

To all those who want to progress faster and more systematically outside of language classes

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Because many people asked me about how I learned Japanese in 4 years to the point of passing the JLPT N1 without ever visiting a single language class, all the while majoring in physics, I decided to write an outline of the approach I took (now *that* sounds like a cheap commercial). Anyway, it doesn't take a genius to do this, just the right methods and tools. Also, the general ideas involved are not necessarily my own, but rather the product of many engaged language learners trying to find better and more efficient alternatives to the (often unsuccessful) Traditional Approach™.

I would like to point out what I personally find so appealing about the approach outlined here, before starting with the explanation. First, it's more fun than the normal approach. Second, it's completely linear, you have a plan you can follow and at any point you can look back and see how far along on the road you are and how far you still need to go. You keep track of your progress and your progress is... to put it in a nerdy mathematical way, continuous and monotonically increasing. You are never in fear of forgetting what you learned up to that point and always acquire new knowledge. Third, it works.

1. Heisig's Remembering the Kanji (RtK)

This first step is in my opinion the most important, regardless of how you decide to proceed afterward. I started off using the book "Remembering the Kanji" written by James Heisig. The idea behind the Heisig approach is to get you up to the same level as a Chinese person approaching the Japanese language, i.e. you already know the meaning of kanji and how to write them, but are not able to read them. Getting to this stage first has many advantages: Learning new words becomes extremely easy, you can breeze through vocabulary at a high speed without having to stop for each word because you've never seen the kanji. Equipped with this knowledge, when you encounter new words, remembering them becomes a piece of cake: local train = 各駅停車 ("each", "station", "halt", "vehicle"), fireworks = 花火 ("flower", "fire") to name but two examples. Once you know the basic meaning of kanji, most Japanese composite nouns will make immediate sense. Even most unknown words will make sense, even if you can't pronounce them! This is extremely useful, because your knowledge of vocabulary will never be complete, but in most cases a basic knowledge of kanji meanings can get you very far even when you don't have a dictionary at hand.

... so how does "Remembering the Kanji" succeed in getting you smoothly up to that point? Let's first look at the "normal approach to kanji". The traditional approach, i.e. the way Japanese children learn

kanji, is extremely inefficient and more or less legislated to be that way. According to the school grade you are in you learn the kanji ordered by their frequency of use. Kanji which are more often used are, in general, taught before less frequently used ones. The real problem with this kind of approach is that you do not learn the kanji in the order in which they are easiest to learn and remember, but in an order that is dictated by some abstractly defined “frequency” (“Frequency based on what?” is what the avid reader should ask at this point). The thing is, kanji are NOT just a random jumble of strokes, divinely revealed knowledge you have to accept for what they are. They are built of smaller units called “radicals” which have meaning themselves. Many people don’t realize this, but the way kanji are constructed is (in most cases) very logical. Put in another way, in normal language classes you learn kanji without ever understanding how they are built. You often learn complex composition of simple parts, without associating a meaning with the parts of which they are built.

Heisig on the other hand works under the assumption that eventually you actually want to learn *all* common-use kanji anyway, because let’s face it: what are you supposed to be able to read when you know the “300 most common kanji” (whatever that means)? The harsh but true answer is, not much. Definitely not a coherent text on any one subject. No story. No manual. No website. Well, not much, because most of the meaning of a text is not in the kanji which are used most often. Rather the most often used kanji in many cases fail to provide the essential point of the sentence, otherwise they wouldn’t be used that often.

For this reason Heisig orders the kanji in such a way as to minimize the amount of time you need to grow familiar with *all* roughly 2000 common-use kanji. The way he achieves this is that only one new kanji part (called a “radical”, or in Heisig’s case, an extended version he calls “primitives” – stroke patterns which consistently show up in a large number of kanji) is introduced at every step. Then you learn all the kanji you can build with this new part and all the other parts you learned up to the point, i.e. at every step you always know exactly what all the building blocks of a newly introduced kanji are and can associate them with a meaning.

In addition, and this is the important part, he uses a *mnemonic system*, that is, you create a story which explains the meaning of the kanji, a story whose main protagonists are the primitives. For example, the kanji for “risk” 冒 consists of 日 (sun) on top and 目 (eye) below it. It becomes immediately clear that it is a “risk” to look into the “sun” with your “eyes”. This is just one random example of how you can use your imagination to remember the meaning of kanji, simply by using your knowledge of the primitives (which can also be kanji themselves, like in the above case).

This way, by creating stories, you can remember the meaning of kanji without having to rely on your visual memory, which is, let’s be honest, not made to remember thousands of really similar looking symbols. In addition it’s easy to remember the writing, because you can simply reconstruct the kanji based on the story you imagined.

There is a really useful website <http://kanji.koohii.com/> which has been made by people who use the Heisig method. It includes a platform to share your stories for kanji (including a ranking system, so if you can’t think of one, you can simply pick one of the best from there) and a built-in SRS (spaces repetition software, like Anki. A flash card software that remembers how well you could recall what you wanted to

learn and uses an algorithm to calculate the most efficient time to show you the card again, just before you begin to forget it. That way you optimize the time you need to review what you already learned and efficiently move your knowledge from the short term to the long term memory. See also, the links under “Further reading”). There is also an Anki deck available for RtK if you prefer to be independent of internet access, but it might be a bit more work to set up. I personally just used the website as I found it more comfortable with the story sharing already integrated.

The kanji.koohii forum is also great for asking questions regarding language learning or the language itself.

Finally, I should point out that if you invest an hour or a little bit more on RtK, going at a pace of 20 new kanji per day (this sounds much, but it really is not with this method, you can go faster than this without any demerit to your retention rate) you’ll know the meaning of all the 22XX common-use kanji and be able to write them from memory in about 3 months. That’s also roughly how long it took me to finish the book.

The bottom line is: *This is a fun way to discover the world of kanji!* Can you say the same about writing a kanji you don’t understand a dozen times in the hope it’ll stick somewhere in your subconscious brain because of repeated muscle activity? It might look like you’re investing a lot of effort before you even get to any “real” language learning, but believe me, it will pay off, not even in the long run. I mean, what’s three months compared to all the time you will save later on?

By the way, you can get the complete first part of the book for free:

<https://nirc.nanzan-u.ac.jp/en/files/2012/12/RK-1-6th-edition-sample.pdf>

Actually, you might not need more than this. I just advise reading the *Foreword* and *Introduction*. Also, it is very helpful to see the stroke-order for all the kanji in the book, but the stories shared on kanji.koohii are often better than the ones introduced in the book.

So, you finished the book. What now? Now that you have attached a label to all the kanji and can recognize them, it’s time to associate them with vocabulary. Think about it as filling empty drawers in your brain. They are labeled with the meaning and you can reproduce the content. Now you want to fill them up with all the ways they can be read and the combinations in which they form vocabulary. I don’t think you need to learn the reading in isolation (as is advocated by the second volume of *Remembering the Kanji*). The drawers will automatically be filled up with all kinds of possible readings as you “encounter them in the wild” and acquire new vocabulary which uses the kanji in question.

2. Learn basic grammar

The best grammar guide in existence for westerners is in my opinion “Tae Kim’s Grammar Guide”, which is freely available on the internet: <http://www.guidetojapanese.org/learn/grammar>.

It is written in a much more accessible style than most normal text books and explains many deep connections that are left out in the class room, but obvious to any native speaker. Instead of

disconnected facts, it tells the story of Japanese grammar in a systematic way. Especially in Japanese you often can't help but wonder: "Why is stuff the way it is?" and this guide will provide (at least some) answers to those questions. Plus, it does so in a way unburdened by heavy linguistic terminology. When I started out, every chapter was a revelation to me.

Another important point is that it starts from the dictionary form and the colloquial speech instead of formal speech, which is already conjugated into masu-form. Honestly, it isn't very smart to learn the conjugated form first and then learn how to unconjugate it... but don't get me started on that topic.

What makes this guide even more attractive is that all the example sentences are available in an Anki deck for download. So after finishing a chapter you can just add the example sentences to Anki and review them on a regular basis. From my own experience, if you already finished Rtk and work through the Tae Kim chapters on essential and basic grammar: You can reach the grammar up to JLPT N4 in about 3 weeks. If you finish all the chapters your grammar will be at JLPT N2 level. Oh, did I mention that it is free?

3. Acquire a basic vocabulary

This should actually run in parallel to step 2, as explained in more detail a bit further down.

So what is a good way to acquire a broad range of necessary vocabulary in an efficient way? In this case it actually makes sense to start off with frequency, because regardless of what kanji the words use, you already know what they mean. Anyway!

First my own opinion: I do not like to study vocabulary in isolation, I think one should always learn words in their natural habitat, i.e. in sentences. *The smallest unit by which you can actually communicate.* That being said, again, Anki comes into play.

Through some community effort a number of extremely good vocabulary decks have been created. The easiest to acquire and most exhaustive is probably the shared deck "Core 2000 Japanese Vocabulary", which you can just download from the list of shared decks in the Anki menu. This is a deck with example sentences for 2000 of the most commonly used Japanese words. AND, hear this, it includes audio from a native speaker for every sentence! You can actually hear the correct pronunciation for each word and sentence you learn!

Basically, what I did was to study the "Basic Grammar" and little more than half of "Essential Grammar" so that I could understand the example sentences in the vocabulary deck and then learned a couple hundred words, then continued with more chapters of grammar. Learned some words again. And so on. I leave it to your own discretion how to go about it, but this is in general a good way to learn grammar and vocabulary in parallel.

3.5. Enjoying the freedom you gain from your knowledge of kanji, basic grammar and vocabulary

After I finished “basic grammar”, “essential grammar” and the “special expression” chapter of the grammar guide, in addition to maybe the first 500 most common words, I began reading Japanese manga on the side. Over time, reading Japanese material and adding sentences containing words I liked to my deck began to outweigh adding new cards from the frequency list, up to the point today where I’m only reading and adding native Japanese material (manga, books, websites, games etc) to learn new words. The listening comprehension you gain from all the example sentences with audio in the core deck also provides a good starting point for enjoying Japanese radio, television, anime, drama etc. If you echo back the example sentences read by the native speaker, you’ll also acquire good pronunciation, something which might be a hard thing to achieve in a classroom filled with other people who can’t pronounce words correctly.

In closing I want to emphasize, that I think the most important part in learning a language is having fun and Japanese is just *perfect* for that. A huge motivation for me in following the path outlined above was to create a basis that makes it as easy and quick as possible to come to the point where you can actually ENJOY *native materials* not only watered down stuff aimed at foreigners (read: “What that game wasn’t released outside of Japan. DAMN!”, “Whaaat, no subtitles for that drama??? I wish I could just watch the original...”). Turn that desire into motivation, but also don’t forget to enjoy the way there! Every single step of it. Rome wasn’t built in a day, and your Japanese won’t be either, but it’s still fun to watch the edifices slowly and steadily growing over time (ok... I’ll stop with the bad analogies). The most underrated aspect of language learning (and pretty much everything else to be honest), is the cumulative effect of small but steady progress over time. Learning 5 new words a day is not a big deal in terms of time investment, but it will still amount to almost 2,000 words per year. And let’s be honest, you’ll be in this for the long haul and hopefully enjoy the journey, because there is not end-point to language learning.

Well, now you know (more or less) how I got to the point where I am today (JLPT N1), while majoring in a completely unrelated subject. If you have any questions about what is written here, or about Japanese or learning Japanese in general, please feel free to ask me any time.

健闘を祈る！(Fight bravely)

Matthias Samland

Further reading:

- 1) The Foreword and Introduction to *Remembering the Kanji*:
<https://nirc.nanzan-u.ac.jp/en/files/2012/12/RK-1-6th-edition-sample.pdf>
- 2) http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Spaced_repetition#Software
- 3) <http://ankisrs.net/>
- 4) <http://kanji.koohii.com/learnmore>
- 5) <https://web.archive.org/web/20190309065638/https://forum.koohii.com/forum-9.html>
A real treasure trove of questions about learning techniques, Japanese grammar etc etc. Unfortunately it is not existing anymore, but can be accessed in the archived version!
- 6) <http://www.alljapaneseallthetime.com/blog/all-japanese-all-the-time-ajatt-how-to-learn-japanese-on-your-own-having-fun-and-to-fluency>
A lot of good advice about language learning in general and learning Japanese in particular and how to keep yourself motivated and have fun

Useful tools:

- 1) <http://nihongo.monash.edu/cgi-bin/wwwjdic?1C>
Japanese-English dictionary. If you click on kanji, you can look up stroke order diagrams.
- 2) <http://jisho.org/> A dictionary.
- 3) <https://addons.mozilla.org/en-US/firefox/addon/10ten-ja-reader/>
A pop-up dictionary for firefox, which allows you to show dictionary entries for words on websites, just by hovering your mouse across the word. It is able to show you the form of the verb as well, i.e. past, imperative etc.