



LEARNING JAPANESE: OBSERVATIONS FROM A LIFELONG EXPERIENCE

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Abstract. *This paper discusses the author's first encounter with the Japanese language at the age of 23 and documents his continuing response to it up to the present time. At first, the language learning methodology he had used before failed and proved to be inappropriate for learning Japanese. Then came the realization that learning a foreign language needs some previous knowledge to build on. The search for the most efficient way to master Japanese brought the author to receptive multilingualism, which by chance opens up new vistas for the aspiring learner to improve listening skills. The physicality of speech and the consequent importance of some form of outside stimulation for its development are discussed. Mention is made of how he came upon the idea of adapting childhood techniques in learning how to read to the acquisition of reading competence in the Japanese language. In connection with this, the author makes another digression on the relationship he perceives as existing between active and passive language skills, and from this proceeds with the mention of how this might be applicable to his progress to date in learning Japanese and why, for better or worse, this would not normally apply to classroom acquisition of Japanese either inside or outside of Japan today.*

Keywords: Japanese, language learning, listening skills, reading competence, receptive multilingualism

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Japanese is not an easy language to learn, or so the Japanese are proud of thinking about their own language. And this is true for most speakers of most other languages, though it is not equally true for all speakers of other languages, whatsoever.

Chinese do not struggle as much as English-speaking people, because so much of the vocabulary and the writing system are similar. Learning how to read Japanese, thus, is not such a difficult matter for Chinese, though learning how to speak Japanese well requires a major effort because the grammar, the word order, and pronunciation of Japanese are different from Chinese, as different as is the case for English.

Koreans, typically, do not struggle much to learn Japanese, either. This is because the word order and grammar are largely the same. Vocabulary, however, and pronunciation are totally different as is the writing system. The tendency is for Koreans to speak Japanese fluently, but with a heavy Korean accent. Nepalese-speaking people also have it relatively easy, because the word order is very similar and because

they find the pronunciation to be easy. Learning vocabulary remains a problem, as does reading, which Nepalese typically find extremely difficult to master.

English-speaking people, when trying to learn Japanese, face the greatest number of problems. For one, the grammar of the body language as well as the spoken language is completely different. The pronunciation, both in terms of sound and rhythm, is in every instance different, making it impossible for one to ever hope to sound like a native. The vocabulary of the language, other than for certain loan words, is completely different in their origin. For loan words themselves, differences in the pronunciation system often keep them from being recognizable. There are no ways to cut corners on vocabulary learning, even for many of the loan words. Finally, there is a problem of the writing system. It is very efficient when learned in full, but learning it in full requires great dedication. There are two syllabaries and approximately 2,000 Chinese characters, which must be learned. In addition, it is usually written up to down and from right to left. Then there is the most troublesome problem of all. Self-learning, by oneself, through reading, as is typical when mastering a European language, is all but impossible for a beginner of Japanese, because there is no space used between words when writing. There is no easy way for a beginner to know when a word seen on a piece of paper begins and when it ends, meaning that using a dictionary becomes almost impossible. In addition, there is the problem of English being a required part of the curriculum for six years of study after elementary school before going to university, where typically Japanese study English a further two years. The Japanese who are most willing to interact with English-speaking people tend to be quite good at speaking English which they usually enjoy using. Finding someone with whom one can get a real chance to use Japanese often becomes a serious problem, which is further complicated, when, like myself, I am, by profession, an English teacher and have an obligation to use it with my students.

A further problem is the belief that the communicative method of language learning is always the best method, that the teacher should be a native speaker of the language, should always use the language when teaching, and should only use authentic language materials. This proceeds on the belief that something can be made out of nothing, that someone with no linguistic foundation, on which to build, which is the case of English-speaking people learning Japanese, will, if exposed to Japanese only, magically learn enough Japanese to communicate with others. The idea is that, if babies can do it, why not adults. Common sense would suggest that this idea cannot work without an immense amount of planning and time. After all, babies are not adults and their environments are totally different. People easily forget that there is a physicality to the language learning of babies that cannot be easily replicated among adults.

In my generation, perhaps only one out of a thousand English-speaking people who tried to learn Japanese ever mastered the language, but I did, more or less. In my case, it was partly a matter of determination to succeed, but also a matter of luck. The combination is what made it possible, but, with careful planning, others can largely eliminate the necessity for luck, which was of so much importance to me.

My first bit of luck was that the communicative method was not yet popular when I began learning Japanese¹. Even native speakers of Japanese who taught the language at that time realized that, when teaching a group of English-speaking beginners, they would need to give a lot of explanation in English and that they would have to use the Latin alphabet when writing Japanese words and would have to divide words by using word spacing. This meant that, as a graduate student at Sophia University in downtown Tokyo, when I took a special undergraduate course in Japanese, I was able to get a total of 135 hours of class time in a form that was meaningful to me. I estimate that I acquired knowledge of approximately 500 items of vocabulary, of which less than 200 words represented the active component. My pronunciation at that point remained very English, but it became understandable. Though I still had almost no ability to process Chinese characters, I had learned the two Japanese syllabaries and could use it to understand a portion of the advertising around me, much as I find myself using the Cyrillic alphabet in Russia. More importantly, though, I got a good, though largely passive, knowledge of how Japanese grammar worked. It was always different from English, but it was simple and, once learned, was used in a completely regular fashion. Only in the case of verbs, did I ever encounter an exception to the rules and that was only in the

¹ For an example of a textbook used in that time see [3].

case of one verb. Of course, none of this was enough. My listening comprehension was still too weak to understand what people would say to me. I still did not have enough vocabulary for even the simplest of conversations. Moreover, I did not yet know Japanese well enough to make reading Japanese an option.

Then good luck played a role once again. I found a New Testament that was printed in the Latin alphabet with normal spacing between words [2]. Of course, in many instances, the vocabulary was useless, but I had a foundation on which I could take things one step further and that was immensely useful. I had already read the New Testament in English and had several Bible translations I could use for purposes of comparison when the ordinary dictionary meaning of a word did not match its use in the context of Biblical Japanese. By the end of my second year in Japan, as a result of reading this book from beginning to end, I built up a still largely passive vocabulary of approximately 2,000 words. Theoretically, this would have been enough to be conversational in Japanese had all of the vocabulary I knew been active vocabulary. As it was, my active vocabulary at this point by the end of my second year could not have been more than 800 words. I was still not at a point where I could use Japanese to communicate.

Then good luck intervened yet again. In my third year in Japan, I made it a practice twice a week to have coffee with a Japanese company worker who was my age, but made a great friend. I met him at an English language school class I helped to teach, so of course we made it a practice to speak English, something that was also comfortable for me because he was quite good at it. Then fate intervened. One night at coffee, he said work had been really rough that day and that he would be going home as soon as he finished coffee, because he was too tired to manage speaking in English for a long time. I had a sudden inspiration that had never occurred to me before. I said, why don't you speak Japanese, but let me continue to speak English. I said that, if I tried, I probably could understand some of his Japanese and he certainly could understand my English. Anyway, our common conclusion was that it was worth trying. Two hours later, I went away feeling my Japanese comprehension ability had measurably improved at least several percent. He went away happy, too, so every time we met thereafter we continued what we had done that night. I continued to talk in English, but he switched to talking in Japanese. In two months, I was able to watch television and understand television programs. More importantly, I was able to go to faculty meetings at the university I was working at and become bored, not by not understanding anything at all, but by understanding everything and, being young, finding it a waste of time. I did not know it at the time, but the method I was using to develop my Japanese listening comprehension and to pick up a lot of new vocabulary had a name. It would now be called "receptive multilingualism" [1].

I continued using receptive multilingualism for four years and I was stuck in a rut. I could use Japanese well enough for shopping, but was still not talking in Japanese fluently. Then a strange form of luck intervened. I encountered a young lady I desperately wanted to have a romance with but that certain individual was intellectually lazy and disliked using English. It was either sink or swim and I really wanted to swim, so I used all of my intellectual resources and began swimming beautifully. Within a month, I was not only having a fascinating romance, but I could go to faculty meetings at the university and talk sympathetically with other faculty members about how boring it all was. This relationship lasted less than a year, and would be viewed, even now, as having represented an expensive outlay of financial resources. It has been 35 years since I last met the person I owe the foundations of my Japanese speaking ability to, but I owe that person an eternal debt of gratitude for giving me something money cannot buy, which is fluency, so by my way of thinking it was a bargain from which I have profited greatly.

With conversational ability, work responsibilities increased, as did involvement in faculty politics. After being in Japan 10 years, to protect myself, I realized that I needed to learn how to read Japanese. I had a former student who had just graduated but had not found a job and wanted to stay in Tokyo for a year to keep looking. I made it a practice to have coffee with him once a week on Sundays and to take him to a restaurant afterwards for dinner. In return, he let me read out loud at my own speed two books that I chose. When I did not know how to read a Chinese character, he would read it, let me repeat it, and then let me continue. I read the translation of a famous French novel this way, as well as a history of three Renaissance women. After a year, he went back to his home town, but by the time he went back I had acquired the ability to read the documents provided at university faculty meetings and, as a result of a university faculty crisis, I became very good at reading legal Japanese.

Acquiring fluency in writing Chinese characters is largely a matter that requires the physical training of picking up a pen and copying the concerned character enough times to imprint it in the brain. Fortunately or unfortunately, first the word processor and then the computer has made this unnecessary. Though I am fairly good at reading Japanese, I can write Japanese only when I have to, and then, other than necessary items like my name and address, not by hand, only by machine.

My advice for language learning is, if you are an adult and an absolute beginner as I was when I began learning Japanese at the age of 23, to start by connecting Japanese with your own language as much as possible. Do not hesitate, if you are Russian, to use the Cyrillic alphabet for the first two years. If there is any book, whatsoever, which is written in the Cyrillic alphabet, use it to build up vocabulary. If there is no such book, then use a book written in the Latin alphabet. If it is at all possible to do so, use receptive multilingualism as a method to build up both listening comprehension and reading comprehension skills. If you take the time to do this properly, a positive influence will be clearly perceptible with your pronunciation. Then, if you want to build up your speaking skills and do not have an intellectually lazy partner that makes you talk in Japanese, you could consider taking regular language classes, as the communicative method which is now overwhelmingly popular as a language teaching methodology could be a big help in acquiring speaking fluency for those with intermediate language skills. As for writing Japanese, the chances that an adult would ever be in a position to get the necessary training to become fully fluent in the Japanese writing system are slim. However, advanced language school classes can, in this regard, be a big help and, in a worst case, dependence on one's computer is not a bad option.

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