

EPISODE 2 TRANSCRIPT

Hello, everyone. I'm Sonia Paul, and welcome to Shizuoka Speaks, based in Shizuoka City, in Shizuoka Prefecture, Japan. This series examines what happens behind the scenes of language education in Japan. We're talking about personal experiences, educational viewpoints, different cultures.

That singing you just heard comes from one of today's guests, a Japanese language instructor. For our first episode, we talked with 15 year old Jogi about adjusting to life in a Japanese public school. He's studied English both in Japan and at an international school in China.

Today, we continue our discussion of language learning...but we're going beyond English. The topic is learning methods between English AND Japanese. What can the experience of one language tell us about understanding the other, or teaching the other?

We'll hear from a couple of language teachers later on during the show, including that singing instructor. But for now, we'll talk to three students.

They are all from different countries. And they are all graduates of Kokusai Kotoba Gakuin, a Japanese language institute in Shizuoka City.

Phan: My name is Phan Duy Van, and I am from Vietnam.

Sonia: What is your name and where are you from?

Manasi: My name is Manasi and I'm from India.

Sonia: And how old are you?

Manasi: I'm 22.

Sonia: So, could you spell your name?

Ria: R-I-A, you can call me Ria.

Sonia: And where are you from?

Ria: I'm from Indonesia.

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Sonia: And how old are you, Ria?

R: Now, 28.

Sonia: 28!! But you look so young!!

R: NOO!! (laughing).

Ria really does look very young for her age.

Manasi and I interviewed at her apartment last fall. Phan and I met at his school last spring. And Ria and I talked last spring as well, at a park. Here is what they each have to say about why they started learning Japanese, and what's it's like for them to study in Shizuoka City and try to improve. First, Manasi.

Sonia: Why this interest in Japanese?

Manasi: Actually, you know, when I got into college, I wanted my hands to be full, and I also wanted to do a language. So when I spoke to people about which language should I do, so everyone said, you know, well Chinese and Japanese is supposed to be, like, really good? Because there's a lot of Japanese companies in India? A lot of them, yeah. And there's a lot of scope for the language, and not many people choose Japanese because it's really difficult, so it's quite challenging. And I thought, "Yeah, what the hell, let's give it a try." And I attended a Chinese class also, by the way, and that was like, really weird because, you know, in Chinese, you have these tonal...stuff. So if you say "ta" and "taa" and "taaa," it means three different things. So you know, when I attended that, I was like, "Dude, I can't do this, this is not my thing. I might just end up abusing somebody!"

Manasi has been studying Japanese for a few years now. At the time of our interview, she had been living in Shizuoka for about seven months.

Manasi: On the speaking, yeah, I think I'm pretty comfortable now, but the script and the written exams are extremely difficult, and I keep forgetting the kanjis. So for me, that is still a challenge... Because Japanese is an extremely difficult language, and I've realized that they can speak in Japanese, but most of them can't write most of the kanjis...

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By “most of them,” she means most Japanese people.

Manasi: ...which is quite shocking for me because it's their own language. So unless they're not practicing every time, it's difficult to actually know what it really is.

Let's stop for a moment to talk a little bit about the Japanese writing system. Japanese is a language of syllables, really. Take Shizuoka. Shi, Zu, O, and Ka each have a character in hiragana, which is the most basic writing system in Japanese. The Japanese also have a writing system for foreign words called katakana. Though the characters are different, the sounds in katakana mirror the sounds in hiragana.

Anyway, what Manasi is talking about is a third writing system in Japanese called kanji. Kanji borrows its characters from Chinese, and each kanji character can encompass multiple syllables. So if you write Shizuoka in kanji, there are just two characters, rather than the four in hiragana. That's because one kanji character stands for “Shi-zu” and the other character stands for “o-ka.”

Sonia: All right, so is it required for you, for any exam that you have to take, to actually write the kanjis?

Manasi: Yeah. Actually, I need to remember the kanjis for the tests that I want to get through. But if you don't write the kanjis and practice, and if you don't know how to write it, you can't read it. I mean, once the level goes up. Because there are a lot of kanjis which look the same, but if you know the strokes, you know what it is.

The test that Manasi is referring to is the JLPT, which stands for the Japanese Language Proficiency Test. It has five levels, with level 5 being the most basic and level 1 being the most advanced.

Phan is also studying for the JLPT. Obviously, he knows English, too. But whereas English was a required subject in school, Japanese was something he decided to study more for fun.

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Phan: ...I have interest in Japanese culture, such as in anime, or manga, and some kind of music.

Sonia: What's your favorite anime?

Phan: When I was a boy, I liked Doraemon the most, and now I am enjoying watching every episode of Naruto anime.

Anime is the name for Japanese-style cartoons. Doraemon is one of the most popular characters. He's a blue, happy-go-lucky robotic cat. Naruto is another popular animation about a boy with superhero capabilities.

Anime has definitely been one of Japan's biggest cultural exports in recent years. Phan was 19 years old when we interviewed; he's since turned twenty. But he remembers watching these cartoons years ago, when he was a little boy.

So Phan's initial interest in Japan is quite different from the one Manasi had. And he has a totally different outlook toward learning kanji as well...

Phan: When I look at the kanji, I think about its meaning. Because our language is similar to Chinese, I can understand its meaning without knowing how to read it.

We know that kanji comes from Chinese. And Japanese is similar to Chinese because of that shared writing system.

But it turns out--and I didn't know this before myself--traditional Vietnamese is similar to Chinese too. Modern Vietnamese language, which is what most people are used to seeing, uses Roman letters along with different accent markers. But the older, more traditional Vietnamese writing system incorporates some Chinese characters. Apparently, this relationship between Vietnamese and Chinese makes it easier for some Vietnamese speakers to learn Japanese. But it's not enough, at least for Phan.

Sonia: How would you rank your ability in each language? Like, on a scale of one to five, with one being the worst and five being the best, how would you rank yourself in Vietnamese, English, and in Japanese?

Phan: In Vietnamese I can give me 6.

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Sonia: 6! Oh, okay.

Phan: In English, at this moment maybe 2. Because I forgot a lot of words and pronunciation. In Japanese, about one and a half.

Sonia: One and a half!

Phan: Yes, in my opinion, Japanese is ten times harder than English.

Sonia: Really.

Phan: Really.

Sonia: Why do you think it's ten times harder?

Phan: When you write a word in English, you have only one way to read it. But in Japanese, one kanji letter can have about five or four ways to read, and each way has another different meaning.

What Phan is saying is true for Japanese. But in English, there isn't always "only one way" to read a word. Some words that are written the same way may have different meanings. For example, the word spelled c-l-o-s-e. The meaning of the word in the phrase "a close call" is different from its meaning in the phrase "close the door."

In this way, English is actually similar to Japanese, not different from it. But not everybody sees it this way.

As for Ria? Her childhood too, brought her to Japan in a sense.

S: So why did you decide to come to Japan?

Ria: Because it was my dream since I was born, maybe! Yeah, it's like my childhood dream, and I think like, "Ah, no way could I go there," and like, I get this chance when I got my third job. My mom called me one day and asked me, "Do you want to go to Japan? Do you still want to go to Japan?" "Yes, I would love to," "Yeah, if you want to, you have to quit everything and start everything from zero, because you have to learn the language and everything." And so I said, "Yes, I will," so I resigned and I studied Japanese in my country for six months and...and then I came here.

S: So, okay, hold on...

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Ria: It's kind of weird.

S: Why was it your childhood dream to come to Japan?

Ria: Because once, my dad...the company sent him to Japan to do some kind of job for a month or two. I was like, five, maybe, or six years old? And when he came back, he tells great stories about Japan, and so I really start to get interest, and then I watched Japanese videos, that kind of stuff, comics...and I find it really interesting and ...so I start to dream, you know, of going here someday.

But now that Ria's in Japan, she's got to study.

Sonia: What do you think about Japanese language?

Ria: Really damn hard. Yeah at first time time, you find it, "Oh yeah, excited, it's cute to know the language." But after you really have to use it...it's still a process that I'm struggling.

Sonia: Is it very different to study Japanese here versus studying Japanese back in Indonesia?

Ria: Well...not much different, actually, but...because...you can't learn language only by the theory, right? And mostly I improved my Japanese not in the school but in my part-time job. So, to directly interact with the people....Yeah, it's working to improve my Japanese.

Manasi, Phan, and Ria each pointed out different ways for studying Japanese. Writing. Recognition. Talking. But do some techniques work better than others? And does the Japanese language itself call for certain methods more? And what about methods for studying English? Are they different or similar?

To try to answer these questions, I spoke with two teachers from a graduate institute affiliated with Kokusai Kotoba Gakuin. The institute is for graduates of Kotoba who want to continue their language studies. But they don't just study Japanese. They study Chinese, Korean, English, AND Japanese.

Nishigai: My name is Reiko Nishigai.

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Reiko Nishigai is a Japanese language teacher for the institute.

Nishigai: I'm from Shizuoka! I was born in Shimizu.

And Noriko Kobayashi is an English teacher for the institute.

Kobayashi: English is quite door to the entire world...dakara, I was really interested in English.....

Japanese students call their teachers "Sensei," so I'll refer to them as Nishigai Sensei and Kobayashi Sensei.

Sonia: In terms of teaching foreign languages, do you think there is a very big difference in teaching English, for example, versus teaching Japanese? Is the methodology a little bit different?

Nishigai: In English, sound and speaking is much more important. But in Japanese, sometimes silence is more important than speaking. Besides, Japanese is a visual language, I think. So to teach them letters is very difficult. How do you...(gomen, chotto).

Nishigai Sensei can speak English, as we just heard. But since this topic is a bit complicated, she's telling her views to Kobayashi Sensei in Japanese.

Kobayashi: She mentioned that English is more of a sound-oriented language. Phonics is important. Compared to Japanese, Japanese is more a visual language, and....what do you mean by visual language?

That's a good question.

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Kobayashi: Methodology for teaching English doesn't always match to the methodology of teaching Japanese language. And for those who use kanji characters, like for Chinese students who have already knowledge of kanji, usually have no problem of learning, mastering kanji. However, those students who have never seen kanji before, and using different writing system, for them, writing itself is quite difficult. And also, what she said was in English, you really have to explain and speak out what you think, but in Japanese, there are many embedded meaning behind the word or letter...

Embedded meanings? What does that mean?

Kobayashi: Context exists a lot in Japanese language.

Hmm...but context itself means many different things. So it might be better for us to think of "context" as "subtleties" or "nuances." And both Japanese culture and language are very nuanced.

For example, body language plays a big role in Japanese communication. This might be why, in comparison, English seems more "sound-oriented." English speakers are more likely than Japanese speakers to actually say what they mean instead of hint at it subtly.

Another way to think about context in Japanese is with speaking or writing. People will often omit the subject in a sentence...because others can assume what it is through the context of that sentence.

The actual kanji characters also often have history, culture, and emotion behind them...so this affects their individual meanings and the way people will interpret them. That's probably what Kobayashi Sensei meant when she said that kanji have "embedded" meanings.

Sonia: As language teachers, though, are there any techniques that you think can apply to all kinds of languages and all kinds of students?

Kobayashi: You use songs a lot.

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Nishigai: Mmm..because I like songs.

Kobayashi: Because you like songs! And if students like songs, it really works, you know.

Nishigai: But sometimes it doesn't work....For example, Vietnamese don't like sing. Once, one Chinese student asked me, "Why do you make us sing a song?"

Kobayashi: Really?...

Sonia: Can you give an example of a song?

Nishigai: Of a song? In Japanese?

Sonia: Yes...

Nishigai: It is called counting songs in Japanese. Japanese singer-songwriter, she wrote this song for the world peace? And if we sing a song by counting numbers, we know each other, and...how do you say...there is no barrier between countries? That kind of thing. For example, like this:

(singing)

Sonia: That's great! Thank you!

Nishigai: I'm so shy!

Kobayashi: I don't think so.

Sonia: So good!

Nishigai: Through this song, we teach a lot of things. For example...how to count things, one apple, two apple, three apples, like that. We have different ways of counting. That is a very difficult thing.

Many educators use songs for teaching both Japanese AND English. But Nishigai Sensei and Kobayashi Sensei touched on some important issues. Some students are shy about singing. And Japanese language and culture are both very indirect.

This presents an issue: how do you get students who are familiar with assuming and conveying things by context used to a more explicit language like English?

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Kobayashi: If you know, please let me know. I don't think there is any method which works for all students, but songs is quite ice-breaking, games, songs. But for them to get gradual effect, they really need to do, you know, drills, reading. That part of learning is essential, I believe.

Remember Susan, from our first episode? She's a junior high school Japanese English teacher. She had this to add about learning languages:

Susan: I want my students to motivate their learning. So I'm thinking about that for these years!...For me, I want to communicate with people from other countries...but anything is okay! For about English songs, or students want to go abroad. So, the motivation is very important.

Ahh, motivation. I guess the saying is true for some people. If there is a will, there is a way.

Thanks to our guests Kobayashi Sensei, Nishigai Sensei, Susan, and Manasi, Phan, and Ria. We'll definitely hear more from all of them as our podcast continues.

Next week: does it make a difference what language background you come from?

For the students from China and Korea and Taiwan and...mm, Myanmar and Vietnam is okay. But then...some other countries...No matter how long they stay in Japan, they cannot read kanjis. They cannot write kanjis....

Join us next week on Shizuoka Speaks. I'm Sonia Paul. Thank you for listening.