

Net resources make light work of Japanese study

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'When the tunnel where the border is long is passed through there was snow country.'

So starts Yasunari Kawabata's classic novel "Snow Country," as garbled by online translation service Alta Vista Babel Fish.

It's no surprise that learners of Japanese, from humble beginners to professional translators, are seeking more electronic help. As worldwide fascination with Japanese pop culture bolsters interest in the language, Net resources are expanding. These range from commercial operations such as online language school YesJapan, the online branch of a Las Vegas language school, to altruistic endeavors such as Jim Breen's free dictionary, Edict.

Catering for all levels, YesJapan.com allows students to schedule live online lessons to practice communication in Japanese. The site's main strength, says company president George Trombley, is "having a complete library of sounds for every Japanese character, word and conversation taught in our courses."

Many will feel that even interactive online lessons cannot match face-to-face communication. But the Net comes into its own with the written language. It may yet make thumbing through bulky dictionaries, counting strokes and identifying kanji radicals obsolete.

One place to begin is Manythings.org. Charles Kelly has produced his own quizzes, vocabulary lists catered toward the Japanese Language Proficiency Tests and quirkier features such as a guide to the local dialect of Nagoya, where he teaches at the Aichi Institute of Technology. His kanji dictionary is more extensive than most, including, with readings and sample usage, 2,545 characters -- several hundred more than the Ministry of Education's 1,945 *joyo* (general use) kanji or the 2,000 odd tested in level one of the JLPT.

Kelly has compiled an invaluable list of links to other online resources for learning Japanese. Beginners will find numerous sites offering multiple-choice quizzes for reading kana, though these are somewhat repetitive.

To sugar the pill of rote learning, children especially might practice kana recognition against the clock with Katsumi Hatasa's Hiragana Challenge site, an arcade-style game where players click on the characters in the standard order as they whiz around the screen.

Multiple-choice tests seem better suited to kanji, where students must memorize numerous readings and meanings. Fujiko's Nihongo Page (www.terra.es/personal/fujiko) is a user-friendly site listing all the *joyo* kanji and some nongeneral-use characters. A problem for many foreign learners is that the kanji are listed in school-grade order -- different from the order in which students will need to learn kanji when preparing for the JLPT.

Online dictionaries are also proliferating. Jim Breen, a retired telecommunications professor at Monash University, Australia, modestly claims that Japanese and lexicography are "hobby interests," but his Japanese-English dictionary Edict and accompanying server, www.jdic, are reliable and close to comprehensive. Breen's site also offers a text word translation service, but this "doesn't pretend to translate into English," he says. As with Babel Fish and Google's Language Tools, users paste Japanese text into a box to search for English equivalents, but www.jdic only explains individual words, rather than trying to render complete sentences into English. While some Japanese ability is thus required to understand particles and tenses, embarrassing mistranslations are avoided.

Also invaluable for higher-level students is Rikai.com, a Web site and downloadable software package allowing the user to open any Japanese Internet site and obtain readings and translations by scrolling over the relevant kanji with the mouse's cursor.

Software engineer Todd David Rudick created the site in response to concerns that *furigana* readings of kanji discouraged learners from concentrating on the kanji themselves. He recognized that the Internet could avoid this by using "invisible *furigana* that you have to 'mouse over' to see."

Drawing on the 100,000-word lexicon of Jim Breen's Edict, Rikai is usually accurate even with obscure kanji compounds. One failing is that it overlooks kana words. This may leave some midlevel students able to read -- but not understand -- particular words.

Still, using these sites, even those of modest Japanese ability can produce serviceable translations. Here is Kawabata via Rikai:
"Beyond the long border tunnel lay the snow country." The gibberish of Babel Fish is no competition.

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