

## Developing Japanese Language Learning Content for the Japan Virtual Campus Platform

JV キャンパス用日本語学習コンテンツの開発

Vanbaelen Ruth, Ono Masaki, Sekizaki Hironori, Bushnell Cade,

Moon Changyun, Anubhuti Chauhan, Hatano Hiroaki

University of Tsukuba

vanbaelen.ruth.gp@u.tsukuba.ac.jp

**Key words: Japan Virtual Campus, Academic Japanese, Daily Life Japanese, Assessment of Speech Performances, Job-hunting Support**

### Abstract

Japan Virtual Campus (JV-Campus) is a MEXT-supported platform managed by the University of Tsukuba where Japanese universities, companies and local governments provide a wide range of online learning content, currently free of charge. This paper discusses how the Japanese Language Education Division at the Center for Education of Global Communication at the University of Tsukuba is developing Japanese language learning content for the JV-Campus platform. Based on student voices and in-class experience regarding available teaching and learning materials, several topics had emerged where a hiatus was felt in terms of adequate learner support and autonomous learning. Here, we explain the selection process of the different types of learning content currently being created, namely Academic Japanese (on-campus situations, extensive reading), Daily Life Japanese (short CFER A1-A2 conversations), Assessment of Speech Performances (prosodic aspects, oral summarization skills), and Job-hunting Support (self-analysis, entry sheet writing, interview practice). We will then continue with a content description and the goals of the different materials. Finally, we will indicate areas we will work on in the future to provide learners of Japanese with practical and multi-level multi-purpose learning content.

### 1. Background

During the Covid-19 pandemic, educational institutions around the world were forced to adapt their teaching formats. The University of Tsukuba in Japan was no exception. For nearly three years, classes were taught online. For large student groups, like freshman courses, MOOC-like on-demand formats were chosen. At the Center for Education of Global Communication (CEGLOC), language classes at the Japanese Language Education Division (JLED) catering to international students, the classes were also online and mainly implemented in real-time. At a time when international travel was prohibited, students and teachers alike were required to deal with time differences, and accordingly sometimes individual class formats were adopted to accommodate the students' time zones. Thanks to student and instructor flexibility, and through continued support of the course coordinators a balance was found (Vanbaelen 2023). Nevertheless, based on student voices and in-class experience regarding available teaching and learning materials (Vanbaelen 2022), several topics emerged where a hiatus was felt in terms of adequate learner support and autonomous learning. Students indicated they were looking for classes addressing Business Japanese, Academic Japanese and Culture. In addition, some pointed out that as a result of the online classes, they had become able to learn autonomously. As a consequence, the JLED started looking into developing new learning materials to enable the students to autonomously master new topics in the Japanese language.

Almost simultaneously with the Covid-19 pandemic, JV-Campus started offering a platform for universities, companies and local governments “to manage and operate their own content” with “access to various features necessary for operating their own online education system” in order “to contribute to internationalization” and “enhance connections with society and expand the value created as a platform by engaging with various stakeholders, including educational institutions, organizations, local governments, and private corporations”.

Based on the above, from December 2022 and expected to be available from March 2024, the JLED started developing and expanding online learning content, using the JV-Campus platform as an intermediary to run the developed content materials. In the next section, the actual content under preparation will be outlined.

## 2. Content under development

The content under development can be categorized into three parts, namely entrance support (at the start of the student's university career), learning support (at any stage of the student's university career) and exit support (to smoothly transition to a professional career). Entrance support is divided into academic Japanese and daily life Japanese. Learning support is constituted by speech performance assessment. Finally, exit support guides the student through the job-hunting process.

### 2.1 Entrance support (at the start of the student's university career)

#### 2.1.1 Academic Japanese

The textbook series “Situational Functional Japanese” was developed by the JLED in the early 1990's. At the time, this textbook series was groundbreaking through its approach to using natural language versus strongly grammar-based instruction. However, some of the situations such as the use of public phone booths and tape recorders had become outdated. This was a first prompt that academic Japanese instruction materials needed to be revamped. The online instruction format during the Covid-19 pandemic and the subsequent positive student reactions led to the actual implementation of the ideas. At present, two major types of content are being developed, namely videos addressing student life on campus and extensive reading content.

First, Academic Japanese Teaching Materials for Beginners is a collection of videos. The videos feature situations that students are likely to encounter in their university life and that require a high degree of interaction in Japanese. Some of the situations are difficult to handle at the beginner level because of the complicated Japanese required in the interactions. Such scenes have been excluded from the current materials. The selection of scenes was generally completed in 2017 (Bushnell et al. 2017). However, since there have been some changes in lifestyle due to the Covid-19 pandemic, a complementary survey was conducted in 2022-2023. Examples of on-campus scenes are “Introducing oneself at a seminar,” “Confirming class times,” and “Reserving a seminar room in the library”. Examples of off-campus situations are “Telling the number of people in a restaurant,” “Answering when asked if you need a plastic bag at the supermarket,” and “Asking about train and bus stops”.

From an educational stance, classroom Japanese in general takes into consideration clear pronunciation and simplified expressions. This often results in learners not being able to understand the real-life Japanese they hear outside of the classroom. As a consequence, especially beginning learners tend to lose their motivation to learn and become afraid to interact outside of the classroom. In response to the said problem of classroom Japanese versus real-life Japanese, no scenarios were prepared when filming the videos. The creators envision two ways to address the problem. First, teachers can provide explanations inside the classroom concerning expressions students could not catch in the real-life exchanges in the videos. However, for video materials made available online, the same response as in the classroom is not possible. The creators are considering the addition of explanations that can appropriately facilitate learners' understanding.

Next, extensive reading content is being created to support academic Japanese language skills. The rationale is that learners benefit through input from reading. Research (McQuillan 2020) shows that 85% of the words on the Academic Word List appear in the popular Harry Potter series. In addition, given the high efficiency of vocabulary acquisition through extensive reading shown by Mason (2007), simply reading the Harry Potter series can be expected to result in the acquisition of 20% to 50% of these important words, 1.6 to 4 times more efficient than traditional teaching methods (McQuillan 2020). While these studies show the high effectiveness of extensive reading in language acquisition, and while there are a great many fascinating graded readers for English language education, there are still not enough extensive reading resources for Japanese language education. Of the existing and appropriate reading materials, few are story-based, and their ability to attract readers is likely weaker than that of their English counterparts.

With the goal of creating and providing compelling extensive reading content for Japanese language education that will attract readers, currently 50 short stories are being written. Sample topics include life as an exchange student in Japan, relationships with Japanese classmates and teachers, the perplexities and joys experienced in Japanese culture, romance, adventure, and so forth.

### 2.1.2 Daily Life Japanese

“Nihongo Avenue”, also developed by the Center for Distance Learning of Japanese and Japanese Issues, is a Progressive Web App with conversation and speech example search content. This is a search engine for university students and graduate students who are studying or preparing to study abroad in Japan. It allows them to search for conversation examples in accordance with can-do activities, speakers, places, and situations. Users can also freely post their own conversation examples and rate postings of other users.

Currently, an advanced version of “Nihongo Avenue” is under development. The specific point of change is to adapt the screen functionality on the user side from a traditional story collection to a textbook design. A group management function will be added to allow instructors to track the usage trajectory of learners, both for individual study, as well as for use in the classroom.

The intended learners are Japanese language learners who have finished learning Japanese characters and elementary grammar, and are at CEFR level A1 or above. The design of the course is based on often heard student feedback, namely that they practice conversation in Japanese class, but don't know how to phrase their thoughts in real situations. This course is a departure from existing Japanese language textbooks, allowing students to learn actual examples of Japanese used in different situations and variations of Japanese conversation.

Using the JF Standard for Japanese-Language Education as a reference, students will be exposed to practical Japanese expressions at the A1 level that international students are likely to encounter. This enables students to learn how to use Japanese in different situations, such as “who (speaker),” “where (place),” and “for what purpose (situation/function)”. The speech-to-text function allows users to check pronunciation, write personal examples, and/or record and post examples of conversations. Users can view examples of conversations posted by other users and send feedback (“likes”).

The system is equipped with furigana and auxiliary language functions to assist users, so that even beginner-level learners of Japanese can use the system with ease. There are also features to improve accessibility, such as changing text size and screen color.

In sum, “Nihongo Avenue” is conversation material that can be used regardless of the textbook being used. It will enable users to speak in Japanese at the university and around town without worrying.

## 2.2 Learning support

In order to support overall learning, tools focusing on oral production practice and concurrent evaluation are being developed under the “Assessment of Speech Performances” component. Many learners of Japanese have “finding a job” or “studying abroad” as their learning objectives (Japan Foundation 2021). However, in business situations and in long-term life in Japan, native speakers assess the pronunciation of non-native speakers in a severe manner (Ogawara 2001). While face-to-face communication is established through the medium of speech, its instruction and evaluation are difficult due to the high burden in terms of time for individualized instruction and the (non-native) Japanese teachers' own lack of confidence in their judgement for some phonetic aspects (Taniguchi 1991, Isomura 2021). Therefore, the development of speech-learning materials that adequately assess learners' speech and enable self-study (Matsuzaki 2016) are a necessity.

The concepts in developing the tool are three-fold:

1. Provide learners with an environment in which they can practice a variety of oral exercises.
2. Automatically evaluate learners' speech in terms of both speech and content.
3. Provide a system that can be used without complicated operations or specialized knowledge.

In line with these goals, two main components are being developed, namely various oral exercises and their voice evaluation, and immediate oral summary exercises and their content evaluation. For the first component, oral practice

tasks such as reading aloud, repeating, shadowing, and overlapping can be done online. Speech is visualized interactively based on acoustic processing technology, and differences from model speech in terms of accent, intonation, rhythm, articulation, etc. are presented as scores. For the second component, users perform an on-the-spot oral summary task of the text presented on the screen. After the free speech responses are converted into text by speech recognition, the AI summary of the same sentence is used as a reference to evaluate the content of the summary. Since this task is text-based, linguistic aspects such as vocabulary richness and grammatical appropriateness will be evaluated.

In both cases, learners can choose the difficulty level of the exercises and tasks, so they can be used by learners of any level. Qualitative and quantitative feedback will be provided on “where,” “how,” and “how much” the differences are. It is intended that this tool will be one effective means of helping learners of Japanese improve their oral production skills.

### 2.3 Exit support

Many international students want to work in Japan upon graduation, but find it hard to navigate the job-hunting process that is characteristic to Japan. The number of successful applicants is still low (JASSO 2021). To support the transition from student to being a member in the workforce, online learning contents geared towards job hunting is under development. As a start and to gauge the needs of international students, semi-structured interviews with Japanese and international students regarding their job-hunting activities were conducted. The interview analysis revealed various differences between the two groups. First of all, it became clear that Japanese students have long-term goals when looking for a job, while international students approach their job-hunting activities with short- to medium-term goals. This is normal for international students who may return to their home countries, but it makes a big difference in how they choose a job when looking for employment and how they plan to handle that job once employed. In addition, misunderstandings regarding the job-hunting schedule, lacking knowledge to gather information, differences in the type of peer support, and insufficient language skills can be mentioned as some of the gaps found between Japanese and international students.

Accordingly, the following content elements were deemed as the bare minimum to support international students throughout the process in a sequential manner: 1) Story line creation and self-analysis to help users recognize their own strengths and weaknesses and create their axis for the whole process, 2) Entry sheet writing in conjunction with the self-analysis prepared in 1), followed by 3) Interview practice with a recording function to enable self-reflection on content and appearance such as facial expressions and eye contact.

Most companies that seek to employ international students expect a JLPT N2-N1 level. Therefore, being able to navigate websites in the Japanese language is a given. Consequently, the online content will be monolingual Japanese. However, by providing, for example, entry sheet templates and interview samples, autonomous work will be possible. Also, instructors can opt to request sharing materials and use these with the students in the classroom.

Along with the above, a multilingual manga is being created to help students understand the job-hunting concept in Japan and its importance.

### 3. Summary and future areas to be developed

In this paper, the learning content under development by the Japanese Language Education Division was described. Divided in three parts, namely entrance-learning-exit support, four types of content (Academic Japanese (videos and extensive reading), Daily Life Japanese, Assessment of Speech Performances, and Job-hunting Support) are being prepared.

The content is scheduled to be available online to the users by March 2024. Future developments will include but are not limited to the following:

1. Academic Japanese will begin by catering to beginner level students. As a next step, for the extensive reading part, the vocabulary, grammar, and kanji in the 50 stories will be adjusted in order to create an authentic graded reader series comparable to those found in English.

2. Within Daily Life Japanese, “Nihongo Avenue” caters to the needs of users at CEFR A1-A2 level. This will be expanded to higher levels.

3. For the job-hunting support portion, a collection of phrases and expressions to support users with a level below N2-N1, and more interactive interview practice options are envisioned for the future.

## References

- Bushnell, C., Sekizaki, H., Nagai, A., Ito, H., Vanbaelen, R., Heo, M., Ono, M., Imai, S., Kido, M., Sakai, T., and Kano, C. (2017) A trial proposal for the development of an elementary Japanese textbook based on conversation analysis research (in Japanese), Oral presentation at the 10th International Conference of Practical Linguistics in Japanese (ICPLJ10).
- Center for Distance Learning of Japanese and Japanese Issues “Nihongo Avenue” <https://n-avenue.cegloc.tsukuba.ac.jp/> (Last access Sep 26, 2023)
- Isomura, K. (2001) The current state of Japanese accent education in foreign countries. Proceedings of the Autumn Meeting of the Association for Japanese Language Education, pp. 211-212.
- Japan Foundation (2023) Survey report on Japanese-Language education abroad 2021, <https://www.jpf.go.jp/j/project/japanese/survey/result/dl/survey2021/all.pdf> (Last access Sep 28, 2023)
- Japan Foundation “JF Standard for Japanese-Language Education” <https://www.jfstandard.jpf.go.jp/summaryen/ja/render.do> (Last access Sep 26, 2023)
- Japan Virtual Campus <https://www.jv-campus.org/en/providers/about/> (Last access Sep 26, 2023)
- JASSO 2021  
[https://www.jasso.go.jp/gakusei/career/event/guidance/\\_icsFiles/afieldfile/2021/07/09/ryugakusei\\_monka\\_gakuryu.pdf](https://www.jasso.go.jp/gakusei/career/event/guidance/_icsFiles/afieldfile/2021/07/09/ryugakusei_monka_gakuryu.pdf) (Last access August 21, 2023)
- Mason, B. (2007) The efficiency of self-selected reading and hearing stories on adult second language acquisition. Selected papers from the sixteenth International Symposium on English Teaching, pp. 630–633. Crane Publishing Company.
- Matsuzaki, H. (2016) Pronunciation training of Japanese prosody: Progress in a development of CALL system. Journal of the Acoustical Society of Japan, Vol 72(4), pp. 213-220.
- McQuillan, J. (2020). Harry Potter and the prisoners of vocabulary instruction: Acquiring academic language at Hogwarts. Reading in a Foreign Language, Vol 32(2), pp.122–142.
- Ogawara, Y. (2001) Japanese people’s evaluative attitudes toward the pronunciation of Japanese spoken by non-native speakers of Japanese: The case of working people. Journal of Japanese Language Education Methods, Vol 8(2), pp. 10-11.
- Taniguchi, S. (1991) The present situation and problems of phonetic education: Results of a questionnaire survey. Symposium on Japanese Phonetic Education: Prosodic Research and Education, pp. 20-25.
- Tsukuba Language Group (1994) Situational Functional Japanese. Bonjinsha.
- Vanbaelen, R. (2022) Survey results of three semesters of online classes. Journal of Japanese Language Teaching (University of Tsukuba), Vol 37, pp. 135-150.
- Vanbaelen, R. (2023) Japanese language education at the University of Tsukuba: Issues that emerged from two years of online practice. Japanese Language Education in Europe, Vol 26, pp. 210-218.

## Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge Ito Hideaki and Iwasaki Takuya of the University of Tsukuba for their valuable input in this project.