

WEB-BASED *KATAKANA* DICTATION PROGRAM

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Abstract: At present *Katakana* words are flooding into Japan. If you know *Katakana*, you can read menus at Baskin Robbins and at Pizza Hut, and movie titles in Japan. Some students believe that it is more difficult to study *Katakana* than *Hiragana*. In order to help students master *Katakana*, I have created a web-based *Katakana* dictation program to encourage them to study on-line outside of class. This program shows positive results. This paper will examine how the program benefits both students and instructors, and its potential usage beyond *Katakana*.

Keywords: *Katakana*, Japanese language, dictation, Japanese sounds, reading

INTRODUCTION

For those who are studying Japanese as a foreign language, it is challenging to master *Katakana*, particularly the pronunciation of *Katakana* words. Students often fail to hear such words correctly. Native speakers always alter the pronunciation of *Katakana* words and often their meanings as well, which makes it even harder for the foreign learner to master them. I also have observed that: 1) students have a difficult time associating *Katakana* symbols with the corresponding sounds; 2) students have a difficult time associating *Katakana* words with the corresponding meanings; 3) some students believe that it is harder to learn *Katakana* than *Hiragana*.

How can I help students master *Katakana*? In her research on second language reading, Koda supports a direct and seemingly causal relationship between phonological accessibility and reading ability (Koda, 2004). Matsunaga claims that subvocalization occurs when fluent native and nonnative Japanese speakers read *kanji*. She also asserts that it is key to acquire the skill of reading *kanji* automatically via Japanese sounds in order to comprehend a given text (Matsunaga, 2001). Noda also supports a positive correlation between Japanese sounds and text comprehension (Nara and Noda, 2003).

The aforementioned findings have led me to create a web-based *Katakana* dictation program. This program encourages students to go on-line outside of class to listen to *Katakana* words and take dictations. Subsequently, students have greater exposure to spoken *Katakana* words. This paper will examine: 1) if the program helps students learn *Katakana* effectively as well as overcome their phobia; 2) if it provides benefits to instructors; 3) if this program can be used for *Hiragana* and *Kanji*.

KATAKANA DICTATION PROGRAM

I selected Wimba and Dreamweaver to create a *Katakana* dictation program. I recorded *Katakana* words directly on Wimba and uploaded them onto HTML pages. There are 10 sessions of *Katakana* dictations. Each session contains 10 *Katakana* words. Japanese 101 students used this program during the fall of 2005 and 2006. When students were assigned to take *Katakana* dictations, they logged onto the Japanese 101 course website outside of class. Students were allowed to listen to each word as many times as they wanted. After listening to the audio file, they transcribed the words, and then they e-mailed their answers or submitted them to me the following day.

FINDINGS AND EVALUATION

After identifying the students' mistakes, I chose three major errors to analyze. They are double consonants, long vowels, and consonant + /y/ sounds. The average percentage of these mistakes is 19.6% (SD=16.4), 14.2% (SD=12.9), and 27.5% (SD=20.9) respectively. The following findings have thus become apparent: 1) instructors can verify if students heard each vowel correctly; 2) original foreign words interfered with students' writing or transcription of *Katakana* words; 3) students learned to differentiate long vowels from short ones.

A questionnaire gathered students' reactions. It was conducted during the spring of 2007. Twelve students enrolled in Japanese 102 answered the questionnaire. Eleven students out of 12 used the program last semester. One question asked students if s/he had a phobia of *Katakana*. Although only one student agreed, nine disagreed and two strongly disagreed. Another question asked if they enjoyed doing *Katakana* dictations. Seven students chose either 'agree' or 'strongly agree'. These answers indicate that the program motivates students to practice listening to and transcribing *Katakana* words. Not only does the program motivate students, but students apparently enjoy doing this form of practice.

All 11 students chose either 'strongly agree' or 'agree' in response to the question asking if *Katakana* dictations helped him/her pay more attention to the pronunciation of *Katakana* words. This suggests that students practiced *Katakana* symbols with the corresponding sound. Nine students believed that *Katakana* dictations enabled them to differentiate long vowels from short ones. Their reaction corresponds with finding 3).

CONCLUSION

The *Katakana* dictation program showed positive results as I discussed earlier. The program motivated students to practice listening and transcribing *Katakana* words. With my feedback, they learned whether they heard double consonants, long vowels, and each vowel correctly. The program has made them pay more attention to the pronunciation of *Katakana* words. The students also attained more exposure to *Katakana* words with sounds outside of class. As a result, they were able to associate *Katakana* words as well as symbols with the corresponding sounds. Once students learned the pronunciation, it was not too difficult for them to figure out the meanings.

The program also offers benefits to instructors by providing supplementary instruction to students outside of class. By using Wimba and Dreamweaver, instructors can create original HTML pages with sounds according to their own curriculum.

This program could be used for learning *Kanji*. Although it may not help students write *Kanji* letters or words correctly, it would help them with recognition.

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