
Hirayama, Hitomi. *Breakthrough Japanese: 20 MiniLessons for Better Conversation.*

Tokyo, Japan: Kodansha, 2004. ISBN: 4-7700-2873-3.

Breakthrough Japanese addresses a variety of topics, specifically Japanese idioms. It consists of twenty lessons on appealing subjects such as the idiom “wide face and light mouth” and personal pronouns that cannot be used in certain situations. Each lesson begins with an eye-catching anecdote. Multiple examples follow along with application exercises. In addition, the sample sentences are filled with culture. For example, “Hmm ... well ...” (118) does not mean that the person is thinking but, instead, implies “no” in Japanese culture. However, in spite of these examples, supplemental explanations on corresponding sociocultural aspects of the language seem relatively scarce. About halfway through each lesson is a section for application in the form of fill-in-the-blanks or translations of an entire sentence in a dialogue.

One strength of *Breakthrough Japanese* is that the topics and language samples reflect Japanese culture very well. One of the stated goals of the text is to describe “why Japanese say something in a particular way” (8), which is illustrated in the anecdote at the beginning of each lesson. Many of the selected topics cover what appears more in colloquial expressions than in relatively formal

teaching materials. Sample sentences and dialogues in formal teaching materials tend to be very grammatical, though their grammaticality makes them look sanitized and unnatural. However, *Breakthrough Japanese* presents samples that are close to authentic uses of the language.

Breakthrough Japanese may not be suitable as the sole textbook for a Japanese course because it requires a substantial amount of background knowledge. The level of vocabulary, grammar, and sentence length does not gradually increase but remains constant throughout the lessons. This attribute leads this reviewer to believe that learners should have a certain amount of background knowledge of Japanese prior to using *Breakthrough Japanese* instead of trying to add to their knowledge of the language by studying this text.

Teaching culture creates difficulties regarding vocabulary and grammar. Many times when sample sentences are authentic, readers must already know how to use certain vocabulary words. In order to provide this type of knowledge, an instructor must prepare numerous supplemental material to teach any language skills with *Breakthrough Japanese*. It requires time for any learner to decode language samples that need to be presented in meaningful and constructive steps. The samples in *Breakthrough Japanese* seem to skip these constructive steps that beginning level learners must take. It is erroneous to assume that students can read sample sentences and immediately understand how to use them.

As the author states, the explanation of grammar is limited to a minimum, which leaves learners to discover the rules by themselves. An advanced learner may not find this hard to do, but a beginner most likely needs a separate resource. Another confusing characteristic of *Breakthrough Japanese* is that the information is not always organized into consecutive units. For example, Lessons 5, 15, and 16 should follow each other since the topic is numbers.

Another possible problem deriving from limited grammar explanations is the structural difference between English and Japanese. Japanese sentences do not always require a subject and a verb. What is already mentioned becomes unnecessary to repeat. Deleted parts of a sentence must be filled in by the reader. Due to this characteristic, the longer a reading selection, the more difficult it becomes. Secondly, there is a part of speech called particles that are rather hard to understand when presented without a context. Third, the use of *kanji* characters is quite extensive from the beginning, which, as a result, makes each short language sample denser and that much harder to decode.

As regards reading, *Breakthrough Japanese* provides few extended materials with sufficient context. Most of the samples are independent sentences. The dialogue in Lesson 17 is somewhat longer than others, yet insufficient for intermediate students. Eight lines of a conversation in this dialogue is hardly enough for intermediate or advanced learners. If the vocabulary, sentence length, and structures were controlled, dialogues of this length would provide a great reading practice for beginners.

Being rich in cultural content may add yet another type of difficulty concerning the use of honorific and humble forms. Unless a learner is already familiar with the concept of different ways of showing respect, they may be easily confused.

If *Breakthrough Japanese* is to be used for speaking, some form of audio guide seems necessary because pronunciation in Romanization can be a problem. Without an audio guide, the readers' pronunciation of Romanized Japanese scripts typically would be heavily influenced by their native language. Japanese has characteristics such as high and low pitches. Intonation and location of pauses are also quite difficult to acquire through Romanized Japanese.

Although the author claims this book is for multiple levels of learners, it is suited more for advanced students for reference purposes because of the level of vocabulary, idioms, and the organization of the lessons. These elements are not introduced step-by-step so that the degree of difficulty increases gradually in each lesson.

Breakthrough Japanese can serve as a great resource for non-native Japanese speakers to learn about the culture expressed in Japanese idioms. However, it is probably more suitable as a supplemental reference book of specific usages of the language in an authentic Japanese cultural setting.

Yasue Oguro
Assistant Professor
Defense Language Institute
Monterey, CA