

Collaborative Study on School Communication Accessibility for Diverse Families in Osaka

学校と地域社会の架け橋を目指して 一大阪における多言語家族のための学校連絡
アクセシビリティに関する共同研究

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1. Background of this Study

In recent years, the number of children with international backgrounds has increased in Japan. As a result, supporting children and their parents from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds has become an important issue in schools. According to a survey by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) (2026b), the number of students who need Japanese language support reached a record high of 84,759. This is about twice the number reported in 2016. Under these circumstances, good communication between schools and families has become an urgent issue for supporting children's school lives.

The same survey also showed that there are 8,706 Japanese language teaching supporters (*Nihongo shidoo no shiensha*) and 7,301 home language supporters (*Bogo shienin*)¹(MEXT, 2026b). Currently, they are part-time. Their actual jobs vary by region, and often beyond teaching language support and translation (e.g. Yamamoto, 2014; Usui & Chen, 2020; Homma, 2024). This fact shows the system often relies on the goodwill of individuals. According to newspaper articles from February 2026 (Uematsu, 2026; The Sankei Shinbun, 2026), MEXT plans to officially recognize them as full-time school staff members under the School Education Law, with regulatory changes targeted for 2026. However, the terminology for those supporters still varies by region, and they are defined as “external personnel” in the document published in May 2026 (MEXT, 2026b).

Communication between schools and parents has become increasingly digitalized in recent years, alongside the continued use of printed letters and other traditional forms of communication (Digital Agency, 2026; MEXT, 2026a). Indeed, translation apps and AI may be able to help when home and school languages differ. However, from the parents' perspectives, receiving information does not necessarily mean understanding it and knowing what to do.

2.

2.1 Language Barriers in School-Family Communication

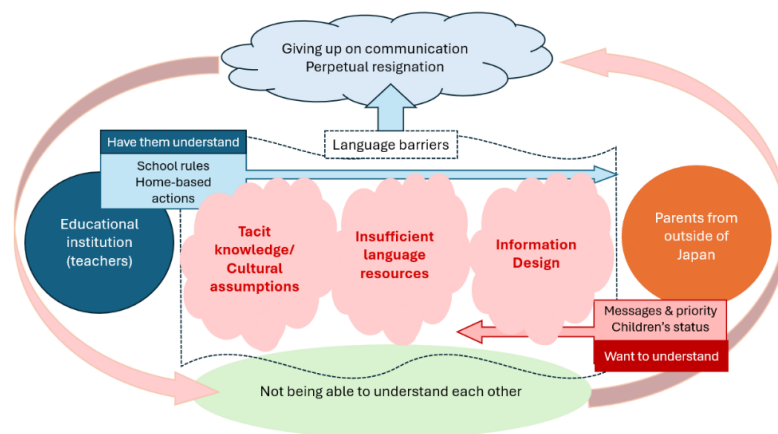
Figure 1, developed by Inouchi and Ide (2020), illustrates how viewing the lack of a shared “language” as a “barrier” to mutual understanding can hinder communication and interaction, while mismatched expectations increase anxiety. This framework is useful for

¹ Following the terminology and definitions in MEXT (2026b, pp. 106, 108), we use *Japanese language teaching supporters* (日本語指導の支援員) to refer to external personnel who provide support for Japanese language instruction in schools, and *home language supporters* (母語支援員) to refer to external personnel who provide support in students' home languages at schools, including assistance for students, communication with parents, and translation of documents for parents.

understanding the communication gap between schools and parents from non-Japanese language backgrounds. Schools want parents to understand school rules and support children at home, while parents want to understand school messages, priorities, and their children's situations. However, communication is shaped by several layers: (a) tacit knowledge and cultural assumptions, (b) limited language resources, and (c) information design. Together, these can create *language barriers* (Inouchi & Ide, 2020).

In Japan, school communication is increasingly being digitalized, partly to reduce teachers' administrative workload and make communication more efficient (Digital Agency, 2026). At the same time, digital communication may also provide benefits for parents, particularly multilingual parents, by making information easier to access, reread, and translate. Meanwhile, some schools have Japanese language teaching supporters and/or home language supporters. They support not only academic learning but also families' everyday lives by bridging between schools and teachers and parents with foreign backgrounds (Yamamoto, 2014; Usui & Chen, 2020; Homma, 2024).

Figure 1. *A structural Problem in Communication between Childcare Centers and Foreign Parents* (Inouchi & Ide, 2020, p.73)



Translated by authors

2.2 Accessibility of School Information in the Digital Era

Along with advances in technology, an increasing body of research has examined communication between schools and families, information support for parents with migrant or international backgrounds, and the role of digital technologies in family and educational contexts (Notley & Aziz, 2024; Wang et al., 2020; Obojska & Vaiouli, 2023). These studies suggest that access to digital technologies does not necessarily translate into equitable access to information, particularly for families experiencing linguistic, cultural, literacy, or digital barriers. From an informational design perspective, this literature highlights the importance of making institutional information accessible, understandable, and usable for parents from diverse backgrounds.

From the perspective of childcare providers, studies have examined challenges in communicating with multilingual families from different perspectives, including listening to parents, providing appropriate information and support, and considering linguistic and cultural differences (Wadagami et al., 2017; Wadagami, 2021; Inouchi & Ide, 2020; Kano & Ide, 2023). These studies have also focused on the roles of supporters, particularly home language supporters (Yamamoto, 2014; Usui & Chen, 2020; Homma, 2024). Usui and Chen (2020), for

example, demonstrated their roles in facilitating communication across cultural differences, understanding students' feelings and overcoming their silence, and broadening teachers' perspectives by connecting them with different values.

However, these studies have mainly examined communication challenges and support from the perspectives of schools, childcare providers, and supporters, while research focusing on parents' perspectives remains limited, particularly on multilingual parents.

2.3 Our Study

In this study, accessibility means more than simply having access to information or being able to translate a message. We conceptualize school communication accessibility as *the ability to access, interpret, and respond to school information within its linguistic and institutional context*. In other words, parents need to understand not only what a message says, but also what it means in context, what is expected of them, and what actions they need to take. Thus, access to information does not necessarily guarantee accessibility.

In our study, we sought to hear from parents with non-Japanese language backgrounds, using the following question as the main focus and exploring related experiences through the survey: "What difficulties do you face in understanding school information, and how do you deal with them?"

3. Method

3.1 Research Design and Setting

This study focused on parents of children with international backgrounds attending public schools in Japan. It examined difficulties in understanding school communications, how parents respond to these difficulties, and their use of support and digital tools such as translation apps, digital school communication systems, and generative AI. The study was conducted as a local case study in Toyonaka City, Osaka Prefecture, where Japanese language teaching supporters and home language supporters are placed in schools with children with diverse linguistic backgrounds. The participants were parents of children with international backgrounds attending public schools.

3.2 Questionnaire Development and Content

The questionnaire was developed collaboratively by the researchers, a Japanese language teaching supporter, and seven home language supporters, all of whom had extensive experience supporting linguistically diverse children and their families in Toyonaka City. An initial questionnaire based on previous studies (Notley & Aziz, 2024; Fung et al., 2025) was revised through discussions with these supporters to reflect challenges experienced by families in actual school contexts. These discussions also shifted the focus from simply asking whether parents used translation apps and/or AI to examining whether they could understand school information and take the necessary action.

The team first developed Japanese version as well as Easy Japanese (*yasashii nihongo*) version, paying particular attention to clarity and translatability. The Japanese version was then translated using AI into English, Chinese, Vietnamese, Nepali, and Indonesian. The language supporters checked and revised the translations. This combination of AI translation and human review was used to reduce the burden on collaborators while maintaining the clarity and accuracy of the multilingual questionnaires, and ensuring that they reflected the researchers' intended question.

Seven versions of the questionnaire were prepared: standard Japanese, Easy Japanese, English, Chinese, Vietnamese, Nepali, and Indonesian. Participants selected the language they found easiest to understand. The questionnaire covered participant background, languages used at home, understanding of school communications, use of AI and translation apps, difficulties with school information, sources of help, and support expected from schools. An open-ended section was also included to collect experiences and opinions that could not be captured through multiple-choice questions.

4. Results

4.1 Overview of the Participants

This paper reports preliminary results based on 48 questionnaires collected. Participants responded in six languages, with Vietnamese, Indonesian, and Chinese being the most common. Only one participant used the Easy Japanese version. This may suggest that participants preferred using their own languages rather than Easy Japanese, even though Easy Japanese is intended to make information more accessible to people who may have difficulty understanding standard Japanese.

As shown in Figure 2, participants varied considerably in their length of residence in Japan, although the largest group had lived in Japan for 1–5 years (43.8%). Figure 3 shows that the participants had children across a wide range of ages. Preschool-age children accounted for 47.9%, while elementary and junior high school-age children accounted for 45.8%.

Figure 2. *Length of Residence in Japan (N = 48)* Figure 3. *Age of Child*

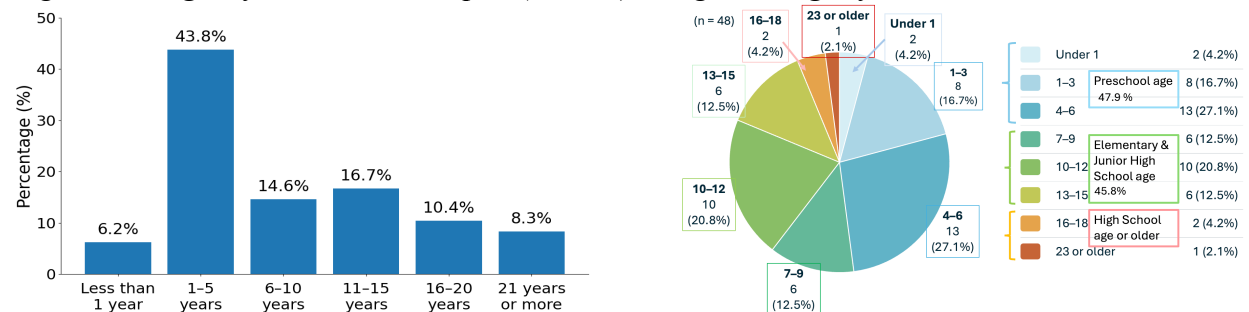


Figure 4 highlights that the difficulty was not only linguistic. Although difficulty understanding Japanese was the most frequently reported reason, 40.0% of parents reported difficulty related to not understanding school rules or the usual flow of school life. This suggests that a lack of tacit knowledge about Japanese schools can also make school communication difficult. In contrast, very few parents reported difficulty using the school app itself. These findings point to an important distinction between access to digital communication and accessibility of school communication.

As illustrated in Figure 5, parents used multiple resources when they had difficulty understanding school communications. Digital tools such as Google Translate and ChatGPT were the most commonly used, but parents also relied on their children or family members, school teachers, and local Japanese language classes. These findings suggest that parents assemble a support network across technology, family, school, and community.

Figure 4. *Why is School Communication Difficult?*

Multiple responses among parents reporting difficulty

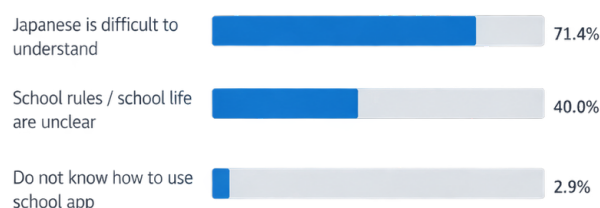


Figure 5. *How Parents Manage Difficulty*

Digital tools are central—but people remain essential

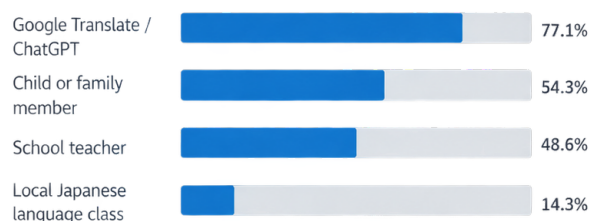


Figure 6 shows mixed evaluations of school translation support. While 58.3% of parents considered the support at least more or less sufficient, 41.7% reported that it was not quite enough or not at all enough. This indicates that existing translation support does not fully meet the needs of all parents.

As shown in Figure 7, parents use a mixture of communication channels to contact schools. Telephone was the most frequently used method, followed by school apps and printed notices or communication notebooks. The continued use of telephone is important because teachers' email addresses are generally not shared and access through school apps can be limited. Thus, digitalization has not replaced older communication channels, and parents may need to navigate several formats at the same time.

Figure 6. *Adequacy of Translation Support*

*e.g. handouts and/or letters from school

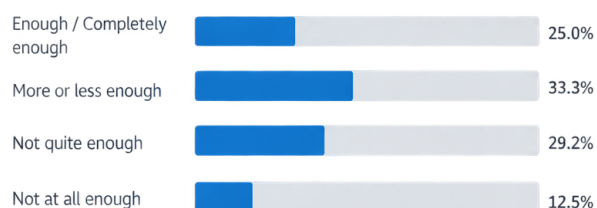
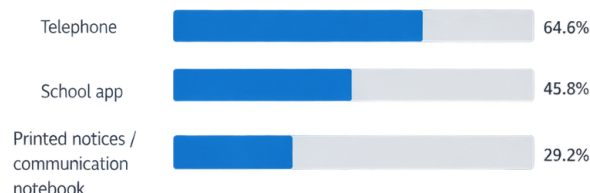


Figure 7. *School Communication Channels*

Multiple responses

Note: "Telephone" refers to oral communication by phone.



4.2 Qualitative Analysis of the Open-ended Responses

The qualitative analysis of the open-ended responses examined how parents interpret and navigate school communication practices, rather than viewing accessibility simply as the availability of translated information. In particular, the analysis focused on the linguistic, technological, and institutional expectations embedded in school communication. Three major themes emerged from the analysis. The first indicates that challenges in school communication extend beyond Japanese language proficiency. The second examines how digital communication can improve access but does not always ensure accessibility. The third highlights parents' own strategies and support networks.

The first theme indicates that challenges in school communication extend beyond Japanese language proficiency. Several parents reported difficulties with written communication, particularly when school documents contained a large amount of kanji. For example, one parent explained, "Seeing everything in kanji can cause headache. I have to use a translator app all the time. The sea of kanji can just be a strain to the eyes because of its unfamiliarity" (English language response).

This comment is significant because the parent was not simply indicating an inability to read Japanese. Rather, the response highlights the cognitive burden of processing unfamiliar

written information. Thus, accessibility is not only a matter of whether information is translated, but also whether parents can comfortably process, interpret, and act on that information.

Another parent reported difficulties understanding test score reports, evaluations, and graphs related to high school entrance examinations. In this case, the challenge involved more than understanding the Japanese text itself. The parents also needed to understand the Japanese educational system and the meanings underlying these documents. This suggests that school communication often contains institutional knowledge that may remain implicit for families who are new to the Japanese school system.

The second theme concerns the role of digital communication. Overall, many parents expressed positive views toward school apps. Digital communication provides several advantages: parents can reread messages, use translation tools, and process information at their own pace. For example, one parent described the advantages of app-based communication, noting, “I find communication through the app very suitable for foreigners like me. I can use a dictionary to write or choose words. When communicating by phone, there are many times when I cannot clearly express what I want to say” (Vietnamese language response).

This response demonstrates how digital communication can reduce the pressure of immediate spoken interaction. Unlike phone communication, which requires parents to respond in real time, digital platforms allow parents time for reflection, translation, and clarification. In this sense, digital communication can enhance accessibility by giving parents greater control over how they receive, interpret, and respond to school information. However, the findings also show that digitalization does not automatically create accessibility.

Several parents mentioned limitations of current school apps. For example, one parent noted that the translation function was available but had poor formatting, while others requested more multilingual options. More importantly, one parent emphasized that “support should not be limited to language alone, but should also help with understanding context and culture” (Indonesian language response). This comment points to a central finding of the study: *translation can make words accessible, but it does not necessarily make school communication understandable*. Parents may still need to understand why certain information is being provided, what is expected of them, and what action they are expected to take.

The need for human support alongside digital communication was also reflected in the experiences of the language supporters. This is just an example that they described on what they have been doing whenever needed, even though such support is not included in their definition by MEXT (2026b). They described their efforts to prevent negative impacts on children’s school experiences, such as children not having lunch due to miscommunication, and to reduce the additional burden on teachers, who may need to arrange lunch for children who did not bring one. This suggests that accessibility involves not only accessing or translating information, but also understanding what is important, what requires action, and when.

The third theme concerns parents’ agency and the ways in which they actively create and utilize support networks. When parents encountered difficulties, they did not rely on a single source of support. Instead, they employed multiple strategies, including asking their children, family members, teachers, translation tools, Japanese language classes, community volunteers, and other parents.

This demonstrates that parents are not passive recipients of support but actively develop strategies to navigate school communication. At the same time, some responses reveal the limitations of relying on informal support networks. For example, one parent mentioned difficulties when the only other parent they could contact did not know the answer, did not

respond, or had moved away. This suggests that while community-based support is valuable, it does not always provide reliable or sustainable access to information.

5. Discussion and Conclusion

5.1 Limitations of School Apps

The findings and the language supporters' experiences illustrate a communication gap between schools and linguistically diverse families. From the perspective of accessibility, the figure shows that school apps alone cannot eliminate all barriers to communication. While apps can make information easier to access, they do not necessarily address linguistic needs, institutional knowledge, or information design.

Both educational institutions and parents with diverse linguistic and educational experiences share a common goal: effective communication. The parents' responses demonstrate a clear desire to understand school information and support their children. Thus, the issue is not a lack of willingness to engage. Rather, there are several layers between a message sent by a school and a parent's ability to understand and act on that message.

Digital communication and school apps can help bridge some of these gaps. As the parents' narratives showed, apps allow parents to reread messages, use translation tools, and communicate without the pressure of responding immediately by phone. Digitalization can therefore improve access. However, access does not automatically mean accessibility.

An app can make a message easier to receive or translate, but it cannot necessarily explain why the information matters, what the school expects parents to do, or how a particular school practice should be understood. Our findings suggest three important barriers that remain.

First, tacit knowledge and cultural assumptions (Inouchi & Ide, 2020) can make school communication difficult to interpret. Schools often communicate based on knowledge that is taken for granted, such as school rules, expected parental behaviors, or how families are expected to respond to particular situations.

Second, insufficient linguistic resources (Inouchi & Ide, 2020) can remain a barrier even when information is translated. Parents may still encounter unfamiliar terminology, kanji, or educational concepts that require additional explanation.

Third, information design (Inouchi & Ide, 2020) can affect accessibility. Parents may receive a large volume of information without knowing which messages are most important, which require action, or which are urgent. This is where the experiences of the language supporters become particularly important. Their role demonstrates that accessibility involves not only how information is delivered, but also how its relevance, urgency, and required actions are communicated.

Based on these findings, *accessibility* can be conceptualized as involving three interconnected processes: *accessing information, interpreting its meaning and context, and being able to respond to it.*

5.2 Japanese Language Teaching Supporters and Home Language Supporters

The findings also highlight the important role of language supporters and community-based support. These individuals can serve as mediators between schools and families, with roles that extend beyond language translation. In many cases, parents rely on human support to understand, interpret, and navigate school information. Language supporters can make implicit expectations more visible, explain relevant contexts, and help parents determine what actions are required. At the same time, the findings suggest that accessibility cannot depend solely on

individual supporters or informal support networks. Relying only on such support is not sustainable, as parents may not always have access to sufficient or consistent assistance. This highlights the need for more systematic and sustainable support structures.

Insufficient support may also contribute to what we describe as “giving up on communication,” or “perpetual resignation” (Inouchi & Ide, 2020). When parents repeatedly encounter messages that they cannot fully understand or do not know how to respond to, they may gradually disengage from school communication. This suggests that accessibility is not solely an individual concern but also an institutional responsibility.

Overall, the findings indicate that the challenges faced by linguistically diverse families are not simply problems of language proficiency or access to technology. Rather, parents navigate communication systems that contain implicit institutional expectations, culturally specific knowledge, and assumptions about how families interact with schools.

Improving the accessibility of school communication therefore requires moving beyond translation and technological solutions alone. It requires collaboration among schools, language supporters, and local communities to develop communication practices that enable linguistically diverse families to understand information, participate in school-related activities, and respond to institutional expectations.

5.3 Implications for Accessible School Communication

The findings suggest three implications for improving the accessibility of school communication. First, translation needs to be combined with human support. Digital translation tools can help parents access information more quickly and independently. However, translation alone cannot always convey the context, expectations, or meanings underlying school communication. Human support remains important when parents need to ask questions, clarify information, or understand unfamiliar school practices, which is actually helpful for creating and developing parents community.

Second, schools need to make expectations more explicit. Effective communication should convey not only what parents need to know, but also what is expected of them, when action is required, and why. This requires making the institutional knowledge that is often taken for granted more visible and accessible to linguistically diverse families.

Third, the voices of parents and linguistically diverse users should be incorporated into the design of school communication. Parents should have opportunities not only to receive information, but also to ask questions, express their needs, and identify aspects of communication that are difficult to understand. Their experiences can inform the design and improvement of communication practices.

Thus, rather than asking only, “How can we make information available to parents?” it is also necessary to ask, “How can we create communication practices that enable parents to understand and respond to information more easily?” Previous research has explored approaches to making school communication more accessible, including the use of visual information and direct reference to relevant images or symbols (see Ogura et. al., 2023). Such approaches suggest that accessibility can be enhanced not only through translation, but also through more inclusive information design.

Ultimately, accessibility cannot be achieved through translation tools or digital applications alone. It requires an ongoing process of listening to families, reflecting on their experiences, and adapting communication practices to better meet the needs of families and schools.

6. Conclusion

This study is a preliminary case study conducted in Toyonaka City, Osaka Prefecture, and the findings cannot be generalized. However, the study is important because it shows that it is not enough simply to provide information to parents.

It is also necessary to support parents so that they can understand the information and take the actions needed for their children's school lives. In this sense, *access to information does not necessarily mean accessibility*.

The study prepared an Easy Japanese version and several multilingual versions of the questionnaire. However, only one participant chose the Easy Japanese version. At the same time, some open-ended responses suggested that electronic materials are easier to use with translation tools and generative AI than paper-based materials. These findings suggest that the variety of languages and the choice of format should be considered together when designing accessible school communication. Future research should include interviews with Japanese language teaching supporters and home language supporters, as well as participant observation, to examine how they support parents by helping them understand the school context and to explore their professional roles. It is also necessary to investigate more systematically how different formats of information affect parents' understanding and their ability to respond to school-related matters.

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