

# INTEGRATION POLICY TOWARDS MIGRANTS IN JAPAN WITH A FOCUS ON LANGUAGE

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## ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the present Japanese policy towards working migrants to Japan, based on the example of nurses and care workers from the Philippines. The integration of working immigrants and Japanese language training, two intricately interconnected issues, are therefore the focus of attention. The paper summarizes the legal, political and ideological context of Japan's slow and sometimes hidden shift towards a multicultural society. Benchmarking Japan's integration policy and examining the circumstances under which nurses and care workers from the Philippines are employed in Japan reveals several fundamental difficulties. With regard to language education, it is argued that Japanese as Foreign Language (JFL) needs to address the specific needs of professionals such as care workers and nurses, and that it must play a more prominent role in the creation of realistic learning goals. As things stand, high expectations of Japanese language proficiency combined with a lack of attention from language educators act as a barrier to embracing and integrating new immigrants into Japanese society.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Almost two decades have now passed since the first foreign workers and their families came to Japan to cover postwar labour shortages. In these two decades, communicative and cultural problems between Japanese and non-Japanese in the workplace, in local communities, in schools and other settings have become apparent. Japan's transition into a more multicultural and multilingual society has also expanded the demands on Japanese as Foreign Language (JFL), in that it had to expand beyond the target group of international students. Teaching Japanese to foreign residents, i. e. Japanese as Second Language (JSL), became a new task.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Broadly speaking, JSL refers to teaching Japanese to people living long-term in Japan while JFL refers to the language taught outside the country.

In recent years, the discourse on the necessity of foreign workers for the future of Japan's rapidly ageing society has grown more prominent. The word "integration", long tainted by Japan's past imperial policy in East Asia (Oguma 1998), has re-emerged in such discourse. The idea of integration has been reconsidered, drawing in particular on the experiences of western European countries (Kajita 1994; Miyajima 2003), which had received large-scale immigration several decades earlier than Japan.

Several actors are shaping the discourse on migration and integration in Japan. First, the introduction of foreign workers is promoted by Japanese economic organizations. But the Japanese government also identifies migration and the establishment of an integration policy, in particular with regard to Japanese language education, as important issues (Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications 2006). Both government and economic organizations suggest language education merely as a means of ensuring short-range interests such as economic efficiency and the ability to accommodate to Japanese companies. In other words, they lack concern about integrating non-Japanese into Japanese society.

In the present paper, the main emphasis will be on the introduction of care workers from the Philippines. Their case will serve as an example for the discussion of Japanese integration policy within a framework of benchmarking integration following Entzinger and Biezeveld (2003). At present, Japan accepts only short-term or limited-term workers from abroad. In the government's perception, Japan is not an immigration country, nor does it endeavour to become one. It is for this reason that the government avoids using the term "migrant" but continues to prefer "foreigner" in official documents and opinion polls.

## 2. FOREIGN WORKERS IN JAPAN AND JAPANESE LANGUAGE EDUCATION

The postwar debate about foreign workers can be subdivided into two periods. The debate first started in the 1980s and was reignited around 2000, and the latter debate is still continuing. In the 1980s, foreign workers came to Japan in order to cover labour shortages, in particular in small and medium-sized companies. Consequently, companies pressured the government to revise the immigration act of that time, which did not allow for the introduction of unskilled foreign labour. The issue of a possible revision of the immigration act led to the discussions of the 1980s. The government had to negotiate between the two extreme positions of either "opening the gate" (*kaikoku*) or "keeping the gate closed" (*sakoku*). It chose a compromise between these two positions.

In 1990, the immigration law was revised, and, consequently, foreigners of Japanese descent (the so-called *nikkeijin*) were permitted to enter and work in Japan without any limitations.<sup>2</sup> In other words, Japan succeeded in employing unskilled “foreign” workers without changing its official stance of not admitting low-skilled foreign workers. It was argued that the *nikkeijin*, because of their Japanese ancestry, understood Japanese to a certain degree, and that they would easily integrate into Japanese society. Up to 2003, more than 300,000 *nikkeijin* came to Japan, mainly from Brazil and Peru. The experience of migration revealed, however, that the *nikkeijin* rarely understood Japanese and that they did not differ substantially from other foreigners residing in Japan. The idea of circumventing problems arising from migration by accepting unskilled migrants of Japanese descent proved naïve in reality. Schoolteachers were confronted with children who did not understand Japanese. Because of *nikkeijin* migration, Japanese language classes, multilingual information and support systems for foreign residents had to be established around the mid-1980s (Nuibe 1999; Takahashi and Vaipae 1996).

The Japanese government also introduced foreign workers on a short-term basis. This, too, did not entail the idea that Japan was transforming itself into an immigration country. However, against the government’s intention, the increase of migrants to Japan did not stop after the Japanese economy started declining in the 1990s. In addition, foreign workers initially planning to live in Japan for only a limited time chose to stay. Against this backdrop, an awareness of language problems arose on the part of these foreigners as well. In particular, lack of proficiency in written Japanese turned out to be a major obstacle in their daily lives.

Despite official rhetoric, Japan had started to transform itself into a multicultural and multilingual society in the 1980s. This manifested itself in, among other things, the increased demand for JSL from a completely new target group, immigrants and their children. Confronted with this new situation, the government decided to delegate the responsibility of teaching them Japanese to local authorities. Since some communities have a large foreign population, demand for JSL differs considerably

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<sup>2</sup> Before and after World War II, thousands of Japanese moved to South American countries such as Brazil and Peru in order to obtain farm land and seek a higher standard of living. According to estimates of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, the descendants of these Japanese emigrants amount today to some 2.6 million people. From 1990 onwards, about 300,000 *nikkeijin* came to Japan (Kajita 1994). In many cases, they work for small and medium-sized companies. Places such as Ota City in Gunma Prefecture, Hamamatsu City in Shizuoka Prefecture and Toyota City in Aichi Prefecture are well known for their large *nikkeijin* communities (Gaikokujin Shūjū Toshi Kaigi 2006).

among them. Some cities established their own support systems, such as setting up Japanese language classes for foreign workers and their families, dispatching interpreters to public schools and publishing multilingual information about everyday life in Japan (Bunka-chō 2004; Kawahara 2004).

As mentioned above, the second period of debate about foreign workers started around 2000. This time, the debate related to problems resulting from Japan's ageing society. Japan has today the longest life expectancy in the world: 85 years for women and 78 years for men. It has, in addition, one of the world's lowest birth rates, with a national average of 1.29 children per woman (Cabinet Office 2004). According to a United Nations report, Japan will lose 17 percent of its population in the period between 2000 and 2050. The report further predicts that, by 2050, the percentage of the population aged 65 years or older will rise from the present 17 percent to 35 percent, making Japan the oldest society ever to have existed. In reaction to the challenge of Japan's ageing society, this time the government is seeking various solutions, such as longer employment and increasing the number of women in the workforce. Countering the rapid decrease of the Japanese working population is, however, not an easy task. This is exactly why the issue of immigrants has again come to the fore. Since 2000, the Ministry of Justice, the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, and several economic councils have published more than 15 schemes addressing the issue of foreign workers (for example, Japan Business Federation 2004). The Japan Business Federation (*Nippon Keizai Dantai Rengōkai*) went as far as to suggest the establishment of institutions, such as a Foreigners' Agency or an Agency of Multicultural Cohabitation, which should play key roles in the formation of policies relating to immigrants (Japan Business Federation 2004).

At present, there are 16 professional fields for which working visas are issued in Japan. These include diplomats, professors, teachers, artists, journalists, technicians and employees dispatched to Japan by foreign companies. In 2005, the Ministry of Justice announced a new plan to expand the field of working visas to further professional jobs which now also included nurses and care workers.

### 3. INTRODUCING FOREIGN CARE WORKERS AND NURSES

Let us consider first, however briefly, the general situation. According to the Nihon University Population Research Institute (2003), the Japanese ratio of people available for the care of elderly people is the lowest in the world. Japan's established care system is based on the offspring, especial-

ly women (daughters and wives), taking care of their parents or parents-in-law at home. Until 1986, about 80 percent of female informants answered that it was a good custom or an inevitable duty that women should take care of elderly parents. In 2000, however, that number had dropped to a mere 45 percent. Women resuming their working careers after marriage and having children is one of the more prominent developments underlying such a dramatic change in attitude. It is therefore not easy for them to take care of elderly parents at home. All of this means that a different policy for elderly care is needed, and, even more crucially, these changes render nursing and the care of old people a work field for which a high future demand can be projected.

Reacting to developments such as those described above, the Cabinet Office (Naikaku-fu 2000) conducted an opinion poll on attitudes towards the introduction of foreign care workers. The result clearly showed that Japan still had a long way to go to transform itself into a multicultural society: 43 percent answered "I agree with the introduction of foreign care workers", but 48 percent stated "I do not agree" and 9 percent were undecided. The younger generations tended to agree more strongly than the older generation. Several reasons were given for objecting to the idea of introducing foreign care workers: almost 70 percent suggested that "Japanese language proficiency is needed for care work"; about 60 percent answered that care workers "need to understand the Japanese welfare systems and Japanese customs"; 38 percent pointed out that "professional skills are needed for care work"; another 18 percent were concerned that "foreigners take jobs away from the Japanese"; 16 percent thought that the introduction of foreign care workers was "not necessary"; the same percentage thought that "it costs too much to manage these systems"; and 11 percent stated that the scheme would have "a bad influence on Japanese workers".

Tab. 1: Reasons for disagreeing with the introduction of foreign care workers

Japanese language proficiency is needed for care work	69.5%
They need to understand welfare systems and Japanese customs	58.0%
Professional skills are needed for care work	38.3%
Foreigners take jobs away from the Japanese	18.3%
It is not necessary	16.7%
It costs too much to manage the systems	16.5%
It has a bad influence on Japanese workers	11.3%
Others	1.8%
Don't know	1.0%

All in all, the results of this opinion poll plainly revealed that the Japanese are most strongly concerned about problems arising from insufficient language proficiency, which they emphasized more than issues such as customs or professional skills.

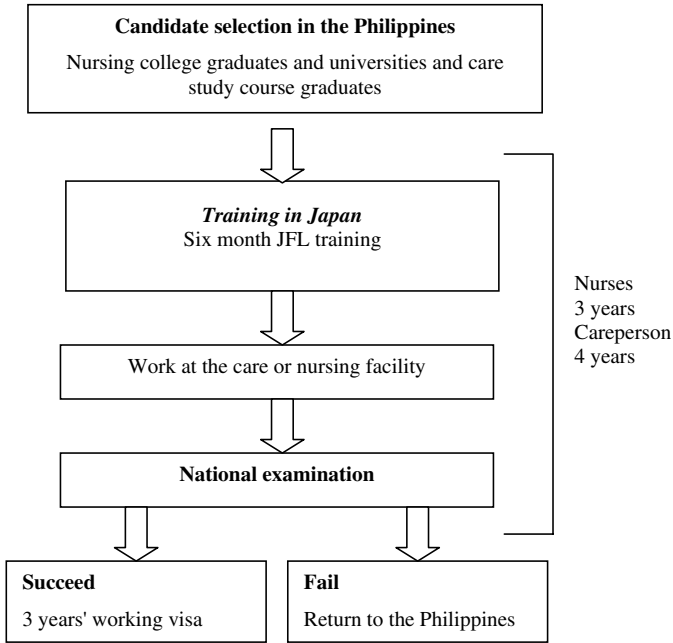
Despite considerable misgivings about the introduction of foreign care workers among large parts of the Japanese population, the Japanese government signed an agreement with the Philippines<sup>3</sup> in 2004. According to this agreement, Japan will introduce 400 nurses and 600 care workers from the Philippines starting in 2007 (*Asahi Shinbun* 11 September 2006). Japan is considering this a first test. Once this plan is underway, the government plans to expand the scheme and to conclude similar agreements with other Asian countries.

As mentioned above, Japan does not issue working visas for unskilled jobs, and because care work used to be categorized as unskilled work, it was previously impossible to introduce foreign care workers. Based on requests from the Japan Business Federation and other organizations, the government resolved the problem by promoting care work from unskilled to professional work. The government requires that care workers to be employed in Japan must learn Japanese, since they are required to pass the standard Japanese examinations necessary to be licensed as nurses and care workers. Since the national examination is designed for Japanese native speakers, this implies that prospective candidates will need a high level of written and spoken Japanese language proficiency. In view of the difficulty of Japanese writing conventions, one clearly has to wonder how many candidates will actually pass such an examination and will, ultimately, be able to obtain a working visa as professional care workers or nurses. Figure 2 graphically illustrates the process of introducing care workers and nurses from the Philippines.

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<sup>3</sup> The Philippines is already exporting 20,000 nurses and care workers per year to various countries around the world. The government of the Philippines encourages nurse migration, as it regards the export of nurses as a new growth area for overseas employment. In the Philippines, 175 nursing schools produce more than 9,000 graduates yearly, of between 5,000 and 7,000 are licensed (Kline 2003).

Fig. 1: Process of introducing foreign nurses and care workers



As can be seen from the figure above, nursing applicants first have to earn a nursing qualification and gain work experience. In addition, applicants have to graduate from a nursing college or graduate from a four year university programme. There are already some private schools training prospective applicants for care work in Japan and in the Philippines. It is only upon graduation that care workers are permitted entry to Japan, where they will be issued a four-year trainee visa. Nurses, on the other hand, receive a three-year trainee visa and are required first to enrol in a six-month training course. After completion, they can start working at a care facility or nursing home. If trainees pass the Japanese national examination for care workers within three years, that is, during the period of their trainee visa, they subsequently receive a three-year working visa as a professional care worker or nurse. The working permit can be extended as long as the applicant is employed. If candidates fail the examination, return to the Philippines is obligatory after the end of the trainee period. Presently, there is no special JFL syllabus for trainee nurses and care workers.

As we have seen above, the Japanese government's position towards migration has made some fundamental changes since the 1980s. The two periods under discussion can be summarized in the following way.

Tab. 2: Two periods of discussion and solutions regarding foreign workers

	Problem	Discussion	Migration solution	Social change
End of 1980s	Economic boom Lack of workers	Foreign workers Yes or No?	<i>Nikkeijin</i> (Japanese descendant)	Multicultural, multilingual society Long-term residents
Around 2000	Aging society Lack of workers	Foreign workers Yes or No?	Strict requirements Limited numbers	?

In 1990, the government revised the law of immigration control and the Refugee Recognition Act in order to accept *nikkeijin* immigrants under the concept of Japan's standing *jus sanguinis* policy. This allowed for the introduction of low-skilled or unskilled workers to Japan without departing from official immigration policy. After 2000, demand for foreign workers was principally caused by a decline in the Japanese working population, and as a result, pressure was exerted by the economic world on the Japanese government to help compensate for the declining Japanese working population. Following the (usual) debate on whether to the gates should stay "locked" or be "opened", the government decided, again, on a compromise. This time it allowed for migration with very strict limitations and constraints. The work of nurses and care workers was classified as professional work and strict requirements were imposed on numbers, qualifications and employment. In summary, therefore, starting with the economic boom of the 1980s, Japan started to become a multicultural and multilingual society, in spite of the fact that the Japanese government never envisioned such a transformation. There are numerous problems ensuing from governmental attitudes to migration to Japan. The "hidden internationalization" of Japanese society that is taking place results in a lack of support and specific policies towards foreign workers. Such a lack is detrimental to the aim of integrating them into Japanese society. Further problems relate to the health insurance system, unequal working rights and the relationship with the host society in general. I will turn next to a more detailed look at these problems.



#### 4. IMMIGRATION FROM THE PERSPECTIVE OF INTEGRATION

There are various theories on integration, and migration countries often adopt widely different approaches to ensure integration. However, Entzinger and Biezeveld (2003) provide a helpful categorization of factors relating to integration which allow for the benchmarking of integration policies. The four dimensions Entzinger and Biezeveld (2003: 5) propose are the following:

- (1) Socioeconomic integration: successful labour market participation, employment, income level, social security, level of education, housing etc.
- (2) Cultural integration: creating an atmosphere of mutual understanding in a society.
- (3) Legal and political: participation in politics: naturalization, citizenship, voting rights etc.
- (4) The attitude of recipient societies towards migrants.

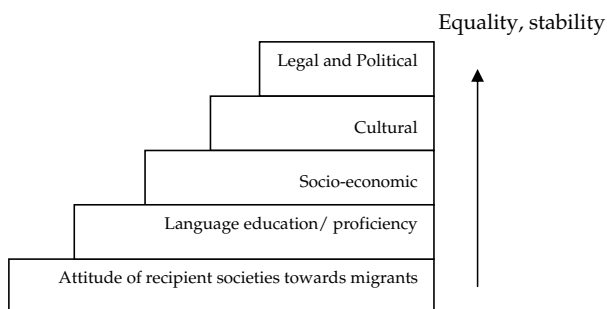
Socioeconomic integration implies successful labour market participation. Five main indicators, employment, income level, social security, level of education and housing, are used to measure the extent of integration within this dimension. The case of education and housing somehow constitutes the border between socioeconomic and cultural dimensions. In recent years, it has increasingly been recognized that integration is not limited to the socioeconomic domain. The quest for integration in the cultural domain is, however, more difficult to grasp. Sharing certain societal values is considered an important factor of cultural integration, but even the dominant or mainstream culture is not uniform, and the same holds true for any migrant culture as well. It is, in addition, difficult to clarify the borders between assimilation and integration, and also those between integration and multiculturalism. The indicators of legal and political integration are, on the other hand, comparatively straightforward. Rules for naturalization introducing the concept of "civic citizenship" and the right to vote at national or local elections are often used to measure national policies as well as the attitudes of a country towards migrants. Literature on the issue is in agreement that integration is not a one-sided process which requires efforts only on the part of the immigrants. The host society equally bears a responsibility. Entzinger and Biezeveld (2003: 29) suggest that "successful integration requires the major institutions of the recipient societies to be sufficiently accessible to migrants".

Hospitals and care centres in which foreign nurses and care workers are employed can be seen as a microcosm of society. The extent to which foreign workers are accepted or welcomed into hospitals, the kind of

positions that they can attain in the workplace, the degree to which they share the culture and values of their co-workers and patients, their formal participation in various institutions and so on all need to be considered. With regard to these issues, Japanese language proficiency is undoubtedly a key factor. How well care personnel are able to demonstrate their abilities and work skills depends on it. Magnúsdóttir (2005: 268), who studied foreign nurses in Iceland, noted a widespread semi-fluency among nurses and concludes that “the language barrier was central to the nurses’ experience”. No doubt, the same can be expected from foreign nurses migrating from the Philippines to Japan.

In order to discuss Japanese migration policy in more detail, I remodelled the four categories of policy processes set forth by Entzinger and Biezeveld (2003) in the following way.

Fig. 4: Steps of integration

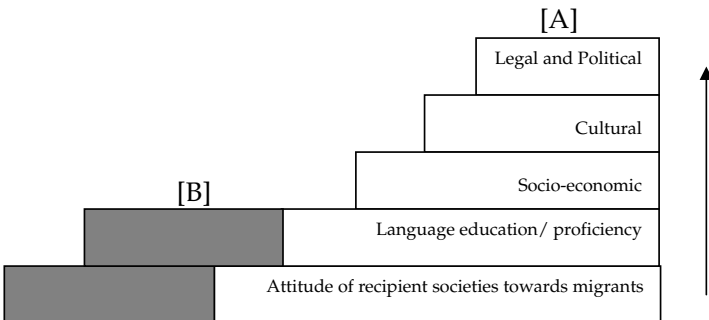


The steps described above refer to steps in an integration process. The attitude of the host society represents the basis of all integration processes and is hence the most vital factor for a successful migration policy. Language education and the development of language proficiency allow migrants to benefit from these policies. The socioeconomic dimension is based on the two preceding stages, the attitudes of the host community and Japanese language education. In the same way, the realization of the cultural dimension in an integration process requires successful management of the three preceding stages. The same holds true for political participation. In other words, language education and the enhancement of language proficiency is a basic measure in assuring migrant integration into the host society. The lesson to be learned from this model is clear. The development of a cultural integration policy, for example, is bound to be unsuccessful if it is not embedded in a policy ensuring socioeconomic integration and linguistic integration. It should be emphasized, further-

more, that the steps in the above model merely depict processes of policy formation and not necessarily the processes of how foreigners actually integrate into their host societies.

Next, I will apply the above model to the Japanese context. As discussed above, foreign workers came to Japan in the 1980s. Japanese language education for migrants began roughly around the middle of that decade, that is to say, the Japanese government, Japanese nationals and non-Japanese residents entered the first stages of the integration process. In present-day Japan, the government is showing intentions of reforming existing socioeconomic inequality and of promoting what is called here the cultural dimension for foreign workers. This is manifested, for instance, in the reform of the social security system, which had previously been disadvantageous to foreign residents. Today, the government is also paying attention to the relationship between foreign residents and the local community, thus expanding its attention beyond economic issues. This hints at the fact that the government has shifted from treating foreigners not merely as short-term residents. Irrespective of such a shift, however, high levels of proficiency in Japanese language are still expected, as evidenced in the case of foreign nurses and care workers. The problem of this position is that, the more stringent the linguistic requirements are, the more difficult it is to acquire socioeconomic equality for foreigners in Japan. Present-day JFL thus faces a difficult task. It should endeavour to help foreign language learners to attain high levels of Japanese language proficiency, and, at the same time, it should endeavour to set out realistic learning objectives (see also Galan in this volume). Let us, therefore, consider the model of integration outlined above in the Japanese context.

Fig. 5: Steps of integration in the Japanese context



According to the governmental position, the policies presently being implemented should ensure that foreign workers reach level A. In reality, however, attaining this level is quite difficult, because of strict requirements, especially in terms of language proficiency. As a result, many foreign workers settle on B. In other words, the gap between A and B represents the existing gap between governmental expectations about existing policies and their actual effects.

## 5. CONCLUSION

There cannot be any doubt that Japanese proficiency is a key qualification for care work. The ambitious task of foreign nursing candidates having to pass the standard national test, though, appears to constitute too high a requirement. As things stand, such a requirement represents a considerable barrier to integration rather than a tool towards integration. Upholding such requirements, and witnessing the failure to live up to these expectations on the part of foreign care personnel, might thus serve as a convenient argument to reject long-term residents in Japan. At the same time, and against the inclination of the government, the number of non-Japanese residents is more likely to increase than not. The effect of this is a contradictory situation: while Japan officially promotes integration policies, these policies, intentionally it appears, serve to block integration and in so doing ensure and reproduce segregation and inequality between Japanese nationals and immigrants to Japan.

While the present situation is unfavourable for non-Japanese residents in Japan, we should nevertheless expect the situation to improve. To begin with, the number of occasions where Japanese people have contact with care workers of foreign nationality will certainly increase in the future. As a result, Japanese individuals will be confronted with the Japanese language skills of foreign care workers. Their views and their expectations will in all likelihood have a decisive influence on future requirements. Together with such changes, we should also expect attitudes to change with regard to issues such as how language education for foreign workers should be supported at work and who ought to fund foreign workers' language education. Such issues constitute considerable challenges for Japan in general and for JFL in particular. It is in this sense that these issues deserve attention from scholars of language acquisition planning and of JFL.

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