

Studying How To Study Kanji: A Practical Approach

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Abstract

One of the biggest challenges for Japanese language students is to effectively learn *kanji* (Chinese characters used in modern Japanese writing system). Therefore, teaching *kanji* becomes also one of the biggest challenges for Japanese teachers/professors. A variety of teaching methods has been developed in order to make this learning effective, i.e., pleasant, long-lasting and accurate. Some of them are the study of *kanji*'s *naritachi* (the elements they are composed of, as in Yoshimitsu's *Kanji no Naritachi Jiten* – “Dictionary of *kanji* origins” or “Dictionary of *kanji* composition” – and James Heisig's “Remembering the Kanji”), the study of *kanji* from context or by dividing them in semantic groups etc. Recently many computer programs and phone apps have been created not only for studying Japanese language but specifically for learning *kanji*. From the perspective of a Japanese language class to Brazilian Portuguese native speakers, the purpose of this brief work is to reflect on strategies on learning *kanji* in order to improve Japanese language classes and self-study practice.

Keywords: Kanji, learning strategy, self-study.

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Introduction

The present work is motivated by Japanese language students in Brazil and their struggle in learning *kanji*, Chinese ideograms used in Japanese language. This paper is part of a beginning research project – named *Kanji no Kandan*, or “Pleasant conversations on *kanji*” – on how to more effectively learn and therefore how to teach *kanji*. It is aimed at analyzing frequent practices and at verifying possible strategies, in order to find what has and what has not been working for the purpose. Not being able to retain studied *kanji* is a common complaint from students all over Brazil and, as far as it is possible to see, the same scenario can be found regarding Japanese language students in other places of the world.

It all started from the researcher’s own experience as a Japanese language student. I had my undergraduate studies on Japanese Language and Literature from 1995 to the year 2000 in Rio de Janeiro Federal University, Brazil. Unfortunately, I let my Japanese studies on second plan until 2010, when I started teaching Japanese at Amazonas Federal University. Having passed such a long time, it was not surprising that I didn’t have the same proficiency, but it was worse than I could ever imagine. In fact, it was one of the most frustrating experiences I’ve ever had in my life. When I was reviewing my first lessons, it seemed that I hadn’t lost much, but as long as I was going deeper and reaching the most difficult topics, I started wondering how I could have forgotten all that so quickly. I found in my treasured pieces of paper a speech I had written to participate in a Speech Contest. I couldn’t read most of the ideograms I had written myself, I couldn’t remember the words. Studying so hard for so long, repeating *kanji* over and over again – and it seemed to be almost totally lost.

Nevertheless, teaching Japanese makes one study even harder than he/she used to do as a student. It was common to hear from the students themselves they also didn’t feel stimulated, because *kanji* seemed to be very hard to retain. One of them once told that in a given time of study life, it feels like learning two *kanji* and forgetting one, giving two steps forward and one backward. It is the teacher’s role to tell students that it’s perfectly normal to feel this way, so that at least there is a moving forward – and say *ganbatte kudasai*, “try to do your best”, even though they feel it is being asked too much of them.

Notwithstanding, maybe it is not really normal to feel that it is too much struggle for not having a reasonable result. Searching for some information on the Internet, trying the sentences “how to learn *kanji* fast” and “how to learn *kanji* easily” was really surprising. There were many videos and tutorials whose title would promise, for instance, “How to learn *kanji* in three months” or “How to learn *kanji* fast and never forget them”, and similar contents. However, most of the entries only give some basic tips, like “study at least one *kanji* every day”, or “go to Japan and live there for at least one year”. Some of the resources promised to make one learn *kanji* in a funny way. These were the most interesting ones, because most of them introduced *kanji* games, and it is known that game activities are popular among students from all countries and ages, no matter what subject they are studying. In spite of that, the games we found would not globally approach *kanji* – they would test meaning, reading, writing, stroke order and more rarely composing, but not all at the same action: the user was to choose one of the abilities to test at a time.

Back to classroom, there was an urge to find out what we – Japanese language teachers – have been doing wrong. If someone tells it is possible to learn 500 kanji within a month, for example, and one feels he is not able to do that, he is definitely doing something wrong. And here we have a huge misunderstanding point: people might have different expectations about what “learning kanji” really means. Maybe some understand that only knowing the readings, or maybe the most important, the meanings, is enough to consider it learning kanji. However, whenever I refer to “learning kanji” I mean learning stroke order, meaning, reading, context and radicals. Which perspective is the most accurate? Is the last one too severe, or the first one too condescended? Or none is appropriate? The fact is that students go to the University to become Japanese teachers and they suffer with the problem of graduating and yet not being able to read a newspaper article from Asahi Shinbun, for example.

Strategy awareness: what has been done wrong?

Starting from the need of rethinking the strategies of teaching/learning *kanji*, the quest for previous studies in which the same problem was being faced took place. An interesting article from R. H. Gamage, from the University of Wollongong, Australia, named “Perceptions of kanji learning strategies: Do they differ among Chinese character and alphabetic background learners?”, brought some initial insights to the present research. Toyoda (as cited in Gamage, 2003) says that “it is during the intermediate stages that most learners from alphabetic backgrounds lose their interest and motivation for studying kanji, although they were interested during the initial stages” (p. 3).

This situation looks familiar to Brazilian students of the Japanese language: most of the students can be considered as having an intermediate level of Japanese language when they are about to graduate, and it is exactly the most critical step for their self-esteem: they wish they hadn’t forgotten many *kanji*, they wish they could have had the chance of learning a lot more. Gamage (2003) also mentions Shimizu and Green’s three types of conventional strategies to teach/learn kanji: rote, contextual and mnemonic or memory strategies (p. 3). Gamage (2003) writes that in his own research that “Learners with good performances have claimed frequent use of a wide variety of strategies and frequency of use was mostly considered as a determining factor for effectiveness of a strategy” (p.5). Curiously, in Gamage’s research there was the following result: participants answered that “they tend to rely more on rote learning skills for retaining a new kanji. All participants very rarely use contextual skills and associating kanji with alphabets in order to remember the shape or pronunciation” (p. 10).

Considering that this article was led more than ten years ago in a University in Australia, it is to wonder: what about students in Brazil, in the years 2014/2015? What is going on with Brazilian students when they study kanji? What kind of strategy – or strategies – do they use? Are they aware of them? Then a poll was launched on the Internet, and information was collected – not really worrying if they were in University undergraduate courses or not. The poll opened on March and closed in April 15th 2015. From the results, we could notice that, just as Gamage’s students, most of them rely on rote learning (63,27%).

Strategy for a tough subject

Last year an online course called *Learning How To Learn: Powerful Mental Tools To Help You Master Tough Subjects*, ministered by Terrence Sejnowski and Barbara Oakley, from Coursera.org, caught our attention. The risen interest was obvious, since *kanji* can be indeed considered a tough subject, but as we came to know the course was based mainly in a book called *A Mind For Numbers - How To Excel At Math And Science (Even If You Flunked Algebra)*, by Barbara Oakley, it led to think that probably it wouldn't reach the target, which was to learn specifically *kanji*, not Mathematics. Anyway, we registered in the course and it was a very helpful experience. In this paper, some of the insights from the course that led to a reflection about strategies of studying and teaching *kanji* are shown.

The first insight is the difference between the focused and diffuse modes of learning. In the focused mode, the student is concentrated in the action of studying and no interruptions are allowed. Brain is committed to that moment and to digging in the contents one is studying. But concentration cannot last so long. Time of profitable concentration may vary in context, but definitely spending hours and hours without taking breaks does not make a more efficient study. On the other hand, there is the diffuse mode, when one is not really sitting at a desk, reading and writing, but doing something else (walking, surfing on the internet, talking to someone, relaxing, for example) and, underneath perception, the brain makes connections and we suddenly have an insight, a solution to a problem, or the expected comprehension of a difficult subject.

Which one is the best for learning more effectively? The answer seems to be both of them (Oakley, 2014, p. 26). We need the two of them in order to learn effectively. Most of the people must have already had the experience of focusing in finding a solution for a given problem, but it didn't come before a good night of sleep or a walk in a beautiful park, for instance. What happens is that the focused way is generally thought as the appropriate way of learning. Diffuse mode is usually taken for granted and, with so much effort and so little result, then comes procrastination, leaving *kanji* study for another time, because it is somehow painful, yet important. Steel (as cited in Oakley, 2014, p. 76) affirms that procrastination is for things that make people uncomfortable. It has been studied and proved through medical imaging studies: the pain centers of the brain light up when the person is doing something he/she doesn't like or doesn't want to.

Hence, different strategies should be used to make study (brain either on focused or diffuse mode) more dynamic – and this would very likely help avoid procrastination. Students in Gamage's research were not using many contextual or association (mnemonic) skills, but preferred rote learning. In our poll, students showed the same tendency. It is to wonder what the results would be if they all tried varying study strategies.

Shimizu and Green's types of strategies

Since it is a matter of strategy and the purpose of the paper is to study how to study *kanji*, it is necessary to bring back Shimizu and Green's three types of strategy on *kanji* learning, which are rote, contextual and mnemonic:

- a) *rote learning* – based on repetition; it is still present in many language books and is mostly used by students who had a traditional approach background in their mother language or in other language studies.
- b) *contextual* – based on a context, like the name leads to think: *kanji* is studied in a word, in an expression, in a sentence, in a text.
- c) *mnemonic* – based on association and comparison techniques, in order to make it easier to memorize the *kanji*.

Approaching each one of them, some comments are necessary. Firstly, the word “repetition” might sound somewhat tedious, time-wasting, unattractive. Almost nobody would describe a good class as an environment in which people are simply repeating contents. But repetition is not only good: it is important. The problem remains on how it is done. If someone chooses to study 50 *kanji* in one afternoon by copying them twenty times each, for instance, he might remember them in the beginning of the night, but most of them will be forgotten by noon the day after and just some of them will be kept for a test the week after. It is important to have **spaced repetition**; otherwise, it won't have the same effect. Content must be studied in a day and reviewed constantly.

Repeating must be done for memorizing: but what kind of memory is being talked about? Oakley (2014, p. 46-47) reminds us that there are different kinds of memory: working memory and long-term memory. Students seem to be putting much effort in memorizing *kanji* keeping it in working memory, and it seems to be one of the reasons why *kanji* is so easily and quickly forgotten. As Oakley (2014) explains: “Working memory is the part of memory that has to do with what you are immediately and consciously processing in your mind. [...] you need to maintain these memories actively; otherwise, your body will divert your energy elsewhere, and you'll forget the information you've taken in. In contrast, long-term memory might be thought of as a storage warehouse. Once items are in there, they generally stay put (p. 46-7).”

Spaced repetition is the way to settle information in long-term memory. Some good resources for helping students to memorize *kanji* are word flashcards, but recently apps like Anki©, Memrise© and others work just the same way – with the advantage that they can store much more information in a fast, accessible and light way, inside a cell phone.

In class, we have been trying to use what we called 「漢字のチャレンジ！」, “Kanji Challenge”, small tests that usually have a theme (animals, family names, names of Japanese provinces etc.). As Barbara Oakley points out (2014, p. 210), testing yourself is one of the ten rules of good studying. Some students might not like the word *kanji* or *challenge* (or both together, sounding even more intimidating), but they respond positively to the exercise after it is done, even if they can't remember most of the ideograms. It helps them to become aware, before graduation, about how fast *kanji* can be forgotten when they are not seen very often.

Secondly, contextual strategies are important as well. Learning *kanji* from texts is obviously better than learning them alone. Just as varying strategies can prove to be the best one, varying types of texts can also help improve learning effectiveness. Studying *kanji* through lyrics or *manga* is not a new idea, but it has been turning good results. A teacher can ask the students to choose their favorite song, their favorite singer or band, and if they don't know any it can also be a good time to learn some Japanese culture, too. Other suggestion that can be easily put into practice is to download exercises based on *Kanji Kentei Shiken*, the *kanji* proficiency test (www.kanken.org). It can be a very good tool specially for intermediate and advanced learners. For example: imagine a simple fill-in-the-blanks exercise and a given sentence that has to be completed with the word *shika*. In Japanese, the word *shika* has different meanings, depending on the *kanji* that are used: 鹿(deer), 歯科(dentistry), 市価(market price), 史家(historian). It is not just a matter of knowing how to read *kanji*, but also how to write it and, most importantly, knowing to what context it belongs.

Finally, mnemonic or memory strategy is based in associations and comparisons in order to better keep information by forming connections. Linking information is the better way to keep it, so it will not be lost in working memory, but appropriately stored in long-term memory.

The reason why I started studying Japanese was *kanji*, and I fell in love with *kanji* when a friend of mine taught me the first one, and she used the *naritachi* technique. The *naritachi* is based on explaining *kanji* through the elements that form them. This friend showed me the *kanji* for person (人) and told me it resembles the drawing of a person. She also showed me the *kanji* for tree (木) the drawing of a tree. And then she showed me the *kanji* of the word *yasumu* (休), which means “to rest”. Thereafter I learned the *kanji* for the verb “to work” (働), *hataraku* in Japanese: a person, plus something heavy, plus physical strength. Then the problem came: *naritachi* will not make sense every time. What could be the explanation for the *kanji* for 紫(*murasaki*) “purple”? It has a footprint, a spoon and a thread. How does “purple” come from that? And the word 零(*rei*) “zero”? How can rain and orders make “zero”?

In the book *Remembering the Kanji*, the author James Heisig makes associations and even short stories from the elements in a *kanji*, so that it becomes easier to memorize it. In his book's introduction, Heisig writes (1997): “What makes forgetting the *kanji* so natural is their *lack of connection with normal patterns of visual memory*. We are used to hills and roads, to the faces of people and the skylines of cities, to flowers, animals, and the phenomena of nature. And while only a fraction of what we see is readily recalled, we are confident that, given proper attention, anything we choose to remember, we can. That confidence is lacking in the world of the *kanji*” (p. 1).

The idea went on further and it became a website: <http://kanji.koohii.com>. People from all around the world can share their stories/their associations to remember the *kanji*. It is really useful – and funny, most of the time. Only to illustrate the associations with some comments shared in the website, below there are two explanations for the words “purple” and “zero” mentioned above:

We know he ate that blueberry pie! We saw purple footsteps, leading to a purple spoon and purple stains on the threads of the tablecloth. (jameserb)

If you just rain orders on people, the chance any of it gets done is zero. (Zareon)

Dividing *kanji* in semantic groups is also related to mnemonic strategy. The book named *Gaikokujin no tame no imi kara manabu kanji*, or “Learning kanji through the meaning – for foreigners” is a good example of semantic division technique. The lessons are divided according to different semantic groups, i.e.: a lesson for parts of the body, a lesson for food, a lesson for religion, a lesson for colors and sounds so on. When studying a lesson, all *kanji* are linked through meaning; this link is supposed to improve the quality of mnemonic input. Although it can be used as a very empowering tool, it is hard to be used in basic or even intermediate levels, being more adequate to upper intermediate and advanced levels. When starting to learn a foreign language, words for everyday life and from varied semantic groups are immediately necessary.

Conclusion

This paper addressed strategies on learning *kanji* in order to improve Japanese language classes and self-study practice, from the perspective of a Japanese language class to Brazilian Portuguese native speakers. Strategy awareness (studying how to study) is advocated as the key to reflect on how some practices have been working and some others haven't in order to improve learning/teaching *kanji*. Shimizu and Green's (as cited in Gamage, 2003) types of kanji learning/teaching strategies – rote, contextual and mnemonic – served as a parameter to guide the reflections on what advantages and disadvantages some tools and resources have shown so far. Some insights from Oakley's work (2014) were also used in this article, such as the danger of procrastination, how it works and how varying strategies can help avoiding it. Another insight is that in spite of the fact that repetition is good for learning, it has to be spaced; otherwise, information will not be transferred to the long-term memory, and by continuing in working memory, it can be easily discarded in a short time. Frequent testing is another way to transfer information to the long-term memory, since it is a form of spaced repetition. Contextualization and association are also useful to learn *kanji* linking them to context, semantic group or formation (*naritachi*). Finally, to vary strategies (rote, contextual, mnemonic) seems to be the best one.

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