

We overlook our learning habits. Then our energy fizzles out, along with the learning. Then you replace the enthusiasm with regret.

You can change that.

Taking positive action steps from here can help you get from textbook to talking Japanese:

What is a habit?

A habit is something we do without having to think about it.

The same goes for muscle memory

It takes 21 days to make a new habit

It takes 67 days to automate that habit

In other words, you really have to stick at something for it to get easy!

“Habits lead to actions, which lead to results which in turn leads us to success”

So we have to BE, to be able to DO, to be able to HAVE

What I mean is:

We have to BE the person that learns daily.

To BE the person that learns daily we have to DO the right actions.

Then we will HAVE the Japanese in our head that we want to learn.

.....
If we HAVE the right Japanese in our head and DO the speaking we want regularly, then we will BE the Japanese speaker we want to BE

.....
It starts with the BE - being the effective Japanese Learner.

The habits that I refer to here are designed to help you connect your learning to a real life spontaneous conversation in Japanese, and take beyond memorising phrases and grammar routines that often miss out the element of speaking in realistic situations. That leaves you feeling frustrated and deflated when you enter a real conversation. The conversation is out of your control and by the time you have understood something, the conversation has moved on.

And if you are just spouting memorised phrases, you'll never be able to have the next sentence to add to the conversation. By the time you've searched your memory for a pre-learnt sentence, the conversation has moved on without you.

If you want to make lasting connections through speaking Japanese, you have to master the art of spontaneous conversations.

To do that you need effective conversation habits:

PLEASE do not think that all these are to be done each day! This is a bunch of ideas or you to choose from.

We all learn in different ways, with different lives. Choose what fits your lifestyle.

One habit is one step closer to your goal! Closer to your Japanese speaking success.

Make your daily plan realistic.

Stick to your plan. Don't let yourself not do it.

Work out just how much you can do in any one study moment. Too much in your plan will mean you don't feel the element of accomplishment. The same goes if there's too little - you will feel like you are not moving on.

Keep a little excitement going by having a learning plan and getting through your learning units, from something with a structure like a book, or a series of lessons. Check in with someone to see if you have understood before you plough ahead just cramming information into your head. Application is vital.

Avoid planning unspecific goals like flicking through YouTube to find some Japanese. Make your YouTube video searching match exactly what you are looking to learn.

So really, you need to start with your learning goal:

Look at your learning goal every day.

Remind yourself that you are aiming to achieve a long term goal. Have that goal at the forefront of your mind each day.

Make a reminder - a dream board, a mantra, a picture, a scribbled note, an audio alarm on your phone “日本語を勉強しましょう!”, for example. When you look ahead, it's easier to see why you have chosen your learning path. Make sure your learning path matches your goals!

To make a good plan you can ask these questions:

Why am I learning this?

What purpose will it achieve?

What am I going to learn?

How much can I learn in a given time?

How will I learn that - will I use a book, free apps, podcasts, a teacher?

When will I make the time to learn that?

How will I manage the people around me to support my learning?

How will I know that I am learning properly?

How will I be able to practise what I learn regularly with other people?

How will I be able to speak Japanese regularly?

Are you ready to choose from this list now?

Simple habit forming actions:

Set your phone alarm ten minutes earlier than usual for every day, and do some Japanese learning.

Set a reminder for when you are travelling to do something Japanese.

In your lunch hour or your journey home, have a small list of words you can test yourself on.

If you like walking or running, line up your podcasts to go with you. You can listen to lessons or stories. Listening to stories actively in Japanese repeatedly helps patterns of Japanese rest more easily in your brain. However, if you listen with no intent you will not learn so much - you will be thinking about what you're going to eat for your next meal with the 'noise' in the background!

Read something in Japanese. Just a small portion of it. Focus on it. Collect new words.

Listen to, or watch the news or the weather in Japanese. Listen out for specific sounds and repeat them out loud.

Keep it short and snappy. Repeat each day, picking new words and sounds.

With your new words make a new reminder later in the day to create a new sentence with them, each one. Say them out loud. Send them on a voice messenger or a message to someone who will check them for you. Get feedback. Keep the list really short.

Keep your weekly list of new learning AND review it.

At the end of the week make up even more new sentences with those words or phrases. Use each one again at least once.

Build up word families to expand your vocabulary in the same field, eg opposites and words with similar meaning. Change the tense of the sentence to practise one you are currently learning. Send a voice message to someone who cares to practise with you and feedback on your creations.

Keep creative application realistic:

Make all creative sentences something you would normally say, not a random phrase you would never use in real life.

Read out loud in Japanese for five minutes every day.

Read slowly and articulate the sounds. Locate the sounds you find hardest and collect them. Practise these sounds more often in the day - make a note somewhere. Bring them to your live Japanese meeting with your learning partner or teacher to help you pronounce well.

Give yourself daily/weekly time to learn Japanese, even when all around seems chaotic.

1 Make a specific time each day or week to sit down and study with no interruptions. It is important to get the support you need from those who are likely to interrupt you. Have someone take the dog out, take your youngster for a little walk or play with them, or prepare you a meal once a week. If you're on your own, try to shift your day a little earlier and get up just before everyone else to have uninterrupted time. Maybe that time is at the end of the day, or when your little ones are having an afternoon nap. If you're at work, add ten minutes to the day before you leave, or arrive a little earlier. This is hard though as you have your 'work head' on, so you need to be super organised for that!

2 Prepare everyone around you to know that this is your quiet learning moment. Avoid sitting in a place where people are likely to want a piece of you - close the door and make a simple sign - LEARNING TIME - I'll be back to you in ten minutes. It works for little children too, as they come to realise that learning is important and life long. Soon enough, they follow your example!

3 Most importantly, the time needs setting in stone - if you decide ten minutes per day, or an hour a week or even more, make sure you stick to it. Short bursts daily are better than long sessions of two hours rushed at the end of the week. With a language, especially speaking, you are likely to engage in short conversations. Aim for short and intense practice rather than burying your head in the textbook without designing the time to speak to someone in Japanese at least once a week.

4 Make a different specific time to practise speaking Japanese at least once a week. The more you speak Japanese, the more you will progress. All the knowledge in your head will not help you learn to speak Japanese comfortably if you are not allowing yourself to get spontaneous conversations flowing with someone. This goes for any level of Japanese: you can create sentences on paper, and creative application helps you learn, yes, but you need to stimulate that part of your brain that helps you speak spontaneously. You get this in regular, live conversations.

Give yourself daily/weekly space to learn Japanese and design your learning zone.

Make sure your learning space is comfortable

Pronunciation & Intonation

When you can, listen to any Japanese: the radio, music, a downloaded film. Listen for five minutes with intent. Repeat any sound you pick up in just the same way you heard it. 'Tune in' again and find another random sound to repeat.

Record yourself speaking - focus on the clarity of your pronunciation and intonation. Copy sentences from a podcast and compare the difference until you are happy with the result, and choose a new sentence. One sentence said well per day will help. Quality, not quantity.

Weekly meeting focus points:

- Practise reading out loud and get feedback
- Talk about a specific topic
- Have questions ready to stimulate conversation
- Have your answer ready to give, but avoid memorising it - aim to be able to adapt
- Have a learning point to ask about
- Practise a specific grammar point
- Check out your creative sentences from the week

Make yourself accountable - get a “tomodachi” or teacher to help you progress

It’s so easy to drift off and ‘let yourself off the hook’. Once you do it, you let it happen so much until you have broken the habit.

Have someone to check in with you each week and discuss your progress. Importantly, discuss what you have learnt, your application and how you will manage your next week’s learning. Review how well you are learning and discuss the best way forward.

A learning partner is someone on your learning journey who can help you learn more, but you still need a person in the teacher role to help you advance your Japanese.

Be kind to yourself if you slip up.

Adjust to the changes around you and think for the long term. It’s ok to do more one week and a little less another. It’s ok to make mistakes in your speaking - that’s part of the learning. And it’s perfectly fine to adjust in the light of evaluating how well you’re learning. So you find time to cover more learning? Great! Or maybe you found you have too much to do? Just adapt carefully. Without making necessary changes to your learning plan, you are not paying respect to your overall goals.

And that is where we come full circle:

Keep your goals always up front!

Recommended further reading: I wholeheartedly suggest reading “**Atomic Habits**” by James Clear, one of the world’s leading experts on habit formation. He draws on the most proven ideas from biology, psychology, and neuroscience to create an easy-to-understand guide for making good habits inevitable and bad habits impossible.

Now, with this in mind, go and fill in your planner!

Activity	Day & Date	Tue 30/7						
Learning goal decided and written down		y						
New learning list		y						
Review list		y						
Comfortable learning zone								
Kept creative application realistic		y						
Read out loud in Japanese								
Pronunciation & Intonation								
Weekly meeting focus points								
Spoken to “tomodachi” or teacher ?		y						
Were you kind to yourself today?		y						

example