

Susan Gogue uses the mnemonic cue, "See the headless running superman," on this flashcard to illustrate the sound of "su" in Katakana.

Photo courtesy of Susan Gogue.



TEACHING KATAKANA TO SOCIAL STUDIES STUDENTS

By Susan Gogue

Recipient of the 2005 United States-Japan Foundation Elgin Heinz Outstanding Teacher Award, Humanities Category.

As a first grader, I pretended to write cursive. My friends and I felt very grown up, connecting our printed letters into a flowing stream of imaginary words. In second grade, I went one step further and began writing imaginary words in "Japanese." Later, I became fascinated with "real" Japanese that I found in a book in my parents' library. I painstakingly copied the Kanji, having no idea what the words were. In my rural Midwest community, there were no Japanese people, no Japanese language instruction, or even teachers knowledgeable about Japan to quench my inquisitiveness.

When I became a teacher and began to learn more about Japanese culture, I felt I was too old to learn to read and write Japanese, much less include it in my classroom lessons.

Years later, I participated in a week-long workshop sponsored by the Great Lakes Japan in the Schools Project, and was exposed to Japanese writing that I could learn and teach: *katakana*.

Katakana, one of Japan's three writing systems, is used to write foreign names, places, and words of foreign origin. The forty-six basic katakana syllables are often found in words borrowed from English.

A Japanese language teacher at the workshop worked with us for fifteen minutes each day. She taught hiragana and kanji, the two other Japanese writing systems. Both of them require knowledge of Japanese. The teacher used flash cards and mnemonic cues to teach us to read and write katakana in a fun, quick way.

A visiting teacher from Japan created my first set of flash cards. Today, numerous online sites provide charts that one can use to do this; for example, see <http://www.kanachart.com/cgi-bin/index.pl?katakana&a&1>.

Now ready to tackle the task of teaching katakana to my students, flashcards in hand, I was excited.

My Japanese unit is six weeks long and must include Japan's history, culture, geography, and economics, as well as allow time for students to research their projects for Japan Night. Determined to include it in my curriculum, I found three days to devote to katakana.

By the end of the first day, students could read and write *a, i, u, e, o*, along with *ka, ki, ku, ke, ko*, and *sa, shi, su, se, so*, and *ta, te, tsu, te*, and *to*, by using mnemonic cues, and they could write the word *sushi*. We all practiced speaking Japanese words. I was amazed at how quickly students picked up katakana compared with the teachers I was with seventeen years ago!

By the end of the second day, we had covered all but *ra, ri, ru, re, ro*, and *wa, n*, and *o*. After reviewing the blends, students were challenged to write their first and last names. On the third day, we finished the charts and sounded out Japanese place names

from a map. Students worked in groups to translate a variety of words in katakana, words that can be found on Web sites such as <http://japanese.about.com/blkatakana.htm> and <http://www.thejapanesepage.com/katakana.htm>.

Today, the Internet provides a variety of tools for students to reinforce their learning of katakana through games, quizzes, and flash cards. Many provide students with pronunciation tutorials. These include:

<http://www.genkienglish.net/genkijapan/katakana.htm>

<http://www.manythings.org/q/nk.php?u=1>

<http://members.aol.com/writejapan/katakana/writutor.htm>

http://www.thejapanesepage.com/readarticle.php?article_id=5

<http://www.myjapaneselessons.com/mjl/KatakanaQuizServlet>

<http://www.realkana.com/katakana/>

<http://www.manythings.org/japanese/kana/>

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Most importantly, learning katakana is a wonderful motivator. Students find it both challenging and exciting to read a McDonald's menu in Japanese.



A guest teacher from the Japan-Wisconsin Education Connection assists a student writing katakana in Susan Gogue's class.

Photo courtesy of Susan Gogue.

One site, http://www.i-am-bored.com/bored_link.cfm?link_id=8581, teaches students to write their first and last names in katakana.

The mnemonic cues I've used over the years have evolved to include those suggested by students. To create more participation, I include hand and body motions. A few of my cues include:

Su is for Superman—See the headless running Superman.

Mu is for move over—This is an elbow (demonstrate) asking you to “move over.”

He is for haystack—Do you see the haystack?

Once students learn katakana, they can easily pronounce Japanese names, whether in history or in the news. At the beginning of the unit, students are unable to differentiate between China and Japan. After learning katakana, they quickly begin to tell the difference between China and Japan, and between Chinese and Japanese words and names.

Visitors from Japan have been impressed with the students' efforts to learn their language. Each year, our school has one or two Japanese teachers as guests during our Japan unit. What a surprise to have students in our small rural school district reading katakana.

Most importantly, learning katakana is a wonderful motivator. Students find it both challenging and exciting to read a McDonald's menu in Japanese. They decode the Japanese names of American movies, and write their own names in Japanese. For them, writing words like *karate* and *tsunami* is elementary. I've overheard older students bragging to younger ones that they can read and write Japanese.

The excitement I felt writing cursive in first grade is the same excitement that my students feel when they begin to write “real” Japanese. ■

SUSAN GOGUE is an eighth grade World Geography Teacher and Department Chair at Jack Young Middle School in Baraboo, Wisconsin. She has taught for thirty-five years, and has participated in U.S.-Japan Foundation and Fulbright Memorial Fund trips to Japan. Gogue was the recipient of the 2005 Elgin Heinz Outstanding Teacher Award sponsored by the U.S.-Japan Foundation.