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Creative Freelancer

Japanese Language: Learning Japanese with KUMON

(originally published online in 2003, updated regularly)

To contact KUMON

For "[nihongo](http://www.kumon.ne.jp/jpn/english/index.html)" (Japanese for foreigners): <http://www.kumon.ne.jp/jpn/english/index.html>

For "[kokugo](http://www.kumon.ne.jp/)" (Japanese for Japanese children) : <http://www.kumon.ne.jp/> (in Japanese)

Some background

During my first stay in Japan (1995 to 1998), I had a Japanese teacher who came once a week to the office. I was not always as serious as I should have been and we enjoyed a little too much small talk. It was fine for me, because I did not have the pressure of learning Japanese the fast way: basics were sufficient for my daily use (to make phone reservations, for shopping, etc). Little did I know that I would spend the rest of my life in Japan and, thus, really need the language ...

I left Japan in 1998, but left behind me a boyfriend who later became my (dear) husband ... I moved back in 2001. In February 2002, almost one year after my return, I realized that my Japanese had not improved much. I did not like it. Not only because of a short stay at the hospital, where communication with the doctors and the nurses had been, how to say ..., challenging. But also because I (or my ego) just did not like the idea of being an illiterate woman in Japan.

One of my problems: I did not use Japanese very often. And when I did, I needed more than just "basic" Japanese. Somebody once said that you should have a boyfriend/husband who speaks a language in order to learn or improve it. Wrong ! My husband is Japanese, but we communicate in English, a foreign language for both of us.

I was a teacher for one year. Because of my irregular work schedule, I could not go to a school. I also didn't want to pay high fees only to realize later that I just couldn't commit (I had done it in the past ...).

Somebody introduced me to KUMON. Soon, I began learning "nihongo" (Japanese for foreigners). I was studying daily, writing a lot of worksheets. Study was fine.

KUMON method ("[nihongo](#)" for foreigners):

Students can either go to a school and/or fill in the sheets at home. Because of my very irregular schedule, I decided to do it by correspondence. I began at Level 4A (total beginner). Although I could speak basic Japanese, my reading and writing of kana were not very good. To refresh was the best.

Each Level/chapter (at the beginner stage at least) has 200 pages B5 format, printed both sides. I finished the levels 4A and 3A in about one and half weeks (to the surprise of the teacher, I think :-)). From the level 2A, it became more difficult and my pace became slower.

If you go to the schools, you pay 8400 Yen a month. From home, it costs 9400 Yen a month. Each chapter has a tape (or CD) that costs 1050 Yen. The fees are the same whether you send your teacher 10 or 400 sheets a month. There is no registration fee and you can cancel with one-month notice. If you suddenly get too busy, you can also take up to 3 months break. But KUMON recommends studying everyday, even a little.

I have to say that I surprised myself: I have been working on these sheets almost every evening. After 2 weeks or so, I could read and write most hiragana.

For those who don't know the KUMON method: the same words and sentences are repeated many times. It is not boring at all. And it works, especially for the persons who need to read and write in order to learn. This is not a conversation course; it is about reading and writing Japanese.

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Switching to "kokugo" (Japanese for foreigners)

In the meantime, I had left my teaching job to become a hotel concierge. With this new position, I use Japanese on a daily basis. I mainly take care of foreign guests, but once in a while, Japanese guests dare to come to my desk. I also use Japanese to communicate with co-workers, make all kinds of reservations, inquiries, etc. Learning Japanese became stressful. Kanji were introduced at a pace that I felt too fast for me. One morning, I decided that it was just too much for me. I looked on the net at Kumon's kokugo (Japanese for Japanese children) and liked what I saw. Since my "nihongo" teacher was not a qualified "kokugo" teacher, I had to leave her class. I went from correspondence class to normal class. But ... not so normal. The teacher allowed me not to study with other (noisy) kids and I just go there to bring the sheets, get new ones and discuss any problem I may have.

"kokugo" (Japanese for Japanese children)

For kokugo, I pay 6300 Yen a month (children's fee). It is a completely different world. I had to go back to pre kindergarden sheets. And I still did not understand everything. We just don't imagine how much vocabulary small children already have ... Everything is in Japanese, the teacher speaks to me in Japanese only. The pace is slower: for elementary school, 400 sheets for each level (ie year/grade). There is no grammar, no explanations.

"nihongo" vs "kokugo"

Until the level D, learning "nihongo" was fun. After that new kanji were introduced too fast and too often. It was also difficult to find reading material, etc, because the kanji were not introduced in the same order as children's kokugo. The advantage of kokugo over nihongo: it follows the official introduction of kanji (80 for elem 1st, etc). It makes it easier to go to the bookstore and buy reading material. And it is also easier to buy the drill books (for some more kanji revision).

Important: if somebody plans to study with kokugo, he/she MUST love kids stories, because there are a lot of them in the sheets (normal, it's for children :-)). To begin learning Japanese, nihongo may be better: there are English and grammar explanations. It's probably easier. One can always switch later to kokugo, the way I did.

Now (February 2003, one year later)

I just completed ichinensei (elementary school, first grade) and began ninensei (second grade). I repeated the Level A sheets twice and did a lot of drills to remember the kanji. This intensive revision was more than needed. And helped me a lot as well. Studying Japanese became a routine: half an hour in the morning before work and half an hour during my lunch break. I always carry the sheets with me and work on them when there is any waiting time somewhere.

Kanji dream ...

Once, I read an interesting article in the Japan Times, about having a dream or purpose while learning Japanese and kanji: mine is to be able some day to read and understand Japanese magazines (women and gossip) and manga. What is your dream?

To contact KUMON ...

For "[nihongo](http://www.kumon.ne.jp/jpn/english/index.html)" (Japanese for foreigners): <http://www.kumon.ne.jp/jpn/english/index.html>

To see some samples of the worksheets, click "Learning Materials."

For "[kokugo](http://www.kumon.ne.jp/)" (Japanese for Japanese children): <http://www.kumon.ne.jp/> (in Japanese)

Worksheet samples: <http://www.kumon.ne.jp/comeon/material/japanese/>

Kumon also teaches [calligraphy/pen writing, etc.](http://www.kumon.ne.jp/lil/index.html) (in Japanese): <http://www.kumon.ne.jp/lil/index.html>

And, by the way, KUMON has regularly 2 weeks of free trial at their schools. Contact KUMON for more

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information about that.

Some kokugo material I recommend (available at any good bookstore or online*): **I usually love amazon.co.jp (great prices for English books and good deals on market place stores). To see the books, copy the ISBN number, go for example to <http://www.amazon.co.jp> and click Search to get the form and then paste in the ISBN number.*

KUMON drills (for each ichinensei, ninensei, sannensei, etc): "Kanji no kakikata" (for example ISBN 4774305448). "Kanji" (for example ISBN 4774305197). There are also other KUMON drill books (reading comprehension, etc). Other publishing companies also have **drill booklets**. One of them is blue/yellow with fish and dolphins. Each grade has a "before" and "after" level (ISBN for the 2nd grade: 4877223215 and 4877223223. I could not find these at Sanseido, but at my nearby bookstore.)

Books to read: One publishing company, **Kaiseisha**, has books for each grade (ichinensei, ninensei and sannensei): about Aesop, Japanese stories, Foreign stories, Grimm stories, Andersen stories, etc. Here is one example, at Sanseido online bookstore: "isoppu douwa -- ichinensei," (ISBN 4039230108.) The stories are still a little difficult for me ... but it is a nice reading. At the kids corner, I also found an interesting collection of Japanese and foreign stories with pictures. It helps me to understand.

Don't forget to have a look in the children's corner of your local bookstore. Major publishers for **elementary school children's pocket books** (with furigana on kanji) are Aoitori, Pupular, etc.

The collection is "**nihon mukashi banashi anime.**" (ISBN of one of them: 4522182139.)

And another interesting tool, also available at the bookstore: **a book of removable kanji cards** (again, for Japanese children), with, among others, most uses of a certain kanji. Very helpful to try to remember them. Of course, I removed the cards and threw away the book cover ... so I can't find the ISBN ...

And, finally, what would I do without my **electronic dictionary**? I found a nice one at Bic Camera, for about 10,000 Yen. It's called "Canon Wordtank, IDF-3000." Text (directions, etc) can be displayed in Japanese and English. Dictionaries: Japanese-English, English-Japanese, Japanese-Japanese, kanji search, multi-search. It is meant for school students (ie does not have the expensive kanji dictionary usually found in such electronic tools). The only minus point: I am not an English native and once in a while, I don't understand a certain word in English. This is when I am missing the "English-English dictionary." But otherwise, he is a new great friend! And makes especially the kanji search much easier

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UPDATE October 2004

A few months ago, after a break of more than one year, I decided to give Kumon Kokugo another try. I came to realize that other ways of studying the language were not as effective for my writing. In fact, I was writing less and less by hand and forgetting kanji. I started again from 1st year elementary school (kokugo), going much slower this time (repeating each sheet several times). I also noticed that my reading comprehension needs some more attention and purchased some more workbooks. At the same time, I realized that I should also keep up and improve daily Japanese and therefore registered again with the Japanese for Foreigners Program (Nihongo). I had left the program 2 years ago or so. And in the meantime, my Japanese had improved, since I was using it on a daily basis at work. The level that had been very difficult was not as difficult. But as I advance, it is getting more and more difficult. Repeating the same sheets several times helps. Keep you posted !

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UPDATE May 2008

A couple of years passed since my last update. In the meantime, I left the hotel and am now working in a different field, still customer service related.

I continued for some time with Kumon Kukugo, then later did both Kokugo and Nihongo at the same time (I had a lot of free time). And stopped Kumon Kokugo. Later, I also stopped Kumon Nihongo.

About one year ago, I realized that I was not doing much reading and writing in Japanese and decided to go back to my local Kumon Kokugo. The head teacher was very happy to see me again. She is very friendly and helpful. I graduated Level B (second year elementary school) about one month ago and am now working hard on Level C (third year elementary school). Font is getting smaller, texts longer and stories a little more difficult.

UPDATE July 2008

An intensive Japanese course helped me go over a long plateau and I felt that I wanted to try again Kumon for foreigners. I contacted my former teacher who was happy to welcome me back. The test was pretty good, but the teacher recommended, for revision purpose, to start lower. I started with Level D and finished within about one month. I am now working on Level E. It gets more challenging.

I am still working on the Kokugo Level C.

UPDATE June 2009

A few months after the last update, I stopped Kokugo lessons.

Because of family circumstances (mother-in-law's sickness), my husband and I decided to move back with his parents in the Japanese countryside this April. This meant leaving the house we had just moved in and my job in Tokyo.

I decided to make this long stay in the countryside a kind of intensive Japanese life and language studies.

I found a nearby Kumon Kokugo school and a teacher very eager to help me with my studies. She charges the regular 8400 Yen a month (more expensive than the Saitama school, where I paid a child's fee), but since I go to the school twice a week and use a lot of the teacher's time, including chit-chat in Japanese, I feel that it is reasonable.

I took a placement test and started with level C1.

I am still studying with Kumon's Nihongo (now, revising Level F, before studying again Level G).

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