

b. A Case Study: Sign Language in Japan

Image:

In Japan, there are approximately 397,000 persons who have difficulties in hearing. A little fewer than 30, 000 people are estimated to use sign language.¹

Legal Status of Sign Language in Japan

Sign language does not have explicit legal recognition in Japan. However, many local public entities (LPE) have adopted an ordinance on sign language in their jurisdiction. According to the Japan Federation of the Deaf (JFD), there are 280 LPEs (26 prefectures; 7 wards; 205 cities; 41 towns; 1 village) that have adopted such an ordinance.²

Sign Language Interpretation Service

The situation in Japan surrounding sign language interpretation service is somewhat complicated. Under the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare (MHLW), there are three categories of sign language related services:³

1. Sign language volunteer
2. Sign language interpreter
3. Certified sign language interpreter

The first two categories were created in the 1970's to help deaf and hard of hearing persons at the community (LPE) level⁴. These were then updated to meet the requirements of the Act on Independence Support for Persons with Disabilities (2006) and its successor, the Comprehensive Support Law for Persons with Disabilities (2012), thus, making communication support such as installation of sign language interpreters at LPE agencies and dispatching sign language interpreters to communities as essential in municipalities.⁵ LPEs are legally mandated to provide training courses for those two categories of volunteers. However, there is no official requirement on the qualification process for these categories, and it is left to each LPE how such qualification is to be undertaken. Most LPEs, in practice, adopt the National Sign Language Interpreter Examination prepared by the National Sign Language Training Center⁶, a non-profit organization, as the qualifying requirement for being a sign language interpreter at community level. Actual testing is conducted by an LPE that adopts the examination. Those who pass this examination become "persons who are eligible to become sign language interpreters" at prefecture level, which may require further examination of its own. The prerequisite of taking this examination is the completion of a sign language interpreter training course, or to have sign language competence comparable to that level. In order to enrol in a sign language interpreter training course, it is necessary to have completed a sign language volunteer training course conducted by the municipality.

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² <<https://www.jfd.or.jp/sgh/joreimap>>.

³ http://jaits.jpn.org/home/kaishi2013/06_tsuruma-yokkoichi.pdf

⁴ <https://www.mhlw.go.jp/bunya/shougaihoken/sanka/dl/shien02.pdf>

⁵ <http://www.com-sagano.com/about/hojin/igi>

⁶ <http://www.com-sagano.com/>

The third category is created by the MHLW Ministerial Ordinance No. 96 (2000) that stipulates the assessment and certification of sign language interpreting skills.⁷ The qualification of certified sign language interpreter can be obtained by passing the Sign Language Interpretation Skills Certification Examination conducted by the Deaf Information Culture Center, which works as a proxy for MHLW. As of February 2019, there are 3,695 certified sign language interpreters, of which 436 (11.8 per cent) are male and 3,259 (88.2 per cent) are female.⁸ The certification examination is rather difficult to pass. The most recent one, which took place in October 2018, had a success rate of 9.8 per cent, with the overall average success rate of applicants since its first examination is at 14.6 per cent.⁹ It takes approximately 13 years on average for an applicant to pass this test.

The field of sign language interpretation, whether certified or not, is not a licensed occupation, which means it does not require a license (or certificate) to pursue this particular profession for compensation, and thus anybody in principle can become a sign language interpreter.

Organization for Sign Language Interpreters

The Japanese Association of Sign Language Interpreters (JASLI) is the organization of certified sign language interpreters. It was established in 1992, three years after the initial "Sign Language Interpreting Skill Certifying Examination" was first administered in 1989. The aim of JASLI is a continuous contribution to the sign language interpreting system through the enhancement of sign language interpreters' performance and the improvement of specialist skills.¹⁰

Who Covers the Cost of Sign Language Interpreters?

As part of requirements on LPEs mandated by the Comprehensive Support Law for Persons with Disabilities, the cost of dispatching a sign language interpreter, for example, to hospitals, when requested by persons with disabilities, is covered by LPEs. For other services, it is usually the case that the individual or organization requiring the sign language interpretation service is responsible for paying for the service.

What is the Cost of Sign Language Interpreter Services?

According to a study conducted in 2009, the average hourly wage for a sign language interpreter is 1,679.7JPY (Approximately USD\$15.60). Average monthly salary is 166,783 JPY¹¹ (Approximately USD\$1550.40). However, the actual situation may vary greatly as indicated by the following graph:

⁷ https://www.mhlw.go.jp/kouseiroudoushou/shikaku_shiken/shuwatsuyaku/

⁸ http://www.soumu.go.jp/main_content/000605678.pdf

⁹ loc.cit.

¹⁰ <http://www.jasli.jp/association.html>

¹¹ http://www.soumu.go.jp/main_content/000605678.pdf

Figure x. Hourly Salary for Sign Language Interpreters in Japan in 2009



Source: ¹²

Video Relay Service in Japan

Currently there is no public telephone relay service in Japan, however, there are some private companies providing some functions of telephone relay service.¹³ These companies also provide remote video interpretation as well as sign language video receptionist services for third party companies.

The Nippon Foundation has been providing a platform for telephone relay service as its model project since 2013.¹⁴ Prompted partly by this activity, the Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIC), together with MHLW, organized a working group for the discussion of telephone relay service in January 2019¹⁵, leading to the discussion of creating a national telephone relay service including video relay service. Training of the sign language communication assistant, as a sign language interpreter in a VRS is called, will also be officially envisioned by the MIC as well as MHLW¹⁶.

¹² This graph is translated from the one in http://www.soumu.go.jp/main_content/000601863.pdf

¹³ There are at least three companies providing such service: Plusvoice< <https://plusvoice.co.jp/>>, ShuR< <https://shur.jp/en/index.html>> and Mirairo <<https://www.mirairo.co.jp/en/>>.

¹⁴ http://www.soumu.go.jp/main_content/000601863.pdf

¹⁵ http://www.soumu.go.jp/main_sosiki/kenkyu/digital_utilization/02kiban02_04000373.html

¹⁶ http://www.soumu.go.jp/main_content/000631600.pdf