

# **Japanese Language Education in Canada: An Example of a Regional University in British Columbia**

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## **Preface**

This article describes the Japanese language program at University of the Fraser Valley (UFV), a regional university in Canada. It provides an example, for educators in Japan, of the way an overseas Japanese language education program can operate. The author organizes the Japanese language program at University of the Fraser Valley and is currently a visiting researcher at Jissen Women's University.

## **1. University of the Fraser Valley**

University of the Fraser Valley is a teaching intensive public university in the province of British Columbia, Canada. Its main campus is located in Abbotsford, a city approximately 70 km east of Vancouver in a region called the Fraser Valley. UFV also has campuses in other cities in the region: Chilliwack, Mission, and Hope. However, Japanese language courses are currently offered only at the Abbotsford main campus. UFV was founded in 1974 as Fraser Valley College (FVC) as a response to demand for post-secondary education in the Fraser Valley region. FVC grew and changed its name to University College of the Fraser Valley (UCFV) in 1991 and to today's name, University of the Fraser Valley (UFV) in 2008. More than 15,000 students are now learning in University of the Fraser Valley each year.

## **2. Modern Languages Department at UFV**

Japanese is one of eight languages taught in the Modern Languages Department (MOLA) at UFV. MOLA is a unit of the Faculty of Humanities, which is placed along with the Faculty of Social Sciences in the College of Arts. The eight languages are French, German, Halq'eméylem (a local indigenous language), Japanese, Mandarin, Punjabi, Russian, and Spanish. The department has five full-time faculty members - three teaching French, one teaching Spanish, and one teaching Japanese. Sessional

instructors teach courses in the other languages. Each of these languages will have one sessional instructor who is in charge of organizing the program and teaching students. Approximately 50 sections of language courses in total are offered by MOLA each year.

### **3. History of the Japanese program**

In 1994, UCFV began a successful partnership with Takushoku University Hokkaido College in Japan. The cities of Abbotsford, Canada, and Fukagawa, Japan began a formal sister city relationship in 1998. This further strengthened the relationship between the two universities. UCFV faculty members frequently go to Takushoku University Hokkaido College in Fukagawa and teach for a semester.

In 1997, a Japanese course was offered for the first time at UCFV. Initially two first year courses per academic year were offered. Later, occasional summer sections and the second year courses were added, the latter being given for a number of years as Directed Independent Study (DIS) courses. These DIS offerings and extra-curricular activities such as conversational tables in Japanese drew attention on campus and more students began to sign up for Japanese courses.

By 2005, demand for the Japanese courses was steadily growing. For one course offered that year, 26 students signed up on the waitlist of a section that was already full with 26 students in it. That year, MOLA and the Japanese sessional instructor applied for funds from the Tanaka Fund Program of the Japan Foundation, which provides institutional support for the enhancement of Japanese language study opportunities in Canadian universities. It aspires to promote and help improve Japanese language education, and to support institutional program development. Established in 1974, the Tanaka Fund was the result of an exchange of gifts between the governments of Canada and Japan. Canada offered \$1,000,000 to Japan to promote Canadian studies in Japanese universities, while Japan provided 300 million yen for the enhancement of Japanese studies in Canadian universities.

The Tanaka fund offers two types of grants: Continuing Position Grants and Visiting Language Lectureship Grants. UCFV successfully applied for the former, which are available for a one-year period only, but renewable each year for up to three consecutive years. They are designed to cover up to a maximum of 50% of the salaries and benefits

of the project. This type of grant is designed to provide Canadian universities with the means to expand their teaching staff in Japanese language instruction, linguistics and language pedagogy.

Grants are awarded with the understanding that the new continuing position created will be maintained by the institution once support from the Tanaka Fund ends.

Thanks to the support from the Tanaka fund, in 2005, UCFV was able to create an on-going sessional faculty position for Japanese instruction. The funding allowed UCFV to offer three first year courses and a second year course, in each of the fall and winter semesters, totaling eight sections per academic year, funded 50% by the International Department and 50% by the Tanaka Fund. This partnership gave students the opportunity to obtain the Intermediate Certificate in Japanese, which requires completion of the fourth level Japanese course, in a reasonable time frame.

In 2008, after the program had operated under this funding arrangement from the Japan Foundation for three years, and in accordance with the stipulations of the Tanaka Fund, a permanent position in Japanese was created. In 2009, third-year Japanese courses were offered for the first time.

## **4. Curriculum**

### **4.1 Courses offered:**

JAPN 101 Japanese Language I

JAPN 102 Japanese Language II

JAPN 103 Japanese Study Tour – Language and Culture

JAPN 201 Intermediate Japanese I

JAPN 202 Intermediate Japanese II

JAPN 301 Third-year Japanese I

JAPN 302 Third-year Japanese II

### **4.2 Intermediate Certificate in Japanese**

- JAPN 101, 102, 201, and 202 with a minimum 2.33 GPA.

Learning Outcomes:

A student who obtains an Intermediate Proficiency Certificate in Japanese will be able to:

- 1) Read and understand passages about familiar daily topics written with basic vocabulary and kanji.
- 2) Listen and comprehend conversations encountered in daily life and generally follow the subject of the conversation.
- 3) Handle successfully a limited number of uncomplicated communicative tasks by creating sentences.
- 4) Express personal meaning by combining and recombining into short statements what they know and what they hear from others they are conversing with.
- 5) Compose essays with cohesively structured multiple paragraphs about familiar daily topics.
- 6) Demonstrate understanding of aspects of the culture and everyday life in Japan.

#### **4.3 Frequency of Course Offerings:**

- JAPN 101 and 102 are offered in each of the fall and winter semesters. Also JAPN 101 is occasionally offered in the spring/ summer semester.
- JAPN 201 is offered in the fall semester and JAPN 202 is offered in the winter semester.
- JAPN 301 was offered in the fall semester of 2009, 2010, 2012, 2013, and 2014; JAPN 302 was offered in the winter semester of 2010, 2012, and 2014; both 301 and 302 have been taught only as directed independent studies (DIS) courses.
- JAPN 103 was offered in the spring of 2013.

Due to recent changes in the Japanese programs of local high schools, fewer incoming students are capable of starting from JAPN 102 and 201. With the budget of 8 sections of Japanese per school year, the current distribution of Japanese course levels per school year is as follows:

4 - JAPN 101 courses

2 - JAPN 102 courses

1 - JAPN 201 course

1 - JAPN 202 course

When around five students are expected to enroll:

1 - JAPN 301 (DIS)

1 - JAPN 302 (DIS)

#### **4.4 Directed Independent Studies (DIS):**

Sections that expect low enrolment, mainly JAPN 202, 301 and 302, may be taught as DIS courses. These are not counted as a regular part of the faculty workload. They are for the students who would like to complete JAPN 202, the last course to become eligible for an intermediate certificate, and 300-level courses.

#### **4.5 Curriculum Comparison with Other Universities in British Columbia:**

The course offerings are remarkably similar with the Japanese courses offered by other universities in the province of British Columbia. This is especially the case for the first four levels (JAPN 101, 102, 201, and 202) of language courses. The lower-level courses are designed this way to make it easy for credits for those courses to be transferred between institutions. When universities in this province are creating new courses, they are encouraged by the government to consider how course content and learning outcomes compare with similar courses at other universities. Entry-level courses at the various universities will cover similar material. As a result of this, many students in the province are able to study for one or two years at a university, and then transfer to another university to complete a degree program. A large number of entry-level courses are basically interchangeable between different universities in the province.

### **5. Enrolments**

The enrolment numbers for the Japanese courses at UFV in recent years have been between 160 and 200 annually. This number rises and falls for a variety of reasons. Some reasons are shared with many other language courses. Some reasons relate specifically to the Japanese courses.

In the middle of the twentieth century, learning Japanese in universities in North America was a specialized field for a limited number of people who had an interest in East Asia. In the 1980s and 1990s Japanese became one of the major languages to study in university as the economic influence of Japan grew in the world. Many business-minded students tried learning Japanese then. A great many Japanese programs in universities developed at this time. UCFV began offering Japanese in 1997. After the turn of the century, the major motivation to start learning Japanese changed. Now it is the attraction of popular Japanese culture that draws significant numbers of students to Japanese classes.

Some external factors can affect the enrolment numbers of Japanese courses too. When the political tension between Japan and neighboring Asian countries became high in early 2012, fewer international students from those countries started learning Japanese in the fall semester of that year. For example, in the fall semester of 2010 there were 17 international students enrolled in JAPN 101 sections. In the fall semester of 2012 only 12 international students started learning Japanese in JAPN 101. These numbers may not be statistically significant but they hint that there may be a trend linking the political popularity of Japan with enrolment in Japanese courses.

As more people recognize the value and uniqueness of Japanese language and culture, Japanese courses will keep attracting local and international students.

## **6. Strategies to improve student success**

Six levels of Japanese language courses are offered: JAPN 101, 102, 201, 202, 301, and 302. These are designed so that the student will achieve an intermediate level after JAPN 202 and achieve an upper intermediate level after JAPN 302.

The initial goal for a beginner is to achieve an intermediate level. At this level students can consistently create sentences and maintain communication about uncomplicated daily life topics. A student achieves this level after taking JAPN 202, which is the fourth course from the complete beginners' JAPN 101. Students who finished JAPN 202 are entitled to obtain the Intermediate Certificate in Japanese. In some institutions, such as the University of British Columbia, this level is the language requirement for a BA degree.

Besides getting credits, grades, and an Intermediate Certificate in Japanese, the students are encouraged to take the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT). This test, organized by the Japan Foundation, is a widely recognized credential of proficiency of Japanese. Some students in the 200 and 300 levels successfully pass the N4 and N3 levels of the JLPT. We are working to ensure that more students achieve success at this level.

200 and 300-level students are also encouraged to participate in the annual British Columbia speech contest organized by the Consulate General of Japan in Vancouver.

Oral Presentation practice is included in the JAPN 202 and 302 courses. Some students brush up their class presentation and apply for the speech contest. In 2010, a UFV student Jiwon Lee passed the screening, gave a presentation in the final competition, and received a prize. Some other students also participated in the final competitions in 2014 and 2016.

Maintaining and developing relationships with UFV's partner institutions in Japan contributes to the ongoing success of UFV's Japanese program. UFV currently has exchange agreements with Japanese universities such as Chuo, Jissen Women's, Kindai, Nagasaki, Nagasaki Wesleyan, and Osaka Gakuin. Exchange students from these Japanese universities are present on the UFV campus and students who study Japanese here can contact them and use the language skills they learned in their classes. Every year at least a few UFV students take the opportunity of attending classes in one of UFV's partner institutions in Japan. The study tour in the summer of 2013 relied on the support of Chuo University. They offered us the use of a classroom in Japan, made homestay arrangements, and organized cultural presentations, and activities with Japanese students at Chuo University.

After taking the Japanese courses at UFV, students often continue their Japanese studies at larger institutions with Japanese major and graduate programs. Some choose to go to Japan to study or work. The JET (Japan exchange teaching) program is a popular program for graduates. It involves teaching English in Japan for a one-year period with choice of extension up to five years. Some UFV students have been accepted and taught English in public schools in Japan. The Japanese instructors at UFV support these students in the form of consulting, advising, and writing recommendations.

## **7. Community Engagement**

The Japanese instructor keeps in communication with high school teachers who teach Japanese in Abbotsford. When personnel from the Japan Foundation visited the UFV campus in 2010, the high school Japanese teachers in Abbotsford were invited to observe UFV classes and discussed issues in Japanese education. The Japanese instructor and outstanding Japanese language students occasionally give talks at local high schools about studying Japanese in university.

The Japanese program may have a work-study student assistant in some school years when funding is secured. The student assistant helps with conversation seminars and offer tutoring for students in need and students who wish extra practice. The assistant may become involved in organizing cultural activities on campus along with the Japanese Culture Club. In this capacity the student assistant would work with international students from Japan, students taking Japanese courses, and others. Activities may include setting up conversational tables, serving Japanese food, watching Japanese movies and anime, and joining events on campus and in the city of Abbotsford to introduce Japan. After the Great East Japan Earthquake occurred in March 2011, the student group along with Japanese international students and students taking Japanese courses organized a fund raising event. A total of \$8,000 was raised for relief and donated through the Canadian Red Cross. These activities greatly contributed to awareness of internationalization within the UFV community.

### **8. The future directions of the Japanese program - opportunities for improvement**

An Advanced Proficiency Certificate of Japanese for students who completed 18 credits up to JAPN 302 is beginning its way through the approval process. Other languages in UFV such as French, Spanish, and Russian already have an advanced certificate that students can strive for. It is possible to offer another credential of language proficiency by UFV for students without making any changes in course offerings. An advanced certificate will become another interim goal and motivate the students learning Japanese.

The university may also consider a couple of other opportunities for expanding the Japanese language program. The first is the idea of offering more upper level Japanese courses. After taking six Japanese courses (i.e. JAPN 101, 102, 201, 202, 301, and 302) the achievement level of a student is equivalent to the Japanese Language Proficiency Test level N3. A student at this level can communicate in Japanese in basic day-to-day situations. The student would not be proficient enough to fully function in a business environment or to attend a university in which Japanese is the language of instruction, however. We do have students who wish to achieve Japanese language levels beyond those provided by the courses UFV currently offers. A possible new course we could develop would be a Business Japanese course. Several other local universities such as the University of British Columbia, Kwantlen Polytechnic University, Thompson Rivers University, and Capilano University offer this type of course.

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A second opportunity involves cooperating within our university to link related courses and disciplines to develop an Asian Studies Program. Many students who take Japanese courses are also enrolled in the Japanese history course. Those students would like to develop a high language proficiency level and learn about many aspects of Japanese culture.