

# **Accessing Professional Development Opportunities in Japan**

**By Zeshan Sattar**

## **1. Introduction**

Don't be fooled by the fancy title. Reading this article may not change your life, however, if you are inspired by some of the suggestions, you never know. What this article is guaranteed to do is kill about 30 minutes of your time. If that has got you hooked, then read on.

This article's aim is to illustrate the various career development options that are accessible in Japan and especially in Niigata prefecture. The research has tried to explore a variety of subject areas in order to cater for all tastes, however, it is not an exhaustive list, and no doubt there will be plenty of other opportunities available.

The activities and study programs shown here can serve two purposes. The first is to enhance your current job role, and the second is that it will help you gain a foothold in your future vocation. Another reason for undertaking such activities is as an additional hobby to challenge oneself.

## **2. Learning Japanese**

In order to pursue many of the different opportunities outlined below, a functional command of Japanese is necessary. Elsewhere on the Niigata JET website is a detailed article by Melissa Villarreal ([http://www.niigatajet.org/res\\_info\\_learningjapanese.html](http://www.niigatajet.org/res_info_learningjapanese.html)) that gives you the low down on kick starting your Japanese language studies. Here we will explore how it can be used as a career option.

Believe it or not a high proportion of ALTs manage to get by with the most minimal of Japanese. However, the sense of achievement one gets after successfully negotiating a discount or being able to follow directions in Japanese is quite thrilling. As JETs, we are at the right place and at the right time to study Japanese. The fact that we are surrounded by it day and night can accelerate even the slowest learner's study.

There are plenty of classes that JETs can take advantage of. The best place to find out about these classes to ask your supervisor and friends, and if that fails, look at the list on

the Niigata JET website ([http://www.niigatajet.org/res\\_info\\_japaneseschools.html](http://www.niigatajet.org/res_info_japaneseschools.html)).

Once you have mastered enough Japanese for communication, it's time to take it to the next level and make it count towards improving your career prospects. This is where undertaking formal examinations can be beneficial. The most well known Japanese language certification is the **JLPT** (Japanese Language Proficiency Test). Most ALTs who study over a two year period are able to successfully achieve Level 3 and beyond. The JLPT can be taken in various locations in Japan, except Niigata prefecture. In the past, Niigata JETs have taken the examination in Toyama, Nagano, Saitama, and Tokyo. For more information about the JLPT, see <http://www.jees.or.jp/> and <http://momo.jpf.go.jp/jlpt/home.html>

If you are fluent in the Japanese language, or have already obtained either Level 1 or 2 of the JLPT, you can aim to take the **BJT** (Business Japanese Test) which examines candidates on their ability to use business Japanese. The BJT can be taken in Niigata City and is administered twice a year. See <http://www.jetro.go.jp/en/bjt/> for more details.

Another general test of the Japanese Language is **JTEST**. The test has been described as the "TOEIC for Japanese". It is divided into two categories of difficulty so you need to make sure that you choose the right one. The test is administered five times a year and can be taken in several major cities including Sendai, Toyama, and Tokyo. When you get your scores back they will be as points. 600 points is equivalent to JLPT Level 2 and 700 is JLPT Level 1. You will also receive a full breakdown of your results explaining which questions you got wrong, the percentage of listening questions that you answered correctly, and so on.

For sample questions and more information, please visit: <http://www.jtest.org/jtest/>

The **Kanken** (Kanji Kentei) is a test that measures knowledge and proficiency of the Kanji characters. It can be taken at eight different levels and examines both reading and writing skills. The test takes place several times a year in various locations. It may even be possible to take the Kanken at your school. For more details, ask your teachers and visit the Kanken website:

<http://www.kanken.or.jp/index.html> (Japanese only)

The best way to set about learning Japanese, no matter whatever your aim, is to get

some good books. Recommendations from past and present JETs include:

### **Grammar:**

Japanese for Busy People series <http://www.ajalt.org/e/publications/textbooks1.html>

Minna no Nihongo series [http://www.3anet.co.jp/english/books/books\\_01.html](http://www.3anet.co.jp/english/books/books_01.html)

Shin Nihongo no Kiso series [http://www.3anet.co.jp/english/books/books\\_kiso.html](http://www.3anet.co.jp/english/books/books_kiso.html)

Genki Series <http://www.genki-online.com/>

Intermediate Japanese <http://bookclub.japantimes.co.jp/english/pages/0859.html>

### **Hiragana and Katakana:**

Kana can be Easy <http://bookclub.japantimes.co.jp/english/pages/0804.html>

### **Kanji**

Basic Kanji Series <http://www.japancentre.com/bookSearcher.php?type=3>

Shin Nihongo no Kiso Kanji Workbooks I & II

[http://www.3anet.co.jp/english/books/text\\_e\\_k\\_kanji.html](http://www.3anet.co.jp/english/books/text_e_k_kanji.html)

Remembering the Kanji by J.W. Heisig

[http://www.nanzan-u.ac.jp/SHUBUNKEN/publications/miscPublications/Remembering\\_the\\_Kanji.htm](http://www.nanzan-u.ac.jp/SHUBUNKEN/publications/miscPublications/Remembering_the_Kanji.htm)

### **JLPT**

Kanzen Master Series (particularly for levels 1 and 2)

[http://www.3anet.co.jp/english/books/books\\_06.html](http://www.3anet.co.jp/english/books/books_06.html)

White Rabbit Kanji cards <http://www.whiterabbitpress.com/>

Bonjinsha JLPT Mondai Shu <http://www.japancentre.com/bookSearcher.php?type=5>

If you do not want to invest in textbooks, there is always the CLAIR course for Beginner/Intermediate/Advanced levels.

### **Summer Courses**

If you are having difficulty trying to focus your study and have not managed to find a tutor or class that suits you, then there are a number of intensive Japanese summer residential courses available. The Yamasa Institute (<http://www.yamasa.org/>) based in Aichi Prefecture is highly praised by ALTs for its intensive summer course. Other intensive programs include:

Kai Japanese School in Tokyo, <http://www.kaij.co.jp/e/general/index4.html>

Osaka YWCA, <http://osaka.ywca.or.jp/college/english/intens-e.html>

Please see Melissa's article on the Niigata JET website for more suggestions:

[http://www.niigatajet.org/res\\_info\\_learningjapanese.html](http://www.niigatajet.org/res_info_learningjapanese.html)

### **3. TESOL/TEFL Qualifications**

Teaching English as a Foreign Language certification is not necessary for participating in the JET program. Sometimes this can prove challenging to anyone who has never taught a class of school children, on the other hand it means we have no preconceptions and thus are open to new ideas. In any case, throughout our contracts we pick up many theories and good practices, and this can serve as a good foundation to get certified.

The British Council offers an intensive CELTA summer course. CELTA is an internationally recognized TESOL certification. Places are limited to 12 students at a time, so the competition is quite fierce. For more details, please visit:

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/japan-teach-english-elt-celta-details.htm>

The British Council also has a range of different courses; however, as all of them take place in either Osaka or Tokyo, it is inconvenient for most Niigata based JETs. However, it may be worthwhile keeping an eye on the courses and seminars website for events that take place during the school holiday periods:

<http://www.britishcouncil.org/japan-english-teach-elt-events.htm>

If you are completely new to teaching English and really have no idea where to begin, then there are many distance learning TESOL courses available. The accreditations from most of these training firms have limited value as they all self certify. Hence to find the right course, your first port of call should be at the ACTDEC website (<http://www.actdec.org.uk/>). Here you will find a list of institutions that offer distance learning TESOL courses, whose materials have been checked by an independent body. Most of the listed institutions have made all their courseware available online, so you don't have to carry any heavy books to and from your school/office.

If you are looking for a complete crash course in TESOL and your main concern is cost

over accreditation, “i-to-i” (<http://www.i-to-i.com/>) offers an online course for about 200 UK pounds. This could also be beneficial to those wanting to explore the type of material is covered by a typical TESOL course before committing themselves to a Post Graduate level course at a later date

#### **4. Post Graduate Studies**

ALTs both past and present in Niigata have managed to do all or part of their post-graduate studies while in Japan. There are many kinds of degrees on offer. For subject specific qualifications it is best to look up your preferred university website and inquire whether they have a distance learning option. Popular post-graduate studies include Masters in TESOL and Japanese Language and Culture.

A good starting point is the “Distance Learning” section of “David English House”:

<http://www.davidenglishhouse.com/distancelearning.html>

This website outlines the TEFL courses offered by the University of Birmingham (UK) and the Japanese Studies diploma and MA as offered by the University of Sheffield (UK).

The University of London has a very good External Program. The university offers a wide range of courses that can be done via distance learning. For more information, please visit: <http://www.londonexternal.ac.uk/index.shtml>

Similarly the University of Arizona (USA) also offers a range of correspondence courses. Please visit <http://www.ceao.arizona.edu/corresp/> for more details.

A distance learning MA specifically tailored for those teaching English in Japan is offered by the University of Technology in Sydney (AUS). More details can be found at <http://www.eigokyoshi.uts.edu.au/>

Past ALTs in Niigata have also used the University of Southern Queensland (<http://www.usq.edu.au/futurestudents/distancede/default.htm>) and the University of South Australia (<http://www.unisa.edu.au/future/study/offcampus/default.asp>) to pursue distance learning graduate courses.

## 5. Graduate Study Entry Examinations (USA)

In order to apply for Graduate School in the USA, many prospective students undertake Graduate Exams. The examinations that are available in Japan are shown in the table below. You can register for all of them online (in English) through the examination vendor's website.

Name	Description	Locations	Website
GRE	The GRE is a general examination for entry to a postgraduate course. It supplements the application and adds value to their Bachelor studies.	Tokyo Yokohama Osaka	<a href="http://www.gre.org/">http://www.gre.org/</a>
GMAT	GMAT is for students who wish to pursue a business/management graduate course.	As above Niigata <sup>1</sup>	<a href="http://www.gmac.com">http://www.gmac.com</a>
LSAT	LSAT is required for entry into law school.	Tokyo	<a href="http://www.lsac.org">http://www.lsac.org</a>
MCAT	The MCAT is required for entry into medical school and related courses.	Tokyo <sup>2</sup>	<a href="http://www.aamc.org/">http://www.aamc.org/</a>

<sup>1</sup> From January 2005, Pearson Vue (<http://www.vue.com/>) began delivery of the GMAT test through their authorized examination centers. This means that soon you may be able to take the test in various locations across Niigata prefecture.

<sup>2</sup> International testing for the MCAT is administered by Thomson Prometric (<https://www.prometric.com/MCAT/Default.htm>), hence it may be possible to take the examination at a Niigata based Prometric center.

## 6. Foreign language acquisition

In addition to learning Japanese, you might want to brush up on a language that you studied at school or learn an entirely new one.

The BBC website has some fabulous resources for French, German and Spanish. Please visit: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/languages/>

If you do pursue such studies, you'll be pleased to know that you can do a range of proficiency tests:

#### **French Proficiency Test (実用フランス語検定)**

This test evaluates practical French language skills. It is divided into five levels from 1-5. It is held twice a year. <http://apefdapf.org/>

#### **Spanish Proficiency Test**

This test started in 1973 to measure one's level of Spanish proficiency. It is held twice a year. <http://www.casa-esp.com/>

#### **German Proficiency Test (ドイツ語検定 (独検))**

This test was introduced with the aim of improving useful communication skills in German for non-native speakers. It is held twice a year. <http://www.dokken.or.jp/>

#### **Tests by the Goethe Institute**

The Institute offers various German language tests. <http://www.goethe.de/os/kan/>

## **7. Professional IT Qualifications**

If you are already an accomplished IT savvy person and have experience working in the industry, this is the ideal time to bolster your qualifications. You can do the entire gamut of Microsoft and Cisco qualifications while in Japan.

If you are just a computer hobbyist, don't let that hold you back from doing some IT qualifications. If you like tinkering around inside your PC or playing with the various functions of your software, or publishing a website on the internet, there is a qualification to suit you.

Some recommended qualifications are:

<b>Qualification</b>	<b>Difficulty</b>	<b>Description</b>
CompTia INet+	Easy	Internet and web publishing.
CompTia A+ OS	Easy	If you can use a computer, this is relatively straightforward.
CompTia A+ Hardware	Medium	PC hardware building and troubleshooting

Microsoft Office Specialist	Medium	This is for those who use all the functions of any one of the Office suite applications (e.g. Word, Excel etc.)
CompTia Network+	Difficult	This is where things start to get serious.
Microsoft Certified Professional (MCP) certification	Difficult	The MCPs are mainly suited to those people who have previously studied/worked in a computing environment.

Other qualifications can be found at [www.cramsession.com](http://www.cramsession.com)

You can search for exam centers and book tests online via [www.vue.com](http://www.vue.com)

Through the website, you can book, cancel and reschedule exams as you feel like. You will need a credit card and all transactions will be charged in Japanese yen.

Pearson VUE centers are spread all across Niigata, and indeed Japan. The staff and non-disclosure forms are all in Japanese. However, the actual exam will be the target language that you selected on the website.

The “Microsoft Office Specialist” certification is offered through authorized “Certiport” centers. You can register with the Certiport website in English, and that will give you the necessary information that you need to give to the testing center, however, the center may only have the Japanese version of Microsoft Office. Proceed with caution. To find the center closest to you, use the search engine at:

<http://www.certiport.com/Portal/Pages/LocatorView.aspx>

## 8. Soft Skills

The role of an ALT can vary from one contracting organization to another. Whatever your situation may be, the position always allows some kind of flexibility and this is where you can shape the role of the ALT and learn skills that no amount of study can give you. These skills and activities will make your role better and ultimately be beneficial to your future career as it demonstrates initiative.

Each ALT has a unique skill set that you can apply to your work. For example, if you are good at computers, then perhaps you can make the school’s website. Or if you are good at arts and crafts you can make a colorful bulletin board. You can read up about

other activities that past ALTs have done on Valerie Rambin's article:  
[http://www.niigatajet.org/res\\_teaching\\_extracurricular.html](http://www.niigatajet.org/res_teaching_extracurricular.html)

One of the most valuable skills that the ALT position gives you is being able to present information. This is gained by each and every class that you do. You can show off these presentational and demonstrational skills at the Niigata Prefecture conferences where you can plan and present a presentation on any subject that you want. See Ian Woosley's article on "Planning and Presenting a Workshop" for more information:  
[http://www.niigatajet.org/res\\_teaching\\_workshop.html](http://www.niigatajet.org/res_teaching_workshop.html)

Your skill as a good communicator can also be recognized by contributing articles to the Niigata JET website. In addition to being immortalized online you will also be helping both current and future JETs.

As JETs we act as ambassadors for our home countries and this is shown when we have found ourselves in situations where one has to be diplomatic and courteous. This can be frustrating when the person whom you're communicating with has a low level of English. Thus being able to deal with different kinds of people demonstrates leadership skills.

## **9. A Final Note**

JETs who have returned home at the end of their contracts have advised "Make sure you have a plan before you return". It is quite easy to fall into a trap where one could say "I will decide what to do when I'm at home". This form of procrastination sometimes leads to valuable time lost as you consider your options. Hence if you have some sort of idea in the back of the mind and dedicate some time towards it while you are in Japan, this can help make the transition easier.

All the best with whatever you choose to do and if this article has inspired you to do something that has not been mentioned here, please come back and tell us. We look forward to hearing from you.

Good luck!

## 10. Other Useful Links

Free Japanese language learning resources are available at the Meguro Language Center website: <http://www.mlcjapanese.co.jp/>

TESOL Global Association: <http://www.tesol.org/>

TESL Canada Federation website: <http://www.tesl.ca/>

Internet TESL Journal: <http://iteslj.org/>

The Guardian TEFL website: <http://education.guardian.co.uk/tefl/>

An article about doing a Distance Learning MA from a UK university:

<http://jalt-publications.org/tlt/files/97/mar/distance.html#Appendix%201>

University of Wollongong`s Distance Learning TESOL MA:

<http://www.uow.edu.au/handbook/yr2005/cour576.html>

UMass Boston Distance Learning Website: <http://www.ccde.umb.edu/dl/index.html>

ETS – Administrator of the GRE and other tests <http://www.ets.org/>

Practice Tests and information about US graduate exams: <http://www.kaptest.com/>

CompTia Certification site: <http://www.comptia.org/certification/>

Microsoft Certification site: <http://www.microsoft.com/learning/mcp/>

Discount IT certification vouchers: <http://www.getcertify4less.com>

Online magazine about IT certification: <http://www.certmag.com/>

Please check the link pages on the Niigata website for other useful websites for learning Japanese and TEFL related information.