

# Language Support for International Residents: Creating a Working Definition of Easy English

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## I International Residents and Language Support in Japan

### 1. Multilingual Japan

Japan is gradually becoming more multilingual and multiracial. Data from the Statistics Bureau at the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications show that 2,066,445 foreign nationals from at least fifty countries were residing in Japan in 2013. This number shows an increase from 1,075,317 people in 1990. The most numerous nationalities in 2013 were Chinese (648,980 people), Korean (519,737), Philippines (209,137), Brazilian (181,268), and American (49,979).

Having historically seen itself as homogeneous, monolingual and monoethnic<sup>1</sup>, Japan is now faced with pressing questions about how to deal with the increase in migrants. While some of the international residents consisting in the numbers above will have been born and brought up in Japan, many will speak little or no Japanese, let alone be able to read documents written in the Japanese writing system. As a result, they may have difficulty in communicating with people in the wider society, and they may be unable to receive the information necessary for daily life.

### 2. International Residents of Kyoto

Kyoto is an extremely cosmopolitan city. It was formerly the imperial capital, and has long been a religious centre, so it has many temples and shrines, and historic buildings, including World Heritage sites. As such, it is a magnet for tourists, both domestic and overseas, and was even voted the World's Best City for tourism by Travel+Leisure<sup>2</sup> magazine in 2015. Kyoto is also home to around 37 universities and colleges. Approximately 1% of the city's population are students, so the city promotes itself as a "university town" (「大学のまち京都・学生のまち京都推進計画」).

There were a total of 40,676 international residents from 138 countries as of December 31, 2012. The total population at the time was 1,383,762<sup>3</sup>, so the number is 2.94% of the total population of the city. The four largest groups are Koreans from ROK (22,212), Chinese (9,486), Koreans from DPRK (1,882) and Americans (951).

In a previous survey by this author (Wright, 2014), questionnaires in English about living and working in Japan were distributed to English-speaking international residents living or working in Kyoto. Not all the respondents were speakers of English as a first language, but were targeted because they were working or studying in an English-speaking environment (for example, overseas students who were enrolled in English-based programs, and thus were not expected to use Japanese). The nationalities of the 61 respondents were as follows: USA (18), UK (17), Australia (5), Canada (3), NZ (1), Ireland (1); also South America (3), Asian (6), European (7), and dual nationality (1). Many of the respondents were permanent residents, or had working or students visas, and at least a third of them had full-time permanent employment. Generally speaking the level of education of the respondents was high: all had graduated university in Japan or their own country, and many had postgraduate study experience.

Respondents were asked to assess their own language ability. About two-thirds of them reported that they can speak Japanese without difficulty, although two-thirds of this group are less fluent with their reading. About one-third of the respondents reported that they are illiterate in Japanese, and a few also have difficulty in speaking Japanese.

Table 1: Respondents Self-assessed Japanese Language Ability

Japanese Language Ability	Total	% of Total
Can speak, read and write Japanese without difficulty	13	21.3
Can speak Japanese without difficulty, and can read and write a little	25	41
Can speak Japanese, but cannot read or write it	7	11.5
Can communicate in a limited way	10	16.4
Can understand spoken Japanese a little	4	6.6
Very limited understanding	1	1.6
Cannot speak Japanese at all	1	1.6
Totals	61	100

### 3. Language Problems Encountered in Daily Life

When asked about difficulties experienced in their daily lives, many of the respondents said that they did not experience any particular problems. The proportion roughly corresponded to the number of people who said they could use Japanese reasonably proficiently, as described in the previous section. Multiple answers were permitted and some respondents encountered various problems in utilising medical services. For example, documents, information and signs in hospitals were in Japanese only. Clearly, this is a significant problem for the people who are unable to read or write Japanese. Moreover, respondents could not make themselves understood by staff, or could not understand explanations about treatment and medicines.

While many doctors in Japan are able to speak enough English to talk about medical problems, albeit using medical terms which may not be easily understood by the layperson, accessing information about medical treatment was difficult for some respondents. Respondents found that there was not enough information about where to have a consultation in a language other than Japanese, or that they did not know which facility to use, including for night-time emergencies. Some services are available in English for those who know about them, but this is clearly an area where more language support could be given, particularly in view of the large number of tourists and temporary visitors who may need medical care during their visit.

The respondents in our survey were asked about difficulties they had when raising children in Kyoto. Nineteen of the respondents answered that they had children, and nine of them stated that they had had no particular problems with childrearing (multiple answers were possible). However, four respondents said that they found it difficult to teach their children about the language and customs of their country of origin, and three were concerned that their children were not fluent in their own language. Three respondents experienced difficulties in communicating with teachers at schools, day-care or kindergartens, and two experienced difficulties in accessing day-care. One respondent noted that his children had initially experienced difficulties with Japanese.

Respondents commented that they found difficulties or had trouble understanding when using administrative systems, such as the tax and pension systems. Mostly, they relied on Japanese friends and family members (a large number had Japanese spouses), or accessed workplace or school support when

necessary.

Many English speakers are in a socially and economically privileged position compared to other minority languages. In the English-speaking community, there are very strong links between members (for example, in job-seeking, accommodation, exchange of goods and entertainment), electronic social networking, and easily recognisable places to gather (such as Irish-style pubs), as well as disaster support volunteer groups. It seemed clear from the survey that public language support is either not provided or not utilised.

While many native English speakers do not experience significant problems in their daily lives, the situation may be different in emergencies. In cases of emergency such as earthquakes and typhoons, only 28 of 61 respondents said that they knew where their local evacuation area was. Of the 33 people who did not know, eighteen said evacuation areas and routes are not well signposted, and twelve said that the signs were in Japanese only (multiple answers were possible). One person did not know of the existence of such evacuation areas. Moreover, twelve people answered that they had little or no contact with other people in the neighbourhood, suggesting that a significant minority of non-Japanese residents may be isolated from their local communities in daily life and at times of disaster.

This finding is borne out by the result of a survey on the disaster preparedness of international residents in Kyoto carried out by Kyoto Prefectural International Center (KPIC). They found that international residents seemed to be less worried than Japanese residents about disasters, and many did not know what to do in case of an earthquake. They would like to participate in disaster drills but do not know how to, since their communication with neighbours tends to be very limited. The KPIC concluded, “Judging from these results, there is a need to keep spreading information about natural disasters and how to be prepared for them, as well as to encourage international and Japanese residents alike to actively participate together in their local community’s disaster drill.”

#### 4. Language Support in the Public Sphere

As described in the previous section, given that language support can be said to be provided in the private sphere voluntarily, what support is provided in Kyoto? Furthermore, what can be done to help international residents in times of disaster? Firstly, it is necessary to define ‘language support’. Kawahara defines it as support given to non-Japanese residents to help them participate more fully in Japanese society by providing them with the information they need using language that they can understand (Kawahara, 2007:11).<sup>4</sup>

General living information is available at both the Kyoto City International Community House (in English, Chinese, Korean and “others”), and the Kyoto Prefectural International Centre (in English, Chinese, Korean, Spanish, Portuguese, Tagalog on a daily rotating basis). For mental health, there is the nationwide Japan Help Line, which purports to offer help in 18 languages and is available 24 hours a day. Legal, police-related, child-welfare-related and consumer-related advice is offered in Japanese only. Some information on general government policy is available at a national level from ministries, such as the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (about health advice including heatstroke). The National Tax Agency has handbooks in English.

The Kyoto City web page is available in four languages, Japanese, English, Chinese and Korean. Some information written in Spanish is available on the website and in pamphlets. There is information for what to do in the event of a fire or earthquake, but also general information about the city and the local government’s future plans. There is public transport information tourist information and useful information. The format gives each bullet point in the four languages at the same time.

This study proposes a two-pronged approach to language support that will help non-Japanese residents to

“participate more fully in Japanese society by providing them with the information they need using language that they can understand”: Easy Japanese (Yasashii Nihongo) along with Easy English (Yasashii Eigo). As reported above, many of the English-speaking residents can read Japanese to a certain extent, suggesting that support given in the written language using Easy Japanese will assist a large number of the international residents without undue costs related to translation. Because there is no special system for immediate translation of target languages after a disaster, it takes at least 72 hours (3 days) for information to become available. Easy Japanese can be a substitute. Further studies are needed on non-native but main users of English, such as Vietnamese or Thai students, who may fall between two stools. Many of these non-native speakers will be assisted in understanding by the use of Easy English.

## II Language Support through Easy Japanese and Easy English

### 1. Introduction

This section examines the concepts of Easy Japanese and Easy English, by examining an actual example of disaster-related language support in Kyoto. The KPIC has produced a booklet, “Disaster Preparedness Handbook for International Residents”. The booklet covers earthquakes and wind and flood damage, and gives concrete advice about how to prepare for disasters, and what to do in the event that a disaster occurs. It gives some simple phrases and useful words in Japanese. The booklet is available in Korean, Chinese, English, Portuguese, Spanish, Tagalog, and Easy Japanese (やさしい日本語), with Indonesian, Vietnamese, and Thai added in April, 2015.

The efforts of KPIC to prepare as many international residents as possible through offering the information in as many languages as possible are commendable, but as can be seen from the table below, there are diminishing returns for the investment, as the number of people who are supported by each particular translation becomes smaller and smaller.

Table 2: Numbers of international residents in Kyoto by nationality (arranged according to languages covered by the disaster booklet translations provided by KPIC)

Languages covered	Residents	English speaking	Residents	Other	Residents
ROK	22,121	USA	951	France	358
China	9,486	UK	322	India	248
DPRK	1,882	Australia	221	Germany	200
Philippines	881	Canada	196	Nepal	199
Taiwan	665	New Zealand	64	Russia	136
Thailand	369	Ireland	21	Malaysia	116
Vietnam	293			Italy	106
Indonesia	286			115 nationalities with less than 100 people	1290
Spain	76				
Mexico	38				
Brazil	145				
Portugal	6				
Total	36,248		1,775		2,653
Subtotal	36,248			2,653	
Grand total	40,676				

## 2. Easy Japanese

The following definition of Easy Japanese is based on Hirosaki University's Sociolinguistics Laboratory home page. It requires familiarity with 2,000 spoken and written Japanese words. They suggest that information be given using no more Chinese characters and grammatical structures than Level 3 of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test: if a person can arrange a meeting with friends and make purchases in a store, their Japanese level should be sufficient. The sentences should be short and simple, and the pronunciation of Chinese characters can be shown using furigana. Ambiguous expressions should be avoided. This would allow information to be given to a wide non-Japanese audience within 3 hours of a disaster.

## 3. Easy English

Yoneoka (2005) surveyed artificially simplified Englishes, and identified the following types:

- a. Basic English: This is for learners of English and has a basic 850 words plus another 150 specialist words.
- b. Special English: For learners of English, based on American English. It has a basic vocabulary of 1500 words.
- c. Plain English: This is to simplify administrative English, such as government publications and documentation for native English speakers. There is no particular vocabulary limit or word list.
- d. Simplified English: Based on American English, this is aimed at engineers working in the aeronautical and space industries. It has a basic vocabulary of 823 words, plus specialist terms.
- e. Easy English: This English was developed to make the Bible accessible. It is based on British English, and has two levels, where Level A has a vocabulary list of 1200 words, and Level B which has 2800 words.
- f. Specialized English: This English was also developed to promote the diffusion of Christian ideology, and is based on a mixture of British and American English. It has a vocabulary list of about 1500 words.

As a working definition, the developers generally suggest the following parameters for producing artificially simplified English:

- a. Use a limited vocabulary (around 1000 words);
- b. Express ideas in as few words as possible;
- c. Keep the sentences short, and do not use more than one topic in one sentence;
- d. Do not use the passive voice;
- e. Paraphrase in simple words;
- f. Avoid jargon;
- g. Avoid idioms.

Because the different types of simplified Englishes have a particular basis (or bias), such as promoting Christian ideology, or to simplify administrative English for native speakers, it makes it very difficult to find a new title, but Easy English, or perhaps Yasashii Eigo is better, to since we will be considering them as a partner to Yasashii Nihongo.

### III Defining Easy English

Following similar parameters to those mentioned above, Takagaki (2015) has produced the following example of Yasashii Eigo. The original text is from an English newsletter called The Globe, published in May, 2010 by the International Exchange Association of Fukushima City):

“So it’s that time of year again – the annual Fukuyama Rose Festival is upon us! This month’s issue of The Globe will provide you with all you need to know about some of the events going on during the city’s

biggest annual event, the Rose Festival, on Saturday, May 15 and Sunday May 16.”

(Simplified version from Takagaki):

“It’s that time of the year again – the Fukuyama Rose Festival is here! This month’s issue of The Globe will give you information about some of the events during the city’s biggest yearly event, the Rose Festival, on Saturday, May 15 and Sunday May 16.” 高垣 (2015、23)

As Takagaki describes in his report, he has taken out superfluous words and generally used simpler vocabulary items, so, for example, the complex noun phrase, ‘all you need to know’ has been replaced by the relatively accessible noun ‘information’, and the verb ‘provide’ has become ‘give’.

Takagaki has produced a much more accessible piece of English by adhering to the above guidelines, and using his common sense of what may be acceptable to Japanese learners of English. However, this common sense needs to be developed into concrete guidelines that can be applied to documents produced for the needs of the huge variety of non-Japanese residents in Japan. It will be necessary to find a way of writing Easy English that is accessible to as many different nationalities as possible.

Firstly, which English words can be understood by a large number of non-native speakers and so are acceptable for Easy English? There is no simple answer to this question at the moment, and further work is necessary. Each of the artificially simplified Englishes studied by Yoneoka has an associated word list, but there is a large discrepancy in the number of words allowed (from 850 to 1500, or more). There are numerous word lists for ESL, such as the Ogden Word List (which has a list of 850 words) or the Voice of America Word List (1510 words) that can be used as guidelines.

A short passage from the first page of the KPIC booklet (written in English presumably for native English speakers) has been used as an example to show the accessibility of the booklet. The English booklet also gives a Japanese translation beside the English text. The table below shows these two texts, plus the Japanese from the Easy Japanese booklet. A simplified version of the English has been made by translating the information provided in the Easy Japanese booklet.

Table 3: English, Japanese, Easy Japanese and Easy English texts

<p>1. What is an earthquake?</p> <p>Whenever the boundaries in the bedrock beneath our feet shift, or when great pressure is exerted onto the bedrock’s interior and the bedrock breaks, the shaking from that event is transmitted to the surface. When a major earthquake occurs, electricity and water lifelines can be cut and falling buildings may cause fires or other secondary damage.</p>
<p>1. 地震とは</p> <p>地下の岩盤どうしの境目がずれたり、岩盤の内部が大きな力を受けて割れたりしたときに、その揺れが地上へ伝わってくるものです。大地震が発生すると電気、水道などのライフラインが寸断され、建物の倒壊による火災などの二次災害も引き起こす恐れがあります。</p>
<p>やさしい日本語</p> <p>1. 地震を知っていますか？</p> <p>地震はいつ、どこで起きるかわかりません。地面が揺れて、家やビルが壊れます。水道や電気やガスが止まります。火事になるかもしれません。</p>
<p>Direct translation of the easy Japanese</p> <p>1. Do you know about earthquakes?</p> <p>We do not know when or where an earthquake will happen. The ground shakes, and houses and buildings are destroyed. Water, electricity and gas may stop. There may be fires.</p>

How accessible are the different versions in terms of vocabulary? Words not appearing in the Ogden word list, which has 850 words, are highlighted in the texts below:

(Original English version)

### 1. What is an earthquake?

Whenever the boundaries in the bedrock beneath our feet shift, or when great pressure is exerted onto the bedrock's interior and the bedrock breaks, the shaking from that event is transmitted to the surface. When a major earthquake occurs, electricity and water lifelines can be cut and falling buildings may cause fires or other secondary damage.

(Simplified version)

### 1. Do you know about earthquakes?

We do not know when or where an earthquake will happen. The ground shakes, and houses and buildings are destroyed. Water, electricity and gas may stop. There may be fires.

Words not appearing in the VoA list (1510 words) are highlighted below:

(Original English version)

### 1. What is an earthquake?

Whenever the boundaries in the bedrock beneath our feet shift, or when great pressure is exerted onto the bedrock's interior and the bedrock breaks, the shaking from that event is transmitted to the surface. When a major earthquake occurs, electricity and water lifelines can be cut and falling buildings may cause fires or other secondary damage.

(Simplified version)

### 1. Do you know about earthquakes?

We do not know when or where an earthquake will happen. The ground shakes, and houses and buildings are destroyed. Water, electricity and gas may stop. There may be fires.

The above analyses suggest that the number of words necessary is somewhere between the Ogden and VoA lists. All the words in the simplified version appear on the VoA list whereas some essential and commonly used words, such as 'earthquake' and 'electricity', do not appear in the Ogden list.

The grammar and phrases have naturally been simplified, but by how much? Text Analysers for Readability such as SMOG or ATOS use sentence length and the number of syllables in the words used to calculate how many years of formal education a person would need to read a text. They also give hints on how to improve readability. These text analysers are generally provided for use by native English speakers. In the KPIC pamphlet, the original English in the pamphlet would expect the reader to have about 13-15 years of education, namely a university level of education, whereas the translation of the やさしい日本語 would need 4-7 years of formal schooling. Clearly, this is much closer to the level which can be expected to be easily read by a non-native speaker of English.

## Conclusion and Considerations

Efforts are being made in Japan to provide for the linguistic needs of non-Japanese residents and visitors, but this paper has suggested a way in which language support could be improved, namely, by providing support

in Easy Japanese and Easy English. Easy Japanese can be produced quickly by Japanese native speakers who have no other linguistic knowledge, based on the common sense rules suggested by Hirosaki University and others. Many international residents (and even Japanese residents) would be helped by this provision. For those international residents who have little command of the Japanese language, and moreover, are not native English speakers, Easy English would help to fill the gap in native language support. This paper has attempted to give some parameters for Easy English, using examples from the wide variety of artificially simplified Englishes. It goes without saying that some non-Japanese residents will speak neither Japanese nor English, easy or otherwise, and other methods of support must be found for them. Large-scale studies are necessary to determine the actual number of people to whom this applies.

One of the respondents from the Kyoto survey of the language support needs, a native German speaker, sums up the situation: "In general, I think Japan is still not well prepared for English-speaking foreigners. Any language outside English is without question. It's OK, I manage, but that not even Municipal Institutions, such as Ward Offices have any English-speaking personnel was surprising. Apart from that, I think it is my duty to try hard to understand their language!"

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#### Notes

- 1 There is a large body of literature on this topic. See for example Maher (1995:9-10, 1997:115-6), Arudou's *Japanese Only* (2006:ii-iii) or Maher and MacDonald (1995:10), among others.
- 2 Travel+Leisure magazine HP
- 3 Kyoto City Official Website
- 4 「外国人が理解できる言語を用いて、必要とされる情報を伝達すること」(河原、2007:11)。

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