Introduction

Objectives and Organization

The DVD and text Living Japanese: Diversity in Language and Lifestyles are designed to hone Japanese listening comprehension and speaking skills at the intermediate and advanced levels through the medium of unscripted interviews. The conversations focus on twenty topics in Japanese culture and society. Students have the opportunity to develop an extensive vocabulary while gaining familiarity with conversational Japanese. The DVD and text may be used as primary or supplementary materials in Japanese classes or as review materials by individuals who wish to maintain or enhance their language skills. Living Japanese may be used as well in classes with an emphasis on Japanese culture and society, through the presentation of diverse elements and viewpoints. While the conversations reflect individual perspectives and are not intended to provide a definitive view of the topics, they provide a valuable springboard for further research and discussion.

Living Japanese will facilitate implementation of the “Standards for Foreign Language Learning” established by ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages). Students will develop communication skills by using the DVD to improve listening comprehension; by building vocabulary; and by discussing the topics and the style in which they are presented. Their understanding of Japanese culture will deepen as they listen to diverse perspectives on the culture of everyday life as well as broader social institutions and issues. They will perceive elements of culture in conversational style. The DVD permits students to visualize cultural practices and products. Discussion questions encourage students to make cross-cultural comparisons. Some questions require that students interview native speakers at their school or in the larger community, and students are encouraged to invite native speakers to take part in discussions of the DVD topics. Students may make connections with knowledge gained in other disciplines, bringing new perspectives to class discussion and new methodologies
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for framing or analyzing specific issues on the DVD. Likewise, viewpoints presented by the Japanese speakers will help students evaluate aspects of their own lives, as well as topics presented in different disciplines, from another cultural perspective.

To students:

As you watch and listen to the DVD you will find that the speakers, aged seven to seventy-five, will gradually become familiar as they reappear in different lessons, sharing their thoughts, experiences, and feelings on a wide spectrum of topics. The speakers are drawn from diverse professions and come from many different parts of the country. We begin with topics related to everyday living: the family; the house and its environment; architecture; household crafts; organic farming; eating habits in a busy society; views of marriage; women and work; and personal experiences at the elementary, high school, and university levels. The second half of this text introduces the speakers’ views on familiar topics such as anime, manga, kendō, and related pastimes and artistic disciplines, as well as less widely discussed issues such as ways of seeing and valuing the natural world, environmental education, and the Buddhist doctrine of the essential interrelatedness of all things. In Lesson 14 two speakers present moving recollections of childhood experiences, and in Lesson 15 a professional singer and a pianist perform the two songs on which the music used in the beginning of the DVD and the lesson openings is based. In the final two lessons the speakers discuss linguistic diversity within the Japanese language. Recurrent themes are highlighted by cross-referencing related lessons or segments within lessons; recurrent themes are also the subject of many discussion questions.

Preceding each transcription is an English introduction intended to place a specific topic in a broader cultural context, to provide further discussion by one or more speakers, or to provide background information about the speaker relevant to the topic. The transcriptions are followed by extensive vocabulary and grammar notes so that you can dispense with hours of dictionary work and focus on listening. Phonetic readings of kanji are provided throughout. Each lesson ends with discussion questions, providing you with the opportunity to articulate your own views, drawing on the vocabulary and
expressions introduced in each lesson. Expressing ourselves becomes easier when we have models of natural speech.

A list of references and suggested readings follows the main text. To protect the privacy of the participants many names have been changed and place-names withheld.

The Transcriptions

The transcriptions are verbatim recordings of every word spoken by the speaker. When several speakers appear in one lesson, the responses of each speaker are given a specific number (Speaker 1 is Segment 1; Speaker 2 is Segment 2). If a speaker’s conversation is extensive, it is broken into short segments for easy listening (Segments 1.1, 1.2, 1.3). If there is only one speaker who addresses a series of questions about the topic, each question is given a separate segment number. Time codes corresponding to the DVD recordings are given for every segment in the text so that you can listen to a segment repeatedly until you hear each word.

In most cases you will not hear the interviewer ask the question. Questions are highlighted as follows in the text: [Q]. At each question, pause the DVD and read the question aloud. In this way you will become the interviewer.

Although you are listening to spontaneous interviews rather than two-way conversations, you will find many of the elements present in natural everyday discourse.

Elements of Conversational Japanese

Reviewing basic elements of conversational Japanese will help you avoid some confusion from the outset. Specific word usage is addressed in the vocabulary notes following the transcriptions.

Word order

Word order is flexible, often deviating from the standard “subject, object, verb.” An inversion occurs when the speaker withholds important information until the end for emphasis. Examples:

すこしの差に敏感ですね、女性は。(They’re) very sensitive to subtle differences, women are.
An architect: I’d really like to be able to facilitate that sort of communication—through the medium of the house.

Ellipsis

Ellipsis is the omission of a word or phrase necessary for a complete syntactical construction, but not necessary for understanding. In Japanese conversation, almost any element in a sentence may be omitted: the subject, the predicate, or various particles such as を and が. Listeners are able to fill in the missing items for themselves. In the following examples the topics and the particles を and が are understood in context:

パン * 買いに行ったんです。（を）

決められたところ以外に当たる時 * あるんですね。（が）

（About kendō:) There are times when (the bamboo sword) lands on other than the designated places.

Contractions

One of the most common contractions is って、representing either と or という。

どちらかっていうと どちらかというと

●ってふうに ●というふうに

日本の家屋ってのは 日本の家屋というのは

職人さんの仕事ってのは 職人さんの仕事というのは

必要があるって思います 必要があると思います

Other common contractions:

大事なことだと思ってます 大事なことだと思ってます

住んでる 住んでいる

使ってらっしゃる 使っていらっしゃる
Filler words

By “filler words” we mean かんとうし, literally “words thrown in between.”

These include utterances such as あ、ああ、あの、あのう、うん、ええ、ええと、こう、その、そのう、ね、ま、and まぁ. Most people filter out the filler words as they listen to a conversation, focusing on the meaning. As language learners, you will want to avoid these fillers, in the same way you would avoid excessive use of “um” and “uh,” or “like” and “you know,” in English. However, from a linguistic point of view these fillers can be interesting, as they each have their own nuance. A linguist would take note of the particular environment in which each type of filler is found.

Filler words may have any of the following functions: they give the speaker time to think; they make the speech less direct; they express emotion or emphasis regarding the subject matter; they qualify a statement; they express the speaker’s nervousness. Their use may be habitual, even providing a verbal signature. On occasion, fillers appear to play a hybrid role, retaining much of their basic meaning (こう、その). The speakers themselves are not aware that they are using them. The most common filler words have been reduced in size so that you can practice reading the conversations aloud without them.
Related to filler words in terms of expressing nervousness or hesitation or giving the speaker time to think are phrases such as 何ですか、何て言いますかね、何ていうんですか— all variations of “What should I say?” or “How should I put it?”

Misspeaking

Often we begin to express something one way and then decide to take a different approach. We may use one word but correct ourselves and use another. In clear instances of misspeaking (言いよどみ), I have placed the rejected word or phrase in parentheses.

Aizuchi 相槌

As you will recall, aizuchi are feedback signals letting the speaker know that the listener is paying attention—for example, はい、ええ、うん、そうですか、and それで？ Head-nodding is an important non-verbal feedback signal. The term aizuchi is derived from the rhythmic hammering of blacksmith and apprentice as they forge a sword blade. Interjecting aizuchi after key phrases or at the end of sentences helps maintain the rhythm of a conversation. These words confirm the involvement of the listener and encourage the speaker to continue. In our text the longer utterances of the interviewer are placed in brackets { }, but in order to focus on the speaker’s words and keep the sentences uncluttered, most aizuchi are not noted.

Speech level and style

Because being interviewed is a somewhat formal occasion, most of the participants tended to speak at a more polite level and in a more formal style than they would if they were off-camera chatting with a close friend. At times the speakers forgot about the camera and spoke directly to the interviewer—in these cases the speech level is more familiar and the style more representative of age and gender. This is especially true of the first speaker in Lesson 14, who reared the interviewer. In some instances, the speaker was quite conscious of a DVD audience and used polite verb forms on behalf of that imagined audience. In another instance, people in the room with the speaker
influenced the speech level. These differences are noted in the individual interviews. Most of the speakers were longtime acquaintances of the interviewer. Some were more accustomed to public speaking or speaking before a camera than others.

Communication

Communication involves so much more than words—sincerity, proper etiquette, an interest in learning the other person’s viewpoint or cultural background, listening, adjusting to a different rhythm, and reassessing one’s expectations. Obviously we can’t approach our neighbors or visit another country and expect people to do and think as we would. While you develop your language skills, don’t forget to open your heart and mind!

Using the DVD and Workbook

To the instructor:

The terms “intermediate” and “advanced” are still rather fluid in Japanese instruction. An “intermediate” course at one school might be an “advanced beginning” course at another. You may wish to use selected lessons and segments within lessons according to your students’ interests and ability. (Each lesson is followed by a complete vocabulary list.) Or, you may wish to use all of the text as primary or supplementary course material. This will give students the opportunity to think about recurrent themes and to consider one topic in light of another. The grammatical patterns used are not complex; they are patterns generally introduced by the third year of language study. What may be new to students are elements of conversational Japanese, as well as vocabulary specific to a given topic. Students must also adjust to language spoken at natural speed and to variation in speech according to region and individual characteristics.

Whether you use these materials over one semester or one academic year, you may wish to incorporate these suggestions:

- Ask the students to read the introduction and vocabulary notes for the segments you wish to cover before coming to class. You may wish to designate vocabulary the
students should memorize. Students should have a personal copy of the DVD so that they can watch it multiple times on their own.

- View the lesson or segment as a class. This is an important review, even if students have watched it in advance. Pose basic content questions, and have the students listen again in order to pick up key information without looking at the transcript.

- Go over the transcript with the students, highlighting grammar, word usage, and elements of conversational Japanese. You may wish to test listening comprehension by providing selections from the transcript in which key words or expressions have been left blank. Have students complete the selections as they listen to the DVD in class. It is useful to play the selections at least twice.

- Proceed to the suggested discussion questions. Many of these questions involve native speakers at your school or in your community. Some of the questions require students to think about the topic in their own personal or cultural context. Answering the questions and discussing the topics will prepare students for responding to similar questions in Japan. These, or your own questions, may be used as composition topics, and you may wish to have students develop a topic further as an oral or written report.

To independent learners:

Form a study group of individuals who have returned from prolonged stays in Japan. Invite native speakers to join your group in watching the DVD and discussing the content. Have fun!