RESEARCH ARTICLE

A preliminary study of Japanese co-workers' attitudes towards migrant workers' Japanese language skills in blue-collar workplaces [version 1; peer review: 1 approved with reservations, 1 not approved]

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Abstract

Background: This is a preliminary study of Japanese co-workers' attitudes towards migrant workers' Japanese language skills in blue-collar workplaces. This is an important topic, seeing as Japanese co-workers' attitudes can result in inequalities at the workplace, directly impacting migrant workers' everyday lives. Understanding these attitudes and addressing them can improve migrant workers' experiences.

Methods: The study is based on content analysis of documents taken from English-language sources.

Results: The author found that Japanese co-workers and employers assume ownership of the means of communication, expecting only Japanese to be used at the workplace. They also underrate migrant workers' Japanese proficiency.

Conclusions: Although the data has its limitations, the study provides some insight and can potentially serve as a base for further research.

Keywords

Japan, blue-collar, migrant workers, attitudes, workplace

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1. Introduction

Recent research in blue-collar workplaces¹ in Norway (Kraft, 2019a; Lonsmann and Kraft, 2018) have shown that Norwegian workers' attitudes towards Polish migrant workers' Norwegian language skills can result in inequalities at the workplace. Japan is a country known for its exclusionary attitudes towards foreigners (Doudou, 2006; Morita, 2015; Park, 2017), so it is reasonable to ask if Japanese co-workers have similar attitudes towards migrant workers' Japanese proficiency. Since Japan amended its immigration law² to formally accept blue-collar migrant workers in April 2019, there is some urgency for research looking into Japanese co-workers' attitudes.

The April 2019 revision to the immigration law is ground-breaking in the sense that it officially accepts blue-collar migrant workers for the first time in Japanese history. Migrant workers were only accepted through 'side doors'³ in the past. Two new visa categories were created in 2019: one for lower skilled workers and the other for higher skilled workers. These workers are employed in accommodation, agriculture, aviation, building-cleaning, car-maintenance, construction, electronics, food-manufacturing, fisheries, food services, forging technology, industrial machinery, nursing care, and shipbuilding. Both visas are referred to as 'Specified Skilled Worker visas' (MFA, 2019a, 2019b).

The conditions attached to the visas include applicants having to pass tests in trade skills and basic Japanese language. The lower skilled visa carries a limit of five years, while the higher skilled one can be renewed indefinitely as long as the applicant has a valid employment contract. Holders of the latter may bring their family to Japan and are eligible to apply for permanent residency (MFA, 2019a, 2019b).

The Japanese language requirement for the visas indicates the expectation that Japanese is to be used at the workplace. This is understandable since Japanese blue-collar workers are most likely to have secondary-level education and do not have command of foreign languages. It is a practical matter to ask migrant workers to learn some Japanese so that Japanese co-workers can communicate with them. The question which follows is whether migrant workers' less-than-perfect Japanese will be accepted by their Japanese co-workers. This is a fair question to ask, since Japan is a country in which there is widespread interest in speaking correct Japanese (Miyo and Chung, 2006), resulting in a situation in which those who speak correct Japanese are considered as regular members of society, while those who do not are not accepted. Native speakers' Japanese is also thought of more highly than the Japanese spoken by foreign learners (Miyo and Chung, 2006).

Kusunoki's (2018) study is one of the very few which investigate Japanese co-workers' attitudes towards their foreign colleagues' Japanese language skills. The study takes place in hospital settings in which foreign nurse trainees are employed under the Economic Partnership Agreement (EPA). Japan signed EPAs with Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam to enable nurses and healthcare workers in these countries to work in Japan. The condition attached is that these professionals work as assistants or trainees until they pass the Japanese national licensing examination in Japanese. After they obtain their licenses they are employed as fully fledged professionals and as equals to their Japanese counterparts.

Kusunoki (2018) found that Japanese co-workers assumed ownership of the means of communication, meaning that they not only expect Japanese to be used when the EPA trainees communicate with them, they also expect Japanese to be used when the trainees are speaking among themselves. The reason given is that since the trainees are in Japan, they are learning Japanese, and Japanese co-workers understand Japanese only, therefore only Japanese should be used. Furthermore, Japanese co-workers underrate the Japanese proficiency of the trainees.

¹Blue-collar workplaces are defined as workplaces in the production sector which usually require strength or physical skills. Blue-collar workers are those employed at production sites.

²A brief description of recent immigration to Japan provides a backdrop to what is happening at present. After the end of World War II, the first significant numbers of immigrants arrived in the late 1970s. They consisted of, firstly, women mostly from the Philippines, Korea, Taiwan and Thailand, who came on the 'entertainer' visa. The second category of immigrants were Indochinese refugees from Vietnam, Cambodia and Laos. The third were descendants of the Japanese left behind in China at the end of World War II. The final category is made up of business professionals from Europe and North America (Green, 2017; Oishi, 2012a, 2012b; Vogt, 2015). A large number of immigrants arrived in the 1980s, which was a period of rapid economic growth also known as the 'bubble economy'. They were mostly Koreans and Taiwanese. The numbers of those from the US and other Asian countries also increased. In the 1990s and 2000s, Japanese-Brazilians and -Peruvians came to work, and their numbers increased dramatically before falling in the early 2010s (Green, 2017; Oishi, 2012a, 2012b; Vogt, 2015).

³The first side door is the Technical Intern Training Program (TITP), which has been permitting workers from less developed Asian countries and Peru to come to work in Japan as trainees since 1993. The second side door is for Japanese-Brazilian and -Peruvian workers who have Japanese ancestry. The official rationale for this visa is for Japanese-Brazilians and -Peruvians to acquaint themselves with Japan, although in reality they serve as much-needed blue-collar workers.

Drawing on Kusunoki's findings, the present paper is a preliminary study of Japanese co-workers' attitudes towards migrant workers' Japanese in blue-collar workplaces. It asks two questions: firstly, if Japanese co-workers assume ownership of the means of communication, expecting only Japanese to be used at the workplace, and secondly, if they underrate migrant workers' Japanese.

After the significance of the two attitudes is explained in the next section, the methodology and data are presented in Sections 3 and 4, respectively. The findings are discussed in Section 5, and the concluding remarks in Section 6 bring the paper to an end.

2. Attitudes can become covert mechanisms of language policies

Attitudes such as assumption of the means of communication and underrating of migrant workers' language skills are significant. This section draws on research on language policy, especially Shohamy's (2006) work, to demonstrate their importance.

Language policy is often associated with overt mechanisms such as official documents, declarations, language standards, curricula, tests, and other types of documents, which are used to manipulate and control language practices. Lonsmann and Kraft (2018) focused on the official languages, which are overt mechanisms, in a warehouse in Denmark and on construction sites in Norway. More subtle and hidden, however, are the covert and hidden mechanisms of language policies. These mechanisms can be used in conversations and negotiations to exercise control over the language space, and can serve as major devices that affect and create de facto language policies (Shohamy, 2006).

Attitudes such as assumption of the means of communication and underrating of migrant workers' language proficiency can become covert mechanisms if made known frequently enough. Identifying them as potential covert mechanisms is consistent with Shohamy's (2006) call for a broader perspective of language policy. Assumption of the means of communication, if made known often, can become a covert mechanism of a policy to use Japanese only in the workplace. Likewise, underrating of migrant workers' Japanese can become a covert mechanism of a policy to raise their Japanese proficiency. The effects of these mechanisms can be as far-reaching as those of overt mechanisms such as the introduction of an official language or minimum standard of Japanese.

There are many reasons why covert mechanisms deserve attention and study. Shohamy (2006) emphasised that a real language policy should not be observed, understood and interpreted only through declared policy statements, but through a variety of devices that are used to perpetuate language policies, often in covert and implicit ways. These devices, which may not appear to be policy devices, have direct effects on language practice. Schiffman (1996), who also agrees with the distinction between overt and covert mechanisms, stressed that there is a need to study de facto policies, and that covert mechanisms are often overlooked.

3. Methodology

This paper draws on the documentary research method (McCulloch, 2004) to study the attitudes of Japanese co-workers towards migrant workers' Japanese language skills. Documentary research is built on the belief that analysing documents and understanding them help us develop a study. Documents include policy reports, committee papers, public treatises, works of fiction, diaries, autobiographies, newspapers, magazines, letters and electronic mail (McCulloch, 2004).

The author started with a search on the internet using various combinations of the keywords 'migrant worker', 'blue-collar', 'Japan' and 'Japanese language', and found few results which contained comments made by Japanese co-workers or employers on migrant workers' Japanese proficiency. One of the results was a report by Builders and Wood Workers International (BWI), penned after they inspected the 2020 Tokyo Olympics construction sites (BWI, 2019), which contained remarks on the Japanese language abilities of migrant workers. Also among the results were a few newspaper articles, so the author took a closer look at newspapers by conducting keyword searches via online archives of the major English-language newspapers: *The Japan Times*, *The Japan News*, *The Mainichi*, and *Nikkei Asia*.

She attempted a few different keyword searches for articles published between January 2015 and December 2020, using 'migrant workers', 'blue-collar workers' and 'foreign workers'. 'Foreign workers' retrieved the largest numbers of articles, which is 233 articles in *The Japan Times*, 1,928 articles in *The Japan News*, 375 articles in *The Mainichi* and 1,160 articles in *Nikkei Asia*. The author read through the articles and found that most of the search results for *The Japan News* and *Nikkei Asia* were barely related to foreign workers. Among those that were related to foreign workers in all four newspapers, many articles were written in the run-up to the introduction of the Specified Skilled visas, debating the issues

involved and announcing the visas' specifics. There were also many articles on abuses of the Technical Intern Training Program⁴ (TITP), detailing poor treatment and underpayment of the foreign interns.

Only two newspaper articles which contained comments on migrant workers' Japanese were found.⁵ The first is a news story by *Nikkei Asia* about a TITP intern who was sent to do decontamination work in Fukushima (Lang, 2018). The second is by *The Japan Times*, and is about small firms taking on foreign employees (Nagata, 2019). Content analysis was performed on all three documents (the BWI report and two newspaper articles). In future research, the data must include Japanese-language sources in order to increase the size of the data as well as to provide a more balanced point of view.

In spite of the limitations of the data, and the fact that it is based on what is reported in documents rather than information recorded by the author, the study can still provide some insight. Its findings are also consistent with Kusunoki (2018), Kraft (2019a) and Lonsmann and Kraft (2018). Until the author gains access to blue-collar workplaces, this study can serve as a base for future research.

4. Data

In sections 4.1, 4.2 and 4.3 below, background information and a summary of each of the three documents analysed in this paper are provided.

4.1. The BWI report

Building and Wood Workers' International (BWI) is a global federation of trade unions in the building, building materials, wood, forestry, and related industries. It is a non-profit organisation based in Geneva, and has regional offices and project offices scattered around the world. Its goals are to organise workers into trade unions, and more importantly, to improve standards in the construction industry in the long run. BWI appears to have significant experience in large-scale sports events, having been involved in the 2012 Euro Cup in Poland and Ukraine, the 2018 World Cup in Russia, and the 2018 Winter Olympics in PyeongChang.

BWI seems to have no political agenda apart from seeking to improve workers' rights. It claims to focus on supporting its affiliates to achieve better working conditions and ensure safety and health for workers in all projects related to large-scale sports events (BWI, 2019). It also aspires to leave behind a legacy of improved standards in the construction industry after the events.

The BWI report was penned after an international delegation visited the 2020 Tokyo Olympics construction sites in September 2018 (BWI, 2019). The gist of the report is that there was an acute labour shortage and the workers were overworked. More relevant to the present paper is the short section on migrant workers. At one site there were migrant workers, or strictly speaking, TITP interns, but the Japanese workers noted that these interns were given only menial tasks to perform, such as shifting raw materials. BWI pointed out that shifting raw materials is a task that should be carried out with forklifts or other equipment, and that the interns could more effectively contribute on the construction site if they were assigned work that would develop their skills (BWI, 2019). Some of the remarks made by the site management revealed their attitudes towards the interns' Japanese language skills.

4.2. The Nikkei Asia story on a TITP intern doing decontamination work

Nikkei Asia is a weekly publication owned by Nikkei Inc. Nikkei Inc's flagship publication, *The Nikkei*, claims to be the world's largest financial newspaper. *Nikkei Asia* targets business readers, and is slightly to the right on the political spectrum. Unlike left-leaning newspapers such as *The Mainichi*, which sympathises with migrant workers and frequently runs stories on the injustices they suffer (such as a recent series on the plight of Vietnamese TITP interns), *Nikkei Asia* features fewer stories on the misfortunes of individual migrant workers.

It is difficult to ascertain but it seems likely that the TITP intern approached *Nikkei Asia* with his story. After *Nikkei Asia* ran the article, it was taken up by other newspapers, which based their reporting on the original article in *Nikkei Asia*. The story appeared in March 2018, providing details on a TITP intern's experience of being sent to Fukushima Prefecture to do decontamination work, even though it was not within the scope of his duties as he understood it (Lang, 2018). The 24-year-old Vietnamese male, who was hired by a construction company, said he had been sent to residential areas in

⁴The Technical Intern Training Program was established in 1993 to allow interns from less developed Asian countries and Peru to work in Japan and gain experience and technical know-how to take back to their home countries. The programme has been widely criticised and discredited as an excuse to bring in unskilled workers. Abuse of the programme as well as the interns is rampant.

⁵The reader may have concerns about the author selecting only articles which support her position. That is not the case at all. The only two articles which contained comments on migrant workers' Japanese are presented in this paper.

Fukushima on numerous occasions to demolish contaminated structures. His Japanese employer was interviewed for the story, and his responses revealed his attitudes towards the intern's Japanese language skills.

4.3. The Japan Times story on small firms taking on foreign employees

The Japan Times claims to be the most widely read English language newspaper in the country. It also boasts of being the largest and oldest English language daily newspaper. It appears to be in a neutral position politically, with no particular leanings. However, the article analysed in this paper is part of a series which claims to examine Japan's immigration policy as the country opens its doors to an increasing number of migrant workers (Nagata, 2019). The article is dated 21st April 2019, the same month in which the Specified Skilled Worker visas were introduced. It wouldn't be unreasonable to assume that the newspaper was trying to be supportive of the new visas, thereby adopting an optimistic tone, as well as providing a 'happy ending' to the story in which the featured companies' efforts result in success.

The article mainly focuses on the experiences of Sakae Casting Co, a small aluminium manufacturer located in Tokyo. Two other firms with similar experiences are also mentioned towards the end of the article. Sakae's CEO, Takahashi Suzuki, believes that foreign employees are necessary for overseas expansion of his business. After a difficult process of adaptation, the foreign employees are integrated and Suzuki successfully expands his business.

5. Findings

5.1. Ownership of the means of communication

Japanese co-workers or employers assume ownership of the means of communication in all three documents analysed. Analyses of the documents are presented below, beginning with the BWI report.

In the report, the site management of one construction site reported that the TITP interns working there spoke no Japanese and communication was a challenge, especially on health and safety matters:

'The next day the BWI Mission visited the TMG (Tokyo Metropolitan Government)-managed Canoe Slalom Course, where site management reported that there were indeed a number of migrant workers on the site. At the same time, it was reported that they (the migrant workers) spoke no Japanese and communication was a challenge, particularly on OHS (Occupational Health and Safety) matters.' (BWI 2019: 11)

When the above extract is read in conjunction with the Japanese workers' observation that the interns were given only menial tasks, such as shifting raw materials, it seems likely that it was because they did not speak Japanese that they were assigned such work. Although the management did not explicitly state that it was due to that, given the context that there was an acute labour shortage and the Japanese workers were overworked, it is the most likely explanation. It appears that the Japanese supervisors felt they lacked the means to communicate to the interns the complexity of more challenging tasks, as well as the health and safety issues involved. Although under Japanese law, employers must ensure that foreign employees can understand the health and safety procedures, the interns noted that there was no special provision to translate safety materials or procedures into other languages (BWI, 2019).

Reading between the lines, it seems that the management implicitly assumed that Japanese is the only means of communication, which suggests ownership of the means of communication. Their reasoning appears to be that since the interns did not speak Japanese, there was no way of communicating with them. This reasoning is made to appear to be common sense in that 'it was reported that they (the migrant workers) spoke no Japanese and communication was a challenge' (BWI 2019: 11); since the interns did not speak Japanese, and Japanese was the only means of communication, therefore communication was difficult. It is untrue that Japanese was the only means of communication. The management and Japanese workers could have been taught Vietnamese, Chinese or any other language.

Proficiency in the hegemonic⁶ language of the state is often used to classify people, and those who are not proficient are frequently said to be unable to function in society (Shohamy, 2006; Shohamy, 2009). In this case, the interns seem to have been classified or labelled as 'non-speakers of Japanese' and are seen as being capable of menial tasks such as moving raw materials only. This deprives the construction site of the contribution they are potentially capable of making as well as the interns of the opportunity to develop their skills. It echoes Kraft's (2019b) finding, that Norwegians think that Polish workers on Norwegian construction sites need to be restricted to simple tasks because they do not speak Norwegian.

⁶Hegemony (Gramsci, 1971) is the domination of one group over another, and this domination is often supported by legitimating norms and ideas, making it seem like common sense (Blommaert *et al.*, 2003). In multilingual contexts, the more powerful group often assumes that the 'local' language, typically the official language of the nation state, is the one and only language to be used (Lonsmann and Kraft, 2018). Researchers (Blackledge, 2000; Piller, 2016) have pointed out that in spite of the multilingual realities we live in, these hegemonic and monolingual norms predominate.

In the second document analysed (the *Nikkei Asia* story about a TITP intern who was sent to do decontamination work in Fukushima), the intern's employer also assumes ownership of the means of communication. In order to provide adequate context, the analysis below includes what the employer said prior to the sentences indicating ownership of the means of communication.

When *Nikkei Asia* interviewed the employer, who was also the president of the construction company, he defended his decision to send the intern to Fukushima:

“The technical intern training program sounds nice, but in reality, for the foreigners in the program, it's the money that matters.” The president of his (the intern's) former company acknowledged that the man was given decontamination work but denied there was anything illegal about it. The foreign trainee, the president said, was doing “what the Japanese workers were doing.” “We do various kinds of work; decontamination is just one,” the president added. “The location was a residential area and wasn't particularly dangerous.” (Lang, 2018)

Based on the beginning of the extract, we can see that the employer perceives TITP interns as opportunistic individuals. He thinks that as long as the intern is assigned the same duties as his Japanese employees and therefore treated equally, the risks involved in decontamination work do not matter. He used the word ‘foreign’ before ‘intern’, even though it was obvious which intern the interview was about. He then referred to ‘the Japanese workers’ rather than ‘other workers’, so the contrast between the categories ‘foreign’ and ‘Japanese’ is accentuated. He then attempts to downplay the risks by pointing out that the work site was a residential area, as opposed to, presumably, the nuclear power plant.

The employer's response continues below:

‘He (the president) said the nature of the decontamination work was explained before going to the site. “We always give a training session before going to a site,” the president said. “In fact, we spent a day for training at the office on the site before we did the decontamination work. He (the intern) may not have understood it because he didn't understand Japanese, but if he had asked, we would have given him a full explanation.”’ (Lang, 2018)

The employer's reasoning appears to be that it was because the intern did not understand Japanese that he was not provided with an explanation on the decontamination work. However, if the intern were to be treated equally to the Japanese employees, the employer should have made sure he understood, with perhaps a mixture of Japanese, English, gestures and drawings. It is clear here that equality is a principle used at the employer's convenience. It was convenient earlier when he cited equality with the Japanese employees as justification for assigning the intern decontamination work. When it is inconvenient, meaning the employer has to be willing to make an effort to be understood, he explains his lack of willingness and effort away by saying the intern did not understand Japanese. As in the BWI report, Japanese is assumed to be the only language of the workplace in as if this is common sense.

In the third document analysed (*The Japan Times* story on small firms taking on foreign employees), ownership of the means of communication was also found. The extract below is taken from the middle of the article, where Suzuki, the CEO of Sakae Casting Co, describes what happened after he hired foreign employees:

‘But right away Suzuki realized the company wasn't properly prepared to take in non-Japanese staff. Language limitations meant that many had trouble communicating, which frustrated their Japanese co-workers tasked with training. (1)

That frustration piled up among the Japanese workers until one day the following year, it exploded. They demanded that Suzuki stop hiring foreign employees, threatening a walkout. (2)

“It was (choosing) either them or foreign workers,” Suzuki recalled. “Thinking of the company's future, I couldn't give up on the strategy to expand business overseas.” (3)

And that was what he told the Japanese employees. In the end, the plant chief whom Suzuki worked with for many years walked away. But the rest stayed. (4)

Suzuki believes his hard line – refusing to meet the workers' demand to stop hiring foreign staff – made the Japanese workers realize he was serious. (5)

“From there, I think their mindset changed a bit,” he said. (6)

Japanese workers started making efforts to create a work environment more friendly for foreign employees, using English for some in-house communications and taking online English lessons that the company provided.' (7) (Nagata, 2019)

Although Suzuki did not explicitly state at the beginning of the extract what language was used when his employees experienced 'language limitations' which frustrated the Japanese employees, paragraph (7) implies that it was not English. English was only used later, after he asserted his position on keeping the foreign employees. The most logical interpretation is that the Japanese employees used Japanese with the foreign employees at the beginning, and failed to communicate. The use of Japanese again indicates ownership of the means of communication.

Paragraph (1) suggests that communication difficulties were the only cause of the Japanese employees' frustration, and this frustration led them to threaten to leave. They appear to have been insistent about using Japanese. One of them, the plant chief, sacrificed his job of many years because of this attitude.

The turnaround in the Japanese employees' attitudes, from insistence on the use of Japanese to willingness to use English, is significant. Suzuki's firm position on foreign employees being necessary for overseas expansion seems to have led to the change. He practically coerced the Japanese employees into using English. This shows that firm leadership may be one way to persuade Japanese employees to relinquish ownership of the means of communication. This news story also suggests that the Japanese are capable of using English at work, in spite of the common belief that their English is only adequate for passing examinations.

As long as Japanese co-workers claim ownership of the means of communication, expecting Japanese to be used, they discount the possibility of using a mixture of Japanese, English, and gestures as a means of communication. Recent research (Blackledge and Creese, 2017; Creese and Blackledge, 2019; Creese, Blackledge and Hu, 2018) has in fact shown that effective communication can be achieved with fragments of various languages, signs, and gestures, also known as translanguaging. As this field of research grows, it challenges the more traditional understanding of language and communication, especially mastery of a language, as indispensable to successful communication. What we have observed in Japanese co-workers and employers in this section is adherence to the socially and politically defined boundary of a national language, namely, Japanese (Otheguy, Garcia and Reid, 2015). As more migrant workers arrive and blue-collar workplaces become more diverse, adherence to Japanese will stand in contrast to the reality that translanguaging is the norm when people from different backgrounds are brought together (Blackledge and Creese, 2017; Creese and Blackledge, 2019; Creese, Blackledge and Hu, 2018). Studies conducted in blue-collar workplaces (Dijkstra *et al.*, 2020; Goncalves, 2020; Theodoropoulou, 2019) also attest to the effectiveness and prevalence of translanguaging.

In addition to the successful use of translanguaging, a hotel kitchen in Austria also shows how an inclusive work environment can be achieved when higher-level employees are willing to accommodate to the communication needs of lower-level employees. In this workplace, higher-level Austrian employees accommodate for lower-level Romanian employees by using online translation services, fragments of various languages, gestures, body language, and signs (Goncalves, 2020). This unusual bottom-up approach results in an inclusive and successful workplace, and serves as an example for Japanese co-workers and employers.

5.2. Underrating migrant workers' Japanese language skills

Japanese co-workers and employers underrate migrant workers' Japanese language skills in the first two documents analysed.

In the first document, the construction site management commented that the TITP interns spoke no Japanese. The extract below is the same as that cited in section 5.1:

'The next day the BWI Mission visited the TMG (Tokyo Metropolitan Government)-managed Canoe Slalom Course, where site management reported that there were indeed a number of migrant workers on the site. At the same time, it was reported that they (the migrant workers) spoke no Japanese and communication was a challenge, particularly on OHS (Occupational Health and Safety) matters.' (BWI 2019: 11)

TITP interns are usually taught Japanese for about six months before coming to Japan, and another month after arrival, usually in a language school (Obe and Funatsu, 2018). To say that 'they spoke no Japanese' underrates their Japanese.

It is unclear what qualifies as speaking Japanese to the management. In her study of communication on Norwegian construction sites, Kraft (2019a) noted that the level of competence required to pass as a speaker is opaque. One Polish

worker in particular was competent in understanding Norwegian and his job, but was regarded by Norwegian and Swedish foremen as well as team leaders as ‘speaking no Norwegian at all’ (Kraft, 2019a; Lonsmann and Kraft, 2018). Kraft observes that Polish workers are often better at understanding other languages than their Norwegian and Swedish co-workers think. Having received seven months’ instruction in the Japanese language, the interns are likely to understand more Japanese than the management give them credit for. Polish lorry drivers are likewise thought of as being unable to communicate in the Netherlands, in spite of the fact that they successfully complete their assignments (Dijkstra *et al.*, 2020).

‘Svorsk’, which is a mixed language that results from inter-accommodation between Swedish and Norwegian speakers, is commonly used on Norwegian construction sites (Kraft, 2019a). Also prevalent is ‘construction site English’, which refers to grammatically imperfect and gesture-dependent English. Instead of grammatically correct sentences, central words carrying specific work-related meanings, combined with objects such as tools, technical drawings and models of the buildings, often serve as the means of communication (Lonsmann and Kraft, 2018). Having a shared professional knowledge eases communication. Although languages such as Vietnamese or Chinese are not commonly taught in Japan, English is. English is practically compulsory for all students in school. There is no reason why a mixture of Japanese, English, gestures, objects and drawings should not be used on construction sites, although it would require some measure of accommodation from both parties, or as Kubota (2013) and Canagarajah (2017a, 2017b) point out, the willingness to communicate.

A good example of willingness to communicate or accommodate has been given in section 5.1, in the hotel kitchen in Austria where higher-level Austrian employees adapt to the language abilities of lower-level Romanian employees (Goncalves, 2020). This is partly motivated by the desire to have an inclusive workplace and partly due to the fact that there is a labour shortage. Japan is also in the grip of a labour shortage because of its rapidly aging and declining population (Green, 2017), which is the very reason why the Specified Skilled Worker visas were introduced. Unlike the Austrian kitchen, in which online translation services, fragments of various languages, gestures, body language, and signs are used by the Austrian staff (Goncalves, 2020), Japan’s labour shortage has not yet pushed Japanese co-workers and employers to look beyond the Japanese language.

Similarly, in the second document analysed, the employer underrates the intern’s Japanese language skills. The extract below is the same as that cited in section 5.1:

‘He (the president) said the nature of the decontamination work was explained before going to the site. “We always give a training session before going to a site,” the president said. “In fact, we spent a day for training at the office on the site before we did the decontamination work. He (the intern) may not have understood it because he didn’t understand Japanese, but if he had asked, we would have given him a full explanation.”’ (Lang, 2018)

To say that ‘he didn’t understand Japanese’ underrates the intern’s Japanese proficiency. This statement is contradicted by the following:

‘He (the intern) said he often saw Japanese colleagues holding what appeared to be radiation detectors close to the ground and saying to each other things like, “This spot seems dangerous.” The man complained to the company president about the unexpected work but was told, “If you’re scared, go home to Vietnam.”’ (Lang, 2018)

The intern clearly understands Japanese, or he would not have understood what the Japanese employees were saying about dangerous spots. In addition, he spoke sufficient Japanese to complain to the employer about his work. The employer was also aware that the intern understood Japanese, or he would not have suggested going home to Vietnam. In spite of all the above, the intern was thought of as ‘not understanding Japanese’ (Lang, 2018). The criteria for ‘understanding Japanese’ is again unclear here.

Underrating migrant workers’ Japanese can result in inequalities at the workplace and their exclusion. O’Rourke *et al.* (2015) argue that, to be more inclusive of immigrants, we should value their various linguistic resources, shifting from expectations of native-speaker mastery of a language to include partial and imperfect use. Recent research has also found that immigrants use and claim ownership of language as part of their repertoire in various ways and for different purposes (Garcia and Li, 2014).

Stereotypical images of foreign workers’ poor linguistic abilities can undermine the effectiveness and efficacy of their work (Dijkstra *et al.*, 2020). We have seen in this section that underrating migrant workers’ language skills can also lead to

exclusion from meaningful work and work briefings, as well as from permanent employment contracts (Kraft, 2019a; Lonsmann and Kraft, 2018).

6. Concluding remarks

To answer the questions asked in the Introduction, the author has found that, firstly, Japanese co-workers do assume ownership of the means of communication, expecting only Japanese to be used at the workplace, and secondly, they do underrate migrant workers' Japanese language skills.

The above findings cast doubt on the efficacy of the Japanese language test required by the Specified Skilled Worker visas. The test will provide further reason for Japanese co-workers to insist on the use of Japanese, thereby exacerbating current tendencies to assume ownership of the means of communication. In addition, Japanese co-workers who underrate migrant workers' Japanese in spite of their seven months' language training are likely to continue to do so to those who passed a test. It would be more effective to address Japanese co-workers' attitudes than to have migrant workers invest significant amounts of time, effort and money in passing the test. Furthermore, language tests are typically centred on monolingual norms, and their contents are distant from the realities of communication in a diverse environment (Shohamy, 2006, 2009). This is confirmed by Niveria and Rojas-Lizana (2019), who found that the required test focuses on reading and listening skills.

Although this is only a preliminary study based on limited data taken from English-language sources, it can serve as a base for further research. Japanese co-workers' attitudes towards migrant workers' Japanese can result in inequalities at the workplace, directly impacting migrant workers' everyday lives. Understanding these attitudes and addressing them can help to improve migrant workers' experiences.

Data availability

All data underlying the results are available as part of the article and no additional source data are required.

Grant information

The author declared that no grants were involved in supporting this work.

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Maria Grazia Monaci

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In this study the author uses content analysis to examine coworker's attitude toward migrant workers in Japan. Although this is an interesting topic, my enthusiasm for the manuscript is severely diminished by not only the several methodological issues, but also by the general structure of the manuscript, in which I have identified major conceptual, methodological, and technical shortcomings.

The author admits that the study is exploratory and with weaknesses, nevertheless some limiting choices need at least to be justified. Why has the research of relevant text and sources been restricted to English newspapers or sources? Also, 3 text seem a very scarce base. Please, add rationale underlying this choice.

The study aims at studying the attitudes of Japanese co-workers towards migrants coworkers, however it is not clear where the aim originates from a theoretical base. Only the concept of the relevance of language proficiency has been previously introduced, but not really in relation to the attitudes of coworkers. Besides, as a social psychologist, I have doubts that "attitudes" is the right term here. The first indagated construct (assumptions of the means of communication) seems more a behavior, a decision, or a language policy as actually stated at a certain point, and foremost not of the coworkers but of the managements, as emerged also from the analyzed text. A confusion in the terminology which appears in the paper, for instance calling the examined attitudes "covert mechanisms," or even "devises". Later in the paper, the attitude of the Japanese workers towards migrant coworkers proficiency in Japanese language is also referred to as a stereotypical image of foreign workers' poor linguistic abilities, probably the most correct definition.

Nonetheless, the concepts mentioned are at very different levels, and indifferently considered as attitudes of the coworkers or of the employers.

In the presentation of the findings, the order of the paragraphs should be improved. For example, the first sentence is already a strong statement of the expected results, before presenting them ("Japanese co-workers or employers – *who between the two?* – assume ownership of the means of communication in all three document analysed. Analyses of the documents are presented

below.....). Same at the beginning of paragraph 5,2, again with no distinction between coworkers and employers. I would leave comments after the analyses. Several comments about the results (with related references) should be moved to the Concluding remarks section.

There are also redundancies; for example restating concepts as “having a shared professional knowledge eases communication”, or about the Romanian employees adapting language abilities at a lower level (repeated twice in a very similar manner).

In my opinion, the hypotheses must be clarified, based on the previous literature, and it would be helpful to state what can confirm previous research and to clearly indicate the new research questions.

In sum, although this topic has great relevance, I am not sure that this study can make a significant contribution to the literature. The author admits limitations without however justifying such limitations; an example is the last sentence of the abstract which refers not to concrete conclusions of the study but it is really generic and mainly about limitations. From my point of view, it would be necessary to considerably modify the approach of the study to clear certain issues.

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?

Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?

Partly

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?

Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?

Partly

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: social psychology

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to state that I do not consider it to be of an acceptable scientific standard, for reasons outlined above.

Reviewer Report 18 January 2023

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Peerayuth Charoensukmongkol

National Institute of Development Administration, Bangkok, Thailand

The paper provides insightful evidence about Japanese co-workers' attitudes towards migrant workers' Japanese language skills. Overall, the results add meaningful contribution to literature. However, the paper is still weak in terms of the theoretical foundation that can be used to support the role of language skills in the cross-cultural work context. The authors will need to provide some theoretical foundation and related literature about the role of common language in a work context that can affect relationships among employees who speak different languages. In the point, the authors should add some extra content in the literature review section about the theory and some research evidence which can explain why language proficiency of expats can help them to get along well with coworkers in a foreign country. In particular, I recommend two relevant papers which provide information on this issue, which should be covered in the literature review.

- Fu and Charoensukmongkol (2021¹).
- Seriwatana and Charoensukmongkol (2021²).

The discussion of the findings also needs to be made related to the theoretical foundation. This can help strengthening the theoretical contribution of the research.

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2. Seriwatana P, Charoensukmongkol P: Cultural intelligence and relationship quality in the cabin crew team: The perception of members belonging to cultural minority groups. *Journal of Human Resources in Hospitality & Tourism*. 2021; **20** (2): 147-173 [Publisher Full Text](#)

Is the work clearly and accurately presented and does it cite the current literature?

Partly

Is the study design appropriate and is the work technically sound?

Yes

Are sufficient details of methods and analysis provided to allow replication by others?

Yes

If applicable, is the statistical analysis and its interpretation appropriate?

Not applicable

Are all the source data underlying the results available to ensure full reproducibility?

Yes

Are the conclusions drawn adequately supported by the results?

Yes

Competing Interests: No competing interests were disclosed.

Reviewer Expertise: Organizational behavior, Cross-cultural management

I confirm that I have read this submission and believe that I have an appropriate level of expertise to confirm that it is of an acceptable scientific standard, however I have significant reservations, as outlined above.

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