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Portfolio Case Study

Designing a Differentiated Online English Programme for Japanese Learners:

From Market Gap Identification to Platform Launch

Venture	English Nexus Online
Role	Co-Founder, Programme Director & Lead Consultant
Context	Independent venture — self-initiated from concept to operation
Commenced	November 2023 — ongoing
Focus areas	Market analysis · Programme architecture · Curriculum design · Platform build · Quality framework

CONTEXT

The market for online English lessons in Japan is huge, and it is crowded. Dozens of platforms sell one-to-one lessons at low prices, most of them staffed by non-native teachers offering something affordable and easy to start. For a large share of Japanese learners, this is where their English begins.

I spent six years living and working in Japan, teaching English to everyone from elementary-school children to working adults, and I learned the language myself along the way. That gave me a clear view of two things at once: how this market actually works, and what Japanese learners specifically need from it. What I kept seeing was a structural problem in how the market served learners, and a gap nobody was filling.

We co-founded English Nexus Online to fill it. The programme was built from scratch around two things: the particular difficulties Japanese learners run into, and the qualities a teacher needs in order to address them.

THE PROBLEM

There is no shortage of online English teachers for Japanese learners. The shortage is of the right kind of teacher, and its consequences are more serious than the market lets on.

Beginners are where this bites hardest. The usual path is to start cheap with a non-native teacher and 'graduate' to a native speaker later. The trouble is that the errors picked up early are the ones that stick. Pronunciation, grammatical habit, the basic willingness to speak: all of it gets laid down in those first lessons. If the teacher there lacks the accuracy, the cultural grounding, or any real experience of learning a language themselves, the damage is done before the learner even knows it.

Further up, the problem changes shape. However good a non-native teacher is, there is a ceiling to what they can pass on: idiomatic authenticity, the cultural reflexes, the feel for English as a first language that keeps an advanced learner improving. Without that, learners stall. Usually they cannot say why.

Language is culture. You can know a language's grammar inside out and still not be able to hand over what really matters. That part only comes from having lived in it.

THE MARKET GAP

I went through the existing platforms with more than a decade of teaching Japanese learners behind me, six years of it in Japan. Not one of them brought all five of the following together in their teachers:

- 1 Native English speakers, for genuine pronunciation, idiomatic accuracy and cultural fluency
- 2 Formally qualified teachers, with real teaching credentials behind the native-speaker label
- 3 Serious teaching experience in real classrooms with real learners, earned beyond the screen
- 4 First-hand experience of Japanese learners, or of living in Japan, and a real grasp of the context that comes with it
- 5 Personal experience of learning a second language, so the teacher knows from the inside what a learner is up against

I meet all five myself, and that is where the standard came from. The principle behind English Nexus Online is simple: every teacher on it has to clear the same bar.

PROGRAMME DESIGN

The curriculum starts from the specific things Japanese learners struggle with:

- Strong passive knowledge, weak active production: years of formal schooling leave most learners with solid grammar and almost no practice speaking. The gap between what they know and what they can produce is wide.
- Pronunciation as a structural barrier: Japanese and English sit a long way apart in sound. The phonemes, the rhythm, the intonation are different enough that pronunciation work has to be built into the programme rather than bolted on at the end.
- Confidence before competence: for a lot of learners, the wall in front of speaking is psychological more than linguistic. Until someone is willing to take a risk and be wrong out loud, they don't progress, so the programme has to make that feel safe.
- Thinking in Japanese: intermediate learners tend to hit a ceiling because they translate in their head before they speak. It slows everything down. Breaking the habit doesn't happen on its own; it has to be targeted directly.

So I built the curriculum in seven strands, each one aimed at a different part of the problem:

Lesson Type	Purpose & Design Intent
Discussion Den	Structured, topic-led conversation. Builds the vocabulary and the nerve to hold a real discussion rather than answer in fragments.
News Nook	Language through current events. Real stories give learners something genuine to understand and argue about, which is where comprehension and listening actually grow.
Pronunciation Pod	Focused pronunciation work. It goes straight at the sounds, rhythm and stress patterns that trip up Japanese speakers of English.
Conversation Corner	Student-led free talk. The learner sets the agenda and brings the topics, which builds both confidence and a habit of steering their own conversations.
Topic Terrace	Rapid-fire topics, on purpose. Throwing unpredictable subjects at learners and asking for fast answers leaves no time to translate in their head, which is exactly the point.
Beginner's Breakroom	A strand built for absolute beginners. Native-speaker-led from the very first lesson, so the foundations are laid correctly instead of being unpicked later.

Interview Inn

Interview preparation and coaching. Plenty of Japanese learners study English for a job or a university place, where one high-pressure conversation can decide the outcome. This is for them.

PLATFORM & BUSINESS MODEL

From the start, English Nexus Online was set up to run as a managed learning operation rather than my personal teaching practice. Almost everything else followed from that one choice.

If the revenue depended on my own teaching hours, the whole thing would be capped by how many lessons one person can run. So I built it around contracted teachers doing most of the instruction, with my own time going into design, quality and operations. I still teach some lessons, but my real job is the curriculum and the team. That is a decision about scale, and it is also a decision about quality: a director who watches standards full-time gets better results than one trying to do that while carrying a full timetable as well.

The platform itself runs on a custom WordPress LMS that I designed and built in-house, pulling course delivery, student management and the day-to-day business operations into one system.

Alongside it I ran a content strategy, a long-form blog and a podcast, backed by targeted search ads, to build visibility and credibility from nothing. Together they brought in over 600 site visits in the first 90 days, from a standing start.

The quality of the programme was never meant to rest on any single teacher, its founders included. The curriculum, the standards and the framework hold up no matter who delivers the lesson.

OUTCOMES & CURRENT POSITION

Programme architecture

A seven-strand curriculum, fully designed and running, with each strand aimed at a different, evidence-informed part of how Japanese learners develop.

Platform operational

A complete WordPress LMS, built in-house and live, handling course delivery, teacher management and the business side in one place.

Audience growing

600+ site visits in the first 90 days, off the back of the blog, the podcast and a targeted search-ad campaign.

WHAT THIS DEMONSTRATES

This piece of work shows a different set of strengths from the ALTIA Central engagement, and one that complements it:

- Market analysis and needs identification: spotting a structural gap in a crowded market, drawn from fifteen years working directly with these learners rather than from a desk review.
- Evidence-informed programme architecture: designing a seven-strand framework where every strand answers a real, named learning problem instead of just being another lesson slot.
- Strategic business-model design: weighing programme quality, teacher standards and scale against each other, then building something whose revenue and quality don't hang on the founder turning up to teach.
- Platform design and build: turning teaching requirements into a working digital environment, and closing the usual gap between what educators want and what gets built.
- Content strategy and audience development: earning visibility and credibility in a target market through steady, expert-led content.

- Quality framework development: setting and holding teacher standards that are concrete and tied to what learners actually get out of a lesson, rather than box-ticking criteria.