



## The Potential Negative Impact of the Institutionalisation of Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) Teaching

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### Abstract

*Anime is considered one of the main reasons students study JFL. However, many formally trained Japanese teachers do not endorse its use as a good learning tool. As a rule, they adhere to the curriculum driven by the Japanese Language Proficiency Test. Their reservations about anime and social media stem from the common belief that students should focus on learning 'proper' Japanese: grammatically correct and polite Japanese, rather than informal language and slang (1). This paper examines this view critically and highlights the intriguing situation in which conventional teaching materials avoid using authentic resources, including anime. This issue is closely related to the strict criteria of the grammar-driven approach, which focuses on a specific type of Japanese. The particular system neglects spoken Japanese, as it's considered not to adhere to grammar. Instead, it teaches a 'formal' constructed version that closely resembles written Japanese but is presented as a spoken language through dialogues. It can be misleading for students, especially beginners, who would not know the difference, and indeed, many beginner students talk as if they were reading from written text. It is fascinating to learn that written Japanese has a relatively recent history, emerging in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries with significant grammatical influence from European languages, notably English (2). Remarkably, the development of Japanese grammar alongside this has sparked debates about its fidelity in accurately representing the Japanese language, as its formation followed Western linguistic concepts (3) This may mean the problems students encounter with spoken Japanese is not that the language does not follow grammar but is culturally more Japanese than the written variety since it has remained largely uninfluenced by foreign languages. The main issue here is that conventional materials following the JLPT curriculum, including textbooks and courses, don't cater for students who wish to learn to speak and understand spoken Japanese, but they are unaware of this fact.*

**Keywords:** *The Japanese Language Proficiency Test, authentic materials (anime), spoken language, one-size-fits-all approach and alternative approach.*

### Introduction

The institutionalisation of teaching Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) began in the 1970s due to the increasing popularity of the language as a business tool worldwide. In 1972, the Japanese government considered it necessary to standardise the practice, and the Japan Foundation was established under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. It essentially functions as a vehicle for conducting cultural diplomacy to promote Japan through various cultural activities, and providing support for teaching and learning the language is a significant part of its role. Of relevance here is the establishment of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) in 1984 in conjunction with Japan Educational Exchanges and Services. Since then, the testing system has become prevalent in language teaching as most courses and mainstream textbooks directly or indirectly suggest they prepare students for the JLPT examinations.

This paper examines one of the negative implications of the predominance of the JLPT-led system, focusing on the situation in the UK, where many students with JLPT qualifications exhibit poor oral communication skills. Thus, the paper investigates the system's emphasis on grammar and written language in the new JLPT, introduced in 2010. Accordingly, it presents the rationale for this move, the new aim, relevant changes and the political and economic factors behind its establishment. Central to the new JLPT is its claim to measure 'communicative competence', which drew much criticism as the new format does not examine students' productive skills (4, 5 and 6). This paper suggests the JLPT's disproportionate focus on grammar and written language may be more problematic because students following the system do not experience spoken language. It argues that spoken language needs to be taught since it is culturally distinct from written language, as the latter was constructed with significant



"grammatical borrowing" from European languages. Here, Japanese grammar is equally unhelpful since its development relied much on concepts and theories in Western Linguistics.

### **Objectives:**

The main objectives of this paper are twofold. First, it aims to demonstrate the institutionalisation of JFL teaching revolving around the JLPT. Second, it attempts to show the role of JLPT in shaping the curriculum, thus, it argues, the outcome: students' communicative competence in oral communication.

### **Research Methods:**

It is necessary to introduce the background to this research before detailing the methods. While working in a corporate environment, I observed many experienced learners of Japanese with poor oral communication skills, particularly in listening. By experienced learners, I mean those with at least one year of formal Japanese training. Interestingly, these included those with higher JLPT qualifications (i.e. N1 and N2 levels). Their speaking skills were adequate; however, their use of language was unnatural: they sounded as if they were reading textbooks aloud. These led to investigations into the JLPT and related materials, which revealed the significant influence of the JLPT on the Japanese teaching curriculum, focusing on grammar and written language. Therefore, students had few opportunities to experience spoken Japanese.

Thus, this research began with unstructured observations of experienced Japanese learners with poor speaking and listening skills within a corporate setting in London, UK, from 2013 to 2018. I also noted a similar phenomenon as I began teaching the language professionally in 2020. Below are the research questions:

- Why do experienced students have poor oral communication skills, including those with higher JLPT qualifications (i.e. N1 and N2 levels)?
- What are the JLPT syllabi, and what aspects of the system are responsible for this outcome?

I conducted a literature review of academic journals and books about the new JLPT of 2010. Following this, it became clear that the main issue with the system is its claim that the examinations examine students' "communicative competence" while they do not test their productive skills, particularly in speaking (4, 5 & 6).

The research methods were informed by relational approaches employed in Cultural Studies and Anthropology (7, 8, 9 & 10). They advocate that objects can be studied as if they were persons by examining the relationships they have formed since their inceptions. Thus, this research conducted a relational historical study of the JLPT. The data collection method was documentary research of primary and secondary sources to create a biography story of the JLPT system.

### **Findings**

#### ***The Introduction of the New JLPT***

According to the Japan Foundation, the diversification of the needs of the examinees was the main reason for revisions, leading to the introduction of the new JLPT in 2010. Indeed, the number of students who study Japanese rose from 127,000 in 1979 to 3.65 million in 2009, and those who took the JLPT examinations rose from 7,000 (8,000 applied) in 1984 to 770,000 (900,000 applied) in 2009. Thus, they argued that the system had to be updated accordingly. For example, the new system allows students to take examinations twice a year rather than once. Also, they adjusted the gaps in difficulty by adding another level between the N3 and N2 levels, making the new system consist of five instead of four levels (11).

#### ***Political and Economic Factors***

Another highly instrumental factor, albeit not mentioned by the JLPT, is the decade-long economic stagnation from 1991 to 2001, known as 'Japan's lost decade', prompting the Japanese government to



turn to 'Soft Power'. The new JLPT can be seen as part of the political strategy to market Japanese cultural goods, such as Japanese food, manga and anime. Of interest here is that the government set quantitative targets to increase the number of students studying Japanese and taking the JLPT exams. For example, the document produced by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, entitled 'The expansions of growth opportunities through Soft Power', published in 2011, clearly states their ten-year plan to increase the number of students taking Japanese courses run by Japan Foundation to 30,000, while its target for the year 2012 was 10,800. (12) Since the new JLPT came into being, the number of applicants has significantly grown worldwide. In 2023, the number of examinees came to 1.27 million (an estimated 1.48 million applied), of which overseas applicants exceeded 1 million "for the first time"(13).

### ***The Prevalence of the JLPT System in the U.K.***

The JLPT is promoted widely and has test centres throughout the world. In the U.K., all four test centres are at universities, namely the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), the University of Edinburgh, The University of Leicester and Cardiff University, whose associations may help add more authority. Indeed, the JLPT has established itself as one of the international standards for describing Japanese language ability, comparable to The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in the U.K. For example, eleven out of fifteen non-randomly selected institutions in the country, according to 'online reputation', teach Japanese courses that claim to help prepare students for JLPT. If they do not mention the JLPT, they use textbooks, which are considered to cover the syllabi at the beginner levels (N5 to N4) (See Table I below). While these books do not openly claim to follow the JLPT curriculum, online advisory services and participants in relevant online forums suggest they help students prepare for N4 and N5 level examinations.

<b>Name of Institution (In alphabetical order)</b>	<b>Mention compatibility with the JLPT curriculum</b>	<b>Use of Textbooks covering the JLPT curriculum</b>
Alpha Japanese Language School	✓ <input type="checkbox"/>	
Cambridge University	✓ <input type="checkbox"/>	
City Lit	✓ <input type="checkbox"/>	
City University	✓ <input type="checkbox"/>	
Dear Asia		<i>Japanese For Busy People</i>
International House	✓ <input type="checkbox"/>	
Ito School	✓ <input type="checkbox"/>	
King's College London		<i>Genki</i>
Lingo Class	✓ <input type="checkbox"/>	
Oxford University		<i>Japanese For Busy People</i>
School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS)	✓ <input type="checkbox"/>	
The University of Cardiff	✓ <input type="checkbox"/>	
The University of Edinburgh	✓ <input type="checkbox"/>	



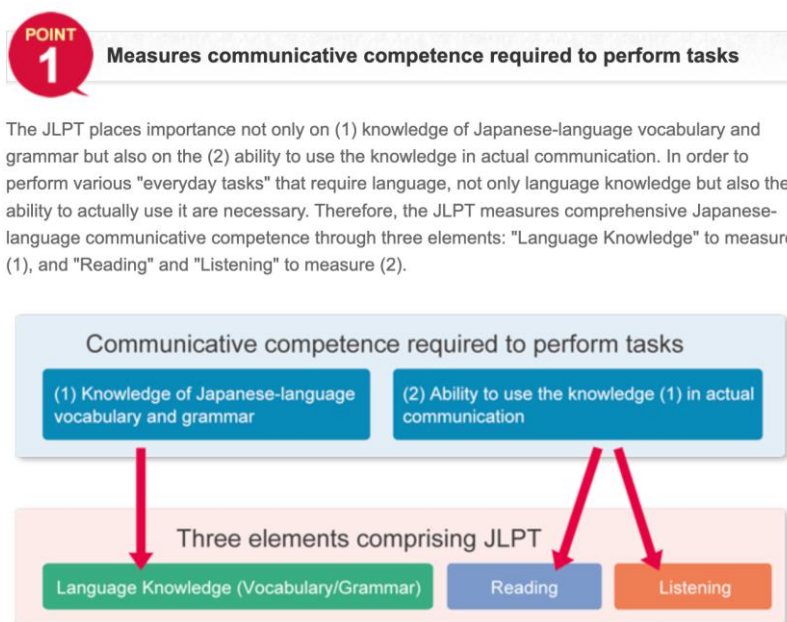
The University of Leicester	✓ <input type="checkbox"/>	
UCL		<i>Minna no Nihongo</i>

Table I

As can be seen, institutions tend to use one of the following textbooks: *Minna no Nihongo* I and II, *Japanese For Busy People* I, II and III and *Genki* I and II. Indeed, these textbooks can be considered the most well-established beginner textbooks in the industry. The origins of *Minna no Nihongo* and *Japanese For Busy People* date back to the 1970s. The first edition of *Genki* was published in 1998; however, its publisher is affiliated with the oldest English-language newspaper in Japan, founded in 1897. These textbooks share similar syllabi despite their differing target audiences. These textbooks provide dialogues in Japanese and translations and explanations in Romanised characters, except for *Minna no Nihongo* (only in Japanese) and the Romanised version of *Japanese for Busy People*. They all teach formal Japanese through dialogue, and the main aim is to teach grammar points focusing on verbs. For example, their first books begin with the formal copula 'desu' or 'to be' in English as the grammar point and the sentence structure, X wa Y desu (X is Y). They also teach the writing system, including *kanji* or Chinese characters. At the N5 level, students learn eighty *kanji*, and the number goes up to one hundred and seventy at the N4 level. These textbooks cover the requirements more than adequately.

### Criticisms about the JLP

Overall, academic responses to the new system have been critical. The main issue is their central claim, suggesting that the examinations measure the 'communicative competence' コミュニケーション能力 of learners in performing 'everyday tasks that require language' (See Figure I) (<http://jlpt.jp/e/about/points.html>). They consider it untenable as they do not examine productive skills, especially in speaking (4,5 &6).



Due to the large scale of testing, answers will be machine-scored. Note that the JLPT does not include sections to measure speaking or writing proficiency directly.

Figure I (<http://jlpt.jp/e/about/points.html>)



"This new test takes full advantage of the most advanced research in Japanese pedagogy and testing theory, and reflects the vast wealth of data accumulated since the original JLPT was launched over 25 years ago" (14).

Empirical evidence also supports the academic researchers' negative assessment of the new JLPT. Many recruitment agencies and related service providers in Japan warn potential employers about the unreliability of the JLPT qualifications on their websites. They suggest that the N1 and N2 certificates do not guarantee holders' oral fluency in the language. For example, Willhof, a human resources-related service provider in Japan, clearly states: "Some of those who achieve N1 level (the highest) in the JLPT don't speak Japanese well". (<https://willhof-work.co.jp/journal/3142/>). Many of these companies point out that the JLPT examinations favour those skilled at reading comprehension and kanji knowledge, which rules out many with good oral communication skills. It is, therefore, reasonable to assume many Japanese companies know the reputation of the JLPT.

### ***A Different Perspective on the New JLPT and Issues***

I agree that the JLPT cannot claim to measure the "communicative competence" of students; however, for different reasons. As Figure 1 indicates, the JLPT focuses on grammar and written language, although they devote roughly 30% of the time to testing listening skills (15). A historical examination of Japanese grammar and written language reveals this approach presents more fundamental problems.

The reasons are twofold. Firstly, Japanese grammar is unsuitable for understanding written language fully, let alone spoken Japanese, since it was developed by applying Western approaches to studying Japanese beginning in the late nineteenth century. Secondly, the written language, which Japanese grammar purports to explain, was created with significant "grammatical borrowing" (2) from English and other European languages. As such, it is markedly different from spoken Japanese, which is culturally more Japanese. Similarly, Kanji is considered a large part of the Japanese language; however, it is another element that makes the written Japanese more foreign. Therefore, focusing on these aspects does not help students improve communicative competence in oral communication. It is highly relevant since it influences teaching.

### ***The Creation of Modern Written Japanese***

Modern written Japanese was established after undergoing a lengthy and arduous process initiated by the Genbun-Itchi Movement in the late nineteenth century. It was to reconcile differences between the written and spoken language, following European examples. At the time, Japan was experiencing an unprecedented modernisation/Westernisation process to catch up with the West. Therefore, they considered creating a standard written language to educate the nation was necessary. The movement was elitist, led by prominent writers and intellectuals. While there was a diverse range of regional dialects, those involved in the project preferred the speech patterns of the upper class. More importantly, the project members were experts in European literature and eagerly turned to the languages of powerful nations they admired for inspiration, such as English and Russian.

'The Influence of English on Japanese Grammar' by Akira Miura, a linguist and Japanese language specialist, sheds light on the significant influence of European languages in this process. Miura suggests that the foundation was laid in the eighteenth century. Then, Japanese scholars of Dutch studies significantly contributed to the effort by pioneering literal translation from a European language into Japanese. Holland was the only Western trading partner, and Japan acquired modern knowledge, particularly in science and technology, brought into the country. In translating Dutch texts, the scholars often created words and expressions to accommodate terms and concepts that didn't exist in Japanese. For example, the auxiliary verb **である** (de aru) or 'is/'are' and the personal pronouns for 'he' and 'she' or **彼** (kare) and **彼女** (kanojo) are some of the notable ones. Miura claims these "grammatical innovations" helped translate other languages, specifically English. As for the effect on the Japanese written language, his statement sums it up.

Today, we complain about some authors whose styles are made stilted by the presence of too many translation-like elements.



Interestingly, Miura considers the English influence enriched Japanese, nevertheless. (2)

### ***The Development of Japanese Grammar***

Japanese grammar underwent a considerable Westernisation process, not dissimilar to written Japanese. Accordingly, the Western concept of Linguistics (西洋言語学) was introduced by British academic Basil Hall Chamberlain in 1886, paving the way for establishing Japanese language studies as an official discipline in 1898. Remarkably, this was despite Japanese scholars' approaches to the subject having developed to 'high standards'. In examining the modernisation of Japanese Language Studies, Toru Kuginuki sheds light on Japanese researchers' interest in Western philosophy as they struggled to understand the Western approaches to the studies of languages. He describes Japanese scholars' endeavour as challenging, tinged with 'conflict' and 'controversy' (16).

One notable instance of this is the strivings by Yoshio Yamada who authored 'Theory of Japanese Grammar (日本文法論)' in 1906. He found defining the term 'sentence' challenging and even went as far as developing a conceptual framework of "統覚作用 (tougaku sayo) or 'psychological drive'". For this, he studied Wilhelm Wundt's notion of psychology and Immanuel Kant's idea of 'apperception' or 'self-consciousness'. It is revealing that Yamada had to approach such a simple notion as 'sentence' in a distinctly complex manner: he could not fathom what "a complete thought or meaning" meant. This episode suggests that the concept is too alien to Japanese culture and is, therefore, reasonable to assume it is unsuitable for understanding the Japanese language.

Over a century later, the struggle to reconcile Japanese grammar with the Japanese language continues. Many studies demonstrate the unsuitability of applying Western approaches to studying Japanese. For example, Akira Mikami argues that the Western concept of 'subject' (主語) does not exist in Japanese as he criticises the 'indiscriminate imitation' of English grammar (17). Shigehiro Kato is also vocal about the foreign concept of part of speech as unsuitable for analysing Japanese (18). Mutsumi Yamamoto argues that agency in Japanese works differently from English, which 'tends to highlight agency in expressing actions and events'. She claims, however, that agency is less clear as potential agents tend to be 'impersonalised' in Japanese (19).

### **Discussion**

The institutionalisation of JFL teaching or its standardisation according to the JPLT curriculum comes with many issues. This paper has focused on an overlooked aspect in assessing the claim that the JLPT examine communicative competence: the JLPT's focus on grammar and written language, neglecting spoken language. It means it does not pay attention to students' oral communication skills. Its implications can be manifold and complex, but the main issue is that most stakeholders, including many teachers and students, are unaware of the negative impact of following this approach, especially if they are to teach and learn speaking and listening skills. In short, students will not acquire oral communicative competence in the language by following the system.

Teaching 'grammatically correct Japanese' is considered imperative in JFL teaching, together with 'polite language' (1), which explains the emphasis on grammar and written language in the JLPT system, including the conventional textbooks and courses. Following this, it is implied that spoken Japanese should not be taught because it is not grammatically correct and impolite. In many languages, spoken and written varieties are distinct. English is one good example. Interestingly, Nguyen Cao Thanh argues that spoken grammar should be taught separately since it is vastly different from standard grammar, which is focused on written language. He makes this statement as he examines the differences between written and spoken grammar in English, which was prompted by the fact he teaches Vietnamese speakers. He claims the difference between written and spoken language in Vietnamese is insignificant (20).

I would argue this is the case for the Japanese language. As I have demonstrated, modern written Japanese was constructed in a specific way by incorporating much 'grammatical borrowing' from European languages, notably English. This makes written Japanese substantially different from spoken Japanese. The main problem with the current situation is that students are not aware they are



learning written Japanese. Japanese teaching materials usually do not specify that they teach written Japanese, and most Japanese textbooks include dialogues, which gives the impression that spoken language is taught. Yet, they place much emphasis on grammar, even though it is considered for understanding written language. In addition, Japanese grammar was developed with much Western influence, which is claimed to be unsuitable for studying the language on the whole.

## Conclusion

This paper has examined the institutionalisation of teaching Japanese JFL, which began with the increasing demand as Japanese became considered a sought-after business tool in the 1970s. In doing so, it focused on the prevalence of the JLPT, established by the Japan Foundation under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, particularly after the introduction of the new JLPT in 2010 with substantial revisions. Despite its popularity, the paper has demonstrated its negative aspects, particularly its deficiencies in testing oral communication skills because of its focus on grammar and written language. Also, it has shown how influential the system may be in standardising the curriculum, as many institutions and textbooks claim to cover their syllabi. While this study focused on the situation in the UK, it is reasonable to assume its negative impact applies to students elsewhere as long as they seek to acquire oral communication skills. As indicated, many students with JLPT qualifications exhibit poor speaking and listening skills, and they are not entirely to blame. Although the JLPT claims to measure 'communicative competence', that is not what happens: they pay most attention to grammar and written language. Moreover, because of its apparent influence on the general curriculum, it is difficult for students to find ways to address their lack of progress.

It has been argued that spoken language needs to be taught since it is utterly distinct from written language. It is more so because the latter was created with much grammatical influence from European languages: it is culturally less Japanese. Also, it has been suggested that it is necessary to consider a grammar that helps understand spoken language, as the current variety does not serve the purpose, let alone written language. Again, the problem is the way in which it was developed: it has been informed by concepts and theories in Western Linguistics.

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