

# LESLLA Symposium Proceedings



## Recommended citation of this article

Rosenbrock, A. V. (2017). Educational Level, Length of Residency, and Japanese Language Use of Spanish-Speaking Unskilled Workers in Japan. *LESLLA Symposium Proceedings*, 12(1), 263–273. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.8059669>

## Citation for LESLLA Symposium Proceedings

This article is part of a collection of articles based on presentations from the 2016 Symposium held at Universidad de Granada in Grenada, Spain. Please note that the year of publication is often different than the year the symposium was held. We recommend the following citation when referencing the edited collection.

Sosiński, M. (Ed.) (2017). *Alfabetización y aprendizaje de idiomas por adultos: Investigación, política educativa y práctica docente/Literacy education and second language learning by adults (LESLLA): Research, policy and practice*. Universidad de Granada.  
<https://lesllasp.journals.publicknowledgeproject.org/index.php/lesllasp/issue/view/476>

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EDUCATIONAL LEVEL, LENGTH OF RESIDENCY, AND JAPANESE  
LANGUAGE USE OF SPANISH-SPEAKING UNSKILLED WORKERS IN JAPAN

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**ABSTRACT:** Since 1990, a number of Spanish-speaking migrants arrived in Japan to work on manufacturing jobs without any official support for improving their Japanese language abilities and social adjustment to Japanese society. This paper reports the initial results of a questionnaire to Spanish-speaking adults living in Japan, which focused on their Japanese language abilities and their use of Japanese in the private and social domains, in relation to their educational levels in their home countries. After more than twenty-five years living in Japan, this is a marginalized minority with a precarious, lack of social integration and unstable employment status, along with limited Japanese language ability in all social domains.

**KEYWORDS:** Spanish speakers, Japanese language, migrants, adults, Japan

## 1. INTRODUCTION

For the migrant, using the language of the host society gives the opportunity to access invaluable information and improve employment, health, and other areas of life, resulting in a general sense of well-being and higher level of integration into the new society. One of the factors that often correlates with a positive outcome with the acquisition of a second language is the level of education (Chiswick & Miller, 2007). However, is having attended school in their Spanish-speaking home countries for a greater number of years one of the keys to success with Japanese language acquisition and use? This study examines Spanish-speaking unskilled workers' level of education in relation to their acquisition and use of Japanese language in private and social domains.

## 2. SPANISH SPEAKERS AND THEIR SOCIAL SITUATION IN JAPAN

Officially, Japan is not a country of immigration as the government policies remain opposed to recruitment of foreign labor, but the revision of the Immigration Law in 1990 aiming to satisfy the demand for a low-wage manufacturing sector led to a large influx of descendants of Japanese emigrants up to the third generation and their relatives, from Latin America, mainly from Brazil and Peru. Difficult economic and political situations in their home countries and comparatively higher earnings in the Japanese market force favored Latin Americans to live and work in Japan. Compared with other foreigners, Latin Americans are a minority. According to the Ministry of Justice, there are approximately 60,000 Spanish speakers living in Japan, and they are mostly from Peru, followed by Bolivia, Argentina, and Colombia (Ministry of Justice, 2015).

These Spanish-speaking workers from Latin America are characterized by whether they are Japanese descendants or not. Most of them do not possess Japanese language abilities or understand Japanese culture (Japanese International Cooperation Agency, 1992; Hamamatsu, 2007; Mita et al., 2009; Tamaki et al., 2014). They are overwhelmingly unskilled workers in the manufacturing industry, in which it is not necessary to be competent in Japanese (Takaya, et al., 2015). These blue-collar workers fill the so-called three-K jobs (*'kitsui, kitanai, kiken'* - 'difficult, dirty and dangerous') and they are usually the "last hired, first fired" in the job market. Initially they were guest workers, who intended to return home in a few years, but most of them are settling in with their families. Compared with Brazilians, Peruvians more often change their nationality and residency to Japanese. Their residency is mainly in industrial areas, but they also live in dispersed areas (Yanagida, 2011). Their level of education in their home country is relatively high, with more than 75% having achieved higher than a middle-school level (Mita, et al., 2009 p. 5; Hamamatsu, 2007; Japanese International Cooperation Agency, 1992). This is a well-educated group that may come from wealthy families, but more often are from the middle class and are more likely to have had job experiences in their home countries.

With the arrival of the "newcomers" in the mid-eighties -, such as Filipinos, South Koreans, Brazilians, to name the biggest - the Japanese government did not initially support them in any way to adjust to the host society, with regard to the Japanese language and sociocultural courses as integration measures. The acceptance of these new Japanese-descendant migrants was based on the assumption that being descendants was enough to have the socio-cultural and linguistic skills to successfully adapt to the land of their ancestors. As a result, this new social need for linguistic skills was fulfilled by volunteer organizations who offer very cheap Japanese classes delivered by unqualified, though well-intentioned, volunteers who lack the skills and preparation to teach adult migrants (Gottlieb, 2012). It was not until the financial crisis in 2008 that the government for the first time assisted the unemployed ones with retraining programs to improve their skills, including Japanese language classes, as a way to improve migrants' linguistic abilities and their chances of finding better jobs (Higuchi, 2014).

## 3. MIGRANTS AND THE ACQUISITION OF THE HOST SOCIETY LANGUAGE

The major challenge for migrants to new countries is their adjustment to the new social and cultural environment. It is known that migrants who have higher

probability of finding employment and higher earnings are more proficient in the host society language (Adamuti-Trache, 2012; García Delgado et al., 2012). As the best predictors of a new language acquisition, research has focused mainly on three concepts: Exposure, Efficiency, and Economic incentives. Among them, age of migration, level of education, and length of migration are included (Chiswick & Miller, 1995; 2007). Related to the level of education, more highly educated people have a good basis for learning additional languages, as they have already developed a set of skills and implicit metalinguistic knowledge that can be applied to learning a second language (Baker, 2014).

The success of the acquisition of the host language is also related to factors outside of the classroom, such as the extent to which newcomers interact on a daily basis with members of the host society. The more interactions on a daily basis to which a foreign adult is exposed, the more chances there are of relevant communicative exchanges with native speakers to assist improvement of their language skills and their understanding of the new society. Furthermore, the ability to communicate in the host society language also leads to higher levels of societal participation. In addition, the use of the second language in the private sphere at home has been argued as having positive outcomes in the acquisition of the new language (Coby van Niejenhuis, et al., 2015).

Another factor to take into account is the linguistic distance between one's mother tongue and the language of the host society in terms of differences in the grammar, pronunciation, vocabulary, word order, writing etc. (Kajita, 1994). Due to this, it is more difficult for Spanish speakers to acquire Japanese than it is for them to acquire another romance language. This affects acquisition due not only to the complexities of the new language itself, but also the difficulty of transferring knowledge from one's own language to the new one (Cummins, 2000).

## 4. THE STUDY

Past studies of Spanish speakers in Japan have focused primarily on demographic data (Hamamatsu, 2007; Japanese International Cooperation Agency, 1992) or on their participation in the job market (Inaba & Higuchi, 2010; Watanabe, 2012). This study sets out to fill the gap in the research by examining the sociolinguistic integration of Spanish-speaking migrants into Japanese society, and how it correlates with their educational background, Japanese language study background, type of employment, and their patterns of Japanese use in private and social domains. The concept of social domains belongs to Fishman, who proposes to use them as analytic parameters for social behavior in terms of language use, telling us the occasions in which language is used to whom, where and when (Fishman, 1972). Furthermore, this information shows us the level of Japanese that they have acquired after 25 years in Japan, and the manner in which Spanish speakers have come to participate in the Japanese community.

Therefore, this study examines the relationship between the subjects' higher level of education achieved in Latin American countries and their job-market opportunities, experiences learning Japanese, self-assessment of Japanese language abilities, and daily use of Japanese language in different social domains.

## 4.1. METHODOLOGY

Primary data was obtained through a survey given to Spanish-speaking Latin Americans resident in Japan. The eligibility criteria were that the subjects were adults at the time of arrival in Japan, who were not eligible to attend Japanese school, and came to Japan to work on manual jobs. The study excluded Spanish speakers who had come to Japan as overseas students and spouses of Japanese nationals, for example. The snowball technique was used to recruit future subjects from among their acquaintances because of the difficulties for the researcher in accessing them. Due to the fact that the Spanish speakers are scattered over a wide geographical area, those captured first in the sample were encountered in locations of religious services, gatherings, ethnic festivals and in businesses which the subjects owned. The questionnaire covers basic information about the respondents, and their experiences of learning Japanese language. It also asks questions about their Japanese use with their family, in the workplace, with friends, while doing hobbies or while participating in religious activities. The respondents could choose to do the questionnaire on paper (32%) or online survey (68%) (SurveyMonkey), and the data was processed by an SPSS software program. Details of the responses on the survey are shown in Table 1.

Background variables	Number of persons	Percent
Gender		
Female	39	59.0
Male	27	41.0
Years in Japan		
0 to 9 years	4	6.0
10 to 19 years	26	39.0
20 or more years	36	55.0
Actual age		
Up to 29 years old	4	2.0
30 to 44 years old	24	36.0
45 or more years old	41	62.0
Country of birth		
Peru	51	77.0
Argentina	5	4.0
Colombia	4	4.0
Others	6	15
Employment		
Yes	54	83.0
No	11	17.0
Type of employment		
Manual work	34	76.0
Eldercare	7	13.0
Entrepreneur	3	6.0
Others	10	5.0
Level of education		
Up to Middle School	10	15.0
Up to High School	24	36.0
College or more	32	49.0

Table 1: Background of the Sample (n=66).

## 5. LENGTH OF RESIDENCY, TYPE OF EMPLOYMENT AND EXPERIENCE WITH JAPANESE LANGUAGE STUDY

Table 2 shows years of living in Japan by the highest educational level achieved. The majority of the respondents have been living in Japan, regardless of their years of schooling, for more than twenty years.

	0 to 9 years	10 to 19 years	20+ years	%
Up to middle school 15% (N=10)	0%	50%	50%	100
Up to high school 36% (N=24)	4%	42%	54%	100
College or higher 49% (N=32)	9%	35%	56%	100

Table 2: Years of Residency in Japan by the Highest Level of Education Achieved.

	Unskilled/ manual jobs	Eldercare	Entrepreneurs	Others	%
Up to middle school 15% (N=10)	67%	22%	0%	11%	100
Up to high school 36% (N=24)	67%	22%	0%	11%	100
College or higher 49% (N=32)	63%	0%	11%	7%	100

Table 3: Type of Employment by the Highest Level of Education Achieved.

As shown in Table 3, the Spanish speakers who have achieved as high as a middle-school level of education do not appear to have different types of employment from migrants who achieved higher levels of education. In all the cases, employment in unskilled jobs consists of daily routines which do not require higher Japanese language skills since they are repetitive work duties involving simple tasks unrelated to the workers' educational backgrounds in their home countries.

	Studied Japanese before coming to Japan	Studied Japanese only after coming to Japan
Up to middle school 15% (N=10)	10%	50%
Up to high school 36% (N=24)	8%	38%
College or higher 49% (N=32)	23%	74%

Table 4: Studied Japanese Before v. Only After Coming to Japan by the Highest Level of Education Achieved.

In accordance with other studies about Latin Americans in Japan, few of the subjects in this study came to Japan having any knowledge of the language. For some of the Japanese descendants from Peru and Argentina, studying Japanese before coming to Japan meant attending weekend Japanese lessons intended for the community of Japanese emigrants in their home countries. Among the ones who attend Japanese classes in Japan, the group with college or higher-level educational backgrounds shows more interest in mastering the language, followed by the group with only a middle-school level of education. The respondents described their difficulties in studying and/or continuing their Japanese studies as follows: a lack of time to study because they cannot attend classes after work; their schedules do not match those of the Japanese classes offered; they feel that they can live with the Japanese that they mastered. However, the ones with experience with Japanese classes mention their disappointment with the content of their Japanese classes, as they found them unsuitable for their personal needs in their daily life.

### 5.1. USE OF JAPANESE IN THE PRIVATE AND PUBLIC DOMAINS

In the following tables, one can see what is called "Language background measurement" (Baker and Jones, 1998). First, Table 5 below shows how much Japanese is used in the private domain by the two following questions: 'If you are living with another adult, in what language do you speak to that person?' (We just included the data for responses of "in Japanese most of the time" and "always in Japanese", excluding the responses for Spanish use). 'In what language does that person speak to you? (The responses of "in Japanese most of the time" and "always in Japanese" are added, excluding the results for Spanish).

Table 5 shows that around a quarter or less of respondents communicate in Japanese at home, and the highest percentage is among the Spanish speakers with the lowest level of education. For the group as a whole, contact with Japanese and use of Japanese in their private lives is remarkably low.

	Respondent's use of Japanese with another adult in the house	Use of Japanese by another adult in the respondent's house
Up to middle school 15% (N=10)	25%	25%
Up to high school 36% (N=24)	13%	13%
College or higher 49% (N=32)	7%	14%

Table 5: Use of Japanese at Home by the Highest Level of Education Achieved

Secondly, the next table shows the use of Japanese in the context of relationships that might be developed in the mother language, in Spanish or in Japanese. The three domains covered were the friendship domain, the work domain and the neighbor domain. The latter two are probably the most common public spheres in which the subjects can interact with the members of the majority group. We asked the following questions: a)

In what language do you communicate with your friends? (Multiple choice question): b) For the workplace: In your workplace, what language do you use? c) Do you speak to your neighbors? (The answer options were: "yes, we often speak and or visit each other" and "yes we sometimes speak to each other").

	With friends a-in Spanish b-in Japanese	Use Japanese in the workplace	Use Japanese with neighbors
Up to middle school 15% (N=10)	a. 100% b. 40%	67%	10%
Up to high school 36% (N=24)	a. 100% b. 42%	78%	46%
College or higher 49% (N=32)	a. 100% b. 66%	48%	45%

Table 6: Use of Japanese with Friends, in the Workplace, with Neighbors and in One's Social Life by the Highest Level of Education Achieved

Two more domains of hobbies and religious worship take place in a public space in Spanish or Japanese. The hobbies included here refer only to the ones done in person, in direct contact with other people; Japanese classes and activities using internet, for example, are excluded. Table 6 shows that with friends, the use of Spanish is overwhelming, and the numbers of friends with whom they talk in Japanese is relatively high, too. In the workplace, the cases of a lower use of "Japanese only" might be explained by the presence of other Spanish-speaking co-workers who might know Japanese. The use of Japanese with neighbors should be considered high among the ones with a higher level of education, although the more general trend of avoiding contact with the neighbors nowadays should be taken into consideration, which is independent of language, race, or ethnicity.

	Use of Japanese for doing hobbies	Use of Japanese in religious activities
Up to middle school 15% (N=10)	50% (2 of 4)	50% (2 of 4)
Up to high school 36% (N=24)	31% (4 of 13)	14% (2 of 14)
College or higher 49% (N=32)	40% (10 of 25)	18% (5 of 28)

Table 7: Use of Japanese in One's Social Life According to Level of Education

From the results of Table 7, we can see that few respondents in each educational level group are doing hobbies or religious activities at all, but when they do, the use of the Japanese language is relatively high for the lower education group.

As a whole, Japanese language use is inevitably higher in the workplace, while it is lower with leisure activities. The results show that the respondents have a lower sociolinguistic integration into Japanese society, while having a separate social life in other languages than Japanese.

## 5.2. SELF-ASSESSMENT OF JAPANESE LANGUAGE SKILLS BY LEVEL OF EDUCATION

As a measure of their Japanese abilities, each subject was asked to assess their Japanese language abilities in the four language skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing.

	Highest	Middle	Lowest	%
Up to middle school 15% (N=10)	50%	40%	10%	100
Up to high school 36% (N=24)	29%	33%	37%	100
College or higher 49% (N=32)	32%	52%	6%	100

Table 8: Self-assessment of Listening Skills by the Highest Level of Education Achieved.

	Highest	Middle	Lowest	%
Up to middle school 15% (N=10)	60%	30%	10%	100
Up to high school 36% (N=24)	46%	38%	16%	100
College or higher 49% (N=32)	42%	42%	16%	100

Table 9: Self-assessment of Speaking Skills by the Highest Level of Education Achieved.

	Highest	Middle	Lowest	%
Up to middle school 15% (N=10)	0%	20%	80%	100
Up to high school 36% (N=24)	8%	21%	71%	100
College or higher 49% (N=32)	0%	55%	46%	100

Table 10: Self-assessment of Reading Skills by the Highest Level of Education Achieved.

	Highest	Middle	Lowest	%
Up to middle school 15% (N=10)	0%	20%	80%	100
Up to high school 36% (N=24)	8%	21%	71%	100
College or higher 49% (N=32)	3%	45%	52%	100

Table 11: Self-assessment of Writing Skills by the Highest Level of Education Achieved.

The tables 8 to 11 are organized by their level of difficulty of Japanese language by the four basic skills. The results related to speaking and listening skills show that Spanish speakers with a lower-level education declared having higher language abili-

ties in listening and speaking, compared with the group with a higher-level education. However, with the Japanese abilities related to reading and writing skills, self-assessment is remarkably low or nonexistent in most of the groups. Nonetheless, it is the group with the higher-level education who declare having slightly higher abilities in reading and writing.

Considering these results, level of education of the respondents does not seem to follow the common understanding that the more schooling a person has, the higher their level of proficiency will be in a second language. Moreover, taking into account that half of these respondents have been living in Japan for 20 years or more, length of residency in the country does not appear to help in gaining a certain proficiency in the Japanese language. These findings are similar to those in Mita's study (Mita et al., 2009).

## 6. CONCLUSION

This study contributes to our understanding of the sociolinguistic integration into Japanese society of Spanish speakers who are long-term residents in Japan. The findings in this study may have a number of potential shortcomings; it does not represent a random sample due to the small number of respondents, and because of the difficulties in reaching Spanish-speaking adults, only represents the ones who wanted to participate in the study. However, the general trends of the sample correspond to the official statistics and other studies on the foreign population in Japan, as was quoted before (Japanese International Cooperation Agency, 1992; Hamamatsu, 2007; Mita, et al., 2009; Inaba & Higuchi, 2010; Tamaki, 2014).

The variables used to analyze the sample - the level of education, with the length of residency, type of employment - do not seem to clearly explain the influence of the acquisition and use of a second language. It highlights some conditions for Spanish speakers, who are probably distinct because of their different background in socio-cultural and linguistic terms, compared to those with more social and linguistic advantages such as Chinese, for instance.

Moreover, in another example, in Canada migrants' income is on average lower than Canadians' when they are new arrivals, and the migrants' income improves as they gain more experience and socio-cultural immersion. This is the same for Spanish speakers in Japan, where the economic reward or return is lower for migration. As in the case of migrants in Canada, their level of education and past job experiences are discounted (Alboim, et al., 2005). However, foreigners who have the opportunity to get a Canadian degree, training or qualification eventually have similar earnings as the Canadians. However, for Spanish speakers in Japan, such opportunities to improve their skills are nonexistent and represent one of the biggest obstacles to a relative improvement of their living conditions and wellbeing over time (Higuchi, 2014).

The economic incentives in the job market are one of the predictors of language acquisition (Chiswick & Miller, 1978). However, in the case of Spanish speakers in Japan, those incentives are scarce, and as a result, might also discourage further language improvement. Their Japanese language acquisition has been left in their own hands, and therefore, their insufficient language proficiency has led to segregated migrants becoming marginalized-minority foreigners. The length of their stay in Japan also does not help to improve their linguistic abilities and employment conditions since they still

belong to the same unstable and precarious job markets as they did upon arrival. The adjustment to Japanese society for these Spanish speakers is intertwined with their social class, cultural and symbolic capital, as well as their identities, as demonstrated in the studies of Bonny Norton (2013) and David Block (2007, 2014). To the same extent, their lack of proficiency in the dominant language does not operate in isolation from other forms of disadvantage and constitutes but one of many facets of multiple vulnerabilities (Piller, 2016:96).

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