

How to Learn Japanese

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Why learn Japanese?

Japan has a fantastically rich culture, wonderful people and the latest technology to say nothing of the great food and shopping. You may already be set on going to Japan and know that learning Japanese is what you want to do. Others may just want to visit for a short time. It's possible to enjoy a very comfortable life in Japan even without English but learning some of the language will definitely improve the experience a great deal.

Even those who for some reason do not intend to visit Japan may still gain from studying the language. I believe that almost everyone can benefit from learning a foreign language and that budding linguists could do a lot worse than choose to learn Japanese. It will certainly give you a whole new perspective on English. Your CV will stand out from the crowd of Spanish speakers. I use my Japanese to communicate with my wife, follow martial arts, read and watch *manga* and even to read basic Chinese signs. It's surprising how useful it is.

Learning Japanese is immensely rewarding and not as difficult as people think, providing you approach it correctly. When I went to Japan to work as an English teacher in 2001 I remember expecting to pick up Japanese within 6 months or so. With hindsight, this was rather naïve of me considering I had never gotten very far with the languages I had studied at school (or most of the other subjects either!). I was confident that before long I would be impressing everyone with my new-found language skills and that upon my triumphant return to Britain I would be able to answer "yes" to anyone asking if I spoke Japanese.

6 months later and my Japanese had not progressed much. Little wonder; I was battling with long working hours, English speaking friends, lack of academic discipline, expensive yet inefficient Japanese classes and general linguistic ineptitude. I did have two things in my favour: I liked studying *kanji* and I refused to give up. Eventually, I found study methods that worked for me and went on to pass the Japanese Language Proficiency Test level 1 in 2005. If I had known in 2001 what I know now, the journey would have been a lot easier.

With this book, it is my intention to pass on this hard-won knowledge to help you avoid the many pitfalls of learning Japanese and give you the tools to reach a high standard much quicker than I did. The Japanese themselves do not usually wish each other luck but rather say *ganbatte* (do your best). *Ganbatte* and good luck on your quest!

Learning to learn

Language learning can be divided into four interrelated skills. The active skills: speaking and writing, and the passive skills: reading and listening. The active skills are considered harder to acquire than the passive ones i.e. listening is easier than speaking, reading is easier than writing although this is not always the case. With Japanese, the writing system is quite complicated which also plays a part.

All four skills are built upon vocabulary and knowledge of grammar however, they will each need to be developed in different ways.

Where to start

Start by learning the most common and most useful phrases that you will hear in daily conversation in Japan. I have provided a list on my website [here](#). Note that you must familiarise yourself with the rules of Japanese pronunciation as soon as possible if you have no source of spoken Japanese to relate these phrases to. If you do not, you are likely to pick up bad habits that will take time to unlearn. [Pronunciation](#) is dealt with in the next chapter.

Next, read about Japanese grammar. A lightweight book like [Japanese Grammar](#) is ideal at this stage. You don't have to take everything in right away but hopefully you will start to relate some of the grammar to the phrases you have learned. Simply parroting phrases with no real understanding of how they are put together will not get you very far.

Once you have some basics you should go on to studying dialogues and short passages in textbooks like [Japanese for Busy People](#). If possible, you should attend classes somewhere. I discuss possible options [here](#).

If you are going to learn Japanese. the sooner you start the better. This definitely applies to learning to read and write. You should begin with *katakana* (characters used for foreign loan words), then go on to *hiragana* (the basic Japanese script – *hiragana* and *katakana* are together known as *kana*) and finally *kanji* (Chinese characters). I discuss methods of attaining literacy in Japanese [here](#).

Once you have good grasp of basic grammar and vocabulary, you will need to start reading books aimed at Japanese learners. I recommend several [here](#). Watching Japanese TV programs and films regularly will aid your progress. Gain as much speaking practice as possible. Taking exams in Japanese like the JLPT may provide you with motivation.

If you stick with a logical and disciplined approach to your *kanji* studies, you may reach the point at which you can start reading Japanese articles, stories and novels. This is a real accomplishment and further than many will ever get. It is possible to reach this point within a year with an efficient study plan and hard work.

Should I learn to read and write Japanese?

This depends on you and your goals. Becoming literate in Japanese is a formidable task. Many foreigners decide that they only want to speak Japanese. Someone who plans to stay a couple of months in Japan may have different goals to someone who marries a Japanese person and intends to live in Japan for a long time.

It is perfectly possible to write Japanese in roman letters (*romaji*) and you could, for example, communicate with Japanese people by email using this method. Obviously, you will not be able to read real Japanese but you would be able to ask nearby Japanese people to read things for you if necessary (assuming you were reasonably fluent).

Another option is to learn the *kana*. There are about 50 *hiragana* and 50 *katakana*. This can be done fairly quickly and will definitely be of use to you if you go to Japan. This would allow you to read some signs and shop names (useful for knowing where to get off on the train or finding all-you-can-eat restaurants!).

I recommend learning *katakana* first as they are a little easier to write and are generally used for English loan words (although some loan words are from other languages). Thus an English native speaker would be able to start understanding real Japanese immediately upon mastering *katakana* (though only to a very limited

extent). Learning *hiragana* is worthwhile but there is less “instant gratification” as without a vocabulary you will have to look unknown words up in the dictionary. You will not be able to read notices or newspaper articles without a thorough knowledge of *kanji*.

Finally, and this is the course I recommend, you could learn *kana* and *kanji*. As stated, there are about 100 *kana*. These should be learnt first and shouldn't pose too much difficulty. The main hurdle is the *kanji*. There are 1945 *jouyou* (everyday use) *kanji* and about another 100 name *kanji* (names are notoriously difficult to read). Each *kanji* may contain up to 30 strokes (although the majority contain much less than this) and can have several pronunciations.

Learning *kanji* is difficult but not impossible and the skill is sure to impress most people you meet. There are several other reasons for learning *kanji*, the chief one being that they are essential to read real Japanese and distinguish between the many homonyms inherent in Japanese. In addition, many consider they are aesthetically pleasing. The topic of learning *kanji* is covered in more detail [below](#).

Approaches to learning

Now that you have decided to learn Japanese let's look at some effective ways to study. Previous experience studying other languages will help you a little as you will know what kind of methods work for you and you will have some kind of idea of the time and effort involved.

Japanese is very different to English and thus harder for English speakers to learn than a relatively similar language like, say, French. Koreans tend to pick up Japanese quite quickly as Korean and Japanese grammar share some similarities. Likewise, Chinese people have a tremendous advantage with the writing system as they learn *kanji* at school. A background in either of these two languages would definitely be beneficial; however, it is perfectly possible to learn from scratch. Indeed, English speakers actually have one advantage over Chinese speakers as Japanese borrows many words from English.

Finding a teacher

Once you have read a couple of books and articles and memorised the most common phrases, it's worth finding yourself a teacher. Most people will not become fluent in Japanese without some kind of teacher. Sadly, it has been my experience that good Japanese teachers are hard to find.

A good teacher should want you to improve, make learning interesting (up to a point), speak at a level you can understand or almost understand and correct your mistakes and give you feedback. They should adapt their teaching methods to suit your learning style. They should not leave you behind to concentrate on more advanced students nor hold you back at the pace of lower level students.

A good teacher is not necessarily a professional; by having an understanding of what you need as a student you can turn friends or language partners into effective teachers. A good teacher does not necessarily have to speak English well; certainly, the less English they use in class, the better.

It's essential to remember final responsibility for your improvement rests with you, not your teacher. If you don't put the intellectual effort in, you will not reach your goals.

Let's look at some of your options.

Language schools

There are many private language schools in Japan and these usually charge around 2-3 thousand yen per hour for a group class of anything up to 10 students. Students can be from various countries which can lead to problems as the English speakers struggle to keep up with the Koreans and Chinese. Find a class where you do not struggle at the bottom or become bored at the top. Many schools will operate a level system based on exams.

You will likely have to pay in advance to enter a school like this so I strongly suggest caution before spending a great deal of money. Do other foreigners recommend the place? What difference did it make to their Japanese? I have seen many people drop out of such courses for a number of reasons ranging from a change of employer and schedule to inability to keep up with the homework.

I do not recommend private language schools for those living in Japan due to the cost and abundance of potential free learning material. If you can get your company to pay for your classes, or you have no problem with the cost, then they can work well. If you are on a budget, make sure you check out the other options before spending your hard-earned yen.

Volunteer language schools are quite common in Japan especially in the larger cities. Classes tend to be quite cheap (maybe a couple of thousand yen per term) and again you will find a mix of nationalities. The teachers tend to be retired people or aspiring Japanese teachers (becoming a qualified teacher of Japanese is quite an arduous task). These organisations can usually be found advertising through the local international centre or foreigner magazines. It's well worth going to classes like these and sometimes you can come to an arrangement for cheap private lessons with one of the teachers. Classes are also a good place to find study partners if you're having trouble finding like-minded students.

You could also try placing a wanted-ad at the local international centre or searching online for a teacher/school. With the advancement of web-cam technology, it is possible to learn Japanese over the net. If you decide to go this route, make sure you are getting value for money.

Language exchange

Language exchange is another common method for learning and it's extremely easy to find Japanese people who will offer to teach you Japanese in return for some English. Language exchange most often takes place in cafés or through a chat program on the net.

The problem here, especially for beginner learners of Japanese, is that the Japanese person will have the linguistic advantage and end up explaining everything in English, the result being that a lot of time is spent speaking in English and very little spent speaking in Japanese. Remember that even an inexperienced English teacher can earn about 3,000 yen per hour teaching privately. If you are going to try language exchange, be sure to strictly divide the time equally and insist on speaking only in Japanese during the allotted time.

Women should note that meeting strangers for language exchange can be dangerous and should always arrange such meetings in public places. Japan has a reputation as a safe country but police still haven't caught the man who likely killed English teacher Lindsay Hawker.

Self-study

You will have to discipline yourself to do a certain amount of study on your own time whether you attend regular Japanese classes or not. A general guideline for those attending classes is to spend at least an equivalent amount of time on self-study. If you don't attend classes you should try to set aside a *minimum* of four half hour periods a week for study. Of course, the more you study the better and those who regularly undertake rigorous academic programs will be able to do more.

An English friend of mine astounded people with the speed with which he learnt Japanese. His secret? He was a smart guy who studied every evening for a couple of hours in coffee shops. Another friend of mine was a Chinese man whose aim was to get into university to study medicine. He studied an incredible 13 hours a day! It's always good to meet successful students - hopefully they will provide you with some inspiration.

Self study tips

- Find a nice, quiet place where you will not be interrupted to study.
- Use time spent travelling to study; train journeys are a great opportunity to review your *kanji*.
- Vary your study material. *Kanji*, vocabulary, grammar, listening, reading, writing and speaking should all be practised.
- Have a goal. This could be to finish reading a certain book, to learn a certain number of flashcards, to pass a certain exam or even to speak better Japanese than your annoying friend (this last one is a joke).
- Have a study plan. Writing out a detailed ten week study plan is not necessary but you should at least have an idea what you will be studying over the next month. For example I might decide that over the next two weeks I'm going to read through a book like [A Dictionary of Basic Japanese Sentence Patterns](#) while reviewing the first 500 *kanji*.
- Use your self-study time efficiently. Get what you need to do, done. Don't study half-heartedly.

- Keep a diary of what and how long you studied. How will you look back and judge your progress if you do not have a record of what you have done? Progress is very hard to measure at the intermediate and advanced levels and a diary will help keep you on the right track.
- Study with people who inspire and motivate you. Try not to study with friends who interrupt your studies.
- Study at pace you can consistently achieve - do not study so much that you burn out especially at first!
- Have fun! Learning Japanese is very rewarding! You will do much better if you are enjoying yourself learning Japanese than if you are not.

Building vocabulary

Vocabulary is the bedrock upon which your language skills are built. Building your vocabulary is a cumulative endeavour and you should aim to learn new words consistently whilst reviewing the older vocabulary regularly.

One of my favourite methods to learn vocabulary is to make my own flash cards. All you need is some paper, a pen and some scissors. Cut the paper up into small rectangles and write the Japanese word you want to remember on one side and the English equivalent on the other. Some like to write one word upside down as it will appear the right way up when the card is flipped. Simply shuffle the cards and go through the deck separating the words you know from the words you don't know. You will need to repeat the process with the words you didn't know until they are fully ingrained in your memory. You should practice going from Japanese to English and vice versa.

To help you, I have put a lot of vocabulary into printable flashcards on my [website](#) so you can print them out and cut them up. Cut out the English and Japanese together, glue the back quickly and fold in the middle to make an instant flashcard.

Mnemonics are very useful for those hard-to-remember words. Let's take a random word, *hebi* meaning "snake". Imagine yourself being bitten by a Japanese snake and saying "He bit me!" This kind of memory trick is absolutely invaluable for learning new words. The only limit is your imagination. Soon, the word will sink into your consciousness and you will not have to use the mnemonic.

Mnemonics are the basis for Heisig's [Remembering the Kanji](#). Mnemonics come in many types from simple word mnemonics to visual mnemonics and imaginative mnemonics. It's well worth reading up on them.

It is important that you actually learn how to use new words in a sentence. It's very easy to use words incorrectly. For example, *majime* means serious but you cannot use it in the sense of "serious injury", only in the sense of a "no-nonsense person".

Learning grammar

Read through a decent grammar book (e.g. [Japanese Grammar](#)) at least once to get an overview of the language. Make sure you understand the meaning of grammatical words like verb, adverb, clause, intransitive etc.

The same flashcard tricks that are so useful for learning vocabulary can also be applied to chunks of grammar. Learning example sentences can be a great help when tackling a new grammar point. Make sure you know how the grammar connects to the other parts of the sentence (nouns, adjectives etc.).

Try to learn the grammar appropriate to your level and not get too advanced too quickly. Verbs and particles will need a lot of attention at first. I have organised the grammar in this book on a progressive need to know basis. If you need a comprehensive guide, check out [A Dictionary of Basic Japanese Grammar](#) and [A Dictionary of Intermediate Japanese Grammar](#).

It is possible to speak fluently using a few grammatical structures that you know well but you will need to be familiar with a great deal more if you want to understand what people are saying. Know the ones you need for speech extremely well. Make sure you keep a note of any grammatical mistakes you make and do your best to correct them. Feedback from a native speaker will be invaluable for this and you must make sure

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your teacher corrects your mistakes. Review, review, review.

Finally, note that some people are more concerned about speaking quickly than speaking correctly. Your focus should be on speaking clearly and correctly rather than achieving a high “words per minute”. Speak in complete sentences wherever possible in order to become used to Japanese word order and sentence structure. I realise it will not be possible to speak with perfect grammar all the time but the more you ingrain your mistakes, the harder it will be to unlearn them.

Listening

It takes some time to develop *nihongo no mimi* (an ear for Japanese). At first, all you be able to make out will be the *-masu* and *-desu* endings (a Japanese friend once complained to me all he could hear of English was the “I”s and “You”s at the start of sentences). Speech will seem terribly fast but that is how natives speak.

The more you listen, the better your listening will get provided you are spending some time learning vocabulary. Ideally, you want exposure to comprehensible or almost comprehensible Japanese i.e. not too far above your level. Bear this in mind when selecting listening materials.

There are many sources of spoken Japanese suitable for learners. Japanese TV is especially great if you are learning to read because programs often have subtitles. Following TV is going to be all but impossible for a beginner but it’s a great way to get exposure to the sound of real Japanese. Most serious language learners I know watch a lot of TV and switch it on in the background when doing housework etc. There are several programs on NHK (the government channel) aimed at students of Japanese.

If you live in Japan, joining clubs and taking part in activities is a good way to practice your listening. I belonged to a jiu jitsu club where most of the students couldn’t or wouldn’t speak English (some of the Brazilians couldn’t even speak Japanese). Some people like to hang out in bars to practice their Japanese. I always found I got hassle from drunks wanting to practice their English on me.

Don’t spend all your free time with other English speakers if you want your Japanese to improve. Make sure if you do make friends with Japanese people that you are not just speaking in English. You should not be working as someone’s unpaid teacher.

Lots of textbooks come with CDs and tapes which are worth listening to. I like to rip them to my computer for use on my mp3 player. There are other sources of spoken Japanese available for download on the net. When you get more advanced (around level 2 JLPT) you might want to try listening to an audio book. I had the first two Harry Potter audio books and they were quite helpful.

If you have a microphone there are ways to record Japanese and play it back through your computer with programs like [Audacity](#). I used to record the news and slow it down until I understood it. I also used to record interesting vocabulary for myself to listen to (hearing yourself speak Japanese is pretty weird at first).

Travel time is ideal for listening practice. Listen to your mp3 player while you shop. Try to listen to Japanese at home while doing the housework (at least your house will be clean and tidy). Be aware though that it’s very easy to tune out when listening to Japanese. If you feel like your concentration is wandering and the Japanese is not really going in you might want to take a break.

What did you say?

You’re in a conversation with a Japanese person and they say something incomprehensible. Relax, all is not lost. Let’s look at some phrases to make communication easier.

Please speak more slowly.	<i>Motto yukkuri hanashite kudasai.</i>
Could you repeat that?	<i>Mou ichido onegai shimasu.</i>
What does that (word) mean?	<i>(Sono kotoba ha) Dou iu imi desu ka.</i>
In other words, you mean...	<i>Tsumari,</i>
I’m not good at understanding polite Japanese.	<i>Keigo ha amari wakarimasen.</i>

Of course, you are not just limited to these phrases. Feel free to come up with your own.

Speaking

For most people, speaking is the most rewarding part of learning a foreign language (*kanji* fetishists may disagree). The better you get, the more fun it is to speak Japanese. How do we achieve fluency then? Well, many people are confused as to what fluency actually means. In my opinion, fluency simply means that you can say what you want to say without resorting to a dictionary.

This kind of fluency can be most quickly achieved by preparing for the situations and topics you often encounter in your own life. I myself am much more comfortable discussing jiu jitsu and martial arts than I am talking about cookery. Before job interviews, I would make a special effort to practice my polite Japanese and review the vocabulary I was likely to need.

Be picky about what you learn. If you don't think you are likely to need a particular word, don't spend as much time on it as with other ones that you are likely to need. Apply the vocabulary you learn to your own life and you will master it much faster.

It's all very well to say "I want to speak like a native speaker" or "I want to be able to understand films perfectly" but these are quite lofty goals and will take a long time to realise. You don't have to have native-level Japanese to get a lot out of the language. It's better to set short term goals and exceed them rather than to get discouraged failing to achieve vague and unattainable goals. Better goals would be to say, "I want to be able to talk about my hobbies" or "I want to be able to enjoy samurai films".

All news is good news when learning to speak. Don't worry if you don't have anything momentous to impart to your friends or classmates. Explain to them your daily routine in detail if you have nothing else to say. The more you speak, the more you will improve. Grasp every opportunity to speak Japanese.

Confidence

One barrier many encounter is lack of confidence in their skills. It's interesting to note that attitudes to speaking in a foreign language often vary according to culture. I found Americans were generally confident speakers even when they didn't know a lot of Japanese. British learners were more worried about being correct and tended to downplay their abilities more.

Most Japanese will be impressed that you are trying to speak to them in their native language and won't be worried about any mistakes you make. The more you speak, the better, so try not to let lack of confidence hold you back. Sometimes you'll end up in classes with other learners who are better than you. Try to look at these as good opportunities to learn; foreigner Japanese is often easier to understand than native Japanese as it tends to be simpler and slower. Don't let others intimidate you.

There's usually one bore in the class who'll drone on forever if not stopped. Don't rely on your teacher to give everyone equal talking time. Fight for your share of the conversation. Make sure the bore is you! :-)

Less is more

It's better to know a few useful grammatical constructions well than to half-know many. There are many ways to say "I have to do something" in Japanese; you only need one. The essential ones are all covered in this guide. Do master the simpler ones before moving on to the more complicated ones.

One thing to accept is that it is very difficult to translate accurately from English to Japanese. If you are having trouble, think how you could re-phrase what you want to say in English without losing the meaning. You must learn how to use the grammar you know to express a range of concepts, especially in the beginning.

Tips on starting a conversation

Japanese people can get a bit jumpy if a random foreigner starts speaking to them in public. In general, they are not confident in their English and have a terror of being accosted in English and made to look stupid in front of others. Yes, I know we want to speak to people in Japanese but (unless you are of Asian descent) the tendency will be for people to assume you are going to speak to them in English and panic. As a result it's a good tactic to make your first words simple and to pronounce them well. Creating a good impression at

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