

The Implementation of 5S Work Culture and Japanese Language Use in Newspaper Distribution by International Students in Japan

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Abstrak

Meskipun jumlah pembaca koran di Jepang mengalami penurunan di setiap tahunnya, Jepang tetap memerlukan tenaga yang mendistribusikan koran atau biasa disebut looper koran)新聞配達 (karena di Jepang juga terjadi penurunan tenaga kerja pada usia produktif. Untuk memenuhi kebutuhan tenaga looper koran di Jepang, tidak sedikit pekerja paruh waktu asing yang merupakan pelajar atau mahasiswa yang bekerja paruh waktu sebagai looper koran karena mereka membutuhkan beasiswa untuk biaya hidup dan belajar di Jepang. Namun demikian, dibutuhkan persiapan kemampuan bahasa Jepang untuk bekerja paruh waktu pada pendistribusian koran, dan juga konsep budaya kerja Jepang yang berkaitan dengan kegiatan 5S pendistribusian koran. Terlebih lagi bagi mahasiswa asing yang baru datang ke Jepang. Oleh karena itu, tujuan penelitian ini mengkaji penerapan budaya kerja 5S dan penggunaan bahasa Jepang pada kegiatan 5S pendistribusian koran di Jepang, agar dapat membantu para pemegang di perusahaan koran Jepang. Metode penelitian yang digunakan penelitian ini adalah metode penelitian kualitatif dengan teknik pengumpulan data observasi partisipan dan wawancara. Lokasi pengumpulan data adalah tempat berkerja di perusahaan koran dan area pengantaran koran di Jepang. Data dianalisis berdasarkan konsep 5S: Seiri (整理), Seiton (整顿), Seisou (清掃), Seiketsu (清潔), dan Shitsuke (躰) dan JF Standards. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa kegiatan 5S yang menjadi tantangan para mahasiswa asing pemegang looper koran Jepang adalah kegiatan *Seiri* dan *Seiton*. Adapun penggunaan bahasa Jepang pada kegiatan 5S pendistribusian koran di Jepang berfokus pada kemampuan membaca nama koran, brosur, dan penanda yang ada di area kerja yang dapat dikategorikan pada level kosakata level JLPT N3-N2.

Kata Kunci : 5S, Budaya kerja Jepang, Bahasa Jepang, Distribusi koran, Perusahaan koran Jepang.

Abstract

Although the number of newspaper readers in Japan has been declining every year, Japan still needs workers to distribute newspapers (commonly known as newspaper delivery workers) because there has also been a decline in the working-age population in Japan. To meet the demand for newspaper delivery personnel in Japan, many foreign part-time workers, who are students or university students, work part-time as newspaper delivery personnel because they need scholarships to cover their living and study expenses in Japan. However, proficiency in the Japanese language is required to work part-time in newspaper distribution, as well as an understanding of Japanese work culture concepts related to the 5S activities in newspaper distribution, especially for international students who have recently arrived in Japan.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the application of 5S work culture and the use of the Japanese language in 5S activities related to newspaper distribution in Japan, in order to assist interns at Japanese newspaper companies. The research method used in this study is a qualitative research method with data collection techniques including participant observation and interviews.

The data collection locations were the workplace of a newspaper company and the newspaper delivery area in Japan. The researchers analyzed the data based on the 5S concept: Seiri (整理), Seiton (整頓), Seisou (清掃), Seiketsu (清潔), and Shitsuke (躰) and JF Standards. The research results indicate that the 5S activities that pose challenges for foreign exchange students working as newspaper delivery interns in Japan are Seiri and Seiton. The use of the Japanese language in 5S activities related to newspaper distribution in Japan focuses on the ability to read newspaper names, brochures, and signs in the work area, which can be categorized at the JLPT N3-N2 vocabulary level.

Keywords: 5S, Japanese work culture, Japanese language, newspaper distribution, Japanese newspaper company.

1. Introduction

The Japanese people still use printed newspapers as a source of information, even though the number of newspaper readers is declining every year. According to data from Nihon Shinbun Kyokai, in 2024, the number of newspaper subscribers declined by about 2 million from 28,590,486 to 26,616,578. However, this number is still relatively large, as can be seen in the graph below.

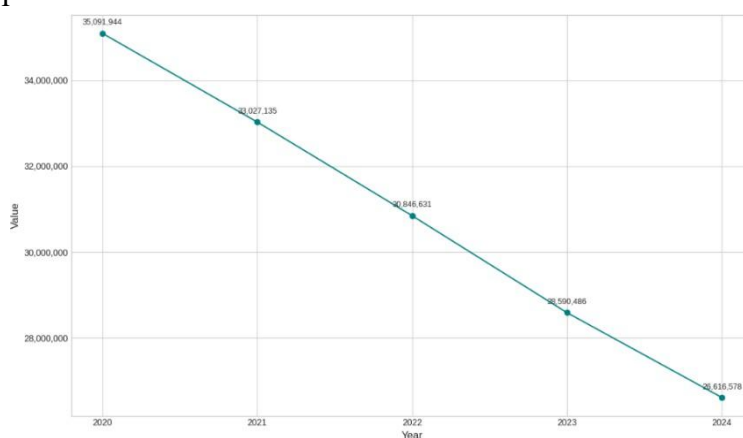


Figure 1.1 Graph of Newspaper Readership in Japan from 2020 to 2024
(Nihon Shinbun Kyokai, 2006b)

As shown in Figure 1.1, despite the annual decline in newspaper readership in Japan, the newspaper distribution industry still requires workers to distribute newspapers, commonly known as newspaper delivery (新聞配達).

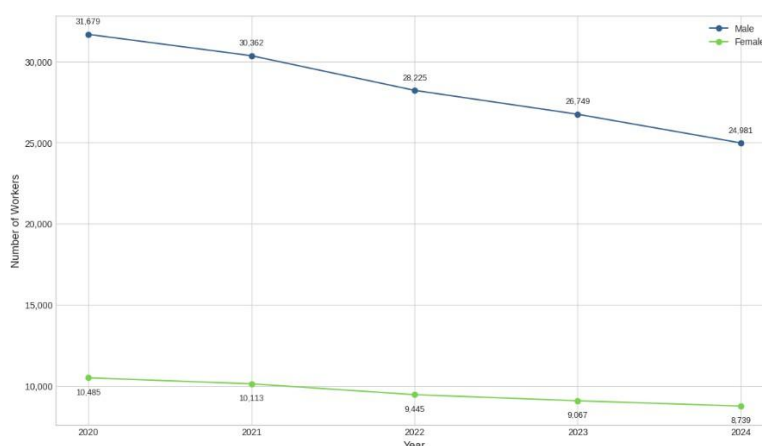


Figure 1.2 Graph showing the decline in the workforce in Japan from 2020 to 2024
 (Nihon Shinbun Kyokai, 2006a)

Figure 1.2 above shows that, in addition to experiencing a decline in print media readership, Japan is also experiencing a decline in the working-age population. Therefore, the newspaper distribution industry in Japan has a high demand for foreign part-time students or university students, as international students and university students need scholarships to cover their living and study expenses in Japan.

On the other hand, the newspaper distribution industry in Japan is facing a shortage of newspaper delivery workers due to the decline in the working-age population in Japan.

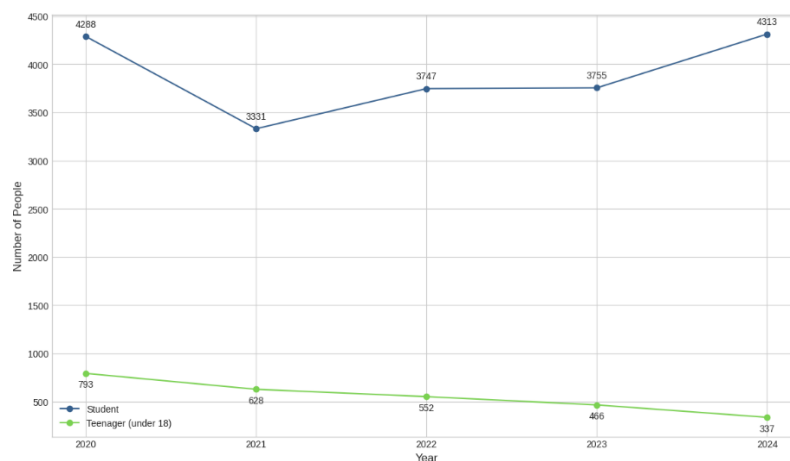


Figure 1.3 Graph showing changes in the number of foreign newspaper delivery workers
 in Japan from 2020 to 2024
 (Nihon Shinbun Kyokai, 2006a)

Figure 1.3 shows that many foreigners work as newspaper delivery workers in Japan with a student status. Although the number has been decreasing every year, it is expected to increase in 2024. However, since foreign part-time newspaper delivery workers are not native Japanese speakers, they often struggle to deliver a large number of newspapers quickly, efficiently, and effectively. Previous studies have extensively researched the Japanese language barriers faced by foreign workers in Japan. However, the respondents in those studies were generally professional workers such as translators or interpreters. According to

Wahidati & Djafri (2021), the Japanese language barriers experienced by interpreters are particularly challenging when a native Japanese-speaking supervisor becomes angry with a foreign staff member perceived as causing an issue. The interpreter must convey the supervisor's intentions without offending either party and find a solution to resolve the issue.

Additionally, elderly care workers or caregivers, commonly referred to as 介護 (kaigo), face significant language barriers. The main obstacle for elderly medical workers is the difficulty of learning Japanese for Indonesians, so the ability to speak, read, and write Japanese is essential for prospective nurses who want to work in Japan (Aminah et al., 2018). There are also communication barriers in Japanese for interns in various fields, commonly referred to as 研修生 (kenshuusei). Although these interns receive Japanese language training before departing for Japan, the reality on the ground shows that language barriers and difficulties in adapting to the work culture persist (Devta Kautsar & Hesarianti, 2025). Research on foreign vocational school students and interns in Japan is still limited. In reality, the language proficiency and cultural understanding requirements for professionals, nurses, caregivers, interns, and part-time workers in each field are different. Therefore, research is necessary to understand the Japanese language proficiency and cultural understanding requirements for international students and workers engaged in part-time work in newspaper distribution.

Regarding Japanese work culture, 5S is one of the work cultures adopted by Japanese newspaper companies in newspaper distribution. 5S is the most well-known and frequently applied work method in Japanese companies, aimed at organizing the work environment to remain clean, organized, efficient, and safe to achieve productive work and reduce time and cost waste (Osada, 1991; Imai, 2021). Additionally, by implementing 5S, it is expected that existing waste can be minimized and conditions within the company can be improved (Osada, 1991; Imai, 2021). The 5S itself consists of Seiri (整理), Seiton (整頓), Seisou (清掃), Seiketsu (清潔), Shitsuke (躰) or in Indonesian known as 5R (Ringkas, Rapi, Resik, Rawat, Rajin) (Prihantoro Sutopo, 2021). In newspaper distribution work, there are activities such as sorting chirashi and newspaper (Seiri), arranging the sets of chirashi and newspaper on the vehicle (Seiton), maintaining newspaper quality (Seisou), and maintaining overall cleanliness (Seiketsu), maintaining the discipline of the working rules, delivering newspapers to customers not more than 6 hours and ensuring no Fuchaku (不着) occurs, which means undelivered, and continuously doing the same thing (Shitsuke).

The 5S principles were first implemented in Japanese factories and, due to their proven effectiveness, were later adopted by organizations in both manufacturing and service sectors around the world (Osada, 1991; Randhawa et al., 2018; Imai, 2021). Its ability to improve work environments and streamline operations made it widely accepted across different industries.

These principles serve as the foundation and entry point for applying more advanced lean manufacturing practices. They are also considered the simplest and most practical work culture to understand and implement (Osada, 1991; Hashibuan & Nishikubo, 2024), making them a strategic starting point for companies seeking to improve productivity and reduce inefficiencies.

Meanwhile, the Japanese language proficiency standards according to the Japan Foundation (JF Standard) consist of several levels of Japanese language proficiency, namely Level A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2. (JF Standard, 2018; Waseda University, 2016). In the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), JF Standard levels A1-A2 are equivalent to JLPT levels N5-N4, JF Standard levels A2-B1 are equivalent to JLPT level N4, JF Standard B2 is equivalent to JLPT level N3, JF Standard C1 is equivalent to JLPT N2, and JF Standard

C2 is equivalent to JLPT level N1 or close to native speakers' proficiency. At levels A1-A2, reading ability according to the JF Standard can recognize short phrases and understand general information from simple texts. At levels B1-B2, one can begin to understand the main points in longer, organized texts about social issues and other topics. At levels C1-C2, one can understand complex and longer texts. In terms of listening ability, the JF Standard provides measurable Can-Do criteria. At the A1-A2 level, one can understand words or information in everyday conversations. At the B1-B2 level, one can grasp the main points in discussions about familiar topics, formal announcements, or media such as TV, radio, and others. At the C1-C2 level, one can understand complex discussions and diverse audio materials. Although writing skills are still not tested in the JLPT (Japanese Language Proficiency Test), there is still a standardization of writing skills in the JF Standard: A1-A2 can write simple sentences for self-introduction or explaining daily activities, B1-B2 can write clear and structured texts when explaining personal experiences, reasons, opinions, and short reports. At the C1-C2 level, one can write longer texts such as essays, professional reports, or articles. For speaking skills, at the A1-A2 level, one can make simple requests and communicate on everyday topics. At the B1-B2 level, one can discuss hobbies, interests, and everyday issues. At the C1-C2 level, one can speak spontaneously in presentations, social debates, or formal job interviews (JF Standard, 2018).

2. Method

The research method was qualitative. The data collection techniques in this study were participant observation and interviews. Data collection was conducted from March 18, 2025, to May 27, 2025. Data obtained through participant observation was collected directly at the newspaper distribution office in Japan and involved observations of the areas or regions where distribution took place, such as residential areas like apartment complexes and small shops. All data collected was documented through photographs. The collected data was then categorized according to the 5S categories: 整理 (Sorting), 整頓 (Straightening), 清掃 (Cleaning), 清潔 (Cleaning), and 躰 (Discipline). The data was further categorized based on the JF Standard with the assistance of an AI platform, ChatGPT, to aid in the search with the prompt “this vocabulary is at JLPT N level.” The Japanese terminology data collected consists of Japanese terms used directly in both written (順路帳、チラシ、表札、看板、不着) and spoken contexts (customer requests and instructions from supervisors). For data triangulation, follow-up interviews were conducted with five international students in Japan working as newspaper delivery personnel. For analysis purposes, the five international students were coded as X1-X5. The interview results were transcribed using the Transcriber application. The data was then analyzed by triangulating the results of participant observation, interviews, and the literature references used.

3. Result

3.1. 5S activities in newspaper distribution work in Japan

From the data collected through observation and interviews, the following results were obtained regarding the types of 5S activities in newspaper distribution work in Japan.

Table 1. Types of 5S Activities in Newspaper Distribution Work in Japan

No	5S Activities	Type of Work	Location
1.	<i>Seiri</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Sorting chirashi ● Sorting newspapers 	Office
2.	<i>Seiton</i>	Arranging the sets of chirashi and newspaper on the venichle	Vehicle
3.	<i>Seisou</i>	Maintaining newspaper quality	Office, Destination
4.	<i>Seiketsu</i>	Maintaining the cleanliness and quality of newspapers to be delivered to customers	Office, Vehicle
5.	<i>Shitsuke</i>	maintaining the discipline of the working rules	Destination

Table 1 above shows that the 5S *Seiri* activity in newspaper distribution involves sorting chirashi or pamphlets to be inserted into newspapers, which is done at the office and carried when delivering newspapers in the morning or afternoon. Additionally, newspapers are sorted because there are various types of newspapers. The *Seiton* activity, which means organizing, in the newspaper distribution process, involves arranging all the newspapers to be delivered to customers. Each newspaper delivery person has a different way of arranging their newspapers on the motorcycle. However, the most common type of newspaper is usually placed at the back of the motorcycle, followed by the second most common type of newspaper arranged in the motorcycle basket, and the left and right pockets of the basket are filled with other newspapers. Arrangements are also made at the newspaper distribution office. The next 5S *Seisou* activity in newspaper distribution is to maintain the cleanliness and quality of the newspapers for customers, preventing them from getting damaged, torn, wet, or otherwise compromised. For some rare types of newspapers that are only available once a month, they are usually placed in plastic or what is commonly referred to as ビニル to prevent unwanted incidents. There are two types of cleanliness in 5S: *Seisou* and *Seiketsu*. The difference is that *Seisou* focuses on the cleanliness of the newspapers. At the same time, *Seiketsu* maintains overall cleanliness, including the newspapers, the vehicles used, and personal hygiene such as wearing masks, gloves, and helmets. *Seiketsu* cleanliness has a broader scope compared to *Seisou*. Lastly, the 5S *Shitsuke* activity in newspaper distribution involves disciplining the daily delivery of newspapers, ensuring it does not exceed 6 hours and avoiding *fuchaku* (non-delivery) where the newspaper does not reach the customer. This 5S activity is repeated daily.

From the above explanation of the 5S, the most important aspect of newspaper distribution work is *Seiri*, or sorting, because the process of sorting flyers and newspapers must be done quickly and carefully, as many types of newspapers and flyers must be bundled. In addition to sorting, newspaper delivery personnel also remove unnecessary items from the workplace to save time and improve work efficiency. Time is of the essence for newspaper delivery personnel who must deliver newspapers to customers on time in the morning and afternoon (Osada, 1991; Imai, 2021). Furthermore, the *Seiton* process in newspaper distribution is the next most important task, as proper organization is key to whether newspapers can be distributed quickly or not.

3.2. Japanese language used in newspaper distribution work in Japan

Furthermore, from the data collected through observation and interviews, results were obtained regarding the Japanese terms used in newspaper distribution work in Japan. From the Japanese terms collected, the study focused on vocabulary with high usage frequency according to respondents during interviews, then categorized them based on 5S activities and

JLPT levels for each term. The results of the sorted Japanese term data collection are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Japanese terms used in newspaper distribution work in Japan

No	5S Activity	Type of Work	Data Source	Term	Level
1.	<i>Seiri</i>	Sorting the chirashi and newspapers to be delivered, as well as sorting areas for newspaper delivery	Print Out (written)	チラシ	N2
			Notice Board at the Office (written)	新聞	N4
			Junrocho (written)	町	N4
			Junrocho (written)	区	N3
			Junrocho (written)	団地	N2
			Residential Building (written)	号	N3
2.	<i>Seiton</i>	Organizing the types of newspapers to be delivered	Notice Board at the Office (written)	取り置き	N3
			Print Out (written)	入れ止め	N5-N4
			Print Out (written)	希望	N3
3.	<i>Seisou</i>	Maintaining the cleanliness and quality of newspapers	Print Out (written)	回収	N2
			Supervisor's Instructions (verbal)	タオル	N5
4.	<i>Seiketsu</i>	Maintaining overall cleanliness	Supervisor's Instructions (verbal)	手袋	N3
5.	<i>Shitsuke</i>	Delivering newspapers within 6 hours & not missing any deliveries	Supervisor's Instructions (verbal)	配達	N3

The table above shows that the vocabulary used is predominantly from the JLPT N3 level and generally consists of written or printed materials displayed in specific locations. The 5S task that most frequently uses written sources is *Seiri*, or sorting. This is because many flyers need to be sorted before being inserted into the newspaper, as well as to avoid mistakes. Therefore, the newspaper company staff in Japan always provide information through written materials that are updated daily. In addition to sorting flyers, foreign workers must also sort the newspapers they will carry, as each person receives a different type of newspaper.

Written information is also provided for sorting the delivery areas for newspapers to customers, but in a different format. At the same time, information for sorting flyers and newspapers is typically in the form of printouts, and delivery area information is provided in the form of a book or what is commonly called a *Junrocho*, which must be carried during delivery. This book is an essential tool for ensuring newspapers are delivered to the correct customers.

In the 5S work at a newspaper company in Japan, workers must have the ability to read Japanese text. Much important information is provided in written form, such as *chirashi* (flyers), newspaper names, and delivery route books. Workers must be able to read these texts accurately to avoid mistakes when sorting or delivering newspapers to customers.

For example, workers need to be able to read newspaper names like 読売新聞 (Yomiuri Shimbun), or terms like チラシ (flyer), and 順路帳 (route book). Most of these vocabulary words are at the JLPT N3 level, although some are easier, such as 新聞 (newspaper) at the JLPT N4 level. However, to work more effectively, it is advisable to have reading skills equivalent to JLPT N3.

4. Discussion

From the explanation of 5S above, the most important and dominant aspect of newspaper distribution work is Seiri, or sorting, because the process of sorting chirashi and newspapers must be done quickly and carefully, as many types of newspapers and chirashi must be bundled. In addition to sorting, newspaper delivery personnel also remove unnecessary items from the workplace to save time and improve work efficiency. Time is of the essence for newspaper delivery personnel who must deliver newspapers to customers on time in the morning and afternoon (Osada, 1991; Imai, 2021).

Some respondents noted that Seiri demands time and concentration, particularly when dealing with a large volume of chirashi and newspapers. However, Seiri helps make the work neater, faster, and avoids mistakes. Therefore, although it may seem simple, Seiri is an important first step to ensure that all subsequent work processes run smoothly.



Figure 4.1. Chirashi that must be sorted and attached to newspapers (personal documentation)

Some respondents (X1 and X2) noted that Seiri demands considerable time and concentration due to the large number of flyers and newspapers.

The Seiri activity, or sorting, is quite tricky because you have to put the flyers one by one into the many newspapers and then organize them on the bicycle (X1)

Seiri is the most challenging task because, in addition to sorting newspapers, there are also flyers to handle, making the preparation process quite time-consuming (X2)

However, if Seiri is done appropriately, it helps make the work more organized, faster,

and avoids mistakes. Therefore, although it may seem simple, Seiri is an important first step to ensure that all subsequent work processes run smoothly, as mentioned by (Osada, 1991; Imai, 2021). Furthermore, the research findings also reveal that the Seiton process in newspaper distribution is the next most important task because the arrangement process is key to whether newspapers can be distributed quickly or not.

Seiton is challenging because arranging/organizing newspapers onto bicycles requires careful planning. The difficulty lies in carrying 110 newspapers initially and figuring out how to fit all 110 newspapers into the basket (X3).

The most challenging part of organizing newspapers (Seiton) is the physical labour involved in transporting them, which is quite strenuous. (X5)

Respondents stated that workers not only sort chirashi but also have to arrange the prepared newspapers. According to some respondents, arranging newspapers into bicycles or motorcycles is quite tricky, especially with large quantities, and moving them from the workbench to the bicycle or motorcycle is also cumbersome because the newspapers are very heavy. If not appropriately arranged, the newspapers can fall or get damaged. That is why Seiri and Seiton are crucial for making the work faster, neater, and less confusing for the newspaper delivery personnel themselves. The findings from the interviews about the importance of Seiri and Seiton align with the research results of (Osada, 1991; Imai, 2021), indicating that the success of Seiri and Seiton activities will determine the success of implementing the 5S activities.

In addition to the importance of implementing Seiri and Seiton, the research findings in section 3.2 also reveal that international students or learners who work as newspaper delivery personnel must possess the ability to read Japanese vocabulary or terms written in Japanese. This written information is crucial for newspaper delivery personnel to read, as it contains a significant amount of work-related information in written form, such as チラシ, 不着, 入れ止め, and 取り置き, which also appear in reports and work documents. According to the JF Standard, vocabulary such as チラシ, 不着, 入れ止め, and 取り置き is equivalent to JLPT level N3-N2 vocabulary (JF Standard, 2018). Listening skills are also required to understand instructions related to newspaper delivery work.

The terms frequently mentioned are fuchaku, iredome, and torioki. Fuchaku refers to instances where newspapers are not delivered, a common complaint often heard from people. Iredome involves updating the list of customers who have stopped or started using the service at the end of each month. Torioki occurs during long holidays in Japan, when some customers may choose to suspend their service (X4).

From the statements of respondent X4, it is evident that understanding terms communicated by supervisors is essential for smooth work operations. The specialized terms mentioned by the respondent are terminology used in newspaper

distribution work equivalent to JLPT N3-N2 (JF Standard, 2018). These terms were initially difficult for newspaper delivery workers to master during their adaptation period as part-time workers. However, through the 5S Shitsuke (habituation) activity, these terms can be mastered effectively (Osada, 1991; Imai, 2021).

5. Conclusion

The results of the study indicate that the 5S activities that pose challenges for international students interning as newspaper delivery workers in Japan are Seiri and Seiton. In addition, the use of the Japanese language in the 5S activities of newspaper distribution in Japan focuses on the ability to read the names of newspapers, brochures, and signs in the work area, which can be categorised at the JLPT N3-N2 vocabulary level. Additionally, listening skills are necessary to comprehend instructions related to newspaper delivery work.

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