

CHOOSING A JAPANESE TUTOR

When looking for a Japanese language tutor, it's naturally very important that you know all the necessary facts about a prospective tutor before hiring them. After all, you'll be placing a significant amount of trust in them that will affect your academic success.

Whenever you're talking to a prospective tutor therefore, you should always bear in mind that *you* are the customer, and you have a right to know exactly what you're paying for.

This guide is designed to teach you everything you need to know when looking for a Japanese language tutor, and includes the 7 most important questions to ask when evaluating them.

Please feel free to print out this guide and keep it with you for reference. It will ensure that your choice of Japanese tutors is a good one.

1) How did you learn Japanese?

It's important to understand that when learning any language, there is always a significant difference between what is learned from books or in the classroom, and how the language is actually spoken in the real world. This is especially true of Japanese, which is so closely tied up in the culture of Japan.

It's not really possible therefore, for any tutor to have a strong command of Japanese without having lived in Japan for a considerable amount of time. Their pronunciation will generally sound awkward, their expressions will often not be totally appropriate, and their speech will sound obviously irregular to any Japanese person. Of course these limitations of their 'classroom Japanese' will then be passed on to each of their students.

It's most important to the quality of Japanese that you are taught therefore, that you preferably choose a tutor who is native Japanese, or alternatively one who has lived in Japan for at least 5 years. This way you can be assured of being taught by someone who is truly familiar with the language and its usage, and who can teach you excellent pronunciation and conversational usage.

2) What experience do you have in tutoring Japanese?

You should choose a tutor who has at least 5 years experience in teaching Japanese of your level. There are many factors that go into successfully teaching students a language in a one-on-one environment, and these can only be developed over time with experience.

Bear in mind that a tutor with even 10 years experience in teaching primary school students would not be very suitable for a university Japanese student. Make sure that their experience is relevant to your situation.

Also very importantly, avoid tutors who hesitate or refuse to discuss their previous experience. Often tutors with an inadequate background will become defensive and act as though their skills are beyond question. As I mentioned earlier, *you* are the customer and you have a right to know what you're paying for. You deserve an answer to this question, and there is no valid reason for any tutor not to provide one.

3) How familiar are you with my curriculum?

This follows on a little bit from the last point, but it's very important that your tutor is totally familiar with your curriculum, so that they teach you what is relevant to your studies.

When teaching Japanese, there are 3 general areas that your tutor should cover effectively. Firstly, they should ensure that you know the basics of the language. This includes grammar, vocabulary, sentence structure, etc, across all of the 4 language disciplines: reading, writing, speaking and listening.

Of course this is a large part of what you learn at school, and it can often also be learned quite effectively from books and tapes. Fortunately, most tutors are quite capable of covering this point reasonably well. Secondly, your tutor should teach you to perfect your pronunciation and general speaking quality. I talked about that earlier in question 1).

And thirdly, it's very important that your tutor ensures that you achieve a very high grade in your Japanese studies. They can only do this by being very familiar with your curriculum and covering specifically what is relevant to your coursework. Also, your tutor should be able to tell you exactly what to expect in exams, and to instruct you on what and how to prepare for them in order to get high marks.

Many tutors simply teach from books and almost ignore the specific material in your coursework. For a student hoping to achieve high grades, hiring such a tutor would be an unfortunate waste of time and money.

Be sure to satisfy yourself therefore, that your prospective tutor knows exactly what to cover for the coursework and exams of your level of study before hiring them.

4) What qualifications do you have?

Knowledge of the Japanese language alone does not guarantee that a tutor will have the ability to successfully teach students Japanese. There are many requirements to consider when tutoring a student, to ensure that they learn as quickly and completely as possible.

Tutors must know how to structure and deliver their lessons for each individual student, how to detect and correct a student's weaknesses, how to maximise the students' memory of the material, how to motivate their students to learn, etc.

The best way to ensure that a tutor will be able to do all these things effectively is to choose one who is a qualified teacher. A tutor who has a teaching qualification will have been trained in all the necessary aspects of making their students learn effectively.

Some tutors may have studied Japanese language in Japan for a year or two, and then advertise the fact that they lived in Japan. They are nevertheless not qualified teachers and much too inexperienced to be teaching the language effectively to others. Be sure to avoid unqualified tutors, even if they are native Japanese, and those who refuse to discuss what qualifications they have or don't have. As I said earlier, you have a right to know.

Also be wary of Japanese tutors who are simply Japanese travelers visiting Australia on a working holiday. They are rarely qualified teachers and will usually have no idea of how to teach correctly, or of the requirements of Australian curricula.

5) Do you tutor Japanese full time?

A full-time Japanese tutor will always be preferable to someone who is simply tutoring as a means of extra income, for several reasons. Generally speaking, a full-time tutor will be more reliable and well-prepared since they will take their occupation more seriously, and

therefore put more effort into maintaining a high level of professionalism and proficiency.

One thing to be especially careful of when choosing a Japanese tutor are university students. Some university students decide to take on Japanese tutoring as a convenient part-time source of income, especially after achieving a good HSC grade in Japanese language.

These tutors are not qualified teachers and have nowhere near the necessary experience or level of Japanese to be teaching students. Some of them will actually be taking lessons from a tutor themselves while earning money by tutoring others.

To make matters worse, because of the study commitments and the young age of these university students, their Japanese language studies will generally take a low priority. They will be much too concerned with their own studies, exams, and social activities to be effective and dependable tutors.

6) How do you structure your lessons?

It's very important that your Japanese tutor firstly covers each of the 4 main language disciplines that I mentioned earlier, reading writing, speaking and listening, including vocabulary and grammar, in each lesson they give you.

Some tutors who are not particularly fluent in Japanese will tend to focus excessively or even exclusively on grammar and Kanji, rather than ensuring that their students are proficient in all the language disciplines.

The reason for this is that these tutors themselves are not competent Japanese speakers and have difficulty with Japanese vocabulary and sentence structure in their writing. They therefore take the easy option of teaching the more simple components of the language that can be found in many books.

A good tutor will conduct most of their lesson in Japanese, so that you can quickly become comfortable with speaking and listening to the language. A very important side-benefit of having a tutor outside of your regular Japanese classes is that you get the opportunity to interact with someone in the language you're studying. This of course is a huge benefit that helps you to learn the language so much faster.

There's really no excuse for a tutor who doesn't take every opportunity to speak Japanese to you during a lesson. It's really a free bonus to your education because it costs neither of you any extra time.

Another very important point to consider is how your tutor teaches. You should avoid lazy tutors who teach in a 'classroom style', where you are simply told what to say, read or write, or given printed notes to study on your own.

The whole point of one-on-one personal tutoring is to maximise student interaction, to accelerate your learning. This is what makes good tutoring lessons so effective. By promoting student participation in their lessons, a good tutor will not only ensure that you get the most from your lessons, but that you will enjoy learning Japanese, rather than making it a painful, boring process. And this of course will motivate you and make it easier for you to progress.

You should be able to get a reasonably good idea of how a prospective tutor structures their Japanese lessons, simply by talking to them. In summary, you should ensure that they cover reading, writing, speaking, listening, grammar and vocabulary in each lesson. They should also conduct their lessons in Japanese for maximum benefit to the student.

Of course you'll only get the full picture about your chosen tutor once you have actually experienced a few of their lessons. So don't be afraid to quit from your tutor after several lessons if you feel that they're not what you expected. There is no point persevering in a situation that is clearly not ideal for you while other, more promising opportunities are available.

7) How many hours of tutoring will I need per week?

There is no right or wrong answer to this question since every student is different, but you should understand that while a tutor can advise you of their opinion, it should be your decision in the end.

A good tutor will give you an honest assessment of your level of proficiency in Japanese during your first lesson, and point out your main strong and weak areas. They will then make a recommendation about how many hours of tutoring per week would be necessary to achieve your goals, and therefore provide you with the best value for your money.

It's in your best interests to avoid tutors who try to pressure you into being tutored for more hours per week than you feel are necessary or that you feel comfortable with. A tutor who insists on an too many hours per

week, especially before even evaluating you, is either trying to maximise their profit, or compensating for their ineffective teaching methods.

What is your prospective tutor's attitude like?

This is not exactly a question to ask your prospective tutor, but rather something for you to consider when speaking to them.

You'll find your whole learning experience, both in terms of enjoyment and results, so much more pleasant with a tutor who is positive, open and friendly. Tutors who tend to be authoritative or aggressive may project an image of efficiency and discipline on the surface, but in reality will generally be less effective in motivating their students to higher levels.

A friendly yet professional teacher, on the other hand, will provide more interesting and educational lessons, that drive students to learn faster and achieve better grades.

CONCLUSION

As you can see, there are quite a number of important points that you need to be sure of before deciding on a Japanese tutor.

To complicate the situation further, there is a whole variety of people who label themselves as Japanese tutors, so you need to be especially careful about checking the background of anyone who you are intending to hire. Many try to attract students by offering unusually cheap rates, but like everything else, always remember that you only get what you pay for.

Follow this guide closely and you're sure to find a good tutor who will provide great value for money. And the level and quality of your Japanese will improve greatly, as will your grades!

Good luck!!

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