

Joint Declaration of Korea-Japan Literacy Learners

We, literacy learners of Korea and Japan, got together in Fukuoka, Japan from March 27 to 29, 2019. Fukuoka is the place where the Japanese literacy movement began. Through the three days, we talked about our own background, and shared motivations that made each of us to learn literacy and changes that the learning has brought to each of us. The more we talked, the deeper our interactions became. It was as if we had known each other for some time. While we were small in number, we definitely represented many of our colleagues who were not there. This declaration is outcomes of these interactions, gathering the threads of voices that each of us raised.

For various reasons, we did not learn during our childhood. When we were child, we lost our parents and had to take care of our younger siblings. We were not allowed to go to school bringing our small children. Since the time when we were child, every day and night, we worked, shopped, cooked and handled household chores. We used to be told, “No education for women.” We were very envious of other friends going to school. We survived hand to mouth. We could not write the word “graduation” on our resume. We were willing to work harder than anybody else. But, with no ability to read and write, we could do only manual labor. Yet, in the old days, jobs were available to those who did not have reading and writing ability. Nowadays, jobs are not available if you do not read and write. When we were assigned a job that required literacy, it was the time for us to leave the work. We did not have time, even a single minute, to feel pain.

Some people among us were forced a harder life because of handicap. Others hardly survived the war, and did nothing but supporting themselves. Out of poverty, some were cheated with the sugared words, “You can get much money,” and trafficked. Because of the place where they were born, they had to suffer exclusion and discrimination in their life. With no hope and no future, some attempted to end their life.

Men were also not exempted. They also lived in poverty and discrimination since they were small children. Men would find it more difficult than women to say “I cannot read and write.” Men are likely to put on a brave front in their life.

We, having such a background, began to learn how to write and read encouraged by different motivations. My child has only learned ‘standard Japanese’ and did not understand what I spoke. Gradually, I was losing communications with my child. After my task of child-rearing was over, I found that I had more time for myself. It was then when I was told by my child, grandchild and friend where I could learn how to read and write.

I did not want to be found my illiteracy by anybody. I did not ask anybody to “read” letters sent to me. As I wanted to hide this, I picked a literacy class located far away from my place taking a few hours by bicycle. I met my old friend there, and we said to each other, “Oh, you also can’t read and write.”

In the literacy class, there were many who were also illiterate. Before, I had believed that it was only me in the world who did not read and write. But I found it incorrect. In the class, all classmates always welcomed me. People there were good and credible.

After I started to learn, my life has drastically changed. Time began to move around me. My life started again. I became friends with others who I felt safe and comfortable talking with. I feel that they care for me. I saw black stains on the paper and found them letters. My daughter-in-law, a wife of my son, put a memo pad on the refrigerator door. I asked my friend to read what was written. It read, "Thank you mother." Four years after I received the memo, I could write my reply to her. Scars in my heart slowly started to be cured. Now I can ask what it is when I see unknown letters in my literacy class. Letters used to freeze me are no more freezing. In my workplace, I keep a notebook to write down new words to remember. I used to walk with my head down and be said by others, "Are you seeking for money on the road?" Now I walk with my eyes fixed ahead. I feel like to challenge something new. Reading has helped me understand what is going on in the world. Through writing my life story, I became aware why my life in the past was like that. With healed mind, I have become much stronger than before.

My children grew up watching me. I took my children to the literacy class, and they watched me what I was doing there. They spontaneously studied without any parental advice "to study." Each of my children found their own dream and left the nest for a new world. If I had gone to school with a half-serious attitude, or had not taken the literacy class, I would have given importance only on their school results and always urged them to do this and that.

There are more people behind us who have not yet come to a literacy class. "I will join next time," they said, but never appeared. I also said the same words before, but I was determined to come. I regrettably say to myself, "I wish I had started much earlier." Some say, "I am not in trouble though I cannot read." If there are a paradise and hell in our afterlife and if we are not able to read the signpost, we may take a wrong direction. In reality, they do not have enough time and money to join. They struggle in their daily life.

They cannot come and learn because there are not many literacy classes. Operation of the literacy class requires money. Those who are involved in the operation are volunteer and not paid honorarium at times. Facilities accommodating classrooms have no elevators, but stairways. With no restrooms for the handicapped, people with disabilities are disappointed when they come. There are people who want to learn, but, they do not come because they do not know where they can learn. We want to be more exposed on TV or in the newspaper, so that they will know where to go and learn. Through the media, we want to convey our message, "Come and join us." Government is responsible to ensure that free and safe literacy class is available to anybody in need.

For us, literacy means not only the learning how to read and write, but also the learning how to live. Mothers teach us how to manage our daily life, whereas the literacy teaches

us how to live. Owing to the literacy, we see the world more clearly. Thus, the literacy is like a pair of glasses to us. Literacy provides us with a place to learn letters and to express ourselves. It is a joy and purpose of our life. It is a happiness. It is a place for our spirit to stay. Literacy helps us aim higher. It opens a door to life. Through learning, we become stronger and not easily give up. For us, learning is living. We believe that mutual support and learning will help build a society where people live peacefully.

Now we can say,

“Because we were not allowed an access to learning during our childhood, we can appreciate happiness we now enjoy.”

Requests to the society and the government:

Through our exchange program, we have concluded our requests to the government and the civil society in both Korea and Japan.

1. Please conduct **a national survey** to find those who still have difficulties in reading and writing. Please understand that there are people who are upset because of their illiteracy.
2. Please provide all children with **a school where they safely and comfortably study**. Some of our friends who went to school in their childhood were sometimes hurt by their teachers. Many of our friends did not go to school because of poverty. There are still children who cannot go to school. Please do not make such situations.
3. Please ensure **a system and measures to support literacy learning and basic education**, so that those adults who did not receive education during their childhood for various reasons can have the access to safe learning. **Government as well as the civil society** should be more responsible to achieve it by making **a law** and ensuring **budgets**.
4. It takes much more time to learn if people start learning after growing up. If they learn in the feeling of urgency, learning may become a burden on them. It should be provided in **a longer term**, taking more time. Learning takes place not only in a classroom, but in an exchange program with other classes, or outside the classroom to have more experiences.
5. For the safe learning, it is necessary to have our own classroom in the vicinity of our places. For those wheel-chaired, an elevator is required for free access. Please ensure that learners are not given financial burden with tuition or transportation cost. Please build more **literacy classes and schools for adults**, so that they can go and learn **wherever they reside**.
6. Many of those who support us listen carefully to us, make learning materials that satisfy needs of each learner, and help us know each other. While they work hard and care about us, most of them are not paid. We expect more people become our supporters who understand us. For this, we request to improve their teaching conditions including **remunerations, training or teaching materials to encourage more concerned people to be involved**.
7. **Governments of Korea and Japan are requested to jointly designate a “literacy and basic education month,” during which promotional activities for more actions and networking are taken place**. Literacy programs are not sufficient, and it is important to

make people understood the issue of literacy. During our program, while we met for the first time, we talked each other as if we had been old friends. All participants were energized. We wish to have more opportunities for this kind of exchange.

8. Please deliver this joint declaration to those who want to learn. Convey this declaration in voice or picture. Please produce an animation or drama of our life history and let many people know us. Not only through this declaration, but also through other means of communications, please **make voices of literacy learners all over the world heard to many people.**

September 27, 2019

All Participants of the International Symposium
for the Enhancement of Literacy Education of Korea and Japan

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Interactions over the issue of literacy between Japan and Korea began in 1990 when the world celebrated the International Literacy Year. It was the year when people working for literacy both in Japan and Korea first met and started to exchange research work and classroom visits. During the 1990s, literacy learners in both countries were mainly those who had spent their school-age before and after the World War II. In Korea, they underwent the colonial rule by Japan. The issue of literacy in Korea is indivisibly connected to the colonization by Japan. Through interactions, it was always the big challenge for us how we took the historical fact into our consideration. Even in our present interactions initiated in 2017, this remains as an underlying philosophy.

After the World War II, the issue of literacy in both countries has developed passing through the following problems that are partially common among the both and not common otherwise. They include Korean War, the rapid economic growth, dictatorship, myth of the 100% literacy rate, different forms of discrimination, poverty and disparity, exam competition, acceptance of foreign migrants and campaign for the enactment of literacy-related act. Through our interactions, challenges that each of us face have been made clear.

During the workshop to formulate the joint declaration, learners of both countries deepened mutual understanding and shared their experiences and thoughts. This declaration came out of thoughts of learners of Korea and Japan. We believe that this joint declaration will contribute to pave a path to a new ear for the literacy interactions between Korea and Japan.

Steering Committee of the Workshop to Formulate the Joint Declaration of Literacy Learners of Korea and Japan

Translated by KOMORI Megumi of IMADR: The International Movement against All Forms of
Discrimination and Racism