



**INDO-JAPAN CHAMBER OF COMMERCE & INDUSTRY**

# **JF STANDARD for Japanese Language Education**

by  
**Geethanjali Rajan**

RESOURCE PAPER - 12



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## **PREFACE**

IJCCI's Language School, with all humility, I would say, is a professionally run school, appreciated by the Japanese and Indians. The Language School conducts need-based conversation programmes and the regular coaching for Japan Foundation's JLPT programmes. Besides language teaching, the school also teaches Japanese culture, Japanese mores, business etiquette etc. The school facilitates interaction among interested Japanese language students on these important subjects regularly through the *Nihongo Koryuu Kurabu*. A lot of effort is put in to make the language learning interesting and easy. While attention is paid to the Japanese language teaching methodology and the resource material for the various programmes, efforts are also made to compare and contrast; to understand and assimilate the foreign language teaching and the various standards set-in internationally for the purpose. This Resource Paper is another effort by IJCCI and I hope the Japanese language teacher and student community would appreciate it.

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**Suguna Ramamoorthy**  
Secretary-General

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## **Introduction**

In the global context that we live in, businesses, economic ties, trade relations, and cultural interactions are all equally important. In the current circumstance of increased engagement between India and Japan, as well as the people-to-people exchanges that both the Abe and Modi governments are focusing on, it is pertinent to point out that 2017 has been designated as the Year of Japan-India Friendly Exchanges and marks the 60<sup>th</sup> year of Cultural agreement between the two countries. While the goals of understanding and improved relations between the two countries have been explored in great detail in various fora, it is necessary to take cognizance of the fact that the basis of a good relationship rests on the strong foundation of language and its use for good communication. This paper tries to explore the learning and testing standards that prevail in the area of language education and also, the role of the Japan Foundation in drawing guidelines that are highly commendable in the specific sphere of Japanese language education for foreign learners.

The Japan Foundation, which has been working towards better ties and understanding between Japan and various countries of the world for the last 45 years, has had its efforts concentrated on intellectual exchange,

cultural understanding and language education. The belief that language and communication is the basic building block of understanding has not been overstated. Their efforts towards improving Japanese language education in various parts of the world and the necessity to give all language learning a cultural context, has been a very successful strategy. After all, any language learnt without the cultural understanding of the country is half done and not of practical use. Japan Foundation reworked their approach to standardizing the metrics and rubrics of Japanese language education by working on the JF Standard in 2005. Five years later, they published the JF Standard for Japanese Language Education 2010. This is the standard tool that will be explored in this paper.

### **The Standardization Conundrum**

The basis of science and research is standard processes and results. But when it comes to languages, how is it relevant? This problem is one that has been faced by language learners, educators, facilitators and researchers for a long time. Let us take the case of a person learning a foreign language or any language that is not his/her mother tongue. How does one evaluate the level of language ability? For a very long time, people wrote out biodatas that said fluent/very fluent or used the RWS (read / write / speak) columns. It is well known that in the absence of standards in gauging the level of proficiency in language learning, the result is a subjective assessment by the assessor of the learner. What assessor 1 thinks is 'fluent' may well be 'very fluent' to assessor 2. Hence, language learning standards are essential, so that they set guidelines that are easily understood and used by educators, learners and other stakeholders.

### **Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)**

The Council of Europe established the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in 2001 after 30-odd years of research by linguists, educators, researchers and specialists. This forms the basis of standards in measuring language proficiency across 39 languages in Europe. This framework is also used in other parts of the world (over 40

countries use this framework).The CEFR revolutionized the way of gauging language proficiency by dividing all language skills into 6 bands starting from A1 and going up incrementally to C2 (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2). Each band defines what a learner is capable of doing with language. Hence, across the international spectrum and regardless of individual assessors, one can gauge how proficient a learner is. For instance, the matrix defines that a person who is capable of making a business presentation fluently has the level of say, B2. Or that a person who is capable of conducting basic exchanges while shopping has the proficiency level of A1 and so on. In this manner, a learner can also self-assess one's own language proficiency. Hence, it is safe to say that the CEFR is a successful attempt at making a standard matrix for language proficiency and now, a learner of English or French in India (or any other country of the world) can easily be described as being at a particular level of proficiency and a corporate entity in Europe will understand how proficient he/she is before employing them.

### **Japan Foundation's Rubric and the CEFR**

The JF Standard that Japan Foundation released in 2010, is based on the CEFR standard framework and that makes it easy to be accepted as an international standard. The basic measure of the JF standard is the ability of the learner to use Japanese for various everyday activities and tasks and is strongly rooted in the cultural context of Japan also. The bands of proficiency are the same as those of CEFR (A1 to C2) and are further broken down to describe what the person can do and how much, through “**can do**” statements. For instance, each statement starts with the phrase “I can ...” and learners can assess the level of proficiency by themselves as well.

The advantage of using the same matrix as the CEFR is that language proficiency can be gauged in an internationally accepted standard for Japanese too. The JF standard uses both CEFR and JF “Can do” statements. However, there are a few differences between the CEFR “can do” statements and the JF “can do” statements. While CEFR uses abstract multipurpose descriptors, JF “can dos” are related to practical examples of activities where Japanese is used.

For instance,

- I can interact in a simple way provided the other person speaks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help. This is a descriptor of the beginner level of A1.
- I can make a short congratulatory speech to a bride and groom explaining one's relationship to them - A2

This approach can help the learner plan his/her learning based on actual communication. Further, a learner is quite clear about his/her proficiency in an international environment. A1 and A2 would be Basic Users, B1 and B2 would be Independent Users and C1 and C2 would be Proficient Users of Japanese language. A prospective employer too is likely to know how much the applicant is capable of doing in a Japanese language environment. The greatest advantage is of course, for the teacher whose goals and activities towards learner outcomes become clearer.

### **The JF Standard Tree**

From the point of view of an educator teaching Japanese to foreign learners, the JF Standard tree is a boon. A sakura or cherry blossom tree that explains the various aspects of language is an essential part of the JF Standard structure. This tree is drawn out like any other tree with branches, leaves and flowers and also roots. What it represents are the various aspects of language functions.

The portion of the tree that is above the ground represents communicative language activities and has three main aspects of using the language:

1. Receptive activities This refers to a person's ability to understand the language. This may further be divided into listening or reading comprehension. This area deals with a person's ability to understand a speech in Japanese or understand an essay or article in Japanese.
2. Productive activities This area deals with expressive language and relates to a person's capability in writing a piece in Japanese or making a speech in the language.

3. Interactive activities This is the important area of interaction with others and consists of conversational skills, ability to answer questions in interviews and also interaction through written communication.

All the above main areas are divided into subskills and help an educator understand the activities required to strengthen that particular area of communication. Based on a learner's learning objectives, classroom and course activities can be tailored to ensure successful learning outcomes.

The portion that is below the ground or the root of the tree represents the competencies of communicative language. This, in turn, is subdivided into 3 main areas:

1. Linguistic competency
2. Sociolinguistic competency
3. Pragmatic competency

These areas are vital for any language learning and deals with the fundamentals, foundation or the “nuts and bolts” vocabulary, grammar and so on.

The JF Standard Sakura tree is a very useful tool in classroom activity management and a basis of what should be planned for learner outcomes and lesson planning.

### **The Current Testing and Certification Scenario in India**

Japan Foundation and Japan Educational Exchanges and Services together have been conducting the JLPT or the Japanese Language Proficiency Test, which has been the gold standard for non-native learners of Japanese across the world. Started in 1984, it has morphed into an international standard with many improvements along the three decade journey. This too is a standard to measure proficiency or competencies in Japanese and has worked well for many of its stakeholders. In India too, most non- university courses prep students to clear the JLPT and its levels. The standardized certification is a necessity for employment in jobs requiring Japanese proficiency.

Any system has its pitfalls despite the best intentions. JLPT too has turned into a certificate “goal” in the hands of some institutes. To



explain further, Japanese has to be learnt with the goal of clear communication and cultural context, to be successful. While the classroom should focus on skills and competencies involved in communication, the end result can be a certificate to prove this competency. However, in many cases, the classroom itself makes JLPT the goal and not communication. Much like many educational institutions in other subjects focusing on certificates and exams rather than the learning, some Japanese language institutes in India too are guilty of running courses that make sure that the student passes the JLPT, rather than learn to communicate in the language. JLPT does not test expressive language or interaction orally (unlike the IELTS in English). It also is an exam with a Multiple Choice Question format. Hence, there are cases where learners who possess JLPT certificates and appear for interviews disappoint in their lack of conversation or spoken/ written skills. This cannot be described as a disadvantage of the JLPT. It is more a subversion of the system by the schools that run Japanese courses. Again, this may not be willful, but more due to a lack of understanding of what real communication skills are required.

Currently, the JLPT is the existent and popular certification standard in India, with corporate companies demanding that they require a candidate with N3 or N2 level of JLPT. However, delve a little deeper and the answers are not so easy. Prospective employers say that it is always better to have a candidate who communicates well, rather than an N2 certified candidate who struggles to speak. To overcome these gaps in expectations and delivery, the JF Standard of 2010 must be used in the class room, and to assess learner outcomes. This does not necessitate that the JLPT be stopped. Both could continue in tandem and strengthen the process of certifying Japanese Language Proficiency at international standards.

### **India and the JF standard**

In India, the Japan Foundation in New Delhi offers courses in Japanese that adhere to the JF Standard and are certified as A1 or A2, instead of the earlier JLPT standard alone. A few other institutes have also started using the JF Standard based approach. However, what is even more interesting for a prospective learner of Japanese is that Japan Foundation's language education wing did not just stop at

implementing and formulating standards for testing and learning. They have brought out a series of textbooks (Marugoto series) that actually make implementing the JF Standard easier. These textbooks cater to the learners' communication needs and come as an easy and fun method to learn Japanese, along with technology based web based materials, videos, worksheets, and cultural inputs. The books are being made available in India and this is an opportunity for the existing approach in Japanese learning and teaching to change to a more viable and vibrant communication based model.

India has not yet caught on to the Can do based JF Standard teaching model of Japanese as yet. Once this model is popularized among language schools and institutes, there will be many positive changes in the classroom as well. From a testing based strategy, the situation will become more learner-centric. From a syllabus based on JLPT alone, the model is likely to become more communication based. Most importantly, the learner will be empowered to decide the course of study that is required because they can well take a part of the learning on a self-driven mode, rather than the classic pedagogical style that has been followed so far.

The prevalent University courses may not see much change as they delve into much more than just language; they include literature or history of Japanese as well. These will remain largely the same and the changes made will be in line with their own research and development. However, for the majority of learners who look at learning Japanese at a language institute or at a college as an additional language, the scene is all set to improve if we adopt the newer JF standard.

From the point of view of the employer, a more cautious approach may prevail. Many corporate entities that employ Japanese language professionals prefer university graduates (majoring in Japanese). But these candidates are very few in number when compared to the numbers required. Companies may then continue to use JLPT as a standard. However, it will benefit them to start asking for a self-assessment along the lines of the JF Standard as well. This will work positively to start the change towards the internationally accepted framework, as well as implement a more “communication-based” model that includes expressive language (where JLPT alone will not suffice).

## Conclusion

India is a country of many languages and dialects. In a sense, the situation is like in the European Union, where many languages exist side by side and every state has its own regional language. In this situation, a standard that is nationally, if not internationally accepted is a good idea. Maybe it is time we too looked at formulating a standard learning, testing and assessment model that will help all stakeholders understand the level of proficiency in a language. If formulated and implemented on the lines of CEFR, or the JF Standard, it will well put our large pool of language learning on a practical and improved communicative platform.

The JF Standard has been developed keeping in mind that Japanese language will be used **practically** to accomplish tasks. It also takes into consideration that in a global environment, language is the key to better understanding through cultural and interpersonal understanding and relationships. With these objectives in mind, the JF Standard is useful for the learner, the educator as well as other stakeholders like prospective employers, linguists and language professionals. It moves the focus successfully from grammatical models and the number of kanji and the vocabulary one knows, to what is practically possible while using Japanese (can do). The quicker we move to start using this model, the better the learning outcomes are likely to be.

## Note from the author:

The JF Standard in Japanese Language Education is an internationally accepted and standardized tool for learners, teachers and linguists. All information that has been used here is available for further reference and study at <https://jfstandard.jp>. For more details on the CEFR, please look at: [http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/cadre1\\_en.asp](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/cadre1_en.asp).





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