

# Understanding the World Today

**Dave Rear**

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## Understanding the World Today

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# To Teachers and Students

We live in a world that is constantly changing. Every week seems to bring new developments in work, society, media, and technology. Making sense of all these changes is not easy, and all too often we find ourselves struggling to keep up with the vast amounts of new information swirling about us daily. But we mustn't give up! To be a global citizen means to be informed about the world we live in, both inside and outside our own country. This book, in a small way, aims to help students deal with that challenge.

It is organized into four main sections, each with five units that illustrate the major theme. We start with Economy and Work, looking at new trends like remote working and Universal Basic Income, while acknowledging the endurance of tradition with Japan's 200-year-old *shinise* businesses. In the second section, we examine developments in Culture and Society. We learn about the tricks retailers use to make us spend money in their stores. We look into the dark secrets behind social media, and we hear the moving tale of Mats Steen, the boy who found freedom in the world of online gaming. The third section delves into Language and Learning. We read about the mysteries of mentalism and the ups and downs of child geniuses, and we try to answer the question of how human beings learned to speak. In the final section, we turn to Science and Technology, which is at the heart of change within our world. We investigate the history of vaccines, the concept of healthspan, and developments in solar power, and we gaze toward the International Space Station and ask whether it is really worth the money we spend on it.

To help students understand the topics introduced in the book, each unit contains a variety of activities for them to complete. There is a vocabulary exercise to help students understand key words in the reading passage. Two sets of reading questions test their comprehension both of broad themes in the passage and specific details. There is a listening activity employing important vocabulary from the text, and finally a set of discussion questions to encourage students to think critically about the topics they have read. I hope you and your students enjoy using the book. Good luck!

Dave Rear

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# 100-Yen Shops

Still going strong

## Introduction

現代の厳しい経済状況の中において、多くの企業はビジネスを成立させることを難しいと感じています。しかし、その中でも日本の100円ショップは順調な成長を見せています。現在、コンビニエンスストアよりも急速に拡大する100円ショップの成功の秘訣とは何でしょうか。

## Key Vocabulary

Match the word to its meaning.

- |                      |   |
|----------------------|---|
| 1. _____ poverty     | a. being unable to pay your debts             |
| 2. _____ bankrupt    | b. to make possible                           |
| 3. _____ retailer    | c. to produce something, usually in a factory |
| 4. _____ manufacture | d. the state of being very poor               |
| 5. _____ enable      | e. a shop or person selling goods             |

## Reading



1-03~09

**CD1-03** Hirotake Yano is an unlikely billionaire. Born in 1943 to a family of five brothers and three sisters, he grew up in the poverty and hardship of post-war Hiroshima. Two of his brothers became doctors, but Yano was not considered suitable for a career in medicine. Getting married while studying engineering at Chuo University, he began to work at his father-in-law's fishery business in Hiroshima, taking over as president at the age of 26. Unfortunately, the small company soon went bankrupt and, burdened with 7 million yen in debts, Yano fled with his young family to Tokyo, where he took a job as an encyclopedia salesman. That too, however, failed to work out and, returning to Hiroshima at the request of his father, Yano started his own street stall, moving from location to location to sell cheap household goods. In 1977, he decided to simplify his business by charging a uniform price of 100 yen for all his products, the cheapest price he could possibly make a profit from. He changed the name of his small, one-man store from Yano Shoten to Daiso, meaning "big warehouse." Perhaps you might have heard of it. 5 10 15

**CD1-04** Now Daiso operates over 3,000 stores in Japan and around 2,000 overseas in 26 countries, including the United States, Australia, China, Malaysia, and Saudi Arabia. The largest of the stores in Japan is in Funabashi, Chiba Prefecture, a so-called "giga Daiso" that spans no fewer than seven floors; but the company's headquarters remain where they started in Yano's hometown of Hiroshima. 20

**CD1-05** Daiso is the largest of Japan's 100-yen chains, ahead of Seria, Can Do, and Watts. Despite the difficult retailing conditions in Japan over the past decade, all four of these chains have been expanding at great speed. In 2019, Daiso announced they would be opening 170 new stores in Japan during that fiscal year. Runner-up Seria planned to open 150 outlets, while Can Do and Watts aimed to add 80 and 115 stores respectively. Remarkably, the total of new openings exceeded even those of Japan's 25

30 mighty convenience store chains of Seven-Eleven, Family Mart, and Lawson, although with over 52,000 outlets nationwide, these retailing giants are still much larger than the growing empires of the 100-yen chains.

CD1-06 So, what is it that makes 100-yen stores successful, even when  
35 faced, like all the world's retailers, by intense competition from Amazon and other online stores? How on earth do they manage to generate a profit when selling their products so cheaply? The answer lies primarily in the way they manufacture and purchase their merchandise. The majority of their products are manufactured cheaply in low-wage factories in China  
40 and southeast Asia from where they are shipped directly to the chain's warehouses, without any middlemen that would add costs. Furthermore, they are always ordered in bulk—tens of thousands of each single item. Buying in bulk allows the chains to negotiate lower prices with the manufacturers, enabling the retailers to make a small but crucial profit on  
45 the products sold in their stores. Manufacturing on a large scale also means the products do not necessarily have to be low-quality. By itself, each item might cost more than 100 yen to produce, but because the factories are able to make so many, they can keep the costs down.

CD1-07 That said, not every item in a 100-yen store costs under 100 yen to  
50 produce. Retailers like Daiso are willing to accept a loss on some more expensive items because they know that customers will also purchase cheaper items (some costing the company less than 10 yen) at the same time. Indeed, it is the sheer number and variety of products on sale that is the secret to the popularity of the 100-yen stores. Daiso, for example, sells  
55 over 70,000 unique items across 15 different categories, from kitchen goods and garden equipment to cosmetics, apparel, and electrical devices. Each month a further 700 new products are added to the line-up, giving shoppers a constantly changing selection from which to choose. This often means that, while customers might enter the store intending to buy just  
60 one or two specific items, they end up leaving with four or five more that



suddenly caught their eye.

**CD1-08** Like all retail businesses, operating a 100-yen chain is not without its risks. Although competition from online stores like Amazon is not such a problem with low-cost goods of this type, rising labor costs caused by worker shortages are an issue. Some 100-yen shops have begun to introduce automated checkouts to compensate. Also, with profit margins tight, the chains are vulnerable to changes in exchange rates, which can suddenly make imports more expensive. 65

**CD1-09** If Daiso's founder Hirotake Yano has anything to do with it, however, the 100-yen business should be safe. Famously modest and publicity-shy, he once said, "*O-kyaku-sama wa yo wakaran*" ("I just don't understand customers"). Clearly, though, he knew something. 70

#### NOTES

**encyclopedia** 「百科事典」    **uniform price** 「均一価格」    **span** 「及ぶ, 広がる」    **fiscal year** 「営業年度, 事業年度」    **outlet** 「直売店, アウトレット」    **middleman** 「仲買人, 仲介業者」    **bulk** 「大量」    **profit margin** 「利益幅」    **vulnerable to** 「～に対して弱い」

## True / False

*Decide if each sentence is true or false.*

- [ T / F ] Hirotake Yano started to sell encyclopedias for 100 yen.
- [ T / F ] Although there are more convenience stores than 100-yen shops, the 100-yen business expanded more quickly in 2019.
- [ T / F ] 100-yen stores keep their costs down by asking their manufacturers to use the cheapest materials possible.
- [ T / F ] Daiso's profit margins are basically the same for each item they sell.
- [ T / F ] Exchange rates and labor costs are the two main risks to the 100-yen chains.

## Finding Specific Information

*Write down the answer to each question.*

1. Why did Hirotake Yano move to Tokyo?

.....  
.....

2. Where are most of Daiso's products manufactured?

.....  
.....

3. Why have some 100-yen stores begun to introduce automated checkouts?

.....  
.....

## Summary



1-10

*Fill in the spaces with the words at the top.*

operates

expand

bulk

founder

shortages

Daiso is the largest 100-yen chain in Japan, but its <sup>(1)</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ Hirotake Yano did not seem like the kind of person who would go on to become a billionaire. His first businesses were unsuccessful, and it was not until he hit on the idea of selling all his goods for the fixed low price of 100 yen that he began to make progress. Now his firm <sup>(2)</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ thousands of stores all over the world and is still continuing to <sup>(3)</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ rapidly today. The profitability of 100-yen stores depends on buying goods in <sup>(4)</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ directly from low-wage factories in China and southeast Asia, enabling them to keep costs as low as possible. There are still risks to the chains from worker <sup>(5)</sup> \_\_\_\_\_ and exchange rates, but for now they seem set to continue their success.

## What Do You Think?

*Write down and share your ideas with your classmates.*

1. Do you or your family often visit 100-yen stores? What kind of goods do you buy?

.....

.....

.....

.....

2. Do you think that 100-yen stores will continue to be popular in Japan? Why / why not?

.....

.....

.....

.....