This study is one of a series of exploratory investigations to gauge the state of multi-cultural coexistence in Iwate Prefecture. The ultimate aim of these studies is to facilitate the adaptation of foreign residents to Iwate and their integration into the community. The impetus for these studies is, of course, the increase of foreign residents in Iwate (as with the entirety of Japan). Not only are the home countries, cultures, and languages of these foreigners widely disparate, the residence statuses vary widely and some locales include a predominance of a particular ethnic group (e.g. Brazilian or Brazilian-Japanese workers in auto manufacturing, Chinese or Southeast Asian spouses in farm areas, foreign language instructors of European languages in cities). Thus, support measures for the integration of foreign residents must be community-specific and agency-specific.

To this end, previous and concurrent studies have included the following: In 2006, a survey of local government and NPO services was undertaken, identifying foreign residents’ support services (Ishibashi, et. al, 2007). Concurrently with this investigation, the practices and activities of international exchange centers were investigated (Yoshihara, Kumamoto, Hosogoe, & Ishibashi, this volume).

The study reported here has two complementary thrusts: One is the close interviewing of a small sample of foreign residents regarding their ability to access and use community resources for the needs of daily life, as well as how language proficiency mediates this access. These resources include medical services, postal services, banks, drivers’ licensing, housing, and emergency services. The other is a set of survey questions to Iwate offices and agencies providing for daily life needs to determine their response to foreign users and customers, as well as the condition and prospects for their employment of foreigners. These offices and agencies include hospitals, banks, post offices, stores, hotels, and drivers’ license agencies.

**Part 1 - Interviews with Foreigners on Access to Community Services**

**Method.** A total of 20 foreign residents were interviewed, including 8 (Han) Chinese, 3 U.S. Americans, 2 Haitians, 2 Filipinas, 1 Uigher (a Chinese national of ethnic minority), 1 British, 1 Australian, 1 South Korean, and 1 Zambian. Thirteen of these were women, and 7 were men. Six of the Chinese interviewees were initially interviewed as a group, then most had follow-up interviews. Interviewers spent 45-90 minutes with each interviewee, depending on the circumstances. Interviewers were prepared with a schedule of interview items, including the following:

- Demographic information (circumstances prior to coming to Japan, employment, length of time in Japan, family and living circumstances, Japanese proficiency and learning history, age, level of education, etc.)
- Experience of the interviewee dealing with the following areas of daily life: Medical services, post office services, banking services, drivers license/driving school, food matters, housing matters, religious matters, disaster/emergency services, receiving community information.
For each of these daily life areas, interviewees were asked about their access to services or contacts with others, whether there were difficulties in getting services or information, what sort of supports might be desirable, etc.

While the schedule of interview items was standard for all interviews, interviewers were free to pursue details and issues appropriate to individual cases. Thus the resulting profiles of individual cases varied to some degree.

Although we were limited by time and resources to this very small sample, it was felt that the interview data should still yield useful information about the state of foreigners’ needs for access to the community.

Results.

Interviewee attributes. The interviewees included 7 English language teachers (including 2 part-time teachers), 5 students, 2 factory workers (1 part-time), and 6 housewives (1 a part-time waitress). Home languages included Mandarin Chinese (8), English (5), Tagalog/English (2), French/Haitian Creole (2), Mandarin/Uighur (1), and Zambian (specific language unknown)/English (1). Four had been in Japan less than 1 year; 12 from 1-6 years, and 3 from 10-27 years. Five described their Japanese as advanced, 3 as intermediate, 4 and between elementary and intermediate, and 8 as elementary. Seven had Japanese spouses.

Medical Services. The challenge cited by most interviewees seeking medical services was difficulty in communication. Interviewees with Japanese spouses or family depended heavily on them for translation in receiving medical services. Others called on friends or colleagues. Some Chinese interviewees used written kanji when their Japanese was not sufficient. Some English-speaking interviewees sought out English-speaking doctors when possible, and some felt an index of foreign language-speaking doctors would be helpful. The majority of interviewees (though not all) expressed a wish for translation to be made available (3 who experienced pregnancy in Japan expressed particular concern). Some expressed dissatisfaction with the diagnosis and treatment, some doctors’ unwillingness to listen carefully or respond to questions, or long waits. Some noted the kindness of personnel and the high level of technology.

Postal Services and Banks. Again, many who had Japanese spouses relied on them for introduction to postal and banking services. Generally, interviewees managed well and found personnel kind and helpful, although some had specific difficulties (e.g. sending a large package from a small post office, or the impression of being viewed with suspicion). Several expressed a wish for more bilingual services, including foreign language speakers, bilingual forms, and foreign ATM languages (in addition to English at the postal ATMs). Some indicated they would use more services if they knew about them. One person expressed appreciation for the efficiency of postal services. A number take pains to prepare or rehearse necessary Japanese before approaching the post office or bank.

Drivers’ Schools and Licensing. It appears there were some difficulties in the experience of interviewees. The Australian found he was unpleasantly rebuffed and could not get a Japanese license, though he remains unclear why. One U.S. American’s credentials were not accepted on her first attempt; however, they were on her second attempt. The two Filipina women were told the licensing test must be administered in Japanese and struggled through many re-tests; however, it is known to the authors that written tests in foreign languages are available. Many pointed out that the specialized terminology associated with driving in Japanese is a problem. Chinese speakers indicated that reading kanji is difficult. Some expressed a wish for bilingual manuals, wordlists, or other assistance, since a driver’s license is a necessity for many.

Dwellings, Neighborhood Associations & Information, and Food. Student interviewees lived in international dormitories or apartments, and had assistance from housing personnel. Interviewees married to Japanese spouses relied on them or family to deal with or explain rental paperwork and processes, neighborhood association matters, rules on garbage separation, etc. A few had housing provided by an employer. Those without Japanese spouses depended to a greater extent on friends or employment contacts, and had more difficulty dealing with landlords (especially an American who rented a house and wished there were a bilingual ombudsman available), understanding garbage separation rules, or understanding neighborhood association information.

Food did not seem to present serious issues, except with a Muslim interviewee, who had difficulty finding suitable food. Other enjoyed Japanese food,
were able to find the foods that they want, and have found access to their home foods in various ways.

Emergency Information. While some felt they know what to do in an emergency, a number of interviewees lacked confidence in their ability to communicate with emergency personnel in police, fire, or other agencies. Some knew some information (e.g. emergency phone numbers), but lacked other information (e.g. did not understand emergency procedures, or where the nearest shelter might be found). A few expressed the desire for bilingual information, bilingual emergency service operators, etc.

Language Learning. In our small sample of 20, only 5 interviewees had self-described advanced proficiency. Some of these described themselves as highly motivated to study Japanese, and did a great deal of self study. One had had previous experience with foreign language learning to a high level of proficiency and living in the country where it was spoken. Most interviewees had mid- or low-level proficiency, as is the case with most foreigners in Japan. All seemed to be willing and motivated to study Japanese, yet many were hampered by the time constraints of work and family life, or the inconvenience of Japanese class hours or locations. Some who live in rural areas do not have reasonable access to city language courses. Others noted that the opportunity to practice Japanese might be limited by factory rules against speaking. Some graduate students have laboratory courses in English, limiting their opportunity to learn/practice Japanese. Interviewees with Japanese spouses may have some advantage, but this depends on circumstances; Japanese spouses and families may not speak the language of the foreign spouse. It may be noted that non-native speakers of English from the Philippines, Zambia, and Haiti expressed the desire for English as an alternative language in service encounters even more strongly than did native English speakers. Chinese-speaking interviewees had comparatively less expectation that Japanese offices and agencies should accommodate their lack of Japanese. The Australian interviewee commented that he should be prepared to adapt to the Japanese environment rather than having the system cater to him. It should be noted that some interviewees clearly expected to live in Japan permanently (e.g. spouses of Japanese), whereas others anticipated long-term, but limited, stays (e.g. students). Still, the majority expressed some preference for improved linguistic access. Even interviewees with advanced Japanese proficiency felt that bilingual aids should be made available to those who have less proficiency. Some additionally expressed a wish for bilingual summaries of information on medical insurance, car insurance, pensions, and tax matters.

Other. Many interviewees, in the context of other topics, commented that it was difficult to get to know Japanese people, or difficult to make friends with neighbors or other Japanese people.

Beyond an enumeration of foreign-language informational aids and services, our interview data reveals two keys to foreigner adaptation (or lack of it) to the Japanese community. The first, as might be anticipated, is Japanese language proficiency, discussed above. The second key is the presence of support people in the foreigner’s life, i.e. someone who is bilingual or native Japanese and who understands systems for accomplishing things. In addition to spouses, friends, or coworkers who could fill this role, a few interviewees mentioned using consulting services at Iwate International Exchange Center, though no one seems to have used the services extensively.

Part 2 – Surveys of Offices and Agencies on Providing Access to Foreigners and on Foreigner Employment

Method. An intensive, two-phase survey was conducted to study a) how enterprises and offices in Iwate are attending to foreign users and customers, and b) to find out the reality and awareness regarding the employment of foreigners. Survey forms were sent out by post to hospitals, post offices, banks, travel offices, mobile phone companies, department stores, hotels, drivers’ license centers/drivers schools. Although we aimed to research all areas in Iwate while concentrating on Morioka-city, there was an imbalance in regions and the types of business. Especially in connection with the employment of foreigners, manufacturing and restaurant businesses needed to be taken into account.

With regard to how enterprises and offices in Iwate are attending to foreign users and customers (the
first phase), survey forms were sent to 142 enterprises and offices in Iwate and received responses from 94 organizations (a 66% response rate). The surveys elicited information about how many foreigners used the services and whether there were user increases, nationality of foreign users, main language used in the transactions, the nature of difficulties experienced in communication, use of foreign language signage, guides, and other aids, and plans for future accommodation to foreigners.

The same survey with additional questions about the employment of foreigners (the second phase) were addressed to a subset of 88 of the 142 organizations permitted to hire foreign employees, and 53 responded (a 60% response rate). (Offices and agencies which are not permitted to hire foreigners, such as prefectural hospitals, drivers’ license centers, etc., were excluded.) These additional survey items elicited information about how many foreigners were employed, the merits and demerits of foreign employment, plans for future employment of foreigners, and reasons for doing so. The survey also offered the opportunity for free comments and opinions by the respondents on “multi-cultural coexistence.”

Results.

Foreign customers/users. Respondents indicated a substantial need to attend to foreign customers and users – all but two respondents (98%) indicated that they have foreign customers and users; 68% indicated they had such users on a monthly basis or more. Regarding whether there are more opportunities these days to attend to foreign customers or not, 30 (31.9%) organizations answered “yes,” 57 (60.6%) answered there has been no change, 2 (2%) answered they have fewer opportunities, and 2 (2%) answered they have no opportunities to attend to foreign customers. The organizations that answered “yes” included mobile phone sales businesses in Morioka, shopping centers, and hotels in places such as Kitakami and Ichinoseki, which are located in the south inland region of Iwate; and Rikuzentakata, Kamaishi, Miyako, Ofunato and Kuji in the coastal region. Most of these organizations answered that there were 2-3 occasions a week or a month to attend to foreign customers.

As for the country of origin of the foreign customers, East and South East Asia accounted for the highest proportion in the following order: China (indicated by 71% of respondents), the Philippines (32%) and Korea (28%), followed by North American countries such as the U.S and Canada (48%), South American countries such as Brazil (9%) and Oceanic countries like Australia and New Zealand (8% total). It is a noticeable fact that there are many Russian customers and users in coastal regions, indicated by 7% of respondents.

The language used with foreign customers is Japanese in 63% of cases. In more than 70% of cases, Japanese or Japanese and English are used. Hospitals and driver and vehicle licensing centers report that where technical terms are required, foreigners ask for interpretation or the accompaniment of interpreters. To the query asking whether they experience any sense of difficulty in communicating, 71% answered that they experience difficulty either strongly or slightly. However, few cases attributed to the lack of communication were reported except for unpaid bills at some hospitals and difficulty in having technical terms understood by foreign customers at some mobile phone stores.

While virtually all offices and agencies have foreign customers, slightly under half (47%) have prepared signs, labels, guidebooks and brochures in foreign languages to respond to foreign users. The languages used are mainly English (mentioned in 30 cases), but also various languages like Chinese (12 cases), Korean (7), Portuguese (4) and Spanish (2), depending on the stream of foreigners being served. Russian (6 cases) is included in coastal regions. An additional 17 (18%) of respondents said they have plans for foreign language aids, mentioning English most frequently, and Korean and Chinese. Some have prepared manuals or even language classes for their employees so that they can attend to foreign customers directly. It is probably a reflection of the business content that some mainly mobile phone stores, make use of bilingual operators at service centers. Regarding plans to accommodate foreign customers from now on, only 14 organizations answered that they will do so by making manuals, giving foreign language training to employees, setting up help desks, making good use of translation program on mobile phones and preparing signs and handbooks in foreign languages.

Since the number of foreign customers is increasing, especially in coastal regions, some respondents suggest that more signs and guidebooks should be provided in foreign languages and
employees should receive foreign language training. However, in so far as Iwate goes, most people surveyed do not have the sense that there are more foreign users and residents compared to before, there is not so much related trouble and it seems they do not feel they need to take specific measures.

The employment of foreigners. Nine out of 53 (17%) respondents answered that they currently employ foreigners or had done so in the past. They are mainly department stores, shopping centers and hotels, as well as hospitals that have medical-internship systems requested by the prefecture. The advantages of employing foreigners include these: Foreign employees respond to foreign customers well, and they work harder than Japanese employees and at a lower salary. The disadvantages include obstacles encountered due to lack of Japanese skills and different customs, damaging their health because of the stress from a new environment and requiring special attention to religion and food. Many hospitals and driving schools are unable to employ foreigners due to requirement for professional knowledge and qualifications. Many of the prefectural facilities, branch offices of banks, and travel agencies answered they have not been authorized to employ foreigners, whereas some mobile phone stores answered that they deal with the issue when there are foreign applicants at the time of recruitment.

As for employment of foreigners, most offices and agencies are not proactive about it because of the issues of nationality, qualifications, and Japanese language ability and they take the position of supporting the community by employing local Japanese people.

Comments and opinions on “multi-cultural coexistence”. From a viewpoint of “multi-cultural coexistence”, people do not seem to have a real sense of it although there are opinions like: “It’s only a matter of getting used to [foreigners]. By having more experience, it enables us to respond to a wide range of customers and can become a catalyst for a richer life in some way.” (Hotel A); “Culture in each country is important. We must understand and support one another while keeping our own viewpoints” (Bank B, Tono branch); and “The important thing is to understand one another. If that can be improved, we can coexist” (Hotel C). These opinions and observations are highly significant, reflecting some awareness of the need for multi-cultural coexistence. At the same time it may reflect the need to encourage still more awareness.

Discussion and Conclusions

In this section, we will integrate conclusions which can be drawn from the two focuses in our investigation.

First, while our small sample of foreign residents was not statistically representative, several things about this group become apparent. One is that there is tremendous diversity in the foreign community. While some Japanese people may envision the typical foreigner to be a western language teacher (typically English) (see Evans, 2007, as an example), in fact it is known that Chinese and Korean immigrants predominate (Ishibashi, et al., 2007). Additionally, it may be that many people imagine that most foreigners are in Japan for a limited period, e.g., as an ALT. In fact, an increasing number of foreigners plan to stay in Japan for the long term. Finally, foreign residents are not necessarily congregating in urban areas; many are in rural and semi-rural areas, with little access to multi-cultural resources. In a sense, several of our interviewees might be considered “invisible” to the typical Japanese person who has no routine contact with foreigners and does not realize the presence and ethnic makeup of this population.

The interviewees seemed to understand that learning Japanese would give them greater access to the community, yet the constraints of daily work schedules and the demands of family life, as well as (in some cases) lack of convenient access to language classes hampered their efforts. This may be a significant consideration in view of recent public discussion of a foreign language requirement for foreign residents (Shimizu, 2008). Most welcomed the idea of bilingual resources, but expectations of finding such resources varied, and some resources (e.g., agency and office foreign language web sites) were unknown to many interviewees.

In some cases, where interviewees have married into Japanese families, yet know little Japanese, access to language learning resources and home language resources may be particularly significant in affecting the quality of life of these foreign residents.

Offices and agencies, on the other hand, clearly have regular contact with foreign customers and users, and the majority indicated difficulty in communication. Almost half of the agencies and offices queried do
offer some foreign language aids (and more are preparing to), mainly in English, with some Chinese and Korean, although the rate of Chinese and Korean speakers is certainly higher than English speakers in Iwate. However, it may be that foreign language aids in fact match the rate of foreign customers and users in the areas of these institutions. While the number of foreign residents in Iwate is known to be growing, respondents did not uniformly seem to be observing this. Some encouraged more foreign language aids, but most did not seem to feel the need.

While a small proportion (17%) of agencies and offices that are permitted to hire foreigners actually do so, it was noted that issues of qualifications and language ability forestalled more active hiring of foreigners.

In conclusion, a) foreign residents’ knowledge of and access to resources seems unsystematic, b) available foreign language resources are not uniformly available, and agencies’ and offices’ perception of the needs for such resources may not match the reality of the growing population of foreign residents. Given the steady increase in foreign residents, however, it would be best to address the needs of multi-cultural coexistence proactively.

To that end, we see the following needs emerging from this study:

- Widely-available Japanese language classes, even delivered by television and internet, if not in person
- An increase of office and agency signs, labels, guidebooks, and brochures in a variety of foreign languages matching local demographics; it is recommended that signs be bilingual to aid learning of Japanese (rather than only in a foreign language)
- Continued funding of satellite international exchange centers
- Continued education of the Japanese populace on the significance and nature of multi-cultural coexistence.

References


