

Field Study Report on Japanese Language Education in Vietnamese Sending Organizations

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Abstract:

This study examines Japanese language education in sixteen Vietnamese sending organizations, which are major contributors of human resources for Japan's labor market. Many institutions implement curricula that set the target of students achieving the JLPT N4 level within six months; however, this goal is often difficult for them to achieve. *Minna no Nihongo*, published by the 3A Network, is the primary textbook used, while orientation programs are provided that emphasize daily life and workplace norms. Thus, the Japanese language teachers provide both language instruction and lifestyle guidance. The introduction of new policy frameworks for foreign worker acceptance may further increase institutional burdens.

Keywords: *Japanese Language Education, Sending Organizations, Vietnam*

1. Introduction

Japan faces the concurrent issues of a rapidly aging population and a severely declining working-age population. Therefore, the acceptance of foreign workers has steadily increased. Vietnam has become the largest sending country in terms of contributing human resources to Japan's labor market. In October 2024, approximately 570,000 Vietnamese people were working in Japan, accounting for roughly 25% of all foreign workers (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2025). In 2023 in Vietnam, the labor force reached approximately 52 million workers, the unemployment rate was 2.3%, and 65% of the workforce were in non-regular employment (Tổng cục thống kê 2024). These conditions have encouraged many people to seek work abroad, with Japan being a preferred destination (Báo Điện tử Chính phủ 2024).

In 2027, a new system known as the Development and Employment System (*Ikusei Shūrō Seido*) will replace Japan's Technical Intern Training Program (TITP). Under this new policy framework, Japanese language proficiency will be continuously fostered from pre-departure through post-arrival for all foreign workers. In Vietnam, Japanese language education has also been institutionalized within the formal school system. Since 2016, Japanese has been introduced as a first foreign language at

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the primary school level, marking the first such initiative in Southeast Asia (Cao 2017). As a result, Japanese language education has been incorporated throughout the school education system, including secondary and higher education, and Japanese is now included as one of the foreign language options in the national high school graduation and university entrance examinations. At the same time, however, surveys conducted by the Japan Foundation indicate that a substantial proportion of Japanese language education in Vietnam takes place outside the formal school system, with non-school institutions such as sending organizations accounting for a large share of instruction. Separately from formal school-based Japanese language education, initial instruction in Japanese is typically provided by the sending organizations, which conduct pre-departure training for new workers. While understanding this initial stage is essential for ensuring continuity in education, relevant research remains limited. Although the Japan Foundation conducts a survey on Japanese language education overseas every three years, as mentioned above, it mainly reports macro-level statistics concerning the institutions, teachers, and learners without conducting case-level analyses. Consequently, the knowledge of Japanese-language education within sending organizations remains insufficient.

To address this gap, this study conducted field research in Vietnam, Japan's largest source of foreign workers, using a survey that focused on the educational environments, curricula, and teaching practices. It should be noted, however, that this paper is intended as a field report aimed at documenting on-the-ground realities and organizing key issues, rather than as a study designed to undertake theoretical examination or validation.

2. Method

(1) Participants and Research Sites

The field survey was conducted between August 7 and 19, 2025, at 16 sending organizations in Vietnam that provide Japanese language education.

(2) Procedures

Initial contact with the sending organizations was made through the researchers' personal and professional networks. The study's purpose, methods, and ethical considerations were explained in advance, and only organizations that provided consent were included. The survey comprised sections on institutional profiles, organizational structures, curricula, and instructional content, as well as challenges in educational management.

(3) Data Collection

The data were collected through classroom observations, facility tours, and photographic documentation. In addition, semi-structured interviews were conducted with administrators and teachers. This combination of methods enabled a multifaceted understanding of both instructional practices and organizational characteristics.

(4) Data Analysis

The dataset consisted of observation notes, interview transcripts, and photographic records of facilities and activities. These materials were then comprehensively analyzed to clarify the actual conditions of Japanese language education within the target sending organizations.

3. Results

(1) Overview of Institutions

Table 1 presents a summary of relevant information regarding the 16 sending organizations surveyed in this study, with the information being correct as of the time of the survey:

Table 1: Sending Organizations Surveyed

Name of Organization (pseudonym)	Location	Established (Year)	Number of Learners	Number of Full-Time Teachers	Type of Visa Provided
A	Ho Chi Minh	2006	2370	140	TIT, SSW, ES, ST
B	Ho Chi Minh	2023	20	2	TIT
C	Ho Chi Minh	2015	100	6	TIT, SSW, ES, ST
D	Ho Chi Minh	2015	20	3	TIT
E	Ho Chi Minh	2015	40	4	SSW (in preparation), ES
F	Ho Chi Minh	1981	250	16	TIT, SSW, ES
G	Ho Chi Minh	2019	25	3	TIT, SSW, ES
H	Ho Chi Minh	2023	10	2	TIT, ES, ST
I	Hue	2010	400	15	TIT, SSW, ST
J	Danang	2024	80	5	TIT, ES, ST
K	Hanoi	2020	150	12	TIT
L	Hanoi	2006	40	6	TIT, SSW, ES, ST
M	Hanoi	2018	100	11	TIT
N	Hanoi	2015	35	5	TIT
O	Hanoi	2017	30	2	TIT, ES, ST
P	Hanoi	2000	100	4	TIT, SSW, ES, ST

Abbreviations: TIT = Technical Intern Training, ES = Engineer / Specialist in Humanities / International Services, ST = Student, SSW = Specified Skilled Worker

As the table indicates, eight of the sending organizations were located in Ho Chi Minh City, six were in Hanoi, one was in Hue, and one was in Danang. While one institution was established back in 1981, before the Đổi Mới reforms, most were founded after 2000, and several were even established after the COVID-19 pandemic period. Whereas Institution A was notably large, most of the other institutions had from only a few dozen to approximately 100 learners. The majority of the institutions primarily trained students for the TITP, although some also prepared learners for the Engineer/Specialist in Humanities/International Services (ES) visa. Many learners who later pursued the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW; *Tokutei Ginō*) visa had prior experience of the TITP before transitioning.

This study did not systematically collect data on learners' gender composition within each institution. However, it is possible that gender ratios varied depending on the occupational fields targeted by each sending organization, as certain sectors—such as caregiving—are known to attract a higher proportion of female workers. Similarly, although detailed data on learners' age distribution were not collected, previous studies have shown that many Vietnamese workers come to Japan shortly after graduating from high school or in their early to mid-twenties (Michigami 2024). It is therefore

reasonable to assume that a broadly similar age profile characterized the learners in the institutions examined in this study. Regarding teachers, the numbers reported in this study refer only to full-time instructors; however, some institutions also employed additional part-time instructors alongside their full-time staff.

(2) Curricula

Most organizations designed 6-month curricula targeting the JLPT N4 level, with progress often being measured by lessons completed in the textbooks *Minna no Nihongo* I and II (3A Network). Large institutions sometimes grouped classes by residence status; however, in most cases, all learners followed the same 6-month N4 course. Achieving this level is often difficult for learners due to the short study period and their frequent departures once their visas are approved. Extending the training is considered impractical because longer study periods could reduce Japan's competitiveness compared with other destinations that hire foreign workers like Taiwan and South Korea, which do not require pre-departure education (with an exception being nursing/care workers, who often study for longer). Alongside language instruction, all institutions provided orientation classes on daily life, workplace practices, and manners in Japan.

This difficulty may also be related to the cognitive demands of learning Japanese orthography, particularly kanji. Kanji are generally regarded as challenging for many learners from non-kanji-using backgrounds, not only in Vietnam but more broadly. At the same time, it has been pointed out that Vietnamese contains a substantial number of Sino-derived words, which may potentially facilitate Japanese language learning (Matsuda 2016; Phan 2006). However, knowledge of Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary and the ability to draw on it vary considerably among learners, and not all are able to make effective use of this resource (Phan et al. 2022; Amano et al. 2025). While kanji knowledge alone cannot fully account for the difficulties observed, differences in prior literacy backgrounds are also likely to interact with the limited duration of training.

(3) Teaching Materials, Orientation, and Teacher's Roles

In terms of Japanese language education, the primary teaching materials were the *Minna no Nihongo* Elementary series of textbooks published by the 3A Network. Many institutions also used the Japan Foundation's Marugoto and Irodori textbook series as supplementary materials. *Minna no Nihongo* adopts a structural syllabus and is well-suited to the step-by-step accumulation of linguistic knowledge such as grammar and vocabulary; however, this approach does not necessarily translate directly into the development of actual language use ability, particularly oral communicative skills. For this reason, institutions reported that Marugoto and Irodori, both of which are based on a Can-do syllabus, were often used as supplementary teaching materials in practice. For learners whose primary goal is employment, oral communication skills are clearly of central importance. Nevertheless, the continued reliance on structurally based textbooks can be understood in relation to institutional demands, including expectations related to standardized Japanese language assessments such as the JLPT. Under the current Technical Intern Training Program, passing a Japanese language examination is not mandatory; however, under the Development and Employment System scheduled to begin in 2027, passing such examinations will become a formal requirement. This policy change is therefore likely to further reinforce the use of structurally based textbooks in pre-departure training.

As previously mentioned, *Minna no Nihongo* served as a universal reference for measuring learners' progress according simply to which lessons they had completed. As this measure was widely

recognized among stakeholders, *Minna no Nihongo* effectively functioned as the de facto standard textbook for learners in Vietnam. The following factors were found to explain its widespread use:

1. The availability of a Vietnamese translation and extensive supplementary materials;
2. Its suitability for use with the audiolingual method, which is common in Japanese language teaching in Vietnam;
3. Its alignment with JLPT-based assessments, which are the prevailing standard;
4. The fact that many teachers have studied using this textbook, which makes it easier to teach.

In orientation classes, institutions developed their own materials to teach basic practices that are considered essential for working in Japan. These included behavioral norms such as the “5S” principles (i.e., sorting, setting in order, shining, standardizing, and sustaining discipline) and *hō-ren-sō* (i.e., reporting, communicating, and consulting). Daily life practices were also taught, such as greeting people, separating garbage, and being mindful of appropriate manners and etiquette when using public transportation. Such knowledge was not only explicitly taught in class but also reinforced through posters and notices displayed within the institutions. The overall purpose of these orientation sessions was to foster workers who could adapt to Japanese society by learning and internalizing Japanese-style behavior, often in the format of one-way transmission.

The contents of the orientation sessions were further integrated into the learners’ daily Japanese language classes. For example, collective behavior and the observance of greetings were required during lessons, thereby linking Japanese-style discipline with the language instruction. These lessons were frequently conducted by teachers with experience of living in Japan, and, in many cases, such experience was a prerequisite for their employment as a teacher.

As a result, the Japanese language teachers were expected to assume responsibilities that extended far beyond language instruction. Even when separate staff were assigned to conduct the orientation sessions, the day-to-day implementation of such practices was primarily entrusted to the Japanese language teachers. Thus, they were responsible for not only transmitting linguistic knowledge but also guiding learners in the behavioral norms expected in Japanese society. For learners entering Japanese workplaces, learning not only the Japanese language but also Japan’s sociocultural norms may contribute, at a micro level, to workers’ early adaptation to the workplace and, at a macro level, to the broader social integration of foreign workers in Japan. At the same time, however, it is also necessary to consider how learners’ own perspectives, experiences, and judgments are positioned within instructional settings where such norms are predominantly conveyed in a one-way manner.

Figures 1 and 2 present photographs from inside the language institutions at the sending organizations:



Figure 1. Orientation Session Concerning Transportation in Japan



Figure 2. Posters Displaying Information for Students Inside an Institution

4. Conclusion

Amid time constraints and competition for human resources, Vietnamese sending organizations have developed educational programs to meet Japan's demand for foreign workers. Japan requires such workers to possess both Japanese language proficiency and cultural adaptability, which shapes these institutions' curricula and practices. The Japanese language teachers at these institutions thus assume multifaceted roles that extend beyond instruction to include guidance on daily life and workplace norms in Japan. The new Development and Employment System (*Ikusei Shūrō Seido*) will set pre-departure language standards for new workers; however, such standards may impose further burdens on the sending organizations. This study's survey clarifies current practices in these sending organizations as well as highlights challenges in both language education and human resource development.

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