Strategies for Learning Kanji Vocabulary among Thai Students Who Studied Japanese Courses as an Elective in Higher Education

Chinnawat Ninmote, Silpakorn University, Thailand

Abstract
The purposes of this research were 1) to study how Thai students who chose Japanese as elective courses learned the kanji vocabulary and 2) to study the differences in using strategies for learning kanji vocabulary between beginning and intermediate learners. The sample population of this research consisted of 80 students, who were divided into two groups. The first group consisted of 40 beginner learners and the second group was 40 intermediate learners. The data collection was conducted using 25-item questionnaires on strategies for learning kanji vocabulary, which involved four strategies: the writing-based vocabulary learning strategy, pronunciation-based vocabulary learning strategy, meaning-based vocabulary learning strategy, and usage-based vocabulary learning strategy. The data analysis involved descriptive statistics, mean values ($\bar{x}$), and standard deviations (SD). The research findings found that 1) the students mostly used the writing-based vocabulary learning strategy, followed by the meaning-, pronunciation-, and usage-based vocabulary learning strategies, respectively and 2) beginners mostly applied the writing- and meaning-based vocabulary learning strategies, while the most popular strategies for memorizing kanji vocabulary among intermediate learners were the meaning- and pronunciation-based vocabulary learning strategies. The recommendation based on this research is that in addition to the writing- and meaning-based vocabulary learning strategies, students should be encouraged to memorize kanji vocabulary using the pronunciation and usage-based strategies.

Keywords: Learning Strategies , Kanji Vocabulary, Japanese Learners

Introduction

A survey by Motona Okamoto (2000: 111) on the difficulties in learning Japanese amongst native Thai students revealed that native Thai learners thought that the most difficult part for learning Japanese is kanji, followed by grammar.

Table 1 Difficult Areas for Learning Japanese (Motona Okamoto, 2000: 111)

	The Japanese Foundation	Chulalongkorn University	University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce	High school	Rajabhat University	*TPIF (General public）	*TPIF (Student）
No.1	Kanji 50%	Grammar 73.2%	Kanji 62.3%	Grammar 83.8%	Kanji 65.9%	Kanji 40.9%	Kanji 63.3%
No.2	Grammar 37.5%	Honorifics 37.5%	Grammar 54.1%	Kanji 51.4%	Grammar 50.0%	Pronunciation 38.6%	Grammar 43.3%
No.3	Honorifics 31.3%	Kanji 33.9%	Honorifics 32.8%	Pronunciation 40.5%	Pronunciation 47.7%	Katakana 36.4%	Pronunciation 30.0%
No.4	Pronunciation 12.5%	Pronunciation 16.1%	Pronunciation 16.4%	Honorifics 40.5%	Katakana 9.1%	Grammar 29.5%	Katakana 20.0%
No.5	Vocabulary 3.1%	Listening 7.1%	Katakana 5.0%	Katakana 5.4%	Honorifics 4.5%	Honorifics 11.4%	Honorifics 6.7%

Remark* Technology Promotion Association (Thailand-Japan).

One of the major reasons why learning kanji is difficult is because of the kanji characteristics, which contain a lot of information, including shapes, sounds, meanings, and usage.
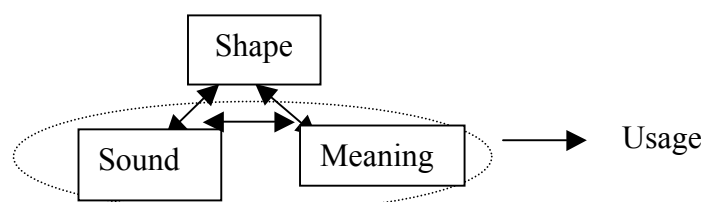

Figure 1 Kanji Characteristics (From "Teaching Kanji for Japanese Teachers," p. 171).

The Japanese-Language Proficiency Test, or JLPT (Japan Foundation, 2006), indicates the number of kanji characters that students at each proficiency level should learn – 1,926 kanji characters for Level 1; 1,023 for Level 2; 284 for Level 3; and 103 for Level 4, which totaled 3,336 characters. While there are only 26 letters in the English alphabet, there are over 3,000 kanji characters, which are not easy to memorize. In addition, kanji characters have complex shapes, with the most complex one composed of 64 lines.

A kanji character carries Chinese sound and Japanese sound . For example,「行」 can be pronounced「ぎょう」,「こう」,「あん」,「い」,「おこな」, 「ゆ」. In addition, there are many kanji characters that are homophones. For example, the characters 九、苦、区、句、倶、玖、供、玖、矩、駆、駒、口、

紅、宮、孔、貢、and 工 share the same sound, which is [ku]. Learning kanji characters that carry many different sounds is time-consuming.

Apart from shapes and sounds, complexities of kanji characters involve semantic and usage aspects. For example, 「新」 in 「新 し い」 reads [atara], which is used as an adjective , as in the sentence: 「新 し い か ば ん」 . However, the character 「新」 in 「新 た な 」reads as [ara], which is used as an adjective verb as in the sentence: 「新 た な 証 拠」 .

The above-mentioned examples manifest that kanji characters are complex in terms of shape, sound, meaning, and usage. To allow learners to understand and use kanji for listening, speaking, reading and writing, they need to remember, understand, and practice using kanji in these four skills.

However, the study by Bussaba Banjongmanee et al. (2011) on the ability to recognize kanji information amongst native Thai beginning learners found that native Thai beginning learners who were study participants were good at distinguishing kanji shapes, but they failed to link their shapes to their meanings or link their shapes to their sounds. This might result from the style of classroom instruction which focused on kanji shapes. To teach kanji vocabulary, instructors mostly selected 5-10 kanji words from each lesson and asked their students to repeatedly write these words. In addition, they asked their students to write kanji words based on hiragana pronunciations. Then, they asked them to translate these kanji words into Thai and read the kanji words repeatedly until they remembered these words. This instruction method allowed learners to remember kanji vocabulary and earn good scores on kanji vocabulary tests. However, in real usage, they were not able to write, read, or understand the meanings of, kanji words which they had already learned. Some learners recognize kanji characters in writing forms but did not understand them when they heard them. The study by Miyagi Nakamura（2007）indicated that knowledge about kanji words was not only important for reading and writing, but also important for capturing the main ideas of listening messages. The research by Somchai (2008) on opinions about kanji learning among beginning learners found that the students had problems relating to pronunciation and meanings of kanji.

It is apparent that memorizing kanji is a major obstacle to learning Japanese among native Thai students. Because there have only been a small number of studies on kanji learning-related issues, it was essential to investigate kanji vocabulary learning strategies used by native Thai learners. This aimed to identify key factors that are obstacles to such learning in order to optimize kanji instruction in the future.

Research Objectives

1. To study kanji vocabulary learning strategies amongst students who study Japanese courses as an elective.

2. To study the use of kanji vocabulary learning strategies amongst beginning and intermediate learners.

Research Methodology

1. The population of this research was 80 native Thai students who studied Japanese courses as an elective. They were from the Tourism Management Program, the Faculty of Management Science, Silpakorn University and the University of the Thai Chamber of Commerce.

2. The tool for this research was a questionnaire about kanji vocabulary learning strategies, comprising two parts, as follows:

Part 1: General data: first name-surname, age, gender, the Japanese proficiency level based on the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), duration of learning Japanese, Japanese vocabulary textbooks, and duration of learning kanji (six items).

Part 2: Kanji vocabulary learning strategies, divided into four areas – the writing-based vocabulary learning strategy, pronunciation-based vocabulary learning strategy, meaning-based vocabulary learning strategy, and usage-based vocabulary learning strategy. (25 items)

3. Variables and statistics used in this study consisted of mean values ($\bar{x}$) and standard deviations (S.D.). The average scores were divided into five levels, as follows:

Level 5: Means: 4.50-5.00: Always use the strategy.
Level 4: Means: 3.50 to 4.49: Often use the strategy.
Level 3: Means: 2.50 to 3.49: Sometimes use the strategy.
Level 2: Means: 1.50 to 2.49: Hardly ever use the strategy.
Level 1 average 1.00- 1.49: Never use the strategy.

Conclusion

As mentioned above, the kanji vocabulary learning strategies were divided into four categories: the writing-based vocabulary learning strategy, pronunciation-based vocabulary learning strategy, meaning-based vocabulary learning strategy, and usage-based vocabulary learning strategy. The findings of the research are as follows:

Table 2: Kanji Vocabulary Learning Strategies amongst Native Thai Learners

Types of strategies	$\bar{x}$	S.D.	Level of strategy use
The writing-based vocabulary learning strategy.	4.60	0.62	Always
The pronunciation-based vocabulary learning strategy.	3.31	0.72	Sometimes
The meaning-based vocabulary learning strategy.	4.08	0.72	Often
The usage-based vocabulary learning strategy.	2.35	0.87	Hardly ever

Table 2 indicates that these native Thai learners mostly used the writing-based vocabulary learning strategy, followed by meaning-based vocabulary learning

strategy, the pronunciation-based vocabulary learning strategy, and the usage-based vocabulary learning strategy, respectively.

Table 3: Comparison of Kanji Vocabulary Learning Strategies between Beginning Learners and Intermediate Learners

Types of strategies	Beginning learners		Intermediate learners	
	x̄	S.D.	x̄	S.D.
The writing-based vocabulary learning strategy.	4.76	0.46	4.43	0.71
The pronunciation-based vocabulary learning strategy.	3.25	0.69	3.38	0.74
The meaning-based vocabulary learning strategy.	4.15	0.67	4.02	0.77
The usage-based vocabulary learning strategy.	2.06	0.53	2.33	0.81

Table 3 shows that the beginning learners mostly used the writing-based vocabulary learning strategy (x̄= 4.76, S.D. = 0.46) and the meaning-based vocabulary learning strategy (x̄ = 4.15, S.D. = 0.67). The intermediate learners mostly applied the writing-based vocabulary learning strategy more than (x̄ = 3.38, S.D. = 0.74) beginning learners (x̄ = 3.25, S.D. = 0.69). The meaning-based vocabulary learning strategy was used the least frequently by both groups.

This research also found that both groups of learners mostly memorized kanji vocabulary through frequent writing (x̄ = 4.59, S.D. = 0.50), writing kanji characters in their notebook or vocab book (x̄ = 4.73, S.D. = 0.59), and using vocabulary cards (x̄ = 4.60, S.D. = 0.67). This finding was consistent with that of the study by Pailin Klinkesorn (2015), which found that Japanese learners mostly memorized Japanese vocabulary by writing Japanese words repeatedly and jotting down Japanese words while they were in class. In this research, the frequently-used strategies consisted of looking up the meanings of kanji words in dictionaries (x̄ = 4.06, S.D. = 0.75), forming pictures of kanji characters in their minds (x̄ = 3.93, S.D. = 0.85), and finding the antonyms, synonyms and associated words of kanji words and memorizing them along with these kanji words (x̄ = 4.41, S.D. = 0.61). This was in line with the research by Supalak (2013), which identified that learners mostly used Japanese-Thai dictionaries to look up the meanings of kanji words. With regard to the pronunciation-based vocabulary learning strategy, both groups of learners sometimes listened to CDs and repeated what they heard (x̄ = 3.29, S.D. = 0.77), linked kanji pronunciations to their meanings (x̄ = 3.23, S.D. = 0.84), and linked kanji pronunciations to their characteristics (x̄= 3.41, S.D. = 0.79). This was the reason why the beginning and intermediate learners had difficulties in listening, which is the heart of communication. This was in line with a result of the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test (JLPT). It showed that the part in which native Thai learners earned the lowest scores was listening. In this research, the beginning and intermediate learners hardly ever used the meaning-based vocabulary learning strategy. They rarely wrote Japanese messages using kanji characters which they had already learned (x̄ = 2.14, S.D. = 0.35) or searched for kanji characters which they had already learned, in printed materials, such as newspapers, magazines, or on billboards (x̄= 2.29, S.D. = 0.86).

The findings from this research identified that these beginning and intermediate learners mostly learned kanji words by writing and looking up meanings of words. They hardly ever memorized them by listening or usage. Thus, Japanese instructors should encourage their students to practice linking the pronunciation of kanji characters to their meanings and to memorize kanji characters through sample sentences to ensure that they are able to apply them in their everyday use.

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Contact email: chinnawat@ms.su.ac.th