

L2 ASSESSMENT GUIDELINES: REPORT ON A PROJECT  
IN THE JAPANESE AND KOREAN PROGRAMS

日本語・韓国語プログラムにおける L2 評価基準作成プロジェクト実践報告

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

The present study reports on the process and outcome of an ongoing project to develop a set of proficiency guidelines to be used in the Japanese and Korean programs at York University. In the field of teaching and learning second languages, there are several assessment tools available for determining learner proficiency levels, including those created by ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) and CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference). There have also been extensive efforts to develop different, more tailored sets of guidelines, as seen in EAQUALS (Evaluation and Accreditation of Quality in Language Services) and the JF Standard (Japan Foundation), both of which were based on CEFR. These guidelines are designed to provide language learners and instructors with common tools by which they can check their achievements and make it easy to situate themselves in a larger teaching and learning context as opposed to only within the institution they belong to. One of the disadvantages of these tools, however, is that they set goals only for general learners and may not accommodate the specific needs of learners in, for example, Canadian university settings, including the Japanese and Korean programs at our institution. Guidelines that address common errors among such a designated group of learners would be more helpful in providing them with specific feedback. Therefore, in order to offer a rating scale more befitting of a university-level foreign language context, we have developed and tested our own tools tailored for practical use in the two programs, based on the results of data analyses that delineate typical grammatical errors made by our students.

While our final goal is to create assessment guidelines for all levels in the areas of the four major components of language learning — listening, speaking, reading and writing — the current report focuses on writing proficiency at the elementary level, where the programs hold the largest number of students. The next section briefly reviews the ACTFL and CEFR proficiency guidelines and discusses what we need to keep in mind when using the respective scales. Then we report the results of data analysis for various types of errors that students made in the task they were asked to perform. The final section summarizes the overall findings of the study and concludes with our proposed guidelines.

## 2. ACTFL AND CEFR PROFICIENCY GUIDELINES

The ACTFL *Guidelines* (1986, 2001, 2012) have become the basis for a widespread approach to teaching and evaluating foreign languages within the U.S. After two revisions since the original publication in 1986, these currently contain descriptions of five major levels of language proficiency: Novice, Intermediate, Advanced, Superior and Distinguished. Among these, Novice, Intermediate and Advanced have three sublevels (Low, Mid, High), thus distinguishing eleven levels in total. The *Guidelines*

present a performance profile for a foreign language in terms of “functional trisection,” i.e., “functions or tasks that can be performed [e.g., asking questions, giving simple reasons], types of content or contexts in which they can be performed [e.g., personal information in informal settings], and a description of the range of accuracy with which language will be received or produced [e.g., understood only by sympathetic interlocutors]” (Galloway 1987:27). The ACTFL scale presumes that “language use is best assessed holistically, that is, from the standpoint of overall performance. Nevertheless, the global assessment reflects a high awareness of the specific factors contributing to the performance of a given linguistic task” (ACTFL 1999:13).

The latest version of the CEFR (2001, 2011), on the other hand, is the result of over 20 years of research by the Council of Europe, which aims to describe achievements of learners of foreign languages across Europe. This framework of reference is being used increasingly and is now available in 39 languages world-wide. The three broad levels of CEFR are: A. Basic User, B. Independent User, C. Proficient User. These are further divided into six levels: A1. Breakthrough, A2. Waystage, B1. Threshold, B2. Vantage, C1. Effective Operational Proficiency and C2. Mastery. For each level, CEFR provides ‘Can-do’ descriptors for (1) reception, interaction and production on communicative activities, (2) some of the strategies employed in performing communicative activities, (3) aspects of linguistic competence, pragmatic competence, and sociolinguistic competence. According to CEFR, a learner’s communicative competence is activated in the performance of language activities, involving reception, production, interaction or mediation. Language activities can be contextualized within four broad domains: the public domain, the personal domain, the educational domain, and the occupational domain. Communication and learning further involve the performance of tasks, the use of strategies and the processing of oral or written texts (CEFR 2011: 14-16).

Many researchers and instructors state that the ACTFL *Guidelines* provide rather detailed descriptors to enable discriminations at the proposed proficiency level with solid experiential grounds developed by language-teaching practitioners over the years. At the same time, the ACTFL scale has also received criticism regarding its theoretical validity by many researchers, as exemplified in (1).

- (1) “...the most important failing of the ACTFL is, therefore, the fact that none of the scales have any “empirical underpinning” (Lantolf and Frawley 1985, 1988; Pienemann, Johanstone and Brindley 1988). Similarly, Valdman (1988: 219) argues that it is fair to say that although the OPI may be experientially based, its theoretical underpinnings are shaky and its empirical support scanty.”  
(Fulcher 1996:164)

Similarly, though the empirical foundation of the CEFR scale may be more concrete than that of ACTFL, the CEFR ‘can-do’ statements are rather too vague and general to be helpful for instructors to distinguish second language learners from one another. Fulcher finds it problematic “that the meta-objective of providing proficiency descriptions that are applicable across languages requires a framework so abstract that it is not a framework, but a model” (Fulcher 2004: 258). Also, many ‘can-do’ statements are created based on the assumption that learners are exposed daily to the target language.

Learners in a foreign language setting, however, may not have this daily contact, making the assessment of proficiency difficult. With only limited exposure to the language, a learner's knowledge-base is limited to what is provided in the classroom, especially at the elementary level.

As the descriptors of ACTFL and CEFR are targeted at a common audience, they tend to be too broad and may not be specific to the learning environment where our students are situated, including the use of the non-roman writing systems that they need to learn. Moreover, interpretation of the descriptors is up to the instructors and may be dependent on subjectivity. Creating an assessment tool that provides instructors with fair and concrete grounds for each level would help them accurately evaluate student performance in specific target areas. Although there is individual variance (inter-learner variation), there are common errors that students at the same level tend to make. Detailed descriptors that are created based on such errors would enable both students and instructors to pinpoint each student's strengths and weaknesses. Instructors could also inform students as to which areas they are good at, and provide them with opportunities to practice specific target areas for improvement.

It is therefore vital for us to create guidelines that take account of the specific learning context in which students are situated. Keeping the content of the above-mentioned proficiency scales in mind, we formulated our own 'can-do' statements in order to measure our students' proficiency levels, as shown in Table 1. The validity of these statements was checked against the students' productions, and the descriptors were revised based on analysis of the test results. In the following section, we report on our data collection procedure for learners of Japanese and Korean.

Table 1. Writing proficiency scales for elementary levels

ACTFL	CEFR	York (First draft)
<p><b>Novice Low</b> Writers are able to copy or transcribe familiar words or phrases, form letters in an alphabetic system, and copy and produce isolated, basic strokes in languages that use syllabaries and characters. Given adequate time and familiar cues, they can reproduce from memory a very limited number of isolated words and familiar phrases, but errors are to be expected.</p>	<p><b>A1</b> <b>OVERALL WRITTEN PRODUCTION</b> Can write simple isolated phrases and sentences <b>CREATIVE WRITING</b> Can write simple phrases and sentences about themselves and imaginary people, where they live and what they do .</p>	<p><b>1-1</b> Can write familiar words using the basic writing systems. Can write one's own name. Can write a short and simple sentence.</p>
<p><b>Novice Mid</b> Writers can reproduce from memory a modest number of words and phrases in context. They can supply limited info on simple forms and documents, and other basic biographical info, such as names, numbers, and nationality. They exhibit a high degree of accuracy when writing on well-practiced, familiar topics using limited formulaic language. With less familiar topics, there is a marked decrease in accuracy.</p>	<p><b>A2 Low</b> <b>OVERALL WRITTEN PRODUCTION</b> Can write a series of simple phrases and sentences linked with simple connectors like 'and,' 'but' and 'because.' <b>CREATIVE WRITING</b> Can write a series of simple phrases and sentences about their family, living conditions, educational background, present or most recent job. / Can write short, simple imaginary biographies and simple poems about people</p>	<p><b>1-2</b> Can write short, simple notes related to matters in areas of immediate needs, using the basic writing systems with some <i>kanji</i> for Japanese</p>

### 3. DATA COLLECTION

#### 3.1 JAPANESE

##### PARTICIPANTS

Canadian and international students (N=60) who were enrolled in the elementary level Japanese course (JP 1000) at York University participated in the study. All of the students were exposed to Japanese for less than 130 hours in class and had no previous experience, or limited experience, in learning Japanese.

##### METHOD

Data were collected in the 7th month of Japanese instruction. As a part of the final test for the course, participants were asked to write a minimum 160-character-long essay within twenty-five minutes on the topics given to them, namely, a description of one's family or friend. The task type was narrative, but they were also asked to include in their essay a description of giving and receiving things. This additional instruction was given to tap students' ability to use "donatory" verbs that they had recently learned in class. This was meant to evaluate their knowledge of a specific grammar item and to prevent them from repeating simple, familiar structures in their writing.

In the data analysis, the authors checked the errors in each student's writing. We created categories and counted the number of errors for each type. Repeated errors were counted as one error type rather than counting every occurrence. This will be illustrated in detail in section 4. It should be noted that the focus of our current investigation was on the mechanical errors that students made.

#### 3.2 KOREAN

##### PARTICIPANTS

The participants in this study were Canadian students (N=21) enrolled in the elementary level of Korean (KOR 1000) at York University. All the participants were exposed to Korean for fewer than 130 hours in class and had no previous experience, or limited experience, in learning Korean. They were asked to participate in this study on a voluntary basis.

##### METHODS

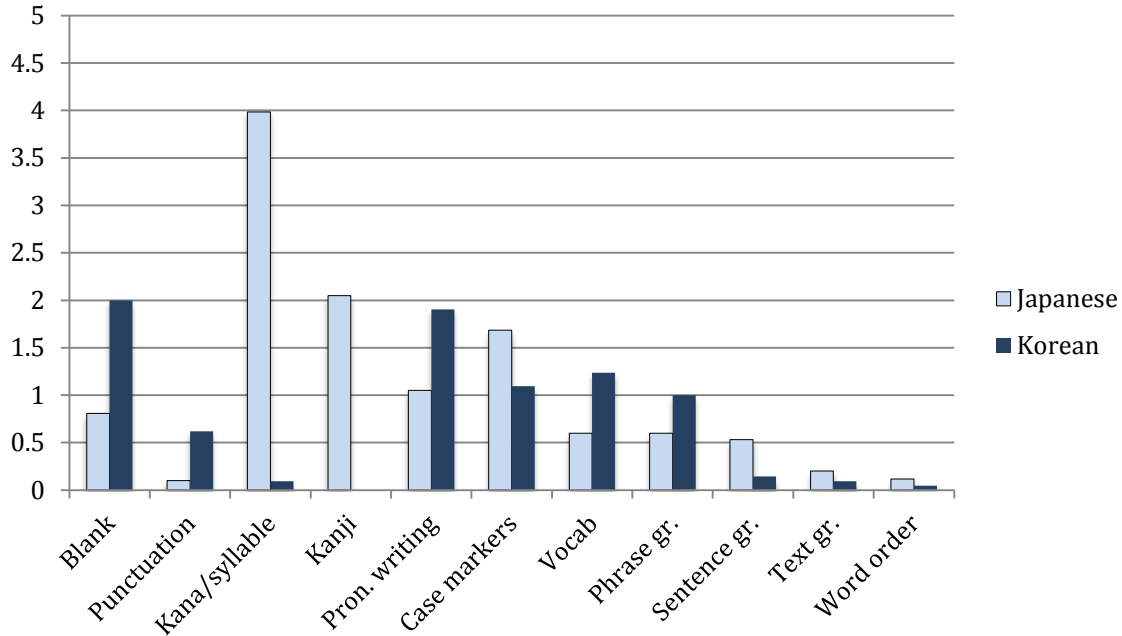
Data were collected on the 5th and 6th month of instruction in the Korean 1000 course. The participants were presented with a series of pictures and asked to write a story in Korean. Similar to the Japanese test, this task was also a narrative type, but since this task was performed voluntarily, there were no constraints in terms of length. The Korean author checked the data based on the same categories as the Japanese section, except for *kanji* inasmuch as the Korean writing system is alphabetic and does not make use of Chinese characters any more.

### 4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Summary results of these investigations are charted in Graph 1. The error types that students made were (a) blank row (unable to produce), (b) wrong or missed quotation mark/ punctuation, (c) wrong or missed (*kana*) syllable, (d) wrong or missed *kanji* (Japanese only), (e) wrong pronunciation realized in writing, (f) errors with particle/case

marker, (g) choice of vocabulary, (h) phrase-level grammar, (i) sentence-level grammar, (j) text-level grammar, (k) word order.

Graph 1. Average number of error types of elementary learners of Japanese and Korean



In the Japanese section, most of the errors made by the participants were found at the surface level of writing, as shown in Graph 1. Many students frequently missed basic *kanji* characters and used wrong *kana* and *kanji*. Most of the grammar errors were also found to be made at a local level, which suggests that the participants tended to use more simple structures in order to avoid any major errors they might make using less familiar complex structures. Furthermore, errors that can seriously affect the meaning of the whole sentence were found mostly in the required element, i.e., ‘giving’ and ‘receiving’ verbs, suggesting a need to include such elements in order to limit the use of avoidance strategies.

Most of the errors made by the participants in the Korean section involved “pronunciation writing,” wrong choice of vocabulary, wrong usage of case markers (particles) and mistakes at the phrase level with copular verb and verbal/adjectival conjugation. Specifically, students tended to write letters as they pronounce them with their English accent, rather than following morpheme boundaries or orthographic rules. When Korean word-stems ending in a consonant are followed by a vowel, such as the nominative case marker *-i* or accusative case marker *-eul*, learners restructure the consonant and vowel to form a new CV syllable (Consonant + Vowel), which is known as “resyllabification.” Some of these errors in Japanese are exemplified in (2)-(6) and in Korean in (7)-(10).

(2) Error type: *kanji* (Subject #1)

毎

(correct form: 毎)

- (3) Error type: long vowel, double consonants (Subject #7)  
いしょう (correct form: いっしょ)
- (4) Error type: particle (Subject #33)  
クラスを行って (correct form: クラスに行って)
- (5) Error type: phrase-level grammar (Subject #37)  
目が大きいで (correct form: 目が大きくて)
- (6) Error type: word order (Subject #60)  
名前の私のおとうと (correct form: 私のおとうとの名前)  
私はすきお母さんの朝ごはん (correct form: 私はお母さんの朝ごはんがす  
き)
- (7) Error type: pronunciation spelling – segmental error (Subject #101)  
타타는 페고파요.  
*tata-neun* \**pegopa-yo* (correct form: *begopa*)  
Tata-Top. hungry-copular “Tata is hungry”
- (8) Error type: pronunciation spelling – resyllabification (Subject #106)  
돼지가 사과를 머걸 거예요.  
*tweji-ka* *sagwa-reul* \**meo-geolgeoyeyo*. (correct form: *meok-eul*)  
pig-Nom. apple-Acc. eat-future-Decl. “Pig will eat an apple.”
- (9) Error type: wrong choice of case marker (Subject #105)  
돼지가 사과를 봐요.  
*tweji-ka* *sagwa-\*eul* *pwa-yo*. (correct form: *reul*)  
pig-Nom. apple-Acc. see-Decl. “Pig sees an apple.”
- (10) Error type: phrase level grammar (Subject #108)  
돼지가 굶주린이에요.  
*tweji-ka* *kulmjuri-\*n-\*ieyo*. (correct form: *eosseoyo*)  
pig-Nom. starve-Rel.-copular “Pig is starving.”

One of the most common writing errors made by students of both Japanese and Korean results from an incorrect correspondence between pronunciation and orthography. In other words, participants show a tendency to write words “as they sound” rather than memorizing the written form or following orthographic rules. This common error type indicates a need to reinforce learning with pronunciation-to-orthography links. That is, students need to be reminded of the fact that not every sound is realized equally in writing and that they are required to know how the target orthography deals with it. Students of Japanese have difficulty with basic-level orthography, using the *kana* syllabaries, but this is rare for students of Korean. This difference likely arises from the fact that Korean has fewer new characters that need to be memorized and uses an

alphabetic writing system, allowing students to master the new symbols (Korean *Hangeul*) relatively quickly. If we consider the differences between the two writing systems, it becomes clear that assessment guidelines should reflect the difficulty of mastering orthography in the target language. The results suggest that the challenges that occur in different writing systems should also be included in the descriptors.

A small number of errors were found at the sentence level, which may be the result of student avoidance strategies. As noted earlier, the sentence-level mistakes were found mostly in the elements that required the inclusion of a more complicated grammar item. Though it is understandable that the participants tried to write accurate narratives, as requested, this masked their true ability, preventing precise assessment of proficiency. Though creating tasks that challenge students without affecting authenticity is difficult, it is also necessary.

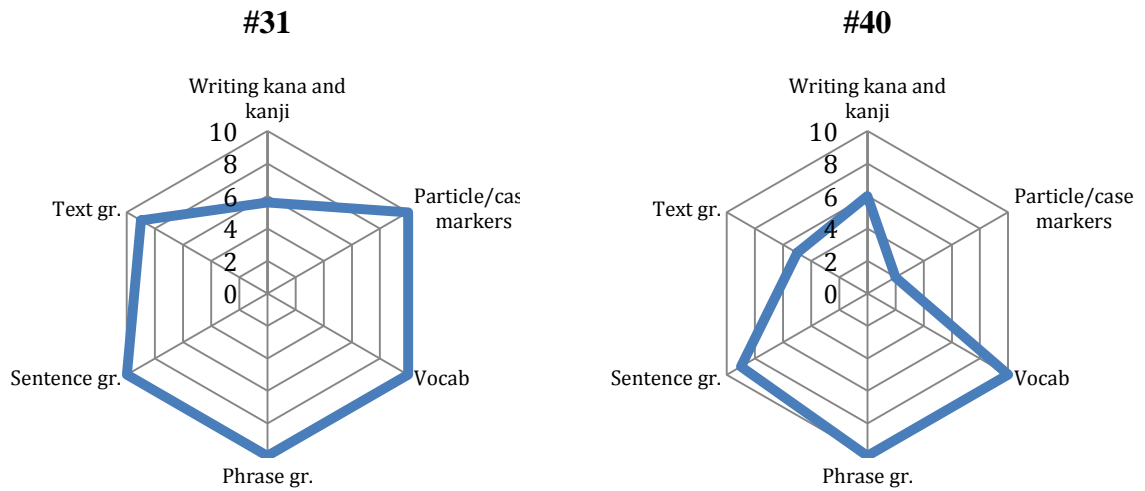
The test results suggest a need to create more finely-tuned descriptors to track the improvement of student writing skills. Accordingly, a separate set of descriptors that incorporate our findings is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Revised York writing proficiency guidelines for elementary levels

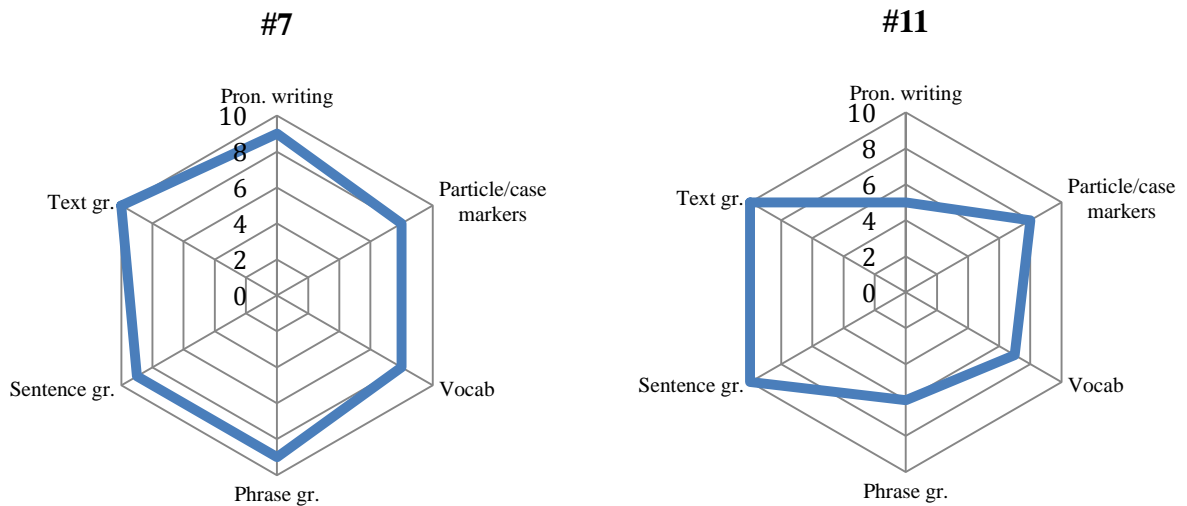
	Japanese	Korean
1-1 (1 <sup>st</sup> semester)	Can master the <i>kana</i> writing system by the end of the semester. Can understand and use set phrases and familiar expressions, such as greetings and familial terms, using the <i>kana</i> writing system. Can use case markers correctly with basic verbs introduced in class.	Can master the Korean alphabet system by the end of the semester. Can understand and use set phrases and familiar expressions, such as greetings and familial terms, using the Korean alphabet. Can understand pronunciation rules in Korean and can write correct morphemic forms with only a few errors. Can use case markers correctly with basic verbs introduced in class.
1-2 (2 <sup>nd</sup> semester)	Can correctly use basic <i>kanji</i> (110 characters) at the end of the semester. Can write short and simple notes which are related to matters in areas of immediate relevance, such as personal and familial information without referring to the textbook. Can produce frequently used sentences and expressions of five or more words with few errors. Can use correct case markers for predicates presented in the textbook with only few errors. Can write correct conjugated forms of verbs, adjectives, and copular verbs in the present tense with full understanding of pronunciation rules introduced.	Can write short and simple notes which are related to matters in areas of immediate relevance, such as personal and familial information, without referring to the textbook. Can produce frequently used sentences and expressions of five or more words with few errors. Can use correct case markers for predicates presented in the textbook with only few errors. Can write correct conjugated forms of verbs, adjectives, and copular verbs in the present tense with full understanding of pronunciation rules introduced.

Graphs 2 and 3 below show some sample charts indicating each student's strengths and weaknesses in writing proficiency. The proficiency profile charts are intended to help students easily visualize the areas they need to work on.

Graph 2. Sample proficiency profiles for Japanese students



Graph 3. Sample proficiency profiles for Korean students



## 5. CONCLUSION

In this study, we examined the writing proficiency of students at the elementary level in the Japanese and Korean programs at York University. The results show us the areas that students of Japanese and Korean have difficulties with at this level. Specifically, our students are struggling with complex writing systems of Japanese, *kana* and *kanji*, even at the end of the school year. In the Korean section, learners have most difficulty in preserving the original form of morphemes in writing when resyllabification



occurs, which happens more frequently than students seem to realize. Students in the elementary level of the two language courses also made errors with regard to correct usage of case particles (topic, nominative and accusative markers), presumably due to the fact that their native language does not contain case markers or have different forms depending on the type of predicate (e.g., *-が* (not *\*を*) *好きです* ‘to like something’). In addition, students seem to need instructors to focus their attention more on the range of conjugated forms of predicates, be it copular verb, verb or adjective, in both Japanese and Korean. This type of error may also stem partly from interference from their native language, similar to the case marker errors. Finally, the test results also indicate that writing assessment in an open-ended format may not tap the grammatical skills of the students as intended when students use avoidance strategies. Therefore, it seems crucial that instructors design tasks that require learners to produce the target grammatical forms.

These findings, however, need to be interpreted carefully as our study is not free from limitations, the most obvious being the small number of participants. The task type that was used in the study was also limited to one writing test on a specific topic. A larger set of data would be needed to cover a variety of error types to identify the target areas to be included in the descriptors of our guidelines. Furthermore, as mentioned under “Methods” in Section 3, we only looked at mechanical errors, as the content and organization of their compositions were not included in the analysis. In our future investigations, we will also evaluate the quality of students’ writing. What we found in this study, therefore, is not inclusive and needs to be adjusted as we collect more data.

In sum, this project has provided us with the opportunity to determine individual learner achievements in writing thus far and to understand where possible further improvements could be made. We expect to develop rubrics to assess student performance on the proposed six elements of writing charted in Graphs 2 and 3. Our goal is to create and improve our assessment tools by testing each component of listening, speaking, reading and writing at all proficiency levels so that these can accurately inform learners on their overall proficiency levels in Japanese or Korean. We also expect that the final comprehensive rubrics will provide instructors with concrete and detailed guidelines for use in the classroom.

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