

Diplomates: Jay Kotak

The Diploma in Modern Japanese from SOAS Language Centre.

Is it for me?

I was always one of those people who would say “I really want to learn a foreign language” but never actually take any steps to make it happen. Whether I was too busy with work, or just didn't want to give up my free time, I would always manage to find an excuse. I even lived and worked in Japan before signing up to the course, but even then I didn't make an effort to study. Perhaps this situation sounds familiar to you, perhaps it doesn't, but after finishing the course I can say, if you REALLY want to start learning Japanese, the Diploma in Modern Japanese from SOAS Language Centre is the best way to make it happen.



But make no mistake; it's going to take a lot of time and effort. I can honestly say that I worked the hardest I have ever done in my life on the course. To achieve the course goals, dedication and commitment is a must, but the end result is simply life changing. With new abilities gained, new friends made, and a world of new doors opened, I was amazed at just how much progression was possible in such a short time. It wasn't just me who was amazed either, as within two months of finishing the course, I found myself back in Japan with a new job. This was only possible thanks to how much my language ability has improved and developed thanks to the course. (Really! My interview was partly in Japanese – that would have been impossible before!)

People from all backgrounds take the course; you are never too young, too old, or too far away. For example, in my class there were people on their gap year, people wanting a change of career, people who commuted for 2 hours every day, some people even moved from South America, the Middle-East, Asia and Australasia in order to attend! The one thing we had had in common however, was a positive attitude and a desire to learn Japanese. It brought us together at the start, and as friendships formed and the course went on, we helped each other to the finish.

To sum up, and at the risk of sounding like a broken record, the course will be hard work and you must be prepared to put in the hours to see the end result. But, if you finally want to stop saying “I want to learn Japanese” and actually learn Japanese, then this is the course for you.

What is the course like?

Your course mates really will be your family for the year. It's easy to feel overwhelmed, especially at the start when you all first turn up and you have lots of new information thrown at you. You are all going through exactly the same situation, so talk about it and ask how others are getting through the day. It's also a good idea to discuss and share ideas and studying techniques. Everyone learns differently, so the course is also about finding which methods work best for you.

Yes, there will be days when it all feels too much, and your brain just can't take anymore. But honestly, please don't panic! It's not the end of the world. Just do your best, try to enjoy the lesson and learning experience. You will be surprised how something that seems impossible can make perfect sense the very next day. The course content is covered at a fast pace, so remember to keep positive and don't forget about your desire to learn Japanese. In the end when the course is over the feeling of achievement makes it all worthwhile.

You are also incredibly lucky to be studying at SOAS Language Centre which has amazing staff and facilities to help you during the course. The staff will do their best to look after you and will always go the extra mile to make sure you understand and aren't left behind. We often had extra revision and review sessions scheduled throughout the year to help consolidate everything in our minds. If you make sure you put in the time and effort then the teachers will be happy to return the favour. SOAS Language Centre also works with the IFCELS Programme at SOAS to introduce Japanese students who are studying English in the UK with those taking the Modern Japanese Diploma course. So you will have a chance to practice your Japanese and make new international friends as well. Make sure you join the SOAS Japanese society as they try to host regular conversation exchange sessions too.

The Language Study Room will also help keep you motivated throughout the year. When my brain couldn't take anymore studying, I would sit and watch some Japanese TV and actually find myself understanding the words and grammar we were learning in class. I knew I was making progress when I found myself laughing out loud along with the TV shows. Studying in the UK means you have to make an active effort to seek exposure to the Japanese language and the SOAS Language Centre offers you a helping hand to achieve this.

How to find a job in Japan?

As I mentioned at the start, thanks to the course, I was able to find employment in Japan within months of the final exam. Completing the course at SOAS Language Centre will go a long way to help you find a Japan related job, be it in the UK or in Japan itself. SOAS is an internationally recognised university and showing you can thrive under the workload of an intensive Diploma course says a lot of positive things about your work ethic, character and personality. It is an outstanding achievement to put on your CV that is sure to make you stand out from other candidates.

There are countless number of websites devoted to finding jobs in Japan. Off the top of my head I can personally recommend gajinpot, ohayosensei and topcareer.jp, but there are many more that can easily be found by searching online. Applying for jobs in Japan can be a bit different to the UK, but towards the end of the course we were given a writing exercise to help us familiarise ourselves with the format of a typical Japanese CV. This proved invaluable when my job hunting began.

When applying to jobs in the UK sending your CV by e-mail has become commonplace, however I found many places in Japan were still asking for my application to be sent by post. While this may seem strange at first, I can also understand why. It's easy to send an e-mail about a job you might consider doing, but sending an application by post, especially from the other side of the world, says you are a bit more serious and committed to the role and living in Japan.

In fact, I even found some jobs that would only consider applicants currently residing within Japan. I really wanted to give myself the best chance possible of finding a job, so I decided to book a flight to Japan and continue my job hunting in person. If possible, I would thoroughly recommend you to do the same! It may seem a bit daunting, especially if you have never been to Japan before, but there are so many opportunities once you are there in person. Just make sure you are prepared in advance. Bring copies of your CV, any references you have and don't forget to take a smart passport photograph too. Once you have arrived, be sociable, network and apply, apply, apply!

If you meet the requirements, a Working Holiday Visa is an ideal way to get started in Japan. It provides you with the flexibility to work and travel within Japan for up to a year. While you are finding your feet in Japan, you could also consider volunteering with an organisation like WWOOF Japan, where you can work for bed and board. There are also many seasonal jobs available working for companies like Boobooski Japan. Being in Japan goes a long way, you will make connections, new friends and as an added bonus, improve your Japanese in no time at all.

I should also mention the wonderful opportunity provided to one student every year to those enrolled on the course, the Hagio Prize. You will have a chance to explain your passions for Japan and what your ideal itinerary would be if you were to visit. A panel will consider all applications and select the student who they feel will benefit most from the experience. The lucky student will be

granted a £5000 budget towards achieving their goals. I (unfortunately) wasn't chosen, but I knew I wanted to improve my Japanese, so made the commitment to follow my plan and achieve my goals on my own.

What's it like working in Japan?

I have however, been incredibly lucky with finding great places of work within Japan. Of course, every situation will be different, but in my experience, everyone is very helpful and understanding towards new members of staff, especially those who are from a different background. Just as my fellow students on the course were my family before, my new work colleagues have become my family now. I know if I have any questions or queries, I can ask those around me and they will be happy to help. It's also a good chance for me to practice my Japanese, and probably a welcome break from work for those who I am asking!

Appearances and attitude are important within the Japanese workplace. Teamwork, being present and part of team are valued very highly. Even if you have finished with work for the day, it doesn't mean you can leave and go home early, as just being in the office is seen as contributing to the work effort. This leads to a great sense of community and togetherness within the workplace, and it's a good idea to try to contribute to this as well. So even if your contracted working hours are over, you might find yourself staying late to help others with their work too. Japanese working culture even has people announce "I'm sorry for leaving before you" to those still in the office as they depart. I always wonder what the last person in the office says as they turn off the lights, but I'm guessing I'll never know!

When working in Japan, there will always be things that you don't understand. Sometimes it's because of the language barrier, but sometimes things will still seem strange even when you can understand the explanation. There are many rules in Japan, some spoken, some unspoken, so reading between the lines, using your intuition and a bit of common sense is a must. Comparing before and after I took the course, I can certainly understand the language and explanations a lot more now, but there are still a lot of things that are strange and won't ever make sense. For example, it has been a particularly cold November this year and it's even snowing outside as I type this. However, we are not allowed to turn the heaters on at work until December starts. Not even one day early, no matter how cold it gets – that's the rule! But at least now I can discuss these things with my colleagues and I would encourage you to do the same, you will be surprised about how many times they will agree about the rules being strange.

Working in Japan is a challenge, but it's a really enjoyable one! As long as you have an open mind then you are more than capable of working and succeeding in a Japanese work environment. I fully admit that when I first came to Japan after finishing the course I was scared to speak and try out my newly gained abilities. But you will be amazed how many things you can understand straight away, kanji on signs, directions to the station - it's all there in your head. It's an exhilarating experience as you realise all those hours of hard work really have made a huge difference. As you get used to hearing Japanese on a daily basis, your brain will remember all those grammar points from the classroom and you'll find yourself understanding more and more. And before you know it, you'll be using that grammar point you found impossible in the classroom only months before!

Am I happy after the course?

Yes, I really am! I am so happy I decided to join the Modern Japanese Diploma at the SOAS Language Centre. I am now in Japan with a good paying job and surrounded by great people. I not only get to speak Japanese every day, I also know I am becoming more and more confident and comfortable with my Japanese ability with every passing day. I've even recently managed to conquer one of my biggest fears and manage a successful phone call completely in Japanese! I know none of this would have been possible without the course. So I want to say thank you very much to all those at the SOAS Language Centre for helping me get where I am today. Thank you!

Jay Kotak

Modern Diploma Graduate 2011-2012.