Japanese Language and Literature
*Journal of the American Association of Teachers of Japanese*
jll.pitt.edu | Vol. 55 | Number 1 | April 2021 | https://doi.org/10.5195/jll.2021.169
ISSN 1536-7827 (print) 2326-4586 (online)

**REVIEWS**

## *Genki: An Integrated Course in Elementary Japanese I*

By **Eri Banno**, **Yoko Ikeda**, **Yutaka Ohno**, **Chikako Shinagawa**, and **Kyoko Tokashiki**. Tokyo: The Japan Times Publishing, Ltd., 2020. Third edition. 383pp. ¥3,600.

***Reviewed by***
**Ryan Francis Lidster**

Since the first edition's initial publication in 1999, the *Genki* series of elementary Japanese textbooks has been adopted by over 100 universities worldwide. Also popular as a self-study resource, *Genki*'s influence on Japanese pedagogy and learning is hard to overstate. The third edition, coming nine years after the second in 2011, closely follows its predecessors in terms of content and overall structure, but several changes show the authors' care in modernizing the material to reflect its increasingly diverse audience.

*Genki* is broken up into two volumes, starting at the absolute beginner level in volume one while building on that foundation in the second volume. This review focuses exclusively on the first volume, typically used for the first two or three semesters of university coursework, but many of the comments here will also apply to the second volume, given its very similar structure.

The textbook is divided into two main sections: a "Conversation and Grammar" section that presents the majority of the new material and classroom exercises, and a "Reading and Writing" section located at the

back of the book that provides more extended reading opportunities and introduces new characters—*hiragana* in lesson 1, *katakana* in lesson 2, and thereafter fourteen to sixteen kanji per lesson. In total, there are twelve lessons, each introducing fifty to sixty new vocabulary words, and between three and eight new grammar points. The authors recommend completing the "Conversation and Grammar" section of each lesson first, optionally moving on to the "Reading and Writing" section of that lesson, and then proceeding to the next lesson.

In the "Conversation and Grammar" section, each lesson begins with a set of four-to-nine-turn example dialogues (as well as a monologue in lesson 1 only), followed by a vocabulary list, explanations of new grammar points, and a more detailed explanation of how specific expressions are typically used. Next, there are various exercises, beginning with bottom-up drill activities such as conjugation practice that build up to increasingly open-ended exercises and role plays. Each lesson concludes with a "Culture Note" that briefly presents one aspect of Japanese society such as a list of national holidays or an overview of the Japanese education system, and a page of "Useful Expressions" that provides more vocabulary on a particular theme such as colors, parts of the body, and asking for directions.

In the "Reading and Writing" section at the back of the book, each lesson first presents new *kanji* with example pronunciations, followed by a short set of bottom-up recognition drills, and finally a longer reading passage or set of passages that incorporate the new characters. Uniquely in the "Reading and Writing" section, previously studied characters are not given glosses, whereas in the "Conversation and Grammar" section, all *kanji* are glossed, making it possible for teachers to use only the "Conversation and Grammar" section of the textbook without introducing any *kanji* if so desired.

The twelve lessons of the "Conversation and Grammar" section have titles such as "Family Picture," "A Day in Robert's Life," and "Barbecue," but only the dialogue and occasionally some exercises are connected to these topics; rather, the practice exercises within each lesson are organized by grammar point, largely independent of each other. For example, the opening dialogues of lesson 9, titled "Kabuki," take place in a *kabuki* theater, but the lesson's subsequent practice exercises have students role play service encounters at a fast food restaurant, describe people at a park, and so on. The topics of the twelve lessons in the "Reading and Writing" section are, beyond the first few

lessons, also unrelated to that lesson's dialogue theme. For example, lesson 9's reading passage makes no mention of *kabuki*; it is titled "Sora's Diary" and recounts a Korean student's experience at a host family's house for dinner. In place of lesson-level themes, the unifying theme of *Genki* is the developing story of Mary, an exchange student from the United States living in Japan, and the friends she meets on her journey, including Takeshi, a Japanese student at her host university, her Korean friend Sora, and her host family. Several exercises in each lesson focus on this group of students, their families and teachers, and use them as tropes to anchor the new linguistic forms.

After proceeding through the twelve lessons, the first volume concludes with both a Japanese-English and English-Japanese glossary of vocabulary present in the book, complete with the lesson it was introduced in, and a set of conjugation tables. In addition to the textbook, there is a companion workbook with homework exercises, similarly split into "Conversation and Grammar" and "Reading and Writing" sections, a free online app that contains listening sound files for each lesson, and separately purchasable affiliated apps for reviewing vocabulary and verb forms.

In terms of changes from the second edition, the most substantial differences are aesthetic; there are new visuals, more color, and a streamlined, professional look throughout. While nearly all of the exercises, including the homework exercises in the workbook, remain largely the same, several of the secondary characters appearing in the book have been replaced in order to create a more diverse cast, reflecting an explicitly stated conscious effort on behalf of the authors to better represent the make-up of Japanese classrooms.

Some activities have been modified to reflect changes in the real world; for instance, the reading passage of lesson 5 formerly featured two postcards, whereas the third edition retains one, replacing the other with a blog entry on the same content. A few new vocabulary words including smartphone have been added in order to modernize the lists, and there are also some new example sentences and footnotes in the grammar explanations. That said, these changes would all be fairly characterized as peripheral; the core structure and presentation of the textbook remains such that a teacher who was accustomed to the second edition would be able to transition to the third without substantial changes to lesson plans, curricula, or classroom teaching materials.

Overall, the result is that *Genki*'s strengths as a textbook are largely maintained or improved upon in the new edition. The series' most obvious strength is its use of plentiful, engaging visuals in each lesson. These allow for non-linguistic prompts that encourage students to come up with Japanese output based on a conceptual understanding of the situation, rather than on a simple conversion from English or conjugation of a base Japanese form. The visuals are further strengthened by consistently using the same set of recurring characters. Students quickly learn who Mary and Takeshi are and many become invested in their stories, increasing opportunities and buy-in for role play activities.

The images also help achieve a goal the authors explicitly state in the foreword: namely, to avoid intimidating students. English and Japanese texts are kept short, and there are visuals to help reduce student anxiety. On a top-down level, each lesson's consistent organization makes the focus of each activity clear, and students usually understand where to look up information when needed. Finally, the use of a textbook font, rather than the more common Mincho or Gothic fonts, helps to reinforce the orthographic form expected in students' own handwritten production.

Unfortunately, *Genki*'s many shortcomings are also retained or even exacerbated in the newest edition. The most glaring area of weakness is the grammar explanations which, despite the authors' focus on approachability, are laden with metalanguage and obtuse descriptions that many native English-speaking students find difficult to understand, let alone those who speak English as a second language. Lesson 12 explains the concept of "have to" as follows: "なければいけません and なきゃいけません therefore literally mean 'you cannot go not doing …' with the double negatives giving rise to the affirmative sense of the mandate" (280). Few students come away from reading that explanation with a clear intuition of the form's meaning or use. Of more direct concern, however, are the incorrect statements, such as the assertion on page 213 that the counter つ is "used to count small items." In fact, many small items such as a pencil do not take つ, many large items like galaxies and planets do, but so do shapeless concepts like ideas and questions. Rather, つ is a default counter, conceptually unrelated to size.

Broadly speaking, the English throughout the textbook is stilted and unnatural, sometimes to almost comic effect. Lesson 7's dialogue translation on page 167 is presented below:

Yui: Is this your family picture, Sora?

Sora: Yes.
Yui: Which is you?
Sora: This. I was wearing glasses when I was in high school.

Even if the aspect on "was wearing" can be overlooked, this level of unnatural dialogue is problematic in that it reduces the motivation to imitate and use textbook forms since students do not want their own language to sound robotic or contrived. To some extent, unnatural translations are inevitable and perhaps even sometimes preferable for pedagogical purposes, but there are forms that would certainly strike the balance between meaning and pedagogical focus better. Other small grammatical mistakes can be found throughout, such as the dialogue on page 231, newly revised in the third edition, which reads "It will take about two and half [*sic*] hours by train and bus." These reduce the impact and effectiveness of the examples.

From an instructor perspective, however, the most frustrating aspect of *Genki* is its unsystematic presentation of material. It is unclear why grammar points are ordered the way they are, or indeed what even constitutes an independent "grammar point." For example, だから ('so, therefore') is introduced in lesson 4 as a vocabulary word with no grammar component, while the sentence-final phrase から is a grammar point of lesson 6, and the conjunction から is a separate grammar point in lesson 9.

As mentioned previously, there is no unifying theme to lessons, so the grammar points are only rarely connected to each other in terms of situations of use, semantics, or form. Each grammar point has standalone activities that use different vocabulary, so a lesson-level vocabulary list appears disjointed and random. For example, the irregular verbs in lesson 11 (titled "After the Vacation") are "to have a fight," "to introduce," "to go on a diet," "to be late," and "to study abroad," which have tenuous connections to each other and to the grammar points, which in turn only vaguely relate to a theme that is only relevant for a short dialogue. The *kanji* introduced in lesson 11 similarly have no consistent connection to that vocabulary, grammar, or even each other. For example, the character 好 is introduced in lesson 11, although expressing likes and dislikes is an outcome of lesson 5. Inversely, the vocabulary word "river" is introduced in lesson 11, although the *kanji* 川 was part of lesson 4. In general, teachers who use *Genki* must be quite creative to attempt to unify its disparate elements.

This lack of organization often arbitrarily limits what students are able to say on their own. For example, the word 高い 'expensive' is introduced in lesson 2 along with prices and a dialogue about a flea market, but the word 安い 'cheap' and negative forms of adjectives are not introduced until lesson 5. Of course, students can simply label every price they see as "expensive," or the teacher can intervene, but if *Genki* had been organized around the principle of enabling students to communicate their own original thoughts and ideas, it is unlikely that this problem would have occurred.

Overall, while *Genki*'s appearance has been modernized, its language teaching philosophy has, if anything, regressed. There is no mention of broader proficiency goals or standards. While each lesson begins with a statement of ostensible outcomes (e.g., two outcomes of lesson 9 (*kabuki*) are "Report someone's speech" and "Order food in a restaurant or shop"), the material presented is insufficient to support their achievement beyond the narrowest of contexts. While the field of second language acquisition has placed increasing focus on fostering the development of skills that language learners can apply in various contexts flexibly, *Genki* still promotes an idea of language acquisition as the piecemeal memorization and assemblage of discrete words and grammatical forms. To be sure, great teaching can be achieved using *Genki*—this author personally will continue to use it in the classroom—but with considerable regret for what could have been if the effort that went into improving on its already strong points had instead focused on what learners of Japanese will do outside the classroom.

## *New Essays in Japanese Aesthetics*

By **A. Minh Nguyen, ed.** Lanham, Maryland: Lexington Books, 2018. lxxv, 449 pp. $49.99.

***Reviewed by***
**Rea Amit**

The discourse on "Japanese aesthetes" could probably be traced back to the middle of the nineteenth century and the European trend known as *Japonisme*. The French label marked a profound fascination for Japanese (mainly visual) culture that, while inspiring European and North