Kanji Learning Strategies:
From the Viewpoint of Learners with Non-kanji Background

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要旨

　漢字は非漢字圏の日本語学習者にとって日本語学習を困難にしている要因の一つである。本稿では、留学生に実施したアンケート調査の結果を元に学習者の視点から漢字について分析する。非漢字圏の学習者は漢字の数、各々の漢字の類似性、複雑性などから長期間にわたる漢字の記憶の保持に苦手意識を抱いている一方、同時に漢字の持つ意味や視覚的形状、漢字の部首等に興味も持っている。これらの漢字の特徴を踏まえ、複数の学習法を使った漢字学習が有効であると考えられる。

【キーワード】　kanji, learning strategies, learners with non-kanji background,
　　　　　　　　pictographic images, internal components, radicals

1.　Introduction

　　　One of the most important features in terms of learning the Japanese language lies in mastering kanji (i.e. the Chinese characters). However, kanji is difficult to learn especially for those whose native languages use only phonograms such as alphabets. According to Kaiho's survey (1984), the students with non-kanji background feel kanji more difficult than the students with a kanji background. The learners sometimes feel anxiety and frustration, and it may even discourage them from continuing to study Japanese.

　　　This paper will first show the results of a survey. The survey was conducted in order to investigate how the learners consider and perceive kanji characters. Secondly, it will consider the reasons why it is difficult for the learners to acquire kanji. It will also mention the advantages kanji characters have for the learners. The students feel that it is difficult to keep remembering kanji for long-term. In addition, the physical complexity, a variety of readings and meanings presented by kanji confuse the students. On the other hand, the students find beneficial features such as its pictographic meanings and kanji internal components. It is effective to use these advantages as learning strategies.

2. Survey

2.1 Method

To investigate the features that students commonly have when they study kanji characters, the following survey was conducted. A written questionnaire was provided to 47 students in the Asian Studies Program at Kansaigaidai University. There were three students with a kanji background and these students were excluded, and, therefore, 44 students were the subjects of this survey. These students are divided into two groups: 24 students who had no prior experience studying Japanese before they came to Japan are put into group A. Hiragana, katakana and approximately 100 kanji were introduced for these students during the semester. In group B, 20 students are counted who had already known hiragana, katakana, and some basic kanji (about 100), and approximately 110 kanji were introduced during the semester. The survey was conducted at the end of the semester, which means all students had some experiences learning kanji. The students were asked to answer the questions and write their opinions freely. There are four questions and are shown below.[1]

(1) Question 1: What do you find difficult, if anything about studying kanji.

Question 2: Do you find studying kanji interesting? If so, please explain further.

Question 3: How do you memorize kanji?

Question 4: What kind of classroom activities would be beneficial?

2.2 Results

2.2.1 Is kanji difficult for the learners?

Table 1. Is kanji difficult?

	Group A	Group B	Total
Yes	23	20	43 (97.7%)
No	1	0	1 (2.3%)

As for question 1, 97.7 % of the students found that studying kanji is difficult in total. This is quite a large number and it leads that most of the students who have no kanji background have difficulties with dealing with kanji.

Table 2. What do you find difficult about studying kanji?

	Group A	Group B	Total
There are a lot of similar kanji	4	5	9
Stroke order	4	5	9
Multiple readings	3	6	9
Each kanji has different meanings	6	1	7
Remembering for long term	3	3	6
Memorizing	1	1	2
How to write	1	0	1
Furigana	0	1	1

The detailed reasons why the students find studying kanji difficult are shown in table 2. Nine students answered kanji was difficult because there were a lot of similar kanji. It also seems stroke order is hard for students. There are also nine students who think that the difficulties lie in each character's multiple readings. It confuses students that each kanji has different meanings. One should notice that six students answer that it is hard for them to remember characters for long term. Much difference between students' levels cannot be found.

2.2.2 Is kanji interesting for the learners?

Table 3. Is kanji interesting?

	Group A	Group B	Total
Yes	20	18	38 (86.4%)
No	4	2	6 (13.6%)

Table 3 indicates whether the students feel interesting when they study kanji. The results are rather interesting comparing with the ones in table 1. 83.3 % of the students found that studying kanji is interesting while 93.3 % of the students answered that studying kanji is difficult. Thus, it indicates that they have difficulties when studying kanji while at the same time finding interesting features.

Table 4. What is interesting when you study kanji?

	Group A	Group B	Total
Origin of words	3	3	6
Pictographic images	2	4	6
Beauty of kanji	4	1	5
Kanji makes it easier to understand passages	2	3	5
Multiple meanings	2	3	5
Kanji internal components	1	4	5
Combination to create words	3	0	3
Others[2]	7	0	0

The reasons quite vary depending on the students as shown in table 4. The original meanings of each kanji, kanji's abstract images as pictograph are pointed out. The students tend to get interested to know how kanji were first created and try to remember by picturing them. Five students answered they think kanji is beautiful and fashionable. Furthermore, five students feel that kanji makes it easier to understand passages. This derives from that they know kanji indicates meanings as well as sounds, so they can read and understand faster if the text includes kanji than if the text is written in all hiragana. Other five students consider multiple meanings that each kanji has interesting, and this is also the reason why they find kanji difficult. This shows that a disadvantage for some students could be an advantage for the other students. Some students find that studying kanji is intellectually challenging because kanji is a different writing system from that of alphabets. These findings are very important and it might be an advantage for them to motivate students to study kanji.

2.2.3 How do you memorize kanji?

Table 5. How do you memorize kanji?

	Group A	Group B	Total
Writing out many times	17	15	32
Flash cards	3	3	6
By kanji components	0	3	3
By readings	0	3	3
Reading kanji in a context	0	2	2
Others[3]	2	1	3

As far as the ways of memorizing kanji are concerned, there are two major methods found in their answers. 72.7 % of the students practice kanji by writing out characters repeatedly. The second way that the students use the most is flash cards. Interestingly, most of the students only use these two ways in group A. On the other hand, it seems that the students in group B use a variety of methods other than writing out and using flash cards. Higher-level students know more ways or develop their own ways to study kanji. The importance of learning strategies for students is stressed by several studies (e.g. Zimmerman 1989, Zimmerman 1998, Hofer et al. 1998).The other ways mentioned by higher-level students are practicing kanji by kanji components (i.e. small parts that compose each kanji) and kanji readings.

2.2.4 What kind of classroom activities would be beneficial?

Table 6. What kind of classroom activities would be beneficial?

	Group A	Group B	Total
Using kanji games	9	8	17
Writing practice (paper/ on a board)	3	3	6
Flash cards	1	2	3
Calligraphy	1	0	1
Reading signs in Japan	0	1	1

The students suggested several classroom activities as shown in table 6. Most of them showed their favor to the activity using games. This activity is preferred by 17 students. They consider writing practice in classroom is beneficial. Several students state that continuous practice of kanji is necessary to keep remembering them. The activities using flash cards, group translation are also suggested.

3. Kanji Features from the Viewpoint of the Learners

3.1 Disadvantages

Considering the results of the questionnaire above, one can point out the following features. Kanji is difficult to study because it is hard to keep remembering them. Firstly, large number of kanji characters is one of the disadvantages of kanji. The National language Council listed 1,945 characters for daily use.[4] This is a huge number in comparison with the characters, for example, the alphabet in English which has only 26 characters. Some students might feel intimidated even by the number of hiragana and katakana when they start studying, though kanji has a much larger number of characters than hiragana and katakana. Kaiho (2002) mentions that teachers need to take how students feel towards kanji into consideration and it is necessary to decrease students' burden and to motivate them.

The physical complexity of kanji is also a disadvantage for the students. The shapes of kanji characters are in general more complex than those of alphabets, and there are more strokes on the average in a single kanji character than in a letter (Taylor and Taylor 1995). Additionally, some kanji characters are similar to each other. Several students state that it is difficult to distinct each kanji because of their similarity.

Furthermore, the readings and meanings represented by kanji are complex. Almost all kanji characters have more than one way of reading. This is attributed to kanji's different systems of reading: one based on Japanese (the *kun*-reading) and the other on Chinese (the *on*-reading). Due to the arbitrariness of kanji readings, learners must know which reading applies depending on the context in which the character is used. Also, some kanji characters have several meanings. In spite of the large number of characters and their complexity, students tend to practice kanji by writing them repeatedly as the survey shows. Takebe (1989) discusses that most likely, without proper guidance, a native speaker of English opts for rote learning with flash cards or writing kanji characters out repeatedly. Practicing kanji merely by writing down might not be sufficient to master kanji.

3.2 Advantages

Although learning kanji has all these difficulties, there are advantages, too. Firstly, many students find kanji's original meanings interesting as the survey shows. Kaiho (2008) stresses the importance of kanji as ideogram to get students motivated. Kanji can be classified into any of four categories: *Shokei-moji, Shiji-moji, Kaii-moji* and *Keisei-moji*. *Shokei-moji* (pictorial kanji) is originated from pictures of actual objects or natural phenomenon. *Shiji-moji* (indicative kanji) expresses abstract concepts including the notions of numbers and positions. *Kaii-moji* (compound ideographic kanji) is formed by combining pictorial or indicative characters. These features could draw the attention of learners and, in addition, the origin of kanji characters might motivate students especially at the elementary level.

Secondly, grasping kanji's internal composite features might also be a good way to remember kanji. In the survey above, some students pay attention to kanji components as a way of memorizing characters. The kanji in the last group are called *Keisei-moji* (phonetic-ideographic Kanji). When one analyses the internal structures of the kanji in this group, several rules are observed. One part of kanji, which represents character's category, is called radicals and they indicate meanings. The other part of kanji demonstrates kanji's pronunciation. Each kanji is a combination of these components. A great deal of characters (approximately 90 % according to Mitamura and Mitamura (1997)) belong to *Keisei-moji*. The shapes of kanji are not merely arbitrary combinations of bars and boxes, and learning these kanji components helps students to read and write kanji characters. As the survey shows, the students learn that kanji has components inside and one character is formed by a combination of components when they get to a higher level, and they utilize it as one of learning strategies.

4. Conclusion

A number of students with non-kanji background have difficulties when they study kanji. Students especially feel that to retain a memory of kanji characters is difficult. Considering the results of the survey, possible suggestions for useful Kanji materials have been made in this paper. The results of the survey shows almost the students feel negative feelings about studying kanji. For instance, the number of kanji which they need to learn is almost 2,000 and this number is huge compared with the alphabets the students' native languages have. Moreover, the shapes of kanji are more complex and each kanji has its

own meanings. These facts keep students from remembering kanji for long-term. However, the survey revealed they found some beneficial features at the same time. The advantages they found are, for example, that they are interested in kanji because some kanji have its original meanings or pictographic meanings, which their native languages do not originally have. Kanji internal components also draw learners' attentions. The higher level students tend to use their interests in kanji as a learning strategy. It is essential for learners to have a variety of strategies in order to master kanji.

Notes

(1) Multiple answers are possible so that one student could give two or more answers for each question.

(2) Other reasons are as follows: Kanji is interesting because it has its history (2 students) / is a different writing system (2) / is compact (1) / is complex (1) /can be found outside the classroom (1).

(3) Other ways to memorize kanji are: Thinking of images (1 student) / Singing karaoke (1) / Testing oneself (1)

(4) The National Language Council established the 1,945 of 'daily use kanji (*Joyo-kanji*)' in 1981.

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