

An analysis of the English communication needs of people involved in tourism at Japanese rural destinations

Reiko Fujita (International Education Center, Tokai University, reiko-f@tokai-u.jp)

Masako Terui (Faculty of Science and Engineering, Kindai University, terui@kindai.ac.jp)

Tamao Araki (Language Education Center, University of Miyazaki, taraki@cc.miyazaki-u.ac.jp)

Hisashi Naito (Faculty of Business Administration, Hokkai Gakuen University, naito@hgu.jp)

Abstract

In Japan, the number of international tourists has been growing sharply in the last decade and the needs for English communication skills to interact with such tourists are increasing. Visitors now explore not only well-known tourist spots but also rural areas where overseas travelers have rarely visited until now. Those people in such areas are now required to communicate with tourists who may not speak any Japanese. Investigating the English communication needs for such tourism situations would be beneficial for developing training programs. Hence, a survey was conducted at two local destinations in Kanagawa Prefecture. Respondents were asked their English proficiency and then to describe difficult situations that they have experienced with international visitors. The initial analysis of the 138 data obtained shows that only one fourth of the respondents were able to speak at most, basic conversational English. Respondents also worried about not being able to make themselves understood to the visitors. In this paper, the current survey is analyzed, and some of the problems are identified. The linguistic issues in rural destinations and pedagogical implications are also discussed.

Keywords

inbound tourism, rural destinations, English, communication, language barrier

1. Background

The Japanese government introduced the Visit Japan Campaign (VJC) in 2003, to promote Japan as an international tourist destination. Since then, the number of international visitors to Japan has grown considerably. In 2015, for the first time, there were almost 20 million international visitors [Japan Tourism Agency, 2016]. This number is four times larger than the number for 2003, when the VJC was launched. The government's new ambitious goal for 2020 is to welcome forty million visitors. To achieve this goal, promoting rural tourism destinations and thereby dispersing tourists over many areas of Japan is crucial.

Until recently, international tourists visiting Japan were concentrated in large famous cities like Tokyo and Osaka, or famous sightseeing spots such as Kyoto and Nara. However, reflecting the government's tourism policies, rural tourist destinations have begun to attract increasing numbers of visitors. For example, the number of international visitors to the Mt. Fuji area in Yamanashi prefecture grew four times larger between 2012 and 2015 [Yamanashi Prefecture, 2016]. Similar phenomena have been observed at many other destinations in Japan, such as Aomori, Toyama and Gifu prefectures [Japan Tourism Agency, 2015]. As a result, people at rural destinations are beginning to see more international tourists in their areas.

Many developing countries have promoted tourism in rural and local areas to vitalize the area's economy. Japan is not a developing country, but turning local tourist destinations into

international destinations, or creating new rural destinations, has become an important issue under the government's initiative to sustain its economy for the future.

For tourism in rural areas to be successful, the local people need to overcome certain obstacles. Scheyvens [2002] points out the lack of ownership, capital, skills, and resources in rural destinations as obstacles. Knowledge is often mentioned as a very important asset needed to overcome such obstacles [Timothy and Tosun, 2003; Sofield, 2003]. In this project, issues related to communication skills at the Japanese local destinations were focused on, because the lack of foreign language skills [Bushell and Eagles, 2006] may be one obstacle that needs to be overcome to effect successful tourism.

At such destinations in rural areas, not only those employed in tourism industries such as inns, souvenir shops, and eateries but also people on the streets may be required to communicate with tourists who do not speak any Japanese. In many situations, English is used as a tool for communication, and thus English communication skills are increasingly needed to interact with international tourists. According to a survey of international tourists by the Japan Tourism Agency in 2016, the communication issues rank as one of the greatest inconveniences experienced by tourists during their travels in Japan. These communication problems can be categorized into two types. One derives from the lack of written information (ranks as the 3rd in the above mentioned survey), such as multilingual street signs and information leaflets. Another is the poor face-to-face communication skills of local people interacting with visitors who may be asking for information or directions on the street, or at their hotels (ranks as the top).

If one or both means of communication are lacking, it is

probably difficult for tourists to travel easily. In the large cities or at famous tourism venues, more and more signs are bilingual or multilingual, and in many cases there are some people who can communicate in foreign languages. However, at local destinations, where most tourists to date have been Japanese, the situation may be different. It is assumed that fewer people have enough English skills to be able to deal with international tourists. This position is supported by an interview survey of people at local destinations by Arima *et al.* [2014], who found that some people at local facilities are not very positive about communicating with international visitors.

2. Research questions

During tourism encounters, speaking and listening are the most important communication skills [Prachanant, 2012]. There is no doubt that interactions between tourists and hosts are mostly conducted by speaking and listening. According to Shieh [2012], most situations involve “listening to guests’ inquiries,” and “responding to guests’ inquiries.” In typical business situations at Japanese companies, Terauchi *et al.* [2015] conducted a large-scale questionnaire survey, and found that Japanese business people had an average CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages) B1 level of English [Council of Europe, 2001]. Respondents to the survey indicated that a CEFR B1 level is not sufficient for conducting business in international situations, and they hope to reach a B2 level (see Table 1 for reference level). Similarly, Japanese people at local tourism destinations are most likely face a similar gap between their English level and the English fluency they really need.

In this research, the aim was to identify the English communication needs of people at rural destinations in Japan, who are involved in tourism business or promotion. The objectives to identify these English communication needs were formulated as two research questions: (1) How do the people in new international destinations in rural areas of Japan feel about

accepting tourists from overseas? (2) What level of fluency do these people have in the English language? Are they capable of dealing with international visitors with their English skills?

To this end, a questionnaire survey was conducted at two local destinations in the southern part of Tokyo. In this paper, the results of the questionnaire survey are reported, and the communication issues identified are summarized.

3. The survey

This paper details one part of a project that comprises of two steps: a written questionnaire and follow-up interviews. Using both quantitative and qualitative approaches based on the questionnaires and interviews, the aim of this project is to identify the English communication needs of people who are involved in tourism at rural tourism destinations in Japan. Target respondents are not limited to the workers of tourism business, but also any residents who have been involved in promoting tourism in the area by holding or helping with festivals or events to revitalize the area. The questionnaire survey was conducted during the summer of 2015. Based on the findings of this survey, follow-up interviews are being conducted; hence, this paper deals with data from the questionnaire survey alone.

The questionnaire survey was conducted at two potential international destinations in southern Tokyo. One of these areas was Oyama, Isehara city, which is about one and one-half hours by train and bus from the center of Tokyo. Another area was Yagurazawa, Minamiashigara city. This area is about a two-hour car-ride from the center of Tokyo. These areas were selected because they are near the campus where one of the researchers works, and the researcher already has some contacts in these areas. Both were just starting to show interest in international tourism in order to revitalize the areas. The contacts at Oyama included a person working at the town tourism office and a public relation liaison. At Yagurazawa, a leader of a town promotion committee helped with this study. In each area, 100 questionnaire forms were handed to the respective contact

Table 1: CEFR common reference levels (extracted from self-assessment grid)

	A1	B1	B2
Listening	I can recognize familiar words and very basic phrases concerning myself, my family and immediate concrete surroundings when people speak slowly and clearly	I can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. I can understand the main point of many radio or TV programs on current affairs or topics of personal or professional interest when the delivery is relatively slow and clear.	I can understand extended speech and lectures and follow even complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar. I can understand most TV news and current affairs programs. I can understand the majority of films in standard dialect
Speaking Interaction	I can interact in a simple way provided the other person is prepared to repeat or rephrase things at a slower rate of speech and help me formulate what I’m trying to say. I can ask and answer simple questions in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics.	I can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. I can enter unprepared into conversation on topics that are familiar, of personal interest or pertinent to everyday life (e.g. family, hobbies, work, travel and current events).	I can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible. I can take an active part in discussion in familiar contexts, accounting for and sustaining my views.

persons. They delivered the questionnaires to the people who either live or work in these areas, have local businesses or are involved in tourism-related activities that may require contact with international travelers. After an interval, the contact persons collected the responses from the respondents at town meetings or the respondents' shops or inns. At the beginning of the questionnaire, the purpose of the survey and the privacy policy were explained. The respondents were required to consent to the policy before answering the questionnaire. 138 valid responses were collected: 85 from Oyama and 53 from Yagurazawa.

The Oyama area was for several hundred years a popular Shinto pilgrimage destination, but the number of tourists declined as the number of pilgrims decreased. Its population is today about 550, comprised of about 170 households, and the area has been trying to revive tourism in recent years. Yagurazawa—located on the outskirts of mountains—is a typical rural town in that the young people have left to go to work in the big cities, and the average age of the residents is quite high. Its population is about 600, with 100 households. The town has been trying to promote itself as a tourism destination based on its hiking trails, old temples, and shrines.

The questionnaire had 17 questions regarding respondents' profiles and language proficiencies. Respondents were also asked about their attitudes regarding the development of their town into an international tourist destination, and their experiences with international visitors. The questionnaire included three open-ended questions in which the respondents could express their opinions or describe their experiences freely.

4. Results

Valid responses from 138 survey participants were obtained. Due to data limitations, at this point, it is possible to show only the general tendencies at these rural destinations. In this section, the results of selected items that are helpful for understanding communication needs at these destinations will be summarized.

4.1 Profiles of the respondents

The ratio of males to females was 6 to 4, and the average age of the respondents was 47 years old. Asked to write their occupation, about 40 % of the respondents wrote that they were "office workers" or "part-time workers", of which fields are unknown. Thirty one percent of the respondents are owners of local businesses that include souvenir shops and eateries. The rest includes owners of small hotels or inns (6 %), service industry (7 %), tourism or travel office (5 %) and others.

More than 40 % of the participants said that they had never been abroad. Another 38 % had been outside of Japan only between one and three times. Thus, these people's overseas experiences are quite limited.

4.2 English proficiency

Asked about their English proficiency, more than three-fourths of the respondents answered they were not able to speak English (see Figure 1).

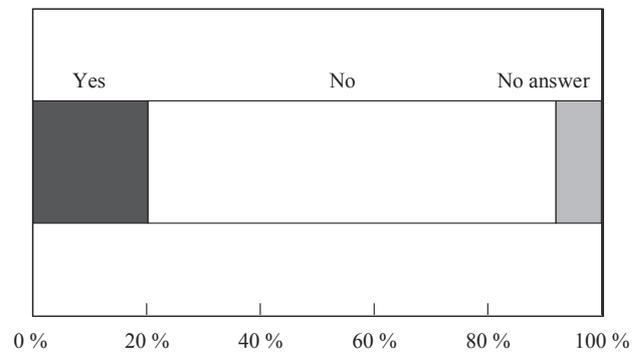


Figure 1: English proficiency

Note: n = 138

Those who said they could speak English were then asked about their proficiency. Over 50 % can "greet" with confidence, but as for "giving directions to someone," fewer than 10 % responded that they are confident in this situation. Overall, they are only able to speak at most basic conversational English.

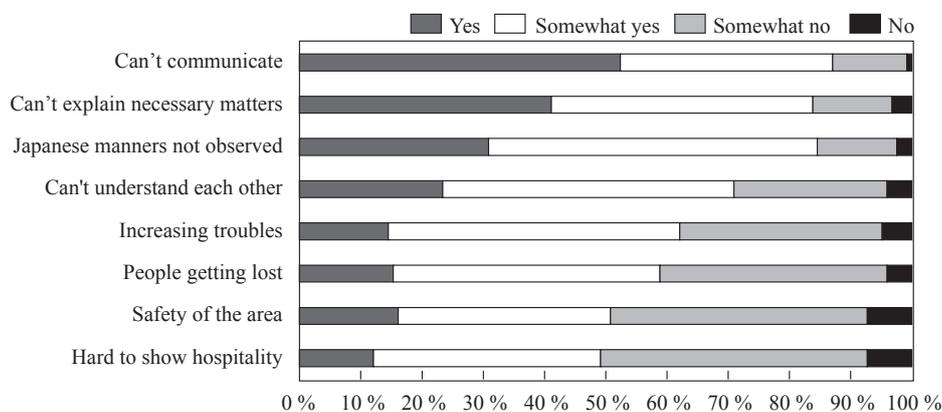


Figure 2: Anxiety about developing their area into an international destination

Note: n = 138

As for concerns about the increasing numbers of international tourists, respondents were most worried about “not being able to communicate with tourists,” and “not being able to explain necessary matters.” They are also worried about the “manners” of the tourists (see Figure 2). Thus, their anxiety comes mainly from not having the language skills needed to communicate with overseas tourists, and also not knowing how these people may behave.

4.3 Attitudes

Asked if they have positive feelings about the increasing number of international tourists in their area, 73 % said they think it is a good trend. In spite of their limited English proficiency, more people are favorable towards the increasing number of international tourists. However, 24 % answered that they “somewhat disagree” with this trend.

Asked about the benefits of the internationalization of the area through tourism, the most frequent response was that, “it is an educational opportunity for children” (83 % of the responses were “yes” and “somewhat yes”), followed by, “it is a good opportunity to spread Japan’s charm” (80 %), and it is a “good chance for cultural exchange” (76 %). Positive outcomes such as “energizing the area” (55.2 %), and “enhancing love for hometown” (56.5 %), were the least-often selected answers.

4.4 Experience

The respondents were asked to describe any experiences they had interacting with international tourists. Forty out of 138 respondents described their experiences. “Giving directions to someone” was the situation described most frequently. Next was “helping someone shop,” and then, “hosting guests at their inns.” More people had successful communication experiences, despite their lack of English proficiency. They used gestures, words, writing pads, and so on, to achieve their communication goals. Some people did not succeed in their attempts to communicate. They had difficulties such as “not being able to understand what was being said,” or they “could not make themselves understood.”

4.5 Measures

They were asked what measures should be taken to help them improve their ability to communicate. Respondents provided answers as to the appropriateness of the listed measures using a 4-point Likert scale. “Increasing the number of English signs” was deemed the most appropriate item (70.9 %). The second most appropriate measure was “increasing the number of English leaflets” (69.8 %), and the third most appropriate measure was, “hiring someone who speaks English (48.8 %).” The least selected option listed was “providing English instruction for the locals” (27.7 %).

In one of the open-ended questions asking if they wished to learn something to help them prepare for communication with international tourists, many respondents indicated a desire to learn “basic level English,” as well as “English for specific pur-

poses.” Their wish lists included “English necessary for work,” “English for customer care,” “English for sales,” “English necessary at inns,” and “English needed to explain the region and its attractions.” However, as mentioned above, it was also found that only about one-quarter of the people think studying English is one of the effective solutions. They prefer to hire English-speaking employees, or to have bilingual signs or leaflets prepared.

The answers to the open-ended question also reflected a need to understand different cultures. Learning about “cultural differences,” “intercultural communication,” and “English taboos to visitors” were mentioned by some respondents.

5. Discussion and pedagogical implications

By analyzing participants’ responses to the survey questions, it was possible to identify two problems. First, it was found that the local people at potential international destinations in Japan have very limited English skills, and/or very low confidence in their English abilities. Only one-quarter of the respondents responded positively to the statement that, “I can speak English.” Many of these English-speaking respondents are able to greet tourists with confidence, but when it comes to a more complicated situation, such as giving directions or providing information, they are not very comfortable doing so. From this information, it is assumed that the English spoken among them is introductory or basic, equivalent to a CEFR A1 level or lower (see Table 1 for level reference). This is not surprising, since many of these people have worked only with Japanese people until now, and there has been almost no need for them to use any foreign language. Thus, when many international tourists start to flow into their area, it is natural for them to worry that they will not be able to communicate easily and provide the necessary information.

Secondly, even though about three quarters of the respondents have favorable feelings about the increase of international tourists, many are worried about the tourists’ possible bad manners and the troubles they might cause. Tourists from overseas have different cultural backgrounds, so they may act according to their norms, which are different from the local norms. People in rural areas may not be sure how to deal with some unexpected trouble or manners, since they have not had much exposure to different cultures. The questionnaire results also showed that 43 % of the respondents have never traveled abroad. One-quarter of the respondents indicated that the internationalization of tourism in their area is not desirable, and consequently they are hesitant to work towards this trend. In response to open-ended questions, some of them made comments such as, “tourists should speak Japanese,” or “I don’t want foreigners to come into our area because they will disturb our social order.” These comments may sound rather unreasonable, but some people in local communities can be very conservative and dislike changes.

For a tourist destination to achieve long-term success, the local people must be actively involved in the process. Com-

munity participation and local empowerment are considered key factors [Botes and van Rensburg, 2000; Kobayashi, 2011]. Psychological empowerment leading to increased confidence is particularly important [Cole, 2006]. Therefore, lowering anxieties about communication and resolving concerns around locals' intercultural issues are urgent tasks, should the Japanese government wish to drastically increase the number of international visitors by dispersing them in rural destinations. Obviously, improving English proficiency is one of the solutions, but it takes a long time for individuals to reach a certain level of competence, and learning about different cultures is not easy, unless some structured information is provided. Thus, it may be believed that some cooperative arrangements are essential. Some respondents also commented on the need for an entity or framework under which they could work together to prepare for this trend. It would be optimal to set up a cooperative to facilitate this transition under some kind of leadership—whether it is a tourist information center, a travel agency, or a municipal office. Under such a framework, language instruction for specific purposes and lectures on intercultural communication could be offered.

In such lectures, the first thing to be offered may be tips to lower people's anxieties concerning communication. Some respondents were found to be successful in communicating with international visitors without much English language skills. The use of communication strategies, including repetition, asking for clarification, and using gestures, is an essential skill that should be introduced at this stage. In addition, people may be encouraged to use so-called *broken English*. It is often the case that people are afraid to speak foreign languages, because they may make mistakes. Getting used to communicating in English and gaining confidence in their particular situations will be necessary at first.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, it was found that people at the two potential international tourism destinations generally have favorable attitudes towards international visitors. However, among some people, there exists a sense of resistance to international tourists. Also, it was found that many people do not have the skills or confidence needed to communicate in foreign languages. Given that speaking and listening are key skills for successful communication in tourism, people at potential international destinations need to learn how to communicate more confidently with tourists from overseas. To achieve this objective, more attention should be paid to the problem of language barriers.

In fact, much more attention is paid to written information, such as multilingual street signs and leaflets prepared by government or municipal offices, which is becoming more available. On the other hand, less attention has been paid to face-to-face communication. Local cities or towns, as entities for leadership, are encouraged to create more opportunities for English communication lessons. Since more people in the

target areas have a positive attitude toward welcoming international guests, the process should not be very difficult, as long as there is a structured framework for facilitating the resolution of communication issues in these areas.

Due to the limited number of samples gathered in this survey, the study has limitations, and only shows the outcomes of two similar areas. Interviews are being conducted currently with people in the local destinations, which is the second step of this project. It is believed that the external contacts facilitated by international tourism will surely benefit these rural areas, both economically and socially. Therefore, by analyzing both qualitative and quantitative data, this research hopes to obtain more specific findings that will be useful for improving face-to-face communication between Japanese locals and international visitors.

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