

*Teaching Japanese across Borders: An Original Intercultural Approach*¹

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Abstract

The goal of this paper is to present to the international academic public a unique and original book for teaching Japanese, the first of its kind in Serbia. However, its significance is not limited only to the students of Japanese in Serbia, because this manual can be the source of ideas for teachers of Japanese in any other culture, as well. The main feature that makes it so outstanding is the use of mnemonic methods for learning how to read and write Japanese characters *kanji*, which has been done before in some Western countries, but in a different way. Namely, though the possibility of using mnemonic devices for memorizing kanji by connecting them with information that can be remembered more easily has already been recognized, the Serbian authors applied extremely inventive and creative forms in order to connect the Japanese and Serbian cultures, thus rendering the process of learning more entertaining and interesting, and making it much easier for the student. Not only did authors include some kanji that are not usually explained with mnemonics, but they also found explanations which are not typical for the common ones, such as comparing number nine (九) with a cat which has nine lives, or number four (四) with two lips plus two rows of teeth. The most original mnemonic is certainly the adjective small (小) which, according to them, represents a young bird hatching from an egg.

Keywords: *KANJI textbook*, Japanese, Teaching, Students, Kanji, Innovation, Serbia, Faculty of Philology at Belgrade University, *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages*

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Introduction

Resulting from an increasingly multi-ethnic and multi-cultural society, i.e. a complex permeation of different national identities, languages, cultures and religions of a modern society, the educational paradigm of the 21st century requires new foreign language teaching methods and approaches. Namely, as we are nowadays witnessing an unprecedented co-existence of diverse languages and cultures at all levels, foreign language intercultural teaching approach is gaining more and more relevance each day. The future European Union model of education is unthinkable without this approach in particular.

Furthermore, lifelong learning has become a necessity of our highly globalised world. In order to remain competitive on modern labour market, which is in accordance with the principles of the New Economy, we are obliged to acquire foreign language skills more than ever before. This is also due to the fact that the “global interconnectedness enabled by information technology calls for new skills, knowledge and ways of learning to prepare students for living and working in the 21st century.”² Alan Murray hence addresses the educators with the following words: “In the New Economy you need to keep your mind active, open, and engaged, because, in the end, it’s your best investment”³. Foreign language textbooks that use intercultural approach, such as the one that we will present in details hereinafter, are suitable for the aforementioned type of active and engaged lifelong learning of foreign languages.

Textbook for Japanese Language and Kanji Writing System

The *KANJI textbook* “represents an innovative project in both the methodological and methodical sense, directly contributing to the autonomous learning process and enables students to learn Japanese as a foreign language.”⁴ It was primarily intended for the Serbian learners of the Japanese language at A1 and A2 levels. Although a more general goal of the textbook is to teach the students whose mother tongue is Serbian the basics of the Japanese language, it primarily aims at teaching them kanji, the writing system that proved to be very problematic to remember in the past. The *KANJI textbook*, written and prepared by Professor Ljiljana Markovic, Dr Divna Trickovic, Marina Erdeljan and Simon Maric, is to some degree based upon the insights and feedback of the Japanese language students of the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade. Textbook authors wanted to acknowledge and respond to the difficulties faced by Serbian students of the Japanese language, which particularly refers to modern *kanji* Japanese writing system, as the one that is used along with *hiragana* and *katakana*. Moreover, an original intercultural approach to teaching the Japanese language in Serbia has also been applied in the *KANJI textbook*, as it was created bearing in mind particular needs and requirements of Serbian learners of the Japanese language. Namely, the authors were guided by the idea that the Japanese language

² Kuhlthau, C. C. (2010). Guided inquiry: School libraries in the 21st century. *School Libraries Worldwide*, 16(1), p. 17.

³ Murray, A. (2000). *The Wealth of Choices*. New York: Crown Business, p.18.

⁴ Markovic, LJ. (2015). Teaching the Japanese Writing System at University Level. *International Journal of Languages' Education and Teaching*, p. 1578.

should be thought from the linguistic and cultural perspective of learners whose native language is Serbian.

In addition to providing an innovative approach to teaching kanji characters, the *KANJI textbook* also offers a new way of reading and interpreting teaching units. It is extremely well organized and can, therefore, be read in multiple manners. For example, although it is somewhat recommended to start reading the textbook from the first teaching unit, the lessons do not have to be read in any particular order. They are accompanied with the cleverly thought-out exercises, which aim to help the students master the kanji writing system. These exercises are directed towards avoiding passive learning, which would eventually result in the inability of applying the knowledge of kanji in real life situations.

Textbook authors have opted for presenting 178 kanji characters, which were selected in accordance with the official standards of the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR). These basic kanji are the starting point of mastering some 2000 kanji characters that are prescribed as a minimum in order to easily read newspapers or freely express thoughts and opinions in the Japanese language in writing. Textbook contents are organized in 15 lessons, within which kanji are grouped into specific thematic areas. Namely, the students of the Japanese language are “immersed into context” as each character can be linked to a particular situation. Therefore, kanji characters are being thought of not only as language entities, but as an integral part of the Japanese language. The textbook also aims at preparing learners for *The Japanese-Language Proficiency Test* or *JLPT*, hence the kanji were purposefully selected as the essential ones in order to attain the *JLPT* N5 level of knowledge. For the aforementioned reason, the *KANJI textbook* is also adequate for autonomous learning.

The *KANJI textbook* represents a state-of-the-art example of how the Japanese language can be taught to the students who originate from an entirely different linguistic and cultural background. It offers a novel methodological and methodical approach that relies upon mnemonic methods for learning foreign languages. This is precisely why this manual can be the source of ideas for teachers of Japanese in any other culture, not only in Serbia. The aforementioned aspects of the *KANJI textbook* will be discussed in details hereinafter. Our goal is to emphasise the importance of introducing mnemonic methods when learning the Japanese language, the significance of autonomous Japanese language learning on the example of the *KANJI textbook*, whilst simultaneously implementing intercultural approach to teaching kanji writing system.

Mnemonic Methods for Learning Foreign Languages on the Example of the *KANJI Textbook*

As early as in 1975, Richard C. Atkinson and Michael R. Raugh published a number of articles on using the mnemonic method in order to master foreign language vocabulary. In 1981, Hall, Wilson and Patterson described the keyword method “as a promising instructional method for the acquisition of foreign language vocabulary and

as an example of more general educational application of mnemonic techniques, or *mnemotechnics*.”⁵ Hulstijn emphasises that “mnemonic techniques should not replace the more natural, contextual methods fostering incidental learning [...], but instead they should be used for words that, for whatever reason, have not been successfully acquired.”⁶ This can particularly relate to the words that belong to the writing system that is difficult to master, which is why the *KANJI textbook* authors have chosen mnemonic techniques for bringing these originally Chinese characters closer to Serbian students. Hulstijn further concludes that “although the applications of mnemonic techniques are limited, their effect has been sufficiently proven. To some extent they can transform the vocabulary learning task from uninspired drudgery into newfound delight.”⁷ The goal of foreign language teachers is to immerse their students into a particular language and culture by making this process as painless as possible. In some ways, *mnemotechnics* resemble a lot the way in which we acquire our mother tongue in the early childhood. Bearing in mind that they are similar to techniques of learning which are adopted in early age, they produce great result both in terms of vocabulary learning and knowledge of complex writing systems, such as kanji.

For the aforementioned reasons, authors of the *KANJI textbook* have opted for devising imaginative illustrations for certain kanji or describing them through funny stories. These mnemonic methods have proven to help students memorise more quickly and efficiently these otherwise difficult to remember characters. Namely, the authors have found explanations for each kanji presented within the textbook that are not typical and have presented them by using innovative mnemonics. For example, they have compared number nine (九) with a cat because a cat has nine lives, or number four (四) with two lips plus two rows of teeth. The most original mnemonic is certainly the adjective small (小) which, according to them, represents a young bird hatching from an egg.

Learner Autonomy through the Prism of the *KANJI Textbook*

Modern educational institutions are encouraged to implement the 21st century educational paradigm guidelines within their curricula. According to the P21 (Partnership for 21st century learning) Framework, educational programs should particularly foster 4Cs: *Communication, Collaboration, Critical thinking, Creativity*⁸. Serbian educational institutions are yet to fully integrate these 21st century educational guidelines for designing modern teaching programs and materials. Moreover, “the kind of education needed today requires teachers to be high-level knowledge workers who constantly advance their own professional knowledge as well as that of their

⁵ Hall, J. W., Wilson, K. P., & Patterson, R. J. (1981). Mnemotechnics: Some limitations of the mnemonic keyword method for the study of foreign language vocabulary. *Journal of Educational Psychology*, 73(3), p. 345.

⁶ Hulstijn, J. H. (1997). *Mnemonic methods in foreign language vocabulary learning : theoretical considerations and pedagogical implications. Second language vocabulary acquisition: A rationale for pedagogy*, p. 220.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ P21 Partnership for 21st century learning (2015). *The 4Cs Research Series*.

profession. Teachers need to be agents of innovation not least because innovation is critically important for generating new sources of growth through improved efficiency and productivity.”⁹ The *KANJI textbook* offers a unique blend of creative solutions to learning kanji and promotes a greater level of communication, collaboration and critical thinking in the classroom. However, this textbook fosters learner autonomy above all.

The learner autonomy constitutes an integral part and one of the requirements of the 21st century overall educational paradigm. “Generally speaking, the learner autonomy rests upon three theoretical arguments: (i) learners cannot help but do their own learning; (ii) this being the case, learning will be more efficient when learners are critically aware of goals and methods; and (iii) it is through the development of such critical awareness that learners are empowered to transcend the limitations of their learning environment.”¹⁰

In formal educational context, the learner autonomy is based upon the acceptance of responsibility for one's own learning; the development of learner autonomy depends on the exercise of that responsibility in a never-ending effort to understand what one is learning, why one is learning, how one is learning, and with what degree of success; and the effect of learner autonomy is to remove the barriers that so easily erect themselves between formal learning and the wider environment in which the learner lives. Such an educational matrix alters the pedagogical panopticon, from a teacher-centred one, in which the teacher controls all knowledge and information and disseminates it to students from the centre of the panopticon to a situation where the student forms the centre of the panopticon of learning. Broadly speaking, learner autonomy paradigm relies upon and contributes to educational democracy, whereby the privilege of education belongs to the widest spectre of society members.

Foreign language textbooks should be adapted to this learning approach in particular, considering that it is the foreign language student himself that needs to invest the greatest effort in order to master the language. Through an excellent organisation of teaching units, i.e. lessons and exercises, the *KANJI textbook* not only provides the conditions for learner autonomy, but also fully supports this approach to learning the Japanese language. Innovative and interesting design of kanji mnemonics gives the learner desire to autonomously acquire knowledge. In this way, tiring, unnecessary and dull explanations are avoided, and, at the same time, the readers are satisfied and amused during the learning process.

⁹ Schleicher, A. (2012). *Preparing teachers and developing school leaders for the 21st century: Lessons from around the world*. Paris: OECD Publishing.

¹⁰ Little, D. (1999). Learner Autonomy is more than a Western Cultural Construct. In: Cotterall, S. and Crabbe, D. (eds.), *Bayreuth Contributions to Glottodidactics*. Frankfurt: Peter Lang, p. 11.

Teaching Japanese across Borders: Intercultural Approach within the *KANJI Textbook*

According to Susanne Günthner, “the relationship between language and culture has again and again been the centre of interest of different traditions in linguistics and cultural anthropology.”¹¹ This should particularly be reflected in integrating intercultural elements into foreign language curricula and textbooks, which often represent the first contact of the student with the unknown language. As a result, foreign language “students will benefit by gaining solid knowledge of the different world cultures, and they must also develop the ability to compare their native culture to other cultures, to evaluate critically and interpret the results of such comparisons, and to apply this knowledge successfully in both verbal and non-verbal communication, for both transactional and interactional purposes.”¹²

The authors of the *KANJI textbook* have divided kanji into lessons, which are simultaneously placed in certain contexts. Hence, the lessons are not simply teaching units, but are also giving insight into situational contexts, in the framework of which particular Japanese cultural features are explained. The Serbian authors have applied extremely inventive and creative forms in order to connect the Japanese and Serbian cultures, thus rendering the process of learning more entertaining and interesting, and making it much easier for the student. This is achieved through stories that are related to a particular kanji which are then associated with mental images that are familiar to people from this area. By doing so, the authors have facilitated the process of learning the Japanese language and the kanji writing system through connecting the stories about the kanji with the ones that are well known to Serbian students. In this way, an original intercultural approach has been applied to the design of teaching units/lessons, which has brought the very content of the textbook closer to Serbian students and encouraged their autonomous learning.

Conclusion

The paper aimed at presenting the *KANJI textbook* as a unique and original book for teaching Japanese language and culture, the first of its kind in Serbia, to the international academic public in order to emphasise the significance of mnemonic techniques, learner autonomy and, most importantly, intercultural approach to acquiring a satisfying level of foreign language competencies and skills. The very fact that the aforementioned methods were successfully applied to teaching kanji testifies in favour of the assumption that the same principles may be implemented with ease for teaching many other far less complex writing systems. Moreover, these methods can help overcome any other linguistic difficulties that continuously challenge foreign language students.

¹¹ Günthner, S. (1998). *Language and Culture - an Analysis of a Chinese-German Conversation*. Erfurt Electronic Studies in English.

¹² Chlopek, Z. (2008). The Intercultural Approach to EFL Teaching and Learning. *English Teaching Forum*, 46(4): p. 12.

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