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## ***Minna no Nihongo: Elementary Japanese I, Third Edition, Main Text***

By **3A Corporation**. Tokyo, Japan: 3A Corporation, 2025. ix, 248, 54 pp. ¥2500

## ***Minna no Nihongo: Elementary Japanese I, Third Edition, Translation & Grammar Notes – English***

By **3A Corporation**. Tokyo, Japan: 3A Corporation, 2025. ix, 181 pp. ¥2000

### **Reviewed by Stephen Luft**

*Minna no Nihongo* is a textbook series published by 3A Corporation that is widely used in Japan. This review is based on the third edition of the beginning level (Elementary Japanese I) main textbook and the corresponding English edition of the Translation and Grammar Notes.

As stated by the authors, *Minna no Nihongo* has been updated to bring the textbook more in line with modern life and society in Japan. Compared to the second edition, the major changes to the third edition are in vocabulary and a limited number of conversations. For vocabulary, some items have been moved to different chapters, while others have been added or removed. For most chapters, the number of vocabulary items that have been changed is less than ten.

There are three chapters with changes to the conversations. In chapter 4, the dialogue has been changed from asking for the phone number of a store to visiting a university cafeteria. In chapter 14, the dialogue has been changed from taking a taxi to participating in a disaster drill. In chapter 16, the dialogue has been changed from withdrawing money from an ATM to using a swimming pool. For instructors who have been using the second edition, the transition to the third edition is unlikely to present much difficulty.



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*Minna no Nihongo* is primarily designed for learners studying Japanese in Japan, and many of the design choices reflect this approach. While the majority of Japanese language learners in the United States share a base language and culture, those learning in Japan are more diverse. Data published in 2025 from Japan's Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology shows that the majority of those studying Japanese as a second language in Japan come from Asian countries. China represents the largest group, accounting for roughly a quarter of the total learner population. It is followed by Nepal, Vietnam, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, the Philippines, Indonesia, the Koreas, and Taiwan. The United States ranks tenth on the list, and with 2.2% of the learner population it is the highest-ranking Western country.

In *Minna no Nihongo*, the main textbook is entirely in Japanese, even at the beginning level. Glosses for vocabulary items, and explanations of grammar or culture, are not included in the main textbook. This decision reflects the reality of teaching in a situation where the majority of the class does not share a common base language or culture.

The accompanying Translation and Grammar Notes textbook provides base language support for learners from a variety of backgrounds. Glosses for new vocabulary items, grammar and culture explanations, translations of conversations, and other base language content is provided in this book. For the third edition, the Translation and Grammar Notes are currently available in English, with Chinese, Vietnamese, Nepalese, Burmese and Sinhalese scheduled to be published by April, 2026. The division between the Japanese-only main textbook and the Translation and Grammar Notes allows the instructor and the students to all work with the same material in class, while still providing support for learners in their base language.

*Minna no Nihongo* adopts a primarily grammar-based approach to language teaching. Grammar is taught deductively in *Minna no Nihongo*, with grammatical structures introduced at the beginning of each lesson, followed by exercises to practice using the structures productively.

The main textbook begins with an introduction that first presents the hiragana and katakana syllabaries, and then provides examples for several aspects of pronunciation. It concludes by listing a number of classroom expressions, simple greetings, simple conversational expressions, and numbers.

The introduction in the Translation and Grammar Notes covers the same material, but with glosses for vocabulary items and explanations of how to use the kana syllabaries and how to produce Japanese sounds. It

also has additional information not included in the main textbook, including an expanded list of instructional vocabulary (e.g., 例文 / example sentence; 索引 / index; 名詞 / noun; ~形 / ~form; 主語 / subject; 肯定 / negative; etc.) and an explanation of the three script types.

Following the introduction, there are twenty-five chapters or lessons. The lessons are relatively short, and each follows a similar format. Unlike the introduction, the content of the lessons in the main textbook is not repeated in the grammar and translation notes.

The main textbook chapters each begin with a list of Sentence Patterns (文型). These are sample sentences that use the lesson's target structures. Next is a collection of Example Sentences (例文). These take the form of simple exchanges, most often with a question followed by a response. For example, in lesson 8, in which adjective modifiers of nouns are addressed, the following material is presented at the beginning of the lesson (p. 66):

Sentence Patterns:

1. さくら は きれいな はな です。
2. ふじさん は たか やま 高い 山 です。

Example Sentences:

1. きのう まつもと 松本さんの うちへ 行きました。  
……どんな うちですか。  
きれいな うちです。そして、大きい うちです。
3. きのう おもしろい 映画を 見ました。  
……何を 見ましたか。  
「七人の 侍」です。

A conversation follows, which features the sentence patterns introduced at the beginning of the chapter. The participants in each conversation come from a familiar cast of characters, which are introduced in the preface. This cast of characters represent a wide variety of nationalities and societal roles. The majority of the conversations involve Japanese and non-Japanese participants, but there are also conversations with only non-Japanese participants. Since a group of learners that does

not share a first language would need to rely on a second language to communicate, this type of conversation is well-attuned to the needs of the target learner population.

Following the conversation are three Exercise (練習) sections. In Exercise section A, the structures introduced earlier in the chapter are presented, with interchangeable elements highlighted. Question word elements are given a darker highlight. The purpose of this section is to present sentence patterns visually in a format that is easy to understand. The actual practice exercises are found in the subsequent sections.

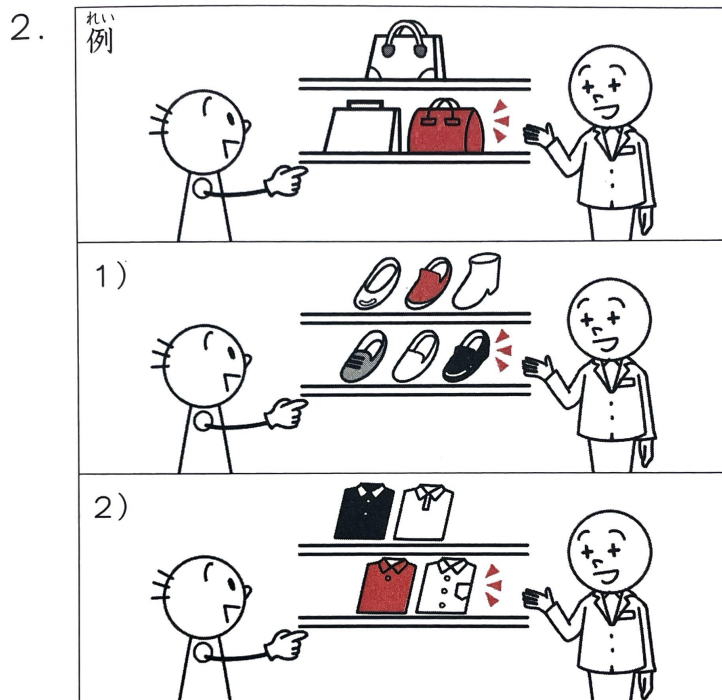
In Exercise section B, students engage in various practice exercises targeting the structures from subsection A. In Exercise section C, students engage in conversational practice using the structures from subsection A. The exercises in both sections B and C usually have a single correct answer.

For example, the following practice exercise appears in Exercise section B of chapter 8, addressing how to use adjectives to modify nouns (p. 70):

7. 例：奈良・町（静か） → 奈良はどんな町ですか  
 ……静かな町です。
- 1) 「七人の侍」・映画（おもしろい） →
  - 2) サントスさん・人（親切） →
  - 3) さくら大学・大学（新しい） →
  - 4) スイス・国（きれい） →

Exercise section C of the same chapter subsequently contains the following practice exercise (p. 71):

- A：すみません。その かばんを <sup>み</sup>見せて ください。  
 B：これですか。
- A：いいえ、その <sup>あか</sup>赤い かばんです。  
 B：はい、どうぞ。



The final section of each lesson consists of Practice Questions (問題). Similar to Exercise section B, the Practice Questions have clear right or wrong answers. However, unlike sections B and C, listening exercises are also regularly included.

A review section appears every few lessons and typically contains fill-in-the-blank and multiple choice problems.

The Translation and Grammar Notes has four sections in each lesson, which complement the content from the main textbook. The first section is a list of vocabulary items related to the lesson, with a gloss or brief explanation for each item. The next section consists of translations of the sentence patterns, example sentences, and conversations from the main textbook.

The third section is titled “Useful Words and Information,” and contains additional vocabulary and/or cultural information. The additional vocabulary are presented in the form of lists of words related to a topic, with glosses for each word. Some representative topics are food, family, inside the house, and occupations. The cultural information consists of

simple explanations of cultural topics such as how to exchange business cards, how to use a public phone, how to use a Japanese bath, and how to use decorated envelopes.

The last section consists of simple explanations of Japanese grammar. These grammar explanations focus on structures that appear in the first three sections (sentence patterns, example sentences, and conversation) of the corresponding lesson in the main textbook.

While *Minna no Nihongo* introduces hiragana and katakana in the introduction, and assumes knowledge of both throughout the beginning level textbook, no kanji instruction is given in the Elementary Japanese I textbook. While the second edition textbook had supplementary kanji books for the Elementary Japanese I textbook, these books are not yet available for the third edition. While 3A Corporation has stated that supplementary materials will be provided for the third edition, kanji books do not yet appear on the publication schedule.

The Japanese-only main textbook makes *Minna no Nihongo* well suited to a teaching approach that maximizes exposure to the target language. Classes that use *Minna no Nihongo* in Japan are usually conducted entirely in Japanese. For teachers that wish to adopt this approach, the textbook is likely to be a welcome option.

The diverse cast of characters, and the variety of societal roles represented by those characters in the conversations, are also positive aspects of the textbook. Students learn not just about how to be a student in Japan, but also about how to be a professional. The diverse characters and the conversations they have in a variety of situations provide students with breadth in their preparation for living in Japan.

In *Minna no Nihongo*, grammar explanations are kept simple. Students are unlikely to be overwhelmed by the explanations, which are straightforward and relatively easy to understand. Students whose base language is grammatically similar to Japanese will not find unnecessary explanation, and consequently are likely to feel that the time they devote to grammar study is well spent. However, for teachers of native English speakers who wish for their students to maintain accurate and appropriate use of the language, some supplemental explanation may be needed.

Exercises that provide practice of new grammar structures are plentiful in the textbook. For teachers using other textbooks, these exercises could be a welcome source of additional practice, either for an individual or for a class. The exercises could also be a useful resource for assessment ideas. The appendix to the Translation & Grammar Notes,

which provides useful lists of counters and verb conjugations, may also be a useful resource for instructors.

However, communicative language tasks are largely absent from the textbook. Teachers who wish to implement role-play activities, task-based activities, or other open-ended conversational activities in their classrooms will find few resources to support this endeavor in *Minna no Nihongo*.

With pragmatics and culture, only the most basic discussion is included. This decision is also presumably related to the diverse target learner population. When one's base language and culture are similar to that of the target language and culture, many pragmatic and cultural aspects of communication can be transferred to the target language and culture without creating communication problems. With the target learner population being primarily from Asian countries, as the publication schedule for the Grammar and Translation Notes suggests, extensive notes on pragmatic and cultural aspects of communication in Japanese may be unnecessary for most of the target learner population.

However, when the learner population largely shares a common base language and culture, addressing those learners' specific needs is usually more effective. Additionally, when the base culture of the learners is far removed from the target culture, content on pragmatics and culture can be essential in ensuring effective communication. Differences in expectations regarding greetings, apology, refusal, making jokes, expressing an opinion, etc. can lead to difficulties in communication and relationships. Differences in expectations regarding gift-giving, punctuality, group activities, and other cultural topics can lead to similar consequences. When teachers are uncertain which aspects of Japanese culture are important for learners to know, a textbook that includes detailed culture notes and explains cultural differences relative to the learners' base culture can provide important direction. For teachers in the United States, a textbook that focuses on American learners in deciding which culture notes to include and how to explain them can be an essential resource.

*Minna no Nihongo* is aptly titled, in that the textbook does not target speakers of a specific base language or those raised in a specific base culture. In that sense, as the title suggests, it is Japanese for Everyone. It is a textbook designed for learning Japanese in Japan, and it has many features that effectively meet the needs of that teaching situation. When choosing a main textbook, teachers who are teaching learners that mostly share a similar linguistic and cultural background, and particularly learners from a Western linguistic and cultural background, may find a textbook

that specifically targets those learners to be a more effective resource. However, teachers in a variety of different teaching situations are likely to find the many grammar-focused exercises contained in *Minna no Nihongo* to be a useful resource for assessments and activities, and a welcome addition to their curriculum. Any teacher looking for additional grammar-focused exercises to supplement their curriculum should consider acquiring their own copy of *Minna no Nihongo*.

#### NOTES

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