

Wakarimasu, “I understand”

The Japanese word for “understand” (*wakaru*) is naturally handy in any learning or classroom situation. Here are some things you need to know in order to use it correctly. First of all, as mentioned in an earlier newsletter, although the Japanese do have words for “I” and “you,” they often consider them too forward or too informal, so they tend to leave them as unspoken but understood. Oddly enough, they also have a spoken *word* which serves the function of our question mark: *ka*. So, if a question is being asked, it will often end with this word. Each verb has a variety of possible endings depending upon the tense or context; the typical endings used when asking or answering about whether something is understood are *-imasu* (the semi-formal non-past affirmative tense) and *-imasen* (semi-formal non-past negative tense). Therefore, when Sensei wants to know if you have understood his explanation or demonstration, he may simply ask: *Wakarimasu ka?* You may answer *Hai!* (“yes”) or *Iie* (“no”), but it would be more elegant to respond with either *Wakarimasu* (“[I] understand”) or *Wakarimasen* (“[I] don’t understand”). Remember that the *u* in *wakarimasu* is practically silent. When trying to say this word at normal conversational speed it also helps to pronounce the *r* as a *d* (“wa-ka-di-mas”).

Wakarimasu ka

([Do you] understand?)

Wakarimasu

([I] understand)

Wakarimasen

([I] don’t understand)

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from Essays on the Martial Arts

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