

LEARNING JAPANESE: THE CHALLENGE, THE PROBLEMS, AND WHAT WE CAN DO ABOUT THEM

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Today the study of Japan is enjoying a surge of interest throughout the world, and the number of people wishing to learn the Japanese language is rising sharply. According to figures recently made available by the Japanese government, there are over 700 facilities for the study of the Japanese language in different parts of the world; at these facilities there are said to be 1890 instructors teaching Japanese to nearly 57,000 students. In addition several thousand are probably engaged in private study, by themselves or with the assistance of tutors.

Most students start their study of Japanese with the same elation that accompanies one's first visit to Japan. The initial euphoria of the traveler will usually outlive his two-month tourist visa, but the language student has a longer-term commitment and sooner or later his enthusiasm is apt to fade. This fascinating language, in which instant communication seemed possible at the beginning, suddenly becomes difficult and frustrating. The path ahead appears endless, muddy, and uncertain. One's initial confidence wanes, achievement slows, classroom attendance falls off and the drop-out rate rises. What are the factors behind the frustration, and what can we do to anticipate or alleviate it?

To begin with, we must recognize that certain goals are unrealistic and overly ambitious. As Japanese language teachers, we are naturally eager to encourage those who wish to learn the language. In our eagerness (or perhaps our ignorance) we are inclined to understate the difficulties that lie ahead for the student and to overestimate his ability to cope with them. Learning a language is an enormously demanding task. It is a task for which the young child has specific inborn abilities which start deteriorating around the time of puberty.¹ The development of these language-learning abilities varies from child to child; it is obvious that not every human being acquires an equal facility in the use of his native language, and some people find the acquisition of their language skills more difficult than do others. While studies have not yet

addressed the question, it is conceivable that certain individuals (even while children) may lack the capacity to activate this native ability to learn a language more than once, using up their plasticity in the mastery of the first language. For some of us, perhaps, even one language is almost more than we can cope with. It is important for us to recognize that individuals vary markedly in their capacity to learn language, even as children, and that the quality of the specific mechanism required is not necessarily correlated with that of other inborn abilities. We may be doing certain adult students an unintentional disservice by encouraging them to take up the study of a second language with our false assurance that all that is required to master the skill is the diligent application of proper methods.

But these remarks apply to all second-language learning. In the case of Japanese we are demanding a particularly difficult chore. The writing system is formidable, so formidable that it is a lifelong job for the Japanese themselves to master it fully. It is not merely that the symbols are numerous and intricate in shape, a problem shared with Chinese; the individual characters are used in such a multiplicity of ways in Japanese that it is far from easy to reach the stage where one can read the printed page accurately and rapidly, even with the best of aids. In English comparable difficulties seldom turn up, except perhaps with our use of numerical symbols. We read the symbol 1 as one but pronounce it *fir-* in *1st* (yet we do not write *fir tree* as *1-tree*) and we combine it with zero in *10* to write the word *ten*; we write *ten cents* as *10¢* but *ten dollars* as *\$10*, and in *\$10 bills* we have a slightly different reading for the symbol \$, *dollar* rather than *dollars*. These kinds of complex relationships in written English but commonplace in written Japanese.² Still, if the Japanese writing system is as complicated as we claim, how does the Japanese schoolchild manage to acquire his basic reading skills with such apparent ease and with so little of the "reading-block" trauma that plagues the

American child? There are several reasons for this³ but what is important for us to bear in mind is that the Japanese child *already knows the language he is trying to read*. Learning to read is a very difficult task from learning a language; manipulating written forms of language is clearly a secondary and parasitic skill for which the human being has no specific inborn mechanism.⁴ People are built to learn languages through their ears, not their eyes, and that is why language teaching today gives primacy to audiolingual methods of instruction. That is also why our elementary teaching materials present the sentences of Japanese in the familiar letters of the Roman alphabet. There are those who argue "but romanized Japanese isn't the *real language*"; of course it isn't, but then neither is the exotic mixture of scripts that constitute the usual form of writing in Japan. The real language is inside people's brains, and it got there through their ears (which accounts for the overwhelming language handicap of the congenitally deaf as compared with the blind).⁵ The purpose of any written version of a sentence is to enable you quickly and accurately to reconstruct the original sentence in your head and, if you like, say it with your tongue. Once you have reconstructed the spoken form of the sentence you have what is needed to grasp its meaning and store that in your memory, from which it can be retrieved, not in the exact form of the original input but in some paraphrase, using different words to say the same thing. This process of reading implies, of course, that you already know the language. Ideally, we would prefer to delay the introduction of the Japanese writing system until the basic spoken language is familiar to the student,⁶ but some sort of compromise is made necessary because of the long period of time required to learn the symbols and their many uses. An excellent new reading textbook soon to appear is closely articulated with the lessons of the most effective of our textbooks for the spoken language.⁷ There are twenty-five reading lessons to be undertaken starting with the tenth of the thirty-five lessons of *Beginning Japanese*; this is the level reached after about two months of semi-intensive class work (8-10 hours a week). In four lessons the student learns to read the *katakana* spellings that are used to write the many foreign loanwords in modern Japanese; he then proceeds to learn the *hiragana* syllabary in the following four lessons. As Lesson 19 of *Beginning Japanese* is being drilled orally, the student begins his study of Chinese

characters (*kanji*) by reading extensive exercise materials that practice the sentence patterns he has learned to understand by ear. By the time that he finishes the last lesson of *Beginning Japanese* the student has learned to read over 400 common characters in a wide variety of contexts.⁸ These materials are well designed and extremely effective; nonetheless, most students will find it requires a great deal of personal effort to learn to read Japanese.

It is the extra time required to study the writing system that has led linguistic specialists at the Foreign Service Institute of the Department of State to conclude that the level of "expected speaking achievement" in intensive language training is from three times to almost six times as difficult for languages with particularly complicated scripts (Arabic, Chinese, Japanese, Korean) as for the common European languages.⁹ For these languages it will take 720 hours of instruction to achieve the level that requires only 240 hours in French or Russian; and it will take 1,320 hours to achieve the level that can be reached with 240 hours of Spanish or Vietnamese, which are blessed with orthographies that follow the pronunciation fairly closely. If we think in terms of semi-intensive courses, with eight to ten hours in the classroom each week, two college semesters can provide as much as 240 hours. It will take three years of such semi-intensive work to give the student of Japanese the same level of skill as that reached by the French or Russian student in one year, and five or six years to reach the same level as that reached in one year by the students of Spanish or Vietnamese. These are sobering calculations; teachers and students of Japanese would do well to ponder them.

For the Japanese language the problems posed by a complicated writing system are compounded by the hypertrophy of the vocabulary. Ever delighting in new words, the Japanese borrow freely from every language they come in contact with, and original concoctions are made up profusely from both native and foreign ingredients. From the English words *base* (*pay*) and *up* the new Japanese word *besu-appu* (an increase in base pay) is created; and that is then shortened in headlines to *bea* (written in *katakana*). Abbreviations are a constant headache for the foreigner, who if not perplexed by *Nichi-firu* for *Nippon Firuhamoni Kokyogaku-dan* (Japan Philharmonic Orchestra)¹⁰ may have difficulty figuring out that *kone* in *kone o tsukete iru* (has connections) is a shortening of *konekushon* (connection). A knowledge of English

Suffix?

hardly prepares one for *hochikisu* (a stapler), named after Hotchkiss, the inventor, or for the meticulously plural prefix in *shurinpusu-kakuteru* ('shrimps' cocktail).

Modern Japanese comprehends a considerably richer vocabulary than we are used to in other languages. According to one estimate, to read modern Japanese requires three times as much vocabulary as English and over four times as much as French.¹¹ Most of our textbooks manage to teach the basic sentence patterns of Japanese with a relatively scant vocabulary. The vocabulary in the two volumes of *Beginning Japanese*, which can be completed in the 240 hours of a two-semester semi-intensive course, may seem a heavy load to the student but it is limited to little more than a thousand words. Before a student can expect to read with ease, he will need a much larger stock of words. To some extent the acquisition of new words is facilitated by the study of Chinese characters, and the two should go hand in hand; but it would be a mistake to rely upon the visual recognition of characters and their meanings as a substitute for learning the productive elements that build up words, such as pronounceable prefixes, suffixes, and other bound elements. The student must not be encouraged to think the problem of reading Japanese is some kind of bilingual crossword puzzle, the aim of which is to find the answer in English. The real problem is one of learning a large array of new words, how they sound and how they can be used in old familiar patterns as well as how they are written. It is not enough to find an up-to-date dictionary that translates the juxtaposition of two characters with the meanings of *public* and *harm* as *environmental damage*; the student must be prepared to understand what a TV discussion of *kogai-mondai* (the problem of pollution) is all about. Learning to translate is a separate discipline, not to be confused with the task of learning to read the words and grasp their meaning in context *without* translating. The very special skill of translating from one language to another is to be cultivated separately from the languages themselves, once they have become familiar.

We have dwelt on the difficulties faced by the student. What can the teacher contribute to help ease these difficulties? First, we can set realistic goals and make clear what is needed to attain them. I spoke above of "completing" the two volumes of *Beginning Japanese* in around 240 hours of classroom instruction. But the material

cannot be completed satisfactorily unless each of those hours is put to optimal use. Most of the time should be devoted to fast-paced drill, preferably in small groups working under a trained drillmaster. The ideal group size is eight students; when the group exceeds fifteen, it is hardly possible for the tutor to drill the students effectively. The drillmaster must stick closely to the materials provided, and not lean heavily upon improvisation (however clever) or unrehearsed sentences. It is a highly technical job to create sentence-pattern drills within a limited range of vocabulary and to work the bugs out of them so that they serve their function efficiently. Unless the tutor has special talent and is willing to take the time to write out and study his materials in advance, he is well advised to suppress his creative urges and content himself with putting to good use the drills provided by the textbook. Some tutors take the attitude that if the students listen to the tapes in the language laboratory (as they should) it is not necessary to cover the same material thoroughly in class; in this they are generally mistaken. The good tutor not only checks to see that the students are memorizing the dialogues and manipulating the exercises, but helps them do it. The tutor should avoid trying to "explain" the language. If it is not possible to have an applied linguist offer the students occasional guidance beyond the explanations in the book, the tutor should offer telling examples rather than lengthy discussions in English. In fact, there should be virtually no English spoken in the classroom. The name of the game, after all, is talking Japanese; every minute spent in some other language requires a justification that seldom withstands scrutiny. Even the applied linguist should keep his explanations brief and to the point; most students are not equipped to follow technical discussions of linguistic matters and few are interested. They are less concerned with rules of grammar than with rules of thumb; how to get by, how to cope, how to make the patterns a part of their unconscious repertoire of usable language. Short answers to individual questions often prove more helpful than elaborate lectures. Both drillmaster and linguist are prey to constant temptations: the tutor is tempted to "teach" rather than to "drill," and the linguist is tempted to impart everything he knows about the language rather than tell the students what they want to know. It is wise to recognize the temptations, whether one is able to resist them or not. And that is particularly important when a single person must double as both

drillmaster and linguist, since the two roles must be kept carefully apart. This does not mean that drillmasters should know nothing about teaching and that linguists should know nothing about the structure of the language; on the contrary, the more one knows about both subjects the better he will be able to use his knowledge in subtle ways that will help the students without diverting their attention to the mechanisms involved.

The difficulties faced by the student of Japanese are indeed formidable, as we have seen. But the attainment of some degree of control over the language will bring considerable rewards. So much of what Japan has to offer can be fully appreciated only through the medium of the language. Quite independently from his acquaintance with the culture and the people, the learner of Japanese is exposed to a way of organizing linguistic expression and human experience that is very different from the habits acquired from languages like English. It can be a liberating experience to approach the expression of ideas through new and different mechanisms. The language itself provides a variety of insights into the Japanese *renzoku-shiso* approach to thought which contrasts so strikingly with the dialectical debates of the Western mind.¹² But this is another topic.

⁶ And that is the philosophy behind *A Manual of Japanese Writing* by Hamako I. Chaplin and S.E. Martin, Yale University Press, 1969 (revised edition). This textbook covers the 881 "education" characters required to be taught during the six years of elementary schooling in Japan. For a critical appraisal of this and other materials, see S.E. Martin, "On the teaching of Japanese: the state of the art," Center for Applied Linguistics 1968.

⁷ The new textbook, by Eleanor Harz Jordan, is entitled *Reading Japanese*; it will be published by Yale University Press, publisher of her spoken language text, *Beginning Japanese*.

⁸ A number of textbooks have made the well-intentioned mistake of writing in *kana* parts of words (or whole words) that are normally seen only in *kanji*, giving the student an unrealistic impression of what constitutes written Japanese. Both the new textbook and the *Manual of Japanese Writing* try to avoid this sort of false kindness.

⁹ Cf. *The Linguistic Reporter* 15:6.2 (1973).

¹⁰ Cf. *Shukan-Asahi* 2666.105a (1970).

¹¹ These ratios are based on Minami Hiroshi's *Kioku-jutsu*, as quoted by Iwabuchi Etsuro in *Gengo-Seikatsu* 1969:9, and repeated by A. A. Pashkovskiy in "Osobennosti yaponskoy leksiki," 169-85 *Voprosy yaponskogo yazyka* (Moscow 1971). It is said that the 5,000 most common words will enable you to make out .96 of a text of French but only .935 of an English text; to understand .935 of the vocabulary used in a modern Japanese periodical you will need 15,000 words and it will take 22,000 to cover .96 of the text.

¹² See Nakane Chie, *Tekio no joken* 123 ff., Tokyo (Kodan-sha) 1972.

Footnotes

¹ For an intriguing theory as to how and why humans came to have this age-terminable plasticity, see Ignatius G. Mattingly, "Speech cues and sign stimuli," *American Scientist* 60:327-37 (1972).

² See S. E. Martin, "Nonalphabetic writing systems: some observations," *Language by Eye and by Ear* (Kavanagh and Mattingly, ed.) 81-102, MIT Press 1972.

³ See S. E. Martin, "Learning to read: why Taro finds it easy but Johnny finds it hard," proceedings of the Second Japan-U.S. Joint Sociolinguistic Conference, Tokyo 1973. The critical point is that the American child must early learn to break the syllable and become aware of smaller linguistic units; Japanese children escape the need for this awareness, since their words are written with symbols for syllables or higher-level units.

⁴ See Ignatius G. Mattingly and James F. Kavanagh, "The relationship between speech and reading," *The Linguistic Reporter* 14:5.1-4. Also see I. G. Mattingly, "Reading, the linguistic process, and linguistic awareness," *Language by Eye and by Ear* 133-48 (1972).

⁵ This is true even for the vocabulary written with Chinese characters. Cf. Donna Erickson, I. G. Mattingly, and M. T. Turvey, "Phonetic activity in reading: an experiment with *kanji*," *Haskins Laboratories SR-33.137-56* (1973).

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