



# My Turning Point in Studying Japanese

By Chris Broad

**S**oon after I arrived in Japan in August 2012, I decided to take up jogging in the evenings after work.

I'd always despised jogging as the concept of moving around on foot, at varying speeds on a variety of surfaces had always seemed a tedious waste of my free time.

It was time better spent eating chocolate and endlessly trawling through Wikipedia, reading interesting things I'd forget about six minutes later.

However, during my first month in Japan, I'd started running alongside a bustling strip of highway through the town where I lived and suddenly I came to see the appeal of jogging.

And so, after a long day spent standing in front of teenagers, I would run through the warm, humid, late night air, passing dozens of restaurants, shops and karaoke bars, with hundreds of neon signs I couldn't read, but nonetheless looked stunning.

It became clear to me that the treadmills I'd once jogged on, facing the cracked concrete walls of the run down gym I'd once attended in the UK, had been the real reason I'd despised jog.

Out in my new environment, on the far side of the world, jogging in the shadow of a 2,000 meter volcano, I grew to love jogging. Each run became a way of discovering the local town around me and the new alien culture I found myself in.

I would jog whilst spectating the locals hunched over bowls of noodles, through the windows of noodle bars, as they ate and simultaneously read manga comic books. Through the open windows, the smell of fried pork and beef seeped out on to street and smacked me in the face as I ran.

And like a game of space invaders, I would move from left to right as I ran to avoid the occasional passerby, or drunkard stumbling out of the late night karaoke bars.

The same week I started jogging was also the same week I sat down to seriously start learning Japanese. It was an exciting time, as I'd deluded myself into thinking I would become fluent in Japanese in three months and would subsequently become a millionaire through a series of books and videos on how to learn Japanese in just 3 months.

It was a flawless plan that simply couldn't fail.

In my first month, in August 2012, I could say a handful of words and I'd memorised some useful expressions and the writing systems of Hiragana and Katakana, although Kanji was still a huge mystery to me.

After I'd studied all evening after work, I'd throw on my jogging gear at around 9pm and go for a run.

Life was wonderful and if somebody had thrown a hand grenade at me on a Wednesday evening in August 2012 and blown me up, the surrounding area would have been sprayed with a wave of my happiness and contentment.

- And vast amounts of blood.

But after three months, the 'honeymoon' period and the initial euphoria of living in a new and exciting environment began to fade and I found myself becoming progressively frustrated for several reasons.

The first was the brutal reality that I hadn't really been jogging at all.

All the times I'd been going for a run, I'd actually just been jogging for five minutes, before being reduced to a puddle of sweat and spending the rest of the journey crawling back home.

I would then reward myself for my 'hardcore' work-out, by collapsing into a nearby Family Mart convenience store and subsequently purchasing delicious, reasonably-priced, fried chicken.

Unfortunately, this actually meant that by jogging regularly, my health began to progressively decline.

At the same time, after three months of studying Japanese I could still barely read a single one of the many hundreds of neon signs I jogged passed every other evening. I'd successfully learnt two of the three writing systems, Hiragana and Katakana, but it turned out that most words in Japan use Kanji – a writing system specifically designed to make learners question their sanity and personal willpower, due to the many years of study it typically takes to learn.

The jog soon turned into a cruel reminder of just how crap I really was. As I jogged half-dead alongside the highway, trying to desperately read my surroundings that I'd now jogged passed dozens of times, yet still couldn't comprehend, I felt a sense of hopelessness at myself, my fitness, and my ability to learn Japanese.

Upon arriving three months earlier, I'd bragged to my Japanese work colleagues that I would be able to converse fluently in only a matter of weeks, to which my Japanese colleagues would applaud in bemusement.

Amongst this praise and the incomprehensibly stupid naivety I was displaying, I had genuinely started to believe my own predictions - predictions that I'd ultimately conjured up just to impress people.

So when after three months had passed and I'd still barely begun to learn the language, it was beginning to feel like I'd lined up my hopes and dreams against a wall and had shot them in the face.

Fortunately, before my addiction to Family Mart fried chicken could kill me off, Siberia arrived. The prospect of jogging in a giant refrigerator on top of three feet of snow would ensure I wouldn't be able to jog again, from December all the way around to early April.

I decided to use my new found free time spent hibernating inside my apartment to re-double my efforts and flood my head with Japanese vocabulary and over 2,000 Japanese kanji characters.

Over the next 4 months, hunched inside my tiny apartment, I worked my way through two Japanese textbooks (Japan Times' Genki I / II series), a book on how to write kanji ('Heisig's Remembering the Kanji') and began watching Japanese anime and tv dramas ('Deathnote,' 'GTO' and 'Hotaru no Hikari') on YouTube, whilst in the bath.

I even read a book on memory ('You Can Have An Amazing Memory') for the first time, as I realised the real battle I was facing was learning HOW to learn a new language in the first place and how to memorise the ridiculous amount of information I was being confronted with on a daily basis.

By the time April 2013 came round, it had felt like a lifetime had passed since December 2012, due to the sheer amount of studying I'd done. Never in my life had I studied so hard for such a sustained period of time; up to five or six hours a day almost every day I'd been dedicated to studying Japanese.

But it was starting to pay off on a grand scale.

At work I could pick up the topics of conversations between students and colleagues, I could write over 1,000 kanji characters from memory and I'd learnt around 2,000 new words.

My speaking was still awful and I was terrified to speak Japanese, but I had recently had a breakthrough in reading words written in kanji for the first time and things were starting to get really exciting.

But it all finally came together on my first jog of the year in April 2013.

For on that warm evening in April, I threw on my jogging gear once more and headed for the same usual stretch of highway I'd jogged along only months before, without knowing it was going to be an incredible experience.

As I neared the highway and had the arduous task of choosing between kicking off the jog listening to The Smiths or Duran Duran (ultimately settling for The Smiths), I downed a bottle of water and did a few last minute stretches.

Finally, away I went and as I began to jog, a magical thing happened.

As my eyes brushed over the brightly lit neon signs once smothered in indecipherable meaningless squiggly lines, words and images suddenly began to appear in my imagination, without me even thinking.

激安ビデオ Dirt cheap video!

中華飯店 Chinese restaurant!

靴 Shoes!

東北機工 Tohoku Organisation!

It was like nothing I'd ever experienced. I was looking at squiggly lines that had meant nothing just months earlier and now they meant something?!

They were forming images in my mind just by glancing at them. I wasn't even trying to think. My head was turning the squiggly lines into symbols as if by magic. It was like a fireworks display in my head.

It was as though I'd won Christmas, won the lottery and consumed premium fried chicken all at once.

On a Saturday.

- But better.

An invisible barrier between the highway and I came crashing down. Though I'd jogged down the highway dozens of times before, it was like being somewhere completely new.

There were shoe shops, bars and Izakayas (Japanese pubs) that had been hidden from my view up until now, and my ability to read revealed the world around me, as though I'd somehow transcended time and space.

People often ask me why I didn't learn Japanese before coming to Japan and to be honest, it's a fair question.

There were many factors – studying for a degree whilst holding two jobs and not knowing if I'd actually be able to get a job in Japan anyway were the key defining factors.

But quite honestly I wouldn't be lying if I said one of the key reasons was because I wanted to experience life in Japan before and after understanding Japanese, and experience the transition first hand, from zero knowledge.

That day jogging alongside the highway was the defining the point in which I was no longer just some foreign guy bumbling around like a mere tourist. I felt like this was somewhere I wanted to stay and learn. A place where I could be for years.

Granted I was still crap at Japanese, but a huge roadblock was out of the way and more importantly I finally had the self confidence and tangible results I needed to see me through my studies. The pathway to learning Japanese no longer seemed impossibly blocked.

As I read the signs of the shops, the bars and the restaurants, I forgot I was jogging altogether. I ran 8km without stopping.

Only after I'd finished running did I realise - it had been the furthest distance I'd ever jogged in my life.