Having Fun with Hiragana

Great Activities for Primary Students of Japanese

Lisa Barker
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GREAT ACTIVITIES FOR PRIMARY STUDENTS OF JAPANESE

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Acknowledgments

This book is dedicated to all of the wonderful children
I have had the privilege of working with.

Lisa Barker

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Having taught in primary classes for many years, I have a great repertoire of games and activities that engage and support children in their acquisition of the English language. When I decided to study Japanese 10 years ago, I started to think about how my previous life in Early Childhood Education could enrich and complement the study of Japanese.

This book is the culmination of many years of thought, and plenty of trial and error. My foremost objective in becoming a Languages Other Than English (LOTE) teacher has been to provide a vibrant and engaging learning environment for my students, where they are immersed in the language, and eager to develop and improve their skills.

When my students are coming to their LOTE class, I hope they are anticipating something different. I would like my LOTE class to be unlike their other classes. After all, having the opportunity to learn another language and immerse yourself in another way of life should be a unique and wonderful experience, something the learner eagerly anticipates. Nothing makes me happier than to have my students come in and excitedly say, “What are we going to do today?”.

I have found that when children are first introduced to Japanese they are fascinated by the characters, and are eager to explore this significant difference to our language. There are so many unusual shapes unlike any Roman letters, they are really interesting to write, but so very hard to remember! Time and time again I have found that the ability to read hiragana is a morale boosting and exciting accomplishment for the Japanese learner.

This ability gives the learner confidence and reassurance; an empowerment that goes a long way towards building a positive approach to learning Japanese.

Determined to build my store of “fun things to do in my LOTE class” I began to give serious thought to creating some games, not just a series of flashcards, but real games with objects, colour and interest that could inspire even my most discerning customer!

I also gave much thought to how I could reach individuals in my classes; in what ways could I present the learning of hiragana that would fit the wide array of learning styles a class operates within. Some students thrive on using technology; others love to get out of their seats and learn on their feet, using their bodies; others enjoy activities that allow them to independently think about the task at hand and try strategies to solve it; put another handful of students in a group and they instantly become a motivated team tackling the challenges before them.
What is this book all about?

Most of these resources have been developed with a particular group in mind, my own primary coeducational classes, a diverse mix of boys and girls with a vast array of skills and talents. However, I have tried to come up with ideas that can be adapted to any classroom and any age group. These basic ideas are designed to be a springboard for the creative teacher.

I would love to think that you will pick up this resource and be inspired. I want it to get you thinking…about the unique individuals in your classes; about ways to get the students up and moving; about crucial revision of taught material; and about how you could adapt some of these activities for other areas of Japanese learning: vocabulary, kanji, sentence structure etc.

I am acutely aware of the time consuming nature of making our own resources, and throughout the process of preparing this book, the little doubting voice in my head kept saying to me, “But teachers don’t need all of this extra work, give them a break!”. My heart goes out to every dedicated LOTE teacher, however I want to reassure you, this is worthwhile work!

Having a fabulous box of great things to do is going to actually give you that break you so richly deserve in the long run! It is really satisfying to have resources at your disposal that your students enjoy using, and helps them strengthen their skills.

My advice is to choose a couple of ideas that particularly appeal, devote the required energy to their construction, and enjoy using them. You’ll know when it’s time to add another to the repertoire!

Some of these games have a competitive component to them and may need to be modified for younger classes. I like to have my students play in teams, and I carefully select particular learners for certain activities to ensure that they experience success in the activity. During a game, I monitor the progress of each team, and never place emphasis on winning. Switching players around is also an effective tactic if one team is continually winning.

I have found over many years of teaching that students love games that can be won, and usually handle losing with grace. However, really young learners will not have the level of maturity needed to be resilient in competitive games, and all of the activities in this book can be used in a way that eliminates this element. It is up to individual teachers to use the ideas in this book in ways that suit their group of learners.

Lisa Barker
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- Climb Mount Fuji Game
  やまのぼりゲーム

- Daruma Otoshi だるまおとし

Vocabulary Game
Hiragana Beanbag Games
ひらがなビーンバッグゲーム

Creating hiragana beanbags is easy and provides your students with a tangible resource that has many learning possibilities.

Materials

• A set of beanbags with a hiragana written on each one. These beanbags were purchased through a sporting goods supplier. Alternatively a group of enthusiastic parents could be asked to make them. Hiragana characters are written with a permanent marker.

• A large blank hiragana chart. (Younger learners could have roomaji included on their chart.)

• A net or washing basket.
Activities

These beanbags can be used for any activities that you might use flashcards with, but are a lot more fun.

A great activity to do on a regular basis is to ask your students, either as a whole group, or a small group, to complete the hiragana chart using beanbags. Distribute the 46 bags among the students and place the large chart in the middle of the circle. Students place their beanbags in the correct space one by one.

Put all the beanbags in a random pile, all facing up and clearly visible. Choose a category or word to search for, for example, まみむめも  and students quickly find these hiragana and put them together.

Using a net or basket, students are asked to find certain hiragana and quickly throw them in. This can be a fun team game using two nets and countdown timers. It is a little similar to the Japanese sports day game, たまいる, where Japanese children, divided into teams, throw red and white beanbags into a net suspended on a pole.
Hiragana Ohajiki おはじき

Ohajiki is a traditional game for Japanese children using small glass discs. These are scattered in the middle of the circle as players sit around the edge. This game is ideal for two players, but also works with three or four.

Materials

- A set of ohajiki glass discs, with hiragana on them, marked on the lower edge of the disc with a small dot to ensure students read them the right way up. These are inexpensive and available at language bookstores.

This student is about to flick the ohajiki between two others.
She has read the hiragana to her opponent.
Activities

The object of the game is to flick an ohajiki through an open space created by two others. With hiragana written on each one, children are encouraged to vocalise each hiragana in the following way: かは、たとそのなか。Meaning: I will flick the か between た and そ. If the か ohajiki is flicked through the gap, the player can pick it up and add it to his/her collection. This player continues until unsuccessful, and play passes to the next player.

At the end of the game when all of the ohajiki have been collected, each student counts his or her collection, in Japanese of course. Ask each student to read out the hiragana they have collected, or sort them into four groups according to the number of strokes. This will provide the teacher with valuable feedback.

I would recommend that each group is allocated approximately 10 ohajiki per person, so a group of three should start with about 30 discs.
Hiragana Spoons ひらがな スプーン

This is a fun variation on the ever-popular game of Spoons, using the hiragana cards.

Materials

• Several sets of hiragana cards are required (you could use just the hiragana you wish to focus on, but make sure you have four of each card).

• Spoons, one less than the number of children playing or, for younger players, a spoon for each player.

Activities

The object of the game is to secretly snatch a spoon from the centre of the circle without anyone else noticing, when you have four of a kind in your hand. This game is very fast and full of action, ideal for a group of energetic learners.

• The players sit in a circle on the floor with spoons in the centre, one less than the number of children playing.

• Deal four cards to each player, the remaining cards are placed face down in a pile near the leader, and become the draw pile.

• To begin the game, each player picks up their four cards and looks at them without showing any other player. The leader then picks up a card from the draw pile, and quickly decides whether to keep it or pass it on. She/he passes to her right, and each player does the same, either keeping the new card or passing it on immediately, also to the right.
Hiragana Recognition Activities

- The game continues in this manner, quickly, and with the following rules: four cards only at one time; the person sitting on the left of the leader discards unwanted cards onto a new pile, which will then become the new draw later in the game.

- When a player has four matching cards, they quietly take a spoon from the centre, a frantic snatch of spoons ensues, with one player missing out. At the end of each round players should be encouraged to lay their cards out, show each other and discuss their strategies.

- It can be fun to vary the game and tell the students that during the next round, they must collect a card from a different hiragana line, or with a different number of strokes. This game encourages students to recognise and say the characters, and have fun at the same time.

- Younger players enjoy this game with a spoon for everyone; the object is to be the first to take the spoon, and no one misses out.

- Older players might be asked to collect five hiragana from the same line of hiragana, for example, かきくけこ then take a spoon from the centre. This encourages reading, and grouping of hiragana.

The players quickly pass cards and prepare to snatch a spoon as soon as they have four of a kind.
Hiragana Flashcard Swat
ひらがなたたいてとりましょう

This game was shown to me by another LOTE teacher and has been a great success with my classes. All ages love the opportunity to play a fast game of Hiragana Swat, and the students’ recognition of hiragana is greatly developed during fun activities such as this one.

Materials

• Sets of hiragana flashcards, two for each group playing works well.

• Fly swats, you’ll need up to four per group playing, depending on the game.

*These two players are playing Hiragana Swat together. A third person calls out a hiragana to be found by the two players, and then play rotates.*
Activities

- The simplest way to use this resource is to arrange cards face up in the circle, select students to go first, and call out a hiragana.

- The first student to correctly swat the hiragana picks it up and puts it on their pile, or gains a point.

- My students like to develop their own rules for this activity, and one of their favourite ways to play is to form teams, and have two players from each team play at the same time. The hiragana that are currently being learnt are placed in the circle face up, and there is two of each hiragana on the floor. As a team, the pair must find both in order to gain a point for their team.

These fly swats come in handy for other activities including finding a certain word or hiragana displayed around the room. It is important to set very clear guidelines before the game to ensure that no student is mistakenly swatted.

Another variation of Hiragana Swat involving four players at once.
Leaping Hiragana Game とんで

This is a game that my students taught me, and it is a big favourite! It involves lots of large body movements, and is perfect for a group of kinaesthetic learners that like to get up and move around. The object of the game is to correctly recognise hiragana or words and then possibly eliminate other players from the game.

Materials

• A large space uncluttered by furniture if possible.
• A set of hiragana flashcards or word cards with vocabulary you are currently studying.

Activity

• Ask the students to spread out around the space so that they are unable to reach or touch anyone. This is very important, as when a student correctly identifies a hiragana, they can then take a leap/jump to try and tag someone and therefore eliminate them from the game.
Hiragana Recognition Activities

- The teacher holds up a hiragana card and all students raise their hands to identify it. The teacher should endeavor to choose the first hand up, but this is quite difficult, and a student could be selected to be the judge.

- The student with his/her hand raised first identifies the hiragana or word and is then allowed to take a giant leap and possibly tag another student and say “すわって ください”, whereupon the tagged student must sit down. This rule could be modified if you feel it is too harsh, but it does encourage every student to have a go at guessing the hiragana. The game ends when only one student is left standing. This game also works if played in pairs or threes, the group must leap together to tag another group. If you lose your balance when you leap, you forfeit the right to tag, but still remain in the game.
Hiragana Stepping Stones
ひらがなとびいしがえ

This is a simple idea that can be easily done in a spacious learning area. It requires hiragana cards to be laid out on the floor in a variety of ways, and students to move along the line saying each hiragana.

Materials

- Large hiragana cards with single hiragana on them, or whole words for a more advanced group. Student made stepping stones are fun to use also. (Non-skid plastic strips, available from a sports supplier are ideal for this game.)

Activities

The teacher lays out hiragana cards on the floor and students take turns to move along the line in a variety of ways reading the hiragana. Variations to this concept are as follows:

- Students read every second or third hiragana.
- Cards are shuffled each turn.
- Two students go together.
- Cards are placed in a random order, and the student reads them and then sorts them into a particular order. For example, かけそせす would be correctly sorted into さしすせそ.
- A line of cards in random order could be read and then made into a word, for example, みんせすま could be rearranged to make すみません.
Parachute Games  パラシュートゲーム

Using a parachute in primary LOTE classes is sure to engage and excite your students. Any activity that will enable you to take your learners outside and give them opportunities to use their bodies and their minds is worth doing!

Materials

• A large parachute at least 3.6 metres in diameter, or a large circle of colourful material could be used.

• Adhesive-backed paper for writing hiragana characters.

Activities

• Focus on a particular group of hiragana and write them on adhesive paper. These are then stuck onto the parachute in different segments.

• In the photograph, we looked at several hiragana that are very similar in appearance, such as ねわれぬめ and の, and this was one of several activities we did to help the student learn each one.

• After some indoor recognition games with the parachute flat on the floor, take the students outside to a large space, and ask them to position themselves around the perimeter of the parachute. When a hiragana is called, those students holding the corresponding segment must run underneath, and find a new position.

• Call out a familiar word; if one of the hiragana in the word is on the parachute segment, then that student goes underneath. For an extra challenge, put all hiragana on the parachute in random order. A student skips around the parachute, when a hiragana is called, they must quickly locate it. This can also be played with two or three players skipping at one time.
**Hiragana Recognition Activities**

**Hiragana Tags ひらがなタッグゲーム**

This is a game that can be adapted to suit whichever hiragana you are currently studying with your students.

**Materials**

Put business sized cards with hiragana on them into lanyard or identification tags, available from stationery suppliers. These could be colour coded depending on the group you are working with.

**Activities**

Students select a tag, and put it around their neck. They are then asked by the leader to form groups or line up as directed.

- Students could have hiragana from あ to と for example, and line up in correct order.

- A variety of hiragana could be used, then students could sort themselves into groups according to the number of strokes in their hiragana.

- Another idea for younger students could be to find their matching partner. This idea would also work using hiragana and picture cards, and students would look for their match, for example: あ with a picture of a duck.

- The teacher prepares the tags with a group of hiragana that make up particular words, then calls out vocabulary. The children then arrange themselves in correct order to make the word.

- The teacher places a tag around the neck of each student. The hiragana faces their back, so that they are unable to see it. When all students have their tags on, they stand and walk around the room, asking each other questions about their hiragana, that can be answered with はい or いいえ. For example, “Am I in the word….?” “Do I have three strokes?” “Do I have any loops?” “Do I have any straight vertical lines?”

- For beginning learners, write the group of hiragana on the board first. I always have a large hiragana chart in the room, and students are welcome to consult it, and I encourage them to do so if they are unsure.
When the student thinks they know what their hiragana is, they ask directly “Am I...?” It is up to you how many guesses you allow them. We swap tags around several times (the teacher must do this to ensure no peeking) and my classes are never ready to finish this game, the students really enjoy it.

Some of the questions could be asked in the target language, but this makes the game much more challenging, and the vocabulary is not used in other situations, so we usually speak in English for this particular activity.

*These students are asking each other questions about the hiragana on their tags.*
**Dekita, Dekita できたI've done it!**

This game encourages students to practise recognition of hiragana and make words/rows quickly.

**Materials**
- A set of hiragana cards for each student, and a large floor space.

**Activities**
- Give each student a group of hiragana cards; using a variety of colours for each stack is a good idea. You might use just a few cards, i.e. the sounds you are studying at the moment. For more advanced students, a full set of 46 cards could be used.

- Ask the students to make a vertical or horizontal line of hiragana with their cards, e.g. あいうえおかきくけこ as quickly as possible. When they do this, they shout “DEKITA!”, meaning, “I’ve done it!”.

After a few rounds, with students shuffling their cards between each round, have them move position, to a new set of cards. This tactic ensures that cards are properly shuffled, and adds variety.
Variations

• Call out a word the class knows well, and ask the students to make it with their cards vertically. This can be as simple as SUSHI すし or more complex for older students, such as SUSHIO TABETE すしをたべて. I have a pile of ten cards made up to make sounds such as be, ga, ji, etc.

• Call out a vowel sound, such as あ, い, う, え or お and ask your students to make a vertical line of all the hiragana that have this vowel sound. For example, if you call out う your students could make a line of うくすつぬふ等.

• Call out two hiragana in the following way: はからんまで meaning “from ha to n”. Students fill in all the hiragana between these two.

• Call out a group of hiragana made up of a certain number of strokes, for example “four stroke hiragana”. Students quickly find きなほぶ and call “Dekita!”. This game, if played in a large group, is loud and fast moving; your students will really enjoy it.
Hiragana Bingo Variations
ひらがなピンゴ

All LOTE teachers have a bingo game in their repertoire, and it is a perennial favourite, especially if a treat for the winners is involved! I have come up with a few variations on the original game that gives the learners some variety and ownership of the game.

Materials

• Blank bingo grids, created by the teacher, to be filled in by the students. The size of the grid will depend on the ability and age of the players, and can be as small as nine squares. I like to decorate the edges with pictures and words written in hiragana, in the hope that students will attempt to read them during the game.

• Cardboard fruit trays.

Activities

When you use a blank grid, give your class the hiragana you would like them to use, for example, you might be focusing on how hiragana sounds change when a small や ゅ or ゅ is added. These hiragana blends could be written on the board, and discussed prior to players filling in their grid. When all squares are filled, they are ready to play the game. As the sounds are called, players then mark them off on their grid.

Beginning learners could be shown each hiragana as it is called out. Those who are a little more familiar with the script might have to listen carefully and then find the hiragana on their grid without a visual aid. I have included some grids at the back of the book that you could use or adapt for your learner (see page 114).

BINGO KUDAMONO BOARDS are so called because the cardboard trays come from the greengrocer. These trays are fun to use for hiragana boards, the object of the game being three in a row wins. Use small counters with them. Another way to use these is to have the student toss a tiny cloth ball onto the board. Whichever hiragana the ball lands on must be read, or a word that has this hiragana in it could be said.
Climb Mount Fuji Game  やまのぼりゲーム

Many Japanese people dream that they might one day climb Fuji San, their most revered and famous landmark. I thought it would be fun to create a game around this concept and also touch on its great symbolic importance to Japanese people.

Materials

- A gameboard with Mount Fuji, and stages marked. (I made this board easily using card and paint, you might choose to have your students make it themselves, or even better, construct a 3D model of Mount Fuji with some way of graduating the journey upwards.) This game is designed for up to four players.
- Hiragana cards or other vocabulary flashcards.
- Counters/playing pieces.

Activities

This game gives the students a chance to climb Fuji San, by correctly identifying the hiragana cards. Depending on the level of your students, the card that the student picks up could have whatever the teacher chooses, such as kanji characters for secondary students; vocabulary for revision; or questions about self, greetings, all written in Japanese. Each player takes a turn at picking up a card from the pile (face down) and identifying the hiragana correctly and moving up the mountain. First player to the top wins.

Variations

Players could start at the top and race down the mountain. Any flashcards could be used, depending on the level of the students. Some added variety could be created with chance cards, asking the students language or cultural questions.

The teacher works with these students as they call out each hiragana shown and move up Mount Fuji.
**Vocabulary Game**

The object of this game is to provide a fun activity that encourages students to recognise hiragana quickly. Daruma Otoshi is a traditional Japanese children’s game.

**Materials**

- A daruma otoshi game, or
- A daruma otoshi with ladder (available from language bookshops).
- A set of hiragana flashcards.

**Activities**

Set up the daruma otoshi on top of his ladder in the middle of the circle, and assign someone to be responsible for the operation. Then present a card and the student/group has to read or say the hiragana before the little daruma hits the ground. This is also fun when you give the students sections of rubber tubing or pipe cleaners and ask them to make the hiragana you call out in the allotted time.

This activity is also very easy to set up in the classroom, and students can work individually or in pairs, testing each other’s hiragana recognition. If the little daruma stops midway through his descent, the operator can give him a little tap.

If you are using a daruma otoshi without the ladder, students simply pair up, and when they correctly identify a hiragana, they have a turn at the daruma otoshi.

*As the little daruma descends, this student quickly reads out each hiragana.*
Having Fun with Hiragana

Stroke Order Activities

- Hiragana Guess
  なんですか

- Creating Hiragana Art
  ひらがなづくり

- Stroke Order Game With Foam Pieces かきじゅんゲーム

- Hiragana Character Puzzle
  まょうのまど

- Hiragana Sorting Games
  ひらがなあつめゲーム

- Show Me! みせてください

- Hiragana Magic Window
  まょうのまど
Hiragana Guess  なんですか

This is a set of hiragana cards that students can touch and follow the stroke order easily. They have been made with a glue/paint product easily obtained through an art and craft supplier. The hiragana is raised and students enjoy the tactile quality of this activity.

Materials

- A set of cards, made with glue paint. I have used a foam background sheet to make the texture interesting, but cardboard also works. These cards are easy to make, however a steady hand and a little patience is required! For the very enthusiastic, you could use different colour glitter glue for each stroke; however these cards would take considerably longer to make.

Activities

- My students love feeling these cards, and a simple activity is to just give the learners an opportunity to use these cards and follow the stroke order. They can be used for any of the hiragana games that require a set of flashcards.

- Have a student close their eyes, (or use a blindfold if necessary) and select a card for them and place it the right way up in their hands. Using target language, the student is asked: なんですか。 They feel the hiragana and guess what it is. I only allow one guess, and then the student can open his/her eyes and have a look. I always show the other students the card first, and this allows them to participate in each round; however, don’t let them reveal any clues, even inadvertently, such as “oh that’s easy, it only has one stroke!”.

- Students can be selected to take the teacher’s role, and therefore practise asking the question in Japanese.
Creating Hiragana Art
ひらがなづくり

Using a variety of materials and templates of hiragana characters, students have an opportunity to create their own hiragana, and make them into a piece of artwork. These creations are then proudly displayed in the learning space, and provide students with the opportunity to read their hiragana artworks in between Japanese classes.

Materials

• *Das* modelling clay or similar (available from art suppliers).
• Pipe cleaners.
• Assorted recycled materials.

Activities

Students create 3D hiragana with a modelling material that hardens or can be baked, and display these in the classroom. Before using a permanent material, students need opportunities to use dough, and it is very important to encourage correct stroke order, during construction.

Pipe cleaners are also an easy and effective way to create hiragana characters. Using templates that indicate stroke order, students enjoy constructing hiragana and getting them just right.
Stroke Order Game With Foam Pieces
かきじゅんゲーム

This puzzle looks hard to make but in fact it was completed on one rainy Saturday afternoon, and was well worth the effort as it is popular with my students. The objective is to construct hiragana stroke by stroke.

Materials

• Foam sheets (easily obtained through a stationery supplier) – four colours are required, one for each stroke.
• Template of Hiragana (see page 102)
• Craft knife and cutting mat.
• Storage bags/boxes – one per row of hiragana

Activities

There are lots of ways you could use this resource in your classes:

• Younger students could be given the templates for a group of hiragana and the foam shapes, and then match them together.
• Older students love the challenge of tipping out a bag containing five hiragana (e.g. まみむめも) and sorting them out correctly.
• The colour coordination of each stroke is very helpful for the students, i.e. 1st stroke is always red, 2nd stroke is blue, 3rd stroke is yellow, 4th is purple.
• Teachers working with advanced students might consider using one colour only, thereby creating a difficult activity for a student that knows hiragana well, but loves a challenge.
• Another fun way to use these foam strokes is to show one stroke only, with other strokes of that particular hiragana concealed nearby, and have the students guess which hiragana you are constructing. Let them guess, or note down which one they think it is as you add each stroke. No winners in this game, just a fun way to build up a hiragana stroke by stroke with your students.
Stroke Order Activities

• Put out a selection of hiragana on the floor in front of the group. For example, you may be focusing on one stroke hiragana and place all 11 of them in front of the group. The students should look carefully at each hiragana and try to remember them. Ask the group to “めをじてください” “please close your eyes” and remove one, then the group must try to identify which hiragana is missing. Take away two hiragana for an extra challenge.

• I always provide paper and pencils in any activities of this nature. Students need to use a variety of strategies to solve the problems presented and the writing of strokes is important to encourage.
Hiragana Character Puzzle
ひらがなパズル

This puzzle contains the 46 characters of HIRAGANA. They have been made, cut and separated into strokes and then individually laminated. Each row of hiragana, e.g. かきくけこ has been made in different colour, this makes it easier for students to group the pieces according to the hiragana group. It also means teachers can quickly divide the pieces into groups and have the students work on a row of hiragana then move to the next row.

Activities

The puzzle can be used in a variety of ways:

• Put the hiragana in groups then ask the class to do each row in rotating groups.
Stroke Order Activities

- Have a small group work on the entire hiragana puzzle, and place it in order.

- Give students an opportunity to make familiar words.

- Practise stroke order.

- Teacher sets up hiragana grid with a few characters missing, students individually find and complete gaps.

- Ideal for individuals, or a small group to work on, or as a challenge activity.

This puzzle is time consuming to make but worth the effort. It could also be made using a particular colour for each stroke order. If paper and laminating is too labour intensive, you could explore the use of other materials, such as stiff fabric, plastic matting or rubber.
**Hiragana Sorting Games**

This is a lively activity using a large space uncluttered with furniture if possible. The objective is to give students a chance to look closely at hiragana and sort them in a variety of ways. This is also known as “bundling”. This activity helps the students to devise effective strategies for hiragana learning. It also encourages animated discussion between students about the ways in which hiragana can be bundled. This activity can be done independently or in a group.

**Materials**

- Hoops or similar, at least five per group.
- Sets of hiragana flashcards, one per group. You could also use beanbags with hiragana marked on each one.
- Several small blank cards and markers for labelling categories.

**Activities**

Give the group a set of hiragana cards and at least five hoops. Ask them to come up with a way to sort the cards into groups. The most obvious way is to count the strokes and make four groups, and this is an interesting activity to do, especially if you ask the students to predict beforehand how many hiragana will be in each category. Once the students have done this, encourage them to make other categories. They will need to look at each hiragana and think about the similarities and differences.

Here are some of the ways my students have sorted hiragana: into five vowel groups; into a venn diagram of loops; curves; straight lines; separate strokes that don’t touch; strokes that cross; dashes; and vertical strokes. I always provide time during the lesson for students to share their strategies and thinking with the group, and to give feedback to each other.
Show Me! みせてください

This is a fun and simple activity that can be used in any Japanese class, no matter what the level. It is best played with a small group, or with students in pairs. Using Magna Doodle drawing boards, available from toy stores, students can have a great time writing hiragana, and learning from each other. You could also use small chalkboards.

Materials

- Magna Doodle boards (travel size is ideal) for the group, or any other drawing board that can be quickly erased.

Activities

- With a small group, the teacher or facilitator calls out a hiragana (or katakana/kanji for a secondary group). Quickly the students write it on their boards without showing each other.

- For younger learners, the hiragana should be displayed in the room on a big chart, and I would encourage students to look around the room if necessary.

- When the teacher calls みせてください the group then turns their boards around to see each other's work. The teacher should praise all efforts, and help the students to learn from each other by encouraging discussion and assistance between individuals.
Hiragana Magic Window
まようのまど

This is a quick game that requires no materials, but is much loved by my students. This game encourages students to focus on the stroke order of the hiragana, and become familiar with hiragana that are very similar in appearance, but represent different sounds.

Activities

• The teacher or a student draws a window frame on the whiteboard and asks the students to watch closely.

• A hiragana is begun, very slowly, in correct stroke order. Students call out as soon as they think they know it, and then one of the students is asked to come and complete the hiragana.

• Students can also play this in small groups, but it works very well as a whole class activity.

• A follow up activity I have done with my students is to create individual magic windows, and draw and decorate their favourite hiragana. These are then displayed in the classroom.