

Building Social Infrastructure for Migrant Workers: A Geographical Analysis of Community-Based Japanese Language Class in Koga City, Fukuoka Prefecture

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Abstract

In Japan, local governments are developing systems for community-based Japanese language education as part of social integration policies. However, about 40% of municipalities in Japan have not yet established community-based Japanese classes. This paper presents action research conducted with the city of Koga, a municipality engaged in building a multicultural society. It examines the roles of community-based Japanese classes. Reinterpreting them as “hub” rather than “third place” expands their potential to offer care and services that support foreign residents in living true to themselves. As a result, such classes are seen to function as important social infrastructure.

Keywords

immigrants; community-based Japanese classes; social infrastructure;
community hub; solidarity hub; assessment; Koga; Kyushu

1. Purpose

Since the late 1970s, local citizens in Japan have been supporting the lives of foreign residents through volunteer activities. One of the most important places for this support is the community-based Japanese language class. In Japanese, the term 地域 has two meanings: *local* and *community*. In this paper, 地域日本語教室 refers to Japanese language classes organized and run by residents living in the community; therefore, the term *community* is used. Led mainly by local Japanese residents, these classes provide a space where refugees and migrants can learn Japanese, receive help with daily life,

and interact with others. This paper discusses the theoretical foundation for understanding the social role and function of these community-based classes.

2. Background: Japan's social integration policy

Japan's policy for accepting foreign residents changed in 2018 with the release of the “Comprehensive Measures for the Acceptance and Coexistence of Foreign Nationals”

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(hereafter, the “Comprehensive Measures 2018”)¹. This marked two important changes.

First, the national government started providing financial support to local governments to help them build systems for community-based Japanese language education. In 2019, the national government launched the “Project for the Promotion of Regional Japanese Language Education Systems for the Acceptance and Coexistence of Foreign Nationals” (hereafter, the “Promotion Project”)². The Promotion Project supports local governments by providing funding, encouraging the appointment of coordinators with expertise in Japanese language education, and recommending classes taught by trained teachers. Because of this, community-based Japanese language classes led by volunteers are now being asked to reconsider their role and meaning.

Second, the policy clearly stated that social inclusion was one of its goals. Before the Comprehensive Measures 2018, the focus was on creating communities where foreign residents could live more easily³. But the Promotion Project makes it clear that foreign residents are full members of Japanese society, and that policies should be based on this idea of inclusion⁴. As a result, Japan is now working to build local Japanese language education systems that focus on social inclusion, especially by the effort of local governments.

3. Problem: Low motivation among local governments

The systems for regional Japanese language education involve many actors, including the national government, local governments, and volunteers. If we consider the national government as the macro level, local governments as the meso level, and volunteers as the micro level, we see different motivations. The national government is motivated by economic development. Volunteers are motivated by an interest in international exchange and a desire to contribute to society. But many local governments are less motivated. This is often because of the small number of foreign residents in their area and the lack of mayors who actively support multicultural coexistence. For example, as of 2023, 38.9% of local governments have not yet established community-based Japanese classes⁵, although this number is going down. Increasing the motivation of local governments to support these classes is an important issue, but it has not yet been studied enough.

4. Discussion: Action research in Koga City, Fukuoka Prefecture

4.1. Overview of Koga City and its initiatives

Koga City is located in northern Kyushu, between Kitakyushu and Fukuoka City. As of March 2025, the city has about 59,000 people,

1 Please refer to the website of the Immigration Services Agency of Japan:

https://www.moj.go.jp/isa/support/coexistence/nyuukokukanri01_00140.html

2 Please refer to the website of the Agency for Cultural Affairs:

https://www.bunka.go.jp/seisaku/kokugo_nihongo/kyoiku/chiikinihongokyoiku/

3 Please refer to page 2 of the 2006 Comprehensive Measures for Foreign Residents as Members of Society.

https://www.cas.go.jp/jp/seisaku/gaikokujin/honbu_n2.pdf

4 Please refer to the “Purpose of the Project” section on the website provided in footnote 2.

5 Please refer to page 26 of the “Survey Results on the Actual Situation of Japanese Language Education (2023)”.

https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20241101-mxt_chousa01-000038170_02.pdf

including 1,300 foreign residents (about 2% of the total). About 31% of the foreign residents have “Technical Intern Training” visas, and about 20% have “Specified Skilled Worker (i)” visas. The city is known for its food processing industry.

Koga city has already had a class under the Board of Education since 2005, but that class was like a regular school and did not involve local residents.

In 2018, a new mayor took office and made a strong commitment to multicultural coexistence. In April 2020, the city government established a new Multicultural Affairs Section as a government unit within the municipal administration. Since then, I have worked with this section to start a new community-based Japanese class. I mainly served as a community-based Japanese language education coordinator in Fukuoka Prefecture, providing advice on the operation of the new community-based Japanese language class in Koga City. According to our design, the new class was to be led by local residents. In April 2022, the old class merged into the new program.

4.2. Theoretical foundations of the community-based Japanese class

When designing the class, at first, I used the concept of the “third place” (Oldenburg, 1989) to understand the Japanese class. Third place is a comfortable place in the community that is not home, work, or school, and where people can make social connections. Oldenburg (1989) listed eight features: (1) neutral ground, (2) a place where everyone is equal, (3) focus on conversation, (4) easy to access, (5) has regular visitors, (6) low-key, (7) playful, and (8) a second home. I thought that community-based Japanese classes could have these features and become places to build and rebuild social relationships. I shared this idea with the Multicultural Affairs Section, and it was accepted.

But as the class continued, some problems became clear, especially the low and decreasing number of foreign participants. Third place theory alone could not explain or solve this problem. Therefore, I looked for another theory and focused on the “hub” concept from geography. I used two ideas from Kornatowski: the “community hub” (2022) and the “solidarity hub” (2024). Community hub is a place that connects people to local resources and does “assessment,” meaning it acts like a consultation center. Solidarity hub is a place where people who want to help others go to show and build solidarity.

Based on these ideas, the Japanese class can be seen as a place where local people who care about foreigners gather (solidarity hub), and also as a place where they talk, share concerns, and connect foreigners with community support (community hub). I focused on the idea of “assessment” in the community hub model. In the practice of community-based Japanese language classes, “assessment” can be considered in two stages. The first stage is to understand the background of each foreign participant: for example, their reasons for coming to Japan, future aspirations, current living conditions, previous experiences of learning Japanese, and the difficulties they face in daily life in Japan. The second stage is to identify their specific needs: for instance, the reasons they joined the class, what they hope to gain from it, and what they wish to achieve in their everyday lives. Based on such assessments, it becomes possible to provide each participant with the necessary information and to set individual goals tailored to their needs. Community-based Japanese language classes, while serving as comfortable spaces for interaction, also have the potential to function as places where foreign participants can pursue self-realization in their daily lives, grounded in such assessments.

5. Conclusion

In Koga City, local and foreign residents are now interacting through one-on-one or small-group activities that reflect the needs of the foreign participants. As the coordinator of Koga City's Multicultural Coexistence Environment Development Project, I provide advice and suggestions for these practices. My research is action research that engages with the field to improve practices and contribute to the realization of a better society. Therefore, together with city officials, I will continue to conduct action research through a cycle of "goal and issue setting," "implementation," and "evaluation." Based on this action research cycle, I plan to develop a practical hub model centered on "assessment."

Finally, this paper connects these ideas to the concept of "social infrastructure." Since Klinenberg (2018), social infrastructure has become a popular way to think about places and organizations that support social relationships. Enneking et al. (2025) list seven types: (1) public institutions, (2) commercial spaces, (3) recreational facilities, (4) religious facilities, (5) transportation, (6) digital infrastructure, and (7) groups of people. One unique point is that they include groups of people as part of social infrastructure. Enneking et al. (2025) also argue that social infrastructure does not only help build social connections but also provide care, services, and platforms for cooperation. These functions match the activities of Japanese classes. The ideas of community hub and solidarity hub can help us study these functions more deeply.

Latham and Layton (2019) suggest that thinking in terms of infrastructure helps us see the value of underappreciated public spaces and systems. To "think infrastructurally" means looking at how these spaces are made and used. They also argue that successful social infrastructure is not guaranteed. We must carefully record and explain why and how it works so that we can protect it. Since the

Promotion Project does not have stable funding, it is important to share and study good examples of Japanese classes as social infrastructure. This will help continue and improve these important programs.

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