

Outline

International Roundtable on the Establishment of Standards for Japanese-Language Education

The importance of foreign-language and second-language education is increasing worldwide amid globalization and emergence of a “borderless” society that affects daily life in various ways. Currently, new steps are being taken in North America and Europe to address this issue.

In bringing these new steps into government policy, the comprehensive and organic connection between “standards” for languages being learned and “proficiency assessment standards” for these standards receives particular emphasis. Typical examples of this can be seen in American “National Standards” (1999) for each language that are based on criteria that are shared throughout the US, and in the CEFR (2001), which can be described as “standards” that are shared throughout Europe. And of course, LOTE—an Australian national project that was implemented ahead of these standards in 1988—can be described as a revolutionary approach that is matched with today’s situation.

Looking at Asia, negotiations of economic agreements are underway among the countries of the region, and it is expected that movement of people within the region will continue to increase in the future. Thus, given today’s multilingual and multicultural environment, it will be important to foster mutual understanding of language and culture as well as broad-minded attitudes toward other languages and cultures, while at the same time further developing active-oriented communicative proficiency. Today, there are 2.35 million people around the world studying Japanese (2003 “Survey of Overseas Organizations Involved in Japanese-Language Education,” The Japan Foundation), and it is expected that interest in Japan will continue to grow in the future. Furthermore, China—a country that is experiencing dramatic economic growth—has a plan to establish Chinese-language education bases in 100 sites overseas as an international development strategy, and it is currently working to coordinate this plan with each country concerned. And the Korean Language Proficiency Test is now being provided to slightly less than 20,000 people each year in 16 countries. It is against this backdrop that The Japan Foundation hopes to make a major contribution toward realization of a multilingual and multicultural society in Asia by establishing “standards” for the Japanese-language world, while at the same time keeping an eye on other Asian languages, such as Chinese and Korean.

In this connection, The Japan Foundation will host three Roundtables in FY2005, to which it will invite extremely prominent academics and experts in this field from the United States, Australia, South Korea, China, and Europe.

1. Background: Overall trends surrounding international Japanese-language education

- “Younger language learners”

Students in primary and secondary education courses make up over 60% of all Japanese-language learners. It is expected that this percentage will increase going into the future. How to smoothly and efficiently connect primary and secondary language education to higher education is a major issue currently facing the United States, Europe, Australia, China, and South Korea.

- “Diversifying purposes and goals”

The above-mentioned major shift (i.e., the increasing youth of learners) in the traditional framework for Japanese research and studies from the higher-education level to primary and secondary education is bringing motives for study and the setting of goals that are based on individual and everyday interests into the spotlight.

- “Substantiation of levels of achievement and proficiency”

Accordingly, formulation of language proficiency standards that ask “what will the learner be able to do” in Japanese and “how will this ability be useful”, and standard syllabi that are matched to proficiency standards have become desired.

2. Purpose: Establish Japanese-education standards

- a. Formulation of new proficiency standards
- b. Pursuit of language tests that are matched to the new proficiency standards
- c. Development of a standard syllabus and standard textbooks that reflect the two points above

3. Implementation:

Bearing the above-mentioned purpose in mind, three Roundtables will be held in FY2005 to set an agenda for formulating future policies.

First Session: May 14 (Sat) to May 15 (Sun), 2005

The Japan Foundation Conference Hall

Roundtable

This session will feature new philosophies for formulation of national curricula and standards (with focus on communicative proficiency) as well as leading examples of proficiency assessment tests that reflect these curricula/standards in the foreign-language education of each country. The session will then establish themes for proficiency and assessment standards in Japanese-language education as they emerge from this discussion. Requests and suggestions pertaining to these themes from overseas researchers, as well as comments on problems in adjusting these themes to Japanese from people concerned with Japanese-language education, will be accepted at this time.

Part 1: New theories pertaining to national curricula and standards, with focus on

communicative proficiency in each country

Part 2: Introduction of proficiency assessment tests that reflect language proficiency standards with reference to language tests around the world

Part 3: Discussion of themes to be set in establishing new proficiency standards in Japanese-language education