

What is Japanese Fluency?

The definition of fluency is really related to the noun, fluent. Merriam Webster online defines fluent as “capable of using a language easily and accurately, effortlessly smooth and flowing.” Clearly, this definition relates to the ability to use Japanese confidently in specific situations.

First, let’s tackle misconceptions. I learned to interpret by what I like to call the baptism by fire method of being thrown into business meetings and commanded by my mono linguistic non-Japanese direct superior to interpret in meetings with Japanese colleagues, customers, vendors and guests. Experience taught me that most non-foreign language speaking professionals believe that fluency means the ability to communicate about any subject matter at any waking moment.

Obviously, that is not even the case in one’s own native language. Most people could not swap jobs with astronauts, doctors, computer geeks, engineers, mechanics, stamping press operators, surgeons or many of the high value jobs in today’s society. I think the only man to do that was played by DiCaprio in the con-artist story about the life of Frank Abagnale Jr. in the film “Catch Me if You Can.” And how ethical was that?

In truth, English fluency was defined in the 1980s quite eloquently and excellently by Welsh Educators as really related to REALMS of EXPERIENCE. This makes the concept of foreign language fluency to be highly subjective, totally dependent on professional training and/or personal experiences in situations. Furthermore, there are different aspects of fluency as it relates to linguistic and cultural competency.

There are bilingual persons who know a few phrases. There are bilingual persons who can travel smoothly managing eating, lodging and signseeing needs. There are bilingual persons who can carry on social conversations at great lengths with Japanese. There are bilingual persons who can simultaneously interpret in a variety of professional fields. And then there are the best of the best interpreters working for politicians or serving at the United Nations. We highly recommend you watch the behind the scenes footage at the end of the Nicole Kidman’s film...The Interpreter. Those two minutes with a Chinese interpreter from inside the UN, offers incredible insight into that impressive level of fluency required for such work.

But back to fluency...with Japanese study comes the KANJI “barrier”--learning to read and write Japanese characters. Our students can write quite well in Japanese about their lives. True Kanji Kings and Queens are bilingual persons who can read and write at adult levels of character competency to function in adult worlds. At the top this are those who work in business or others serving as reporters in Japan or those who translate books. These examples prove Japanese fluency is related to training and life experiences. Set your goals, which will you be or become over time?

Many people have fluency in Japanese, but everyone’s level of fluency can often be very, very different. Regardless, every one’s level of fluency needs to be respected for where they are. We are all on the language learning journey, some folks are behind us, some folks are beside us and some folks are further along the path. Regardless, all of us can help to continue to break down cultural and social barriers and help one another develop REAL productive relationships with the Japanese.

Sensei Says features responses to questions from visitor questions to our website.

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