

**Tourism English – An Assessment of Teaching Materials of  
Relevance for Training Regional Tour Guide Interpreters**

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## 研究論文

# Tourism English – An Assessment of Teaching Materials of Relevance for Training Regional Tour Guide Interpreters

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## 1. Introduction

In 2019, Sakata City started a licence program for regional tour guide interpreters for the Northern Shonai region in Yamagata Prefecture. Sakata City set up this program as a way of helping facilitate in-bound tourism. Before the Covid pandemic, cruise ships from different countries visited Sakata, providing revenue for the city. The cruise ships stopped coming from 2020-2022, but the visits restarted in 2023. The author, who qualified as a regional tour guide interpreter on the above program, is an Associate Professor at Tohoku University of Community Service and Science, which is a small, private university founded in 2001 with the aid of local municipalities. As such it has strong links with the local communities. As of April 2023, there are 6 courses for students, including Tourism & Development course, and International Liberal Arts (ILA) course. Of the students on the ILA course, the majority study English as a foreign language, and the aim of some students is to find a job using English when they graduate. The aim of this paper is to examine the requirements for becoming a regional tour guide interpreter and look at ways in which university students can work towards achieving this qualification. This paper will review the literature to see what Tourism English programs have been created at other Japanese universities and how Tourism English textbooks cover language appropriate to tour guiding.

## 2. Tour guide interpreter program

In Japan, as in many countries, tourism is an important industry which generates

significant revenue for the country. According to Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO, 2021), Japan earned about 46.1 billion USD from inbound tourism in 2019, and the travel and tourism sector contributed 359 billion USD to Japan's GDP, making it the world's third-largest market in this area after the United States and China. The number of visitors to Japan is expected to grow in future, especially with the Expo 2025 to be held in Osaka. In a recent survey of overseas travellers, "Japan ranked first in Asia and second in Europe, America, and Australia as a potential travel destination post-corona" (JETRO, 2021, p. 1). A successful tourism industry requires not just infrastructure and facilities but also services, including tour guides. Japanese is taught as a foreign language in a number of institutions worldwide, but the total number of Japanese language learners is estimated to be less than 4 million (Japan Foundation, 2018). Because of this, there is a clear need for tour guides who can interpret between Japanese and the native language of the tourists visiting Japan.

In 1947, Japan established a licensed interpreter-guide system under which all people who wished to be paid for guiding foreign tourists had to pass written and oral exams in order to receive a tour guide interpreter licence from the government (Mainichi Japan, 2017). Although this system has since been deregulated (see below), the national tour guide-interpreter licences are still available. Applicants for the national licence can select one or two of the following languages: English, French, Spanish, German, Chinese, Italian, Portuguese, Russian, Korean or Thai. They must pass written tests in the chosen language(s), as well as in Japanese geography, Japanese history, general knowledge of industry, economics, politics and culture, and working as a tour guide-interpreter (Japan National Tourism Organization (JNTO), 2022). They must also pass an oral exam and a practical test of tour guide-interpreter skills (Japan Tourism Agency (JTA), 2017). Only about 20% of applicants pass the licence test (Mainichi Japan, 2017).

As well as National Tour Guide-Interpreters, Japan also has a licence system for Regional Licensed Guide Interpreters who have been approved by prefectures or municipalities for tour guide work in specific areas (Hakotani, 2022). Regional Licensed Guide Interpreters "are those who are familiar with regional information such as the history, geography and culture in a specific area, and have been registered as "Regional

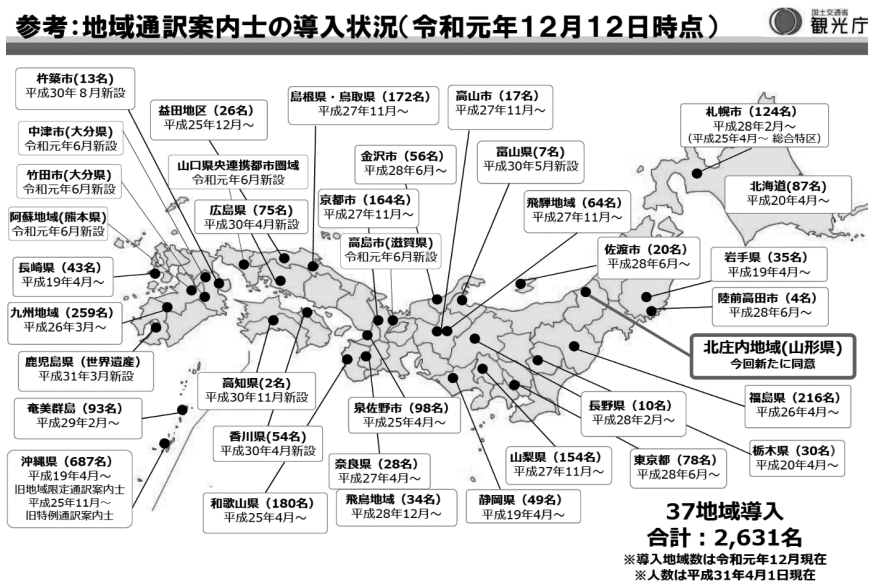
Licensed Guide Interpreters” through attending training conducted by local municipalities” (JTA, n.d.). As of April 2021, “there were around 26,000 guides with national licenses, and about 3,600 regionally licensed ones in 40 areas” (Hakotani, 2022). The system for application and testing depends on the region or municipality, and not all municipalities offer the licence. As Figure 1 shows, as of December 12, 2019, only 37 areas offered a regional licence course and only 2,631 people held a regional licence (JTA, 2019).

Since January 4, 2018, however, under the terms of the Revised Licensed Guide Interpreters Act, “even those without qualifications can provide tourist information in a foreign language for a fee” (JTA, n.d.). The main reason for the deregulation was the lack of qualified tour guides compared to the increasing number of foreign tourists. According to Mainichi Japan (2017), the number of inbound tourists exceeded 10 million for the first time in 2013, but by 2016 that number had more than doubled, to 24 million. The Japan Tourism Agency’s aim is for this figure to reach 60 million by 2030 (Inbound Tourism Guide Association, 2020, p. 14). Limiting the work of tour guides to only those with a national licence therefore became impractical.

A further issue is the lack of qualified regional tour guide interpreters. In 2019, there were only about 2600 licensed regional tour guide interpreters, and about 75% of national tour guide interpreters were based in big cities like Tokyo or Osaka (Inbound Tourism Guide Association, 2020). However, recent trends in inbound tourism show that tourists are increasingly moving away from group tours to individual trips (up from about 60% in 2013 to about 80% in 2018), and are visiting regional areas in preference to big cities. The reasons are due to the changing needs of recent visitors, whose aims in visiting Japan include going shopping, eating Japanese food, seeing nature, experiencing Japanese daily life, and trying skiing or snowboarding (Inbound Tourism Guide Association, 2020, p. 15).

Figure 1

Regional Tour Guide Interpreters situation (as of December 12, 2019). Source: JTA (2019).



### 3. Northern Shonai

#### 3.1 Northern Shonai Regional Tour Guide-interpreter course

From January to March, 2020, a Regional Tour Guide-interpreter (English) course was run in Sakata City for the first time, under the title of 「北庄内地域通訳案内士養成講座」 [Northern Shonai Regional Tour Guide-interpreter course]. The course was established due to the need for more guides who can speak foreign languages to cope with the increase in the number of foreign visitors to Sakata in recent years (Sakata City, 2020). The course included guiding skills, English communication classes for non-native speakers of English, a first-aid course, local history and culture seminars, as well as practical tour guiding sessions. Course participants needed to have an English level of at least TOEIC 730 or Eiken Pre-First (if non-native speakers of English), or a Japanese level of at least JLPT (Japanese Language Proficiency Test) N2 (if non-native speakers

of Japanese). 27 people (including the author) attended the course, of whom 14 successfully attained the licence at the end of the course. Those who passed the course could then have their details displayed on the list of Northern Shonai Regional Tour Guide-interpreters on Sakata City's homepage (Sakata City, n.d.-b). This program was run in 2020, but was subsequently discontinued due to the Covid pandemic.

### **3.2 Northern Shonai region**

Although not a term which is commonly used in the region itself, for the purposes of the Tour Guide licence course, "Northern Shonai" was defined as the area in the north-west of Yamagata prefecture which comprises Sakata City, Yuza Town and Shonai Town (Sakata City, 2020). Sakata City is by far the largest of the 3 municipalities both in terms of population - 100,273 in 2020, compared to 20,157 in Shonai Town in 2022 and 13,130 in Yuza Town in 2021 - and area: 602.79 km<sup>2</sup>, compared to Shonai Town's 249.17 km<sup>2</sup> and Yuza Town's 208.39 km<sup>2</sup> (Sakata City, n.d.-a.; Sakata City, 2020; Shonai Town, 2015; Shonai Town, 2022; Yuza Town, 2022). The area is home to a number of tourist spots such as Mt. Chokai and Tobishima island (which together are designated as a Geopark), Mt. Gassan, Tamasudare waterfall, and the Sankyō Soko rice warehouses.

Although there is no bullet train line to the area, there is easy access from Shonai airport. From 2017 to 2019, many foreign visitors came to Sakata on cruise ships; these cruises were suspended in 2020 due to the Covid pandemic, but in April and November 2023, 6 visits of cruise ships, including the Diamond Princess, are scheduled to arrive in Sakata (Sakata Tourism, 2023). Some of the cruise ships can carry around 3000 passengers, and it is estimated that local shopkeepers double their usual trade when the cruise ships visit (Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport and Tourism, 2022). In 2018, the passengers of the Diamond Princess, which docked at Sakata, were able to take optional tours, which included trips to Mt Haguro, Kamo Aquarium, Honma Art Museum and the Domon Ken Museum. Those who did not choose to take an optional tour could take a shuttle bus to the centre of Sakata City where they received assistance from volunteer English-speaking guides including university and high school students (Sakata City, 2018).

### **3.3 Koeki University**

Tohoku University of Community Service and Science - hereafter referred to as “Koeki University” - is a private university whose main campus is located in Sakata City. It was established in 2001. As of May 1, 2020, there were 970 undergraduate students. All first- and second-year students must take compulsory foreign-language classes - at present, either English or Chinese. From their second year of studies, students can choose one of six courses: Business, Policy Management, Community Welfare, Tourism and Community Development, Media and Information Studies, and International Liberal Arts (Koeki University, n.d.). As of 2022, there were no classes specifically aimed at Tourism English.

The author is an Associate Professor on the International Liberal Arts course (hereafter referred to as “ILA course”) and teaches a Special Seminar - “Zemi” - course in English to a small number of 3rd- and 4th-year students each year. In this paper, the author’s aim is to answer the following research questions:

RQ1. What is Tourism English and how is it taught in universities in Japan?

RQ2. Can Tourism English classes help students become Regional Tour Guide Interpreters?

The author will try to answer these questions by conducting a literature review of papers concerning Tourism English courses at other Japanese universities, as well as an analysis of Tourism English textbooks and English for Tourism research.

## **4. Literature Review**

“Tourism English” or “English for Tourism” are terms used to describe English language classes whose subject matter is the broad genre of tourism. This can include language used by tourists - such as making hotel reservations, booking flight tickets, or going through immigration - as well as language used by people working in tourism, such as tour guides, travel agents or hotel staff. In an analysis of 42 general English textbooks which include content on tourism, Terauchi et al (2017) found that “tourism

language in textbooks is mostly from the tourists' perspective - engaging students as travelers - rather than from the perspective of the people who work in the tourism industry" (p. 120). This language included aspects such as describing features, providing details, describing locations, asking questions and answering questions, and the vocabulary contained a high frequency - relative to non-tourism content - of superlatives or words of extreme positivity; examples included "renowned", "remarkable", "spectacular", "finest" and "one of the world's great..." (p. 117). In general, however, the language used in the sections on Tourism English in these textbooks was not greatly different to the non-Tourism content, leading to the conclusion that "a general level of vocabulary suffices for most of essential tourism English" (p. 120).

#### **4.1 Tourism English courses**

The increase in the number of foreign visitors to Japan in recent years has led to a growth in the number of Japanese universities offering courses in Tourism and classes in Tourism English, aimed at students who want to work in the future for tourism companies or in local government concerning tourism, or who want to become tour guides (Yamauchi et al, 2009). Some universities have a dedicated tourism faculty, such as the Department of Global Tourism at Kyoto University of Foreign Studies, and there is even one Japanese university which includes "tourism" in its university name: Osaka University of Tourism (Times Higher Education, 2020). Hardy (2015), argues that Tourism English classes, which are taught to students aiming to work in tourism, should be classified as English for Specific Purposes (ESP), and should include tasks or projects in order to provide students with practical experience. Hardy's English for Tourism Projects (ETP) course - a 15-week, 1 semester course in spring 2017 - involved three projects: (1) creating a travel brochure and package tour; (2) Regional tourism in Japan - making a presentation about a Japanese prefecture; and (3) a Job interview role-play (Hardy, 2018). In the student feedback at the end of the course, 98% of students agreed, or strongly agreed, with the statement that "The tourism projects in this course are useful for my future" (p. 146).

Another example in the literature of a course for Tourism English is that of the



University of Nagasaki, Siebold, which decided to offer a course on “English for Tourism” (Yamauchi et al, 2009). This course was developed in part due to the need for more qualified regional tour guide interpreters in the Nagasaki area. Nagasaki prefecture started a Regional Tour Guide-Interpreter licence course in 2007, but of the 82 people who took the course for English in 2007, only 8 passed; and in 2008, only 18 out of 90 passed the course. All those who passed the course were aged 30 or over (Yamauchi et al, 2009, p. 306). The course offered by the University of Nagasaki, Siebold, in their Faculty of Global & Media Studies, mirrored the content and skills needed to pass the Nagasaki Regional Tour Guide-Interpreter test. The aim of the course was for students to be able to explain about Japanese culture and daily life, as well as Nagasaki’s culture, history and commerce. The course included four classes about Nagasaki (Nagasaki I, II, III, IV), which covered Nagasaki’s history, culture, economy and Nagasaki’s connection with Japanese literature, and two classes on interpreting (Interpreting I, II). Interpreting I covered basic tourism English and required students to give presentations introducing aspects of Nagasaki. Interpreting II focused on simultaneous translation. In line with Hardy (2015), Yamauchi et al considered this course as coming under the category of English for Specific Purposes, and argued that it could also be categorised in the subset, EPP - English for Professional Purposes.

This categorisation is backed up by Ennis (2020), who, in writing about English for Tourism (EFT) writes that “Most of the standard works on English for specific purposes (ESP) have long pointed to EFT as a branch of ESP” (p. 9). He goes on to say that, “the teaching of EFT can be subdivided into two main branches, English for occupational purposes (EOP) for the specific purpose of work in tourism and English for specific academic purposes (ESAP) for the specific purpose of tourism studies” (p. 16). Hence, teaching English for tour guides and interpreters would come under the banner of EOP for Tourism.

#### **4.2 Tourism English textbooks**

This leads to the question of what kinds of textbooks are available for teaching EFT as EOP, as opposed to simply teaching English which is useful for tourists. There are

currently dozens of textbook series available which cover EFT (Ennis, 2020). In this paper, I will examine three of them: English for Tourism (published by Sanshusha), Oxford English for Careers - Tourism (published by Oxford University Press) and English for International Tourism (published by Pearson).

#### **4.2.1 English for Tourism**

*English for Tourism* is the only one of the three series covered here which is written specifically for Japanese students. There are currently two books available: *English for Tourism – Basic* (Tourism English Proficiency Center, 2014a), and *English for Tourism – Intermediate* (Tourism English Proficiency Center, 2014b). Both books are written primarily in English, but contain Japanese translations for new words in the “Words and Phrases” sections, and some activities which require translation from Japanese to English. There are also Teacher’s manuals available which are written primarily in Japanese. The author is the Tourism English Proficiency Center (観光英検センター) which is also responsible for administering the Tourism English Proficiency tests. According to the Foreword for the Basic book, the textbook is useful for students who are aiming to work in tourism, but also for people who will use English in other careers. The vocabulary is similar to that contained in Level 3 of the Tourism English Proficiency Test. The Basic book is divided into three parts - Part One: Travel in General, Part Two: Traveling Abroad, and Additional Unit: Traveling in Japan. The first two parts cover topics which are arguably more useful for tourists than workers in tourism, such as conversations at immigration, or in the airport, or booking accommodation. The additional unit, however, covers topics which could be of interest for inbound tour guides, such as dining and bathing at a ryokan, buying gifts and souvenirs, and sightseeing. As the title suggests, the language used in the textbook is fairly basic.

The Intermediate textbook, according to its Foreword, contains vocabulary which is similar to that contained in Level 2 of the Tourism English Proficiency Test. Similar to the Basic book, the majority of the Intermediate book is concerned with international travel and tourism; only the last Unit (12 - Sightseeing in Japan) is focused on Japan. Most of the Units feature one or both of two characters - Ms. Tomoko Mori, a Tour

Manager, and Mr. Masashi Katoh, an international traveller. The sections involving the character, Ms. Mori, are ones of more relevance to EfT; these include meeting tour group members at the airport, checking them in at a hotel, arranging transport with a local tour operator, as well as other tour conductor duties.

As mentioned previously, the Basic and Intermediate books correspond respectively to Levels 3 and 2 of the Tourism English Proficiency Test. According to the Tourism English Proficiency Test website (National Association of Language, Business and Tourism Education (n.d.)), Level 3 is equivalent to TOEIC L&R 220-470, and Level 2 is equivalent to TOEIC L&R 470-600. The publisher, Sanshusha, does not provide a guide to indicate in which CEFR band these two textbooks belong, but in the author's estimation, the Basic book would be A1-A2, and the Intermediate would be A2-B1.

#### **4.2.2 Oxford English for Careers - Tourism**

Unlike the English for Tourism series published by Sanshusha, the *Oxford English for Careers - Tourism* series textbooks (written by Walker & Harding and published by Oxford University Press (OUP)) are aimed at a global audience and are written exclusively in English. There are three books (described in the following passage as "levels") in the series. According to the Teacher's Resource Book for Tourism 1 (Walker & Harding, 2006b, p. 4), "*Tourism* is divided into 3 levels. Level 1 (Provision) deals with the areas of tourism related to the creation, promotion and selling of typical tourism products such as flights and package holidays. Level 2 (Encounters) presents students with the English needed to handle face-to-face contact with tourists who are on holiday. Level 3 (Management) covers the language needed for discussion of tourism issues at basic managerial level." It is clear that these textbooks are aimed at students wishing to work in tourism. Indeed, in the first unit ("1: What is tourism?") of book 1, there is a section entitled, "So you want to work in tourism?"

In each unit there are a number of different sections, including Pronunciation, Listening, Reading, Speaking, Vocabulary, Language Spot and Customer Care. There is also a section called "Find out" which includes projects that students can complete in class or for homework, such as making a presentation or writing a brochure description.

In terms of content aimed at students wishing to become tour guides, the second book of the series has the most relevant sections and “places a greater emphasis on cultural difference and cultural awareness, which is crucial in international tourism encounters” (Teacher’s Resource Book, p. 4). In particular, the section On Tour (Unit 8) covers the work of a tour guide and includes speaking activities involving giving a coach tour and role-play conversations between a tour guide and a hotel and a driver.

In terms of level of English proficiency, the Level 1 book (Walker & Harding, 2006a) is aimed at CEFR band A2-B1 and the Level 2 book (Walker & Harding, 2007) is aimed at CEFR band B1-B2 (the Level 3 book was not examined in this paper).

#### **4.2.3 English for International Tourism**

The introduction to the first book of the series published by Pearson states, “English for International Tourism is a three-level series designed to meet the English language needs of professionals working in the tourism industry and students of tourism in further education.” The three books are the *Pre-Intermediate Coursebook* (Dubicka & O’Keefe, 2013), the *Intermediate Coursebook* (Strutt, 2013a) and the *Upper Intermediate Coursebook* (Strutt, 2013b). The three books are aimed at the CEFR levels B1, B1+ and B2 respectively. Each book contains 10 units and 2 review and consolidation sections. Each unit includes a vocabulary lesson, a grammar lesson, a Professional skills lesson and a Case study or tourism-related game.

Each Coursebook contains sections which correspond to different aspects of work in tourism, such as Air Travel, Hotels, and Marketing. The English grammar sections in each book cover areas which are particularly useful for people working in tourism, including tour guides. These include modals, comparatives and superlatives, countable/uncountable nouns, and zero and first conditional. There is, however, a relative lack of content specifically aimed at tour guides. The *Pre-Intermediate Coursebook* has some sections which are useful for inbound tour guides, such as the city guide section in Unit 4 (City Tours) and the short itinerary plan in Unit 7 (Nature Tourism). The most relevant for tour guides is the 2-page section in the *Upper Intermediate Coursebook* on Professional Skills entitled, “Working as a Tour Guide” (pp. 56-57). This contains useful

guiding expressions, a section on dates, measurements and statistics, and a speaking project of giving a walking tour. Many of the other sections, however, are not at all relevant, such as sections on Hotel branding, Customer service, Business Travel, or Marketing. Unlike the OUP series, in which the three books cover different aspects of work in tourism, in the Pearson series each book covers all aspects; the difference between the three books in this series is mainly one of the level of English proficiency.

### 4.3 English for Tour guides

As we can see from a review of the textbooks above, Tourism English, in comparison to General English, contains a high frequency of the following language features: (examples in brackets)

- modal verbs (*have to, must, need to, should, can*)
- questions using modal verbs (*Should I~? Would you~? May I~?*)
- comparatives and superlatives (*cheaper, cheapest, the most expensive*)
- extremely positive adjectives (*outstanding, renowned, remarkable*)
- zero conditional (*We offer a discount when you book online.*)
- first conditional (*If you come in August, the weather will be better.*)

In their book, “Building Guide Skills - Learn from the experts”, Rowthorn and Ijuin (2010) suggest that guides try to use polite forms and avoid direct questions and avoid commands. They give some examples, such as using “Am I making it clear?” instead of “Do you understand?”, or “I’m sorry, but photography is not permitted here” instead of “You can’t take pictures” (p. 11). They also recommend polite introductory phrases to soften questions or requests, such as “I was wondering...” or “If you wouldn’t mind...”. The key messages from the book are that guides do not need to speak perfect English or to memorise large amounts of facts and figures. Rather, they should try to help their clients experience the joy of finding out something new - what they call the “Sense of Wonder”.

## 5. Discussion

The review of Tourism English textbooks shows that there is a difference between textbooks aimed specifically at students of tourism, and those which merely include sections on useful English for tourists. The ones in the former category, which include the OUP and Pearson series, cover useful language as well as professional skills, not just for tour guides but also for different aspects of jobs within the tourism industry, such as hotel staff, marketing and customer service. These books can therefore be categorised as ESP textbooks. The *English for Tourism* textbooks by Sanshusha, however, cannot be put in this same category. They do not provide information on professional skills or issues concerning the tourism industry and, unlike the OUP and Pearson textbooks, do not offer specialised sections on useful grammar for tourism professionals. The Sanshusha series can perhaps be considered as using the tourism genre to teach general English. As stated in Terauchi et al (2017, p. 119), “The presentation of tourism genres for learners of general purpose English is possible because the language of tourism (as part of English for Occupational Purposes) in fact largely overlaps with English for General Purposes [Blue and Harun, 2003]”.

For courses of EfT, the Pearson or OUP textbooks would be more appropriate, but for classes in Tourism English at Japanese universities for students who are not Tourism majors but are interested in tourism or foreign travel, the Sanshusha books offer a tourism-themed alternative. The Japanese translations of new words and useful phrases makes it easier for Japanese students to understand the language used. Tourism English classes using textbooks such as these should also aim to provide students with opportunities to practice guiding skills; projects such as making video presentations about local tourist spots would be highly recommended.

In terms of whether Tourism English classes can help students to acquire Regional Tour Guide Interpreter licences, there are issues concerning the level of English required, as well as the non-language skills. Sakata’s 2020 program required a level which is approximately in the CEFR B2 range, which is above the level of the majority of students at the author’s university. In order just to take the course - let alone pass it - students

would need to show they have an upper intermediate level of English proficiency. In order for students to achieve this proficiency, Tourism English classes would therefore need to be complemented by other English language classes, up to the level of interpreting. As the case of the University of Nagasaki showed, in order to help students pass the licence test there would also need to be opportunities for students to learn more deeply about the local area - such as its history, industry and sightseeing locations. Even with all these classes, it would still be a challenge for students to pass the licence test, but whether they pass or not, the skills they would acquire in trying would still be useful for them in their future.

## **6. Conclusion**

After three years with minimal inbound tourism due to the Covid-19 pandemic, 2023 is likely to see a significant number of foreign visitors coming to Japan, with the numbers of foreign tourists likely to increase further in the next few years. Regions like Northern Shonai, which benefited pre-Covid from the visits of tourists in cruise ships as well as on other tours, will likely need more and more tourism staff – either paid staff or volunteers - who are skilled in languages. This will provide excellent opportunities for university students who have a high proficiency in English to gain skills and experience by meeting and guiding foreign tourists. Courses in English Tourism can help students acquire both language proficiency and professional skills. It is to be hoped that students taking such courses will be able in future to qualify as Regional Tour Guide Interpreters, or at least to gain sufficient skills to assist inbound tourists.

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