

Japanese Learning Advice: Memory, Misconceptions, Resources

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1. Survival Wordlist

Pronunciation for beginners:

- Try to pronounce things with equal pace, without stressing any syllables. Speak more or less “flatly” in pitch and tone. (See “(For Nerds) Pitch Accent below)
- The macron (ō ī ū ē) means the vowel is longer (about twice as long). Note that it’s long but not stressed.
- The vowel sounds are more like Spanish or Italian. Avoid the rounding that we do in words like “No” (the u or oo sound that gets added on – Stick to the sharper sound in “not”).
- The “F” sound is a blow through the lips like you’re blowing out a candle, the lips do not touch the teeth.

i. コンビニ (Convenience Store)

At a convenience store they will ask you 1) whether you want things heated up if you bought food, and 2) whether you want a bag for a small cost. They *may* ask you 3) whether you want a spoon, fork, chopsticks, etc, or 4) whether you wish to have hot things in separate bags to the cold things.

- If you want to point at something like a coffee off the menu, you can point at it and say

これお^{ねが}願います (*kore onegai-shimas*, “This please.”)

Japanese quotation marks 「」 are used to indicate you will need to understand something if it’s said to you but you don’t need to say it.

「 ^{ふくろい} 袋 要りますか。」	Fukuro irimas ka?	Do you need a bag?
^{だいじょうぶ} 大丈夫です。	Daijōbu des.	I'm okay. (No)
^{ふくろ} 袋	Fukuro	Bag
ビニール ^{ぶくろ} 袋	Binīru-bukuro (“Vinyl”)	Plastic bag
レジ ^{ぶくろ} 袋	Reji-bukuro (reji=register)	Plastic bag
^{いちまい} 一枚 ^{にまい} 二枚	Ichi-mai , ni-mai	One (bag), Two (bags)
「 ^{あなた} 温めますか」	Atatamemas ka?	Do (I) heat this up?
^{ねが} お願いします	Onegai-shimas.	Please/Yes please. (e.g. one bag please) (often said when putting down your groceries to start the transaction)
^{あなた} 暖かいものと ^{つめ} 冷たいもの のを ^わ 分けますか。	Atataakai mono to tsumetai mono o wakemas ka?	Do you want the hot and cold things in separate bags?
^{はし} 箸	hashi	Chopsticks
スプーン・フォーク	Supūn, fōku	Spoon, Fork

~ ^い 要りますか。	Iremas ka?	Do you need a ~(spoon/fork etc.)
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- Ways to say yes:

はい。(*hai*. “yes”)

^{ねが}お願いします (onegai-shimas “Please”).

- Ways to say no:

いいえ。(*ie*. “No”)

^{だいじょうぶ}大丈夫です。 (*daijōbu-des*. “It’s ok”)

いいです。 (*ii-des*, “It’s/I’m good”)

- Notice in English we often say “(No,) I’m okay / I’m good thanks” and this is the same. Add a gesture to indicate no to avoid the ambiguity of words like “good” “okay” – (you’re good without it? You don’t want it?)

Sample script:

You: [Places items on counter] 「^{ねが}お願いします。」 *Onegaishimas*.

Employee: 「^{あたた}温めますか。」 *Atatamemas ka?*

Y: 「はい、^{ねが}お願いします。」 *Hai, onegaishimas*.

E: 「^{ふくろ}袋はどうされますか。」 *Fukuro wa dō saremas ka?*

Y: 「^{だいじょうぶ}大丈夫です。ありがとうございます。」 *Daijōbu des. Arigatō gozaimas*.

- The ways of saying things vary so look out for the key words!

ii. レストラン Restaurants

- To order you may have to say すみません! (*sumimasen!* “Excuse me”) loudly or press a small doorbell like object at your table.
- Most of the time you need to bring the bill to a register to pay. Rarely do you pay at the table.

「 <small>ちゅうもん</small> ご注文 <small>き</small> はお決まりで しょうか」	Go-chūmon wa okimari deshō ka?	Are you ready to order?
<small>ひとり</small> 一人	Hitori	One person
<small>ふたり</small> 二人	Futari	Two people
<small>さんにん</small> 三人	San'nin	Three people
<small>よにん</small> 四人	Yonin	Four people
<small>ひとつ</small> 一つ	Hitotsu	One thing
<small>ふたつ</small> 二つ	Futatsu	Two things
<small>みっつ</small> 三つ	Mittsu	Three things
<small>よっつ</small> 四つ	Yottsu	Four things
<small>なまちゅう</small> 生中	Nama-chū	A standard size draught beer

すく 少なめ	Sukuname	Less/small (**rice or donburi at restaurant such as Sukiya)
なみ 並	Nami	Standard size**
おおもり 大盛	Ōmori	Large size** (also for ramen)
しょう ちゅう だい 小 中 大	Shō, Chū, Dai	Small, medium, large (side serve of rice, etc)
いくらですか？	Ikura des ka?	How much is it?
かんじょう ねが お勘定お願いします。	O-kanjō onegai-shimas.	The bill/check please.
てんない め あが 「店内でお召上がり ですか」	Ten'nai de o-meshiagari des ka?	Will you eat/drink this here?
ここで食べます。	Koko de tabemas.	I will eat here.
「お持ち帰りですか。」	o-mochikaeri des ka?	Is this to go/take away?
もちかえり 持ち帰りで	Mochikaeri de.	To go (take away).

- Try simple phrases such as

さんになが
3人お願いします (*san'nin onegai-shimas*) to get a table of three.

- As above, pointing with a これお願いします (*Kore onegai-shimas*, “This please”)
- Try:

これを三つ^{みつ}お願^{ねが}いします。 *Kore o mitsu onegai-shimas.* Three of these please (pointing).

カレーライス二つ^{ふたつ}お願^{ねが}いします。 *Karē Raisu onegai-shimas.* Two curry rices please.

オレンジジュースお願^{ねが}いします。 *Orenji-jūsu onegai-shimas.* An OJ please.

牛^{ぎゅう}丼^{どん}、並^なみでお願^{ねが}いします。 *Gyūdon, nami de onegai-shimas.* A normal size Beef Bowl please.

iii. スーパー (Supermarket)

- You'll be asked if you want to buy a bag like above.
- I am a CIR and I felt a lot of frustration looking for what I thought were basic items, or things that weren't labelled in a way that I could understand. Don't feel bad if this is your experience. It takes a lot of effort and then you get used to it.

しよつきよう しょつきようせんざい 食器用、食器用洗剤	Shokki-yō, shokki-you-senzai	For dishes, Dishwashing detergent
せんたくよう せんたくようせんざい 洗濯用、洗濯用洗剤	Senntaku-yō, senntakuyou-senzai	For washing clothes, clothing detergent
ふるよう お風呂用	Ohuro-yō	For baths
とイレ用 トイレ用	Toire-yō	For toilets
シャンプー	Shampū	Shampoo

コンディショナー	Kondishonā	Conditioner
せんがん 洗顔フォーム、せんがん 洗顔ソ ープ	Sengan-fōmu, Sengan- sōpu	Facewashing foam, facewashing soap
せっけん 石鹸	Sekken	Soap
ボディーソープ	Bodī-sōpu	Body Soap
ハンドソープ	Hando-sōpu	Hand Soap
よう 〜用	Yō	Means “for use with/for…”
かお 顔	Kao	Face
からだ 体	Karada	Body
め 目	Me	Eye(s)
〜に ^{つか} 使ってもいいです か？	Ni tsukatteremo ii des ka?	Can I use this with ~ (my face? My eyes? My clothes? etc)

iv. ^{しごと}仕事で At Work

- There are a bunch of set phrases with *gozaimas* at the end that are often said without *gozaimas*. It's polite and formal so use it in the workplace and with service staff. You can drop it with friends. People at work who are higher up than you might drop it when they speak to you, but that doesn't mean you can drop it when you speak to them.

<p>^{つか}^{さま} お疲れ様です。</p>	<p>Otsukare-sama desu.</p>	<p>Standard work greeting, to recognise hard work of the other. Repeated constantly. Only use within your in-group (i.e. not to visitors or people that don't belong to your organisation)</p>
<p>^せ^わ お世話になります。</p>	<p>Osewa ni narimas.</p>	<p>Greeting used to recognise how someone is taking care of you. Standard greeting for those not in your organisation. You could say it to show appreciation to a boss or supervisor initially if they go out of their way.</p>
<p>^{がんば} 頑張ります。</p>	<p>Gambarimas.</p>	<p>I will try my best. (Common – could use before entering a class to show your enthusiasm to do well, or before doing literally anything.)</p>
<p>^{がんば} 頑張ってください。</p>	<p>Gambatte kudasai.</p>	<p>Please try your best! (Common – could be used to encourage somebody.)</p>

<p>よろしくお願<small>ねが</small>いしま す。</p>	<p>Yoroshiku onegai- shimas.</p>	<p>I humbly ask for your continued goodwill. (Greeting to recognise a shared commitment or relationship. E.g. You are discussing a plan with a work colleague. You both end with this phrase to end the meeting. E.g. You are about to start a class with a teacher to teach together and you both say this phrase.)</p>
<p>ゆっくり話<small>はな</small>してくださ い</p>	<p>Yukkuri hanashite kudasai.</p>	<p>Please speak slowly.</p>
<p>もう一度お願<small>ねが</small>いしま す。</p>	<p>Mō ichi do onegaishimas.</p>	<p>One more time, please. (Say it again)</p>
<p>ごめんなさい。</p>	<p>Gomen nasai.</p>	<p>I am sorry.</p>
<p>お<small>わ</small>分かりません。</p>	<p>Wakarimasen.</p>	<p>I don't understand.</p>

2. Memorisation & Study

For English speakers, Japanese takes longer to learn than most languages. Due to the writing system and the relatively low number of cognates with European languages (*e.g. the information, la información, a informação, l'informazione*), it is very heavy on rote memorisation for European language speakers that are not literate in Chinese. **This means that good memorisation methods based in memory science are key.**

I highly recommend reading the fun interactive comic “**How to Remember Anything Forever-ish**”, at ncase.me/remember for an excellent introduction of the **science of memory**, made applicable to learning pretty much anything.

This section exclusively talks about rote memorisation. Of course, learning lists by heart is not the only key to success in language learning, but memorisation has to happen some way or another, and doing it badly will lead to slower development of your speaking, listening, reading and writing skills.

In brief, the following two things are salient:

1. **Forced Recall** (a.k.a. Active Recall). To memorise something, you need to force your brain to successfully recall it from a prompt. For example, this might mean recalling the Japanese word for something after seeing the translation in your native language. Note that reading over lists of vocabulary does not do this. If you have a study regime already, ask yourself: how much and how often am I forcing

my brain to recall the things that I want to learn? It can be rather gruelling, so most learners pad their study sessions with things that are less unpleasant and avoid the hard yards of memorisation. Up your efficiency by increasing the amount of time that you force yourself to recall things that you want to learn. (Tools to help you do this will be introduced below).

2. The **timing** of when your brain is forced to recall something is important. **The optimum time to force recall the item of information to stimulate long-term memory is just before you forget it.** This is why studying over several days helps you remember things for longer, and cramming before an exam leaves your brain blank a couple days after. Each time you successfully **recall** something, you **remember** it for longer, and this effect stacks. This means that to maximise your retention of an item, you need to actively recall it several times, with a longer time period between each recall. For example, on Day 1 you learn an item, and then you review it with forced recall on Day 2, 4, 7, 11, 16, 25, 40, 60... This is called “**Spaced Repetition**”. *(If you fail to recall a word, you need to decrease the window between reviews for a little while. The software introduced below do this automatically).*

Therefore, paper flashcards help you do **forced recall** very efficiently. But for long lists of thousands of vocabulary items, they become inefficient: you end up constantly reviewing the same items that you do not need to review – you would actually be better off *not* seeing them until you are on the verge of forgetting them! They fail on the spaced repetition front. Acceptable for <75 items perhaps, but inefficient and ineffective to learn

2000+ items.

→ There is software that solves this problem.

The ones that are based on the memory science outlines above are called **SRS: Spaced Repetition System(s)**.

- Many online tools like Wanikani.com (a high-quality paid subscription service to learn Kanji and Kanji-based vocab words), and kanji.koohii.com, the free online component to James Heisig's (in)famous *Remembering the Kanji* book series (more info on these resources below) offer great spaced repetition systems.
- Many students, particularly of Asian languages, use **Anki** (free on computer, Android, and online, expensive (!) app for iOS; ankisrs.net¹). Anki is extremely customisable, which makes it a little daunting at first. Once you get it set up, it's a dream. One study session per day of 5-10 minutes can give you instant and easy recall of hundreds of vocab items in just a few weeks. Do a small and manageable session every day (yes, every single day, but in exchange, keep it short and don't rush) and let it show you its magic. Tragically, it may be necessary to read the manual, but it's written quite well and isn't a huge bore. (*tips: you should almost always be answering "good"; if you couldn't recall the exact word it wanted, answer "again": do not succumb to the temptation of 'oh yeah, I totally knew that' after you see the answer*)
- ✧ There are free, high quality "shared decks" available online that have, for example, the most frequently used 6000 words in order (you can search for "Core 6k" etc). These are a great place to start.

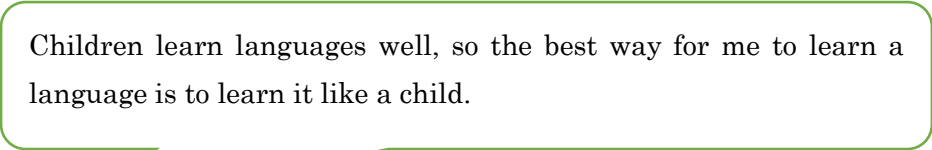
¹ Avoid the inferior and glitchy copycat clone called "AnkiApp".

- ✧ Once you are familiar with the software, making your own personal deck of words that you *want* to learn is extremely rewarding and valuable. These will be words you saw or heard, words you read, words that you wanted to say and couldn't, *words that are important to you.*) It's much more special and satisfying than a pre-prepared deck, particularly if you speak some Japanese already.
- ✧ Get it set up and start using it on the computer, then sync with the app for study sessions on the go. iOS app is costly, so maybe use the free mobile web browser version until you want to invest.
- ✧ Advanced: Install the free **Japanese Support addon** to have the app automatically generate the readings for words and output into a field. Install the free **Japanese Pitch Accent** addon to show the pitch accent for words (Computer only).

If you want to use paper flashcards, please see ncase.me/remember to see how to implement a spaced repetition in a paper-based flashcard system.

3. Common Misconceptions

v. Adult Brain, Child Brain



Children learn languages well, so the best way for me to learn a language is to learn it like a child.

A nice idea but adult students do not have a live-in mum or teacher that will speak to them in Japanese for 12 hours a day for years on end, nor do they have the same brain or free time as they once did.

This misconception has been disproven empirically. The truth is that children only *seem* to learn faster than adults. This is due to environmental reasons, i.e. we are comparing an adult that goes to a class and does homework, perhaps investing 2-10 hours a week, with a child migrant that is immersed in a foreign language environment for 40+ hours each week and can't escape or switch off. The current evidence indicates that for both structured classes and unstructured immersion time, adults perform better at most things, with the noticeable exception of pronunciation.

The caveat: Long term, this picture blurs, as the child becomes a native speaker and gains perfect pronunciation and flawless grammaticality judgements, among other talents, (but not necessarily a good vocabulary) and the adult will have a non-native grasp of the language (which might be functional, might be fun, might be impressive, might involve interpreting and writing gorgeous publishable prose... but non-native

nonetheless).

In sum, the message is clear: buying children's books is not an effective study tool for adults, and exposure alone is the slow route.

(However, it may be quite a lot of fun and make you feel good about yourself, in which case I think it's highly worth it.)

vi. Japanese Language, Japanese Learning Methods

A related idea is that the order that Japanese schoolchildren learn Kanji is a good order for you to learn Kanji in.

This isn't necessarily true, because you are very different to a Japanese child: Japanese children are fluent native speakers, and you are presumably not; you know how the world works and what things are already, and they are still figuring that out. This ordering is for children who speak the language fluently but don't necessarily understand the world yet, so simple concepts with fairly complex kanji come before simple kanji with complex meanings. Grade 2 has the gnarly 曜 (*weekday*), 歌 (*song*), and 線 (*line*), and many simple characters aren't learned until Junior High School, 6+ years later, such as 充 (*allot/fill*), 克 (*overcome*), 免 (*exclude*), 凶 (*villain, evil*), 占 (*occupy, to divine*), 又 (*or/yet/moreover*), and 巨 (*giant*). If you're a foreigner, it's probably best to use a list that lists the characters in order of **character** complexity, regardless of meaning, and introducing radicals slowly. This is precisely what most modern resources will do. (RTK, Wanikani, KanjiDamage, etc., see below)

4. Immersion

A valuable question: with the time that I am given, what do I choose to give my attention to?

Immersion is extremely effective!

5. The Japanese Language Proficiency Test

The most well-known Japanese exam for foreigners. Level 5 is the easiest, and Level 1 is the hardest. The difficulty roughly doubles every level - difficulty is vaguely exponential, not linear.

There are no spoken or written parts of the test, so not all people with Level 1 can necessarily speak or write well! Conversely, many who speak fluently cannot pass these tests as they might not be used to deciphering formal texts with kanji at speed. Being able to read and comprehend heavy kanji-laden texts quickly is essential for the higher levels.

For getting a job in Japanese, you generally need level 1 or 2.

So what about the lower levels? If doing the tests is a good way to keep yourself motivated, structure your study, and set goals, it's a great endeavour! If you want to use it for practical things like jobs or study, you don't necessarily need to do anything lower than Level 2.

If you're studying, I highly recommend the Shin Kanzen Master series. They're unbeatable, particularly the grammar and reading books. Choose the books that you need the most (reading, listening, grammar, vocab, kanji.)

6. Characters, Kanji, and Writing

Learn the **Hiragana** and **Katakana** ASAP with flashcards, and also practice the correct stroke order!

Understanding how **Kanji** work will help you understand and retain vocabulary. It's slow at the start but the benefits stack quickly. You can never start too soon. (But it's 100% okay for this not to be your goal!)

See the Kanji resource list below.

Regarding **Kanji Writing**: It may not be necessary to invest lots of time to learn to write them at the start. Whenever you do write, make sure you learn and use the correct stroke order, as this will help your writing be legible and also help you identify kanji that are handwritten or in stylised fonts. (See: tofugu.com/japanese/kanji-stroke-order for stroke order rules)

7. Resources

i. Dictionaries

Buy a real dictionary! The free dictionary apps all use the same database which has a great number of entries and a great number of flaws. If you search for a word from English to Japanese or from Japanese to English, you will get hundreds of entries, many obscure, and you will have no idea which word to use or how. Real paid dictionaries are worth the money, because they have context, usage examples, and disambiguation. I strongly recommend getting access to a real dictionary somehow. Use the

free one only as a backup.

- All Apple products have built in free Japanese and Japanese-English dictionaries – use the dictionary app in Mac OS or the “Look Up” function on selected text on iOS. You may have to enable it in settings.
- Japanese people often buy a little dictionary device. These are packed with multiple very high-quality dictionaries and are actually not that much of a rip-off as they seem.
- Monokaido’s “Dictionaries” iOS app allows you to buy a range of high-quality monolingual and bilingual dictionaries.

ii. Local

- Look and see if there is a local class or language learning group. Most cities will have an “International Organisation” (国際交流協会) of some kind that often run volunteer groups with locals that volunteer to teach you Japanese, or they may run classes. If not, they might point you in the right direction. Quality varies, and paying for a good teacher will make a huge difference, but exposure is exposure. Try asking JET sempais that live in your area.
- Add “**JICE Chubu**” as a friend on Facebook. Many cities have a very high-quality Japanese class intensive that runs 4 days a week for three months. Several cities have options that run during the evenings and courses are announced twice a year. You have to watch out for the post from JICE (announced in several languages), and then rush to register at any Hello Work office during work time, (so you may have to take annual leave to enrol). The courses are sponsored by the government and provides trained teachers for free!

iii. Textbooks

- The Genki series is very good, particularly for self-study. Minna-no-nihongo is a little more dense and suited to the classroom.
- I highly recommend reading *Making Sense of Japanese: What the Textbooks Don't Tell You*, by Jay Rubin. It's a short volume that goes through some grammar points extremely well in an entertaining way. It's the sort of book you can keep coming back to. PDFs can be found readily online.

iv. Online Resources

- Tae Kim's Grammar Guide is decent.
- imabi.net is my go-to for grammar explanations. Has everything under the sun, comprehensive, written clearly for any level, with loads of examples. If anything, it's too thorough.
- Tofugu.com is full of entertaining articles about Japanese language, culture and history.

v. Kanji Resources

- **Wanikani.com** (monthly paid subscription). Uses mnemonics for radicals and kanji like RTK (below), but teaches you vocabulary and readings at the same time, making the results of study hours using this method much more immediately useable/visible than RTK. A well-designed spaced repetition system (see "memorisation" above) i.e. flashcards is included. Not ideal if you already know several hundred kanji as you have to repeat them.
- If you want to avoid the monthly fee or like books, James Heisig's "**Remembering the Kanji**" (RTK) is an outstanding book series that

has been used widely for decades. It uses mnemonics to help you memorise kanji in a very efficient order, by combining radicals. The first book gives each kanji a keyword, then the second book shows large patterns for you to learn the readings. It is frustrating not to know their readings until the second volume. This also doesn't help you learn any vocabulary or grammar. It's extremely efficient at kanji, but does *only* kanji. Make sure to pair this with other more rounded resources. **Definitely** use with a flashcard application or website as described in the book, and follow his instructions closely. – kanji.koohii.com is the classic flashcard supplement for RTK and is free.

- **Kanji Damage** (kanjidamage.com) is a good free online resource with a pre-made Anki deck for flashcards that may suit your style.
- Other methods: Mnemonics and spaced repetition (intelligent flashcards) are by far the superior methods. If your method doesn't use these, I recommend you adapt your chosen method to include this in a way that suits you. (See “memorization above”.) Many books that you can find in bookstores here are not effective without supplementation.

vi. Reading

Consider buying an **e-reader**. Most e-readers like any Kindle have a function where you can see the translation of a word simply by tapping it. On my kindle, I read books and export the history of all words I looked up into Anki with context sentences and definitions automatically. I assume competing e-books have the same function. Note that you may wish to make a Japanese Amazon Account rather than your existing one for the book availability – and contrary to popular belief, you *are* able to

buy books online from other stores and manually load them onto a Kindle. Many competing brands of e-reader are also fantastic.

You can start reading earlier than you think you can, but weak kanji will hold you back and make it gruelling.

I recommend:

- 魔女の宅急便 (Kiki's delivery service) for a cute and slightly-but-not-too-childish book that's easy to read.
- キッチン by 吉本ばなな, a very short book that has won many awards. Sort of YA fiction, appropriate for adults and not childish. Extremely clean writing that makes it easy to read. Her other books are also good but Kitchen is her star piece.
- There is a whole genre of books that are written to be pulpy and easy to read called ライトノベル.
- Reading a book that you have already read in your native language is a great linguistic exercise.
- For more advanced learners that aren't yet reading a lot, Murakami is interesting and, perhaps because he speaks English, he writes almost as if he were translating from English, i.e., the logical flow and expression choice is rather clear and familiar to Westerners. These books do have serious vocab and dense prose though.

8. (For Nerds) Pitch Accent

This is an advanced side-topic. Beginner students can read this and cruise on, and come back to it later. It's good to have this stored in the back of your mind, as knowing that this system exists will mean you will notice it as you learn, whereas if you don't know that such a system exists you may fail to notice it until you've learnt some wrong patterns and have to try to fix them later like I did.

Pitch accent is almost never taught in the Japanese classroom, and Japanese teachers often have no training or little knowledge about how it works. Lots of learners naturally pick up a good accent, and may perfect it with time, but studying how this works will speed up the process considerably. Earlier investment saves time spent on fixing errors afterwards.

When we learn other European languages, we concentrate on phonemes (sounds) – such as the rolled R in Spanish, the uvular R in French, or the guttural G in Dutch. These tricky phonemes are often the biggest problems with learner pronunciation.

But Japanese doesn't have many challenging phonemes for English speakers in comparison to many other languages. So learners are often perplexed when they can hear how non-native they sound. What on earth is it? What sound am I doing wrong? Which sound can I concentrate on? And Japanese speakers will say, it's not *benkyō*, it's *benkyō*. And English speakers will say benKYO? BENkyo? and not really be able to hear the difference.

This is because Japanese and English have different systems of **accent**. Both have a way of accenting a syllable in a word: English accented syllables are emphasised or stressed, at times being louder, more clearly enunciated, spoken slower, and non-stressed syllables often are rushed through, having

lots of vowels collapse into a neutral schwa sound (/ə/, the ‘uh’ in about). ‘Dictionary’ has stress on the first syllable, and if you pronounce it with another syllable stressed, it sounds wrong but is understandable. A few words like ‘produce’ are stressed differently depending on the part of speech: We produce (verb) good produce (noun).

Japanese uses **pitch** for this, and eschews using volume or stress to emphasise a syllable. Fundamentally², there are two pitches, high, and low, and Japanese accent functions by a word either having an ‘accent nucleus’ or not. The pitch rises up gently towards the accent nucleus and then falls sharply after. If there’s no accent nucleus, the pitch is mostly flat but gently curves upwards if enunciated clearly.

Just like with English, most words have a correct accent and an incorrect accent. In very few words, the accent is used to disambiguate meaning (雨・飴・橋・箸・端・柿・柿、酒・鮭, etc). If you say these words wrong, you might initially get a “huh?” reaction before they figure it out. Oh! Not ame (High-Low), ame (Low-High).

If Japanese teachers do touch on accent, they often say that Japanese accent is ‘flat’. Students that were wildly stressing syllables at random will stop doing that, and that will be an improvement, which is why they say this. It’s not technically true, however.

How much does accent actually matter? The better the accent, the less work the natives have to work to understand you, with dramatically decreasing rewards for spending more and more effort. I think that it’s good to know

² Fundamentally, and reductively. Look up pitch accent ‘terracing’.

vaguely how the system works to prime your ear and brain to pay attention to pitch, as it's pertinent information that is not pertinent in English. I wouldn't particularly worry much about it though. Time and exposure will do most of the work. If you have flashcards, it's great to use software that will automatically put pitch accent information in, though, as long as it's not taking much of your time up (see "Memorisation" above).

vii. Resources for Pitch Accent

- Dogen's Patreon (subscription, about \$10 per month as of writing) has a video course of many hours of extremely high-quality material that covers pronunciation and pitch accent together.
- All Apple devices have a free built-in dictionary that uses a numbering system to indicate the location of the accent nucleus. Mac OS: enable the Japanese monolingual dictionary in the in-built "Dictionary" app. iOS: type the word in Japanese somewhere and use the "Look up" function. You may have to enable the Japanese Dictionary in Settings>General>Dictionaries.
- A free online pitch accent resource is Tokyo University's Online Japanese Accent Dictionary. Give 'Prosody Tutor Suzuki-kun' a try.
- [Forvo.com](https://www.forvo.com/) will have various native recordings of any random word. You can use this to hear the accent rather than just see the number until you get familiar with pitch accent.