



## Teaching Keigo: overcoming the difficulties of Japanese honorific speech

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### ABSTRACT

This article explores the challenges learners face when acquiring keigo (Japanese honorific speech) and proposes effective teaching strategies to overcome these difficulties. Keigo is an essential aspect of Japanese communication, reflecting social hierarchy and politeness, yet it remains one of the most complex areas for non-native speakers due to its intricate grammatical structures, cultural nuances, and situational usage. This study examines common learner difficulties, such as distinguishing between sonkeigo (respectful language), kenjōgo (humble language), and teineigo (polite language), and addresses practical pedagogical methods for improving comprehension and application. By analyzing existing teaching approaches and incorporating real-life conversational contexts, the article suggests innovative ways to enhance keigo instruction, making it more accessible and engaging for learners. The findings contribute to Japanese language education by offering insights into how educators can bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical usage of keigo in various social settings.

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## Ta'lim jarayonida keigo: yapon tilidagi hurmat shaklini o'rganishdagi qiyinchiliklar va ularni bartaraf etish

### ANNOTATSIYA

#### Kalit so'zlar:

Keigo,

yapon tilida hurmatni

ifodalash shakli,

Sonkeigo (尊敬語),

Ushbu maqola keigo (yapon tilidagi hurmat shakli)ni o'zlashtirish jarayonida o'quvchilar duch keladigan qiyinchiliklarni tahlil qiladi hamda ushbu muammolarni bartaraf etish bo'yicha samarali o'qitish strategiyalarini taklif etadi. Keigo yapon tilidagi

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ehtirom va xushmuomalalikni ifodalovchi shakl, Kenjōgo (謙讓語), Teineigo (丁寧語), yapon tili ta'limi, yapon tilida xushmuomalalik, o'qitish strategiyalari, ikkinchi tilni o'zlashtirish, til o'rganishda madaniy o'ziga xosliklar, keigoning hayotda amaliy qo'llanilishi.

muhim muloqot vositasi bo'lib, u ijtimoiy iyerarxiya va xushmuomalalikni ifodalaydi. Biroq, uning murakkab grammatik tuzilishi, madaniy jihatlari va turli kommunikativ vaziyatlardagi qo'llanilish xususiyatlari sababli, ayniqsa, chet ellik o'rganuvchilar uchun o'zlashtirish qiyin bo'lgan til unsurlaridan biri hisoblanadi. Ushbu tadqiqot keigoning asosiy turlarini, jumladan, sonkeigo (hurmatni bildirish ko'rinishi), kenjōgo (kamtarlikni ifodalovchi shakl) va teineigo (odobiy suhbat shakli) o'rtasidagi farqlarni aniqlashda o'quvchilar duch keladigan muammolarni tahlil qiladi hamda tushunishni chuqurlashtirish va amaliy qo'llash samaradorligini oshirishga qaratilgan pedagogik yondashuvlarni taklif etadi. Maqolada mavjud o'qitish usullari tahlil qilinib, real hayotiy muloqot kontekstlarini qo'llash orqali keigo o'qitish jarayonini yanada samarali va o'zlashtirish uchun qulayroq qilishga yo'naltirilgan innovatsion metodlar ilgari suriladi. Ushbu tadqiqot natijalari yapon tili ta'limi sohasiga muhim hissa qo'shib, keigoning nazariy bilim va amaliy qo'llanilishi o'rtasidagi tafovutni bartaraf etish borasida o'qituvchilar uchun amaliy tavsiyalarni taqdim etadi.

## Обучение кейго в образовательном процессе: проблемы освоения уважительных форм японской речи и пути их преодоления

### АННОТАЦИЯ

#### Ключевые слова:

Кейго, форма выражения уважения в японском языке, Сонкейго (尊敬語), форма, выражающая почтение и вежливость, Кэндзёго (謙讓語), Тэйнейго (丁寧語), преподавание японского языка, вежливость в японском языке, стратегии обучения, овладение вторым языком, культурные особенности в изучении языков, практическое применение кейго в повседневной жизни.

Данная статья посвящена анализу трудностей, с которыми сталкиваются учащиеся при освоении кейго (японской уважительной речи), а также предлагает эффективные методики преподавания, направленные на преодоление этих сложностей. Кейго является неотъемлемой частью японской коммуникации, отражая социальную иерархию и нормы вежливости, однако остаётся одной из самых сложных областей для изучающих язык из-за сложных грамматических конструкций, культурных нюансов и ситуативной обусловленности использования. В исследовании рассматриваются типичные затруднения учащихся, включая различие форм сонкейго (уважительная речь), кэндзёго (скромная речь) и тэйнейго (вежливая речь). Также анализируются практические педагогические подходы, способствующие лучшему пониманию и применению этих форм в реальных речевых ситуациях. Путём критического анализа существующих методик и интеграции коммуникативных контекстов статья предлагает инновационные стратегии преподавания кейго, направленные на повышение доступности и интереса к его изучению. Полученные результаты вносят вклад в методику преподавания японского языка, предоставляя преподавателям ценные ориентиры для преодоления разрыва между теоретическими знаниями и их практическим применением в различных социальных ситуациях.

## INTRODUCTION

The Japanese language employs a complex system of honorific speech known as *keigo* (敬語), which serves as a fundamental means of expressing social hierarchy, politeness, and respect in communication. The practical use of language skills has always been valued in foreign language education. After the NCSSFL (National Council of State Supervisors for Languages) and ACTFL (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages) created Can-Do Statements in 2017, they became popular learning posts not only for each language course but also for the overall curriculum goals of language majors and minors. Mastering *keigo* is essential for achieving fluency in Japanese, as it plays a crucial role in both formal and informal interactions. The *keigo* system is traditionally categorized into three main types: *sonkeigo* (respectful language), *kenjōgo* (humble language), and *teineigo* (polite language). Each of these forms has distinct grammatical structures and usage rules, which are highly dependent on the social status of the speaker and listener, as well as the situational context.

Despite its importance, *keigo* remains one of the most challenging aspects of Japanese language learning, particularly for non-native speakers. The complexity arises not only from the intricate grammatical modifications but also from the deep cultural and contextual awareness required to use it appropriately. Many learners struggle to distinguish between different forms of *keigo* and apply them correctly in real-life situations. Additionally, conventional teaching methods often emphasize theoretical explanations over practical application, making it difficult for students to acquire a natural command of *keigo* in everyday communication. This study aims to explore the key difficulties learners face when acquiring *keigo* and to propose effective pedagogical strategies to enhance its comprehension and usage. By analyzing existing teaching methodologies and incorporating real-life conversational contexts, this research seeks to identify innovative approaches that can facilitate the learning process. Furthermore, it highlights the significance of integrating *keigo* instruction into second-language acquisition curricula in a way that bridges the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical usage. The discussion begins with a thorough review of existing literature on *keigo* instruction and second-language acquisition, highlighting the linguistic, cultural, and cognitive difficulties that non-native speakers encounter. Various studies have examined how *keigo* functions as a linguistic tool for expressing social hierarchy and politeness, yet many have also pointed out that traditional teaching approaches often fail to equip learners with the practical skills necessary for its appropriate use in real-life situations.

Building on this foundation, the study outlines the research methodology employed to investigate the effectiveness of current *keigo* instruction. A combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches has been utilized, including classroom observations, learner surveys, and case studies analyzing how students interact with *keigo* in various educational settings. By examining real-world learning experiences, this study aims to uncover the specific areas where learners struggle most, whether it be distinguishing between *sonkeigo* (respectful language), *kenjōgo* (humble language), and *teineigo* (polite language) or grasping the situational nuances that dictate their appropriate use. These insights serve as the basis for assessing the strengths and weaknesses of existing pedagogical strategies, particularly in terms of how effectively they bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical fluency. The findings of this research shed light on common patterns of difficulty among learners and reveal

potential avenues for improving keigo instruction. Traditional rote memorization techniques, while helpful for initial exposure, often fail to provide learners with the confidence and flexibility needed to use keigo naturally in conversation. As a result, there is a pressing need for more immersive and interactive learning environments that allow students to practice keigo in context. By integrating role-playing exercises, real-world simulations, and multimedia resources, instructors can create a more engaging and effective learning experience. Furthermore, incorporating technology, such as AI-driven conversation tools or virtual language exchange platforms, may offer learners greater exposure to authentic *keigo* usage, ultimately enhancing their ability to apply it in diverse social settings.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The necessity of experiential learning in keigo acquisition is evident from the linguistic challenges faced by Japanese speakers. Minayoshi (2014) cites statistical data from a survey conducted by the Agency for Cultural Affairs in 2005, which included 2,107 respondents aged 16 and above. The findings revealed that while 92.5% of participants expressed a strong desire to master keigo, 67.6% reported experiencing significant difficulties in doing so.

In Japan, keigo instruction typically begins in elementary school, around the 5th or 6th grade, and continues through college. The subject is incorporated into regular classroom assessments and appears in entrance examinations not only for universities but also for private high schools and even private junior high schools. Despite this extensive period of formal education, the effectiveness of keigo instruction remains a subject of debate, as many learners continue to struggle with its practical application in real-life contexts.

#### 1. Historical and Social Context of Keigo

Japan's hierarchical society has significantly influenced the development of keigo. Before the Meiji Restoration, people from different castes used distinct speech patterns to maintain social order (Minayoshi, 2014). Although the caste system was abolished, keigo continues to play a vital role in modern Japanese communication. It serves as a marker of social standing and reflects the cultural values of collectivism and respect (Sugimoto, 2010). The concept of **uchi** (内, inside) and **soto** (外, outside) further reinforces keigo's use, as individuals modify their speech based on their relationship with others (Ide, 1982). People within the same in-group, such as family and close colleagues, use casual speech, while interactions with out-group members, such as clients or superiors, necessitate keigo. Determining when to use keigo can be just as challenging as mastering its forms. The uchi to soto (内と外) concept – meaning “inside and outside” – is fundamental in understanding keigo usage.

Individuals within one's uchi (内, inside) circle, such as family, close friends, and peers, generally do not require keigo. Excessive politeness may create emotional distance and come across as overly formal or distant. Conversely, those in the soto (外, outside) category, such as elders, workplace superiors, and clients, necessitate keigo usage. In professional environments, keigo plays a crucial role in defining hierarchical relationships, particularly in distinguishing between senpai (senior) and kōhai (junior) dynamics. For example, an employee must use keigo when addressing their senpai, whereas casual or polite speech (teineigo) is acceptable when speaking to a kōhai. The ability to navigate these linguistic distinctions is vital for professional and social success in Japan.



## 2. The Structure and Forms of Keigo

Keigo is generally categorized into three primary forms:

- Sonkeigo (尊敬語, respectful language): Used to elevate the status of the listener or the subject of discussion. For example, the verb "to say" (言う) becomes おっしゃる.
- Kenjōgo (謙讓語, humble language): Used to lower oneself when referring to one's own actions. For instance, "to say" in kenjōgo is 申す (もうす).
- Teichōgo (丁寧語, polite language): A neutral polite form used in customer service and formal interactions.

Japanese honorific speech is particularly important in professional settings, where hierarchical relationships between **senpai** (senior) and **kōhai** (junior) dictate speech patterns (Kondo, 1990). In workplaces, new employees undergo rigorous keigo training to ensure proper use in business communication (Mizutani & Mizutani, 1987).

## 3. Challenges in learning keigo

Despite its significance, keigo is notoriously difficult to master, even for native speakers. A study by the Agency of Cultural Affairs in 2005 surveyed 2,107 individuals aged 16 and above and found that while 92.5% expressed a desire to master keigo, 67.6% found it highly challenging (Minayoshi, 2014). This difficulty arises due to the complexity of grammatical structures and the contextual sensitivity required for appropriate usage. Keigo is often not formally taught in schools but learned through socialization and workplace training (Gottlieb, 2005).

## 4. Pedagogical Approaches to Teaching Keigo

Various methods have been proposed to enhance keigo acquisition among learners. Kawaguchi (2012) emphasizes *kyōshitsu no bunmyaku* (classroom context) as a crucial factor in keigo learning, advocating for experiential approaches. One notable method is "the champion's speech", where a student, after achieving the highest score on a quiz, is interviewed in front of the class. The student must respond using *kenjōgo/teichōgo*, while the interviewer uses *sonkeigo*. This simulated interaction helps students practice keigo in an authentic setting.

In addition, role-playing activities and business etiquette training are commonly employed in Japanese language education to help learners internalize keigo structures (Ishihara, 2011). Some educators integrate keigo instruction into broader sociocultural lessons, reinforcing the connection between language and societal norms (Cook, 2006).

## METHODOLOGY

The method of "*Time Capsule Journaling*".

This method is suitable for students completing their first year or entering their second year of study, as it requires familiarity with fundamental sentence structures and commonly used everyday verbs. The activity involves instructing students to envision themselves fifty years into the future and compose a reflective letter. In this letter, they describe their present lives and pose questions to their future selves. This exercise encourages self-reflection, reinforces language skills, and fosters creative expression. Aimed at late beginner or early-intermediate learners, this activity strengthens linguistic and metacognitive skills by having students write a self-directed letter from their present perspective to their future selves fifty years ahead. The exercise reinforces everyday vocabulary, basic syntax, and personal reflection. In this introspective task, students craft a journal entry or letter as if addressing their future selves half a century later. By describing their current lives and inquiring about future experiences, they practice narrative tenses, question formation, and expressive language within a personally meaningful framework.

### 1. Writing basic Questions:

Students begin by writing simple, everyday questions in neutral Japanese about daily life:

- 毎日、何をしていますか。(What do you do every day?)
- どこに住んでいますか。(Where do you live?)
- よくラーメンを食べますか。(Do you often eat ramen?)
- 最近、どんな映画を見ましたか。(What movies have you watched recently?)

### 2. Introduction to Sonkeigo (Honorific Language)

The teacher introduces sonkeigo (尊敬語) – special verbs and grammatical rules used to show respect to the person being addressed. Students then revise their original questions using honorific forms:

- 毎日、何をなさっていますか。
- どこに住んでいらっしゃいますか。
- よくラーメンを召し上がりますか。
- 最近、どんな映画をご覧になりましたか。

### 3. Writing a Letter to My Future Self

After practicing sonkeigo in question form, students write a letter to their future selves, combining respectful questions with reflections on their current lives. This reinforces both honorific language usage and self-expression skills.

### 4. Converting to Kenjōgo (Humble Language)

Now, students will rewrite their self-descriptions using kenjōgo (謙譲語) to express humility when referring to their actions. Since the subject (themselves) is the one being humble, kenjōgo is used instead of teichōgo (neutral-polite language).

Original Speech (Neutral):

- 今、大学で日本語と科学を勉強しています。(I study Japanese and Science at college.)
- 毎日、カフェテリアでごはんを食べます。(Every day, I eat at the school cafeteria.)
- 夜、ルームメイトとビデオゲームをします。(At night, I play video games with my roommate.)
- 週末、叔父の家によく行きます。(I often go to my uncle's house on weekends.)

Revised Speech (Kenjōgo):

- 今、大学で日本語と科学を勉強しております。(I study Japanese and Science at college.) – humbly
- 毎日、カフェテリアでごはんをいただきます。(Every day, I eat at the school cafeteria.) – humbly
- 夜、ルームメイトとビデオゲームをさせていただきます。(At night, I play video games with my roommate.) – humbly
- 週末、叔父の家によく伺います。(I often visit my uncle's house on weekends.) – humbly

As they gradually increase the number of both sonkeigo and kenjōgo, they have to keep a track of keigo that they have used.

## DISCUSSIONS AND RESULTS

### 1. The Dual Nature of Japanese Polite Speech

Japanese polite speech- keigo (敬語) is an intricate system that reflects social hierarchy, respect, and humility. At its core, keigo consists of two primary honorific forms that work in tandem to maintain balance in communication:

- Sonkeigo (尊敬語, respectful language) – Used to elevate the actions of others, particularly those of higher social status, customers, or individuals deserving of respect.
- Kenjougo (謙讓語, humble language) – Used to lower the speaker's own actions, demonstrating humility and deference toward the listener.

These two forms complement each other, ensuring that politeness and respect are appropriately conveyed in both directions of a conversation.

#### 1.1. Sonkeigo (尊敬語) – Elevating the Listener's Actions

Sonkeigo is used when referring to someone else's actions, emphasizing respect and admiration. It often involves special verb forms or the addition of honorific prefixes like お (o-) or ご (go-). Sonkeigo is commonly used in professional settings, customer service, and when speaking to elders or superiors. A key characteristic of sonkeigo is that it never refers to the speaker's own actions – using it for oneself would be considered arrogant.

#### 1.2. Kenjougo (謙讓語) – Humbling the Speaker's Actions

Kenjougo, in contrast, is used when the speaker describes their own actions in a way that lowers themselves, thereby showing deference to the listener. This form is particularly important in business contexts, where self-effacement is a crucial part of communication. Kenjougo is frequently used in formal speech, such as in job interviews, business meetings, and official correspondence. By lowering oneself, the speaker implicitly raises the status of the listener, maintaining a sense of respect and humility.

### 2. The Balance Between Sonkeigo and Kenjougo

In a conversation, these two forms function together to create an equilibrium of politeness. If one person uses sonkeigo to show respect for another's actions, the other may respond with kenjougo to remain humble.

For instance, in a workplace setting:

- Manager (using sonkeigo): 「報告をしていただけますか？」 (*Hōkoku o shite itadakemasu ka?*) – "Could you kindly provide a report?"
- Employee (using kenjougo): 「はい、すぐにご報告申し上げます。」 (*Hai, sugu ni gohōkoku mōshiagemasu.*) – "Yes, I will humbly provide the report immediately."

This interplay ensures that politeness flows in both directions, reinforcing Japanese cultural values of hierarchy, respect, and harmonious communication.

### 3. Honorific Prefix System

Japanese uses two primary honorific prefixes:

#### 1. お (o) – for native Japanese words

- 名前 → お名前
- 手紙 → お手紙

#### 2. ご (go) – for Sino-Japanese words

- 連絡 → ご連絡
- 住所 → ご住所

The honorific style can also be expressed with what is called the “easy keigo” with verbs used in the passive form, **れる** or **られる**. Although said to be easier, this form of keigo can be confused with the passive voice and should be used with care.

### 3. Examples of keigo expressions

**Table 1.**

#### Some Useful Japanese Keigo Phrases for Work

English	Casual Japanese	Keigo words for work
Tomorrow	明日 (あした)	明日 (あす)
Last night	昨日の夜	昨夜 (さくや)
This year	今年	本年 (ほんねん)
Last year	去年 (きょねん)	去年 (さくねん)
Now	いま	ただいま
On that day	その日	当日 (とうじつ)
Immediately	すぐに	さっそく
Later	あとで	後ほど (あとほど)
Just now	さっき	先ほど (さきほど)
Where	どこ	どちら
About, approximately	ぐらい	~ほど

The first thing to understand is that certain kanji readings and vocabulary change depending on whether the speech is casual or polite. A simple example is the word for "tomorrow." Initially, you'll learn that 明日 is pronounced あした, but as you advance in your Japanese studies, you'll soon come across another reading: あす (see Table 1).

### 4. Results: Importance of Keigo in communication

At first glance, mastering keigo might seem like an overwhelming task – just a formality for the sake of politeness. Some younger Japanese speakers even share this perspective.

However, many language and etiquette experts in Japan view keigo as more than just a set of rules or refined grammar. They see it as a meaningful gesture, both towards others and oneself. Keigo helps establish a respectful social distance, known as 距離 (kyori) in Japanese, while maintaining professionalism and courtesy. When keigo is used, it fosters a sense of respect that naturally encourages others to reciprocate. This aligns with the idea of treating people the way you wish to be treated. For many Japanese people, particularly the older generation, keigo isn't just a societal expectation – it's a reflection of their values and a way of interacting with integrity. With this perspective in mind, studying keigo may feel less like a challenge and more like an enriching experience.

### CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although keigo may seem complex at first, with dedication and practice, you can become proficient and leave a positive impression on colleagues and peers. For those planning to live and work in Japan long-term, keigo is an essential tool for navigating both professional and social interactions. Mastering keigo is an essential but challenging aspect of learning Japanese, requiring not only grammatical understanding but also a deep awareness of social hierarchy and cultural expectations. While native speakers are



expected to use keigo correctly in formal settings, foreigners are often given leniency. However, learning keigo remains highly beneficial for non-native speakers, as proper usage demonstrates cultural awareness and professionalism, particularly in business environments.

Keigo is more than just a linguistic feature; it embodies Japan's deeply ingrained cultural values and societal norms. Its mastery signifies an understanding of respect, humility, and appropriate social behavior, which are crucial for effective communication in Japanese society. Although challenging, keigo learning can be facilitated through structured educational approaches and immersive experiences. As Japan continues to globalize, keigo remains a fundamental aspect of the language that reflects the country's rich traditions and evolving social structures.

Here are recommendations to solve the issues:

1. **Integrate Keigo Early in Language Education:** Introducing keigo at the beginner level through contextual examples can help learners internalize its forms more naturally.

2. **Utilize Role-Playing and Simulated Scenarios:** Practical exercises such as mock business interactions or formal speech competitions can enhance keigo acquisition.

3. **Encourage Cultural Exposure:** Engaging with Japanese media, interacting with native speakers, and experiencing real-world communication settings can help learners apply keigo authentically.

4. **Develop Comprehensive Learning Materials:** Textbooks and digital resources should provide clear explanations and examples of keigo usage in various contexts.

5. **Foster Workplace Keigo Training:** Companies hiring non-native speakers should offer structured keigo training to help employees adapt to Japanese corporate culture.

Most importantly, even native Japanese speakers acknowledge the difficulty of mastering keigo. Mistakes are part of the learning process, and people are unlikely to judge you harshly for them. The key to truly understanding keigo is simple – using it in communication.

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