

6 tips for learning Japanese

TOKYO —

If you love Japan, chances are you'd love to be fluent in Japanese (if you aren't already). Think of all the friends you could make, and all the anime, manga and video games you could enjoy as their creators intended.

But the road to fluency is long, arduous, and full of pitfalls. Japanese is considered a Category-5 language, which means that roughly 88 weeks or 2,200 hours of study is needed for the average native English-speaker to achieve everyday competency. In comparison, a Category-1 language like French requires only 24 weeks or 600 hours of study time for the average English speaker to get to grips with. Japanese also has two different syllabaries to learn, along with at least 1,945 jouyou (regular use) kanji, or Chinese characters, most of which have more than one possible pronunciation. In short, learning Japanese a pretty daunting task for your average English speaker.

But just because there's a lot to learn, doesn't mean you shouldn't try! Even if you don't have a natural talent for languages, haven't been raised in a multilingual environment, or don't have access to Japanese classes, anyone can learn to speak, read and write Japanese as long as they can put in the effort.

Since most of us here at RocketNews24's English site learned Japanese as a second language, we reckon we might have a few tips to share for those who are looking for a little kick up the booty when it comes to getting serious about learning. So, let's get started! (Note, the following is a basic primer for some of the things that have helped us to study Japanese in a general sense. If you're looking for specific study resources, this post has got you covered.

Tip #1: Immerse yourself

If you're really serious about learning Japanese, you're going to have to put in a lot of hours of studying. But simply cracking the books isn't going to make you a well-rounded speaker, or listener for that matter. Believe it or not, it's totally possible for someone to pass the highest level of the JLPT (Japanese Language Proficiency Test) without uttering a single spoken sentence. And although they'll definitely help, passing those tests doesn't mean you'll be able to communicate well.

In real life, fluency comes from practical use, which requires immersion. Luckily, there are plenty of ways to get lots of Japanese into your day no matter where you live (as

long as you have an internet connection, which covers just about everybody). Love playing video games? Great! Play Japanese games. Love watching anime? Ditch the dubbed stuff and break out the subtitled versions. Like to read manga? Look for bilingual versions. Need some background music? How about some J-pop? By making sure each and every day has some exposure to Japanese language material, you can create an immersion environment for yourself wherever you are. The bonus part is that it's fun, too.

Tip #2: Structure your studies

People who are self-taught in Japanese do exist, but sometimes they can find themselves getting into bad habits. Read enough manga and watch enough anime and you can definitely pick up enough to get by if you're an observant type with a good ear, but there's really no substitute for organized, structured studying. The absolute best thing to do is probably to study Japanese in college or at a dedicated language school, but if that's not an option, try to check out shorter courses or perhaps find yourself a tutor. Even if you can't get access to any Japanese tuition, pick up some textbooks and work your way through them with your own study plan. Working your way through the prep books for the JLPT is an excellent way to teach yourself everything you should be studying. In fact, prepping for and sitting the JLPT at each level is an excellent way for otherwise self-taught students to continuously "level up" and meet study goals.

A combination of points 1 and 2 should be the foundation upon which you base your language learning. Book smarts will only get you so far without any of the more practical stuff, and daily exposure to Japanese won't get you where you need to go without a solid basis in structured studying.

Tip #3: Build your vocabulary naturally

Rather than studying dry lists of vocabulary, a handy trick is to buy yourself a little notebook and write down a new Japanese word (along with its written form and definition) every time you hear it while you're immersing yourself (see hint #1). Doing it this way will help your brain to make connections between the word and the situation in which it's used, and will ensure that the vocabulary "sticks" more firmly than it would if you had simply come across it on a vocab list in a textbook. I started learning Japanese around nine years ago and I've filled countless notebooks like this, and continue to practice this little trick to this day.

Tip #4: Learn the patterns

One thing you might not initially have noticed while studying is that Japanese tends to follow a series of sentence patterns. Along with the variety of situational phrases like “itadakimasu,” “otsukaresama,” and so on, which don’t appear in English, Japanese people also tend to say certain things in ways we just don’t in English. One pitfall English speaking learners of Japanese fall into is attempting to memorise Japanese vocabulary and then trying to use those words to express what they want to say in the exact same way they would in English. In reality, Japanese and English are very different languages and simply swapping words about is going to make you sound like something Google translate might spit out. Memorising a bunch of sentence patterns and adapting them to fit your conversational needs is going to get you a lot further than trying to take the English thought in your head and verbalise it the same way using Japanese words.

Tip #5: Make mistakes

Perfection is the enemy of good, and being afraid to make mistakes when it comes to learning a language is only going to hinder your progress. Our brains tend to remember unpleasant memories a little more clearly than pleasant ones (grr!) so making an embarrassing Japanese snafu is in actuality an excellent way to make sure you’ll never repeat the same error. And if you’re not making any mistakes at all, then you’re clearly not studying hard enough. The person who dives into a conversation head-first, making tons of errors yet doing their best to communicate is going to become a better speaker much, much faster than the person who buries their head in a book and hesitantly regurgitates only those nuggets of language information they’ve already completely mastered.

Tip #6: Stay humble

Japanese is such an awesome language, full of interesting turns of phrase and exciting little squiggly characters to draw. It’s also got that “cool” factor that sometimes tempts people to brag about how awesome they are for being able to speak some Japanese. But it’s really important to stay humble when learning any language. Start thinking your Japanese is the cat’s whiskers (plastic sensei, much?), and you’re going to get complacent and stop improving. Of course, it’s completely your choice how much Japanese you want to learn, and everyone has different needs and goals when it comes to learning another language. Most people who’ve studied Japanese as a second language in a group or school setting, however, can name at least one person who tries to undermine the confidence of others with one-upmanship. The best thing is to stick to the pace that works for you, and ignore what everyone else around you is

doing. Learn with friends, make mistakes together, pool your knowledge and be open to criticism.

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