

Japanese Language Learning and Employment Opportunities for Foreign Residents: Russian-speaking Migrants in Japan

Ksenia Golovina* and Varvara Mukhina**

**The University of Tokyo, Center for Global Communication Strategies*

***Sophia University, Faculty of Foreign Studies*

(Received December 2016; Accepted April 2017)

Abstract

The ability of migrants to integrate with a host society is deeply affected by the migrant's knowledge of the host country's language. This paper presents the empirical findings of our study conducted in Japan in 2015-2016. The focus was the degree of Japanese language ability among Russian-speaking migrants in Japan, and the association between language skills and employment opportunities available to this population. We describe the learning sites and practices that Russian-speaking migrants utilized before and after their migration, offer insight into their Japanese language ability, and highlight the relationship between migrants' employment status and Japanese language skills. Our aim is to illustrate the importance of affordable opportunities for effective learning and the role such learning plays in developing the language skills of migrants, thereby promoting their ability to secure employment in Japan. The analysis focuses on learning sites in Japan where the respondents studied Japanese. The sites included Japanese language schools, universities, private tutoring, and free language classes provided by regional administration centers and volunteer centers. As illustrated by both the objective and the subjective language ability assessments the respondents provided, overall language ability varied per group along a continuum that can be conceptualized as "university – Japanese language school – private tutoring – other." The findings revealed discrepancies in the employment status of participants among these four groups. Narratives obtained through interviews helped us to identify areas of concern that potentially hamper migrants from obtaining the expected degree of oral proficiency and literacy in Japanese, at the corresponding learning sites. The data and findings presented here may serve to inform policy for targeted instruction in Japanese for migrants, according to their ability level and occupations, which would help to deliver effective training in Japanese that accords with migrants' needs.

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

1 Introduction

1.1 *Opportunities for Foreigners to Learn Japanese in Japan*

According to Japan's Ministry of Justice statistics, in June 2016 there were 2,307,388 non-Japanese residents in Japan. This represents 3.4% growth compared with the previous year, and a 36.8% increase from 2000. The largest group in the foreign population is Koreans (19.8%), many of whom were born in Japan and speak Japanese as their first language, and Chinese people (29.3%). Once foreigners naturalize,¹ they are no longer reflected in the statistics kept by the Japanese government on foreign residents. Koyama and Okamoto (2010: 3) report that 63.2% of the 121,000 foreigners who became naturalized in Japan between 2001 and 2008 were Koreans.

The role of language knowledge in the integration of first-generation migrants into a host society is extremely important. Isphording (2015: 1) observes that "Immigrants who fail to achieve adequate proficiency in the host country language generally fail to achieve economic and social integration." Gottlieb explores the problem of migrants' integration into Japan's society through a "language needs of immigrants" approach (2012a: 33). She suggests that "linguistic consequences of immigration for foreign residents can be far reaching in terms of both employment and personal life, whether individual or family" (Gottlieb 2012a: 34). Gottlieb further argues that these consequences have "ramifications for the host society, in terms of delivery of services and social cohesion" (ibid.). She discusses "immigrants who are struggling to achieve mastery of Japanese and the manner in which those needs are (or are not) being met" (ibid.), and points out that Japanese does not have the advantage of being a global language – unlike English. With Japanese not being widely spoken across the world, the struggles of immigrants entering Japan are real, "making the provision of JSL² classes a key social issue as immigration continues to grow" (ibid.). Gottlieb further suggests that migrants deserve access to language services because of their status as taxpayers (2009).

Burgess addresses the topic of Japanese language learning by foreigners who reside in Japan from the perspective of language ideology, which is inextricably connected to the dominant ideas of blood and citizenship. Burgess explores an array of discourses that he sees as inhibiting the development of streamlined policies to assist foreigners in learning Japanese. He states that "national teaching guidelines and curriculum detailing how to teach Japanese to foreigners living inside Japan still do not exist" (2012: 17). Drawing on newspapers and other sources, Burgess describes this condition as a systemic problem of JSL education, illustrated by the fact that in 2009, among 2,200,000 foreign residents only 166,631 were students of Japanese. Only 12.9% of the 31,000 teachers of Japanese in 2010 were full-time instructors; the rest were part-time

¹ Acquiring Japanese nationality generally follows the bloodline principle, although in exceptional cases the place of birth is considered, if a child's parents are unknown. Adult foreigners are required to undergo a naturalization procedure (Kondo 2016). Language requirements for naturalization are not explicitly included in the application guidelines, yet some applicants are selectively asked to take a language test (Gottlieb 2012b: 7-9).

² Japanese as a second language.

instructors (35.5%) or volunteers (51.6%) (2012: 50-51).³ Gottlieb (2012a: 48) examines the positive side of language instruction by volunteers, stating that “it is precisely this bottom-up activity and provision of language training with volunteer participation, reflecting acknowledgement of language needs in local communities, that may in time effect a change in national policy as well.” By contrast, Burgess (2012: 51) raises the concern that “the fact that volunteers tend to play the main role in teaching Japanese to foreigners in turn reflects the fact that no official license or qualification exists for JSFL⁴ teachers.”

To understand how language teaching by unqualified people might fail to meet the needs of migrant learners, the findings of Heyse et al. (2015) are useful. Heyse et al. conducted research with Russian and Ukrainian women migrants in Belgium, many of whom were highly educated. The researchers reported on their conversations with a non-government organization representative, who suggested that current language services in Belgium – originally developed for less educated migrants in the past – might be “too low for highly skilled migrants; that is why many of them drop out” (Heyse 2015: 83). These findings, from a country with a tradition of language education for immigrants, serve as an important benchmark. They suggest that merely providing language classes is not enough; countries have to account for the various migrant populations. The lessons must be methodologically and cognitively structured to create opportunities for effective learning.

Learning a foreign language in a host country, while undergoing a major life transformation brought about by migration, is a difficult task. This reality should be considered by researchers. Although the disturbances associated with such a transformation affect educational and labor migrants, whose primary aim is to study and work, they also affect “marriage migrants.” This is especially true if the period in which the migrant needs to master the language coincides with a gendered life stage that prevents them from studying in a focused manner. For instance, in Japan, language barriers are reportedly one of the most urgent problems experienced by immigrant women in the perinatal period (Kita et al. 2015). These findings highlight that linguistic needs strongly affect every aspect of a person’s life. Scully (2002: 402) examined a small group of Filipina women in rural Japan, and offers important insight into the complexities of the process in which her subjects either “succeeded or failed to assimilate into the local community and/or master the intricate details of Japanese language and culture.” Scully’s study reveals the highly personal nature of the acculturation process, which might not be directly associated with the length of stay in the host country. The women had followed different paths in maintaining or failing to

³ In 2014, the number of Japanese language learners who were accounted for among the foreign population (2,121,831) in Japan was 174,359 people. Of these, 82% were from Asian countries and 5% were from Europe, including Russia and other post-Soviet countries (Iwamoto 2015). The total proportion of migrants from Europe (including Russia and other post-Soviet countries) was 2.9% of the population of foreigners, according to 2014 statistics of Japan’s Ministry of Justice. These figures suggest that European migrants take great interest in attending centers at which Japanese is taught.

⁴ Japanese as a second foreign language.

maintain the Japanese language they acquired, after the community-based support for newcomers – in the form of language and cooking classes – had finished (Scully 2002: 411-413). The community-based learning support lasted six months. Thus, Scully focused on migrants who completed short-term language training provided by the host community rather than solicited by the women themselves. These women were then absorbed into the everyday hassles of their lives, pushing the hope of focused learning opportunities further away and leaving their linguistic needs unmet. This affected their ability to secure stable employment.

The labor shortage in Japan, the increased number of migrants, and the need to utilize their working potential have been among the most pronounced topics in public discourse for nearly a decade. Inability to fully use the language in a society with a literacy rate of almost 100% (Maher and Yashiro 1995: 3) significantly affects migrants' position in the labor market. This reality has an economic cost for Japan. The estimated cost of inadequate literacy in Japan is among the highest in the world, at USD 84.21 billion in 2015 (World Literacy Foundation, 2015). An important development in terms of Japanese language education for migrants occurred quite recently. In 2015, the Japan Ministry of Health, Labor, and Welfare assigned the Japan International Cooperation Center (JICE) to organize the "Training Course for Promoting Stable Employment of Foreign Residents." Although it is too soon to comprehensively assess this system, it is an important step toward providing migrants with targeted language learning opportunities and thus a chance to realize their employment potential. This in turn will have a positive effect on the country's labor-shortage situation.

1.2 *Japanese Employment System at a Glance*

To provide some background for the results presented in Section 3, this section focuses on the main features of the Japanese employment system. The post-war Japanese employment system is characterized by lifelong employment, which favors men over women. Other features include low mobility of employees across firms, seniority-based wages and promotions, firm-specific training, hiring practices that enable new university graduates to be employed, and favoring young employees and those with elite education. All these features help companies to avoid unpredictability and cut their labor costs (Nemoto 2016: 31). Lifelong employment is reflected in Articles 25 and 27 of Japan's Constitution and in the country's legal system; it is still largely supported both socially and politically (Noble 2012: 68). A number of changes have taken place since the 1990s, such as attempts to foster performance-based promotion and to increase temporary hires. However, these moves have only destabilized the employment system and intensified the gender gap, because women are hired to fill temporary positions. They do not provide real solutions to the inertia in Japanese employment practices (Nemoto 2016). Lifelong employment is granted through full-time tenured positions (*seishain*). Other employment statuses include contract positions, with a predetermined length of contract (*keiyaku shain*); and part-time positions (*arubaito* or *paato*⁵). There

⁵ Legally, both terms refer to part-time work and there is no distinction between them. Initially, the term

are also indirect employment positions (*haken*) for which a person is registered with an agency and dispatched to firms for various lengths of time (Takahashi 2012).

1.3 Russian-Speaking Migrants in Japan

According to statistics released by the Japan Ministry of Justice in June 2015, about 7,973 Russians live in Japan, 68.5% of whom are women. Russians comprise the third largest population of European migrants, after people from the United Kingdom and France (Kurata 2016). Japan's Russian-speaking population is in fact even larger, as it includes an estimated 14,000 people who have migrated to Japan from post-Soviet countries and who speak Russian as their first or second language.

The migration of the so-called “female wave” of Russians to Japan, where marrying local men has become a characteristic feature, started in the 1990s. The collapse of the Soviet Union brought with it the liberalization of individual movement, followed by political and economic disturbances that peaked in the crises of 1998, 2008 and most recently 2014. These factors, among others, have contributed to women's migration; in the case of Japan, initially women immigrated mainly for employment in the entertainment sector or for international marriages. More recently and to an increasing degree, women are migrating for educational and professional reasons (Mukhina and Golovina 2017) and are choosing to leave Russia in search of better opportunities.

According to the OECD (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development) report “Education at a Glance” (2016), Russia has the second highest share of adults with a tertiary education. The employment rate of tertiary-educated adults was 83% in 2015, thus revealing the work-oriented nature of this population.

2 Methodology

The research described in this paper took a year to complete. It was conducted in Japan between April 2015 and March 2016, with Russian-speaking migrants as the participants and topic of study.⁶ The data were collected through interviews with four Japanese recruiting companies, an online survey, and 13 interviews with Russian-speaking migrants. The interviews with recruiting companies helped to identify problematic areas pertaining to the employment of foreigners in Japan, including issues regarding the Japanese language. The online survey (titled “On Education and Employment of Russian-speaking Migrants in Japan”) was developed through a paid online survey tool and consisted of 72 questions on migration routes, education in one's

arubaito emerged among students to signify occasional labor; *paato* (from *part-time*), where one works a shortened day, appeared as an antonym to full-time work. These historical connotations are somewhat preserved nowadays, although an employer has the freedom to mark an advertised vacancy with either of the terms. While *paato* is often used to attract housewives, *arubaito* has come to be used rather broadly, without a specific group (such as students) in mind. As a reflection of the governmental discourse to reach marginalized populations, advertisements for *arubaito* posts often mention that “housewives, elderly, and foreigners” are welcome.

⁶ This project was funded by The Japan Science Society (Sasakawa Scientific Research Grant).

home country and in Japan, linguistic abilities, and employment. To create the questions, we relied on previous literature and our own cumulative experience of 10 years in researching the Russian-speaking population in Japan. The incentivized invitation to participate was posted from June 24 to July 8, 2015 in the largest Facebook-based community of Russian-speaking migrants in Japan. At the time of the survey, this group had nearly 6,800 participants. The obtained data were cleaned and the final sample was N=184. The interview portion of the research was aimed at personalizing the data we had obtained through the online survey and at gaining a more in-depth look at the situation of Russian-speaking migrants' education and employment. The interviews were held between August 27, 2015 and January 15, 2016, and the participants were invited through the same online community. For a few participants, the snowball sampling technique was also applied. Thirteen people from localities such as Tokyo, Kanagawa, Saitama, Chiba, Ibaraki, Kumamoto, Kyoto, and Osaka participated in face-to-face, in-depth, semi-structured interviews. Informed consent forms were gathered. All the interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using NVIVO. For the purpose of this paper, we employ the relevant portions of the data.

In the following sections, we introduce and discuss the results of the online survey and our interview fieldwork. The focus is on the learning sites where our research participants learnt Japanese, the degree of language skills they obtained at those sites, and ultimately their employment situation.

3 Survey Results: Japanese Language Learning Sites and Employment

Most of our participants were women (80.4%) who were young, long-term stayers predominantly from Russia (72.8%). Therefore, the data from the online survey represent a microcosm of the population of post-Soviet migrants in Japan who possess comparable demographic characteristics (outlined in Section 1.3). We noted that 82% of the respondents had arrived in Japan as undergraduate or postgraduate degree holders. Given the targeted population's high education level and potential for employment, as supported by OECD data, we were interested in their employment situation in Japan and whether it was associated with the migrants' Japanese language skills – both oral proficiency and literacy.

This paper is focused on Japanese language ability among Russian-speaking migrants, with regard to their current employment situation in Japan; we do not include respondents who held “foreign student” visa status. The latter subgroup comprised 18.48% of our original (N=184) sample but we exclude their data here, as their primary purpose for migration was education. They can only work part-time and can thus be classified in a transitional category. By the same logic, we exclude a respondent who was in Japan on a “cultural activities” visa. We include here the respondents who held working visas; spouses of Japanese nationals; spouses of foreigners who are permanent residents (but not those who accompany their working family member as a “dependent”, because of limitations in their working hours); permanent residents; long-term permanent residents; highly qualified human resources; and people who are naturalized

Japanese. Our sample for the purpose of this paper was N=147. The comparison of data on the current employment situation of the respondents was conducted according to the learning sites where the migrants learned Japanese in Japan. In addition, we outline the time the respondents allocated to learning, and the determination of respondents' language ability using both objective assessment (Japanese Language Proficiency Test, JLPT) and subjective self-assessment (along the given dimensions and response categories). We also examine data on the migrants' pre-migration learning of Japanese. Ultimately, we aim to explore the influence of a person's Japanese language ability on that person's employment opportunities in Japan. The results presented and discussed in the paper are summarized in Table 1 at the end of this chapter.

3.1 *Pre-migration Japanese Language Learning*

About 47.52% of the respondents had learned Japanese language before their migration. Most did so at universities as a first (47.14%) or second (10%) foreign language. These data were obtained from a multiple-answer question. Most (72.68%) of the respondents who had learned Japanese before migrating had continued their language studies for more than two years. The fact that these respondents studied Japanese as a first foreign language at universities in their home country suggests that their specializations might have been largely connected with Japan, in fields such as Japanese studies or translation and interpreting. People who receive a degree under such a specialization before migrating to Japan are commonly called "Japanologists" by members of the Russian-speaking community in Japan, regardless of their current occupations. These migrants are in a somewhat advantageous position in terms of the solid language training they obtained in their countries of origin. They find it relatively easy to navigate Japanese society in general and the labor market in particular.

In the group of pre-migration learners, 50% of the respondents held Level 1 (old system until 2009) and 24.14% held N1 (new system) certificates in JLPT.⁷ The respondents were asked to rate their own Japanese language proficiency for the dimensions of speaking, understanding, reading, and writing. The response categories were "unable to use," "can use with limitation," "can use freely in everyday life," "can use freely in academic settings," and "can use freely in professional settings". In the pre-migration-learning group, most respondents indicated an ability to use the language in professional settings, for all four dimensions: speaking (67.14%), understanding (71.43%), reading (51.43%), and writing (48.57%). Being able to use the language in a professional setting marks the highest level on the confidence scale, and this response was selected more often than any others. The data were gained from a multiple-answer question. With regard to employment, 82.86% were currently employed in Japan under varying employment statuses. We noted that people who had acquired knowledge in Japanese as university students in their home countries, and further continued to study

⁷ Summaries of linguistic competence for each level can be found at the JLPT website: <http://www.jlpt.jp> (Accessed May 1, 2017). There are five levels under the new system; N1 is the most advanced. Under the old system, four levels existed, with Level 1 being the most advanced.

the language at universities in Japan (12.92% of N=147), exhibited a high employment rate (89.47%) and stable working status (76.47%) as tenured full-time workers in Japan. This rate of tenured employment was higher than that of any other group we studied. Interestingly, this group had initially entered the country as educational migrants.

3.2 *Post-migration Japanese Language Learning*

Of the sampled respondents, 80.27% studied Japanese after migrating to Japan. Among them, 55.08% considered this to be their first time ever learning the language.⁸ In the survey (multiple-answer question), we asked respondents to choose the site where they studied Japanese in Japan, with the following options: university, Japanese language school, or privately with a tutor.⁹ They could also specify a particular learning site under the “Other” option, which allowed free answers. Most respondents chose Japanese language school (45.76%), followed by university (29.66%) and private learning (23.73%). In addition, 14.41% had studied at various self-reported learning sites (“Other”) such as language classes provided by local administrations, volunteer centers, weekend courses, and language exchange. One respondent attended UNESCO classes and another had attended JICE (mentioned in the Introduction to this paper). The average age at which the respondents had arrived in Japan was 24.7 years in the “Japanese Language Schools” group, 22.3 years in the “Universities” group, 25.8 years in the “Private Learning” group, and 27.5 years in the “Other” group.

3.2.1 *Japanese Language Schools*

An equal number of respondents (29.63%) in this group had studied the language either for 6 to 12 months or for more than two years – a total of 59.26% participants in this group. In addition, 77.77% of all respondents in this group held JLPT certificates. The prevailing JLPT levels were Levels 2 and 3 for the old system (36.36% each) and N2 (51.85%) for the new system. Some people (16.66%) held both; that is, they held a certificate under the new system and had also passed JLPT under the old system. In their self-assessment, this group selected an equal number of the responses “can use freely in everyday life” and “can use freely in professional settings” (40.74% each) for

⁸ Migrants may possess varying degrees of pre-migratory exposure to the language of the country of destination, which in the long term has a potential to influence their success when actively learning the language in the host country. Isphording (2015: 5) observes: “Pre-migratory exposure might also take place through foreign language education in school or exposure to foreign language television programs, books, or other media.” In our survey, we gathered information on the pre-migratory learning sites, but adequately measuring the exposure through the literature or the media was difficult. However, we should keep in mind that even for migrants for whom studying the language post-migration might be their first time to actively explore the language, learners’ predisposition might vary by the degree of pre-migratory exposure.

⁹ A total of 118 people learned the Japanese language post-migration. The number of samples of 134 (i.e., 54 for Japanese language schools, 35 for universities, 28 for private learning, and 17 for miscellaneous learning sites such as free-of-charge language classes provided by local administration or volunteer centers) slightly exceeds the N=118 of learners. To better reflect reality, the respondents could have chosen multiple answers of the learning sites they attended.

speaking. For understanding, “can use freely in professional settings” (53.70%) was the most widely selected response. For reading, “can use freely in everyday life” was the most popular response (33.33%), but the number of people who indicated they had limited ability was also substantial. For writing, “can use with limitations” was the most widely selected response (40.74%). The difficulty of learning to write Japanese, compared with the other three dimensions, was evident in the high number of participants who selected this response. Clearly, although half of the answers indicated professional-level proficiency in speaking and understanding the language, many respondents were not fully literate – especially in terms of applying their reading and writing skills in professional settings.

About 79.63% of respondents who studied at Japanese language schools were currently employed, with 67.44% working at a single place and the rest combining two or more side jobs. In this group, most people had full-time employment. The responses to multiple-answer questions indicated that 35.88% of these full-time workers were contract workers and 27.91% were tenured employees. However, the percentage of irregular work was also high: 44.18% of respondents indicated some form of part-time employment, mostly *arubaito*. A small percentage (6.98%) indicated entrepreneurship. Generally, this group exhibited a moderate level of Japanese proficiency and a low percentage of tenured employment.

3.2.2 Universities

Among migrants who had studied Japanese at university settings in Japan, 71.43% had received some form of tertiary education in Japan. We assume the rest – those who indicated they had not received tertiary education in Japan but had nonetheless studied Japanese in a university setting – had attended Japanese language centers affiliated with universities. Alternatively, they might not have completed a full university program. In the group of post-migration university learners, 34.29% had studied Japanese for more than two years – which was nearly 5% more people than the equivalent figure for Japanese language schools. Only 14.29% said they had studied for less than six months. A considerable number of responses in this group indicated pre-migration learning of Japanese at universities (82.61%), highlighting this group’s initial characteristic as educational migrants. This finding also shows that, for educational migrants aiming to relocate to Japan and enroll in one of the country’s university programs, learning Japanese or even majoring in it at university might be a necessary prerequisite for a successful transition.

In this group, 71.48% of respondents are holders of JLPT certificates. The majority of cases (86.67%) indicate possession of a Level 1 certificate under the old system of JLPT, and 46.67% hold N1 certificates under the new system. The fact that so many respondents hold the most advanced level under the old system suggests that this group’s proficiency in Japanese is not newly acquired. These respondents had already acquired an advanced proficiency by 2009, the year the old system was replaced. Some hold certificates under both systems; 33.33% of certificate holders under the new system also possess a certificate under the old system. In their self-assessment, this

group exhibited the most advanced ability (“can use in professional settings”) for each of the four dimensions: speaking (80%), understanding (73.33%), reading (60%), and writing (53.33%). Predictably, writing remains an issue for this group. Although no-one reported an inability to write – unlike respondents in the other groups, 20% chose “can use with limitations” to describe their writing. Thus, although this group exhibits the highest level of both oral proficiency and literacy, literacy remains an issue. The situation can be explained in terms of “linguistic distance” (Isphording 2015: 3-5) related to differences in the writing systems of the alphabetic versus non-alphabetic languages (Gottlieb 2012a: 44, 53).¹⁰

A total of 91.43% of respondents who studied Japanese at universities in Japan were currently employed. This is the highest employment rate among the groups we studied. In this group, 75% of the respondents worked in one place, and this group had the lowest percentage of respondents who were combining one or more side jobs to make a living. Most responses in this group indicated either full-time tenured (62.5%) or contract (18.8%) employment. Given that tenured employment (*seishain*) is traditionally considered the most stable and thus the most sought-after form of employment in Japan, a large proportion of this group can be considered as having obtained secure jobs. Only 21.88% of the respondents – a smaller percentage than that in other groups – indicated some form of part-time employment, and 3.13% reported engaging in entrepreneurial activity.

3.2.3 Private Learning

Private learning indicates learning a language with the help of a paid private tutor. In this group, 35.71% of our respondents had studied Japanese for more than two years and 21.43% for less than six months. These figures represent a higher percentage of new learners than in the Japanese language schools or university categories.

In terms of JLPT, 71.42% of the respondents held certificates: 45.45% held Level 2 certificates in the old system and 53.85% held N2 in the new system. Some respondents held both; 30.76% of new certificate holders had passed the JLPT under the old system as well. In their self-assessments, no participants selected the advanced option (“can use in professional settings”) for any of the four dimensions. For both speaking and understanding, “can use in everyday life” was the most popular selection at 42.86% for

¹⁰ In the discussion on *kanji* learning among people who lack a *kanji* background, Paxton and Svetenant (2014:90) state that “mastering *kanji* is a complex and daunting task for learners from alphabet-based languages.” This sentiment is corroborated by the fact that Japanese, a non-Western orthographic language, is classified as one of the most time-consuming languages to learn (Graiger 2005, quoted in Paxton and Svetenant 2014: 90). This does not mean that, for instance, Chinese speakers have no difficulty in acquiring Japanese *kanji*. Tanaka (2015) raises the issue of orthography versus phonology-based processing of *kanji* by Chinese learners, revealing a complex nature of mutual *kanji* recognition within the Sinosphere. Yet she states that compared with learners from alphabet-based cultures, Chinese learners already have a basic knowledge of *kanji* and can distinguish the basic meanings (2015: 902). Furthermore, research has shown that various strategies, such as mitigating “unwarranted negative attitudes” about the Japanese writing system being too complex, and building curricula in line with the learners’ cognitive capabilities (Mori 2012), may help students to master *kanji* acquisition successfully.

each. For reading and writing, “can use with limitations” obtained the highest share of responses, with 39.29% of participants selecting this answer for reading and 46.43% for writing. Across all four dimensions, 7.14% indicated a complete lack of language knowledge.

About 73.08% of the respondents in this group were currently employed; 63.16% worked in one place and the remainder combined two or more side jobs. Cases of employment as irregular workers (mostly *arubaito* and a small percent of *paato*) account for 68.43%, which is a higher proportion than its counterpart in the Japanese language schools and university groups. About 36.84% were employed as tenured full-time workers and 15.79% were full-time contract workers. These data were yielded by multiple-answer questions.

3.2.4 *Other*

The “Other” category combines free municipal language classes, volunteer centers, weekend courses, and JICE and UNESCO classes as self-reported by the respondents. In this group, an equal number of learners had pursued post-migration studies of Japanese for less than six months, one to two years, and more than two years (29.41% each). This group exhibited the lowest number of long-term learners compared with other groups.

In this group, 82.35% were holders of JLPT certificates; the predominant level under the old system was Level 3 at 37.50% and in the new system it was N2 at 50%. Some held both: 25% of new certificate holders also had a certificate under the old system. In their self-assessment, the “can use in everyday life” response gained the most endorsements (47.06%) for speaking. The “can use with limitations” and “can use in professional settings” responses were each selected by 35.29% of respondents for understanding. “Can use with limitations” and “can use in everyday life” were the most popular choices for reading (29.41% each), and “can use with limitations” was the most popular response (41.18%) for writing. The reading and writing dimensions obtained a substantial share of responses that indicated a lack of literacy (17.65% and 23.53%, respectively), higher than those in any other group.

A total of 64.71% of respondents in this group were currently employed, which was the lowest employment rate among the compared groups. In this group, only 54.55% of the respondents worked in one place and the remaining migrants were combining two or more side jobs. This group had the highest number of respondents who performed two or more jobs at once to make a living. With regard to employment status, 73.35% of the participants indicated they had irregular employment (mostly *arubaito*), and 36.36% were employed as tenured full-time workers. The data were obtained from multiple-answer questions.

	Japanese Language Schools	Universities	Private Learning	Other
Length of studying Japanese and JLPT levels				
Over two years' length of studying	29.63%	34.29%	35.71%	29.41%
JLPT holders	77.77%	71.48%	71.42%	82.35%
Predominant JLPT level (old system)	Level 2/Level 3	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Predominant JLPT level (new system)	N2	N1	N2	N2
Both certificates	16.66%	33.33%	30.76%	25%
Self-assessment (predominant responses)				
Speaking	can use freely in everyday life/ can use freely in professional settings	can use freely in professional settings	can use freely in everyday life	can use freely in everyday life
Understanding	can use freely in professional settings	can use freely in professional settings	can use freely in everyday life	can use with limitations/ can use freely in professional settings
Reading	can use freely in everyday life	can use freely in professional settings	can use with limitations	can use with limitations/ can use freely in everyday life
Writing	can use with limitations	can use freely in professional settings	can use with limitations	can use with limitations
Employment				
Employed	79.63%	91.43%	73.08%	64.71%
Work in one place only	67.44%	75.00%	63.16%	54.55%
Employed as tenured workers	27.91%	62.50%	36.84%	36.36%
Employed as contract workers	35.88%	18.80%	15.79%	None
Employed part-time	44.18%	21.88%	68.43%	73.35%

Table 1: Comparison of results by site of learning Japanese. (Legend: “/” indicates that both response categories have an equal percentage of responses.)

4 Interview Results: Learners Raise their Concerns

In this section we present the findings from the face-to-face interviews. The interview data provide deeper insight into Japanese language learning by Russian-speaking migrants. This information allowed us to explore the reasons for many people failing to achieve oral proficiency and (particularly) literacy, despite their learning the language in Japan. In this paper we focus on a few narratives about sites for learning Japanese and the challenges migrants experience when attempting to learn the language.

As we analyzed the interview data, a variety of topics emerged that revealed migrants' everyday struggles while learning the language in the hope of securing a job. These struggles often related to the unavailability of affordable learning sites and being constantly slowed down by daily life circumstances in the migrants' respective life stages. Unclear and often unrealistic linguistic demands by potential employers were also articulated as an area of concern. Discrepancies in the types of tuition required emerged as a structural factor responsible for the divide in respondents' Japanese language ability, which further influenced their employment status. The following narratives gathered during the interviews illustrate the scenario. The narratives are grouped thematically.

[1]. “After going to that language school, I went to another one for two years. As my specialization is education, I could see that the teaching methods were wrong in the first school. Well, I don't know. Maybe this system is considered effective here.”

[2]. “He [Japanese husband] then sent me to study at the X University. But there was no specific language [to use at work] while training there.”

- [3]. “Volunteer centers are not really effective. They are more for just talking.”
[4]. “So I lost my motivation and dropped out of the volunteer center.”
- [5]. “I think the best would be really good language courses, preferably with Russian teachers.”
[6]. “I have to start looking for some instruction, maybe through Skype.”
- [7]. “If only I attended something like this [JICE language courses] when I first came to Japan, it would have changed a lot in my life.”

These narratives reveal the general concerns of Russian-speaking migrants about the Japanese language instruction they received at learning sites they attended in Japan. The narrative [1] by an informant who has an educational background in pedagogy, and who changed schools after observing ineffective teaching methods in the first center she attended, is of interest. Whereas switching schools was an option in her case, for most migrants this might not be a choice because attending an expensive commercial language school is often a challenge in itself. The informant in the second narrative told the story of how her husband had facilitated her university learning in Japan, which later helped her to gain full-time employment. Although proficient in Japanese, she expressed the wish to have had an opportunity for more targeted learning of professional Japanese, which could have minimized her language difficulties at work.¹¹ The second informant’s extended narrative, as well as the many other comments we recorded, suggest that most of these struggles have to do with written Japanese used in the workplace. Although some unskilled jobs might not require one to be literate, our observations of work advertisements targeting foreigners suggested the opposite. For example, kitchen work might require an N1 certificate of JLPT, or people might be asked to read at an interview when applying for a cleaning job at a hotel. Once again this highlights the need to help foreigners become literate in Japanese. As these two cases indicate, the situation is aggravated by the general ambiguity of standards pertaining to language skills required for certain work.

Volunteer centers [3] and [4] were criticized for focusing on casual talking only, thereby suggesting that the centers our informants attended might have been sufficient as multicultural communication sites but not as language training sites. Staying motivated in such an environment proved to be difficult and the informant quit the volunteer center. This situation suggests that the participants’ expectations that they would master the Japanese language beyond daily conversations were unmet, and the level of teaching did not match their educational backgrounds and expectations for future employment. This issue should be considered in conjunction with the critical observations by Burgess (2012) (referred to in the Introduction) on the teaching of Japanese by volunteers and the lack of licenses or qualifications. We argue that when the lack of license or qualification translates into ineffective teaching, as perceived by

¹¹ In this regard, McHugh and Challinor (2011) suggest that implementing effective employment-focused learning for migrants, although difficult policy-wise, can play a crucial role in opening doors for their success in the workplace.

some of our research participants who attended volunteer centers, foreigners in Japan fail to attain proficiency in Japanese. Therefore, their linguistic needs are not met, which does not improve their ability to secure the desired form of employment or to be employed at all. This issue (which we discussed in the Introduction) also emerged in the research by Heyse (2015), which showed that educated migrants tend to drop out of free-of-charge language courses that are not tailored to their level and needs.

One informant [5] articulated the wish to have Japanese taught by Russian-speaking instructors, who could easily convey the complexities of grammar. Another participant [6] desired a more flexible way to sustain her language knowledge through Skype classes with an instructor. These two narratives illustrate that migrants look for alternative ways to improve their Japanese language skills if they cannot afford to enter a commercial language school and have not received proper support at the learning sites they initially attended. Although we chose only a few narratives that we considered illustrative for the purpose of this paper, most of the narratives we recorded about language learning sites in Japan were characterized by a degree of frustration. The narrative [7] from an individual who came to Japan many years ago and in 2016 attended the newly established JICE courses is of particular interest. This narrative highlights the relationship between life's unfolding in the host country, on the one hand, and language skills facilitated through the provision of language education for migrants on the other. The availability of sites for effective language learning, with wide regional representation and a target population in mind, greatly influences migrants' livelihood. Through our conversations about these courses with members of the Russian-speaking community, we recorded the following concerns: unavailability of such courses in many prefectures, limited availability of advanced levels compared with basic levels, and insufficient outreach. Participants reported that representatives in some local *Harōwāku* offices (Japan's governmental employment services center), which are responsible for promoting the JICE courses, were unable to provide them with any information. We suggest that information dissemination about these courses, especially in view of their potential impact – as indicated by the informant in the narrative extract above – may boost the outreach by community leaders.

5 Discussion and Concluding Remarks

In the analysis of data from our online survey, discussed above, we highlighted the major differences among the four groups studied in this paper. The groups were as follows: 1) migrants who learned Japanese in Japan through Japanese language schools, 2) those who learnt Japanese at universities, 3) those who learnt privately, and 4) those who used various self-reported learning sites (the “Other” category). Although the “Other” group had the lowest share of respondents for some parameters (e.g., number of long-term learners or holders of advanced certificates in JLPT), many respondents in each group had clearly devoted much time and effort to language learning. However, as seen from both the objective assessment (JLPT) and especially the subjective language ability assessment the respondents provided, overall language ability varied among the

groups along the “university – Japanese language school – private tutoring – other” continuum. Discrepancies were also noted in the migrants’ resultant employment status, along the same trajectory. The highest levels of unemployment occurred among respondents who had studied in free language classes provided by local administrations and at volunteer centers. Both of the groups in which Japanese had been learned privately or at various (mostly) free learning sites had the highest shares of irregular workers, employed as *arubaito*. In the Japanese language school group, although more participants worked full-time than irregularly, most respondents were employed under contracts rather than as tenured employees. The university group displayed the highest proportion of employment in general and full-time employment in particular. People who had studied the language at universities prior to coming to Japan, and continued their studies in the academic setting post-migration (i.e., so-called educational migrants or “Japanologists”), exhibited the highest rate of full-time tenured employment. Although we were encouraged by the finding that people who could be considered as having initially aspired to connect their future with Japan were able to obtain secure positions in Japan, their share in the sample was relatively small. It is unrealistic to demand that migrants should learn Japanese at a university both before and after migration, or even only post-migration. University is often inaccessible because of the expense and in terms of the life paths of migrants who arrive in Japan through non-educational routes. Most of our participants were already university graduates, at both undergraduate and graduate levels, at the time of their migration. However, our findings showed that pre-migratory education in general plays a less significant role in one’s employment in Japan than does a degree obtained in the country, or a combination of two degrees.

Some comment is needed on the high employment rate among migrants who studied Japanese at universities in Japan. Studying at a university in Japan in itself might be associated with increased employment opportunities. This trend cannot be overlooked when discussing Japan, given the *shinsotsu saiyo* system that favors new university graduates as tenured employees – a system still prevalent in Japan (albeit in changed form). Migrants who graduate from Japanese university programs,¹² having secured jobs in Japan, then develop their language ability further in the workplace; whereas those who do not possess this advantage receive fewer employment opportunities and thus fewer chances to advance or sustain their Japanese language ability. Under these circumstances, as observed by Isphording (2015: 7), “better-quality jobs, higher wages, and higher employment probabilities” function as “incentives for learning.” We observed that in the absence of these incentives, non-university groups with poor

¹² However, mentioning the university programs in Japan that offer tuition in English, the completing of which does not necessarily grant employment in the country for someone who does not speak Japanese, is necessary. Burgess (2012: 49-50) addresses this issue by questioning the positive side of the recently adopted Global 30 project in Japan, which has “promotion of English in research institutions” as one of its aims. He argues: “If non-Japanese students are able to graduate from a Japanese university never having taken content classes in Japanese, their employment prospects in Japan will inevitably be limited and Japan will likely lose much of the very “top-class talent” the project aims to retain.”

prospects of tenured employment might not find an investment in their language ability (beyond the initial period of studying) highly appealing. Therefore, Japan's employment system in itself functions as an inhibitory factor in the employment of foreigners.

We therefore emphasize the need to provide better language services for migrants belonging to non-university groups. Although the Japanese language school group showed a fairly balanced outcome in terms of participants' current employment, with a 20.37% unemployment rate, this type of commercial education might not be within the financial reach of some migrants. However, the fact that 45.76% of our participants had enrolled in commercial Japanese language schools suggests that many respondents were both able to afford it financially and understood the need to do so, given the limited availability of free opportunities for effective learning.¹³

Studying privately with a tutor also emerged as a popular option. The resultant employment rate and status were lower than those associated with Japanese language schools. Our findings showed that only a small number of participants accessed the free-of-charge learning opportunities, and ultimately these did not meet respondents' language needs. Enrollment at free learning sites usually did not boost people's stable-employment status and might not have resulted in any employment at all.

Only 3.03% of the unemployed migrants in our sample indicated that they did not want to have a job; the rest showed a desire to be employed to varying degrees. All the unemployed people in our sample were women and childcare emerged as the most crucial inhibitory factor for employment (54.55%). Language barriers were a close second (51.52%; data obtained by multiple-answer questions). Although the lack of childcare support can prevent women from working at the moment, language barriers may prevent them from using the available childcare support or even from attempting to become employed. Therefore, these factors are strongly interconnected. Krumm and Plutzar (2008: 9) suggest that although mothers might not feel the need to learn the language or might lack opportunities to do so, this situation changes when their children grow older. Therefore, we argue that migrant women who have limited Japanese ability and are unemployed will experience a strong need to master the language later in life. When they do, their expectations should be met. The life-course perspective on female migration is illustrated by Heyse (2011), who traces how initially low interest in employment later transforms into the desire to find a job. Therefore, this category should be examined from a longitudinal perspective.

Essentially, our findings showed that the education which respondents received before migration shaped their potential to become working professionals in Japan. People who succeeded in translating this potential to meet the realities of the Japanese labor market were ultimately able to secure better forms of employment or even start their own businesses. This potential can be enhanced through enrolling in tertiary programs in Japan or investing in commercial language education. Migrants who invest in their language skills eventually become members of the category of "highly skilled foreign workers," who are officially recognized by the Japanese government as a target

¹³ However, it is important to note that recently certain Japanese language schools in the country have served as a channel for labor migration (Liu-Farrer 2009).

migrant population to nurture. However, many of our respondents who could have fit into this category if they had been given access to better language services to strengthen their Japanese, were destined to gain only unstable and socially uncertain part-time positions or to remain unemployed. They had not managed to secure stable employment in, for instance, the service sector.

Our research provides an empirical illustration of the challenges migrants face when attempting to learn the Japanese language through currently available learning sites. The framework of our work is a discussion on employment status and form, and our conclusions are based on firsthand data from the Russian-speaking community in Japan. Because expecting migrants to enroll into university programs to learn Japanese is unrealistic, and because commercial language schools might only be accessible to migrants who initially possess a level of financial security, the Japanese government needs to make a greater effort to provide free municipal courses. This would provide opportunities for more targeted, by-level, work-focused, and thus effective learning that accords with the needs of migrants. At the same time, moving volunteer efforts into the multicultural communication domain to emphasize the inner strength of these initiatives, while ensuring that migrants are not unwittingly misled into assuming that these centers are facilitated by the administration as the primary source for mastering Japanese, may be a reasonable step. Furthermore, an expansion of the JICE program into regions would benefit a large pool of migrants if combined with aggressive outreach. In sum, the provision of Japanese language teaching should be organized in such a way that migrants are able to achieve the language proficiency they need to become employed – which includes the ability to read and write.

References

- Burgess, Chris. “‘It’s Better if they Speak Broken Japanese’: Language as a Pathway or an Obstacle to Citizenship in Japan?” *Language and Citizenship in Japan*. Ed. Nanette Gottlieb. London and New York: Routledge, 2012. 37-57.
- Gottlieb, Nanette. *Migration and Language Policy in Japan Today*. The Tokyo Foundation. 2009. Web. 14 Dec. 2016.
- Gottlieb, Nanette. *Language Policy in Japan: The Challenge of Change*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012a.
- Gottlieb, Nanette. “Language, Citizenship, and Identity in Japan.” *Language and Citizenship in Japan*. Ed. Nanette Gottlieb. London and New York: Routledge, 2012b. 1-18.
- Graiger, Peter. “Second Language Learning Strategies and Japanese: Does Orthography Make a Difference?” *System: An International Journal of Educational Technology and Applied Linguistics* 33.2 (2005): 327-339.
- Heyse, Petra. “A Life Course Perspective in the Analysis of Self-Experiences of Female Migrants in Belgium: The Case of Ukrainian and Russian Women in Belgium.” *Migracijske i Etničke Teme* 27.2 (2011): 199-225.

- Heyse, Petra, Rilke Mahieu, and Christiane Timmerman. "The Migration Trajectories of Russian and Ukrainian Women in Belgium." *New Dynamics in Female Migration and Integration*. Ed. Christiane Timmerman, Marco Martiniello, Andrea Rea, and Johan Wets. New York and London: Routledge, 2015. 68-101.
- Isphording, Ingo E. "What Drives the Language Proficiency of Immigrants?" *IZA World of Labor*. Aug. 2015. Web. 14 Dec. 2016.
- [Iwamoto] 岸本織江「在住外国人の現状と文化庁における日本語教育施策」平成27年度文化庁日本語教育大会. 文化庁. 平成27年8月28日. ウェブ. 2017年3月15日確認.
- Kita, Sachiko, Mariko Minatani, Naoko Hikita, Masayo Matsuzaki, Mie Shiraishi, and Megumi Haruna. "A Systematic Review of the Physical, Mental, Social, and Economic Problems of Immigrant Women in the Perinatal Period in Japan." *Journal of Immigrant and Minority Health* 17.6 (2015): 1863-1881.
- Kondo, Atsushi. *Report on Citizenship Law: Japan*. Cadmus EUI Research Repository. European University Institute, Oct. 2016. Web. 23 Mar. 2017.
- Koyama, Kaoru and Masataka Okamoto. "Introduction: Migrants, Migrant Workers, Refugees and Japan's Immigration Policy." *NGO Report Regarding the Rights of Non-Japanese Nationals, Minorities of Foreign Origins, and Refugees in Japan*. Solidarity Network with Migrants Japan (SMJ), Rep. Feb. 2010. Web. 24 Mar. 2017. 3-6.
- Krumm, Hans-Jürgen and Verena Plutzar. *Tailoring Language Provision and Requirements to the Needs and Capacities of Adult Migrants*. Thematic Study V. Council of Europe, 2008. Web. 1 Mar. 2017.
- [Kurata] 倉田有佳「ロシア系日本人—100年の歴史から見えてくるもの」駒井洋(監修), 佐々木てる(編著)『マルチ・エスニック・ジャパニーズ—〇〇系日本人の変革力』明石書店, 2016. 189-202.
- Liu-Farrer, Gracia. "Educationally Channeled International Labor Mobility: Contemporary Student Migration from China to Japan." *International Migration Review* 43.1 (2009): 178-204.
- Maher, John C. and Kyōko Yashiro. "Multilingual Japan: An Introduction." *Multilingual Japan*. Ed. John C. Maher and Kyoko Yashiro. Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1995. 1-18.
- McHugh, Margie and A. E. Challinor. *Improving Immigrants' Employment Prospects through Work-Focused Language Instruction*. Migration Policy Institute. Washington, DC, 2011.
- Mori, Yoshiko. "Five Myths about "Kanji" and "Kanji" Learning." *Japanese Language and Literature* 46.1 (2012): 143-169.
- [Mukhina and Golovina] ムヒナ・ヴァルヴァラ、ゴロヴィナ・クセーニヤ「ロシア人ディアスポラの現状—在日ロシア人移住者の位置づけに向けて」『移民政策研究』第9号 (2017): 105-122.

- Nemoto, Kumiko. *Too Few Women at the Top: The Persistence of Inequality in Japan*. Ithaca: ILR Press, an imprint of Cornell U Press, 2016.
- Noble, Gregory W. "Japan's Economic Crisis: More Chronic than Acute—So Far." *Japan in Crisis: What Will it Take for Japan to Rise Again?* Ed. Youngshik Bong and T. J. Pempel. New York, NY: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013. 53-80.
- OECD. *Education at Glance*. Rep. 2016. Web. 14 Dec. 2016.
- Paxton, Simon and Chavalin Svetanant. "Tackling the Kanji Hurdle: Investigation of Kanji Learning in Non-Kanji Background Learners." *International Journal of Research Studies in Language Learning* 3.3 (2014): 89-104.
- Scully, Etsuko. "Social Constraints and Language Learning: Filipina immigrants in Japan." *Race Ethnicity and Education* 5.4 (2002): 397-418.
- Takahashi, Koji. "The Ways of Working and Consciousness of Keiyaku-Shain." *Japan Labor Review* 9.3 (2012): 127-151.
- Tanaka, Makiko. "Japanese Kanji Word Processing for Chinese Learners of Japanese: A Study of Homophonic and Semantic Primed Lexical Decision Tasks." *Theory and Practice in Language Studies* 5.5 (2015): 900-905.
- The Ministry of Justice, Japan. Statistics on Foreign Residents. http://www.moj.go.jp/housei/toukei/toukei_ichiran_touroku.html. 1 Mar. 2017.
- World Literacy Foundation. *The Economic and Social Cost of Illiteracy: A Snapshot of Illiteracy in a Global Context*. Rep. 24 Aug. 2015. Web. 14 Dec. 2016.