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Analysis of Japanese Language Proficiency Test

Background

Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) is the most popular Japanese language test in the world for Japanese learners who are non-native Japanese speakers to evaluate their language skills, and if they pass the test, they get certified. This test is sponsored by Japan Foundation and Japan Educational Exchanges and Services. Including Japan, this test is operated in sixty-two countries, and in a year, more than six hundred thousand people take this test according to JLPT's website. Noguchi and Kuramoto (2009) mention the test fee is setting based on each country's economical situation, so the test fee in undeveloped country should be cheaper than the one in the U.S..

Features of JLPT

The main purpose for this test which is indicated in the JLPT website is measuring test-takers' communicative approach by testing language skills of vocabulary, grammar, reading and listening. As the test formats, JLPT has five different levels that is N1 to N5. N1 is the most difficult level and measures the ability of language uses in various occasions. Subsequently, N2 measures language uses in daily situations in various occasions to a certain degree, N3 measures language uses in daily situations to a certain degree, N4 measures the basic language ability, and N5, the easiest level, measures some basic language ability. Each test has three sections, and the first section is about characters (Kanji) and vocabulary, the second section is about listening

comprehension, and the third section is about reading comprehension and grammar. JLPT is all multiple choice question examinations and the questions are mostly four choices and some are three choices.

This test has own grading system as well. Because every test has different questions and the difficultness of the test are slightly different although it is made very carefully, JLPT grades the test differently. The test is not graded on how many questions test takers got correct, instead they are grading on the pattern of the answers. This process is based on the theory called "Item Response Theory", by using this, the test can be graded fairly equal all the time, not based on the difficultness of each test.
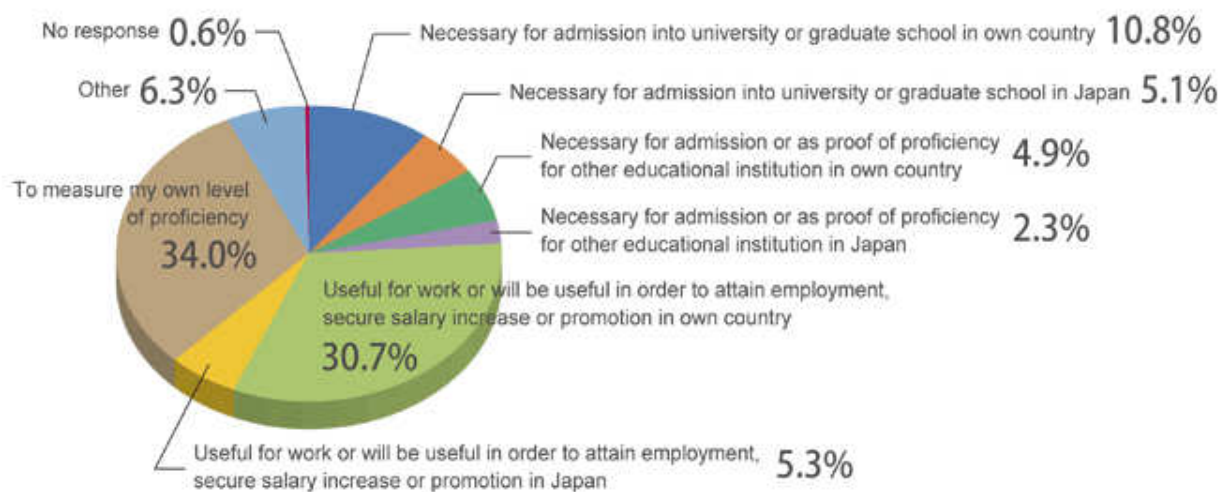
The last special feature of JLPT is that they provide the self evaluation list called "JLPT can-do self evaluation test". The self evaluation can be used to see what the test taker would be able to do using Japanese, by passing the each level of JLPT. This evaluation is based on the survey of 65,000 test takers asking how much they can understand, speak, or using Japanese, or how much they think they can use Japanese. By asking those questions and looking at the actual level of those test takers, JLPT can create the can-do evaluation list to help the test takers succeed in Japanese speaking life. Based on this can-do evaluation list provided, test takers can set the new language goal, and they can use this to find the job that is suited for the test taker's level.

Intended test uses vs. Realty

The purpose of this test in the view from founder is providing a sort of achievement for Japanese learners in a purpose of encouraging test-takers and increasing their enthusiasm and motivation for learning Japanese. Through observing Japanese classes at Kapiolani Community

College and hearing opinion about JLPT from students of Japanese major, many teachers

advocate their students to take JLPT test. However many applicants take this test for various

reasons. According to the Japan Foundation (2011), only thirty percentages of applicants of the

JLPT said that applicants' purpose was just measuring their language proficiency, but most other

applicants said that their purpose is related to academic or job opportunities such as entering

educational institution (colleges in Japan or Japanese major in own countries), or getting better

jobs as the graph below.

The JLPT is taken for various reasons, including admission to advanced education, finding employment and testing one's own abilities.

No response 0.6% — Necessary for admission into university or graduate school in own country 10.8%

Other 6.3% — Necessary for admission into university or graduate school in Japan 5.1%

Necessary for admission or as proof of proficiency for other educational institution in own country 4.9%

To measure my own level of proficiency 34.0%

Necessary for admission or as proof of proficiency for other educational institution in Japan 2.3%

Useful for work or will be useful in order to attain employment, secure salary increase or promotion in own country 30.7%

Useful for work or will be useful in order to attain employment, secure salary increase or promotion in Japan 5.3%

Respondents: Overseas applicants for 2011 December test. (Valid samples: 275,610 registrants)
Survey of 196 cities in 60 countries outside of Japan by the Japan Foundation.

Agency for Cultural Affairs states this test is not suppose to be for entering colleges and

universities in Japan, but some universities, especially national universities' exchange programs,

require foreign students to get at least N2 level of JLPT to enter the universities. So, some people

take the test for academic purposes not only knowing their language proficiency. The reason

behind that is there is a test called Examination for Japanese University Admission for

International Students which prevails since 2002, but before that, only JLPT was a test for

foreign students to enter universities in Japan. Therefore JLPT is not used for formal academic

purposes to enter universities in Japan any more.

Content Validity

The contents of the questions are created based on real-life settings with different

difficulties of Kanji and word choices. For N1, if the test-taker knows about two thousands of

Kanji and ten thousands of words, it should be sufficient to be pass the test. When I analyze the

example questions of N1, in character and vocabulary part, the distracters of the questions are

very similar to the right answers and I am sure that even native Japanese speaker may choose

wrong answers. The topics are related to Japanese culture, for instance, about characteristics of

Japanese people and manners, and other topics are related to social problems in Japan, history,

arts, and modern Japanese like younger generations' languages. The topics in N2 are related to

transportation system in Japan, popular sports, business and relationship with family and male-

female. The sample conversations in listening part in both N1 and N2 are used many discourse

markers and honorific forms, and also casual forms. In addition, the speed of the conversation is

very close to natural conversation between native Japanese speakers.

It seems that the test contents in each levels represents the features of the each test which

I mentioned in Features of JLPT part.

Possible Problems and Improvements

The providers of JLPT says that JLPT is focusing communicative competence, but I think

it is ambiguous because this test does not have any items to test speaking and writing skills

which are very important to measure communicative competence. I can understand if the passers

of the N1 level has enough knowledge of Japanese but it does not mean that they have enough skills of communication.

In order to add the speaking part in the JLPT without any additional costs, the government can add the part in teaching training program for the college students to become the teacher, so the students will be able to actually practice their teaching and assessing skills by doing the interview for the JLPT test as well. If the cost is main concern, then they can make this interview part mandatory for the college students to pass the teaching training program, so that the cost will not be raised and every person in the world still gets the chance to take JLPT.

Reference

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