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## **Book Review: Learning Japanese: Voices of Experience by Belinda Kennett and Yuriko Nagata**

Reviewed by Michael Lin, Kobe Shoin, Konan, and Konan Women's University, Hyogo, Japan

*Learning Japanese: Voices of Experience*, written and edited by Belinda Kennett and Yuriko Nagata, published by Candlin & Mynard ePublishing, is an e-book specially designed for students and teachers of the Japanese language. By utilizing the power of narrative and open sharing to inspire its readers, the book offers many helpful ideas and suggestions on how one can improve their Japanese proficiency. With their wide array of backgrounds and experiences, contributing authors share genuinely about their joys, struggles, and victories. The book is excellent not only for Japanese learners but Japanese teachers as well, because the collected stories demonstrate the importance of social factors in furthering a student's language learning. They also serve as a poignant reminder of the need to pedagogically and strategically address student apprehension of language learning. Particularly insightful is the book's emphasis on how students can always make tangible progress no matter one's background or proficiency level.

The book spans 13 chapters with each chapter covering a contributing author's personal story of learning Japanese. Following each story is a section called, 'Sensei's Tips', in which main instructors, Belinda Kennett and Yuriko Nagata, and guest instructors, Kristen Sullivan, and Todd Allen, provide commentary and lessons learned. Concluding each chapter is a 'Points for Consideration' section wherein insights and questions are given to help readers connect lessons with one's personal journey with Japanese language learning. Artwork after each chapter captures a memorable aspect of the contributing author's story while downloadable materials sprinkled throughout the book provide further opportunity for reflection and consideration.

The introduction previews the stories to be shared and explains how learners and teachers may best utilize the book for self-study or within a course. Emphasis is placed on reflection, which is described as "the conscious process of thinking back and examining what [one] has done or what has happened, in order to gain a better understanding of the situation." (p. 22). Readers are also encouraged to exchange ideas with other learners, teachers, and speakers of Japanese. Online worksheets are provided to help readers set goals and keep track of their

progress in learning and using Japanese. For example, readers are challenged to ask themselves: ‘Where am I at with my Japanese?’, ‘How far have I progressed toward achieving [my goals]?’, and ‘Is what I am doing working?’ (p. 24).

One of the strongest aspects of this book is its careful selection of stories that are very relatable to readers at varying levels of Japanese proficiency. For instance, beginning learners can identify with and gain from the experiences of several contributing authors who described their difficulties in learning Japanese. Some lacked motivation to learn while others became frustrated or discouraged by their lack of progress. But many discovered how helpful it was to learn Japanese organically by incorporating it into their passions, interests, and daily lives. For example, in Chapter 1, Lachlan Jackson describes how he came to Japan during the ‘bubble period’ and taught English but never learned much Japanese. It wasn’t until he witnessed kendo (Japanese fencing) for the first time and passionately pursued it following his return to Australia, that he found the sustained motivation to learn Japanese. In Chapter 5, Bill Fryer details how his love of reading Japanese literature and novels gave him insightful cultural and linguistic knowledge of the language. In particular, he found that Japanese contained intriguing ambiguities and humorous wordplays that made language learning fun and interesting. Similarly, in Chapter 3, Terry Martin explains how his obsession with sumo wrestling and linking a new language with something familiar, such as grocery shopping, aids in vocabulary and usage retention.

Another strong point of this book is its focus on language learning and instruction from an international perspective, and more particularly, the benefits and challenges that come with cultural differences and educational backgrounds. In Chapter 7, Oi Yee Claudette Chan describes her experiences learning Japanese as a third language at an intermediate level, and how she utilized a strong understanding of Kanji due to her Cantonese Chinese background to improve her Japanese proficiency. In Chapter 8, Hulya Park, a native Turkish speaker, recalls her journey of learning Japanese at her university in Turkey and then going on exchange to Shimonoseki in Japan. She candidly admits to having a false sense of confidence in her knowledge of Japanese and shares how she overcame her struggles by intentionally spending more time with local Japanese rather than other foreigners.

Lastly, this book is exceptionally unique in calling attention to how complex social identity issues can impact the study of the Japanese language. For example, in Chapter 11, Lucy

Fraser sheds light on gendered language, which is the use of language with a more masculine, feminine, or neutral connotation. Through interactions with local Japanese, Fraser developed a heightened awareness of what was and was not socially appropriate depending on the type of gendered language used, and was able to instruct her students accordingly when she became a Japanese instructor. In Chapter 12, Naverone Feekery traces his exploration of gay identity within the Japanese language. Finding few materials in Japanese that concretely expressed homosexual identity or challenged prototypical relationships and nuclear families with traditional roles, Feekery used dating apps to research descriptions and grammar reflective of homosexual and heterosexual attitudes.

In sum, *Learning Japanese: Voices of Experience* is a must-read for both students and teachers seeking inspirational and practical advice in improving their Japanese language proficiency. Particularly poignant are the thirteen stories from contributing authors who share their deeply personal and moving experiences in overcoming their learning and teaching difficulties. The ‘Sensei’s Tips’ section at the end of each chapter draw out lessons from these stories to guide readers towards practical application, while the Points for Consideration sections contain well-thought-out questions that are beneficial for individual and group reflective learning. Finally, the last four chapters provide a unique perspective on how identity is linked to Japanese language learning and furthers the discussion on how learners obtain, develop, and sustain motivation.

### **Publication Information**

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### **Notes on the Contributor**

Michael Lin is an adjunct English instructor at Kobe Shoin Women's University, Konan University, and Konan Women's University. He has been living and teaching ESL/EFL in the Kansai area since 2011. He is interested in Japanese language learning and enjoys reading about how different language learners learn, how learners develop their motivation, and how language learning intersects with culture and identity.