

Japanese Learning Websites for Self-directed Learning: An Interview with *Tofugu's* Koichi



Andrew D. Tweed
Meijo University
Email: adtweed@gmail.com

As learners of Japanese, one of the biggest frustrations is learning kanji. Not only is it notoriously difficult to learn, but not knowing kanji also makes it challenging to acquire other Japanese skills such as reading, writing, and vocabulary. While there is no magic formula to learning kanji, some methods are more effective and efficient than others. The best resource that I have found for learning kanji is the website *WaniKani*.

Before I knew about *WaniKani*, I was a fan of *Tofugu*. Koichi's blog about Japanese culture and language. Reading *Tofugu*, I was intrigued that Koichi not only included a list of recommended Japanese dramas, but that he also wrote an article on how to use dramas for learning Japanese by using shadowing and other techniques. In fact, all of Koichi's sites include some focus on particular learning strategies. These can range from tips on how to avoid distractions, to using a spaced repetition system (SRS), and mnemonics for more effective memorization.

Koichi says that his most popular sites are *WaniKani* and *TextFugu*—the latter is a general Japanese course which goes from beginner to intermediate levels. He is also working on a new advanced site called *EtoEto*. As I myself am interested in self-directed learning—I work as a learning advisor at a university in Japan—and learning Japanese, I recently asked Koichi if he would do an interview so that I could learn more about the thinking behind these websites. In our exchange below, Koichi discusses how he got started designing Japanese learning websites, as well as his ideas on self-directed learning and motivation. The interview is followed by some closing remarks by me, including my own experiences with *WaniKani*.

AT (Andrew Tweed): What were you doing before you started your Japanese learning websites?

K (Koichi): I started *Tofugu* while I was in college. Somehow I was able to convince a professor to let me do independent study, so I even got credit for doing it. Afterwards I spent about a year working at an education startup called *eduFire*. The goal of this company was to let anyone create a class and teach it live (online). So, in my free time I would actually teach Japanese classes on the *eduFire* platform. I got to experiment with various “non-traditional” teaching techniques, which I think helped me a lot later on as I started writing my own materials.

AT: How did you get into creating online Japanese learning sites?

K: *eduFire* got sold and I was not part of the future owner's plans, so I glued together *TextFugu* with *Wordpress* and a few really hacked together plug-ins. *WaniKani* was just something I always really wanted to do. I liked the idea of using mnemonics for learning kanji/vocabulary, and I had put together a method for myself. Doing this isn't particularly convenient or easy, it takes a lot of work. *WaniKani* isn't particularly groundbreaking. Other people use mnemonics. Other people use SRS. Other people consider various studies on how people learn. But, we're the only ones that put all those things together in a way that's seamless, and easy for the user. If you 'show up' every day and follow the instructions, you'll learn the kanji.

AT: What motivated you to create Japanese learning materials?

K: A lot of it has to do with the question “what do I wish I had back in the day?” And then, we build it. The other half comes from my time spent studying things other than the Japanese language. I've studied and practiced mnemonic methods. I've studied people's works on memory. I've studied child development in relation to education and learning. Then, I applied them to Japanese. With *WaniKani*, we were able to take something that takes the average person 5 or 10 (or more) years, and reduce it down to 1-2 years.

AT: Could you tell me some ways you think your Japanese learning materials are different from more traditional Japanese textbooks?

K: First, we focus a lot on motivation, and keeping people's motivation for the long term—not just long enough to get people's money. Second, we spend a lot of time teaching people how to learn. If I could change one thing about the education system here, it would be that all students would have to learn how to learn. It would save so much time in the long run. So much of traditional education goes completely against how humans naturally learn things, so we have to spend a lot of time undoing all the damage that's been done.

AT: In your experience, what are some problems that learners have with self-directed learning?

K: There's a lot of them, of course. But there's a lot of problems no matter what path you take. If I had to make a guess, I'd say motivation is the key problem with self teaching. Learning something new basically goes like this¹:

Unconscious incompetence: You don't know enough to know what you're doing badly / wrong. Every thing is new, too, so proportionate to the time you spend, you're learning a lot more than you will be later on. Also, ignorance is bliss.

Conscious incompetence: Then you learn enough to know that you're doing things wrong. You know enough to know that you're not that good. This is where most people quit, because you go from 100 mph in the last step to 10 mph, and you just assume it's because you're stupid.

Conscious competence: If you can make it through the previous step (the wall), you start to learn enough to direct your progress. You know what you need to practice in order to move forward and get better. This is when things become fun again.

Unconscious competence: You're so good that you do things automatically. You get better automatically without thinking. This is the best step of all, and you are able to get a lot of joy out of your skill and

progress.

That's a long way of saying that most people just quit at step two, conscious incompetence. They don't know how to get past it. They don't have people who are doing it with them, or teachers who have been there already and can guide them through more quickly. I definitely spend a lot of time focused on getting people through conscious incompetence as quickly as possible, but I think it's impossible to make it painless. So, maybe that's the biggest problem with self-teaching. Just getting through that learning step. It really is tough. Next time you learn something new, pay attention. If you stick with it long enough you'll run into all four steps.

AT: Some students get derailed from their pursuits with self-directed learning? Do you have tips for dealing with this situation?

K: Another one of those things where it really depends on the individual, but here's some general tips:

- Just know that conscious incompetence, (etc) exist. Knowing you're supposed to be bad at something 2-4 weeks after you start really helps you to come to terms.
- Get rid of the things that are stopping you from progressing. Put those *Playstation* controllers in really inconvenient places. Turn off notifications on your phone. Basically, become a Luddite.
- Focus all your efforts on studying more often, but not longer. Ten minutes a day is better than five hours only one day a week.
- Try to talk to people who have done the same thing you're trying to do. They can tell you about pitfalls, good techniques, etc.
- Try to visualize where you want to go. Paint a picture in your head. Then, come up with training methods that will get you there, one step at a time. If you have no concrete idea of what it is you are trying to do, it's awfully hard to come up with a way to do it. This is kind of a professional sports technique, but I think it applies well to education as well.
- If you are having trouble motivating yourself to study, promise yourself just 1-5 minutes of studying then you can be done. Most likely, once you start, you'll keep going for longer than this.

¹ See Adams (undated) for more details about the Learning Stages model, which was originally developed over 30 years ago by Noel Burch.

In the end, though, it's going to come down to your own motivation, and grit.

AT: Could you share some techniques that you use for motivating learners in *TextFugu* or *WaniKani*?

K: I'll mention a few. First, we try to steer our online community in a direction where people help each other out. It's hard to do on the internet, and our success in this goes up and down depending on who's being a troll that day. Also, we focus on getting people to come back daily. Learners should create a habit, so that *WaniKani* is just something they do, not something they have to do. Another thing is that we try to make things actionable. With *WaniKani* it's easy, the actionable task is doing your reviews, or doing your lessons. With *TextFugu* and *EtoEto*, it's a little harder. I have to come up with actionable tasks for the user to do that will help them to acquire the lesson content. Finally, we keep sessions short. In *TextFugu* and *EtoEto* I keep the pages fairly short, so people have that sense of progress in small but frequent increments. In *WaniKani*, we have it set up so you shouldn't have to sit down for more than 30 minutes a day, depending on your review speed.

AT: Finally, do you have any predictions on how technology will change language learning in the next 5-10 years?

K: I don't even know what I'm going to be doing next week, so predicting the future is a little difficult for me! Virtual reality (VR) would be really cool. Humans learn best when in a visual environment. We can memorize the layouts of new rooms very accurately and instantly, but trying to recall a sequence of numbers is really difficult. VR would add a much more visual element to learning, and I can think of a lot of

interesting applications that could be done. That being said, to make VR a *really* good tool, there'd need to be a lot more advancement in artificial intelligence (AI)—reacting to the things you do in the VR world—as well as speech recognition—so you could interact more with the world, while getting good feedback from the AI. I guess I could see that happening in 5-10 years, though I'm not terribly optimistic.

A: Thank you very much for your time.

Closing remarks

The thing that strikes me most about Koichi is that his experiences come not from being a trained teacher, but rather from being a successful learner. He therefore approaches learning from the point of view of the learner. Koichi is clearly passionate about helping people learn more effectively and this is what really separates him from many other authors of Japanese learning materials.

I'd like to close by saying a few words about my own experience with *WaniKani*. As Koichi mentions, the SRS and mnemonics are two of the attractive features of this kanji learning website. In most cases, I find the mnemonics to work, but in cases where I prefer to use my own, I can enter in whatever personally helps me to learn. Another really helpful element is how *WaniKani* uses radicals as the building blocks to learn Kanji and vocabulary. By memorizing radicals quickly, it is much easier to see how they combine to form Kanji. One minor issue I have had with *WaniKani* is that I find the text to be a little small. When I'm on a PC, I enlarge the screen, but I do not have this option on my smartphone. Hopefully this is something that they will look into in the future.

If you would like to try any of his Japanese learning websites, they offer free trials so that you can see if you it works for you. You can find out more at the following addresses:

- Tofugu: <https://www.tofugu.com>
- Textfugu: <http://www.textfugu.com>
- WaniKani: <https://www.wanikani.com>

Reference

Adams, L. (undated). Learning a new skill is easier said than done. Gordon Training International. Retrieved 23 September 2016 from <http://www.gordontraining.com/free-workplace-articles/learning-a-new-skill-is-easier-said-than-done/>