Online Resources for Developing Reading and Writing Proficiency in Japanese

Whereas many foreign residents in Japan are able to acquire a modicum of Japanese proficiency in terms of listening and speaking skills naturalistically over the years, developing reading and writing proficiency in Japanese is often a more daunting task. As Ubukata (2913) suggests, JSL learners from non-kanji backgrounds (the bulk of the JSL learners outside the Sinosphere) are apt to find reading and writing in Japanese quite challenging. This article introduces some different online resources that can be used to promote reading/writing fluency in Japanese.

(1) *Anki*

Anki is a spaced repetition flashcard program created by an Australian English teacher who was living in Japan in the 1980s. He originally designed the program to help him learn Japanese, but it can be used for learning almost anything. After downloading the cross-platform program from www.ankisrs.net, simply select a deck of cards in a subject area you wish to master. Many Japanese learning decks are available at ankiweb.net/shared/decks/japanese

Simply stated, "tell" *Anki* how easy each flashcard item that appears on your screen is. Items that you feel are difficult will then come back more often - unless they become categorized as "leeches": items that to have a tendency to be forgotten even after multiple exposures. Conversely, cards that you consider easy will appear less often on your computer. This makes learning more efficient. I have found *Anki* to be a useful way of refreshing my memory of less familiar kanji. Its creator cautions that *Anki* should be considered "just one tool in the toolbox" of learning strategies rather than a complete language learning program. (Lewis, 2013).

(2) *Lang-8*

Lang-8 (www.lang-8.com) is a language exchange social networking website. Launched in 2006, today it has over 750,000 registered users learning ninety different languages. Since over a quarter of these are native speakers of Japanese, this site is particularly valuable for JSL learners. Users submit texts they have written in a non-native language (like Japanese) and receive feedback from users, typically those whose first language is your target language. In exchange, they agree to give feedback on texts submitted by other users.

I have found this site a great help in improving my Japanese reading and writing skills, with several provisos. First, since anyone can correct any language entry, the quality of the corrections is somewhat uneven. Often I have had to check with trusted native speakers about which correction is "best." However, this is actually a good opportunity to explore some pragmatic issues. Second, like many open Internet forums, *Lang-8* is not without its flame wars (heated disputes). A certain amount of social finesse is required when correcting some users' entries. However, this also, offers a chance to learn more about pragmatics. Third, *Lang-8* only works well on Google Chrome and during peak hours (19:00 to 22:00 Japan time) freezes are not uncommon. Finally, from a game theory perspective *Lang-8* could be described as a cooperative, sequential, multi-player iterated game. To receive corrections, users generally need to correct other people's entries. In this sense, it is not particularly time-efficient. However, you might actually enjoy reading many of the entries you correct.

(3) *JLTP Practice Sites*

If you are interested in taking the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLTP), sample items from all five levels of the exam can be downloaded from www.jlpt.jp/e/samples/ sample12.html . . . additional sample items for the two lowest levels of this exam are available at www.jlpt-practice.com. Another site with some useful information for the two lowest levels is

jlptbootcamp.com. If you want to focus on the *kanji* needed for each JLTP level, I recommend visiting yosida.com/en/kanji.html

(4) *Japanese News Sites*

If you are just starting to read Japanese, then it is worth reading NHK News Web Easy (www3.nhk.or.jp/news/easy/). Numerous short news articles written in *kanji* with *furigana* are available on this website. Once you become proficient at reading those articles, you might prefer the standard fare of NHK news (www3.nhk.or.jp/news/). Of course, all news items are written from a pro-government perspective. If you are interested in reading some alternative views of various news item in Japanese, http://2 ちゃんねる速報.com/2ch/page.47.html is a helpful starting point.

(5) *ERIN*

The Japan Foundation has created a comprehensive Japanese language learning website (www.erin.ne.jp) with interfaces in eight languages. Much of the content is designed for beginners and this site requires both Abode Flash Player and JavaScript. Still, it is a good source of free JSL materials.

(6) *Maggie Sensei*

maggiesensei.com is a site with many engaging JSL materials, mostly in the form of short dialogs. This website was created by two EFL teachers in Japan in 2008. It explains many Japanese grammar points clearly in English and much of the content is romanized, so it is particularly useful to those who are not yet adept at reading *kanji*.

Conclusion

This article has limited itself to free web-based Internet resources for enhancing Japanese reading/writing proficiency. Many additional resources exist that I have not mentioned. Although I have only mentioned free resources, there are also some modestly-priced learning resources worth exploring. In a future article I will describe some additional smartphone apps for learning Japanese

Acknowledgement

Works Cited

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