

JAPAN BENEFITS FROM BASIC FOREIGN LANGUAGE SUPPORT

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Japanese is, of course, the official language of Japan, but sometimes having an accurate and complete English translation is essential. Traffic signs are a common target for such efforts, as are government publications intended for international tourists. The National Tax Agency's annual forms come with English instructions, something that works to bring additional revenue to the county. And of course, translating emergency preparedness documents into English and other languages will save lives.

Most Japanese-language content is never converted to English, and that's OK. But for some documents, the lack of quality translation can lead to negative social or fiscal impacts for the country. For these items, having accurate translations or providing alternatives that don't require translation can help alleviate the negative results.

One example involves automobile insurance contracts. If you drive a car in Japan, insurance coverage is essential, as it protects both you and those around you. Unfortunately, some immigrants struggle to acquire coverage because insurers are reluctant to issue a policy if the applicant can't read the legal contract or won't be able to communicate clearly during a covered event.

The problem is that some of these drivers take to the road without coverage. When an uninsured motorist is involved in an accident, especially one with significant injuries, the costs normally covered by insurance must be borne by the driver. In some cases, an inability to pay means that those fees will be passed on to governments, health care providers, or the general public through increased costs.

Universal automobile insurance benefits everyone, and the government should ensure that no competent driver is refused coverage. But one group, those with limited Japanese skills, is sometimes rejected. Instead of putting the public at risk from uninsured motorists, governments can help insurers find ways to extend coverage to able drivers even when their Japanese skills are just so-so.

I have heard of similar difficulties for expats trying to obtain cell phone plans, bank accounts, housing contracts, and other forms of insurance. All of these involve legal documents that are both dense and foreign to many immigrants. Concerns about competency when signing contracts are valid. But other societies have found ways to deal with these issues, and Japan needs to consider if any of those solutions would work here.

Providing access to translated materials, or at least to essential summaries, would be the most straightforward solution. When English isn't available, third parties could act on the immigrant's behalf. Japan already has a guarantor system for rental housing, and a simplified version of this system could work for car insurance or similar legal events.

Because of the variety of situations and the burden that English translation could place on smaller service providers, having government mandate a one-size-fits-all English requirement would not work. Instead, nonprofit organizations and businesses that serve the immigrant community can work with relevant government agencies to find solutions for these concerns.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tim Odagiri is the founder and director of Nihon Plus You. He has published a dozen books and hundreds of articles covering technology, society, religion, and humor. Before moving to Japan in 2019, he spent nearly forty years working as a software architect, helping small and medium-sized companies incorporate technology into their business processes. Tim lives with his wife in the Tokyo-metro area.

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