

Becoming a Japanese Language Teacher, Lecturer or Professor: Information for American Non-native Speakers of Japanese

Are you interested in teaching Japanese as a foreign language? In the US, Japanese is taught in some primary and secondary schools, colleges, and universities. Along with describing the nature of Japanese language teaching positions and the training required (including some information about programs at UW), information is provided for non-native speakers of Japanese who desire professional-level language proficiency on how to develop high level Japanese language skills. In addition, the Japan Foundation offers helpful information about becoming a Japanese teacher at <https://www.jflalc.org/jle-teachers-licensure#license>.

Types of Teaching Positions Available in the United States

A. Elementary, middle school, or high school level (K-12) teaching:

K-12 Japanese teachers may teach in elementary schools (foreign language programs or language immersion programs), and middle/high schools (foreign language programs). Some K-12 teachers are certified to teach ESL, another foreign language, or another subject as well, and this improves employability, as some schools have small Japanese language programs, or are starting new programs. In my experience many non-native speakers of Japanese work as K-12 Japanese teachers, as do people from Japan.

Teacher Certification: In addition to proving language proficiency in Japanese, an up-to-date teaching certificate (called an “endorsement”) is required to teach Japanese in US public schools. Certification requirements vary from state to state. At the University of Washington, the College of Education has an endorsement program in World Languages, including Japanese.

Japanese Subject requirements: To get teaching certification, students need to have their coursework evaluated to make sure they have the subject competence to teach in their field. Japanese majors generally have what they need, though should take Japanese linguistics courses when possible during their training to be better prepared. If you didn’t major in a Japanese-related area, you will need to get an academic background related to Japan in order to satisfy subject requirements. Formal Japanese language training (credits) aren’t required in Washington, because language proficiency is proven through testing, not via completion of course credits. Graduates of Japanese colleges generally need to take a course Japanese linguistics.

Language Proficiency Requirements: Many states, including Washington, require language proficiency tests for certification to teach a foreign language. The UW College of Education requires applicants to pass these tests prior to admission. The state of Washington requires ACTFL OPI Advanced-Low, and ACTFL WPT Advanced-Low. Some states only require intermediate-mid. How long does it take to develop “Advanced-Low” proficiency? This depends on the person and on their first language background. For a person whose native language is English, spending some years in Japan is necessary; college language coursework is not sufficient to reach Advanced-Low. The JLPT exam is not used to test the language proficiency of teacher candidates.

Finding a Job: K-12 job openings are listed on school district websites, and information is shared through local teacher organizations, such as WATJ (The Washington Association of Teachers of Japanese). Openings can be anywhere in the state, and are not frequent in any one school district. If you live in a different state, the AATJ website has information on local associations of teachers of Japanese. AATJ also lists some K-12 job openings at <https://www.aatj.org/jobs>, though most K-12 schools do not advertise on AATJ

B. College-level Japanese teaching:

A good first step when considering whether to become a college Japanese teacher is to look at job ads to see what qualifications colleges seek in Japanese language instructors, as well as the nature of current openings. The American Association for Teachers of Japanese (AATJ) has a “jobline” page with current openings advertised (<https://www.aatj.org/jobs>). Most colleges advertise their job openings on this page.

i. Community college positions: Community colleges teach first and second-year language courses. Japanese language students are often well-motivated and excited about learning the language. In Washington community colleges, most faculty are part-time, for budgetary reasons.

Job-search prospects: Openings for part-time instructors are fairly common, since these positions have high turnover. Openings for full-time faculty are rare. When a full-time position is available, community colleges do a national searches to seek highly qualified applicants.

ii. 4-year college and university positions: There are a variety of different types of Japanese language teaching positions at 4-year colleges and universities.

Teaching assistant (TA): A teaching assistant is a graduate student who earns a stipend (salary) and sometimes also a tuition waiver (a partial or full scholarship covering graduate school tuition). Full-time graduate students and applicants to graduate programs may apply for these positions, and selection is competitive. Japanese proficiency is assessed via interview. For UW details, see the Asian Languages & Literature Department website.

Lecturer: See <https://www.aatj.org/jobs> for a list of current openings. Lecturers are often hired on 1-year, annually renewable contracts. Some colleges/universities have 2, 3, or, rarely, 5 year contracts. Some universities have promotion to higher job titles (such as “senior lecturer”), though lecturers cannot be promoted to professor positions except at a very few universities (UH-Manoa is one example). At UW, lecturer openings in Japanese are rare; when there is an opening, UW does a national search.

At least MA in Japanese or a related field is required to qualify for most lecturer positions. Training in Japanese linguistics, applied linguistics or TESOL is generally preferred. Most applicants for lecturer openings are native speakers of Japanese. Experience teaching college-level Japanese language is often required. Finalists may be asked to teach a sample class on campus, or to submit a video recording of their teaching. Most job ads seek applicants with native or near-native language skills, who have professional-level Japanese speaking, listening, reading and writing skills. At UW, we receive dozens of applicants when we have a lecturer opening in Japanese. Schools in areas with smaller Japanese populations or in smaller cities or rural areas, or offering temporary (“one year replacement”) positions receive fewer applications.

Professorial positions: See <https://www.aatj.org/jobs> for a list of current openings. A Ph.D. is required to be a college professor, which takes at least 2 additional years of full-time coursework beyond the MA, plus time for doing dissertation research and writing (varies widely, but usually another 2-5 more years, or longer, after completing Ph.D. coursework). College professors specializing in Japanese linguistics, literature, or culture often teach Japanese language as part of their jobs, if they work in a department which teaches Japanese language. Colleges and universities see applicants who show superior productivity in their research fields as well as strong language skills. Duties often combine teaching in the professor’s academic field as well as language teaching, though depending on the university, the balance between teaching in one’s field and teaching Japanese language varies widely. Professorial positions (assistant professor, associate professor, professor) require a doctoral degree. When modern language teaching is involved, search committees also do extensive interviewing in Japanese. Along with having candidates give a lecture in their field, candidates may also be asked to teach a sample Japanese class.

Tenure-track openings are often highly specialized, and there may not be many openings in one’s specialization each year. Most openings are for assistant professors and visiting or one-year-replacement professors. Hiring for tenure-track positions is highly competitive.

Advice for non-native speakers: The more Japanese language teaching is expected in a position, the more importance search committees will place on Japanese language skills. Academic research productivity and potential for future productivity (publication of research articles and books), are also essential, as these show the candidate’s expertise in their field, and publication is required in order to earn tenure.

Developing High Proficiency in Japanese

For a career in Japanese language teaching, high proficiency is needed. Non-native speakers must compete for jobs with applicants from Japan. Time spent in Japan is absolutely essential to develop bilingual skills and cultural knowledge. People develop high proficiency through a variety of routes, whether working or studying in Japan. Though, generally, 2 or more years in Japan is needed to develop high level skills, time alone is not a good predictor, as some who live in Japan for much longer than don’t develop Japanese skills beyond the intermediate level. To develop high proficiency while living in Japan, it is necessary to spend a great deal of time, daily, using Japanese with Japanese people, along with daily studying to develop high level reading/writing skills in Japanese.

Can I develop professional-level proficiency in spoken Japanese via a US college/university language or graduate program?

American colleges and universities offer first-year through third- or fourth-year Japanese. Fourth-year courses are generally intermediate-level, even if called “advanced.” While there may be students in the courses who have high-level skills, they generally developed them in Japan and are taking courses in the US to maintain or to keep improving their language skills. It can be hard to find a Japanese-speaking social group in the US,

since Japanese people living in the US often have strong English skills.

I've been living/working/studying in Japan, but my language isn't good enough yet. What should I do?

If you are ready to leave Japan, but don't yet have professional-level Japanese language skills, there are sometimes job openings in the US which Japanese language is a plus, but is not required, such as local-hire positions in Japanese companies where work is done in English. For applicants who also have the other qualifications the employer is seeking, having some Japanese language background will help in getting those positions. If the job requires extensive work in Japanese, or teaching Japanese, employers will hire a person who has top-notch Japanese language skills.

If you want to develop professional-level language skills, this is easiest to do when living in Japan. High proficiency develops through many hours of Japanese language immersion and language study. Ask yourself what life changes would allow you to use more Japanese for daily work, informational, friendship, and social functions, along with carving out daily time to study the language. It can also be helpful to consult with a person who knows you and your language skills well, for advice.