

WHAT SKILLS SHOULD THE STUDENT POSSESS AFTER COURSES IN BUSINESS JAPANESE?

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We know that learning language and learning about language are basically different. Both are important in studying foreign languages, but to be truly functional in the environment where the target language is spoken, knowing about the language alone is not enough; we have to be able to use the language as a communication tool. The same is true for culture. It is very important to study the target culture. However, knowing about culture alone is not enough for our students to function well in the target culture. They need to develop critical thinking and perspectives toward the target culture and learn to be able to practice them. Most business Japanese programs require or encourage the students to experience internships in Japan. Many students also seek a job in a Japanese company. Thus, our role as business Japanese instructors is to facilitate the link between classroom teaching and the real world to produce competent students. Specifically, we need to educate the students to develop language skills and cultural perspectives at the same time.

In this paper, I will introduce the results of two surveys and by doing so I will discuss what skills the student should possess after courses in business Japanese. One of the surveys was conducted by JETRO, and the other is the one I conducted with three former students in the IMBA program (Japanese Track) at the University of Memphis who currently work for Japanese companies. All of them had passed what was at the time Level 2 of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test.

The results of these two surveys confirm the thesis that those students who have good cultural perspectives and the ability to adjust to the ways the target culture operates are most successful in finding and keeping jobs in Japanese companies. At first glance, Japanese business executives might appear to focus on personality issues. Through closer analysis of survey 2, we find that Japanese executives need workers who can communicate in Japanese under the Japanese cultural value system.

Appendix A is a survey conducted by JETRO Atlanta in 2006.¹

¹ I thank the Japan External Trade Organization (JETRO) in Atlanta for allowing me to use the result of their surveys for my research.

This survey was given to 18 companies who took part in the International Internship Program covered by JETRO Atlanta. We notice from this survey that the companies prefer students who have a good personality and communication skills at the same time. For example, Company 18 comments that “the success of the program depends on the personality and communication skills of the students.” By looking through the responses from all companies, we notice that company executives consider the attitude and personality of interns to be very important.

Appendix B reflects the view of American workers in a Japanese company. I asked my former students to give me their candid opinions/comments toward the following three questions:

- (1) State some unique characteristics of Japan-related companies that you are aware of (for example the length of meetings; the procedure of allocating tasks; communication mode; group mentality; working hours, etc.)
- (2) What aspects of Japanese culture do you think would be most useful to know to work well with Japanese?
- (3) Which language skills (and what level) would be required to perform your current job well? Did you have enough skills?

All three respondents note that Japanese companies emphasize group harmony. For example, they note that Japanese companies have long meeting hours and require them to be loyal to the company even if they have to work overtime. It is also evident that their job requires language skills that are roughly equivalent to the Level 2 of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test. It looks like they need both cultural and language skills to get the current job.

Thus, it seems that the students of business Japanese need to develop a rather high level of language skills to perform their daily work and to communicate with their Japanese-speaking colleagues.

The general results of existing standard tests confirm our analysis. The Japanese Language Proficiency Test is a very popular exam among learners of Japanese. It measures the knowledge toward vocabularies, grammar, and kanji. However, it does not measure one’s communication skills in real-life situations.²

² It should be noted that the Japanese Language Proficiency Test will be revised from 2010. The revised exam is to measure communicative

In contrast, JETRO's Business Japanese Proficiency Test (BJT) measures the students' practical business skills.³ The BJT is run in cooperation with the Japan Foundation and Japan Educational Exchanges and Services (which also run the Japanese Language Proficiency Test) and the National Institute for Japanese Language, and is supported by the Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Agency for Cultural Affairs, and the Japanese business community. The objective of this exam is to measure and evaluate "communication skills in Japanese in various scenes and situations of business, not how much they know about Japanese and business." The specific purposes of the BJT are explained as follows:

1. To measure the communication skills in Japanese in ordinary business scenes;
2. To measure the expression skills in Japanese to show their own business knowledge or business strategies;
3. To measure the intercultural adjustment skills in Japanese to act properly in Japanese business and commercial customs;
4. To contribute to mutual understanding among business-related people, Japanese or foreign, by clearing up misunderstandings and removing barriers in business communication

The test has two parts. One is a listening and reading test to measure one's ability to understand and communicate in Japanese in various business situations. The second test is an oral communication test which will be given to only those who scored 530 or higher out of 800 on the listening/ reading test.

The rubrics of lower passing levels (J1 530-600 points) of the reading/listening test state that:

People at this level have very good communication skills in

competence in accomplishing tasks. Please refer to the report published in June 2008 by the Japan Foundation and Japan Educational Exchanges and Services http://www.jees.or.jp/jlpt/pdf/20080525_jlpt_kaitei_report_en_pre01_0718.pdf.

³ As of April 2009, the administrator of the Business Japanese Language Proficiency Test has changed from JETRO to the Japan Kanji Aptitude Testing Foundation.

Japanese which are sufficient for general business-related situations. These skills include; having good knowledge and proficiency of the Japanese language, accurately understanding various business conversations, picking-up and effectively understanding dialogues spoken at normal speeds in negotiations, intra/inter-office meetings, telephoning, etc. demonstrating the facility to communicate at a wide level of politeness and formality, reading ordinary business documents and articles with accurate comprehension, effectively understanding Japanese business customs and practices. (JETRO BJT)

It is evident that to score high in this test the students need to be able to obtain high levels of communication and cultural skills.

One surprising drawback of this exam is that this test seems to be very difficult for those students studying in the U.S. According to the summary of the test results published by JETRO, most examinees that score high are already in Japan.⁴ For example, in 2007 (November 18), there were about 2000 people took the test in Japan but only 28 in the United States. The average score of the test was 506.8 in Japan but 399.4 in Atlanta and 419.6 in New York. In other words, the average score in the U.S. group was lower than J2 level (529-420) of the test. The highest score in the U.S. was 472 in that test, which was also J2 level. Therefore, nobody in the U.S. was able to take the second oral test.

The test results also show a comparison with the Japanese Language Proficiency Test. The average score of those who passed Level 1 of the JPT was 511 and that of those who passed Level 2 was 431. This data tells us that linguistic knowledge alone cannot be linked to the success of the exam that tests the task-oriented abilities. This result clearly points out that U.S. students are lacking in some useful exposure to the target business culture. More detailed analysis toward the data is required, but we can say that conventional language skills (vocabulary and grammar) alone are not enough to function well in Japanese business situations. The survey from my students also indicates that familiarity toward cultural values significantly helps them function well in Japanese business environments, even if they have minimal language skills scaled by the traditional proficiency exam (Level 2 of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test).

⁴ See JETRO Data and materials http://www.kanken.or.jp/bjt/english/past_data/index.html.

Given this reality, we have to rethink how to teach culture in language courses in this country. This is, indeed, directly addressed in the National Standards for Foreign Language Learning. In 1996, Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century was established for grades K-12, but subsequently, in 1999, the Japanese task force group had established the Japanese National Standards that target the whole K-16. This was a joint project of National Council of Secondary Teachers of Japanese (NCSTJ) and Association of Teachers of Japanese (ATJ). Standards for Foreign Language Learning articulated the 5C's of foreign language education in the United States. The 5Cs are: Communication, Culture, Connections, Comparisons, and Communities.

These standards emphasize “knowing how, when, and why to say what to whom.” Formerly, most language classrooms concentrated on the *how* (grammar) to say *what* (vocabulary). While these components of language are indeed crucial, we have found that what is important for our business Japanese students is *communication*, which also highlights the *why*, the *whom*, and the *when*. It is the acquisition of the ability to use them and to communicate in meaningful and appropriate ways with Japanese speaking business people. Here is a quote from the National Standard:

Through the study of other languages, students gain a knowledge and understanding of the cultures that use that language and, in fact, cannot truly master the language until they have also mastered the cultural contexts in which the language occurs. (National Standards 1996)

In this spirit, we should change our business Japanese or any Japanese classroom in order to develop the students' practical language skills and perspectives toward the target culture. According to the National Standards, cultures are divided into three integrated components: Practice, Product, and Perspective (3P). There are two standards under Cultures in the National Standards. They are:

Standard 2.1: Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the practices and perspectives of the culture studied.

Standard 2.2: Students demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between the products and perspectives of the culture studies.

Let me give an example of “product, practices and perspectives.” Japanese people exchange gifts or *Oseibo* (product) at the end of the year (practice) to maintain a good relationship with people whom they associated with. They also return the favors they received from them within the year to welcome a new year without owing anything to anyone. There are many protocols involving this practice of gift-giving, such as how to present and receive gifts (practice). Just as the practice of exchanging business cards (product), this gift-giving practice is rooted in the Japanese people’s emphasis on *kata* or basic forms (perspective). As those who have studied any form of Japanese traditional arts (tea ceremony, flower arrangement, etc.), martial arts, or craftsmanship know, the Japanese people give importance to basic forms which must be mastered before going on to learn anything else.

Another example would be the *Ringi* system, or a traditional Japanese decision-making process. All of my students pointed out that *ringi* are very important aspects of decision making in Japanese companies. *Ringisho* (product) is passed around a number of people to obtain everyone’s approval (practice). Before formally signing off a *Ringisho* (product), Japanese people approach affected members to informally discuss the issue as well (practice). This practice is known as *Nemawashi*, or root-binding. All these business practices are based on the cultural value of group orientation (perspective).

In incorporating these cultural perspectives into the curriculum of business Japanese language courses, we need to decide wisely what and how to teach. Our students should be able to learn various cultural and sociological issues affecting how Japanese people conduct business. At the same time, we need to let our students develop their own perspectives toward culture by actively participating in the target culture (Tohsaku 2005). In this regard, the language faculty needs to cooperate with area studies faculty. They can work together to develop curriculum and meaningful programs so that the students can learn culture through language. One example of meaningful collaboration is outreach activities. Business students can learn Zen philosophy and then participate in tea ceremony lessons. In this way, they can learn an emphasis on forms and hospitality in Japanese business. At the same time, the language classes should incorporate these cultural values into teaching materials and classroom activities. In this way, the language classes can be a productive realm for the students to develop both language skills and cultural perspectives. It is a good sign that the field started to see the importance of such integration by

devising the National Standards and proficiency based evaluation methods.

Conclusion

Our students should possess the following skills after courses in business Japanese: understanding Japanese cultural values, and having the ability to practice them in Japanese. To make this happen, the language faculty needs to collaborate with the faculty who teaches area studies such as business, culture, history, and literature to make sure the students can develop cultural perspectives through language usages.

References

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Appendix A

JETRO Atlanta survey to Japanese companies who received interns

Company	About interns	comments
1	スキル不足	
6	専攻と目的が若干ずれていた。	
8	大変優秀な学生	
9	その分野の専門ではなかったが、積極的に取り組んでくれた。	
12	学生の希望に近い形でマッチングできた。結果的には満足	
13	研究開発より日本語学習に関心があり、研究	遅刻が非常に多く（1～5分） くらいは普通で、ひどい時

	開発（仕事）に対するやる気が低かった。	は1時間くらい)、また今年のインターン生は特に社会経験がないために社会人としての一般常識がなかった。何時も問題となるのは、生活スタイル・風習の違い □積極的で明るい性格だったので、会社にもすぐ馴染み、社員とも仲良くなり、プライベートでも比較的充実して過ごせたようで、よかった。
16	性格が内向的でアクティブなプログラムが組めませんでした。	地方の地場産業でも、海外文系の Internship 受け入れが有益であることが実証できた。□
18		International Internship Program の成否はずばり「人柄とコミュニケーション能力」と思います。

Appendix B
Interview of University of Memphis IMBA aluminae who work for Japanese companies in U.S.

Case 1:**Title:** Marketing Manager**Main Duties:** Marketing of coronary/endovascular products to North and South America market**Important skills/ awareness required for working with Japanese:**

- Many more forms and procedures to deal with
- Tasks are allocated based on job description; most employees do not deviate from the job description.
- Some key information is not relayed to me until the last minute

- Working hours are long (I always work overtime and usually have business travel into the weekends)
- We always have weekly meetings and must write weekly reports about our daily tasks and job activities

What aspect of Japanese culture would be most useful to know to work well with Japanese?

- Decision-making process (group decisions) – there is some resistance to change and it takes time
- Risk averse culture – very conservative in business

What language skills (and what level) would be required to perform your job well? Did you have enough skills?

I mainly deal with Japanese doctors and their English is pretty good, so knowing the culture is more important than the language aspect.

When dealing with XXX home office in Japan, I would like to speak/read/type at a higher level of Japanese. I think the Level 2 Japanese Language Proficiency Test would be enough.

Sometimes I have a little trouble but overall my language and cultural knowledge have been enough to do my job successfully.

Case 2:

Title: Delivery Specialist

Main Duties: Maintain inventory in Warehouse to cover orders from Honda. Handle any problems that occur before, during, and after delivery of goods.

Important skills/ awareness required for working with Japanese:

- Working overtime is expected.
- Proximity of desks (My manager sits RIGHT in front of me.) Meetings can be fairly lengthy (2 hours avg. if in Japanese).
- Seniority must be paid close attention to. Emails should include superiors, even if they aren't directly related to the situation.
- Meetings are your best friend. Decisions are usually discussed within a group.
- Women are treated differently. And certain positions (such as secretary or receptionist) are considered to be naturally a female's position.

What aspect of Japanese culture would be most useful to know to work well with Japanese?

- Japanese etiquette. Communication process (group approval). Knowledge of Japanese sense of humor.

What language skills (and what level) would be required to perform your job well? Did you have enough skills?

- My manager's English level isn't so high, so my being able to speak Japanese definitely helps. My knowledge of Japanese culture also helps a lot.

Case 3:

Title: Translator

Main Duties: My company is a Japanese subsidiary where my position is Translator; I translate and interpret English/Japanese, Japanese/English for all departments and track product quality and scrap costs for the Quality Assurance Department.

Important skills/ awareness required for working with Japanese:

- Chain of approval – All of the reports that I make for presentation to all associates and/or distribution outside the company are signed and approved of in order, starting with me, then a QA engineer, next QA Manager, next Plant Manager, finally the President, so everyone approves and agrees.
- Use of ringis – all purchases in excess of \$2000 that are not budgeted as capital expenditures require a ringi (which everyone refers to as a ringi).
- Morning stretching exercises – before every shift, 5 minute stretching with music and directions over louder speakers
- Uniform – all personnel (including the President) wears the same uniform as the factory workers symbolizing that we are in the same group and can all go help in production if necessary.

What aspect of Japanese culture would be most useful to know to work well with Japanese?

- I think that the most important concept to understand is the idea of the company (“uchi”) as your group (almost as family), where you would

take care of it without hesitation or complaint and it will take care of you. The same idea applies to the broader picture of companies in your supply chain. Loyalty is expected and returned; consequently customer relations are extremely important.

What language skills (and what level) would be required to perform your job well? Did you have enough skills?

- I need a very high level in all areas. I need practice most with interpretation and the finer points of Japanese grammar.