

East Asia Study Unit

Module Two: The Basics in Traditional East Asia

LESSON ONE: PRONUNCIATIONS & NAMES

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GRADE: 9-12

TIME: One class period.

GOALS:

1. Introduce the concept of a tonal language
2. Explain how to read and pronounce Chinese and Japanese names and words.

MATERIALS/PREP:

1. Review and practice with the pronunciation guides included in this lesson.

INTRODUCTION:

For many American students, one of the most challenging things about trying to study East Asian history or culture is dealing with seemingly hard-to-pronounce names and terms. This may be an equally difficult obstacle for teachers trying to teach the material as well! This lesson is designed to help teachers and students not familiar with the pronunciation of Chinese, Japanese, and Korean words to learn how to pronounce them correctly. It is only an introductory lesson and so will only deal with a few basic issues. In addition, you may decide that presenting all of the material in one class would be too confusing for students, who will confuse the three languages, so you might consider using just the Chinese material when you study China, etc. Even if you as the teacher decide not to offer any parts of this lesson to your students, you may personally find it useful to study as a primer on how to pronounce Asian words.

ACTIVITIES:

1. Begin class by putting a sentence on the board
2. Learning the languages of China, Korea, and Japan
3. Tones
4. Some hints for pronouncing Chinese words and names
5. Differences
6. Some hints for pronouncing Japanese words and names

DAY ONE:

1. Begin class by putting a sentence on the board: "I am going to take a train to Boston tomorrow." Now ask the class how many different ways there are to read that sentence aloud. In other words, by

stressing different words in the sentence, how many different variations of meaning can they come up with? For example, reading the sentence and emphasizing the word “I” signifies that you are drawing a distinction from someone else who might ride that train, whereas emphasizing the word “train” emphasizes that you are not taking an airplane, etc. Stressing other words will produce different variations in meaning.

2. Today we are going to spend some time learning about the languages of China, Korea, and Japan. One of those languages, Chinese, is what we call a “tonal language.” That is to say, different tones – the rising and falling of your voice pitch – play a part in distinguishing otherwise identical syllables. We do not have tones in English, though we do make distinctions based on stress. In the example sentence that we began class with, we saw how the exact same words could vary in meaning when pronounced (or stressed) differently. And we know that some words sound strange if given the wrong stress – for example, we can say “DRY cleaning” or “dry CLEANing,” but never “dry cleanING” (stressing the last syllable).

3. Of course, the tones of Chinese are much more than just stress. There are four basic tones in modern Mandarin Chinese, and every syllable in the language is pronounced with one of those four tones (or with a neutral tone). For speakers of Chinese, the tones are as much a part of the syllable or word as the consonant and vowel sounds are. Chinese words that might appear identical when written in English letters, such as the word “ma,” in fact are very different depending on the tone used. “Ma” can mean “mother,” “horse,” or “scold,” depending on which tone is used. We will not be studying tones together in this class, but you should be aware of how they work. For more on tones, see <http://www.wku.edu/~shizhen.gao/Chinese101/pinyin/tones.htm>

4. Some hints for pronouncing Chinese words and names: the People’s Republic of China has an official system for representing its language in Roman letters; that system is called pinyin. To properly pronounce pinyin, we would need to spend a lot of time talking further about tones, vowel combinations, and more. But since this is not a Chinese language class, we will just introduce three consonants that many non-Chinese speakers have trouble with:

- “x” in pinyin generally sounds like “sh” in English
- “q” in pinyin generally sounds like “ch” in English
- “zh” in pinyin generally sounds like “j” in English

So let’s try a few words:

- Xian
- Qing
- Zhongguo

5. Japanese and Korean are actually quite different from Chinese. They are not tonal languages the way that Chinese is, and the grammar and structure of Japanese and Korean are very distinct from Chinese. However, the influence of Chinese learning and Chinese writing added a lot to the Korean and Japanese languages, such that they may seem more similar today than they actually are.

6. Some hints for pronouncing Japanese words and names:

- The consonants are somewhat similar to English with one notable exception, the letter “r”, which represents a sound like a cross between an English “r” and “l” with a little bit of “d” thrown in. But if you pronounce the consonants as they sound in English, you will be okay. Note that “g” is always the “g” of “get,” never the “g” of “giraffe.”
- The vowels are somewhat similar to Spanish. The key to pronouncing Japanese is to master the five vowel sounds. They may seem tricky at first, but because there are only five, and because the letters that represent those vowel sounds ALWAYS make the same sounds, they really are quite easy (this is in contrast to English, which has silent “e”s and vowels that represent very different sounds depending on the word). Remember, in Japanese the vowel sounds never vary, even in combination. The five vowels are:
 - “A”, which always sounds like the “a” in father
 - “E”, which always sounds like a cross between the “e” of pet and the “a” of date
 - “I”, which always sounds like the “ee” of beet
 - “O”, which always sounds like the “o” of only
 - “U”, which always sounds like the “oo” of loot
- So let's try a few words:
 - Honda
 - Hiroshima
 - sake
 - samurai
 - futon