



**Japanese Language Education and Examination  
for Indonesian Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) Candidates**  
*An Analysis of the Pre-Departure Program*

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**ABSTRACT**

This study examines how Japanese education prepares Indonesians for Japan's specified skilled worker (SSW) programs. As economic ties between Indonesia and Japan grow, so does the demand for skilled labor in key sectors. Japan's SSW program aims to attract foreign workers, including Indonesians, to fulfill these needs. Qualitative interviews were conducted with Indonesian sending organizations and candidates in preparatory programs for SSW visas. The research focuses on the Japanese language education framework, its alignment with industry requirements, curriculum development, teaching methodologies, and language proficiency training. The study also evaluates the impact of government policies and bilateral agreements on skilled migration between Indonesia and Japan. It aims to offer insights to policymakers, educators, and stakeholders to enhance educational programs and support mechanisms for better integration into the Japanese labor market. By visiting nearly 60 vocational training institutions licensed to send interns to Japan and several Sending Organizations (SO) with SP3MI permits, the study found that the SSW program has diversified teaching materials and introduced a new curriculum for Japanese language education in Indonesia. However, it has also led to a shortage of instructors in non-academic Japanese learning institutions. Additionally, uncertainty surrounding the language examination has caused many candidates to prefer the TITP over the SSW program. Addressing these issues from a human capital perspective, this study highlights the need for immediate measures such as sector-specific curricula and comprehensive instructor training to improve the quality of SSW candidates, thereby enhancing their experiences in Japan.

**KEYWORDS**

Educational Framework; Examination; Japanese Language Education; Migrant; Specified Skilled Worker (SSW).

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**INTRODUCTION**

Japan's labor force is grappling with significant challenges driven by demographic shifts. The Ministry of Internal Affairs and Communications' Annual Labor Force Survey reported that Japan's labor force was 66.48 million in 2016. However, with declining birth rates and an aging population, it is expected to shrink to 39.46 million by 2065

(Mizuho Research Institute, 2017). This demographic change has led to a severe labor shortage, as evidenced by the job-to-applicant ratio of 1.64 reported by the Ministry of Health, Labor and Welfare in September 2018, indicating 1.64 job openings for every job seeker (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare, 2019).

To address these labor shortages, Japan launched the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) program in April 2019. The SSW visa has two

categories: SSW Type 1 and SSW Type 2. The SSW Type 1 visa is valid for five years and does not permit workers to bring their families. Upon completing the SSW Type 1 term, workers can transition to the SSW Type 2 visa, which allows family accompaniment. SSW Type 1 visa holders include newcomers and alumni of the Technical Intern Training Program (TITP), who have completed their internships and wish to return to work in Japan.

On June 25, 2019, Indonesia and Japan signed a Memorandum of Cooperation on a Basic Framework for the Proper Operation of the System Pertaining to Foreign Human Resources with the Status of Residence of Specified Skilled Workers (MoC SSW), facilitating the deployment of Indonesian workers under the SSW scheme (Indonesia Ministry of Manpower, 2019).

Japan plans to abolish the TITP, also known as *ginojissshu*, and replace it with the Training and Employment System (TES), also known as *Ikuseishuro*. This change responds to criticisms of the TITP's treatment of interns. Since July 2023, interview surveys with relevant Indonesian organizations and government sectors have been conducted to understand the implications of this transition. Although these entities have not yet received formal information about the TES, they are closely monitoring developments due to the potential impact on their operations.

The increased demand for SSW from Japan, amid the transition from TITP to TES, has prompted Indonesian institutions that send SSW candidates to enhance their Japanese language education programs. Proficiency in Japanese is a primary requirement for participation in the SSW program. SSW candidates must have language skills above the Technical Intern level, equivalent to the N4 level of the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), as assessed by the Japan Foundation Test for Basic Japanese (JFT).

Despite the necessity of robust Japanese language training for prospective migrant workers, which serves as a benchmark for meeting the stringent qualification standards for working in Japan, many issues have arisen. These include inadequate language education and the language testing process for SSW candidates due to insufficient regulations regarding their selection and dispatch.

This research aims to provide insights and highlight the importance of Japanese language education and proficiency test regulations in preparing Indonesian migrant workers. Improving

and standardizing language proficiency training and testing will enhance the capabilities of these workers under the SSW scheme. As Japan transitions from TITP to TES, effective language training will be crucial to ensure that Indonesian workers can meet the demands of the Japanese labor market and integrate successfully into their new working environments.

Based on the survey report conducted by the Japan Foundation (2021) and published in 2023, Indonesia ranks second worldwide after China in terms of the number of learners and educational institutions, compared to the figures from 2018. One of the factors contributing to the increase in the number of learners and institutions is the rise in non-academic learning institutions, outside of elementary, junior high, high schools, and universities or equivalent institutions.

In 2018, the number of learners from non-academic learning institutions was 23,317, while in 2021, the number increased to 34,887, a rise of 11,570. The number of educational institutions also saw a significant increase, from 2,879 institutions in 2018 to 2,958 in 2021.

This increase is attributed to the SSW program, which was launched in April 2019 in Indonesia, leading many learners to study Japanese to obtain an SSW Visa to Japan through private courses or other vocational training institutions in Indonesia. Although the COVID-19 pandemic emerged in 2020-2021, it did not reduce the number of learners as classes were conducted online, despite many offline classes being suspended.

Academic research related to migrants and the necessity of proficiency in the national language of their workplace is discussed by Esser (2006).

Esser (2006) states that, in addition to educational attainment and professional experience, strong proficiency in the national language is crucial for immigrants' successful integration into the labor market. Lack of language skills significantly diminishes their chances of securing employment and advancing in their careers, often leading to substantial income losses.

This issue is particularly pronounced in jobs that require high levels of communication and coordination, especially when the immigrant's native language has little value in the global market. Without adequate national language skills, immigrants cannot fully capitalize on their professional experience and expertise.

Conversely, higher education levels and language proficiency mutually enhance labor market integration. Employers may engage in

“statistical” discrimination, avoiding hiring immigrants due to perceived higher transaction costs from accents or undervaluing their professional abilities, thus worsening their employment prospects. As a result, immigrants might shy away from applying for mainstream jobs, preferring positions in ethnic niche economies. This, along with limited language proficiency, often prevents them from accessing broader employment opportunities and valuable professional networks.

However, in various Asian nations, the criteria for language proficiency among immigrants exhibit significant diversity. For instance, in Korea, applicants for long-term residency visas can enhance their eligibility by demonstrating Korean proficiency through a standardized test, even though fluency in Korean itself is not obligatory.

Recent findings by Yang, Park, Lee, and Min (2020) emphasize that the language skills of migrant women in Korea tend to improve with prolonged residency and increased exposure to the language. Previously, marriage migrants in Korea were solely required to exhibit proficiency in Korean (Lee, 2015), whereas current regulations mandate passing a naturalization exam or completing 650 hours of Korean language and cultural studies (Lee, 2010). Addressing the educational needs of migrants from diverse socio-economic backgrounds remains critical.

Seong (2019) frames the language proficiency of migrants in Korea as a human rights issue and advocates for initiatives that promote multicultural human rights.

Meanwhile, Japan has recently imposed requirements for migrant workers entering the country to possess Japanese language skills. Historically, Japan’s highly skilled professional program did not impose such a language requirement but rather allocated points based on educational credentials (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan, 2015). Japan’s approach to language policies for migrants has evolved over time, initially establishing government-funded centers post-World War II to support returnees from Manchuria and refugees from Southeast Asia, including Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia.

However, Japanese descendants from South America, despite obtaining permanent residence visas, did not receive comparable structured support for Japanese language proficiency (Ortloff & Frey, 2007).

Ortloff and Frey (2007) draw a comparison between the social benefits provided to returnees in

Germany and Japan, noting both countries’ reliance on volunteer teachers rather than formal language education programs.

However, there is no previous research that presents on-the-ground facts regarding the preparation of prospective migrant workers, specifically discussing the field realities of the language education they must undergo to go abroad, particularly in Japanese, and some of the challenges they may encounter.

In terms of foreign language learning for immigrants and its connection to costs, Chiswick and Miller (2014) argued that acquiring proficiency in a new language poses significant expenses for immigrants, involving both time and financial investments.

Immigrants dedicate substantial effort and money to attend language schools, purchase learning materials, and utilize other resources necessary to master the language of their adopted country. Even infants, although not themselves valuing their time economically, incur costs through the time parents or caregivers spend communicating and reading to them. Several factors influence these costs: the economic value of time, which varies with wage rates; the age of the immigrant, affecting learning speed despite the required investment; exposure to the new language, crucial for efficient learning but potentially limited in linguistic enclaves; and the linguistic gap between the immigrant’s native tongue and the new language, impacting the complexity and cost of acquisition.

In addition to the costs mentioned above, the author attempts to outline several findings from the field regarding Japanese language education for prospective SSW workers and the practical realities of the SSW examination process required as a primary condition for departure to Japan.

From an economic perspective, the focus is primarily on individual behavior through a microeconomic lens, treating language skills as ‘human capital.’

This viewpoint has gained prominence since the 1980s with the surge in non-English-speaking immigrants to the US and Canada, highlighting the need to understand immigrant adaptation to new environments and the growing relevance of human capital theory (Carliner, 1981; McManus, Gould, Welch, 1983; Tainer, 1988).

This perspective underscores the crucial role of language proficiency in enhancing an individual’s economic potential and facilitating societal integration (Becker, 1964).

Based on the extensive background and findings of previous research, particularly the impact of language skills on 'human capital' in the host country, this study will examine how non-academic learning institutions prepare students and evaluate the effectiveness of these institutions in preparing students for the SSW (Specified Skilled Worker) visa requirements.

Specifically, it will document the challenges faced by Indonesian SSW candidates in mastering Japanese and taking the JFT, particularly within the context of the SSW sending process.

Based on the findings, the study will propose policy measures to improve the accessibility, quality, and relevance of Japanese language education for Indonesian migrant workers and suggest initiatives that can support the continuous development of language skills among migrants, both pre-departure and post-arrival in Japan.

## METHOD

This research was conducted from July 2023 to the end of April 2024, focusing on the islands of Java and Bali.

The study involved visiting nearly 60 vocational training institutions licensed to send prospective interns to Japan, as well as several Sending Organizations (SO) that have obtained SP3MI permits, which allow them to send Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI) under the SSW scheme. These SOs are part of vocational training institutions that already have permission to send interns.

The research method is qualitative, involving interviews with the owners or representative staff of each SO related to sending prospective SSW workers.

In addition, the author also visited and held discussions with several organizations focused on sending workers abroad, such as the Association of Overseas Apprenticeship Organizers (*Asosiasi Penyelenggara Pemagangan Luar Negeri*, AP2LN), the Association of Indonesian Internship Organizers (APPI), and relevant divisions within the Indonesian Ministry of Manpower (KEMNAKER).

These include the Directorate General of Vocational Training Development and Productivity (*Ditjen Binalavotas*), which oversees and manages internship programs, the Directorate of Placement and Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers (*Binapenta*), which focuses on

establishing regulations for the protection and placement of Indonesian Migrant Workers, and the Indonesian Migrant Workers Protection Agency (BP2MI), which controls the placement and protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers abroad.

Nevertheless, the research primarily focuses on the perspective of the Indonesian side, specifically the key players involved in sending prospective SSW workers to Japan.

The research on the issues and dynamics of sending and receiving SSW workers will continue in line with the abolition of the TITP or *Ginojissshu* and its replacement with the TES or *Ikusei Shuuro* program.

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

### The Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) Program in Indonesia

In December 2018, Japan's National Diet passed amendments to the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act and the Ministry of Justice Establishment Act, ushering in the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) or *Tokutei Gino* residency status. This new status aimed to address labor shortages by allowing industries with acute needs to employ foreign workers. Effective from April 1, 2019, this legislation mandated that foreign nationals seeking to reside in Japan under this status must obtain approval from regional immigration offices based on their proposed activities.

The introduction of the SSW residency status in Japan offers two distinct categories aimed at addressing specific labor needs. Specified Skilled Worker 1 or *Tokutei Gino Ichi-Go* is tailored for foreign workers possessing substantial knowledge or experience in specific industries. They are granted residency renewable annually, with a maximum stay of 5 years, subject to skill assessments through examinations. Proficiency in the Japanese language, essential for daily life and work, is required, and family accompaniment is generally not permitted.

Specified Skilled Worker 2 or *Tokutei Gino Ni-Go* targets individuals with advanced skills in designated industries. Initially granted a 3-year residency, renewable, applicants are also assessed through examinations for skill level, but no Japanese language proficiency test is mandated.

Family accompaniment is permitted under certain conditions, primarily for spouses and children.

The SSW status encompasses 14 sectors, including caregiving, construction, hospitality, and agriculture, among others. Japan primarily recruits workers from eight countries, including Vietnam, China, and the Philippines, to fulfill its labor needs.

Key features of both categories include structured assessments, varying residency durations, and differing language proficiency requirements. This framework aims to systematically address labor shortages while facilitating the integration of foreign workers into Japanese industries.

In Indonesia, management of the SSW system falls under the Directorate General of Manpower Placement Development and Employment Expansion (*Ditjen Binapenta & PKK*), which operates under and reports to the Minister of Manpower. Additionally, the Indonesian Migrant Worker Protection Agency (BP2MI) is involved, focusing on the protection and monitoring of the safety and human rights of Indonesian workers abroad.

With the introduction of the SSW program, several sending organizations in Indonesia that previously focused on the education and preparation of prospective technical interns for Japan have started to adjust to the evolving job market demands in Japan. These organizations are increasingly seeking workers with SSW visas to meet the rising demand for such employees in Japan. As part of this adjustment, new institutions have been established with licenses to send migrant workers, known as Indonesian Migrant Worker Placement Companies (*Perusahaan Penempatan Pekerja Migran Indonesia*, P3MI).

These companies are required to obtain the Indonesian Migrant Worker Placement Permit (*Surat Izin Penempatan Pekerja Migran Indonesia*, SIP3MI), which involves stringent requirements such as a security deposit of 1.5 billion rupiahs during the permit's validity period. Consequently, some sending organizations have formed their own groups and set up new companies focused on dispatching SSW workers.

Based on field observations, several sending organizations are increasingly focusing on sending workers through the SSW licensing system via P3MI. It has been observed that, aside from companies individually applying for P3MI licenses, one organization acquired another P3MI company and transformed it into a sending organization to prepare and dispatch SSW

candidates. Another approach involves multiple sending organizations who are focused on sending Technical Interns Trainees collaborating by sharing assets and capital to establish a P3MI, thus simplifying the establishment process. These practices are becoming more prevalent, with examples of at least three sending organizations merging, and in some cases, up to 18 organizations joining together to form a new P3MI.

## **Japanese Language Education for SSW Program in Indonesia**

In recent years, the primary mode of Indonesian overseas employment in Japan has been the deployment of Technical Intern Trainees, commonly referred to as *Jisshuusei* or *Kenshuusei*, facilitated by the TITP. Notably, with the exception of the elderly care (*Kaigo*) sector, there is no particular Japanese language ability required by the program.

Nonetheless, it is customary for the majority of the TITP candidates to spend a preparation period of 3-6 months, dedicated to learning Japanese in sending organizations prior to their deployment to Japan. The Japanese language instructors in sending organizations predominantly consist of former trainees who have completed their programs and returned to Indonesia, alongside graduates from Japanese studies departments in universities.

It is noteworthy that Japanese language education for TITP candidates depends solely on the individual policies of each sending organization and the competency of their instructors, given the absence of a standardized curriculum or guidance provided by the Japanese and Indonesian governments. Moreover, in light of the absence of a requirement for Japanese language proficiency and considering the Japanese side's demand for immediate human resources, Indonesian trainees are often dispatched without adequate Japanese language proficiency.

The establishment of SSW in 2019 marked a notable divergence from previous practices, particularly in terms of language proficiency requirements. Unlike the TITP, which did not impose specific language skill requirements, SSW candidates were required to pass the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) N4 or the JFT Basic A2.

Following this marked shift, several sending organizations have adapted their curricula to align with the new standards. Previously, the primary

textbook used by TITP-sending organizations in Indonesia was “*Minna no Nihongo*”, published by the Tokyo International Japanese Language Institute. However, in response to SSW requirements, these organizations have since diversified their teaching materials, incorporating additional textbooks such as “*Marugoto*” and “*Irodori*,” published by the Japan Foundation.

Furthermore, the establishment of SSW has prompted the issuance of the Indonesian National Occupational Competency Standards for Japanese Language Education (*Standar Kompetensi Kerja Nasional Indonesia*, SKKNI), formalized through Decree No. 238 by the Ministry of Labor of the Republic Indonesia in December 2019. Japanese language proficiency standards set by this decree are consistent with the SSW program, JLPT N4 or JFT BASIC A2. The new curriculum is expected to significantly enhance the chances for Indonesians working in Japan.

The introduction of this curriculum has been lauded for providing a foundational framework for Japanese language education in Indonesia, which had previously been lacking. The curriculum encompasses not only guidelines on Japanese grammar and expressions necessary for candidates but also includes telephone etiquette and guidelines on proper behaviors in public spaces such as city halls and banks.

However, despite its potential, only a limited number of sending organizations have adopted the new curriculum. The mere introduction of the new curriculum and new teaching materials like “*Marugoto*” or “*Irodori*” is insufficient for improvement in Japanese language education in Indonesia. It is equally crucial to offer training for Japanese language instructors.

The Japan Foundation has undertaken various activities related to training Japanese language instructors who will teach Japanese to prospective SSW participants. Domestically, the Japan Foundation emphasizes training programs aimed at deepening knowledge of the theories and methodologies of language teaching and enhancing the teaching abilities necessary for providing Japanese language education for daily life and employment. Unfortunately, not all sending organizations and Japanese language training institutes (LPKs) are either unaware of these training opportunities or lack the internal resources to adequately train their instructors. This dual challenge of limited access to information and insufficient internal capacity hampers the

effectiveness of Japanese language education for prospective SSW candidates.

Moreover, with the ongoing discussion in Japan regarding the abolition of TITP and the establishment of the *Ikusei Shuuro* program, many sending organizations and Japanese language LPK are in a wait-and-see stance right now. This uncertainty has led some organizations to maintain the status quo rather than proactively adapt to the new curriculum and standards.

At the same time, the new curriculum has also faced criticism for its exclusive focus on grammar and expression, lacking sector-specific terminology. Previously, much of the terminology for each sector has relied on the experience of returning trainees who serve as Japanese instructors. These returning trainees are highly valued as Japanese instructors within the sending organizations because, in addition to their language skills, they can impart their experiences and knowledge about working in Japan, as well as Japanese culture and customs to the candidates. However, their teaching methods are primarily based on their personal experiences, and many struggles to adapt to the new textbooks and curriculum.

Furthermore, with the establishment of the SSW program, returning trainees who have been relied upon as Japanese language instructors are choosing to return and work in Japan. Consequently, many sending organizations mentioned that they are facing a shortage of Japanese language instructors.

### **Japanese Language Examination for SSW Program in Indonesia**

The primary Japanese language examination for Specified Skilled Workers (SSW) candidates in Indonesia is the Japan Foundation Test for Basic Japanese (JFT BASIC), administered by the Japan Foundation. Conducted six times annually, this test offers greater opportunities for SSW candidates compared to the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), which is held only twice a year. In Indonesia, JFT BASIC is available in four locations on the island of Java: Jakarta, Surabaya, Semarang, and Bandung. Additionally, the examination is conducted outside Java in Medan, North Sumatra, and Denpasar, Bali.

Compared to other sending countries such as Vietnam and the Philippines, Indonesia benefits from more frequent examinations and a greater number of testing venues for JFT Basic. Despite

these situations, the high demand for the exam results in a persistent shortage of available seats, making it challenging for applicants to secure spots.

Several sending organizations mentioned this situation as a “ticket concert stripping battle.” Consequently, many sending organizations have voiced their demands for an increase in the number of locations and venues, particularly on Java Island, to accommodate the growing number of candidates.

In addition, there have been numerous criticisms regarding the brokers to secure exam slots. SSW candidates unable to obtain an exam number independently are forced to rely on broker services, resulting in additional costs prior to their departure. In response, the Japan Foundation, the organizer of JFT BASIC, has implemented several regulatory changes. However, our research indicates that these measures have not significantly improved the situation.

As Japanese language proficiency is a requirement for the SSW program, the foremost priority for participants and sending organizations is passing the test. Specifically, achieving a passing score on the JLPT N4 or JFT BASIC A2 has become the primary objective of Japanese language education for SSW candidates.

However, due to the difficulties in securing a spot for the JFT BASIC, combined with the limited availability of alternative Japanese language exams, has led SSW candidates to take the exam merely when they manage to register, treating it as a matter of chance. This uncertainty has also hampered both instructors and candidates in effectively planning the learning process, as their focus is often diverted by the logistical challenges of the exam.

## CONCLUSIONS

This research indicates that the establishment of the SSW program has significantly influenced Japanese language education in Indonesia, particularly with the requirement for Japanese language proficiency as an entry criterion. This underscores the importance of developing ‘human capital’ starting from the sending country.

The SSW program has led to the diversification of teaching materials and textbooks, reflecting the need to meet new language proficiency standards. Additionally, it has necessitated the creation of a new curriculum tailored to these standards.

Although indirectly related to educational practices, the SSW program has also caused a shortage of Japanese language instructors in Indonesia, highlighting its broader impact.

Moreover, the uncertainty surrounding the Japanese language examination has greatly influenced the language learning trajectory for Indonesians bound for Japan, contributing to the preference for the TITP over the SSW program. Given the Japanese government’s goal to increase SSW participants from Indonesia, immediate measures are essential. Enhancing the fairness and accessibility of the Japanese language examination is crucial, alongside improving the curriculum to better meet sector-specific needs and providing comprehensive instructor training. Addressing these issues will ensure a more effective and equitable Japanese language education system for Indonesian workers.

Regarding the JFT test required for prospective SSW participants, administered by the Japan Foundation, it is vital for relevant authorities to strengthen regulations to eliminate fraudulent practices in the registration process. Ensuring the integrity of the JFT test, which is key to assessing language proficiency and SSW eligibility in Japan, is essential for maintaining fair and transparent selection processes. Fraudulent activities undermine the test’s credibility and disadvantage qualified candidates. By implementing stricter oversight, such as identity checks and digital monitoring, authorities can curb fraud and maintain the examination system’s integrity. This approach not only protects applicants’ interests but also enhances the TITP program’s overall effectiveness and reliability, fostering trust among stakeholders and promoting a fair recruitment process for prospective workers heading to Japan.

Ultimately, a strong collaboration between sending institutions, the government, and Japanese language education advocates including universities, communities, and NGOs, is essential to elevate the quality of ‘human capital’ among SSW candidates. This collaboration will ensure that Japan as the host country continues to trust and accept migrant workers from Indonesia.

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