

How to study Japanese:

Orientation

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Introduction

In this article series, you will be guided to some optimized and intact ways to study Japanese and to maintain your Japanese skill. This article series targets overseas Japanese, intermediate and advanced Japanese learners as well as Japanese language teachers

After acquiring basic Japanese language skills, you may feel thirsty to master Japanese. However, depending on your school's pedagogic philosophy, sometimes you will spend more time on one extreme of the Japanese learning spectrum.

Case 1) You want to know how to read Japanese and to acquire Japanese information via reading. You will gradually get impatient if your Japanese program emphasizes conversational skills over reading skills.

Case 2) You want to learn oral communication skills. You may feel uneasy when you have to tackle additional Japanese vocabularies to develop your reading skills.

Case 3) After completing your Japanese language course, you feel have lost confidence in either your oral communication or reading skills.

Case 4) You are Japanese who live abroad and have good oral communication skills, but have difficulty reading.

In all these situations, you may have tried to reinforce the skills you want. If you have not found some efficient methods so far, this series of articles will be an asset for your Japanese learning and teaching.

In this first article, you will get an overview of the information that will be covered in the series and you will also see several big topics, which will be discussed in more detail.

Chapter 1: What is the best way to master Japanese?

As you may guess, this is the Holy Grail of every single Japanese learner, researcher, and teacher. Even though there is no perfect method to learn Japanese, there should be better ways to accomplish your goals. Whatever language courses you have taken or are taking, you can get the best results if you develop the skills you lack. The question is how.

As it is well known, “**read a lot; listen a lot; speak a lot**” can be a general solution. However, the question still remains on how to do it with maximum efficiency.

When I want to have more reading skills, one of my Japanese instructors told me to “go to a library and read whatever Japanese article you want to read.” I tried, but I soon realized that there should be more efficient ways than just reading articles and spending all my time looking up words in various dictionaries. Looking up virtually every word was drudgery rather than a fun and easy learning experience. I set back and did research on it. Fortunately, I did find a good way, and I applied the method. The informally written article, “*Learning Japanese through Internet*” was born in the first step of my voyage to find the best way of learning Japanese.

Training for listening comprehension was fine to do by the method in that article since there are several news sites that provide video news clips and their scripts. However, I still faced reading problem because machine-help has a limit. It does not guide me to 100% accuracy when I read text only in articles on the web. As I learned more vocabulary, this fact concerned me a lot. To have good reading skills and to learn how to write, you need to read real writings from the real world. Reading news scripts helps you to some extent, but you will gradually realize that it is not enough, since news is written in a straightforward way to give information to the readers or viewers as fast as possible. Due to that, you will not be exposed to other methods, which include how writers can smoothly argue on specific issues. Newspaper editorials can help you to get this kind of writing skill.

I chose to read “Tenseijingo (天声人語)” from Asahi-Shinbun (朝日新聞社) to boost my reading skill. That is not an editorial, but it touches every possible corner of Japanese society. It gives a lot of useful information to help understand Japanese cultural, history and society. I started to read from the web, but I hit the limit of machine help such as Jim Breen’s translation.

Fortunately, however, when I read an article of Tenseijingo via the Asahi-Shinbun's web site, I found that a publisher had published a Tenseijingo-book, which has 3 months worth of Japanese articles with "Hurigana (ふりがな) on Kanji (漢字)" and its English translations.

Note) Detailed review on Tenseijingo-book will be provided later

It was a light at the end of the tunnel for reading blues. I have read 8 books (2 years amount of articles) and now I feel quite comfortable reading any Japanese. The first Hurigana version of Tenseijingo was released in 1998. Following the book, some Japanese books have been published with hurigana on Kanji such as “Gotaihumanzoku (五体不満足)”. I wish more books were published in this fashion. It will be beneficial to Japanese learners as well as Japanese who have weak Kanji skills, including young Japanese students. Considering the fact that Japan will become an international multi-cultural society, "Hurigana on Kanji" will be the glue to bond between foreigners and Japanese.

As my quest goes on, I found "Jimaku hoso (字幕放送)", which I mentioned as a ***Japanese Closed Caption Broadcasting System (JCCBS) in DALL seires-001***. It was a major shock because I never heard of it before coming to Japan, even though it was available since 1986 (showa 61). It is believed that since "Jimaku hoso" was invented for hearing impaired people, this ready available technology was not caught as a language-learning tool. I truly believe that Closed Caption systems will be intensively used to acquire foreign languages in near future.

Note) More detailed information will be provided with publishing DALL series-002 .

The "Hurigana on Kanji", "*Jimaku hoso*," Internet, and digital technology, which comprises DALL (**Digital Assisted Language Learning**), gives Japanese learners the best time efficient learning method ever devised.

Chapter 2: How to enforce reading skills

Let's assume you have better oral communications skill over reading skill. If you are a westerner who has living experience in Japan or an overseas Japanese, you may fit into this category.

To enhance Japanese reading skills, you are required to do some tasks.

Task 1) Increase vocabulary power:

Word-to-word mapping between Japanese and your own mother language

Task 2) Conceptual mapping between Japanese and your own mother language.

This gives you a high reading skill and it is tougher to do than Task 1.

Ex) Learning Kotowaza (ことわざ) and Yojizukugo (四字熟語)

I have met and talked with a lot of westerners who live or have lived in Japan for more than 3 or 4 years and acquired wonderful oral communication skills, but cannot read a Japanese newspaper. They used to tell me they have about 10-20% Kanji recognition. If I did not develop my own learning methods using the Internet and the literature I introduced so far, I surely would have ended up like them.

What you have to remember is that learning individual vocabulary words without any connection to sentences is virtually meaningless. Vocabulary should be acquired via context. If you learned some Kanji on an individual basis in a context controlled class situation, it will work, since the teacher provides relevant sentences and expressions with the introduction of new Kanji. However, if you want to learn Kanji in the real world, you have to learn Kanji in the unit of kanji compounds or verbs. What you should NOT do is individual Kanji learning outside the contextual meaning. You can easily find Kanji learning sites to do that on the Internet or in books at the bookstore. You should avoid it. I saw several people who quit Japanese learning even after memorizing all the Joyo Kanji

(1945 individual Kanji). When they realized they could not properly read kanji compounds, which look like random sound combinations, they felt powerless and had a tendency to quit studying Japanese altogether.

All people may feel frustrated when their time and effort seem fruitless. So, I want you to use your limited time more efficiently. Those people claim it took 2 or 3 years to memorize all Joyo Kanji. If you invest your time and effort more efficiently in more constructive ways, you may be able to master Japanese in the same time frame.

Note) More detailed information regarding to master Kanji will be provided via the next article of this series, "Insight of Mastering kanji"

Section 2-1 [Using Jimaku hoso (字幕放送)]

All you need to do is to be exposed to Japanese as much as possible. If you live in Japan, you can buy a "Jimaku Hoso" compatible device, which includes a standalone TV set for Jimaku hoso, an external decoder, or a computer interface card. You can choose whatever is more suitable to you. If you subscribe to Digital BS satellite service, the Jimaku function will be provided via a set-top box as a basic function, so you do not need to buy any additional devices.

You can trace the Jimaku and do map between your acquired Japanese and the Kanji, which is shown on the screen.

Note) More detailed information will be provided with publishing DALL series-002.

Section 2-2 [Using Internet]

Nouns are easy to memorize and can be easily mapped to your mother tongue since they usually have one significant meaning, unlike verbs, which have various meanings. The best way to use Internet news and news clips is to build up Japanese nouns, which are usually represented by Katakana or Kanji. Since News repeats for several days, if you study at least 3 news clips everyday in the way I introduced in "*Leaning Japanese through Internet*", you can build up Japanese vocabulary quite fast and easy.

Section 2-3 [Using Books with Hurigana (ふりがな or ルビ)]

It is really important that you study on your own after acquiring Basic Japanese Skills. If you study real world writings with your limited learned vocabulary, you will spend more time looking up words in the dictionary than studying Japanese. Moreover, you will not be sure which is the right way to read the Kanji compounds after looking it up in a dictionary, which include Kanwa-jiten (漢和辞典), waei-jiten (和英辞典), etc.

Once you are exposed to a lot of expressions and kanji, you can figure out the right reading much easier than before. Before you hit this level, I strongly suggest you use the Books with Hurigana. Tenseijingo-book, which was mentioned previously, is a candidate. Since it deals with real world stories, you also will get a chance to be exposed to various Japanese names, cities and provinces. I strongly suggest you read at least one year's worth of articles (4 books). If you read it constantly, you can easily maintain or increase your level of reading skill. If you think this method is too much to swallow, you may use "The Nihongo Journal (日本語ジャーナル)", which has Hurigana and an accompanying free CD, which contains sounds files. It is monthly a CD magazine. It has a lot of useful information and contents on Japanese learning. You can get more detailed information from this link, <http://www.alc.co.jp/nj/>.

(Note: A Tenseijigo-book and the Nihongo Journal will be reviewed later in the section of on and off-line study martial review)

Chapter 3: How to enforce listening and conversational skills

If you want to improve conversational skills, you need to have conversation with native Japanese as much as you can. However, it is not possible to have a Japanese conversation partner all the time. Whether you have Japanese conversation partner or not, I strongly suggest you watch Japanese TV programs, especially dramas.

If you watch Japanese dramas, you will have a chance to learn Japanese culture and how they think and react physically and emotionally in Japan. Moreover, you will gradually and automatically learn their body languages and greetings while you enjoy Japanese dramas. During one summer quarter, I watched more than 10 Japanese series. One series usually consists of 11 stories, which usually run 50 minutes per episode. You can easily calculate that I was exposed to more than 100 hrs of Japanese conversations. With the advent of Jimaku Hoso, you have more useful or best Japanese studying materials.

Note) I will review on Japanese TV programs and Japanese learning.

Conclusion

I deliberately left off mentioning “writing skill,” as it is regarded as a highly intellectual activity, and it is the most difficult skill to master. To make it work, I strongly suggest you have human interaction on the issue. In short, please have a tutor or teacher to give some help. However, as you improve your reading and conversation skills, your general writing skills will improve as well. As this e-Japanese project progresses, you will have more information on Japanese learning and teaching. Please stay tuned and enjoy Japanese learning and teaching.

[References]

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