

Japanese Language Education in Central Asian Countries - Examples from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Mongolia

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Abstract

While the Soviet Union was once a powerful influence in the Central Asian region, many countries in this region are now strengthening their ties with third countries such as China and the United States. Among them, the nomadic countries with similar values and deep historical and cultural ties are Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Mongolia. Japanese-language education in these three countries began at approximately the same time and has been developing steadily. Japanese language education, which used to be taught in a few specialties in so-called “isolated Japanese language learning environments” (Onishi:2004), is now expanding as Japanese language courses are offered to primary and secondary school students and adults (Bayarmaa:2005), but there are still many problems, such as the employment of students studying at the postgraduate level and the training of teachers (Sugiura:2007). Given the current changing international context and the goals and scope of Japanese language education abroad, we aim to review the importance of Japanese language teaching in Central Asian countries and explore how we can jointly contribute to Japanese language education in the region.

Keywords

Central Asia, nomadic culture, Japanese language education¹

1. Introduction

While the Soviet Union was once a powerful influence in the Central Asian region, many countries in this region are now strengthening their ties with third countries such as China and the United States. Among them, the nomadic countries with similar values and deep historical and cultural ties are Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Mongolia. Japanese-language education in these three countries began at approximately the same time and has been developing steadily. Japanese language education, which used to be taught in a few specialties in so-called “isolated

¹ This research was conducted through the Sumitomo Foundation's Japan-Related Research Projects.

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- To clarify the current status of Japanese-language education in the three countries mentioned above, the problems and challenges they face and their similarities and differences are explored.
- To clarify whether Japan has established a system for accepting foreign interns and workers and whether the three countries are providing Japanese language training aimed at this purpose.
- To clarify how many students are willing to study abroad, continue their studies, and do internships in Japan, and what are the aspirations of students who intend to study and work in Japan?

Through an examination of the above, the characteristics, current status, and challenges of Japanese language education in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Mongolia are clarified, which will serve as a subject for further research in this field. Hopefully, this will improve communication between Japanese language teachers in Central Asian countries with nomadic cultures and that Japanese language studies and Japanese language education research will be intensified in the region.

To achieve the stated goals and objectives, a questionnaire and interview study were conducted, and the participants in the study were representatives of Japanese-language education institutions in the three countries, teachers working there, and students studying there.

The content of the research questions included, for the target institutions, the history of Japanese language education, current status, challenges, and issues that need to be improved; the importance of teaching Japanese; what influenced students’ learning of Japanese, their goals, and future plans; and, for students who want to study in another country or do internships in Japan, the reasons for wanting to learn, their goals, and challenges. To make the results of the study more accurate and clearer, we used an interview.

2. A brief history of Japanese language education

2.1 Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is located in western Mongolia and southern Russia, with an area of 2,717,300 km² and a population of over 16 million. Seventy-one percent of the population is Kazakh, and the remaining 29% is Russian, Ukrainian, Uzbek, German, Tatar, Uyghur, or Korean.

Kazakh and Russian are the official languages, and Russian is used by 95% of the population on a daily basis. In terms of religion, 69.3% are Muslim, and the rest are Orthodox or other religions.

Japanese language training began in 1992, the year after the country gained independence from the Republic of Kazakhstan, with the establishment of a Japanese language course at the Chinese Language Department of the Faculty of Oriental Studies of the Al-Farabi Kazakh National University in the former capital, Almaty. In 1996, Japanese language training was introduced in primary and secondary educational institutions. In 2002, through an agreement between the JICA and the Government of Kazakhstan, the Kazakhstan-Japan Human Resources Development Center was established to conduct Japanese language training for the general public. In 2006, 1,569 people were studying Japanese in 12 educational institutions, but in 2009, the number of students decreased by half to 723, and the number of educational institutions also decreased. As of July 2024, there were only three universities offering Japanese language training as a major.

The Japanese language proficiency test began in 2001 and has been held twice a year in Almaty since 2011 and once a year in Astana.

2.2 Kyrgyzstan

The Kyrgyz Republic is located in the middle of Central Asia, bordering Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and China, and has an area of 200,105 km² and a population of over 5 million. A total of 78% of the population is Kyrgyz, while the remaining 22% is Uzbek, Russian, Tajik, and other ethnic groups.

The official languages are Kyrgyz and Russian. The majority of the population, 91%, is Muslim, with the remainder being Christian and other religious groups.

The country also officially began providing Japanese-language education after gaining independence in 1991. In 1991, the Department of Japanese Studies was established at Kyrgyz National University, and Japanese-language teaching began in primary and secondary education institutions in the same year. The Kyrgyz-Japanese Human Resources Development Center was established in 1995 and began providing Japanese language training to the public; since August 2013, it has been providing training on the basis of the Japanese Foundation's Japanese Language Education Standards (JF Course). Currently, higher education institutions such as Kyrgyz National University and Bishkek State University are the main centers for Japanese language training, but the Japanese language is also taught in private secondary schools.

The Japanese Language Proficiency Test was introduced in 2007 and has been held twice a year since 2015.

2.3 Mongolia

Mongolia is a landlocked country in Asia, bordered by Russia to the north and China to the south and southeast. It covers an area of 1,564,116 km², with a population of 3.5 million. The vast majority of citizens are ethnic Mongols, with roughly 5% of the population being Kazakhs, Tuvans.

Mongolia's official language is Mongolian. Buddhism is the majority religion (51.7%), with the nonreligious being the second-largest group (40.6%). Islam is the third-largest religious identification (3.2%), concentrated among ethnic Kazakhs.

In Mongolia, Japanese-language teaching began at the National University of Mongolia in 1975. Until 1990, Japanese language teacher-translator training was provided on a selective basis, and since 1990, Japanese language specialist training has been provided for foreign service specialists, Japanese language teacher-translators, and researchers. Currently, in addition to training specialists in Japanese studies and Japanese language translation at universities, secondary schools, language courses, and training centers are actively providing Japanese language training.

The Japanese language proficiency test began in 2001 and is currently held twice a year in Ulaanbaatar and once a year in the countryside.

3. Research Summary

The research was conducted in 2024, and first, information was collected on Japanese-language education institutions in each country. A survey questionnaire was prepared on the basis of that information, and the main survey was conducted in July.

Table 1. Number of institutions, teachers, and students participating in the study

| | Institution | Teachers | Students |
|-------------------|-------------|----------|----------|
| Kazakhstan | 2 | 2 | 19 |
| Kyrgyzstan | 2 | 2 | 21 |
| Mongolia | 5 | 7 | 59 |

4. Research Results

The status of Japanese-language education in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Mongolia, i.e., the number of institutions providing training, teachers and students teaching in them, is shown in the table below. The number of students varies, i.e., the number of students in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is lower than that in Mongolia and is likely to continue to decrease. The number of students studying at all levels of higher education, especially at the master's and doctoral levels, is generally low in all countries.

Table 2. Number of institutions providing Japanese language training, teachers and students

| | Institution | Teachers | Students |
|-------------------|-------------|----------|----------|
| Kazakhstan | 8 | 38 | 611 |
| Kyrgyzstan | 13 | 40 | 1300 |
| Mongolia | 117 | 363 | 13334 |

Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Mongolian languages are structurally similar to Japanese or belong to the Altai language family, so there are no significant difficulties in learning or teaching them. Compared with Russian students, Kazakh and Kyrgyz native speakers learn grammar easily, listen well, and speak quickly.

According to the study, there was no other country except Mongolia that provided training for the purpose of sending interns to Japan. In Mongolia, there are 74 organizations with special licenses to provide skilled interns in Japan, and their affiliated and contracted training centers organize intensive Japanese language training for interns.

The problems and difficulties faced in Japanese language training were relatively common in the three countries, as follows. These include:

- Low employment rate of vocational school graduates
- Instability of teaching staff in institutions other than universities
- Adoption of programs that meet the needs of students

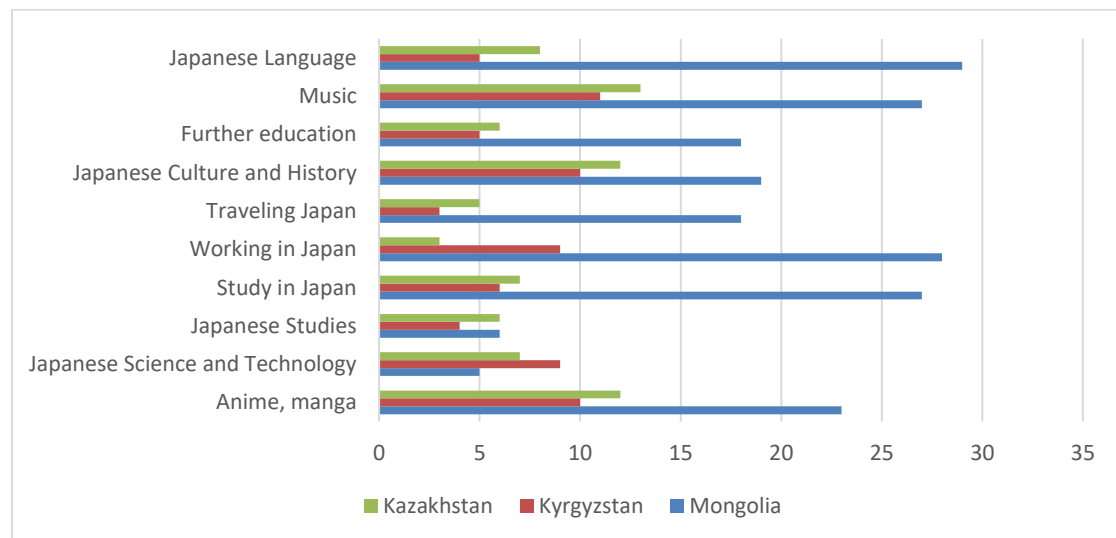


Figure 1. Purpose of learning Japanese

Although the number of students is relatively small, the purpose of learning Japanese is common to students from all countries, namely, to study the Japanese language and culture through Japanese anime, manga, J-Pop, etc.

For Mongolian students, many are learning Japanese for the purpose of studying, working in Japan, and having an interest in the Japanese language, whereas for students from the other two countries, many students are studying Japanese studies, such as Japanese politics, economics, and science and technology.

The following figure shows the future aspirations of Mongolian students studying in Japan for the purpose of working.

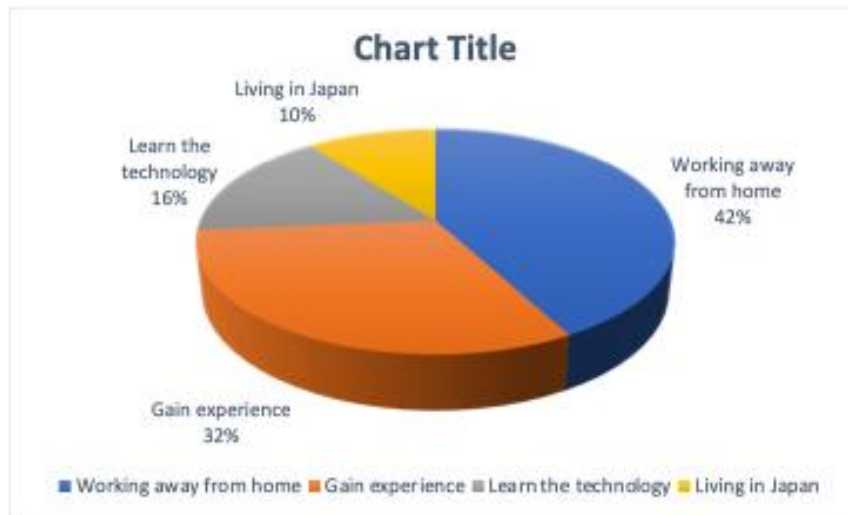


Figure 2. Intentions of students working in Japan

Among students who intend to study in Japan, Kyrgyz and Mongolian students answered “to work in Japan in the future,” whereas Kazakh students answered “to be useful for future careers”.

The teachers and students who participated in the study explained that the differences in students’ learning goals are related to the development and geographical location of the country, and it cannot be denied that differences in people’s employment and religion also play a role.

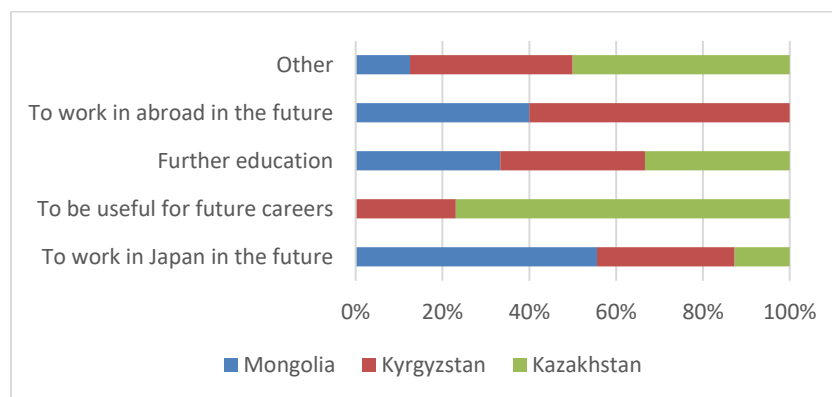


Figure 3. Intentions of students who intend to study in Japan

Regarding the importance of teaching Japanese in the region, the majority of teachers who participated in the study considered it to be of particular importance in the following aspects, which is consistent with the results of previous studies (Yamaguchi:2017). These include

- Education and employment
- Economy and business
- Cultural exchange
- Foreign relations

Japan offers many scholarships and training programs for foreign students, so young people who speak Japanese have more opportunities to study in Japan. They also believe that if Japanese companies expand their investment and business in Central Asia, the demand for Japanese-speaking personnel will increase, and Japanese-speaking experts will play an important role in advancing cooperation between countries in areas such as infrastructure, energy, and education. They also believe that if the Japan–Central Asia dialog (Central Asia + Japan dialog) intensifies, Japanese-speaking experts will serve as a bridge for this relationship, and Japan will be able to increase its soft power influence and deepen its relations with Central Asian countries through its language and culture.

5. Conclusion

On the basis of this research and the information that was collected, it can be concluded that Japanese language teaching in the three countries has a history of thirty to fifty years, that the activities of educational institutions and related organizations are relatively stable, and that competitions, seminars, and symposiums held among students provide valuable opportunities for teachers to exchange information. Japanese-language teaching in the three countries has the following common features.

- Training is relatively regular
- The specialization is similar
- Japanese language teaching based on Japanese language education standards has been introduced
- The influence of the mother tongue positively affects the learning of Japanese

Additionally, the following differences exist.

- Number of students
- The goals of students learning Japanese
- The learning environment and diversity of students

Japanese language experts also believe that teaching Japanese in Central Asia can contribute to the development of not only individuals but also countries and can be a key driver for strengthening regional education, the economy, culture, and international relations.

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9. Research materials collected by ourselves