

The Impact and Needs of Foreign Language Proficiency in Industry : A Case Study of the North-Tohoku Region

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1 Introduction

In the current era of globalization, Marian (2023) notes that approximately 70% of the world's population is bilingual. Furthermore, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2012, p.23) emphasizes that, “In this time of globalisation, language learning is ever more important – central to politics, economics, history, and most obviously, education.” In Japan, foreign language proficiency is becoming an increasingly essential skill, not only for large corporations in metropolitan areas but also for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in regional areas. In particular, in the North-Tohoku region, the cultivation of human resources with foreign language skills is expected to become a key driver of regional industrial development. This is due to a combination of factors, including a recent surge in inbound tourism, the globalization of agricultural exports, and the need to secure human resources in depopulating areas. When considering foreign language education, attention often centers on pedagogical effectiveness—such as identifying effective teaching methods and evaluating the learning outcomes they produce. However, the present study focuses instead on foreign language proficiency as a foundation for regional economies and industries. Based on an analysis of survey responses from 288 working adults, it examines the impact and necessity of foreign language skills, offering analysis and discussion.

1.1 Research Background

Figure 1 presents the top seven most studied languages worldwide, along with the approximate number of learners for each language. As shown, at the time of the survey, approximately 1.5 billion people were studying English globally—375 times more than the 4 million studying Japanese. This underscores the global prominence of English as a key language for international communication. According to Chan's (2016) Power Language Index (PLI), “English is by far the most powerful language” and “it is the dominant language of three G7 nations (USA, UK and Canada).”

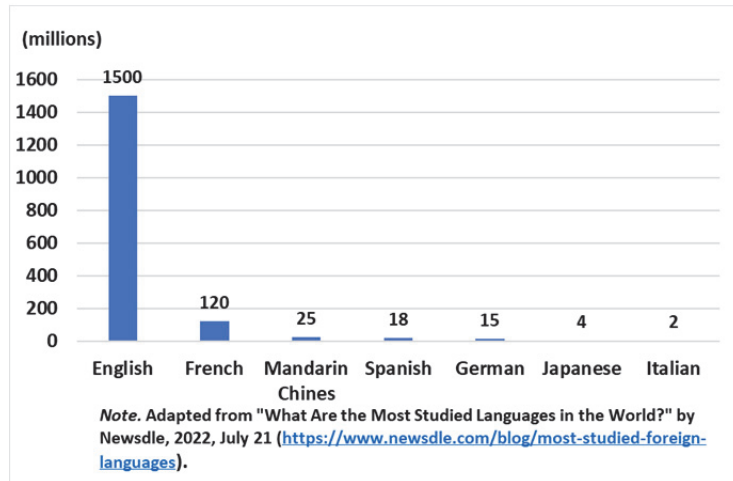
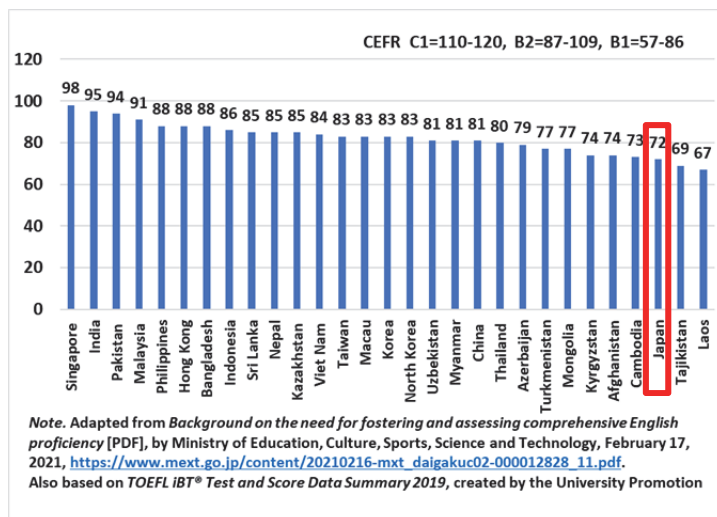
Figure 1*The most studied languages in the world*

Figure 2 shows the average TOEFL iBT scores across Asian countries. The data indicate that Japan ranks among the lowest in Asia. While TOEFL iBT scores may not fully capture the overall English proficiency of Japanese people, they generally suggest that Japan's level of English proficiency remains relatively low.

According to Matsushige (2002), "English is widely used in various international situations, and is recognized as a de facto world standard. It is regarded as the most beneficial foreign language for Japanese to learn, since Japan's economy depends on close business interactions with other countries. It seems that recently, English has become so important that without it, people may be effectively barred from positions of high status and social influence."

Figure 2*Average score of TOEFL iBT (Asia)*

Furthermore, a European Commission (2006) survey of SMEs revealed that a significant amount of business was lost due to inadequate language skills. Among nearly 2,000 businesses, 11% (195 SMEs) reported losing contracts for this reason, and 10 companies had lost contracts worth over €1 million. Many respondents identified English as a key language for accessing export markets and frequently emphasized its role as a *lingua franca*. However, the same report also acknowledges that “English is important as the world business language, but other languages are used extensively as intermediary languages and businesses are aware of the need for a range of other languages in relationship-building.”

Similarly, a survey conducted by the Institute for International Business Communication (2019) reported that “English proficiency” ranked first (82.6%) among the “knowledge and skills considered important for future businesspeople by companies and organizations. Communication skills ranked second (80.7%), followed by problem-solving and execution skills (72.3%). Sato (2020) also argues—while acknowledging that his report reflects a personal view—that “English proficiency can have economic effects on wage levels, employment, and macroeconomic outcomes.”

In the North-Tohoku region today, companies are becoming increasingly globalized through the growth of inbound tourism (Asahi Shimbun, 2025), the rise in technical intern trainees (Aomori Labour Bureau, 2023), and expanded trade with overseas partners (JETRO Aomori, 2024). However, research on the local population’s foreign language abilities, related issues, and needs remains limited. Educational institutions have yet to fully grasp the specific foreign language demands of the region, and there is little evidence of effective collaboration between industry and education in this area. Against this background, it is important to understand how workers—including employees and sole proprietors—perceive their own foreign language proficiency, to identify region-specific challenges and needs, and to explore pathways for sustainable human resource development aligned with regional industrial growth.

1.2 Significance of the research

The significance of this study can be summarized in three main points. First, it introduces the perspective of linking regional industry with foreign language proficiency. Traditionally, research on foreign language skills has often focused on English education, linguistics, or the enhancement of communication abilities. Empirical studies that specifically examine the concrete needs for foreign language proficiency within regional industries, however, remain limited. This study is unique in its attempt to investigate and capture the actual demand for foreign languages in the North-Tohoku region.

Second, it analyzes the results of an online questionnaire survey using both quantitative and qualitative perspectives. By visualizing the actual use of foreign

languages in the workplace and future needs through numerical data, while also analyzing open-ended responses from employees, it aims to identify regional challenges and provide guidance for corporate human resource development. The combination of quantitative and qualitative analyses strengthens the empirical validity of the findings.

Third, the study may provide a practical foundation for bridging the gap between the education and industrial sectors. The findings not only clarify the current situation but also offer a basis for developing new collaborative frameworks between local educational institutions (universities, business schools, high schools, etc.) and industry. In this way, the study holds practical significance not only for academic research but also for future regional revitalization and human resource strategies.

1.3 Purpose of the research

The purpose of this study is to identify the current state and needs related to foreign language proficiency in the industrial sector of the North-Tohoku region, based on the results of an online questionnaire survey, and to clarify the region's specific characteristics and challenges. Furthermore, the study aims to provide recommendations, based on the survey findings, regarding the direction of foreign language education tailored to regional industrial needs, as well as the ideal forms of collaboration among industry, academia, and government.

2 Methodology

To examine the realities and needs of foreign language proficiency in the industrial sector, and to clarify regional characteristics and challenges, an online questionnaire survey was administered to working adults. The survey was conducted via Google Forms in April 2025; and was designed by the author. The target respondents were Japanese-speaking individuals employed either as company employees or as sole proprietors. The questionnaire consisted of approximately 20 items, though branching logic caused the number of questions to vary slightly depending on the respondent. Most respondents were able to complete the survey within five minutes. For the questionnaire design, four categories were established:

1. Basic Attributes (Respondent and company profile, region of employment, number of employees, etc.)
Q1, Q2, Q3, Q4, Q5, Q6, Q7
2. Language Proficiency and Learning Experience (Experience with standardized English tests, languages studied, etc.)
Q8, Q18, Q19
3. Workplace Use of Foreign Languages and Support Systems (Presence of international transactions, frequency of foreign language use, etc.)

Q9, Q10, Q11, Q12, Q13, Q15, Q16

4. Perceptions and Evaluation of Foreign Language Skills (Need for skill improvement, consideration of language ability in hiring and promotion, etc.)

Q14, Q17, Q20

Respondents received the survey URL from the administrator and completed the questionnaire using a smartphone, PC, or tablet. Initially, the URL was sent directly to 31 participants, who then shared it with others through snowball sampling, ultimately resulting in 288 responses. Most of the questions (Q1~20) were closed-ended with multiple-choice options. However, two items (Q8-2 and Q12-2) included supplementary open-ended sections, and one item (Q20) featured a fully open-ended response field.

3 Findings

The following section presents the results of the online questionnaire survey. Responses considered to have little relevance to the present analysis have been excluded. This section focuses on the questions and responses most closely related to the issues addressed in the “Discussion” section.

3.1 Category ① – Basic Attributes of Respondents

Q1. Industry sector of employment (n = 288):

The largest proportions of respondents were employed in the public sector (14.9%), finance (10.8%), education (9.0%), and manufacturing (7.3%). Communications, transportation, travel agencies, and retail collectively accounted for 58%, indicating a broad range of industries represented.

Q2. Region of employment (n = 288):

The North-Tohoku region accounted for 62.9% of respondents, followed by Tokyo (12.1%) and Miyagi Prefecture (6.3%). This shows that more than half of the respondents were employed in the North-Tohoku region.

Q3. Age group (n = 288):

30s – 29.7%, 20s – 26.9%, 40s – 21.3%, 50s – 15.0%, 60s or older – 7.0%.

Q5. Company size (n = 288):

Fewer than 200 employees – 50.8%, 200 or more employees – 49.2%.

Q6. Position in the workplace (n = 288):

General employees/staff – 48.3%, section chiefs/team leaders – 20.5%, indicating that most responses came from non-managerial employees.

Q7. Current job type (n = 288):

Sales – 19.8%, general clerical work – 16.7%, manufacturing – 8.0%, education – 11.8%, customer service – 8.0%.

3.2 Category ② – Language Proficiency and Learning Experience

Q8. Experience with standardized English tests (n = 288):

Yes – 61.1%, No – 38.9%

Q18. Years of foreign language study (n = 288):

10 or more years – 39.2%, 7–9 years – 31.3%, 4–6 years – 26.3%.

Q19. Main language(s) studied (n = 288): (Multiple responses allowed.)

English – 98.6%, Chinese – 12.5%, Korean – 9.4%, German – 4.9%, French – 2.1%.

3.3 Category ③ – Workplace Use of Foreign Languages and Support Systems

Q9. Presence of international business transactions (n = 288):

No – 57.6%, Yes – 33.7%, Don't know – 8.7%.

Q10. Availability of free language training in the workplace (n = 288):

No – 78.5%, Yes – 8.7%, Don't know – 12.8%.

Q11. Self-funded language learning for work purposes (n = 288):

No – 67.4%, Yes – 32.6%.

Q11-2. Languages studied by those who answered “Yes” to Q11 (n = 94): (Multiple responses allowed.)

English – 89.4%, Chinese – 14.9%, Korean – 10.6%, Spanish – 5%.

Q13. Use of foreign languages at work (n = 288):

Yes – 40.6%, No – 59.4%.

Q13-2. Main foreign languages used at work (n = 117): (Multiple responses allowed.)

English – 96.6%, Chinese – 25%, Korean – 18%.

Q13-3. Perceived difficulty due to one's own foreign language skills (n = 117):

Frequently – 51.3%, Occasionally – 29.1%, Rarely – 16.2%, Don't know – 3.4%,
Never – 0%.

Q16. Types of foreign language support needed (n = 288): (Multiple responses allowed.)

Training programs – 46.5%, Subsidies/grants – 35.1%, none – 32.6%, Hiring
instructors – 8.7%.

3.4 Category ④ – Perceptions and Evaluation of Foreign Language Proficiency

Q14. Perceived need to improve foreign language skills (n = 288):

Strongly feel the need– 30.2%, Somewhat necessary – 36.5%, Hardly feel the need–
25.0%, Not at all – 7.3%, Don't know – 1%.

Q17. Consideration of foreign language proficiency in hiring or promotion decisions (n = 288):

Not very relevant – 39.9%, Not relevant at all – 2.7%, Somewhat considered – 19.8%,
Strongly considered – 6.9%, Don't know – 6.6%.

3.5 Q20: Open-ended comments on work and foreign language proficiency (n = 93)

The following are selected excerpts from the open-ended responses to Q20.

Expressions containing proper nouns and other identifiers have been modified to avoid identifying specific workplaces.

- At present, I do not feel the need for foreign language proficiency. However, as the number of foreign craftsmen in the industry increases, it may become necessary in the future.
- With the rise in inbound tourism, I believe that improving foreign language proficiency is extremely important. However, management tends to focus primarily on serving or doing business with Japanese customers, which appears disconnected from the awareness of staff at the operational level.
- While scores on standardized English tests are valued, other types of work go unrecognized, creating a sense of unfairness.
- With the increase in inbound demand, I strongly feel the need to acquire foreign language skills in my daily work.
- I have long felt the necessity of English proficiency. As the use of foreign human resources increases, those working with them will need stronger language skills.
- I feel a sense of urgency, as my company has virtually no measures in place to accommodate foreign nationals.
- I think there should be more opportunities for all staff members to learn foreign languages.
- Some departments primarily use foreign languages, but in my department usage is infrequent. Still, it's always beneficial to have the ability.
- I sometimes send emails in English, but I rely on tools such as generative AI for support.
- Few departments require foreign language proficiency.
- I do not particularly feel that foreign language skills are necessary in my current work.
- I want to be able to use foreign languages at a basic level—for example, to give instructions to passengers.
- In my company's operations, I do not feel that foreign language proficiency is necessary.
- In the nursing care industry, the employment of foreign nationals is increasing. However, since they generally acquire some level of Japanese, there's little inconvenience for employers.
- There is a need to learn formal English. Japan as a whole must strengthen its basic English skills. Compared to other countries, the general level of English proficiency among Japanese people appears low.
- Being able to speak a foreign language alone is not enough; it is important to have additional competencies, such as English plus accounting knowledge, or English plus IT skills.
- It is necessary to cultivate human resources who can address issues faced by

companies and local communities—such as multicultural coexistence, regional revitalization, and workforce retention—rather than focusing solely on improving language skills.

- After our Japanese company became a subsidiary of a foreign parent company through M&A, I believe that language proficiency can increase opportunities to succeed.
- Long-term participation in foreign language courses is necessary.
- This is a necessary skill, as many employees are English speakers.
- Since domestic sales activities account for the majority of our work, there are limited opportunities to use foreign languages.
- In departments that handle overseas interactions, English is used on a daily basis; however, those assigned to such departments typically already possess high English proficiency. For those not placed in such roles, it is quite possible to reach retirement without ever using a foreign language.
- Given Japan’s declining population, the contribution of foreign nationals is essential. It is important to create an environment where they can work and live comfortably.
- I believe that the number of specialist English teachers in elementary and junior high schools should be increased, and that more teachers and staff should be hired to support the growing number of foreign children who do not speak Japanese.

4 Discussion

In this study, an online questionnaire survey was conducted in April 2025 to investigate the needs and current status of foreign language proficiency in corporate settings. A total of 288 responses were collected from a diverse range of industries and age groups, capturing perspectives across a broad spectrum of occupations and generations. Among the respondents, 62.9% were employed in Aomori, Iwate, or Akita Prefecture, enabling an in-depth exploration of foreign language needs in the North-Tohoku region—the primary focus of this research.

Figure 3 presents an analysis of Q12, comparing responses from North-Tohoku (Aomori, Akita, Iwate) and the Kanto area regarding the availability of reimbursement for foreign language learning expenses in the workplace. For the purposes of this study, the “Kanto area” refers to the four prefectures of Tokyo, Chiba, Saitama, and Kanagawa. As shown in Figure 3, only 10.5% of respondents in the North-Tohoku region reported that such a reimbursement system was in place, whereas 66.3% indicated that no such system existed. However, as noted earlier, the proportion of respondents who had taken standardized English tests such as the TOEIC was 60.2% in Aomori compared with 61.6% overall, indicating no significant difference. This suggests that the lack of reimbursement systems in North-Tohoku may be attributed

to underdeveloped corporate support structures rather than from lower levels of individual participation in language testing. One possible explanation, as shown in Figure 4, is that opportunities to use foreign languages in the workplace are less common in North-Tohoku than in other regions. This may, in turn, reduce managerial awareness or motivation to support employee language development.

Figure 3

Q12. Reimbursement for Foreign Language Study – Comparison between North-Tohoku and the Kanto Area

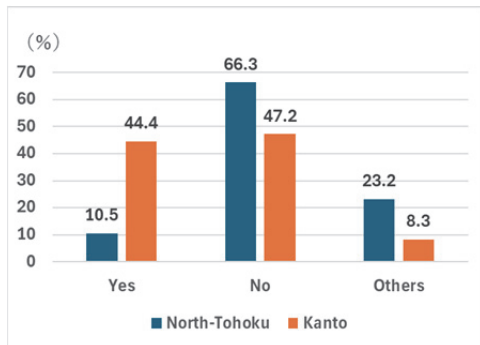


Figure 4

Q13 Opportunities to Use Foreign Languages in the workplace – Comparison between North-Tohoku and the Kanto Area

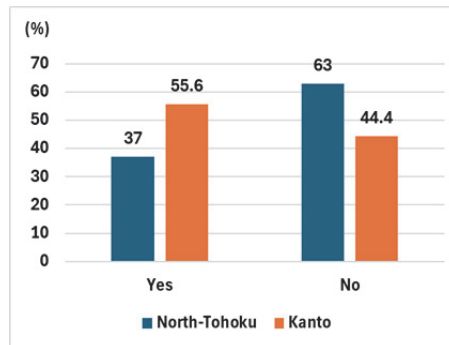


Figure 5

Q13-3. Perceived Work Difficulties Due to One's Own Foreign Language Proficiency – Comparison between North-Tohoku and the Kanto Area

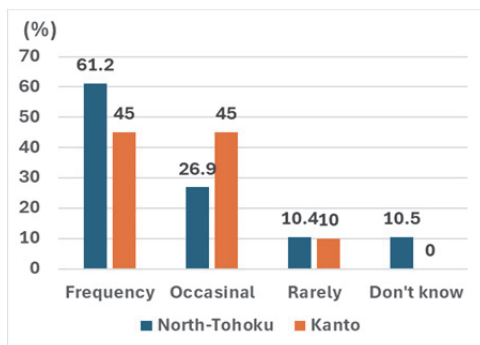


Figure 6

Q14. Perceived Need for Foreign Language Skill Improvement – Comparison between North-Tohoku and the Kanto Area

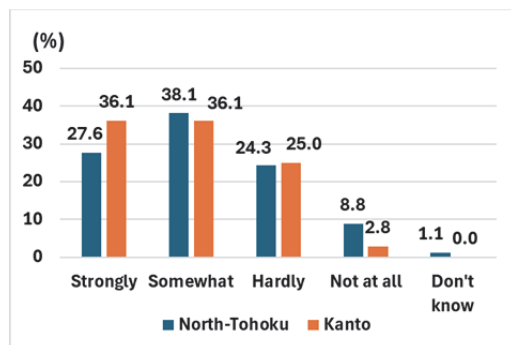


Figure 5 compares the responses from North-Tohoku and the Kanto area to Q13-3, which asked, “Do you ever feel that your foreign language proficiency causes difficulties in your work?” As shown in Figure 5, a slightly higher proportion of respondents in North-Tohoku reported frequently experiencing such difficulties when using a foreign language at work. In contrast, as illustrated in Figure 6, the proportion of employees in North-Tohoku who considered skill improvement necessary was relatively lower, while the share responding “not necessary at all” was comparatively higher. An examination of the open-ended responses to Q20 reveals that some

respondents in North-Tohoku indicated that their companies' activities were limited to the domestic market, or that, with only minimal foreign language skills, they were currently able to manage their work through gestures and other non-verbal means.

However, in recent years, inbound demand in the North-Tohoku region has been on the rise. With the potential acceptance of more foreign workers (Aomori Labour Bureau, 2025), awareness of the need to improve foreign language skills for work is expected to shift, showing an upward trend, in the future.

Figure 7

Consideration of Foreign Language Proficiency in Hiring and Promotion – Comparison between North-Tohoku and the Kanto Area

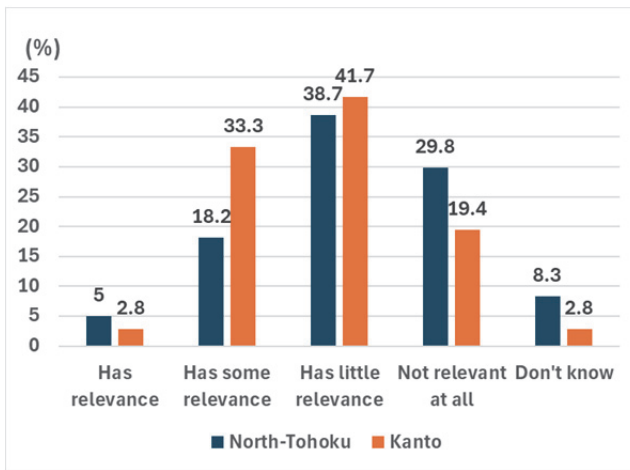


Figure 7 illustrates one factor contributing to the relatively low awareness of the need to improve foreign language proficiency for work in the North-Tohoku region. The figure shows whether foreign language proficiency is considered in hiring or promotion decisions. The proportion of respondents who answered “not relevant at all” was comparatively high, while the percentage selecting “somewhat relevant” was relatively low. Conversely, although the share of respondents who answered “relevant” was slightly higher than in the Kanto area, this may be due to the relatively high number of foreign language-related job postings in Aomori Prefecture. In the Misawa area of Aomori, which hosts a U.S. military base, job advertisements for administrative staff related to the base frequently appear throughout the year on Indeed Japan (June 2025).

As noted earlier, the author directly distributed the survey URL to 31 participants, at least two of whom were residents of Misawa. Since the initial 31 invitations expanded to a total of 288 respondents, this indicates that each participant, on average, shared the survey with approximately 9.3 additional individuals. Therefore, it is conceivable that among the estimated 18.6 individuals potentially reached through the two Misawa residents, some may have been employed in relevant

occupational fields.

For Q20, a wide variety of open-ended responses were observed. In addition to the two representative types of answers—“foreign language skills will be necessary in the future” and “they are not necessary under current conditions”—a notable feature of the overall results was the presence of several responses indicating that personal skill development was unnecessary due to the availability of recent technologies such as generative AI and online translation tools.

Analysis of the Q20 responses using a free text-mining software (*AI Text Mining*) revealed several frequently occurring nouns, including *foreign language*, *English*, *necessity*, *work/business*, *communication*, *inbound*, *translation (tools/machines)*, *conversation*, *no need*, and *foreign nationals/human resources*. These were the central terms found in the responses, with *foreign language* appearing most frequently and often co-occurring with words such as *ability*, *acquisition*, and *necessity*. The term *necessity* appeared in both affirmative and negative contexts. Overall, the findings suggest that respondents who provided open-ended comments were generally interested in foreign language proficiency and chose to elaborate on the topic.

From the Q20 responses, perceptions of the “necessity of foreign language skills” suggested that workplace requirements are often limited, varying by department or job type. Low usage was seen to contribute to stagnation in proficiency development. Respondents also noted that, due to the use of AI translation, translation devices, smartphone interpreting tools, and outsourcing, the perceived need for English proficiency—particularly in the IT sector—was low. Overall, many responses acknowledged the importance of foreign language skills, citing factors such as training linked to promotion or overseas assignments, comprehensive educational models aimed at multicultural coexistence, and practical opportunities for conversation.

In certain occupations—such as tourism, international trade, and the employment of foreign nationals—foreign language skills were considered “essential,” whereas among companies or departments focused on the domestic market, some regarded such skills as “unnecessary.” A perceptual gap was also evident between management, which may see no need for such skills due to the nature of their clientele (“we do business with Japanese customers”), and frontline employees, who feel the need to respond to inbound tourism and foreign customers. While many respondents acknowledged the importance of foreign language skills, some noted that motivation tends to decline when these skills are not directly related to their job duties. Feelings of inequity in skill evaluation were also noted. These findings suggest the need to clarify the relationship between foreign language proficiency and salary increases or promotional opportunities in the future.

Across the overall survey results, it was found that in North-Tohoku, overseas business activities are more limited than in other regions, and opportunities to use foreign languages at work are also comparatively scarce. Internal training programs

and reimbursement systems are largely undeveloped, and evaluation criteria for foreign language skills in hiring and promotion remain unclear. Nevertheless, a notable proportion of respondents—both overall and within North-Tohoku—acknowledged the importance of foreign language proficiency. Based on these findings, it is considered necessary for companies in North-Tohoku to establish systems that support employees in improving their language skills and to provide foreign language education tailored to practical workplace needs. To achieve this, governmental support and the creation of new collaborative frameworks with educational institutions will be essential. Furthermore, clarifying the link between foreign language proficiency and salary increases or promotional opportunities will help attract and retain talent with language skills. These measures are expected, in turn, to serve as a driving force for advancing industrial development in the region.

5 Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to identify the current state and needs regarding foreign language proficiency in the industrial sector of North-Tohoku, based on the results of an online survey, and to clarify the region's specific characteristics and challenges. Furthermore, the study aimed to provide recommendations on the direction of foreign language education tailored to the local industry, as well as on strategies for industry–academia–government collaboration, based on the survey findings. To this end, the results of the online survey were analyzed from both qualitative and quantitative perspectives with the goal of visualizing the actual use of foreign languages among workers and their anticipated future needs.

The analysis revealed that, compared with the overall responses and those from the Kanto area, North-Tohoku showed relatively low figures in both the proportion of foreign language use in the workplace and awareness of the need to improve foreign language skills.

It was also found that, even when individuals in the North-Tohoku region recognized the need to improve their foreign language proficiency, workplaces did not provide sufficient support or adequate programs for skill development. Based on the qualitative findings from the open-ended responses, it is anticipated that optimal English language training programs—namely, tailored or individualized sessions—will be required for each industry. This is because the analysis revealed that the stages of learning and the specific skills demanded vary considerably across different sectors. Similar to a university foreign language class, where all students use the same textbook and attend the same lessons, a uniform approach is unlikely to meet the needs of working adults. For example, a class focusing on English conversation for café service cannot be combined with one aimed at developing the skills required to receive official visitors from abroad. Accordingly, it appears that it will be necessary to provide

a wide variety of small-group language programs designed to meet the specific needs of each industry in the future. However, realizing this will require human resources, financial investment, and administrative support.

In addition, corporate support and preferential measures to enhance foreign language proficiency were also found to be comparatively limited in the North-Tohoku area. This situation may also reduce employees' motivation to improve their foreign language skills while working. Furthermore, because the impact of foreign language skills on promotion and salary remains unclear, it may heighten perceptions of unfairness in the workplace and, in turn, diminish motivation. To address this issue, the establishment of clear and transparent systems is essential. However, it is unlikely that a single small or medium-sized enterprise could quickly and independently develop fair, explicit, and widely acceptable rules.

While further investigation and analysis will be necessary to determine the specific types of support and policies required in the future, it is considered practically essential to establish new collaborative frameworks connecting local educational institutions (such as universities, vocational schools, and high schools) with the industrial sector to address this issue.

Although the number of foreign workers in Japan is increasing, work-related accidents involving them have also been on the rise. According to the Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare (2024), 755 foreign workers died as a result of occupational accidents in FY2023, excluding cases related to COVID-19 infection. In the open-ended responses of the survey, several comments indicated that a lack of foreign language proficiency made communication difficult, particularly in situations requiring explanations. It is believed that improving foreign language proficiency could help prevent occupational accidents involving foreign workers.

While the present online survey targeted individual employees working in companies and organizations, a follow-up study is currently underway, focusing on companies (i.e., employers). Moving forward, by examining the demand for foreign language proficiency from the employer's perspective, this research aims to deepen the analysis of the relationship between industrial sectors and foreign language skills, with the goal of developing practical and actionable recommendations for regional revitalization and human resource strategies.

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