

Towards Global Proficiency Standards

First International Roundtable on the Establishment of Standards for Japanese-language Education

—Prospectus—

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Changes in Overseas Japanese-Language Education

Since its establishment in 1972, the Japan Foundation has been active in fostering Japanese-language education abroad. Contact and interchange among people is the driving force behind international exchange, and language is the key to communication for promoting mutual understanding. At the time the Foundation was set up, there were only around 100,000 people worldwide studying Japanese and Japanese-language learning was considered a subject for university or similarly advanced level study and a tool of scholarly research by Japan scholars.

After the collapse of the Cold War political structure and rapid advances in the mass media beginning in the early 1990s, societies, cultures, and economies around the world have become borderless and globalized. These developments radically changed the Japanese-language education environment as well. Many countries revised their foreign-language education policies. Concurrently, there was a rapid surge of interest in the Japanese language, and the number of foreign students of the Japanese language exceeded one million for the first time. The number of Japanese-language learners continued to grow even after the collapse of the bubble economy in the early 1990s, exceeding 2 million by the latter half of the decade.

According to the latest Survey of Overseas Organizations Involved in Japanese-Language Education by the Japan Foundation in 2003, 2.36 million people in 127 countries and regions outside of Japan are studying Japanese in institutions (Fig. 1). Moreover, 65 percent of these people were elementary, middle, or high-school students, which shows that Japanese-language education is becoming an established subject of study in the schools. In particular, of the top ten countries in terms of number of Japanese-language learners (see Fig. 2), the majority of students in South Korea, Australia, Indonesia, and New Zealand study the language at the elementary or secondary education level, and more young people are studying the language because they are attracted by contemporary Japanese culture.

As the number of overseas Japanese-language learners has increased, the motivations and aims of the students have moved beyond purely practical reasons such as taking exams, studying abroad, or employment. Today, the three main motivations among students learning Japanese

at all levels of education are interest in Japanese culture, communication in Japanese, and interest in the Japanese language itself. The rapid globalization of culture in recent years has also contributed to increased interest in and more positive evaluations of Japanese culture. It has also brought about major changes in Japanese-language education abroad. Japanese *manga* comics, animation, video games and music have become very popular not only in Europe and the United States but also in Asia and the Middle East.

Review of Japanese-Language Proficiency Tests

One other framework symbolizing the popularity of the Japanese language abroad is the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test administered jointly by the Japan Foundation and Japan Educational Exchanges and Services. The aim of this proficiency test is to assess and certify in Japan and abroad Japanese-language proficiency among individuals whose mother tongue is not Japanese. The test is administered once a year on the same date throughout the world. The first test, held in 1984, was taken by 7,000 people, and 20 years later, in 2004, the number of test-takers exceeded 300,000 (Fig. 3). In 2004, the test was given overseas in 99 cities in 39 countries and regions. In China, 90,000 people took the test, far exceeding the 59,000 who took it in Japan. There were also 58,000 test-takers in South Korea (Fig. 4).

Although 300,000 may be a small figure in comparison to the 580,000 people who took the TOEFL CBT in English in 2003-2004 and the 3.4 million who took the TOEIC test in 2003-2004, it came as an unexpected surprise to the joint organizers of the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test that the number of test-takers in Japanese exceeded that of test-takers who sat for other languages proficiency test than English and French. As more and more people move to Japan, and as Japanese companies continue to expand their activities overseas, there will be an even stronger need for this, the only Japanese-language proficiency test recognized as an international standard.

In multilingual and multicultural Europe, meanwhile, which is moving toward pan-European unification, the Council of Europe established a Common European Framework of Reference for Languages and a European Language Portfolio based on this, where language-learners themselves record their learning of other languages and cultures. Implementing common framework/standards for foreign-language education in Europe (syllabi, curricula, textbooks, compiling of test questions, and assessment of language-learners' abilities) improved the transparency of the qualifications presented by individuals moving from one place to another for schooling or work, and has promoted regional cooperation in foreign-language education.

In Asia, various countries in the region are negotiating economic partnership agreements and there is even talk of creating a common Asian currency. To facilitate the movement of people throughout the region, as in Europe, an issue for future consideration would be the introduction of uniform foreign-language education standards and proficiency testing standards, with Japan and the Japanese language taking the initiative, and mainly the Japanese, Chinese, and Korean languages promoting their use. Helping people to understand each other's language/culture and become more open to other languages and cultures would contribute greatly to creating an Asian community embracing a multilingual stance and coexistence in a multicultural context.

To accomplish this, the first thing that must be done is to redefine ideas concerning language proficiency standards, focusing on active communication ability: how language proficiency can be helpful, and what proficiency can help individuals accomplish. This will require a thorough review of Japanese-language proficiency standards and necessitate changes to Japanese-language proficiency tests themselves in the light of global trends in language education. Establishing the position of Japanese, a non-Western language, in the global community is not just a means of promoting understanding of Japanese culture; it is also a way of contributing to the world's cultural diversity as one of many languages. I hope that Japanese themselves will look at their language more objectively, along with Korean and Chinese, as one of the world's many languages.

Establishing Standards for Japanese-Language Education

The Japanese language is being used to communicate manufacturing culture in factories throughout China and Eastern Europe; it is studied as an aspect of an appealing foreign culture in the schools of Central Asia, and it is more familiar to children in Australia through video games and *manga* comics than Japanese often imagine. Japanese themselves need to develop more awareness of this reality.

An appeal making a case for “The Importance of Japanese-Language Education Around the World” signed by prominent scholars, intellectuals, and members of the business sector was submitted to the Japanese Government’s Chief Cabinet Secretary on December 1, 2004. The appeal underlined the importance of the perceptions of Japanese themselves toward the Japanese language and presented clear directions for positioning and encouraging Japanese-language education. Various aspects of the Japanese language—Japanese—as a global cultural asset, Japanese reflecting a “cool” Japanese culture, and Japanese to communicate manufacturing culture—were described in the appeal, which reexamined the international significance of Japanese-language education. Echoing this view, a point has now been reached where the Japanese-language education activities of the Japan Foundation should gradually shift from reactive support in response to the increase in the number of Japanese language-learners to assertive promotion for developing demand while also keeping qualitative changes in mind.

As we move from support to promotion, we must admit that Japanese-language education has so far lacked a system for relating teaching “standards” to proficiency assessment standards, something that is a shared notion in foreign-language education policies in Australia, Europe, the United States, and Britain. We have reached the new realization that the results obtained through support for Japanese-language education—making Japanese easier to learn and clarifying its usefulness—and whether this can be linked to promoting international understanding will depend entirely on the comprehensive establishment of “standards” and assessment standards. This is the topic we must pursue as a new era of Japanese-language education begins.

This first roundtable will explore, in the first session, new ideas for formulating national curricula and standards with an emphasis on communicative ability in participant countries’ foreign-language education, and review leading examples of proficiency assessment tests

reflecting those standards in the second session. The roundtable will also examine future directions for worldwide-standardized tests for German, French, Chinese, Japanese, and other languages, and finally identify issues for setting Japanese-language proficiency standards and assessment standards emerging from those discussions. We hope to receive useful advice from the foreign experts gathered here based on their broad knowledge and perspicuous insight and to bring new focus to the specific problems of non-Western languages such as Chinese, Korean, and Japanese.

Fig. 1 Trends in Numbers of Students

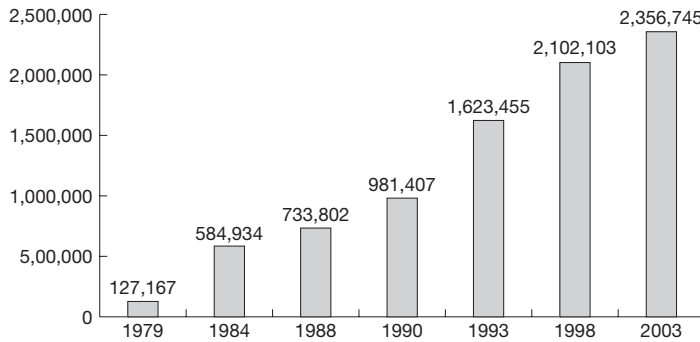


Fig. 2 Composition of Students by Country

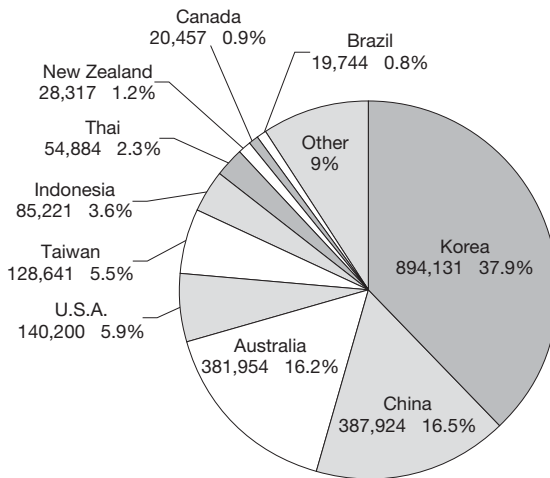


Fig. 3 Trends in Numbers of JLPT Examinees

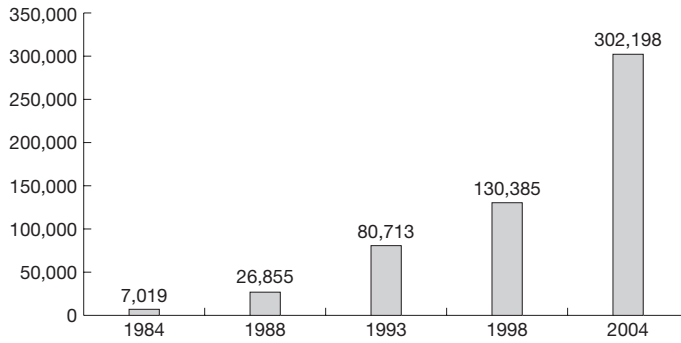


Fig. 4 Number of JLPT Examinees by countries 2004

