

A corpus-based pilot study on the representation of immigration in the Japan English-language press (2025)

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Abstract

The declining birthrate in Japan has led to a significant decrease in the country's working age population, resulting in an apparent shift in the government's immigration policies and a sudden rise in the number of immigrants, who make up approximately 3.5% of the total workforce (Shimai & Yamazaki, 2026). There is currently limited research in English into immigration in the Japanese press, particularly corpus-based studies (Cheng & Fraser, 2022; Mitsui & Green, 2024; Murase, 2025). In this poster presentation, I outline a corpus-based pilot study that investigates how Japan English-language newspapers represent immigration. I provide details on Immigration in the Japan English-language Press (IJELP), an original corpus of 180 articles from five Japanese national newspapers (123,406 tokens) in 2025. I also outline the mixed-methods approach I take which includes a keywords analysis, collocations study and a qualitative concordance analysis. These methods can help highlight the prominent issues and events dominating Japan press immigration discourse and how they are represented. Provisional results suggest that the Japanese press typically cover immigration from an economic perspective with less focus on the social implications. Finally, I consider the study limitations and design improvements needed to produce a more rigorous investigation into the issue.

Keywords: immigration, keywords, press discourse

1. Introduction

Several developed countries across the globe are experiencing population decline alongside falling birth rates, with the situation particularly acute in East Asia. In Japan, for the first time in over four decades, the number of Japanese citizens fell to below 120 million in 2025, with the foreign population increasing by almost 10% to just over 4 million (Japan Times, 2026). Age demographics have also significantly changed, with 30% now aged 65 and over and the proportion of 15–64-year-olds has declined from as high as 70% in 1991 to 58.8% in 2025 (Statista, 2026). This has coincided with a fall in the fertility rate, which has been below 2.00 since 1976 and currently stands at 1.39 (Macrotrends, 2026). There is now serious pressure on the labour supply, and the government has responded by accepting an increasing number of foreign workers into the country. A sudden rise in immigrants has perhaps inevitably led to a backlash from certain groups in Japanese society. In particular, the Upper House election in July 2025 saw the right-wing anti-immigration political group Sanseito gain 14 seats (Asahi Shimbun, 2025). The Japanese government has reacted by announcing various immigration policies which appear an attempt to appease dissenting voices, such as an increase in the capital requirement for the business manager visa and higher visa and permanent residency application fees (Semans, 2025; Speed, 2025).

This altered (and ever changing) environment means there is a pressing need to understand how the Japanese press represent the issue of immigration to their readers. I am especially interested in the manner in which Japanese newspapers report on the subject to their international readership through their English-language website articles. These articles will mostly be of interest to keen Japan observers in foreign countries, as well as English-speaking foreigners resident in the country. In this paper, I outline a pilot study that utilizes corpus methods in a mixed-methods study applying keyword analysis, collocation analysis, and a qualitative study of concordances. For this investigation, a

123,406-token corpus of Japan English-language newspaper articles was created and analyzed through the online corpus software *Sketch Engine* (Kilgarriff et al., 2014). The study attempts to answer two key research questions. First, I look at the corpus as a whole and consider how immigration is presented generally by studying the top 100 keywords and collocates of the top 10. I then conduct a comparative keyword study, comparing each newspaper against the others in the corpus, to see if keywords can shed light on whether a publication reports on immigration in a significantly different manner to the others. To conclude, I outline the study limitations and consider potential improvements to be made in an extension of the investigation.

In the next section, I offer a brief background of some previous studies into the representation of immigration in both international and Japan-based newspapers.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Immigration in the global press

A wide range of literature has reported on media representations of immigration, particularly in the newspaper media (e.g., Blinder & Allen, 2016; Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008; KhosraniNik et al., 2012; Taylor, 2014). Some studies have utilized corpora to collect empirical data and conducted analysis through both quantitative and qualitative methods. KhosraniNik et al. (2012) investigated how refugees, asylum seekers, and immigrants (RASIM) were represented in the UK press between 1996 and 2006. Applying the Discourse-Historical Approach (Wodak, 2021), they discovered that right-leaning newspapers tended to background and dehumanize RASIM through the strategies of using numbers and “us” vs. “them” categorization. The more liberal *The Guardian* newspaper utilizes the topoi of humanitarianism and justice to humanize migrants, yet the authors argue this may be less of a positive representation of migrants and more a form of “victimisation”. Taylor (2014) also investigated press coverage of RASIM in a cross-linguistic corpus-assisted discourse analysis comparing British and Italian

newspapers. McEnery’s (2005) moral panic framework was used to examine how different nationalities were represented and it was found that asylum seekers were typically foregrounded in UK broadsheets and Italian national newspapers. Additionally, negative representations can be seen where a spotlight was shone on migrants being removed from the country in question. In a study of immigration in a 43-million-word corpus of UK national newspapers (2010–2012), Blinder and Allen (2016) found that *illegal* frequently modified *immigrants* and *failed* typically preceded *asylum seekers*. Furthermore, water-related metaphors such as *influx* and *wave* feature in discussions on immigration, suggesting a dangerous, uncontrollable action and which functions to frame the issue in a negative light.

2.2 Immigration in the Japanese press

Previous research has looked at representations of immigration in the Japanese press, in both Japanese and English-language news articles (Cheng & Fraser, 2022; Mitsui & Green, 2024; Murase, 2025). In Murase (2025), a corpus of nearly 2000 Japanese articles on immigration and foreigners from two time periods (1987–1990 and 2016–2019) was examined for evidence of any impact legal discourse may have on media framing of immigration issues. Results found the former had a limited effect on media reporting. Also, while there was some negative framing of immigrants in connection with crime and policing, the most recent article dataset displayed a rise of statistical significance in positive themes surrounding foreigners in Japan (such as multiculturalism and economic contribution) when compared to the earlier period. Cheng and Fraser (2022) conducted a study on the representations of refugees in over 3000 Japanese newspaper articles from 1985 to 2017. Through a deductive frame analysis, the authors investigated the discourse surrounding refugees originating from three countries; Myanmar, Syria and Turkey. They found a larger number of sympathetic frames across all the newspapers and a difference in political leanings as there was greater (and more sympathetic) coverage of refugees in the left-leaning newspapers compared with the right-leaning publications. Mitsui and Green (2024) also performed a deductive frame analysis with 312 Japan English-language press articles on Afghan, Burmese and Ukrainian asylum seekers. As with Cheng and Fraser (2022), they found a significantly higher number of positive frames applied in the corpus. In addition, the authors discovered that left-leaning newspapers were more sympathetic towards refugees but right-leaning publications featured stories on refugees and asylum seekers more frequently. Finally, there was evidence that Ukrainians were represented more favourably than the other two groups, potentially because of their official labelling as “evacuees” and their political values being similar to Japanese values.

3. Methodology

This pilot study was designed to answer two key research questions:

RQ1. What are the keywords in Japan English-language press articles in 2025 on the topic of immigration and do they display a particularly positive or negative framing of the issue?

RQ2. Are there any key differences in how each newspaper in the corpus represents immigration?

To help answer these questions, I designed an original corpus of English-language press articles taken from the websites of five major Japanese newspapers; The Asahi Shimbun, The Japan News (Yomiuri Shimbun), The Japan Times, The Mainichi, and Nikkei Asia (from here on in referred to as Asahi, Japan News, Japan Times, Mainichi, and Nikkei). The corpus consists of 180 articles (123,406 tokens) and is known as IJELP (Immigration in the Japan English-language Press).

First, I conducted a systematic article search through the Google search engine. Using the Advanced Search function, I requested that all articles feature *Japan* and that each article should include at least one of the following words: *immigration*, *immigrant*, *immigrants*, *foreign residence*, *foreign residency*, *foreign resident*, *foreign residents*. I restricted the date to each of the twelve months for every newspaper search in an attempt for balance and to avoid major political or cultural events from dominating the corpus data. In most cases, I was able to source three articles per month for each newspaper to achieve a balance in texts per newspaper and per calendar month.

After the articles were collected, the next step was to compile a corpus using the online software tool *Sketch Engine* (Kilgariff et al., 2014). Table 1 presents a basic overview of the corpus.

Newspaper	Files	Tokens	Average tokens
Asahi	36	27,944	776
Japan News	36	20,464	568
Japan Times	36	24,942	693
Mainichi	36	25,402	706
Nikkei	36	24,654	685
Total	180	123,406	686

Table 1: The IJELP corpus

For the keywords extraction, I created a reference sub-corpus of the *English Broadsheet Newspapers 1993–2021* (SiBol) corpus. This was chosen as the genre aligns with the IJELP corpus and the corpus is preloaded onto the corpus tool. In an attempt for some consistency, the sub-corpus only consists of articles containing the words *immigration* or *immigrants* from British newspapers in 2021, the most recent date available. I subsequently conducted a keywords search between the IJELP corpus (target corpus) and the SiBol sub-corpus (reference corpus). Settings included a minimum raw frequency of five and a minimum document frequency of three to prevent rare or idiosyncratic words from appearing in the list.

Sketch Engine arranges keywords in order of keyness score, which is calculated through the simple math

method. When selecting the keywords for analysis, I decided to select the top 100 keywords in the list rather than an arbitrary cut-off score. In the initial extraction, over half (53%) of the keywords included proper nouns related to Japanese political actors, groups, organizations and places. To avoid skewing the data, these were removed and a new list created, after which I placed the newly-compiled 100 keywords into broad semantic categories.

To examine the data in more detail, I chose the top 10 keywords and then their collocates were investigated for analysis. For each keyword, I conducted a collocation search within a span of five words either side, with the collocate requiring a minimum frequency of three in the corpus and two in the selected range. Finally, I studied the concordance lines for the collocates (ranked by LogDice score) to try to determine pertinent immigration-related topics and whether there were any particularly positive or negative framings. Symbols such as currency signs or parentheses were discarded from the final analysis, as well as grammatical words.

The second research question is concerned with whether any individual newspaper in the corpus represents immigration in a significantly different manner. To investigate this, I conducted a keyword analysis for each newspaper, with the publication in question being compared to all the other newspapers in the corpus. A minimum raw frequency of three was set for the target corpus, as well as a minimum document frequency of three. After downloading the keywords list, I manually discarded all keywords that appeared in fewer than three documents, significantly reducing the final dataset, until I had a top 10 list of keywords for each sub-corpus. I subsequently examined the concordance lines of some of the relevant words in the list to attempt to uncover any dominant themes in each newspaper publication.

4. Provisional Results

4.1 Keywords

As briefly mentioned in the preceding section, an initial keywords extraction was dominated by Japanese political actors and groups (20%), as well as organizations and place names (33%). Notable keywords include current Japan Prime Minister Sanae (9th) Takaichi (1st), former Minister of Justice Keisuke (19th) Suzuki (6th), the right-wing political party Sanseito (2nd) and the LDP (14th), the Liberal Democratic Party who have mostly been in power since 1955. It is to be expected that Japanese proper nouns would feature heavily in a list being compared to British press articles. Therefore, these words were removed from the final list. Table 2 shows the semantic groupings of the top 100 keywords, with only the 20 highest-ranking words being displayed due to space limitations. The ranking for each word is given in parentheses.

Semantic Groups	Keywords	Total
Administration	prefectural(3), prefecture(9), naturalization(14), ordinance(19), reentry(20)	28
Nationality	non-japanese(1), japanese(6), foreigner(10), kurd(13), nepali(16)	12
Society	coexistence(4)	11
Work	specified(5), trainee(7), intern(8)	11
Finance	yen(2), nonpayment(17), premium(18)	8
People	nonresident(12)	7
Travel	overtourism(15)	6
Language	proficiency(11)	4
Other		4
Numbers		3
Education		2
Discrimination		2
Industry		2
		100

Table 2: Semantic groups of the top 100 keywords

The table shows that nearly two thirds of the total keywords (62%) consist of terms related to administration, nationality, society, and work. Other prominent keywords are related to finance, people, and travel, although these make up only 21%.

The top 20 keywords list does not feature any outwardly negative terms, other than perhaps *overtourism* (10 instances in nine articles; 10 in 9), which is obviously a side issue somewhat connected to immigration yet not a central component. Examining the complete top 100 list, the following keywords may be considered terms with negative connotations: *friction* (22), *dissatisfaction* (63), *unfairness* (72), *xenophobia* (68), and *preferential* (75). A concordance analysis of *friction* (22 in 14) reveals that it predominantly refers to friction between Japanese citizens and foreign residents. The other four words are ranked much lower so are less pertinent keywords, however a quick search highlights that they do not typically relate to actual instances of preferential treatment or xenophobia towards foreigners, for instance, but rather the perception of certain individuals or public figures denying that such actions occur.

It would now be useful to study the top keywords and analyze their collocates for any potentially revealing patterns. Table 3 presents the top ten keywords and their top five lexical collocates, ranked by LogDice score.

Rank	Keyword	Collocates
1	<i>non-japanese</i>	students connect wanted prefecture residents
2	<i>yen</i>	billion million weak 10,000 yen
3	<i>prefectural</i>	division authorities Government Chiba government
4	<i>coexistence</i>	multicultural harmonious well-ordered society realized
5	<i>specified</i>	skilled worker status visa skills
6	<i>japanese</i>	language nationals people society companies
7	<i>trainee</i>	technical intern replace companies specified
8	<i>intern</i>	Technical trainees Training replace Program
9	<i>prefecture</i>	Saitama Gunma Chiba Tokyo Ibaraki
10	<i>foreigner</i>	number Japan policies Japanese society

Table 3: Collocates of the top 10 keywords

Space limitations prevent a detailed analysis of all the collocates, therefore I will discuss the general results and select some words of particular interest.

To begin, Table 3 highlights that the Japan English-language press places a fair amount of emphasis on immigrants in relation to work and study. In particular, words connected to the ‘Technical Intern Training Program’, which began in 1993, and the ‘Specified Skilled Worker’ visa program introduced in 2018, appear prominently in

this list. Newspapers frequently refer to numbers in their reporting and in this corpus, several articles discuss the economic impact of the weak valuation of the yen, in addition to scholarships for international students and the increase in visa and permanent residency fees. The phrase *number of foreigners* (27 in 21) relates to various topics, with a minority displaying a negative stance on the recent steep increase in Japan’s foreign population.

An ostensibly positive word high up the list is *coexistence* (43 in 26), with numerous instances of ‘society of coexistence’ and ‘multicultural coexistence’ in the corpus. A reading of the concordances including all five key collocates highlights that there are a small number of cases in which there is a negative framing, as can be seen in the following corpus extracts:

The formation of the administration body comes after a group of lawmakers in Prime Minister Shigeru Ishiba’s Liberal Democratic Party in June proposed measures to realize a “society of orderly and harmonious **coexistence** with foreign nationals.” Those measures included adopting stricter requirements for foreigners switching to a Japanese driver’s license and for buying real estate properties. (doc#27)

...said the government will “stand firm” in responding to “illegal activities or deviations from the rules by a subset of foreign nationals in Japan”. She created the new position, formally titled “minister in charge of a society of well-ordered and harmonious **coexistence** with foreign nationals.” (doc#111)

Prime Minister Sanae Takaichi instructed relevant ministers on Nov. 4 to promote measures preventing illegal activities by foreign nationals in order to realize a society of orderly and harmonious **coexistence** with them. (doc#147)

The current Prime Minister Takaichi has made a new ministerial position that appears to essentially be an ‘Immigration Minister’ in all but name. What is interesting about the government messaging in the three instances above is that the onus appears to be on ‘foreign nationals’ to behave appropriately in order to ensure a ‘harmonious coexistence’ with Japanese citizens, as opposed to Japanese people needing to alter their behaviour or attitudes to live harmoniously with immigrants. These instances are relatively infrequent, however they are worth highlighting, especially when related to government policy.

Overall, these keywords show some evidence that when reporting on immigration, the Japan English-language press tend to focus on labour-related matters such as visas and internships, viewing the topic primarily from an economic perspective. They typically refrain from displaying any outward hostility, but a number of articles do deal with problematic political and societal issues which have arisen due to the increase in immigrants.

4.2 Comparative study of newspapers

This sub-section presents the results regarding RQ2, which asks whether there are any significant differences in how each newspaper in the corpus presents the issue of immigration.

Firstly, I present Table 4, which shows the 10 highest-ranked keywords for each newspaper when compared to the remaining publications in the corpus.

Asahi	Japan News	Japan Times
percent	valuable	nonresident
novel	capability	departure
resonate	countermeasure	extension
careful	inclusive	lift
corresponding	vice	repeat
youtube	earthquake	legitimate
homeland	cooperate	wednesday
uphold	constitutional	naturalize
injury	council	track
relative	disclose	maintenance
Mainichi	Nikkei	
atmosphere	scheme	
entirely	seasonal	
reply	bangladesh	
delay	dub	
smile	scrutiny	
challenging	engineering	
arrange	indian	
bit	maker	
thought	transport	
furthermore	malaysia	

Table 4: Top 10 comparative keywords

What initially stands out is that the Nikkei sub-corpus predominantly features words related to business and industry. This is not particularly surprising as the Nikkei is a Japanese publication that primarily reports on Asian economies and businesses therefore articles related to immigration written from this perspective are to be expected. A study of the concordances reveals that *scheme* refers to such issues as a new foreign intern training scheme being introduced in 2027, as well as a specific case where 22 Pakistanis attempted to illegally enter Japan claiming to be members of a soccer team. *Scrutiny* relates to rule-breaking foreigners and farmland ownership by non-Japanese. Also of note is that *bangladesh* and *indian* typically appear in articles reporting an increase in workers from Bangladesh and a drive to boost Indian students and workers coming to Japan. Japan News has several keywords that display both positive and negative framings of foreigners and immigrants. *Valuable* appears only 3 times in the sub-corpus but positively refers to foreign workers in each instance, and *inclusive* typically relates to immigrants living peacefully within Japanese society. However, *disclose* is often used in relation to foreign real estate purchasers needing to confirm their nationality with authorities. This is a government response to public discomfort at a rise in Japanese land ownership by foreign nationals. While one's nationality does not preclude one from purchasing land in Japan, there is a possible implication here that foreign ownership of Japanese land is sub-optimal and this adds to the negative press coverage in some articles.

Asahi's top keyword *percent* suggests that this newspaper has a focus on statistics when reporting on immigration. The word appears 116 times in 21 articles and relates to survey respondents, voters, foreign nationals and others. It may appear that, among English-language newspapers in Japan, Asahi has a preference for reporting data. However, a closer look at the corpus reveals that this may be dependent on an editorial style choice as other newspapers almost always display a preference for using the % symbol when giving percentages (347 in 82).

In Mainichi, *atmosphere* is used to talk about (relaxed) Japanese society, the workplace and in one instance, exclusion. Also, there are two instances of *delay* which refer to delayed discussions and support in relation to foreigners integrating into their local communities. Finally, in Japan Times, *departure* typically relates to the raising of taxes and fees for travellers leaving the country, *extension* to visa and residence status, and *naturalize* to foreigners becoming Japanese citizens. In the case of the latter, one article is a personal account by someone who gained Japanese citizenship while some other instances refer to racial profiling and potential status revocation for rule or law violations.

To summarize, it is difficult to spot any major differences between the newspaper publications from keyword and concordance analyses alone. For practical purposes, the keyword analysis was restricted to the top 10 lexical keywords in each sub-corpus. All newspapers tend to report on similar topics such as visa issues and social integration. The Nikkei does stand out as predominantly representing immigration from an economic and labour point of view, as mentioned earlier, and the framing tends to be quite positive.

In the next section, I discuss how these provisional results might be compared to the findings in previous research related to immigration in the press.

5. Discussion

The provisional study results outlined above provide useful insights in which some tentative claims can be made about how the topic of immigration is represented by the Japan English-language press. First and foremost, the keywords show signs that overall, the newspapers tend to report on administrative and financial matters such as visa fee changes and the specified skilled worker program. These findings may be in line with Murase (2025) and the positive framing of immigrants regarding their economic contribution to Japanese society. However, a differing perspective would be that of KhosraviNik et al. (2012), who give a negative interpretation of the newspapers valuing immigrants for their function as economic assets as opposed to human beings who can offer a social and cultural contribution to their new home. I believe that in the case of the IJELP corpus, the reality may lie somewhere in the middle. National newspapers will report on what is newsworthy and relevant to an (inter)national audience so it is likely there will be a tendency for articles to discuss immigration in connection with political and economic issues that could affect society at large. This may consequently dehumanize immigrants to the reader, yet little evidence was found of overt negativity expressed towards immigration or immigrants in the IJELP corpus. Japan English-language newspapers are seemingly more conservative in their writing style compared to British newspapers, for instance, and there was a lack of alarmist

or sensationalist language in the data. Despite this, as in Blinder & Allen (2016), there are some instances of water-based metaphors being used to describe foreigners entering Japan, such as *influx* and *flood*, but these are few and far between and do not appear in the keyword or collocation lists.

One final point to make is that this pilot study has investigated press representations of immigration in general whereas other studies have also examined asylum seekers and/or refugees (Cheng & Fraser, 2022; Gabrielatos & Baker, 2008; Mitsui & Green, 2024). In the IJELP, *asylum* appears only 8 times and *refugee(s)* 113 times, and both do not feature in the top 100 keywords list. This may be because Japan has fewer applicants than some European countries and in 2025 the government recognized a mere 183 refugees out of just under 15,000 applications (Immigration Services Agency, 2026). This means that this issue is less likely to be at the forefront of the public mind and subsequently press coverage will be less widespread on the subject, unlike in the case of the U.K and the British press. Including *asylum* and *refugee* to the search words when collecting the corpus data may produce more emotive keywords that offer a different perspective.

6. Conclusion

In this paper, I have reported on a pilot study that has investigated how the issue of immigration is represented in the Japan English-language press in 2025. A roughly 120,000-token corpus of newspaper articles was created for this purpose, and the data were examined through keyword and collocational analyses. Provisional results reveal that immigrants tended to be written about as primarily economic assets, with several keywords related to administrative, financial and work-related matters. Although some keywords did focus on immigrants as social beings, closer inspection showed some evidence of negative framing as the onus appeared to be on the foreigner needing to understand Japanese cultural norms for social cohesion to take place. Regardless, Japan English-language newspapers appear to take a cautious, conservative approach when reporting on immigration, and there were few instances of outright negativity towards immigrants.

This study has a number of limitations and there are design improvements to be made to ensure the development of a future investigation that can offer more detailed insights. Firstly, I intend to expand the corpus size to gather a greater amount of data over an 18-month period from January 2025 to July 2026. I will also consider adding a further media publication, Japan Forward, the English-language news website of The Sankei Shimbun, a popular right-wing daily newspaper. This will expand the number of newspaper publications to six, as well as including another right-leaning perspective to the dataset which could potentially alter the results.

Furthermore, I will consider aspects of the research methodology that can be improved upon. For the keywords analysis, it may be more effective to use a general British newspaper corpus as the reference corpus instead of one exclusively made up of articles on immigration. This likely had an impact on the positive keywords extracted and it might have resulted in missing other frequent words connected to immigration that require further inspection. Finally, much

of this analysis has relied on my own intuition so to avoid researcher bias, it would be pertinent to utilize a semantic tagger such as Wmatrix (Rayson, 2008) for the semantic analysis of the keywords. This could produce different outcomes that can help shine a spotlight on the topic of immigration in the Japan English-language press.

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