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Scope

“Global Perspectives on Japan” focuses on developing a global perspective on the study of Japan and Asia. The journal promotes innovative, interdisciplinary, inter-regional and transnational approaches to Japanese Studies.

The journal aims to be a venue for scholarship in E.M.E.A. region with a special focus on Turkey and neighboring regions. It especially encourages scholars from the Middle East, Balkans, Central Asia and the Mediterranean but also welcomes scholars from other parts of the world.

GPJ invites papers in the fields of history, humanities, and social sciences including topics of the past and the present. In addition to articles, the journal publishes occasional article size translations, book reviews, and surveys of current trends in Japanese and Asian Studies.

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Current Status and Issues of Basic Education Guarantee in Japan under the Corona Crisis*

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Introduction

In Japan, the first case of new coronavirus infection was reported in January 2020, and the infection spread throughout the country. At the request of the government, all elementary, junior high, and high schools in Japan were closed from March 2. In April, a state of emergency was declared in 13 prefectures, followed by a nationwide declaration of a state of emergency, which was followed by a second declaration of a state of emergency in January 2021, and a total of four intermittent declarations.

As shown in Figure 1, the number of foreign visitors to Japan in 2020 was about 4.31 million, a significant decrease of -27 million or -86% from the previous year due to the coronavirus.

* This article was originally published in Japanese:新矢麻紀子・棚田洋平「コロナ禍における日本の基礎教育保障の現状と課題—日本語教室・識字学級・夜間中学の現場より—」。基礎教育保障学研究 第6号(2022.08) https://doi.org/10.32281/jasbel.6.0_240. It was abbreviated and translated by Can Barut for GPJ.

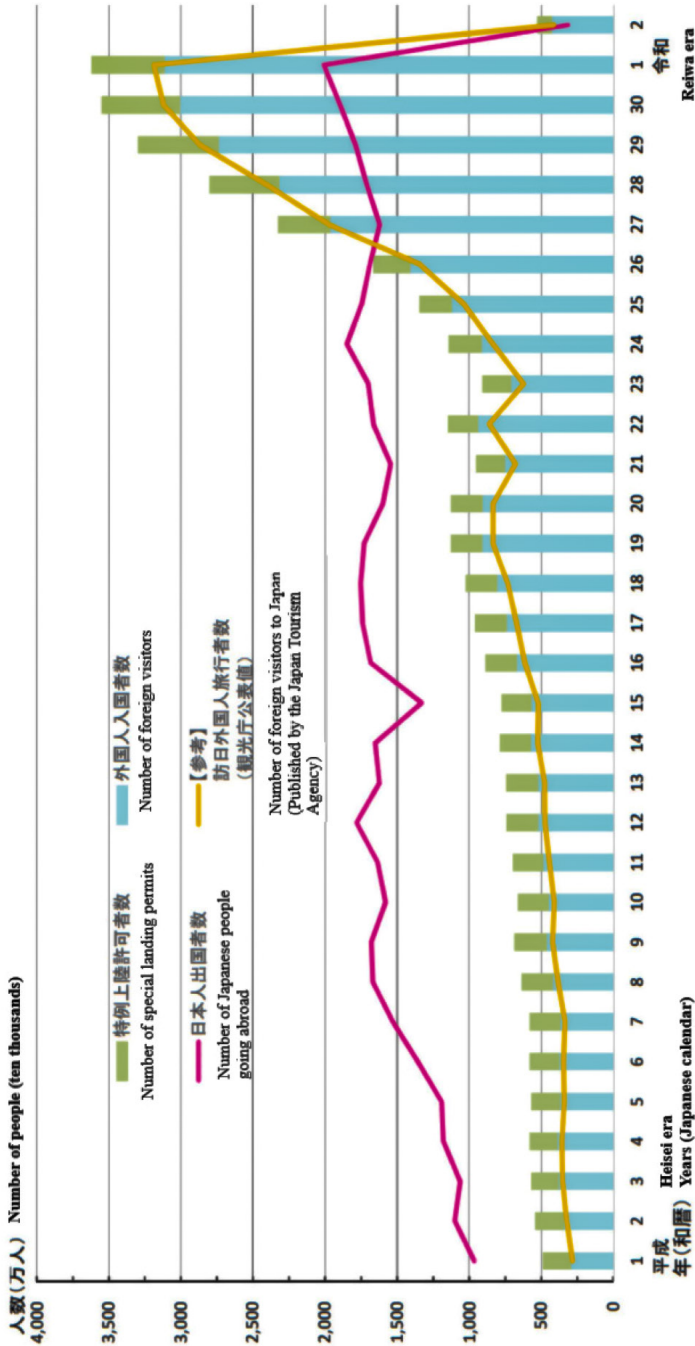


Figure 1: Number of Foreign Nationals Entering Japan, Japanese Departing Japan. (Information Report Document dated 29/01/2021)

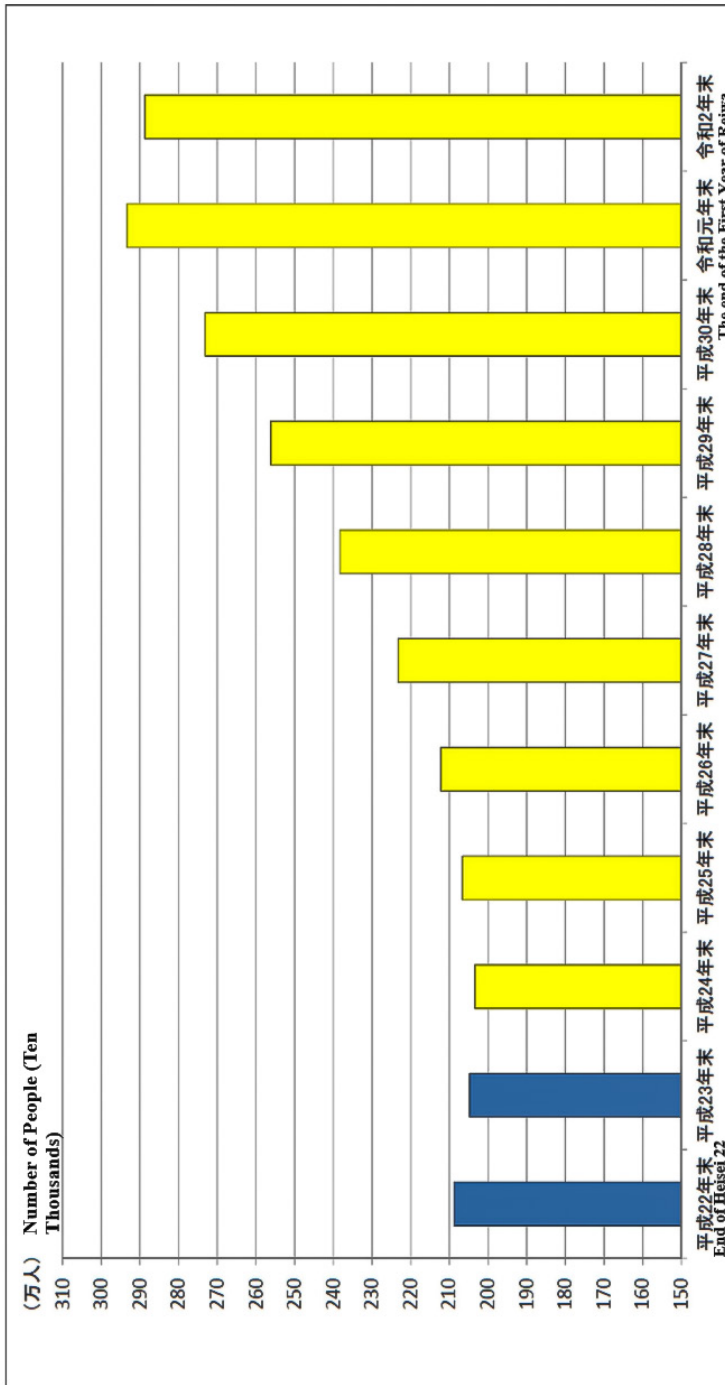


Figure 2: Number of Foreign Residents. (Immigration Services Agency, Information Report Document dated 31/3/2021).

As shown in Figure 2, the number of foreign residents in Japan decreased to 2.88 million as the number of arrivals declined. This is a decrease of approximately 50,000 people from the previous year. In recent years, Japan has seen a large increase in the number of foreign learners not only in local Japanese language classes for foreigners but also in literacy classes and evening junior high schools. In other words, the decrease in the number of foreign learners due to the spread of coronavirus infection has affected the entire basic education field: local Japanese language classes, literacy classes, and evening junior high schools.

This report attempts to clarify what happened at the sites of basic education based on the results of surveys conducted in evening junior high schools, literacy classes, and Japanese language classes under the conditions of a coronary outbreak.

II. Impact on Local Japanese Language Classes

In Japan, several laws and policies related to foreigners have been enacted in recent years. These legislations, in particular, the Japanese Language Education Promotion Act have greatly increased the budget for Japanese language education for foreigners. In 2019 it was 8 billion yen, in 2020 it was 9.5 billion yen, and in 2021 it was 9.9 billion yen, and in 2022 it is demanding a budget of 13 billion yen.

In Japan, the Agency for Cultural Affairs oversees Japanese language education for adults. The Agency's annual "Survey of Japanese-Language Education in Japan" report for FY2020 shows that the number of Japanese-language learners nationwide was approximately 62,000, a 36% decrease from the previous year. However, the questions in both the 2020 and 2021 surveys in the wake of the coronavirus pandemic were identical to those in the past, and no questions were set to ask about changes in educational practices or challenges due to the impact of Corona. This means that no nationwide survey was conducted to determine the impact of corona infections on Japanese language classrooms. Also, with regard to surveys at the municipal level, the reality is that not many organizations have conducted such surveys.

As for public financial support for Japanese language classes under the Corona situation, the budget of the Agency for Cultural Affairs' "Project

for Promotion of Comprehensive Regional Japanese Language Education System” can be used, and classes in the region can be included as a subsidized expense. The system includes a fact-finding survey, establishment of a Japanese language study consultation service, rewards for instructors of online classes, lease of web conferencing tools, PCs, etc., and purchase of consumables for infection prevention. However, perhaps because this project is a 1/2 subsidy project, 1/3 of the prefectures and 40% of the government-designated cities in Japan have yet to apply. Even when budgets are obtained, the use of the budget is left up to the local governments, and some local governments do not provide sufficient financial support for Japanese language classes. This means that the Agency for Cultural Affairs’ project funds are not being used effectively.

To summarize this section, we will discuss the challenges and possibilities of regional Japanese language education under the Corona situation, which we have learned from surveys conducted by several local governments, questionnaires for coordinators, and interviews. Challenges include regional disparities in public support systems; development of online learning infrastructure (PCs, tablets, and other equipment, internet, and other classroom facilities); development and utilization of online learning content; decline in Japanese language proficiency due to loss or decline in learners’ Japanese learning and use environment; disparities in participation (for both learners and learning supporters) due to digital literacy; loss of “connection” and “place” due to non-instructional Japanese classes; and burden on Japanese language volunteers regarding online learning support. In particular, there was a gap between regions and classrooms in the provision of online classes, the lack of digital literacy, or the individual participation gap due to economic problems.

On the other hand, new possibilities also opened up. By holding online classes, the company was able to uncover a new segment of learners who are not able to easily come to face-to-face classrooms. For example, foreign mothers with infants and toddlers, workers who are too busy with work to make time to come to classes, and learners who have psychological difficulties in participating in face-to-face classes participated in the “Online Basic Kanji Class For Parents”. Along with online classes, online learning content and new learning methods were developed. In addition, a collaboration between

supporters with extensive support experience but poor IT skills and those with limited experience but high digital literacy was created.

Just as the negative experience of the Great Hanshin-Awaji Earthquake (1995) led to the expansion of multilingual support and the promotion of “multicultural conviviality,” it is important to be aware of sustainability and develop online learning materials and educational methods that can be effectively used even after the end of coronary infection, rather than just being a transitory response to the current coronary situation.

III. Impact on Literacy and Japanese Language Classes

It is assumed that literacy classes and night classes, as well as local Japanese language classes, were greatly affected by the Corona disaster, but there is no way to know the nationwide situation. However, surveys have been conducted in some areas to determine the status of night classes, literacy classes, and Japanese language classes during the Corona disaster.

In Osaka, the “Osaka Literacy Promotion Guidelines” are in effect, and there are more than 200 literacy and Japanese language classes in the prefecture, and surveys of these classes are conducted regularly. The “Survey on current conditions of Literacy and Japanese Language Classes” conducted by Osaka Prefecture in FY2020 includes an item asking about the impact of the Corona disaster.

Many of the literacy and Japanese language classes are held in rented rooms in public facilities. Therefore, when the state of emergency was declared and the use of public facilities was restricted, literacy and Japanese language classes had to be canceled. According to the results of the aforementioned survey, most of the 193 classrooms that responded indicated that “there was a period of inactivity in the classroom” (188 classrooms) and that “so-called ‘Avoid the Three Cs’ measures were taken” (179 classrooms). The number of respondents who said they were “not particularly affected” was zero, indicating that all literacy and Japanese language classrooms were forced to take some kind of action due to the spread of the coronavirus. Also, more than half of the classrooms had fewer learners (52.3%, 101 classrooms), and about one-third had fewer learning supporters (31.6%, 61 classrooms).

In June 2020, the Center for Literacy and Japanese Language conducted

a “Questionnaire on the Status of Literacy Classes, Literacy and Japanese Language Classes, and Japanese Language Classes” targeting those in charge of literacy and Japanese language classes in municipalities in Osaka Prefecture and those in charge of Japanese language classes at international exchange centers (74 sent, 42 responses). According to the results, only a small number (7.5%) of the respondents answered that they were “unaware of the situation,” in response to the class cancellation and that they took some measures, such as keeping in touch with the learners and their learning partners (supporters), consulting with the learners about their problems, and checking on the learners’ health. When classrooms are reopened, to prevent coronary infection, participants are required to measure their temperature, disinfect their hands, prepare health check sheets, wear masks and face shields, etc. When it comes to classroom set-up, measures such as setting up acrylic boards, placing desks at a certain distance, regular ventilation, and disinfection of used desks and chairs are being implemented.

Some of the problems and difficulties include the following: “We have to limit the number of students we can accept in our classrooms because we have to rearrange the desks and limit the number of students,” even if there are some who wish to attend; and “Most of our staff are elderly, so if infected, there is a risk of serious illness” as well as learners. In addition, many respondents said that there was a variety of confusion and anxiety among learners and supporters and that it was difficult to envision the future of classroom activities in the face of the coronavirus pandemic.

IV. Impact on Night Schools

The public night junior high schools were subject to “nationwide simultaneous school closures”, resulting in a three-month (March to May) learning gap in some places.

According to the survey of the Kinki region by the national association for the study of night junior high school (end of May 2020), many schools provided academic guidance and lifestyle counseling through phone calls, social networking services, and letters, as well as home visits, during the school closure period. As for academic guidance, various measures were attempted to ensure that learning was not interrupted, such as sending school newsletters and home-study handouts by mail and handing them out

during home visits. However, the following things have been identified as challenges with those methods: not meeting face-to-face and limited time, did not allow for in-depth life counseling, and made it difficult to grasp the students' level of understanding of the learning content. After the reopening of school, the school has continued to take measures such as limiting the number of school days, staggered attendance of students, and conducting daily health checks. In addition, many students had trouble applying for the special fixed-amount benefit, so assistance was also sought.

Some students have lost their wages or jobs due to the corona, and this has prevented them from attending night school. On the other hand, some older students have stopped coming due to health concerns. There have been cases where students have been stopped from going to school by their families or the companies they work for. Under these circumstances, the need for school nurses, school counselors, school social workers, and native language support staff, which have been requested to be assigned to night junior high schools, has been realized once again.

V. Guarantee of Basic Education “post-Corona”

Through this report, four points were clarified as the current status and challenges of basic education guarantee in Japan during the coronavirus pandemic: “Decrease in the number of learners and supporters,” “Possibilities and challenges of online activities,” “Growing needs for basic education,” and “Need for a fact-finding survey.

The background of the decrease in the number of learners and supporters can be attributed to (1) the decrease in the number of new learners due to restrictions on the number of foreign immigrants, (2) the long-term suspension of activities, and (3) the departure of learners and supporters due to difficulties and insecurity in terms of living and health. In the field of basic education guarantee for the coronavirus pandemic, the function of consultation and support regarding daily life, health, etc. is also indispensable, including support for application procedures for special fixed benefits, vaccinations, etc.

With regard to learning support activities, online activities were attempted in several literacies and Japanese language classes. As mentioned in section

II, the potential of this approach is to identify needs, realize support through outreach, and build new relationships. On the other hand, some classroom staff members voiced concerns about the digital divide that could alienate learners who do not have an online environment or Internet skills, as well as “the conflict or impossibility between the purpose of the classroom and the purpose of a local classroom. The rapid expansion of online activities during the coronavirus pandemic is a way of questioning the “placeability,” “communality,” and “locality” of classroom activities.

In the coronavirus pandemic, there is an ever-increasing need for basic education. The number of truant students reached a record high in FY2020, with 63,350 elementary school students and 132,777 junior high school students. Apart from that, 20,905 elementary and junior high school students did not attend school for more than 30 days to avoid the infection of coronavirus. The number of children who are not attending school is accumulating year by year, and the number of foreign children is also increasing year by year. The situation of these children alone clearly shows that there is a definite need to guarantee basic education and that measures are urgently required to grasp and respond to these needs.

Finally, it is necessary to investigate the actual situation related to basic education guarantees. The research referred to in this article was only conducted in some regions, but this is not limited to research on the effects of the coronavirus pandemic. In the first place, there is no nationwide, continuous, and cross-sectional survey of the field of basic education guarantee in Japan. It is desirable to conduct surveys on a national scale to grasp the general situation of the basic education guarantee field and to study the needs for basic education as basic data for promoting various measures.

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