

Management of Foreign Language Education: Japanese Language Education as an Example

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1. Practice, research, and the history of educational associations and affiliated societies

According to the latest survey conducted by the Japan Foundation, education of the Japanese language is being conducted in 136 countries worldwide, with learners totaling slightly less than four million in total¹. Domestically, the Japanese Agency of Cultural Affairs lists 191,753 learners of the Japanese language in 2015². In the case of domestic Japanese language education, the number of learners may well exceed those attending educational institutions. There is in fact, a large number of foreigner nationals residing in Japan, for whom education in the Japanese language is a necessity. As of December, 2015, Ministry of Justice statistics suggest a total of 2,232,189 foreign residents living in Japan. Thus, any discussion of a framework for Japanese language education must consider its various domains: both in international and domestic, and particularly in the case of domestic education, must consider not only formal institutional instruction, but also Japanese language education as social support

Leading such discussion, with the mission of furthering Japanese language education for such a diverse target group, is The Society for Teaching Japanese as a Foreign Language. The NKG (*Nihongo Kyoiku Gakkai*) characterizes Japanese language education as follows:

What is Japanese language education?

Japanese language education concerns learners in diverse circumstances:

- Learners studying Japanese as a foreign language at universities or Japanese language schools both domestically and internationally
- Foreign national children, living in Japan and studying Japanese language outside of formal education
- Instruction of Japanese to children of Japanese parents living overseas in international marriages
- International exchange of language and culture between Japanese and foreign nationals as events hosted by local government bodies or volunteer groups

Each individual acquires his or her language through life experience. Throughout life, encounters with different language are compounded as learning experiences. Language learning is not confined to the classroom. Japanese is learned also in social encounters, and between parents and children.

<http://www.nkg.or.jp/ippan/about>

As the NKG suggests, Japanese language education is not limited to adult learners, but rather encompasses an exceedingly broad range of learners: there is a large number of young learners at the elementary and secondary levels, and outside of formal education many residents attend Japanese language classrooms operated by local volunteers. This paper will introduce two initiatives for addressing this issue of learner diversity: 1. the 'Easy Japanese' initiative, and 2. reform of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test.

As a brief description, Easy Japanese is described as 'Japanese that is simpler than ordinary Japanese, and is easier for foreigners to understand'³, and typically refers to expressions that have proved effective in conveying information during natural disasters such as earthquakes. In discussions surrounding the social function of Japanese language education, Easy Japanese has been gaining prominence. After a description of Easy Japanese presented by Iori et. al (2012), NHK (the Japanese public broadcasting network) began to implement the form of Japanese in its

'News Web Easy'⁴. Iwata's "Official documents made easy" (2016) have appeared, and research on Easy Japanese is being beginning to be applied in various settings. Providing the impetus for such developments is the recognition that such Easy Japanese will play an essential role as a universal Japanese for communication in the multicultural society that Japan is expected to become. Noda (2014) suggests that Easy Japanese is also an issue of language education for native Japanese, that Japanese should also be educated about it.

The second initiative regards reform of the Japanese Language Proficiency TEST (JLPT). First held in 1984, the JLPT is the most influential test of Japanese language ability, and is the largest scale test of its kind implemented by public institutions in Japan. As of 2009, a total of 5.6 million examinees had taken the examination. (Lee, 2011). In 2010, the Japan Foundation (the organization primarily responsible for drafting the examination content) made significant revisions to the content in regards to the four points below⁵:

- 1: Measuring communicative competence for the performing of tasks
- 2: Increasing the levels of the test from four levels to five
- 3: Increasing the reliability of test results (regardless of when the test is taken)
- 4: Making available a can-do self-evaluation list for the JLPT

Of particular note are points 1 and 4. As for point one, the 'measuring of communicative competence for the performing of tasks' ostensibly refers to the communicative ability required to successfully perform tasks in various linguistic contexts. Comprising such communicative ability is not only an understanding of Japanese vocabulary, grammar, and written characters, but the holistic ability to product sentences and utterances in a pragmatically sound fashion. The 2010 revisions to the JLPT introduced a new style of test questions intended to comprehensively evaluate such communicative ability. In the three decades since the introduction of the JLPT, the fields of linguistics and foreign language education have changed

greatly, and such change would have a considerable influence in point 1 of the revisions to the test. In particular, the fields of applied linguistics and foreign language education have seen a shift from grammar-translation methodology to a more direct approach, with emphasis being placed on the practical application of language. As educational objectives have changed to reflect the use of language, renewed discussions and suggestions of how to define and evaluate 'communicative ability' have surfaced (Bachman, 1990). This change in emphasis from knowledge about language to an emphasis on practical use are reflected in the revisions to the JLPT.

As for revision point for, the can-do self-evaluation list is a tool that was developed in order to allow examinees to develop an image of the language tasks that those who pass the test should be able to accomplish through the Japanese language. The creation of this list was influenced by recent movements in learner-centered evaluation, and its defining characteristic is that it is used by learners themselves to evaluate their ability. The can-do list has value in that it does not only provide scores, or passing or failing grades, but that it makes tangible the linguistic skills that result in a pass or a fail. The idea behind this approach is that communication through language is a social activity, and as such test results should promote this social aspect of language ability.

To recap the above, 1) there is a large diversity in learners of the Japanese language, and the educational goals are equally varied, 2) the appeal for Easy Japanese requires that not only learners of Japanese as a language be instructed, but awareness raising for native speakers of Japanese is also of importance, and 3) the revisions to the JLPT reflect an emphasis on the importance of practical language ability for genuine communication. Each of these three points may seem at first unrelated, however each reflects the following educational initiative: an educational shift from developing 'learners of Japanese' to 'users of Japanese'. That is to say, the reality of Japanese language education has shifted from the classroom and into society, and that Japanese language education is no longer the sole territory of students in the classroom.

2. Issues in classroom management

When considering Japanese language education from the perspective of classroom management, it is necessary to remember, and to confront, the reality of diversity in learners as mentioned above. Even when limiting the discussion to learners in the (domestic) classroom, there remains the issue of learners being simultaneously students of the language while also active members of society. In other words, students of Japanese language schools or at exchange student centers are, outside of the classroom, active users of Japanese.

To solve the issue of learner diversity in Japanese language education, a generic framework of reference that organically links education and evaluation is necessary. In Europe, the CEFR fulfils this role, while the Japan Foundation's 'JF Standard for Japanese-Language Education' seeks to perform this function in Japan.

The JF Standard for Japanese-Language Education is modelled on the reasoning behind CEFR, as a tool to support the development of skills in accomplishing tasks and in intercultural understanding. A description of the standard appears on the Japan Foundation website as follows;

The JF Standard for Japanese-language Education is a tool for the teaching, studying, and scholastic evaluation of the Japanese language. One may assess their level of achievement by reference to what they can do, and to what degree, in the Japanese language. Uses of the standard may include course design, materials development, or in making tests.

<https://jfstandard.jp/>

As a support system for the introduction of the JF Standard into language classrooms, a collection of tools has been made available online, and is constantly being improved, as the *Mina no Can-do saito* [Everybody's Can-do Site], which included teaching materials, role play tests, and support for portfolio development.

The availability of a common framework of reference such as the JF

Standard provides a pathway for addressing the so-called articulation problem, the problem of consistency between classes. As stated above, issues surrounding Japanese language education are not limited to the domestic context. One particular issue is that of foreign students on short exchanges, studying the Japanese language, and how study in this context might be connected with Japanese language learning in the students' home countries. To address this issue, a large-scale project called J-GAP (Japanese Global Articulation Project; <https://j-gap.wikispaces.com/>) has been implemented. Under J-GAP, three areas of articulation are regarded as problematic:

- (1) Vertical articulation
- (2) Horizontal articulation
- (3) Articulation across subject areas

Here, concrete examples will be used to explain concepts (1) through (3). An example of (1) may be a student who was previously studied the Japanese language at secondary school for 3 years, and after taking a placement test, is placed in the same first-semester, first-year class as students with no prior experience of Japanese language learning. This can be seen as a failure of vertical articulation between institutions. An example of (2) might be in the same program at the same school, several classes of an identical level are being held, although a lack of communication and consensus has led to different teachers using different materials and textbooks, and the instructional focus of each teacher differs. This is an example of a failure in horizontal articulation. Finally, regarding (3), in order to conduct school education both efficiently and effectively, an element of consistency and conformity between related subjects is desirable. An example of this may be at the university level, where classes are being held on Japanese culture as well as Japanese language, that the content of the classes are bound together, so that the students' ability in the Japanese language, and knowledge of Japanese culture is coordinated so as to promote further development in language proficiency.

The J-GAP project aimed to address concerns regarding the above three

articulation standards, by attempting to form a consensus between individuals concerned with Japanese language education from various countries. Specifically, Japanese language education practitioners in Canada, Europe, Hong Kong, the United States, Korea, and Japan have conducted various investigations, and have made these results available online. At the same time, development of tools for successful articulation is underway, and a part of these may be viewed on the J-GAP website.

3. The environments of social acquisition

As mentioned previously, the scope of Japanese language education exceeds the limits of institutional education. 'Easy Japanese' is a concrete example of the Japanese language education in society at large. Supported by funding from the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) as a subject of research, Easy Japanese has been propagated by Japanese language education specialists, and various organizations have been furthering research in a number of contexts. The following are some concrete examples of Easy Japanese:

Passage A

けさ7時21分頃、東北地方を中心に広い範囲で強い地震がありました。

(At 7:21 this morning, a powerful earthquake centered in the Tohoku region shook a large area.)

大きな地震のあとには必ず余震があります。

(Without exception, large earthquakes are followed by aftershocks.)

引き続き厳重に注意してください。

(Please continue to exercise extreme caution.)

皆さんおちついて行動をお願いします。

(We urge that everyone maintains calm.)

ガス臭いようなところがありましたらマッチを擦ったり、照明のスイッチをつけたり、消したり、ということはいしないでください。

(If there is a smell of gas, please refrain from striking matches, or turning lights on or off.)

弘前市は断水や停電となり、市民の生活は麻痺しています。

(Hirosaki City is experiencing power and water outages, impacting civilian life.)

中心部の雑居ビルが完全に崩れ落ちています。

(A multi-tenant building in the city center has suffered complete collapse.)

Passage B

今日 朝 7時21分、東北地方で 大きい 地震が ありました。

(Today, at 7:21 in the morning, there was a strong earthquake in the Tohoku area.)

大きい 地震の 後には 余震〈後から 来る 地震〉が あります。

(Aftershocks [more earthquakes] come after big earthquakes.)

気をつけて ください。

(Please be careful.)

火を 使わないで ください。

(Please do not use fire.)

火事に 気をつけて ください。

(Please be careful of house fires.)

弘前市は 水と 電気が 使えません。

(Hirosaki City has no power or water.)

地震で 倒れた 建物に 気をつけて ください。

(Some buildings collapsed in the earthquake. Please be careful of them.)

The passages above are an example of Easy Japanese as published by the sociolinguistics department of the Graduate School of Humanities and Social Sciences at Hirosaki University. Passage A is a transcription of radio broadcasts following the Great Hanshin Earthquake in 1995; the sentences are detailed and information-heavy. In contrast, although passage B conveys less information, the content is much more accessible, particularly to foreign nationals whose Japanese language proficiency is not high. Sentences such as those in passage B, which are short and convey a clear

message, are 'Easy Japanese'.

Easy Japanese, or simpler language for the dissemination of information, is currently used in a number of media. For example, NHK's News Web Easy as mentioned above and radio broadcasts, as well as attempts to simplify official documents by the Yokohama City Hall⁶, and web magazines introducing Japanese culture and sightseeing spots such as MATCH (<http://mcha-easy.com/>) have also incorporated Easy Japanese.

While the necessity of Easy Japanese is widely recognized, when it comes to the writing (or speaking) of Easy Japanese, a few issues have been raised. For instance, Tanaka et. al (2012) and Iwata (2014), amongst others, have attempted to create an Easy Japanese though the use of test question standards from the former JLPT. In particular, vocabulary and grammar items corresponding to the former Level 3 (lower intermediate level), or Level 4 (advanced beginner level) should form a standard for Easy Japanese. There are however, two problems with this. The first problem is whether it is appropriate to apply test question standards, a list of expressions designed for test making, to situations which do not conform to certain levels of acquisition, such as those that Easy Japanese may be used in. The second issue is that changing the structural elements of a sentence may not be enough to make the sentence easier to comprehend. Whether or not a sentence has indeed become easier can only be determined after creating the sentence with simple vocabulary and grammatical structures, and testing the results. In order to address this problem, research into gauging sentence difficulty from the point of view of readability is considered effective (Lee, 2016).

Readability refers to the ease of reading, and the aim of readability research is to rank the ease of reading for sentences base on superficial information such as the number of words or characters per sentence. Readability research in English can be traced back to Flesch (1948) and Smith & Kinkaid (1970), and various formulae for the calculation of readability have been put forward. Research into the readability of Japanese includes, for example, Tateishi et. al (1988), Sato (2011), Sakai (2011), Shibasaki & Hara (2010), Lee & Hasabe (in press), Sato (2011), Sakai (2011), Shibasaki & Hara (2010), and Lee & Hasabe (forthcoming) all provide

language education research.

4. Towards the development of education systems

In the development of educational systems for the Japanese language, of particular interest are independent e-learning systems. Japanese language e-learning systems began to appear in the 2000s, provided impetus by the government's e-Japan strategy, and post-2010, large budgets have been allocated to the development of web-based systems, overseen mainly by national universities and government institutions. The following are a few examples of such systems:

1. jplang: Tokyo University of Foreign Studies <https://jplang.tufs.ac.jp/>
2. Tsukuba Japanese e-learning: University of Tsukuba <http://e-nihongo.tsukuba.ac.jp/>
3. Marugoto: The Japan Foundation <http://marugotoweb.jp/>

Amongst the many electronic resources for the learning of Japanese, the above three in particular have a general-purpose nature, and have specific syllabi that corresponded to achievement goals. Tokyo University of Foreign Studies' jplang (1), is aimed at the beginner and intermediate levels, with explanations available in a number of foreign languages. Tsukuba University's Center for Distance Learning of Japanese and Japanese Issues has developed a Japanese e-learning system (2) complete with plentiful animations and video, and uses a direct method approach to provide access to beginner Japanese for the learner. The Japan Foundation's Marugoto (3), based upon the JF Standard for Japanese-Language Education, targets A1 and A2 levels, and has an accompanying textbook.

Various other e-learning systems have become available, each with their own specialization, just as an amalgamated course of Japanese culture and manga for Japanese language study 'Japanese in Anime & Manga' (<http://anime-manga.jp/>), or 'Erin's challenge!' (<http://erin.ne.jp/>). Japanese language e-courses for foreign-national nurses and certified care workers are available through the 'Japanese Care-navi' (<http://nihongodecarenavi.jp/>), and 'Toyota's Japanese e-learning' (<http://www.toyota-j.com/>)

e-learning/) provides resources for foreign residents. In recent years, initiatives for the distribution of Japanese language learning content include the portals 'Nihongo e-na' (<http://nihongo-ena.com>), administrated by the Japan foundation, and the 'Japanese Educational Content Web Sharing System' (<http://www.nihongo-ews.jp>), provided by the Agency for Cultural Affairs.

Another important area for Japanese language e-learning resources is the development of online diagnostic tests of Japanese ability. Figure 2 below shows two examples:



J-CAT Japanese test: <http://www.j-cat.org/>



Tsukuba Japanese tests collection: <http://ttbj.jp/>

Figure 2. Internet-based Japanese proficiency tests

Superior education necessitates good evaluation. The examples shown in Figure 2 are two advanced systems made available online from an early stage. Both systems were funded by JSPS grants, and the examination process from test to results may be taken entirely online, and free of charge, by anyone. Both are proficiency tests, and may be easily applied to a diverse range of Japanese language learners.

The motivation behind the development of both tests was the sudden increase in number of international students after the 1990s, and the dire need of improvement in placement tests. Many Japanese language education institutions needed to implement placement tests for prospective students, but the implementation of paper-based tests required an inordinate amount of manpower. Tests also had to be administered and evaluated in a short period of time, further increasing the burden on institutions. Computer-based tests were looked to as an option to address these issues. Computer-based tests such as those shown in Figure 2 above, have the following merits and demerits:

(1) Merits

- ① Scores are totaled automatically.
- ② Varied content is available.
- ③ Problems can be adjusted to the examinee's level.
- ④ There is reduced burden in terms of time and physical testing sites.

(2) Demerits

- ① Users' levels of computer literacy will have an effect on the score.
- ② System development incurs a large financial burden.
- ③ The test may only be held in properly equipped facilities.
- ④ The margin of error in automatic grading systems is large.

(Lee, 2015, p.25)

Given such merits and demerits, it cannot be said that computer-based testing is always superior to paper-based tests. The strengths of computer-based testing should, however, be recognized. It must also be emphasized

that such merits and demerits apply not only to testing, but to all e-learning systems.

Notes

- 1 2012 investigation data, Japanese Language Educational Institution. <https://www.jpf.go.jp/j/project/japanese/survey/result/index.html>
- 2 See the Investigation into the state of Japanese language education, 2015. http://www.bunka.go.jp/koho_hodo_oshirase/hodohappyo/2016072801.html
- 3 'Easy Japanese' for reducing disasters, Hirosaki University Department of Sociolinguistics. <http://human.cc.hirosaki-u.ac.jp/kokugo/EJ1a.htm>
- 4 NHK News Web Easy. <http://www3.nhk.or.jp/news/easy/>
- 5 The new Japanese Language Proficiency Test: JLPT. https://www.jlpt.jp/reference/pdf/guidebook_s_j.pdf
- 6 Information in Easy Japanese (Yokohama City Hall). <http://www.city.yokohama.lg.jp/lang/ej/kijun.html>

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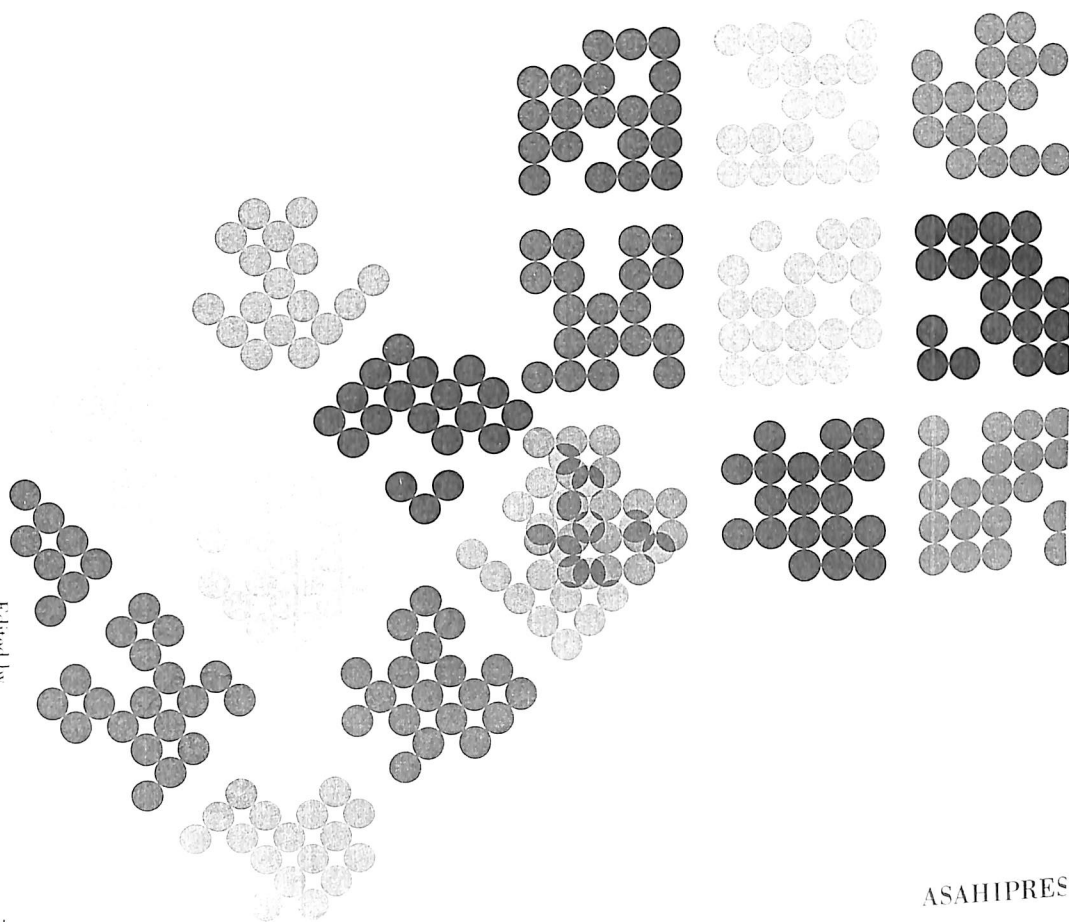
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