

REVIEWS

Tobira Beginning Japanese

Tobira I Textbook, 2021, 383pp. ¥3,850

Tobira II Textbook, 2022, 399pp. ¥3,850

By **Mayumi Oka, Junko Kondo, Michio Tsutsui, Yuta Mori, Tomoko Okuno, Yoshimi Sakakibara, Ayaka Sogabe, and Masae Yasuda.** Tokyo: Kurosio Publishers.

Tobira I Workbook 1, 2022, 127pp. ¥1,980

Tobira I Workbook 2, 2023, 127pp. ¥1,980

Tobira II Workbook 1, 2023, 112pp. ¥1,980

By **Mayumi Oka, Junko Kondo, Yoshimi Sakakibara, Hiroyo Nishimura, and Michio Tsutsui.** Tokyo: Kurosio Publishers.

Reviewed by
Junko Tokuda Simpson

The series of *Tobira Beginning Japanese* (hereafter *Tobira*) was created for beginner-level Japanese learners, especially for learners known as the “digital natives” in today’s world. The series caters to individuals who want to study Japanese for the first time or dive back into Japanese learning again. The authors aimed to infuse the series with the contents



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that bring excitement and intellectual curiosity to learners. Their guiding principle is that “studying Japanese can be both a means of self-discovery and a way of connection to the world.” The series comprises two volumes of the main textbook, Volume I and Volume II, and each volume is accompanied by two workbooks. (Workbook 2 for Volume II is scheduled to be available in 2024.) Workbook 1 focuses on *kanji* (including *hiragana* and *katakana* for Volume I), reading, and writing, while Workbook 2 focuses on Vocabulary, Grammar, and Listening. This series is also available in eBook format in the U.S. In addition, a variety of different types of supplemental materials are available on the *Tobira* website.

Each volume of the *Tobira* textbook begins with an explanation of the structure of the textbook and user guidelines followed by ten lessons which are grouped into three units. Textbook I, however, has one introductory lesson, Lesson 0, to introduce everyday expressions, words, and expressions used in a classroom, the sounds of Japanese, and the Japanese writing system *hiragana*. The titles of the six units are: Unit 1: Rediscovering myself (Lesson 1–3), Unit 2: Connecting with others (Lesson 4–7), Unit 3: Looking out into the world (Lesson 8–10), Unit 4: Going forth into the world (Lesson 11–13), Unit 5: Experiencing different cultures (Lesson 14–17), and Unit 6: Connecting with the world (Lesson 18–20). These titles delineate authors’ visions that the focus of the themes expands from personal out to global contexts. Regarding the writing system, *Tobira* introduces *hiragana* in lesson 1 and *katakana* in lesson 2, and it introduces *kanji* from lesson 3 and on.

Each unit starts with an introduction and concludes with a unit capstone challenge, and each lesson within the unit is organized in the following order: (1) lesson introduction with a list of can-do statements and grammatical structures, (2) three to four short conversations accompanied by a vocabulary list with colored pictures, (3) a list of target *kanji* characters (starting from lesson three) along with a page titled “The Story of Kanji” to give explanations about *kanji*, (4) explanations of target grammar, (5) speaking activities, (6) reading activities, and (7) listening activities.

The unit introduction works to evoke learners’ prior knowledge through a pre-activity to create a schema so that they are prepared to take in new information in the upcoming unit. The pre-activities present unique Japanese cultural information, raising interest among learners, but conversation topics following the activity are not always directly related to the contents of the pre-activities. The pre-activities and the other

components could have been more tightly connected in order to reinforce learning the material in ensuing lessons.

Each lesson introduction includes three components, (1) *Dekiru* (can-do) list, (2) Strategies, and (3) Grammar. The *Dekiru* list contains learning goals in the form of can-do statements (e. g., do your shopping and order food by referring to things around you, briefly describe the things around you, etc.). Each can-do statement has two check boxes, “entry check” and “exit check,” and learners are expected to ascertain the lesson’s learning objectives before each lesson begins and go back to check objectives again at the end of the lesson to verify their mastery of learning. The Strategies section includes a list of conversation tips and focal points (grammatical structures) for reading and listening activities. The Grammar section presents a list of the grammatical points introduced throughout the lesson along with the *Dekiru* goal they are associated with. This allows learners to clearly understand the relationship between each goal and grammatical point.

The introductory section is followed by a series of three to four conversations. The conversations are mainly carried out among a group of students—Keita, Ai, Mark, Riemann, Tao, and their cat, Nyanta, all living together in their university’s shared housing, the “Japan House,” at Goble University in the U. S. The names of the main characters are introduced in the pre-activity of Unit 1, and learners will learn more about these characters in conversations throughout the lessons. Since the conversations in *Tobira* are set at a university in the U. S., language learners especially in the U. S. can easily associate with the characters. A short description is provided for each conversation to set up the situation. The length is about four to six exchanges between two people in general, which is suitable for beginner-level learners to avoid cognitive overload. (There are conversations among three or more people in some lessons.) In lesson 1, *romaji* is fully provided under each line of Japanese text to accommodate learners who just started learning Japanese. In lesson 2, *romaji* is added only for *katakana* words, and conversations in lesson 3 are written only by using *hiragana* and *katakana*. From lesson 4, a phonetic guide in *hiragana* (*furigana*) is provided for *kanji* characters. Audio recordings are also available through the *Tobira* website, and they are great supplemental tools for learners who struggle with reading *hiragana*, *katakana*, and *kanji* characters. Also, at the beginning of each conversation, meanings of some new words (which learners do not know at the point of learning) are introduced in English to support learners’ comprehension.

One of the unique features of *Tobira* is the introduction of vocabulary with colored pictures. In addition to the Vocabulary List that contains Japanese vocabulary with English equivalent, *Tobira* presents the Vocabulary with Pictures to best support learners with different learning styles and needs. Around seventy commonly used words are selected in each lesson. On the Vocabulary with Pictures page, words are grouped by themes such as self-introduction and favorite things, and illustrations are provided to help learners memorize new vocabulary. In the Vocabulary List, words are sorted by parts of speech, such as nouns, question words, numbers, and counters. The pitch accent is indicated by a line over the segments of the word written in *hiragana*, and phrase particles are provided for verbs.

The section of *kanji* presents general information about target *kanji* characters, including the shape of *kanji*, Chinese-style readings (*on-yomi*), native Japanese readings (*kun-yomi*), stroke order, and examples of the usage with some practices. A distinctive feature of *Tobira* is the section titled “the Story of Kanji” which offers useful information relating to *kanji*, including the history of Japanese writing systems, the development of *on-yomi* and *kun-yomi*, and *kanji* elements (radicals). These stories help learners to establish a solid understanding of *kanji* and develop their *kanji* skills.

In the grammar section, a Japanese example sentence is presented with analysis and brief explanations in English. Then, additional examples are provided in Japanese along with English translation. Following the grammar section are activities for speaking, reading, writing, and listening. The speaking activities are the most extensive component replete with a variety of practices. Also, each activity is associated with lesson goals. Most of the speaking activities are mechanical such as conjugation, word substitutions, and sentence completion. The textbook explains that they are designed to help learners build speaking skills holistically. Toward the end of the section, open-ended exercises such as role-play, free conversation, and group work are presented, where learners are given opportunities to practice Japanese based on their own personal information or authentic information through Internet searches. Some of the activities are marked with an audio icon, which indicates that audio recordings are available on the *Tobira* website. The audio recording provides correct answers, enabling self-learners to check their mastery. At the end of the speaking activities in each lesson, there is a review section in which learners are provided with instructions in English (e.g., share what you

have heard, ask if your partner has any experience with it, exchange opinions, etc.) and are expected to expand conversations based on given situations and topics.

Many of the reading activities are designed for learners to obtain information from semi-authentic materials such as event flyers, websites, and infographics. Some activities require learners to look at pictures/illustrations such as famous landmarks in Japan, pictograms of signs, and cover pages of books, and to discuss with a partner what kinds of information those pictures/illustrations contain. In some activities, learners are instructed to match pictures/illustrations with appropriate words and descriptions or to fill in the blanks. Then, longer reading passages including articles, essays, and stories are presented with questions to check understanding of Japanese sentence structure (grammar) and content. After reading activities, topics for writing practices are given in each lesson. The writing tasks correspond to reading exercises, and learners are able to use the reading texts in the lesson as a model for their own writing.

It should be noted that *wakachigaki*, a writing style to add a space between phrases within a sentence, is used in Lesson 0–3 (for example, ジャンさんの しゅっしんは どこですか。). While the style is helpful for beginners to process written Japanese, learners may apply the style to their handwriting. Although there is a note about the style in Workbook 1 of Volume I (74), the information should also be included in the textbook to bring greater attention to the style.

The *Tobira* textbook and workbook both contain listening practices. According to the authors, the listening section is to provide learners with a variety of different listening strategies to understand spoken Japanese. Examples are “understanding omitted words” (lesson 3), “listening in noisy environments” (lesson 9), and “shadowing” (lesson 15). However, the listening contents in the textbook are not always associated with the target content of each lesson. It would be more meaningful for learners if these activities in the textbooks were closely related to a target theme or goals in each lesson. In contrast, the listening exercises in the workbook are closely related to the vocabulary and grammar targeted in each lesson.

At the end of each unit, a “Unit Challenge” consisting of culminating activities is presented. These activities involve tasks such as searching online, creating a product using Japanese, and sharing it with others. For instance, in Unit 1, the following three tasks are listed: (1) find self-learning applications to support Japanese learning and share the list with

your classmates, (2) select your favorite picture you have taken on a trip or during some activity, and then share it through social media or on the Japanese course website with a brief description in Japanese, and (3) read a *Tobira* original online novel. For the online novel activity, a QR code is provided in the textbook, and learners are directed to a *Tobira* website where they are able to find the link to the online novel easily. The *Tobira* online novel is a type of simulation game, in which learners are asked to input or select their answers as the story develops. However, from the instructions given in the task, “Now you can start reading our original online novel titled Hello, Japan,” participants would not expect a simulation game. More careful explanations for tasks would be helpful. Overall, tasks in the Unit Challenge are fun to work with; however, the activities do not require students to use newly introduced skills intensively. As a summary of the unit, tasks that can be used as an overall assessment of language and cultural knowledge would be valuable for learners to evaluate their understanding and reflect on their learning.

Although the authors mention in the introduction that “the textbook is designed so that learners can acquire Japanese just by working through the book, page by page and lesson by lesson,” this reviewer claims that *Tobira* does not arrange contents seamlessly and the organization of the textbook can be difficult for self-learners to use. At the beginning of each lesson, learners are first exposed to three to four different conversations all at once which include all target goals, and then move to learn new vocabulary, *kanji*, and grammatical structures used in those conversations. Classroom teachers may focus on one dialogue at a time, providing lessons to introduce vocabulary and grammar and have students practice the dialogue. Based on this reviewer’s own teaching experiences, many learners seem to be able to follow contents easier if conversations, vocabulary, grammatical explanations, and activities are interwoven seamlessly to master target goals. However, the contents of *Tobira* are organized in the way that a learner needs to cover 3–4 conversations first, and then move to vocabulary, *kanji*, and grammar points. Thus, some additional study tips may be useful for self-learners and teachers who are new to teaching Japanese.

In terms of the workbooks, Workbook 1 for both Volume I and II focuses on the practice of *kanji*, reading, and writing. *Hiragana* and *katakana* are included in Volume I. In the sections of *hiragana* and *katakana* practice, they provide dotted lines specific for each character so that learners can have visual guidance for writing target characters

correctly and in a well-balanced shape. In addition to the writing practices for each character, a variety of recognition and writing activities are included, such as selecting correct characters, matching words with pictures, filling in blanks, or writing sentences by using learners' personal information.

In Workbook 2 of *Tobira* Volume I, practice for vocabulary/particle, grammar, and listening are included. Under the section on vocabulary practice, the authors created a variety of activities such as matching, grouping, providing antonyms, sorting, filling in blanks, and creating word maps. Through those activities, learners can master new vocabulary not just through rote memorization but also by using various cognitive processes. The practice for particles is helpful because learners of Japanese often struggle with the use of particles. The authors designed the practice to have learners internalize particles with verbs and adjectives as a set through fill-in-the-blank exercises. The grammatical practices are listed in the order from basic to more practical applications according to the *Dekiru* list. The difficulty level of each task is labeled by the number of stars, with one star being basic, and three being advanced. Different from those in the textbook, the listening activities in the workbook are directly related to the target goals of the lesson. Audio files are available on the *Tobira* website, and learners can download the files in MP3 format. Blank answer sheets are also available to download in pdf format from the website, and this creates flexibility for users to keep their workbook pages blank for repetitive practices and to write answers on digital devices (typing on a computer, writing by hand by using an iPad, etc.) without printing out physical sheets.

The *Tobira* website (<https://tobirabeginning.9640.jp>) contains a variety of supplemental learning materials, including detailed explanations on grammatical points (Grammar in Depth), instructional videos (Lesson 0–20), and audio recordings for vocabulary, conversation, listening practice, and pronunciation practice. Materials are organized by textbook volume (Vol. 1 or Vol. 2) and lessons (Lesson 0–20), and learners can find materials easily. When an audio file for the materials is available, an audio volume icon is indicated in the textbook and workbook. However, the reviewer noticed that for some reading materials there is no icon even though an audio recording is available. Adding an icon in the textbook would be helpful for learners as an indication of the availability of the audio file. Some of the contents are protected with passwords, and only users who purchased the textbook gain access to the contents.

The instructional videos in the series are substantial, and these are valuable and useful resources for learners. Each lesson has a number of videos corresponding to grammatical points with detailed explanations in English. Each video lasts about four to ten minutes, and through the video, learners are able to familiarize themselves with contents before going to class or to deepen their understanding afterwards. The video materials support a “flipped classroom” model, which leads to enhanced student-centered activities and practices in the classroom, instead of students passively receiving information through lectures.

In summary, the *Tobira* series contains a variety of information, different types of activities, and a wide range of learning resources for both teachers and learners. The series is especially beneficial for instructors who want to implement a “flipped classroom” model as well as for self-learners who wish to have a comprehensive learning experience. Videos covering all grammatical points are already developed for all of the lessons and are available on the website, and these materials will immensely support busy instructors. Moreover, the cultural information and contents are up to date, which stimulates students’ inner curiosity and enhances their motivation for learning. By utilizing this series effectively, teachers can create an active learning environment in a classroom to promote students’ Japanese language and cultural learning.

Meshiagare: A Culinary Journey through Advanced Japanese

By **Kazumi Hatasa** and **Nami Fukutome**. Tokyo: Kurosio Publishers, 2021. 143 pp. ¥2,200.

Reviewed by
Mayumi Ajioka

Meshiagare: A Culinary Journey through Advanced Japanese (hereafter *Meshiagare*) is a Japanese content-based textbook for advanced-level learners, which focuses on Japanese foods, food culture, and history. The book is a complete bilingual edition: its first half (pages 10–80) is dedicated to original Japanese text, and its second half (pages 81–137) has the English translation of all fifteen chapters. Because of its topic and