



## Building a Japanese Language Program from the Bottom Up

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The past fifteen years have seen the establishment of a variety of less-commonly taught "critical language" programs to teach those languages the U.S. government perceives to be of strategic national importance or that students deem as necessary for career development in a global economy. Specifically, Japanese language study experienced a remarkable 94.9 percent growth between 1985 and 1990. The success of new programs depends on a number of specific factors which ultimately determine survival or extinction. Building student interest and a learning foundation at the elementary/middle school level can be a key element to establishing and maintaining a successful language program.

### Benefits of Language Programs for Younger Students

There are diverse explanations for the advantages younger children may have over older learners, such as the plasticity of a young brain or the unconscious nature of children's language learning. Additional factors influencing successful language acquisition include the length of time spent studying, learning conditions, the quality of received language, cerebral dominance, and critical learning periods.

Initiating Japanese language study in the elementary/middle school can establish a strong student base for future high school programs where most Japanese study has traditionally commenced. And since early foreign language experiences are less likely to be stressful than the fast-paced study typical of high school levels, successful early language learning experiences may encourage students to continue their academic study of foreign languages.

### Challenges Faced in Language Programs for Younger Students

In teaching younger learners, educators have the additional pedagogical requirement of helping students learn to take responsibility for the management of their own learning. Often younger children may have no real idea of **how** to learn another language. Learning can be enhanced by providing numerous listening activities supported by significant contextual clues, such as objects, pictures, gestures, labels, and situational clues.

However, finding instructional materials that reflect authentic natural patterns of grammar and speech and that fit the goals of a sequential Japanese language program may be difficult. It is particularly challenging to find suitable materials for young learners because the learning steps must be in small gradations, and there is a need for constant review. Quality materials, carefully selected or teacher-produced, should provide a steady progression of grammar presentation, offer ample opportunities for communicative activities, and use a variety of authentic resources to supplement and enhance language learning.

Another major challenge in the implementation of an elementary Japanese program is recruiting qualified teachers with

certification for teaching Japanese. Short-term language training for teachers of other subjects does not provide adequate preparation for teaching Japanese. A successful program needs a teacher with the ability to use Japanese accurately and communicatively, who has training in second-language acquisition, who has practiced teaching methods with American students, who can work effectively with the management of the school, and who can develop rapport with the students.

### Elements of Successful Elementary/Middle School Language Programs

#### *Administrative and Staff Support*

Entire schools must be committed to implementing new Japanese programs and must understand the complexity of the undertaking. Administrators must avoid overcrowding classes, creating multilevel classes, and assigning classes to time slots that cause scheduling conflicts.

#### *Building Parent and Community Support*

Program visibility and community exposure are important to gaining parent and community backing. Presentations to community organizations, youth groups, and the school board, together with local media coverage, may generate interest in Japanese language study and provide opportunities to relay information about the development of the program.

#### *Qualified Language Staff*

One solution to the challenge of staffing qualified teachers can be achieved by forming teams: a native English speaker with extensive knowledge of pedagogy and of Japanese language and culture paired with a Japanese native speaker with personal knowledge of the language and culture. The JALEX program makes this possible (see Additional Resources section for contact information).

#### *Japanese Curriculum Development*

The elementary/middle school curriculum should provide a sequencing of language that not only allows student to develop communicative competence, but also maintains student interest and motivation. The Japanese curriculum must have well-defined goals for students to accomplish and against which achievement can be measured at all levels. Extensive practice that integrates the old and the new should accompany a gradual, systematic introduction of new forms, concepts, and functions. Currently national standards and state guidelines for the teaching of Japanese are being established which will give direction for K-12 programs.

#### *Student Target-Language Opportunities*

Students generally indicate that they study foreign languages in order to converse with native speakers in a useful way. Learning opportunities should utilize everyday language in a sociocultural

context whereby items of phonology, vocabulary, grammar and culture are incorporated to serve the learner's communicative purposes. Above all, students should have a real purpose for speaking and the freedom to use Japanese to create and experiment linguistically in a supportive classroom environment.

Creating links with students in Japan offers a significant purpose for learning Japanese. Pen pals and E-mail key pals provide written practice through correspondence. Sister school exchanges offer opportunities to share art work, send seasonal greetings, or to exchange a video tape about school or community. Travel exchange programs offer opportunities for American families to host students from Japan as well as provide a home-stay link for American students wishing to go to Japan. Although such programs require extra effort to arrange, they allow students to exercise their language skills in a natural setting and are effective motivators.

#### *Outside Support Resources*

To enrich Japanese language programs, schools should explore the resources of professional organizations, university programs, and grant-awarding institutions for educational and financial support. The Japan Foundation Language Center offers such assistance as training workshops, consulting services, and library services, as well as administering The Japan Teaching Materials Donation Program, the Japanese Language Conference Grant Program, and the Salary Assistance Program.

Several universities across the United States also provide teacher training opportunities through conferences and summer workshops. The National Council of Secondary Teachers of Japanese and individual state organizations of Japanese teachers hold conferences that enable teachers to network. Recently, sources on the Internet have begun to offer a wealth of information about Japan and teaching Japanese.

#### **Selected References**

Ging, Diane F. "Teaching Critical Languages in Public Schools." *Theory into Practice* 33:46-52 (Winter 1994).

Sandrock, Paul and Hisako Yoshiki. *Japanese for Communication: A Teacher's Guide*. Madison, Wisconsin: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 1995. Available from WDPI. Please contact [pubsales@mail.state.wi.us](mailto:pubsales@mail.state.wi.us) to request this publication (pub. number 6186).

Washington State Japanese Language Curriculum Guidelines Committee. *A Communicative Framework for Introductory Japanese Language Curricula in Washington State High Schools*. Washington State Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, 1994.

#### **Curricular Materials for Younger Learners**

##### *Textbooks:*

*Kana Can Be Easy*. Kunihiko Ogawa. Tokyo: The Japan Times, 1990. ISBN 4-7890-0517-8.

*Kimono: Level 1*. St. Paul, Minnesota: EMC Publishing, 1990. ISBN 0-8219-0872-3.

*In Japan*. Philip Hinder. St. Paul, Minnesota: EMC Publishing, 1992. ISBN 0-8219-0921-5.

*Nihongo I*. Machiko Egawa. Vancouver: Japanese Educational Center, 1996.

*Nihongo Daisuki: Japanese for Children Through Games and Songs*. Susan H. Hirate and Noriko Kawaura. Honolulu: Bess Press, 1990. ISBN 0-935848-82-7.

*Niko Niko (Stages A & B)* National Japanese Curriculum Project. Carlton, Victoria (Australia): Curriculum Corporation, 1993.

*Watashi no Nihon*. Rutland, Vermont: Charles E. Tuttle, 1995.

##### *Videos:*

*Tune in Japan: Approaching Culture Through Television*. Three 15-minute segments. Video and teacher's manual. Available from S.C.ETV Marketing, Box 11000, Columbia South Carolina 29211.

*Video Letters*. Twelve 30-minute segments: My School, Seasons and Festivals, Summer Vacation, Tohoku Diary, My Town, Nobles and Samurai, Living Arts, Friends, My Family, Making things, My Day, Tokyo Sunday. Available from The Asia Society, 725 Park Avenue, New York, NY 10021-5088; Fax:914-258-1626.

#### **Additional Resources**

*The Japan Foundation Language Center* offers educational and financial support for Japanese language education. <http://www.jflalc.org>

*The Japanese Language Teacher Exchange (JALEX) Program* enables U.S. schools with willing mentor teachers to coordinate with selected Japanese universities looking for opportunities for their students to gain teaching experience in the U.S. <http://www.jalex.org>

*The Laurasian Institution* administers the JALEX program and provides professional development opportunities and support resources to schools wishing to initiate or expand their Japanese programs. <http://www.laurasian.org>

*The Association of Teachers of Japanese (ATJ)* is a professional network for Japanese language educators. ATJ publishes the *Journal of the Association of Teachers of Japanese* and administers the Bridge Project for Study Abroad. <http://www.Colorado.EDU/ealld/atj>

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