities. It can therefore be seen that comprehensive literacy that translates into satisfactory employment is, arguably, not obtained at commercial Japanese language schools or at volunteer and free-of-charge classes, a natural choice for many migrants who come to Japan for non-educational purposes. It is therefore important to facilitate a language policy for foreign residents while also overseeing the activities of already functioning institutions in order to ensure that Japanese literacy is within the migrants' reach.

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