

# Japanese Language Tests in the Era of *Tabunka Kyōsei*

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## Abstract

This paper examines Japanese language tests available to foreign residents in Japan and considers their role in the context of the Japanese form of multiculturalism, known as *tabunka kyōsei*, or “mutual co-existence”. Three tests are examined and compared: The Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), J.TEST, and the Business Japanese Test (BJT). One of the contemporary challenges facing Japanese society is how it will deal with its increasing diversity. *Tabunka kyōsei* is a government initiative for the purpose of promoting equality between Japanese citizens and foreign residents of Japan. Naturally, the Japanese language presents an obstacle for many foreign residents in Japan, and failure to develop sufficient proficiency in the language can affect living standards and limit employment opportunities. Several Japanese language tests are available to Japanese language learners who are non-Japanese citizens. These tests can provide a useful benchmark of proficiency, can function as a useful goal for Japanese learners, and can help in securing employment opportunities. However, such tests also raise several questions. For example, are these tests an accurate measure of one’s Japanese language ability, and are these tests helping to create a more inclusive society? I argue that, while Japanese language tests can help to empower foreign residents, most tests only focus on passive language skills (reading and listening) and improvements in testing may help to promote greater inclusivity.

## Introduction

According to the Immigration Services Agency of Japan, in 2021 there were 2,760,635 foreign residents in Japan (ISA, 2021). Since the late 1980s, there has been a marked increase in the number of foreign residents in Japan. This increase in foreign residents can be attributed to several factors including the revision of the 1951 Immigration Law in 1990 which encouraged foreign descendants of Japanese emigrants to work in Japan. Moreover, Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone implemented a plan to increase the number of foreign students in Japan tenfold within a span of twenty years, through his “Plan to Accept 100,000 Foreign Students” in 1983. More recently, in 2018 the Japanese Diet amended the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act, establishing a new “specified skills” resident status for foreign workers, which has provided opportunities for more immigrants to come to Japan. While the COVID-19 pandemic has had an impact on immigration to Japan, the number of foreign residents is expected to continue to rise.

With the growing number of foreign residents in Japan, the concept of promoting mutual respect and equality between Japanese and foreign residents has also increased in significance. In the mid-1980s, Hatsuse Ryūhei coined the term *uchinaru kokusaika*, or “inward looking internationalisation”, which represents the need to promote peaceful co-existence with foreign residents within Japan. This represented a shift from *kokusaika*, or “internationalisation”, which had generally focused on Japan’s interaction with foreign countries, sometimes called *sotonaru kokusaika*. However, in the 1990s *tabunka kyōsei*, or “multicultural coexistence”, has somewhat overtaken these words in use. According to Gottlieb (2012), the term *tabunka kyōsei* first came into use in Kawasaki City in the early 1990s and spread more widely after the Great Hanshin Earthquake in 1995. One example of its use was the “Earthquake Information Centre for Foreigners”, established to assist foreigners after the Great Hanshin Earthquake, which changed its name to the “*tabunka kyōsei centre*”. It is thought that the concept of “multicultural coexistence”

emerged to represent a better understanding and cooperation with foreign residents within the local community. Thus, whereas terms such as *kokusai kōryū* (international exchange) reflect interaction with foreigners abroad and within Japan, *tabunka kyōsei* emphasized a more localized form of internationalization.

In March, 2006, in the “Research Report on the Promotion of Multicultural Coexistence” released by the Japanese Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications (MIAC), “multicultural coexistence” was defined as follows: “People of different races and nationalities mutually accepting their respective cultural differences, building relationships of equality and living together as members of the regional community” (p.5). According to this definition, one of the prominent tenets of the concept of *tabunka kyōsei* is equality. Therefore, as an essential part of such equality, the Japanese language needs of foreign residents would, by implication, be a priority. However, Japanese language education for foreign residents has mostly been left up to volunteer teachers at community centres throughout Japan.

On June 21, 2019, the Upper House committee on education and science unanimously approved the “Japanese language education promotion bill” (*nihongo kyōiku no suishin ni kansuru hōritsuan*), a bill aimed at supporting Japanese language education for foreign residents in Japan. While this represents a positive step towards Japanese language education based on the concept of *tabunka kyōsei*, that is, one constructed on equality and mutual respect, it has not been clear exactly what language education support the government has provided to foreign residents. What is clear is that, “the ability of migrants to integrate with a host society is deeply affected by the migrant’s knowledge of the host country’s language” (Golovina & Mukhina, 2017, p. 17). Moreover, Gottlieb (2012) makes the crucial point that the implications of language knowledge for foreign residents in Japan extends to both work and personal life. Thus, the provision of Japanese as a Second Language (JSL) education is an important step in creating a cohesive society.

Many foreign residents in Japan set about learning or improving their Japanese as a self-study activity; and in the absence of a set curriculum many people study for one of

the Japanese language tests available to non-Japanese citizens. These Japanese language tests are, therefore, a powerful motivator and play a significant role in shaping the Japanese language skills of examinees. Japanese language testing can have far-reaching implications for test-takers. As McNamara (2000) notes, “Language testing, like language itself, cannot ultimately be isolated from wider social and political implications” (p. 77). Many of the visa requirements for foreign residents, for example, are dependent on successful completion of a Japanese language test. Japanese language tests can provide an opportunity for residents to improve their language skills, enhance their living situation in Japan, and improve employment prospects. Thus, the questions arise: What Japanese language tests are available to foreign residents in Japan; and how do these tests compare?

In this paper I consider *tabunka kyōsei* from a linguistic perspective, considering the linguistic needs of foreigners. I focus on three Japanese language tests that are available to foreign residents (and, in some cases, Japanese language learners abroad).

## Japanese Language Tests

There are several Japanese language tests that can be taken by foreign residents in Japan. In this section, three tests are considered and compared. This section is not intended to be a comprehensive review of all the tests available, and many tests available in Japan are also available internationally. However, the Japanese language tests considered here are designed for non-Japanese citizens. There are tests, such as the Kanji Proficiency Test (*nihon kanji nōryoku kentei*), that are available to both Japanese and non-Japanese citizens, as well as tests such as the Nursing Care Japanese Language Evaluation Test (*kaigo nihongo hyōka shiken*) for foreign residents on the “specified visa”, but those tests have been excluded from this, exploratory study.

***The Japanese-Language Proficiency Test (JLPT)***

The largest and most recognized test of Japanese language proficiency for Japanese language learners is the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), which had 193,626 examinees in Japan in 2021 (Japan Foundation & Japan Educational Exchanges and Services, 2021). The JLPT is offered twice annually in Japan, and either once or twice annually in other cities throughout the world, depending on the host city. The JLPT commenced in 1984 and is organized jointly by the Japan Foundation and the Japan Educational Exchanges and Services. It was revised in 2010, from a test with four levels to one with five levels. This revision added an additional level between the former Levels Two and Three. The other levels are approximately of the same level as those previously in place, but with Level N1 regarded as slightly more difficult than the previous Level 1. Table 1 provides an overview of the JLPT.

**Table 1** *Overview of JLPT*

<b>Organizing Body</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Availability</b>	<b>Content</b>	<b>Format</b>	<b>Score/ Level</b>
Japan Foundation and the Japan Educational Exchanges and Services	Twice a year in Japan and once or twice in other cities worldwide	In Japan and abroad	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Language knowledge (vocabulary/grammar)</li> <li>• Reading</li> <li>• Listening</li> </ul>	Multiple Choice	5 Levels scored out of 0-180

JLPT tests are scored out of 180, and the areas tested include language knowledge (vocabulary/grammar), reading and listening. The number of points and time allocated for each of these sections varies slightly depending on the level. Significantly, the JLPT does not test writing or speaking. The JLPT consists of multiple-choice questions and is machine tested. According to the official JLPT website, the JLPT “measures communicative competence required to perform tasks” (Japanese-Language Proficiency Test, n.d.).

In addition, it is stated that “use of JLPT results has expanded from skill measurement to include employment screening and evaluation for promotions and pay raises as well

as use as a form of qualification” (Japanese-Language Proficiency Test, n.d.). This is significant, as passing the JLPT can affect decisions about education, employment and immigration, thereby having a direct impact on the livelihood of foreign residents in Japan. Of course, for those examinees who pass the test, there are several benefits. For example, passing levels N1 and N2 of the JLPT can help foreign students to enter university in Japan, and points can be accrued and used in the points-based preferential immigration system.

Although there are five levels available to JLPT examinees, the pass rate is surprisingly low. The pass rate for the JLPT in July, 2021, for examinees in Japan was just 38.8%. Nishizawa et al (2022) speculate that this could be a result of social pressure from the test. That is, examinees do not sit the test level appropriate to their actual language skill level, but rather sit the level of the test that they are required to pass in order to be eligible for entry into higher education or to assist in their visa application.

Perhaps the most significant disadvantage of the JLPT is that productive language skills are not tested, and therefore the test is not a good representation of examinees’ communicative competence. Because writing is not tested and questions are in the form of multiple-choice, it is unnecessary for the examinee to write any kanji whatsoever to pass this test. Therefore, passing the JLPT does not provide an accurate representation of the successful examinee’s writing ability and only indicates a degree of competency in reading. Furthermore, prior to the revision of the JLPT, kanji lists were published which presented the kanji which were subjects for examination at each level. However, these lists are no longer provided, making it more difficult to use this test as a means for selecting kanji to incorporate into a teaching syllabus.

In addition, there is no speaking component to this test. This is somewhat surprising, seeing that this test is probably the most used benchmark for determining a person’s ability to pursue higher education in Japan. The test, therefore, only represents an examinee’s passive language skills. Niveri and Rojas-Lizana (2019) note the contradiction in the claim that the new test measures communicative competence when it

tests the same skills as the previous test and lacks a speaking component.

### ***The Business Japanese Proficiency Test (BJT)***

The Business Japanese Proficiency Test (BJT) is organized by The Japan Kanji Aptitude Testing Foundation and is available in Japan and some parts of Asia. BJT was first offered by the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) in 1996 and then was transferred to The Japan Kanji Aptitude Testing Foundation in 2009. The BJT is, according to the official website, a test to measure proficiency in communicating in the Japanese language required in business settings (BJT, n.d.). The most recent examinee data, according to the BJT website, reveals that the total number of applicants for the test in 2016 was 6,592. Table 2 provides an overview of the BJT.

**Table 2** *Overview of BJT*

<b>Organizing Body</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Availability</b>	<b>Content</b>	<b>Format</b>	<b>Score/ Level</b>
The Japan Kanji Aptitude Testing Foundation	Twice a year	Japan and some parts of Asia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Listening comprehension</li> <li>• Listening and reading comprehension</li> <li>• Reading comprehension</li> </ul>	Multiple Choice	Measured on a scale of 0-800

The BJT comprises three parts: listening comprehension (45 minutes); listening and reading comprehension (30 minutes); and reading comprehension (30 minutes). Questions are multiple-choice. The BJT is measured on a scale of six levels, J5 to J1+, based on a score achieved out of 800. Examinees who receive a mark of 600 and over will fall within the highest level, J1+. The BJT uses Computer Based Testing (CBT) and therefore examinees can book to do the test at any time, subject to availability at each testing centre.

According to the BJT website, BJT scores are used by immigration authorities when evaluating visa applications submitted by non-Japanese. Moreover, the BJT website claims that their test is used by businesses, universities and Japanese language schools. While it is unclear to what degree the BJT is taken into consideration, the website does

provide some examples of companies who are using the BJT. The business focus of the test may make it appealing to foreign residents wishing to pursue careers in business, and may hold some weight with potential employees in this field.

The practical nature and the business focus of this test provides examinees with the opportunity to demonstrate their ability to function in a Japanese business environment. The target market for this test seems to be foreign students at university in Japan, as well as foreigners outside Japan but wishing to migrate. Nevertheless, current foreign residents can still take this test, and it might create employment opportunities for those people who want to secure employment in the business sector.

As with the JLPT, the BJT only tests passive language skills as it does not require examinees to write or speak in Japanese. Furthermore, the number of examinees is still quite low compared to the JLPT. This is perhaps because it is not as well-known as the JLPT. Ohira (2021) conducted a survey of foreign students at Japanese universities and found that foreign students became aware of and took an interest in the BJT in their third year of university, when they started thinking about their future employment. However, of the students she surveyed, 95.1% had not taken the test. Many students reported that they had not taken the test because they were not confident in their Japanese level. Moreover, the BJT is perhaps not very well-known within the business sector in Japan. Ohira (2021) notes that she heard reports of a student who, upon discussing their BJT results in a job interview, had to further explain about the test to the interviewer who was unaware of it but was familiar with the JLPT.

### ***J.TEST***

The J.TEST (*jitsuyō nihongo kentei*) is promoted by the *nihongo kentei kyōkai* and was first offered in 1991. J.TEST is a test designed to test practical use of the Japanese language. The test is offered six times a year, and there are approximately 60, 000 examinees each year. The test is available in Japan and in some parts of Asia. There is an advanced level test (levels A-C), a beginner-intermediate level test (levels D-E), and

an introductory level test (F-G level). The J.TEST (A-C level) is estimated to be more difficult than the N1 level of the JLPT. An examinee's level (A-C) is determined based on the score achieved out of 1000. The J.TEST is divided into two separate but consecutive tests. The first test is eighty minutes and consists of grammar, vocabulary, reading, kanji and writing. The second test is forty-five minutes and consists of listening-based tests. Each test is worth 500 marks each. Table 3 provides an overview of the J.TEST.

**Table 3** *Overview of J.TEST*

Organizing Body	Frequency	Availability	Content	Format	Score/ Level
Association for Testing Japanese Proficiency/ J.TEST Office	Six times a year	Japan and some parts of Asia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Grammar</li> <li>• Vocabulary</li> <li>• Reading</li> <li>• Kanji</li> <li>• Writing</li> <li>• Listening</li> </ul>	Various	Measured on a scale of 0-1000. Levels determined based on score.

Unlike the JLPT, J.TEST takes the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) into account (J.TEST, n.d.). However, the CEFR's rankings also consider speaking proficiency and long essay writing, which are not components of this test, which means it is not perfectly in line with the CEFR. In addition, unlike the JLPT and BJT, which are comprised solely of multiple-choice questions, J.TEST (levels A-C and D-E) requires participants to write in Japanese as well. Therefore, it could be argued that the J.TEST is a more thorough examination of an examinee's Japanese writing ability and therefore a more accurate test of "practical" Japanese, which seems to be one of the selling points of this test.

For the reasons outlined above, J.TEST is arguably a more accurate assessment of Japanese language ability, and it offers several advantages for Japanese learners, particularly for advanced learners who want to test their Japanese language skills beyond N1 of the JLPT. Its biggest drawback, however, is that it is not as widely known as the JLPT. Perhaps greater efforts in marketing this test will help to increase its popularity among learners and potential employers.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, in an era of *tabunka kyōsei*, the linguistic needs of foreign residents of Japan are an important consideration. As we have seen, language testing has a social impact, and therefore promoting effective Japanese language testing can help bring about a positive impact on the lives of foreign residents of Japan. Achieving good results in Japanese language tests can help foreign residents to improve their employment prospects, as well as improving confidence and communication ability. However, while there are a variety of tests available, the tests compared in this exploratory study mainly focus on passive language skills. Therefore, these tests may not provide an accurate measure of proficiency.

A test that focuses on “everyday Japanese” and includes active language skills such as speaking and writing may benefit current foreign residents of Japan. Of course, testing active language skills presents budgetary and logistical problems, and this is perhaps why many tests avoid testing such skills. However, considering Japan’s current demographic crisis and the need for foreign workers, the provision of Japanese language education for foreign residents should be a priority. Ultimately, improved language testing for foreign residents, which encourages active language skills, could help to foster a more inclusive society.

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