

The Evolution of Dedicated Kanji Classes for Adult Learners of Japanese

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Abstract

How can we improve the existing system of teaching Japanese to adult learners resident in Japan? In an attempt to provide a solution, dedicated classes focusing on teaching the Japanese kanji to adults were set up with the support of a local government agency. In order to help assess results, a questionnaire was given to adult learners of Japanese, some of whom had signed up for the class. Progress made in class, the results of the questionnaire (qualitative and quantitative), and a literature review led us to conclude that there was a benefit to be seen from the kanji classes for adult learners of Japanese whose first language was not English, while a clear benefit could not be seen for those whose L1 was English.

Key words: Japanese kanji, L1/non-L1 English speakers, adult learners, peer teaching

1. OUTLINE OF THE STUDY

This paper discusses the thinking behind setting up dedicated kanji classes for adult learners of Japanese resident in Japan, the collection of data to support, or otherwise, the premise that such classes would be beneficial, and the current and expected future situation of the classes. The research project involved augmenting the current Japanese classes available to adult learners living in the city of Kanazawa, Ishikawa prefecture, with an optional kanji class. It was expected that, as the classes evolved, this information could be used to better meet the needs of current and future learners.

A literature review provided a solid theoretical grounding for the research and helped

with planning decisions. The rationale for initiating this program forms a large part of this paper as the need for change to existing curricula should be clear to gain the support of current teachers and policy makers. We are at the initial stage of our research so this paper puts a large weighting on the arguments for setting up, running and continuing the project. The Method section explains the running of the classes in more detail, as well as referring to collected data. The Results and Conclusions section presents the findings of our research with analysis and commentary, followed by a Final Comments section. The various limitations of the study are also mentioned, when necessary.

1.1 Issues in Language Education Affecting Japanese Language Learners

Japanese is regarded as a difficult language by both learners and researchers. According to Jordan and Lambert (1991), it takes 480 hours of intensive education to become proficient in a language such as French or Spanish, while Japanese (along with Chinese) takes 1320 hours to reach the same proficiency. However, according to Abe (2012), if looked at from a linguistic point of view, Japanese is considered one of the easier languages for a beginner to learn. It has a simple pronunciation scheme and, with a few exceptions, a straightforward set of grammatical rules. Limitations on sentence structure are also quite minimal. Abe goes on to say that the reason for difficulty is the mastery of the reading and writing of kanji.

How is this difficult aspect tackled by educators? In a study by Shimizu and Green (2002), it was revealed that the most common method of teaching kanji to people whose first language is not Japanese was the rote learning method, the same technique as that used for Japanese school children. It is not so simple, however, as, on closer inspection, the order in which kanji are taught tends to differ somewhat. The order of teaching is based on an order of usefulness, with the concept of usefulness depending on the learners' needs. As foreign learners, adults especially, and Japanese children have somewhat different needs, this usually results in a different order in which the kanji are taught. Therefore, although there is a lot of

overlap in the teaching of the kanji to each group, there are also some differences.

1.2 Reasons for Focusing on Japanese Kanji in This Study

We are told above that “the (Japanese) spoken language is generally not difficult to learn for those living in Japan” (Abe, 2012). In addition to that, Nunan (2002) tells us that “listening is fundamental to speaking.” If this is true (that speaking is not difficult to learn, and listening goes hand in hand with speaking), the main areas of difficulty in learning the Japanese language will be the remaining skills of reading and writing.

The current classes at the government sponsored International Foundation of International Exchange (IFIE) in Kanazawa, Ishikawa, are focused on teaching Japanese to adult immigrants. As standard published textbooks and curricula are followed, it can be surmised that similar programs exist in other areas of Japan. The Japanese language education provided focuses on some of what Abe’s and Nunan’s research above indicated was difficult, with studies in the classroom being mainly reading (hiragana, katakana, and kanji with furigana) and grammar. However, the study of the kanji is reported as being a difficult to tackle problem as the amount of time needed to learn it is much greater than a part-time class allows. At present, the teachers tell the students not to worry initially about kanji as they will learn it at a later stage.

However, the need to focus on the kanji can be seen by looking at the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT), a test taken by over 600,000 people in 62 countries in 2011 (The Japan Foundation, 2012). It has five levels, from N5 to N1, in increasing order of difficulty. The N5 and N4 test both mention that kanji is needed for success in the examination, with the higher levels using “Can Do” statements without referencing the need for kanji. The descriptors of the most difficult level use phrases such as “logical complexity” and “comprehend comprehensively”. The older version of the test, the JLPT 1 級 (level 1) asked candidates to remember around 2000 kanji, approximating the number prescribed by the

government for native speakers of Japanese. The JLPT website tells us that the old and new test are roughly the same, although the new test include what they call “even more advanced parts”, so it can be inferred that the number of kanji needed is *at least* about the same. As passing the top level of the JLPT indicates proficiency in the use of the Japanese language, this indicates that a mastery of the kanji used by native speakers is essential.

1.3 Anxiety Connected with Learning Japanese Caused by a Lack of Satisfaction

Learning kanji is necessary to become proficient in Japanese, yet prolonged learning can have negative effects. Aida (1994) found that the prolonged period required to master Japanese resulted in high levels of anxiety and psychological pressure on students. In other words, the learning of kanji may lead to a reduction in motivation among learners.

This connects with the behaviorist theory of learning. The cognitive psychologist Roediger (2004) says that, while behaviorism may have gone out of favor in recent times and has a large number of critics, “behaviorism is alive and most of us are behaviorists”. In other words, behaviorism is still important today.

According to one behaviorist theory of learning, basically, when there is a stimulus (pleasant or unpleasant), a response is shown (often, a repetition or cessation of the subject’s action). One behaviorist was Pavlov, known by many for ringing a bell before feeding his dogs. Eventually, the response to the bell was that the dogs would salivate in anticipation. What is of greater interest to us in this research is what happened next: if the food stopped being produced, eventually the dogs would no longer show their response to the bell. Learning kanji is similar in some respects because, as it takes such a long time to learn, the response (the understanding) does not show itself quickly enough for many students to feel satisfied resulting in a reduced response (motivation) to learning kanji. In an attempt to avoid this, many teachers and students begin with the most often used kanji with the expectation that, at least with kanji of very high frequency, the student will regularly encounter what they

had learned both inside and outside of class. However, teaching kanji based on frequency of use may result in a loss of potential efficiency, slowing the overall learning and resulting in the anxiety described earlier by Aida (1994). This will be discussed further in the next sub-section.

1.4 Frequency of Usage and Rote Memorization vs. Efficient Learning

How teaching kanji based on their order of frequency can result in lower efficiency of learning can be seen in an example from elementary and junior high school rote learning of kanji by native Japanese speakers. Elementary school students in their third grade (at about the age of nine) learn the kanji in high frequency words such as ‘problem’, ‘homework’ and ‘topic’. Written in kanji these are ‘問題’, ‘宿題’, and ‘課題’ respectively. Notice that the second of the two kanji for each word is the same, the kanji ‘題’ (pronunciation of the kanji is omitted in this paper). This is a complex kanji that elementary school students tackle by rote memorization, writing it repeatedly until it is mastered. When they get to junior high school, they learn the relatively less frequent kanji in words such as ‘certainly’, ‘revision’, and ‘approval’, being ‘是非’, ‘是正’, and ‘是認’ respectively. It is the first of the kanji in each pair that is learned at this stage, the kanji ‘是’.

The kanji ‘題’ is learned at least four years before learning the kanji ‘是’. On close inspection, it should be apparent that the left part of the more frequent kanji ‘題’ is the same as the kanji for ‘是’. While the elementary school teacher following the Japanese Ministry for Education, Science and Technology’s (MEXT) guidelines for teaching the kanji knows that the children will be taught the less frequent kanji four to six years later, adult learners are often not willing, or psychologically able, to wait so long to learn what they may view as a part of a kanji previously learned. It may be better to, when more efficient to do so, ignore the frequency rule and teach less common kanji first, which can then be used as ‘building blocks’ to form more frequent kanji, as in the above example. This ‘building block’ method may be a

more efficient tool than the rote memorization tool used to teach Japanese children their kanji. Furthermore, Japanese children learn the kanji (a little over 2000 characters) over twelve years at school. As Aida mentioned, such prolonged study would lead to high levels of anxiety and psychological pressure for adult learners.

To add weight to the argument for an alternative to the rote memorization approach to learning the kanji, Feynman and Leighton (1985) tell us that understanding, not memorization, is the way to true learning. There are, of course, instances where rote memorization can be beneficial, as Beran (2004) reminds us that children often use this technique to learn the alphabet or their times tables. However, real benefits seem limited to small children indicating that adult learners need other methods. The personal experience of one of the authors of this paper is that rote memorization can lead to some success such as passing a Japanese examination, but that this knowledge tends to disappear quickly, resulting in inefficiency over the longer term.

1.5 Building an Alternative Teaching Method to Rote Memorization for Adults

Krashen (1985) tells us that we need to present “readily comprehensible input” to language learners. The kanji are ideograms, meaning that each kanji gives us an idea, or mental picture of the meaning. However, they also have an associated reading or sound (in many cases at least two sounds, one to be used when the kanji is in combination with another, and the other sound to be used when the kanji exists alone). The result is that they are not immediately and *readily comprehensible*.

To make kanji more comprehensible to learners, it has been suggested that we separate the sounds from the meaning and teach them individually. For example, Heisig has published a series of books, the *Remembering the Kanji Series*, that does exactly that. The meaning of over 2000 kanji is taught first, and the teaching of the sounds comes separately, in a later book. Heisig’s method, designed for independent study, seems to be what is needed, but

problems remain. The problem is that, in reality for adult learners of Japanese resident in Japan, kanji is not learned in isolation from the rest of the language.

In Japan, learners of Japanese are in contact with the language. They are living the language, with kanji as a part of it. According to Krashen's input hypothesis, acquisition occurs when learners understand input for the meaning it has (Krashen, 1982: 117). As the learners have already learned the meaning of some Japanese words in their Japanese immersion classes (and in their lives in general), we decided to sometimes add more meaning to the input by using the learners' knowledge of Japanese sounds to further explain the kanji. To give an example of this from the classroom and its effect, we have noticed that students seem to express satisfaction when they are taught the kanji for a word they already know in spoken Japanese. They seem to get a motivational stimulus when linking their knowledge in one area (oral/aural) with new knowledge (written kanji). If we are satisfied that the learners already know a word, such as the Japanese word for 'fish' or, in Japanese, 'sakana', then we can teach both the meaning and associated sound of a kanji – making the system more efficient, while motivating the student. However, to do this, a teacher is needed in the system, opposing Heisig's recommendation. We believe that, in the case of teaching kanji, the teacher could be a more proficient learner who is maybe a few years ahead in their learning than the students (a near peer role model), rather than a native teacher of Japanese as the more experienced learner knows and has experienced what the less experienced learner is feeling and may have a good idea of their knowledge level.

1.6 Balancing Behaviorism and Social Constructivism

This brings us to the final part of the outline, arguing for a balance between behaviorist and social constructivist theory. We have mentioned behaviorists already in the paper, those who regard a behavior or action (or the lack of it) as a response to a stimulus and illustrated an example of where this seems to show good results. Social constructivist theory is based on

group work, where members collaborate to create shared meaning about shared artifacts. New knowledge is discussed with all members of the group learning at some level. A theory is that learners work most effectively when the learning is in the Zone of Proximal Development, a term Vygotsky (1978) defines as the distance between the "actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers". To put it another way, we learn better together. This reinforces the call to bring in experienced learners of Japanese and have them work with beginners for effective learning to occur. This method we are arguing for, where the kanji is taught using discussion led by an experienced peer who knows when to introduce certain stimuli, such as kanji sounds the students probably already know, has elements of both behaviorism and social constructivism. In addition, the teacher is careful to choose when it is beneficial to give or avoid giving readings of kanji, based on their perceptions of current student knowledge.

2. METHOD

2.1 Outline of the Resultant Learning System

The regular classes that already existed in the IFIE were not changed, where students learn Japanese reading and grammar in a class with a professional teacher of Japanese. In Kanazawa, Ishikawa, these teachers are Japanese nationals trained as teachers of Japanese language to foreigners. As argued for in the outline of this paper, a separate kanji class taught by a volunteer former learner of Japanese was set up. Students enrolled in the regular classes were offered the chance to take the kanji class for free and information was also sent to the office to answer enquiries by new and existing students. People who were not enrolled as students in the regular Japanese classes were also eligible to join the free kanji classes. The contents of the regular classes and the new kanji class content were intentionally not

synchronized, allowing teachers and classes to work independently of one another.

Most students who opted to take the one hour per week kanji class were also taking the standard two classes per week of the regular classes (of 90 minutes per class), resulting in a total of four hours of classroom work per week. As they were adult learners and not full time students, many of them had outside commitments so we felt that any more than this amount of time may not be suitable. We set up two kanji classes in different venues across the city.

An important piece of information is the language of discussion used in the classroom. The language used was English as all learners' ability in English was greater than their ability in Japanese, shown by the results of a questionnaire. Questionnaires further showed that the students were all at approximately the same level of proficiency i.e. no or a very rudimentary knowledge of Japanese or kanji, and had been in Japan for about the same length of time (all had been resident in Japan for between six months and one year). By chance, one class of students was all native speakers of English (called Class A for this paper), and the other class was all non-native speakers of English (Class B). This allowed us the opportunity to compare the classes based on that characteristic, resulting in a surprising difference in learning outcomes. This result and the results of the questionnaire mentioned above are given in the Results and Conclusions section of the paper. We had a total of eight people who joined the kanji classes and who stayed for at least ten weeks.

About 20 kanji were covered during each lesson, and students were asked to cover an additional ten kanji at home, making a total of 30. The first ten minutes of each lesson was used to give students a quiz on what they had learned, with results recorded by the teacher. The class atmosphere was relaxed and students asked questions frequently and freely both to the teacher and to each other.

2.2 Questionnaire

We wanted to find out more about the student body, so we gave a questionnaire to

learners of Japanese in the center. The questionnaire was given to students taking the optional kanji class and to those who did not take it. We sent out 40 bilingual questionnaires (English on one side, Japanese on the other) and got 20 completed questionnaires back, a return rate of exactly 50%. The questionnaire was written in easy to understand English and Japanese, using furigana (or pronunciation notes) for the written kanji, with the Japanese written by a more experienced learner of Japanese with the learners' level in mind. The questionnaire was of a mixed style, containing multiple choice questions, 5-point Likert scales, and free answer questions.

3. RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

3.1 Questionnaire Results and Conclusions

The mean age of respondents was 28.9 years old and the median age was 27 years old. The nationalities of the respondents were USA (seven people), China (four people), with two each from Canada and Vietnam, and one each from Belgium, Ireland, Italy, Mongolia and Sweden.

Giving a bilingual questionnaire allowed us to find out which language students were more capable in, rather than which they preferred (as a motivated beginner with no capability in Japanese might still select that they preferred Japanese language instruction). We found that 17 people chose to answer the questionnaire which was written in English, and four people (all Chinese nationals) answered the Japanese one. Of these, one person answered in both English and Japanese.

The above confirmed for us the choice to teach the class mainly in English because students were more capable in English than Japanese. This indicated to us that we should avoid using Japanese where possible and teach an English key word or words for the meaning of kanji. This follows Vygotsky's ZPD theory, where students are taught at a level which is

just above what they currently know (Vygotsky, 1978) and with Krashen's comprehensible input theory (Krashen, 1985). Also, in a class of mixed nationalities, the students accepted that English be used as a lingua franca.

We found that most of the students had been in Japan for between six months to one year, including the entire group that signed up for the kanji class. We interpreted that as meaning that either (a) people tend not to stay very long in Japan, or (b) people tend to have an initial enthusiasm for learning Japanese at the beginning and this disappears quickly. This seems to fit in with the claim by Aida (1994), referenced earlier, that "the prolonged period required to master Japanese results in high levels of anxiety and psychological pressure on students." This anxiety may result in students simply giving up taking Japanese classes as Graham's (2004) research tells us that task difficulty is a main reason cited for not continuing with studying a foreign language. What we observed seems to indicate that it is a combination of both (a) and (b): some people tend to go back to their home countries and some tend to lose motivation to study after a while.

None of the learners had ever taken a Japanese language proficiency test of any form. However, information obtained from the questionnaire included what students perceived their own Japanese ability to be and what they expected that ability to be one year in the future, chosen from a scale ranging from 1 (*very poor*) to 5 (*very good*). This data is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Self-Perceived Current and Future Ability in Japanese, By Skills

Skill	Current Ability (1-5)	Future Ability (1-5)	Expected Increase
Speaking	2.0	3.4	1.4
Reading	2.1	3.5	1.4
Writing	2.3	3.6	1.3
Listening	2.3	3.7	1.4
Grammar	2.2	3.3	1.1
General	2.2	3.5	1.3

The scores showed that the subjects perceived themselves to have some ability (above the lowest possible choice ‘1’, even though they only had a very basic grasp of elementary level Japanese). The future expected ability results are also shown in the table, and it was seen that the students were confident that their Japanese would improve across all skills after a year of studying. This confidence could indicate an underlying motivation to learn Japanese (Clément, 1980; Tavani & Losh, 2003).

The respondents had been in Japan for a short length of time. This is still the beginning stage of this research and it will be interesting to see whether this confidence evaporates over time, along with their drive to learn. If so, we need to get students learning as much as possible while they are still confident, making it necessary to teach kanji earlier and not delay it until a later date.

3.2 Performance of Kanji Classes A and B

Class A was a group of four adults whose first language was English. About 20 kanji were taught in each class, with the students asked to study a further ten at home themselves, resulting in a total of 30 kanji covered per week. However, we found that they were more

enthusiastic and reported that they covered an average of approximately 50 kanji per week (including those covered in class). Each class began with a quiz of the kanji learned up to that date, and the average result for the class was calculated and recorded. It was found that Class A went from a high of 91% at the beginning (a quiz on the first 30 kanji) to an eventual low of 29.75% (a random selection of 30 from 450 kanji).

The kanji Class B was a group of four adults whose first language was not English (there were two Vietnamese, one Mongolian, and one Belgian). The same method was followed and it was found that the students covered only the number of kanji they were told to by the teacher, i.e. a total of 30 kanji per week. Unlike Class A, they tended not to work ahead, staying within the prescribed amount. It was found that Class B went from a high of 100% at the beginning (the same 30 kanji), to a low of 80.25% at 300 kanji, back to 94.5% at 450 kanji (again, the same quiz as Class A). It should be noted that one student was absent for the first quiz, and that all students were present for all other quizzes. The results are shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Performance of Class A and Class B

	Class A (L1=English)	Class B (L1=Non-English)
Kanji covered in class	~20	~20
Total kanji covered per week	~50	~30
Quiz accuracy high (30 kanji)	91%	100%
Quiz accuracy low	29.75%	80.25%
Quiz accuracy at 450 kanji	29.75%	94.5%

The difference in performance of the classes was significant, despite participants in both

classes being initially of equal proficiency (beginner level), with all learners having had no experience of learning kanji. The rate of teaching was the same for each class, meaning that students being native speakers of English or not did not seem to affect the amount taught in a session. The amount of kanji done at home was greater for Class A (L1=English). The reason for this is not known, although it could have been that the material written in English may have slowed class B, or that their culture led them to follow instructions exactly. Over time it became clear that the scores achieved in the weekly class quiz were much lower for the L1 speakers of English and it was found that Class A could accurately recall less than a third of the kanji covered at 450 kanji.

4. FINAL COMMENTS

This research uses a very limited number of subjects, so the quantitative data cannot be claimed to be representative of other students in general. However, it is important for us as an indicator of the possible tendencies and needs of students in our area. For example, although this research is still in its infancy, it has provided us with information that suggests that students need to be given clearer targets and that the program should be run over a shorter time frame in order to keep all students motivated.

We can see that the students in Class B performed well in that that they made good progress and remembered the kanji they learned (they have reached 630 kanji in about six months, holidays included, at the time of writing). There is still a real need to have a teacher present to explain nuances, guide thinking and, as mentioned before, sometimes give pieces of Japanese information (kanji sounds) to keep the students motivated and increase learning. That being said, we notice that students are also becoming more autonomous learners as well as starting to teach each other as their knowledge of kanji and the Japanese language in general increases. It is hoped that, eventually, they will come to be able to continue the

process by themselves. We plan to discontinue the class when students reach 1000 kanji (and tell them to continue by themselves) and teach a new class for beginners, making changes to account for what we have learned during our research.

The problem of how to teach the kanji to native speakers of English was noted as a new problem in this research and an effective method is yet to be found. We hope to identify a method (or methods) that will produce lasting results for all adult learners of the Japanese language, regardless of their native language.

NOTES

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