

Japanese Heritage Language Schools in the United States

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Introduction



A sizeable number of individuals with Japanese ancestry live in the United States. The U.S. Census identifies 774,600, of whom 294,108 were born outside of the country. The remaining 480,492 are American-born, representing second- through fifth-generation Japanese-Americans (U.S. Census Bureau, 2011). The Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs gives a figure of 388,457 Japanese people residing in the United States. Of these, 240,152 are “long-term” residents” (those living in the United States for over three months), and 148,305 are U.S. permanent residents (Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011).

Although there are discrepancies between the two figures, it is clear that these numbers are not small. It should also be noted that the U.S. Census numbers include those who have Japanese ethnic origin, indicating that those who are products of international or interracial marriages are not included (U. S. Census Bureau, 2011). It is expected that a sizable number of second-generation Japanese-Americans and Japan-born Japanese children speak Japanese at home, constituting a group of JHL (Japanese as a heritage language) speakers and learners.

Japanese children living in the United States fall into four major groups (Kataoka, 2008): 1) those who are in the United States temporarily and are expected to return to Japan within five or more years; 2) those who have lived in the United States for more than five years and anticipate returning to Japan before they complete schooling; 3) long-term residents, who complete their schooling in the United States, including permanent residents; and 4) children of international marriages, who have one native Japanese-speaking parent and one parent who doesn't speak Japanese and are typically permanent residents or citizens of the United States. Children in each group are likely to have different language use and language learning environments and different needs in developing proficiency in Japanese. There are also individual differences within these groups.

Parents who want their children to learn Japanese as their heritage language often send them to Japanese heritage language (JHL) schools, which are described here. Most schools operate outside of the public/private school system and do not receive public funding.

History and Current Status of Japanese Heritage Language Schools

There are four types of educational institutions in the United States that develop the Japanese language proficiency of heritage Japanese speakers and of other students as well: 1) JHL schools established between the late 19th and early 20th centuries, before World War II; 2) JHL schools established after World War II; 3) Japanese supplementary schools, or *hoshuukoo* (the term we use in this brief); and 4) two-way immersion programs. The first three are private schools operated primarily by volunteer parents of students enrolled in the schools and are outside the public education system. Although *hoshuukoo* are found throughout the United States, JHL schools are limited to the West Coast, Hawaii, and a few other states such as Colorado and Illinois. These schools' origins and functions reflect the needs of the populations they serve. Since two-way immersion programs (our last category) are part of the formal education system, we do not include them in this discussion.

Pre-War Japanese Heritage Language Schools

The first group of Japanese immigrants to the United States crossed the Pacific Ocean in 1868. This phase of immigration lasted until 1924, when the U.S. government's immigration restriction law went into effect, barring further immigration from Japan. Soon after their arrival, this wave of immigrants, known as the first generation or "*issei*" Japanese, felt the need to educate their children in Japanese. There were a variety of reasons, but the most urgent was to promote communication between the Japanese-speaking parents and their children. The first school was established on Maui, Hawaii, in 1895; the second one was established in Honolulu in 1896 (Yano, 2011). The first Japanese school on the mainland United States was established in Seattle in 1902; in subsequent years, schools were established in San Francisco, Sacramento, and Los Angeles (Yano, 2011). Many more Japanese language schools followed. Most were community-based, affiliated with religious groups, or established by other independent organizations (Igawa, 2003). These schools were primarily Saturday schools. Classes were held in school facilities, community centers, churches and temples, or local schools rented on instruction days. Most pre-war JHL schools closed down during World War II, but after the war ended, many were re-established and resumed classes (Shimada, 1998).

Language maintenance among immigrant populations typically suffers from intergenerational instability (Clyne, 2005; cited in Lo Bianco, 2008), and internment during World War II aggravated the loss of Japanese among second-generation Japanese Americans and hastened a shift to English among third- and fourth-generation Japanese Americans.

From a language acquisition perspective, Japanese became a foreign language rather than a heritage language for a large number of Japanese Americans. In response to the increasing number of Japanese-American children who did not speak Japanese at home, most of the pre-war JHL schools shifted their educational focus from JHL to JFL (Japanese as a foreign language) instruction during their post-war revival (Douglas, Kataoka, & Kishimoto, 2003).

Post-War Japanese Heritage Language Schools

New Japanese immigrants, the “*shin-issei*” or new first generation, came to the United States after World War II. This group mainly comprised business-related expatriates who decided to stay in the United States after completing company assignments, individuals who had completed higher education in the United States, and other Japanese nationals who married U.S. citizens and decided to live in the United States. New schools were established in some states, primarily in California, to cater to the children of this new generation. Most schools have also accepted children who are Japanese Americans, raised with no Japanese language, and children of parents interested in having their children learn Japanese regardless of their language or ethnic backgrounds. These are also Saturday, or sometimes Sunday, schools. The schools typically hold their classes in buildings they own or in rented space. Some JHL pre-school and kindergarten programs in southern California operate up to five days a week.

Hoshuukoo

Hoshuukoo are supplementary, private, Saturday schools. They were originally established for the children of Japanese sent overseas by their companies, and their mission was to educate children in Japanese, so that they could smoothly re-enter Japanese schools upon their families’ return to Japan. The first *hoshuukoo* in the United States was established in 1958 in Washington, D.C., and the second, in San Francisco in 1968. As the number of business people sent to the United States increased in the 1970s, so did the number of *hoshuukoo*, and the number of Japanese children of compulsory education age (age 7-15) peaked in 1991 at 22,718 (Japanese Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011). After Japan’s economic bubble burst that year, the number declined to its lowest point, 17,901 in 1998. The number has gradually risen since then, with a 2008 figure of 20,218 compulsory education age children in the United States. Of these, 11,492 students were studying at *hoshuukoo*, which numbered 83 in that year (Monbu-Kagaku-Shoo, n.d.).

Hoshuukoo usually hold classes in local school buildings rented on Saturdays. Their curricula vary from school to school, but all *hoshuukoo* teach *kokugo*, or Japanese as the national language, using the curriculum and textbooks approved by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, & Technology. Some *hoshuukoo* teach math in addition to Japanese, and others teach social studies and science as well as *kokugo* and math.

(*Hoshuukoo* are different from all-day, all week Japanese schools, *nihonjin gakkoo*, which are established exclusively for children who will be returning to Japan and offer the same curriculum that schools in Japan use. As of 2013, there are five *nihonjin gakkoo* in the United States.)

In many areas of the United States, there is little distinction between JHL schools and *hoshuukoo*. Although most *hoshuukoo* are not intended for JHL students, many children of *shin-issei*, including those who are children of international marriages in which one of the parents is not a native speaker of Japanese, attend *hoshuukoo*. In fact, in areas of the country where there are no JHL schools, *hoshuukoo* often function as JHL schools as well. Many of the *hoshuukoo* call themselves “Japanese language school” in English as well as by their Japanese name (e.g., Denver Japanese Language School, Indiana Japanese Language School, and Japanese Language School of Philadelphia). We have also talked with some Japanese language education specialists who do not distinguish JHL schools from *hoshuukoo*.

There are cases in which a *hoshuukoo* was established near one or more large Japanese companies for the children of their employees from Japan. It is likely that children at these schools are mostly native speakers of Japanese and not JHL speakers who will return to Japan after some years (Douglas, Kataoka, & Kishimoto, 2003). However, in their study of four *hoshuukoo* in urban and suburban areas on the West Coast, Kataoka and Shibata (2011) found that the majority of the students were, in fact, JHL students. In addition, children who are native Japanese speakers and whose families have long assignments in the United States tend to lose their native proficiency in Japanese after several years and become JHL speakers. Therefore, it is difficult to apply a standard definition to *hoshuukoo* programs and their students. The ratio of JHL students in *hoshuukoo* may increase in the near future, as found in a study of four *hoshuukoo* in urban and suburban areas (Kataoka & Shibata, 2003), and some *hoshuukoo* have been trying to adjust their curriculum to suit the needs of JHL children (Kataoka, Koshiyama, & Shibata, 2008). To date, there is no national study of the types of students who participate in *hoshuukoo* and their actual language learning needs.

Challenges

JHL education faces many challenges that are also familiar to other heritage language schools. They include a lack of curricula with developmentally (cognitively and linguistically) appropriate approaches, specifically designed for JHL learners (Douglas, 2005; Hart, Burts, & Charlesworth, 1997; Katz & Chard, 1997); a lack of qualified and experienced teachers with adequate professional training to teach Japanese as a heritage language (Kataoka, Furuyama, & Koshiyama, 2001; Sasaki, 2001); inadequate instructional time (Nakajima, 1998); weak motivation of children to learn Japanese (Brook, 1988; Nakajima, 1998); unrealistic parent expectations, which can hinder approaches to JHL education; and financial difficulties.

Some of these problems result from simply and inappropriately using pedagogical approaches with JHL learners that are intended for teaching Japanese as a native language (JNL) to monolingual Japanese-speaking children. A typical curriculum in *hoshuukoo* and most JHL schools duplicates the one developed by Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, & Technology for JNL children in Japan. This approach ignores an important fact: JNL children have already acquired basic oral skills before entering elementary school, but JHL children may not have developed these skills to the same extent. The gap in proficiency between these two groups of children widens as children grow older. While the JNL curriculum assumes a certain degree of oral language proficiency and emphasizes literacy development, the JHL curriculum requires development of both oral and literacy skills. Many parents and teachers, who acquired their own Japanese language as a mother tongue and were educated with this curriculum in their childhood in Japan, assume that this approach is the best one for their JHL children. Because it fails to consider the different educational needs of JHL children who grow up in bilingual or multilingual surroundings, this set of assumptions and approaches hinders implementation of an appropriate and effective curriculum for JHL children regardless of the type of school, whether it is a JHL school or *hoshuukoo*.

The curriculum and teaching methods that flow from this set of assumptions hamper learners' motivation as well. Inappropriate curriculum and pedagogical approaches only serve to frustrate students and squelch their interest and sense of accomplishment in the language, resulting in further alienation from Japanese (Brook, 1988). If JHL schools do not attract children by providing an effective and appropriate education, learning JHL becomes much less relevant for them. Also, since JHL education is not part of children's formal education, and JHL schools typically require students to attend on Saturdays, children tend to perceive learning JHL as an additional (and unfair) burden, thus increasing their distaste for participating.

In the Southern California area, where many JHL schools are found, there has been an increase in the number of Japanese preschools in the past few years, which replicates the Japanese language and cultural environment found in Japan. As of April 2012, there were 37 preschools and kindergartens, including branch schools, listed in the Japanese telephone guide of greater Los Angeles (*Rafu telephone guide*, 2010). Parents who wish to educate their children in Japanese from an early age enroll them in Japanese preschools that meet every day. Many of the children in these Japanese preschools, like the students who attend JHL Saturday schools, come from bilingual or multilingual families. It is too early to know the consequences of this experience for subsequent language learning, but it is extremely important for preschool educators to use an appropriate and effective curriculum in addition to appropriately assessing the language development of each child. As more JHL children start their Japanese learning in school at an early age, it is essential to implement an appropriate approach to JHL education at the preschool level.

Progress in JHL Education and Research

Although having sufficient resources to maintain JHL programs and creating effective JHL curriculum remain a challenge, some grassroots efforts to enhance the field of JHL education are underway.



1) Collaboration between JHL Teachers and College Faculty

JHL teachers are collaborating with college faculty who specialize in JHL education. In 2008, 2009, and 2011, Japanese language faculty members at California State University, Long Beach, offered JHL summer institutes and gave lectures and workshops to JHL school teachers (Chinen, Douglas, & Kataoka, 2010). These efforts introduced essential JHL instruction topics such as differences and similarities between JHL and JNL; curriculum development for JHL programs; multilevel/multiage instruction; developing activities for improving speaking, reading, and writing skills; and differentiated instruction. Participants have successfully disseminated the outcomes of the summer institutes and provided JHL teachers in the area with greater awareness of state-of-the-art JHL instruction. In addition, in the past several years, these college faculty members have conducted annual teacher training workshops for the California Association of Japanese Language Schools (CAJLS). This organization has a membership of 16 schools, and between 70 and 100 member-school teachers attend the workshop every year.

Another collaboration originated with the reorganization of a Japanese Saturday school, [Orange Coast Gakuen](#). The school was established in 1975, as part of a larger school consortium, but became independent in 2010. Taking this opportunity, the school's leadership requested the cooperation of college faculty who specialize in JHL education to act as its academic advisors. The school and advisors work together to develop curriculum and teaching materials and give workshops to teachers and parents to better accommodate the needs of JHL students. The school provides assessment data to the advisors, who analyze them to further improve the program.

2) California Association of Japanese Language Schools (CAJLS) Credit Test

Another effort of JHL schools is the Japanese language credit test for high school students. [CAJLS](#) developed and has managed the test for its member schools since 1967. (In addition to CAJLS' credit test, the Kyodo System, a group of five JHL schools, offers a separate test, which is also accepted by local high schools for credit or a grade.) Students who study at member Japanese schools are eligible to take the test once a year, and many local high schools accept the results to grant foreign language credit or grades when accompanied by sufficient attendance hours in the Japanese schools. The students benefit greatly from this arrangement, and their motivation to attend a JHL school may be enhanced, since they are aware that Japanese in the JHL school helps to fulfill their high school foreign language requirement.

3) Creation of a JHL Program at a *Hoshuukoo*

[Princeton Community Japanese Language School](#) in New Jersey is a *hoshuukoo* that offers a program for JHL students. The school initially had two programs, one for children who were native speakers of Japanese planning to reenter Japanese schools in the home country, and another for non-native speakers of Japanese who had little or no background in Japanese. The JHL program was established in 2004 to accommodate the needs of families with children whose primary language was English but who used some Japanese at home. The school was sensitive to the growing needs of JHL students and reacted promptly to provide support for their families.

This effort addresses a number of issues in JHL education. Perhaps most *hoshuukoo* administrators in the United States are aware of the need for JHL programs, but various factors make it difficult to establish and maintain them. Other *hoshuukoo* have created, or have attempted to create, a JHL track, but only a few have been successful so far, according to our communication with teachers at these schools. One factor is parents' lack of understanding regarding important differences between the JNL and JHL language acquisition process, which has discouraged their children's participation in JHL programs (Kataoka, Koshiyama, & Shibata, 2008). Educating parents about the needs and interests of their JHL children may be one way to create and maintain more JHL programs.

4) JHL Special Interest Group

At the national level, the JHL Special Interest Group (SIG) was established within the [American Association of Teachers of Japanese \(AATJ\)](#), formerly known as the Association of Teachers of Japanese (ATJ). The AATJ houses nine SIGs, of which JHL is one. The JHL SIG was established to provide an opportunity for exchanging ideas related to JHL education. [Its online journal](#) publishes research papers and reports, including studies of pedagogical issues pertaining to young JHL learners.

5) Research-based Scholarly Work on JHL Schools

JHL education also benefits from research-based scholarship. For example, Douglas (2005) has described a design theory for a new JHL curriculum. Kataoka, Koshiyama, and Shibata (2008) conducted a study of Japanese proficiency (vocabulary, sentence structures, and use of particles) among JHL students who attended a *hoshuukoo*. Kataoka and Shibata (2011) studied the Japanese proficiency of *hoshuukoo* children of international marriages, and Chinen, Douglas, and Kataoka (2011) examined the role of family factors in the Japanese language development of students attending a JHL school. Other studies of JHL students focus on students' Japanese language proficiency (Minami, 2005), students' ethnic identity (Chinen, 2008), and external influences on language development, including the local ethnic community (Chinen, 2004).

Similar research and scholarly initiatives to promote and enhance JHL education are underway. Raising the needed public awareness and understanding to strengthen the field will, however, require a more concerted effort.

Conclusion

There may be no immediate remedy for some challenges that JHL schools face, such as financial difficulties and inadequate instructional time. However, despite many challenges, JHL schools have been striving to survive in order to impart Japanese language and culture to the next generation. This survival owes much to the volunteer efforts of parents and other concerned individuals, who serve on boards and PTAs, become teachers and teacher assistants, organize cultural events, and participate in fundraising. We need to acknowledge the dependence of JHL education on the strong commitment of parents, who share responsibility for a range of functions that support the schools.

In addition, recent developments in JHL education suggest that successful solutions will hinge on small-scale grass root efforts; collaboration between JHL schools and college faculty in the areas of curriculum development, teacher training, and parent education; sharing of experiences and information about appropriate JHL pedagogy among JHL schools and teachers; and research on educational approaches and outcomes.

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