

Pronouncing Japanese

Reading Japanese karate terms and names and then pronouncing them correctly is easy, at least to a first approximation. The vowels, for example, each have only one possible pronunciation, rather like the vowels in Spanish. A bar over a vowel, as in Tōkyō, doesn't change the sound; it only means that the sound is of longer duration. Vowels should otherwise be clipped short and crisp. Some words contain occasional nearly silent vowels, which must simply be noted and memorized where they occur.

The following sentence in English, "Ah, we soon get old, yes?" illustrates the proper Japanese pronunciation of the vowels **a**, **i**, **u**, **e**, **o**, and **y** (in that order). The **u** is pronounced with no movement forward of the lips. The vowel combination **ei** is pronounced "ay," as in sensei ("*sen-say*"); **ai** is like the **i** in "hi." The **y** is always pronounced as in "yes," "yoke," "yip," and never as in "happy" or "hungry." The letter **g** is always pronounced as in "go" and never like a **j**.

Yes, there are other idiosyncrasies to Japanese pronunciation. Some consonants (**d**, **z** and **t**, for example) tend to blur into each other sometimes, and there are many subtleties of intonation and accent. Refining your pronunciation further would require practicing with a native speaker; however, for most purposes in the martial arts, an absolutely perfect accent is not necessary. The above guidelines will yield satisfactory pronunciations.

References

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(email: minrecord@comcast.net)

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