

Culture Notes - The Japanese Language

How many letters are there in the alphabet? Do you know how many letters there are in the Japanese alphabet?

Actually, the Japanese language consists of 3 different writing systems!!!

Why do the Japanese use three writing systems?

The Japanese use three different systems to represent different words and meanings and to make the language clearer for the reader. Let's look at the different types of writing:

Kanji - 漢字

Kanji are symbols which represent a whole word. They can be quite complicated to write and often involve many strokes. Kanji came to Japan from China and are now used with the hiragana and katakana alphabets to form whole sentences. Children are expected to know around 2000 kanji characters by the time they leave school and indeed need to know this many in order to be able to read a newspaper! Children have to sit frequent kanji tests at school.

It is sometimes quite easy to see how kanji characters developed. Look at the following kanji and try to guess their meaning (answers on next page).

山 川 月

Because some kanji characters can be so difficult to write and remember, the Japanese simplified some of the symbols to form the katakana and hiragana alphabets :

Katakana - カタカナ

Katakana consists of 48 symbols, each one representing a sound. They are put together to form words, much in the same way we use the letters in our alphabet together to make words. Katakana is used for all words of foreign origin, so your name (unless it's Japanese) will be written using katakana, many place names outside of Japan and loan words used in Japanese etc will also all be written using katakana.

Katakana is also used for onomatopoeia – such as animal sounds etc.

Hiragana - ひらがな

Hiragana consists of 48 symbols, each one representing a sound (the same sounds as the katakana alphabet). Hiragana is the traditional Japanese script and is used to write words of Japanese origin. Hiragana may also be used as a verb ending after a kanji character. All primary school students are expected to learn the hiragana alphabet soon after they start school.

Sounds

The Japanese alphabet has fewer sounds than the English one. This means that the Japanese are unable to hear the difference between the letters 'b' and 'v' and 'l' and 'r'. They also have difficulty in identifying the differences between 'th' and 's'.

So, the words 'pray' and 'play' will sound exactly the same to the Japanese ear as do the words 'berry' and 'very'. If you have a 'b', 'v', 'l' or 'r' in your name, how might your name be pronounced? Have a go and check with your Japanese teacher! What about if you have a 'th' or an 's'?

Answers to kanji quiz:

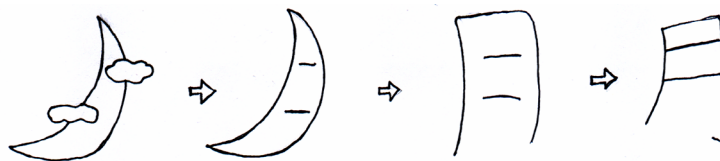
山 = mountain



川 = river



月 = moon



Did you get the answers right? Why not try to come up with your own kanji for a word? Choose an animal and make a rough sketch of it. Now simplify it and simplify it again. Can other children guess its meaning? Why not investigate the real kanji character for the animal you have chosen. Is your design similar to the real thing?

