

# KATAKANA IN CONTEXT, A MOTIVATIONAL LEARNING TOOL

Aukje Both, Nelson College for Girls, New Zealand



Abstract: Many students find Katakana script harder to learn than Hiragana. In this paper I want to explain what makes Katakana the more difficult script to learn, and discuss the advantages of learning Katakana script first. I will explain how I introduce a weekly set of new Katakana in class, using my Power Point resource called “*Katakana in Context*”, with photos of every day Japanese life. I will also show some follow-up activities that students can use to further develop their Katakana reading and writing skills.

Keywords: Katakana, Hiragana, Motivation, Context, Power Point.

## INTRODUCTION

In New Zealand international languages are not a part of the compulsory school curriculum and Japanese is an optional subject which has to compete against other subjects that are often perceived to be easier than Japanese. So it is important that students who choose to study Japanese are motivated to continue with their study. We need to stimulate their interest and give them a sense of achievement. Learning a new script should not be seen as difficult, but as meaningful and fun.

Our students are growing up in the age of technology and I think language teachers should use the available technology to bring variety in their lessons. Teaching Katakana script through Power Point and digital photos is just one of the many ways how language teachers can utilise Information Technology in their classes.

Although the “*Katakana in Context*” lessons can be used at any stage of Japanese language learning, my desire to develop this resource was a direct result of my plan to teach the Katakana script before introducing Hiragana.



## KATAKANA FIRST

Over the years of teaching Japanese, I found that many students find Katakana harder to learn than Hiragana, which seems strange as it is based on the same set of 46 sounds. Three reasons spring to mind as to why this might be. One reason could be that less class time is spent in teaching this second alphabet. Secondly, students have less practice reading and writing this script as Japanese texts contain very few words in Katakana, compared to Hiragana. Thirdly it could be the words that are written in

Katakana that make this script harder to read. Although most are based on English words, they are often not exactly the same and need to be sounded out before they make sense. If a student does not master the script well, it is easy to make mistakes.

The reasons above alone already seem a good reason to introduce Katakana first. If this is the first script students will learn, it is likely that more class time will be dedicated to teaching and practice than when it is taught in the traditional order.



Another important reason for teaching Katakana first, is that students learn better if we teach them what they want to learn. One of the first things students like to know is how to write their own name and those of their friends in Japanese script and they need Katakana to do this. Then there are place names when we teach them to tell where they are from, a whole range of food and clothing items, and names of pop and movie stars when we teach about likes and

dislikes, which are all in Katakana. Students will have a lot of opportunity to practice reading and writing words in Japanese without having to learn their meaning first. Students who can read Hiragana, can read words in Japanese, but they will only know the meaning of those words we taught them. However, a student who can read Katakana can read almost anything in this script.



When students can read Katakana there is a whole world of realia open to them. When flicking through Japanese brochures a student was thrilled she could read words like “*Harry Potter*”. It triggered a frantic search for other interesting words in Katakana in that class. The students were very excited they could understand words they had not studied before.

I want to show students that Katakana is used widely in everyday life in Japan. Teaching them new Katakana in the context of words they could see around them, will motivate them to learn more, so they can read more words. More exposure to words written in Katakana will make it easier to recognise these words later.



### “KATAKANA IN CONTEXT”, THE RESOURCE

I use this Power Point resource to teach Katakana script to a whole class, but once introduced, each lesson is available on “*First Class*”<sup>1</sup> to access from home. Students can then go through the resource again at their own pace for revision and extension, as often

<sup>1</sup> *First Class* is a web-based school intranet site, which students can log into from anywhere.

photos have additional words for them to figure out. Many photos will also give teachers the opportunity to give (up to date) cultural background information, which again will help to motivate students to learn more about Japan. I also found that a large number of students liked to show the slide shows to their parents and talked about the photos and showed off their ability to read Katakana. Encouragement from home is another factor that will help our students to do well in Japanese.

A	I	U	E	O	
		ク	ケ	コ	G"
SA		ス	SE	SO	Z"
	CHI	TSU	テ	ト	D"
NA	ニ	NU	NE	ノ	
	HI	フ	ヘ	HO	B" P °
MA	ミ	MU	メ	モ	
YA		YU		YO	
ラ	RI	ル	レ	RO	
WA				ン	

White = new  
Yellow = old, used in this lesson  
Blue = old

*“Katakana in Context”* covers all symbols of the Katakana script in 8 lessons. Each lesson covers a different topic, introducing 4-7 new symbols. Each lesson starts with a Katakana chart, which highlights the new symbols of that lesson. Looking at the chart first gives students the opportunity to revise earlier learnt symbols and keep track of the progress they are making. New

Katakana and words used in each lesson also have a sound icon, which is useful for students using the resource on their own.

The lesson then shows one or more photos that contain Katakana script with any obvious clues blocked out. Students work out what the word sounds like and try to figure out its meaning. The Romaji reading then follows and any clues are revealed. Lastly, each Katakana is accompanied with its animated stroke order.



Further to these lessons there are several photo quizzes. The first of these can be used after lesson four. The others, some made by students after they finished learning Katakana, can be used at any stage for revision.



In the Katakana lessons and the revision quizzes I used different photos of words the students have seen and learnt before, so they get used to different styles of Katakana script and will learn to recognise words as a whole, rather than having to spell them out each time.

## CONCLUSION

When students learn language in context and see that what they learn has meaning, it will encourage them to learn more. We import many goods from Japan nowadays and it is not hard to find products with Katakana script. Students who realise they can read Katakana and understand the meaning of many words will look out for more words and see if they can decipher them. In doing so, they practice and improve their Katakana reading skills. Katakana will no longer be a difficult script to learn and students are motivated from an early point in their Japanese language learning.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I wish to record my thanks to the “Sasakawa Fellowship Fund for Japanese Language Education”. Their Short Term Fellowship Grant enabled me to go to Japan to develop “*Katakana in Context*” and the Conference Paper Presentation Award made it possible to attend this conference.

