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Revision of the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test: Second Progress Report

Committee for Revision of the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test
The Japan Foundation
Japan Educational Exchanges and Services

1. Reasons for revision

When the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) was first administered in 1984, there were approximately 7,000 examinees who took the test. Since then, the annual test has become a large scale event, attracted some 524,000 examinees in 2007. During this time, there have been many requests for revision and a variety of issues were pointed out in the interim reports published in 1996 and 2000.¹ In 2001 a committee of research associates under the auspices of the Agency for Cultural Affairs presented a proposal for revisions, and the work of revising the test began in 2004.

2. Regarding the future test schedule: multiple yearly test dates and revisions

In the Progress Report presented in 2007 it was announced that the newly revised test would be administered starting in December 2009. However, due to the progress of the revisions, the introduction of the new test has been postponed until 2010.

¹“Interim Report by the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test Planning Subcommittee Research Group,” The Japan Foundation/ Association of International Education, Japan, 1996; and “Second Interim Report by the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test Planning Subcommittee,” The Japan Foundation/ Association of International Education, Japan, 2000.

With over 3 million people around the world studying Japanese, there is a growing desire worldwide for the JLPT to be offered more than once a year. Starting in 2009, the current JLPT will be held twice a year before the new test is introduced in 2010. In July of 2009, the current Level 1 and Level 2 tests will be offered, followed by all four levels in December of 2009. Testing in July will be conducted in Japan as well as in a limited number of locations in China and elsewhere overseas.

3. Points for revision

The current revisions address the following four points.

(1) The goals of the new test

The intent is to produce a test that measures communicative competence in accomplishing tasks. Of course, linguistic knowledge that provides the basis for communicative competence are not forgotten. The test is aimed to reflect real life situation where the test taker will be using the language.

(2) Setting levels

In the past there have been requests for revisions to address the fact that examinees who have passed the Level 3 test often have troubles passing the Level 2 test because of the large gap between those two levels. Furthermore, there was the need to measure abilities more advanced than those targeted by the current Level 1 test. In fact, advances in Japanese-language education and societal changes have produced a more diverse range of needs among examinees that did not exist when the test was first introduced. To better address such needs, the test levels will be reorganized into a 5-level format, which will replace the current 4-level format.

The existing test incorporates 4 levels, or *kyu*: 1-*kyu* (Level 1), 2-*kyu* (Level 2), 3-*kyu* (Level 3), and 4-*kyu* (Level 4), in descending order. The new test will have 5 levels: N1, N2, N3, N4, and N5; the "N" may stand for both "*Nihongo*" and "New."

N1: Approximately the same passing level as the existing Level 1 test, but designed to enable slightly more advanced abilities to be measured as well.

N2: Approximately the same passing level as the existing Level 2 test.

N3: Positioned at a level bridging existing Level 2 and Level 3 tests.

N4: Approximately the same passing level as the existing Level 3 test.

N5: Approximately the same passing level as the existing Level 4 test.

All the tests, N1 through N5, will consist of both a Reading Section (covering Writing-Vocabulary as well as Reading and Grammar) and a Listening Section. This round of revisions will not extend to the introduction of tests of oral and compositional ability leaving it as future challenge.

Table 1: Profiles for new test levels

Level	Examples of typical context which the test taker will be using in actual life
N1	<p>Reading: Reads logically constructed writing, such as newspaper editorials intended for native speakers and can follow the reasoning; reads highly abstract writing and can comprehend configurations of abstract concepts. Reads deep-content materials in a broad range of subjects and can comprehend both the progression of ideas and specific nuances.</p> <p>Listening: Comprehends coherent conversations, news reports, lectures, and the like, spoken at natural speed in a broad variety of settings; can follow the progression of ideas and comprehend the content. Understands relationships among people discussed, logical structures, and other such details, and can grasp essential points.</p>
N2	<p>Reading: Capable of reading and understanding general information manuals and other basic written materials intended for native speakers. Can read more specialized materials with the aid of a dictionary. Reads simply written materials on general topics and can both follow the progression of ideas and understand nuances.</p> <p>Listening: Comprehends coherent conversations, news reports, and the like, spoken at nearly natural speed, in everyday life and various other settings. Can follow the flow of remarks and comprehend the content; understands relationships among people discussed and can grasp essential points.</p>
N3	<p>Reading: Capable of reading and understanding materials written for native speakers only if they are rewritten for nonnative speakers with simplified vocabulary and <i>kanji</i>. Can derive a limited amount of information from article titles in newspapers intended for native speakers. Can glean necessary information from written materials encountered in daily life</p>

	<p>with the aid of a dictionary, if sufficient time is provided.</p> <p>Listening: Comprehends coherent conversations spoken at more-or-less natural speed in everyday life and in some settings seldom encountered in daily life; can generally follow a particular flow of remarks as well as relationships among people discussed.</p>
N4	<p>Reading: Capable of reading and understanding written materials intended for nonnative speakers on familiar topics.</p> <p>Listening: Comprehends conversations encountered in daily life and can generally follow the flow of remarks, provided they are spoken slowly and can be repeated.</p>
N5	<p>Reading: Capable of reading and understanding phrases and sentences written for nonnative speakers using <i>hiragana</i> and very basic <i>kanji</i>.</p> <p>Listening: Comprehends patterned conversations, consisting primarily of phrases and simple sentences, in daily life, typical classroom situations, and other familiar settings; can glean needed information from spoken language provided it is adapted for a nonnative speaker, spoken slowly, and can be repeated.</p>

(3) Presenting reference information in the form of “can-do statements”

The new test will be accompanied by the publication of reference information listing some of the tasks that a learner who passes a given level of the test is expected to be able to perform. These “can-do statements” are based on copious data from self-assessments by learners. Thus, in addition to finding out their scores and whether they pass or fail, examinees will also be provided with a level-specific profile enabling them to understand their respective current abilities. This, in turn, will enable them to more easily formulate goals for future study and will provide specific images of just what the examinee is capable of doing for consideration within the context of employment, admission to a higher-level school, or the like.

(4) Equating of scores

Although great care is taken in designing test questions, it is very hard to ensure that each year’s test presents exactly the same level of difficulty. At present, many people are requesting that the test be offered twice a year, and if this occurs it will be especially necessary to ensure that the results of tests administered on different occasions are

directly comparable. Doing so will help ensure that examinees will incur no disadvantage by taking the test at one time rather than another (although the questions will be different). The method for accomplishing this is called equating of scores, which means ensuring that examinees who have the same abilities will receive virtually the same score regardless of when they take the test. This method, which is common in other large-scale language tests, will be incorporated into the new JLPT.

4. Nondisclosure of test questions

In the past the questions of the JLPT have been published in the spring of the year following the administration of the test. When the new test is introduced, however, the questions will not be made public. Sample questions and profiles of the respective ability levels (see Table 1) will be published instead. The reason why the questions will not be made public is to ensure the quality of the test. Thus, TOEFL and other language tests do not make public the questions to ensure their quality. This measure is necessary in order to make the JLPT a test whose quality is of world class standards.

5. Where to direct your opinion and concerns

The work of revising the test will continue until the new test is introduced in July 2010. If you would like to offer an opinion or suggestion regarding these revisions, please refer to the contact information below.

The content of the foregoing report is based on the information currently available. Please understand that the details are subject to change pending further consideration and adjustments.

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