

QUALITATIVE STUDY OF THE *KANJI* LEARNING PROCESS VIEWED FROM AN
ALPHABETIC READER: PERCEPTIONS, STRATEGIES AND MOTIVATION
非漢字圏学習者からみた漢字学習過程の質的研究: 認識・学習方略・学習動機

Patrick Chaury, Concordia University
シヨールリー・パトリック、コンコルディア大学

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the main hardships for learners of Japanese as a Foreign Language (hereafter JFL) is the acquisition of *kanji* (Dewey, 2004; Gamage, 2003a; Shimizu & Green, 2002), the Japanese script borrowed from Chinese traditional characters. Steps taken in 2010 by the Japanese Ministry of Education have added new urgency: the official *List of Commonly Used Kanji* (常用漢字表, *jōyō kanji hyō*) that Japanese people must be able to read and write by the end of their secondary education was extended to 2136 characters, thereby increasing the learning burden, not only for native speakers, but also for learners of JFL. More than ever, the ways *kanji* characters are learnt have to be questioned.

One strand of research has investigated the impact of learners' orthographic background on their achievement with respect to the acquisition of Japanese *kanji*. For instance, Machida (2013) has tested intermediate JFL learners' performance on both reading and writing before and after a 12-week course specifically designed to increase their knowledge of *kanji*. The results of the pre-test have revealed that 'character based' learners outperformed the 'non-character based' learners on writing previously learned *kanji*. Although both groups received the same amount of instruction, the 'character based' learners also outperformed the 'non-character based' learners in the post-test on both reading and writing. Overall, Machida's (2013) findings suggest that having an L1 that is morphographic provides an advantage at the beginning of instruction which intensifies over time. Matsumoto (2013) has also shown that Chinese-background learners at the beginner level can already make lexicality judgements that are more accurate than English-background learners at the intermediate level. Altogether, these findings provide a rationale for accounting for the orthographic background as a variable in studies on *kanji* learning.

Given the difficulty of *kanji* acquisition, another line of research has examined learning strategies. As a matter of fact, Gamage (2003b) points out the increase of interest observed since the 1990s in identifying strategies to learn *kanji*. Gamage's (2003a) study has revealed that learners with a logographic first language background (e.g., Chinese) employ strategies based on phonological aspects, whereas alphabetic readers (e.g., English speakers) are inclined to rely on rote writing strategies. Anderson and Bourke's (2007) study also offers valuable insights, as it has shown that administering the Strategy Inventory for Learning *Kanji* (SILK) has a positive effect on students' motivation and attitude toward *kanji* learning. Similarly, Mori, Sato and Shimizu (2007) have highlighted the fact that students' belief in the effectiveness of metacognitive strategies and morphological analysis leads to higher achievement.

However, these studies (Anderson & Bourke, 2007; Gamage, 2003a; Mori et al., 2007) are limited by at least one of the following three factors. First, their focus on university contexts results in the exclusion of potential key informants, especially the JFL learners who study in private language schools or self-education. Second, they have only

included participants at the pre-intermediate or intermediate level, thereby excluding the advanced students who may be able to give relevant information on learning and coping strategies. Last but not least, their quantitative framework – the use of Likert-scale questionnaires and tests – limits the participants’ voices. Although this methodology has been successful regarding the identification of learning strategies, the lack of open-ended questions may prevent the participants from verbalising the reasons why they prefer these strategies and share the evolution of their *kanji* learning experience.

The goal of the present preliminary study is to address these issues by exploring the motivation of the underrepresented advanced JFL learners outside the university context, along with the learning strategies that they employ. Using in-depth semi-structured interviews within a phenomenological framework, this study aims at discovering the students’ perceptions of *kanji* learning and the meaning they make of their lived experiences (Hays & Singh, 2011). It concentrates on the following questions: What *kanji* learning strategies do advanced JFL students employ and how do they use them? How do they maintain their motivation and avoid boredom? What challenges – if any – have they been facing and how do they overcome these challenges? How have their perceptions towards *kanji* and strategy use evolved since the beginning of their learning endeavour? What made these evolve? Understanding these aspects has higher relevance now that the official *kanji* list has been extended: it is urgent to find solutions to ease the burden of learning more than two thousand characters.

2. RESEARCH METHODS

2.1 PARTICIPANT

As part of a larger research project on *kanji* acquisition, this preliminary study has focussed on one advanced JFL student. One of the goals of this research is to identify the learning strategies that advanced students consider more effective in order to contribute to theory development. Indeed, advanced students have already learnt more than 1000 *kanji*; thus they have more experience regarding *kanji* learning and can provide richer details than students at earlier levels. Therefore, criterion sampling has been used to recruit one advanced student of Japanese who has an alphabetic background and who is not enrolled in a Japanese language program at the university level. Further details regarding the participant have been provided in the findings section as they should be taken into consideration when interpreting the data.

2.2 DATA COLLECTION

Two semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participant in Montreal, Quebec. Both interviews lasted approximately one hour and were audio recorded using a Zoom H1 Handy Recorder. They constituted the main source of analysis.

The first interview began with general questions about the participant’s experience as a JFL learner. The goal was to provide a thick description of her background to increase the transferability of the subsequent findings. The following questions concentrated on the participant’s experience toward *kanji* learning and followed a chronological progression, from a reflection on the perceptions she held as a beginner, to her current perceptions, through the factors that made them evolve. Before the end of the interview, the participant was presented with a hypothetical scenario in which she had the opportunity to give advice to JFL learners regarding the acquisition of *kanji*. This role-

playing question highlighted the aspects of *kanji* that the participant considers important. Finally, the participant was asked whether she could think of other relevant questions that could have been asked regarding her experience. This left room for the participant to provide additional information. All the questions included in the interview protocol were open-ended and were completed with possible probes to encourage participant's elaboration, which made the data richer. Overall, the flexibility of this semi-structured interview yielded descriptive data regarding the participant's motivation and learning strategies. Given my insider role as her Japanese teacher, the well-established rapport helped to make the interview process feel like a conversation and enhance exploration.

A second one-on-one interview was conducted in the same setting two weeks later. It aimed at clarifying, deepening, and triangulating the data through member checks. After clarifying several points, the transcript of the first interview was provided to the participant and we read it together. The participant added points that she felt were important, such as her volunteering experience in the local Japanese community, and stressed other elements that she had already mentioned in the first interview, such as the value of instruction and the necessity to apply what has been learned. This shows that the participant's views were accurately represented in the data and increases the trustworthiness of this study. Interestingly, the participant seemed very satisfied with the interview, as revealed by the following abstract of the follow-up interview.

“It made me realize a lot of things, like how I study and what kind of approaches I’m using to perfect my studying, and I think it’s quite helpful. Because just even by saying them, I say ‘oh yeah, this method worked, this one maybe not so well, or maybe I should continue in that direction’ so I found it really useful actually!”

Furthermore, descriptive and reflective field notes were taken throughout the interviews and the coding process in order to record events, my interpretations, comments, and both the participant's and my own behaviours.

2.3 DATA ANALYSIS

After having transcribed the first interview into an Excel spreadsheet, several coding methods were considered. Since the goal of this study was to gather the participant's perceptions of *kanji* learning, it was crucial to bracket my own perspective. Hence, in vivo coding was soon chosen as the first cycle coding method in order to conduct this phenomenological analysis. Indeed, in vivo coding is “appropriate for ... studies that prioritize and honor the participant's voice” (Saldaña, 2012, p. 91).

The codes, which were chunks of the participant's responses, were added in the aforementioned spreadsheet. Due to the richness of the interview data, this process yielded 240 codes. Therefore, it was necessary to develop categories to organize the data. To do so, focused coding was chosen as the second cycle coding method as it allows developing categories even if their properties differ (Saldaña, 2012). The names of the codes were determined according to the main idea of the previously created in vivo codes, while cross-checking with the interview data. Finally, overlapping codes (such as “school”, “teacher”, and “teaching methodology”) were regrouped under an overarching code (for example, “instruction”).

The follow-up interview was subsequently transcribed, coded and analysed following the same methodology as the first one. The themes that emerged from the analysis of both interviews have been explained in the following section.

3. FINDINGS

In order to enhance the transferability of the findings, this section first provides a detailed description of the participant, before presenting the three major themes that emerged from the study: the value of instruction, the importance of strategies, and the evolution of the participant's perceptions.

3.1 INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS

The participant was a 30-year-old Ph.D. student in Ophthalmology. A native of Poland, she arrived in Canada when she was 10 years old and has been living in Montreal with her parents and her younger brother ever since. It is noteworthy that she was trilingual (Polish, French, and English) when she started learning Japanese by herself, watching Japanese animation, TV series, and listening to Japanese music. Later, she borrowed a book from the library and learned the two syllabaries (*hiragana* and *katakana*) before attending two summer sessions of beginner Japanese at the university. Then, she continued learning in three different private language schools, changing schools because of schedule conflicts. I taught Japanese grammar to the participant once a week for two years (2011-2012) in the third language school. After I became self-employed, the participant started taking lessons with me, not only focussing on grammar but also *kanji*, reading, writing, and conversation. Another student was in her group from February to July 2013, but now the participant is taking a one-hour private lesson on *kanji*, and a one-hour group lesson to practice reading and conversation.

Throughout the interviews, the participant explained different factors that affected her learning and that complete this overview of her background. She talked about her need for challenge several times in the first interview ("*I need the challenge*", "*I like challenges*") and the follow-up ("*I love challenges*"). She also mentioned being "*very active*". Indeed, she is playing volleyball, taking violin classes, volunteering at least three times a year for the Japanese community in Montreal, and she has also studied Spanish and Korean. However, her motivation appeared to be particularly high for Japanese: "*it's only Japanese where I can do that much*". This is undoubtedly linked with her perception of the language, which is crystallised in the following quotes: "*Japanese is not studying*"; "*it's a hobby*"; "*I study Japanese when I'm bored*"; "*I'm learning it for fun*". In addition, her learning has probably been positively impacted by what she qualified as "*a very strong visual memory*". She used the following metaphor: "*it's just stored in this part of the brain; it's really a textbook*". Last but not least, the participant considers herself "*a lucky person*" who has "*good family and friends*": a mother who "*is very proud*", and supportive friends who "*would help*" her to learn Japanese.

3.2 THE VALUE OF INSTRUCTION

Overall, the context and the individual characteristics of the participant are important factors to take into consideration when analysing her experience as a Japanese learner. However, when the interview concentrated more specifically on the acquisition of *kanji*, different themes emerged. The main finding of this study was how much the participant

values instruction. Not only did she mention that “*the teacher is important*”, but also that the different teachers that she had (“*I changed a lot of teachers*”) influenced the way she studied (“*it all depended on teachers*”). For instance, she described periods where she stopped learning *kanji*, giving the instructor as one of the causes:

“... so my *kanji* learning was like “*I learn, I stop, I learn, I stop, I learn...*” It was depending on different factors like teachers or difficulty or the way someone was teaching it.”

The participant clearly values “*teachers that love to teach*” and for whom teaching is “*their passion in life*”. The interview data allow to give a portrayal of what she considers a good teaching methodology. According to the participant, the teacher should not only introduce the characters, their pronunciations and compound words, but also provide mnemonic devices such as explanations about the etymology of the *kanji* or associations with pictures. The participant also values a progressive approach, where the instruction initially focusses on how to read the most common *kanji*, and then the teacher reuses the same characters to teach writing. The teacher should also leave time for practicing *kanji* during the class and provide “*fun exercises*”. Finally, *kanji* radicals – the morphemic components that are used to classify the characters in a dictionary – should be explained to the students so that they can look up the characters in a dictionary.

3.3 THE IMPORTANCE OF STRATEGIES

Although instruction has played an important role in the participant’s acquisition of *kanji*, it is clear that she has also employed strategies on her side to learn them. One striking finding of this study is the variety of strategies that she has been using (“*I have a lot of methods*”). The participant appeared to be in an experimenting phase: “*I’m discovering new ways ... and trying to see which ones are the best*”. The following is a summary of these diverse strategies: (a) taking the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT); (b) putting up a *kanji* list next to her bed and highlighting the characters already acquired in order to visualise her progress; (c) using a whiteboard to practice writing; (d) transcribing Japanese TV series; (e) testing herself on reading or writing; (f) using flashcards or applications on her smartphone.

The participant insisted on the fact that she does not “*use those methods all at the same time*” and that the variety was necessary to avoid boredom (“*It has to be like diversified so I don’t get bored*”). Another point that she stressed was the importance of applying what has been learned. When the participant was presented with a hypothetical scenario depicting a student struggling with *kanji*, she elaborated on the importance of time management (“*find a schedule that’s like good for you and do it, no matter what, just do it!*”), the necessity “*to be systematic*”, and the fact that students should see it as “*a game*”.

3.4 THE EVOLUTION OF THE PARTICIPANT’S PERCEPTIONS

Another salient theme that emerged from the analysis of the data was the evolution of the participant’s perceptions of *kanji* learning. The interview data revealed contrasting feelings. First, the participant mentioned that learning *kanji* at the beginner level was easy because of a novelty effect and because the teachers were associating them with images:

“At the beginning, when my teachers were showing me kanji, they would always associate it with a kind of image. So it was like very easy to remember. So that was fun because it was new.”

This relative easiness contrasts with other periods when the participant felt that learning *kanji* was hard. Difficulties that she mentioned included the number of pronunciations, the compound words, and also the frustration that she felt when she could not apply what she had learned. Interestingly, both the positive and the negative feelings were closely linked to the points discussed above: the value of instruction, and the importance of strategies (in this case, the application of knowledge). The use of picture associations as a teaching methodology was linked to a perceived easiness, whereas the lack of explanation increased the level of difficulty (*“So that was really hard because I didn’t have any explanation to try and help me to memorize it”*).

4. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Although the participant used the term *“method”*, the analysis of what she does to study *kanji* clearly points to the literature on learning strategies, more specifically learning strategies discussed in the information processing theory. Schunk (2012) defines learning strategies as cognitive plans elaborated by the learner to facilitate the encoding of information and its transfer to long term memory. The researcher provides a list of learning strategies that helps to understand the findings of the present study. For instance, the participant underlined the importance of imagery and mnemonics, which are types of the elaboration strategy. In light of the data, it also appears that the participant uses rehearsal, organization, comprehension, monitoring and affective strategies. Information processing theory can also partially explain the impact of instruction on the participant’s *kanji* learning. Indeed, the participant underlined the need to avoid *“overwhelming”* the students, to repeat the same characters, and to provide rich explanations such as the etymology. This relates to the theory that posits the necessity to reduce extraneous cognitive processing, to activate prior knowledge, and to encourage learners to “engage in deep understanding of the material” (Mayer, 2012, p. 92).

More generally, it can be said that the participant is highly self-regulated. Self-regulation refers to the “processes that learners use to systematically focus their thoughts, feelings, and actions on the attainment of their goals” (Schunk, 2012, p. 441). Indeed, the participant seems to be regularly evaluating her goal progress, using the sheets hung on her bedroom wall where she highlights the acquired characters. She also reflects on the strategies she employs and adapts them according to their effectiveness. Furthermore, the participant demonstrates a high level of intrinsic motivation since she considers Japanese as *“a hobby”*, and research shows that there is a strong link between self-regulation and motivation (Schunk, 2012).

However, neither information processing theory nor self-regulation can fully explain why instruction has had such influence on the participant’s learning, or why her perceptions evolved. The growing literature on the acquisition of Japanese as a foreign language (JFL) provides some insight into these all-important questions. Shimizu and Green (2002) showed that JFL teachers’ appreciation of cultural tradition in *kanji* and their beliefs in the usefulness of this writing system were associated with positive

attitudes toward *kanji* teaching and the use of a variety of instructional strategies. Drawing upon these results, Mori and Shimizu (2007) studied the relation between students' attitudes and their strategy use. The researchers concluded that positive attitudes were associated with the use of a variety of strategies, suggesting a link between teachers' and students' beliefs. This link between teachers' and students' attitudes has clearly been shown by Dewey (2004), at least at the beginner level of Japanese. His study revealed that English native speakers studying Japanese value the teacher's views regarding the immediate or delayed introduction of the Japanese syllabaries. Those who had a teacher in favor of delayed instruction were satisfied with the use of Roman transcriptions. Conversely, those who had a teacher in favor of immediate instruction valued this approach. The present study suggests that this link between teachers' and students' attitudes is not limited to the beginner level and may impact learning over the long term. Therefore, it would be especially interesting to conduct a longitudinal study to observe the evolution of JFL students' learning strategies and teachers' methodologies in order to explore the relations between these factors.

In addition, the evolution of the participant's perception of the difficulty of *kanji* learning can be explained by the structural differences of the characters across the levels of Japanese curricula. *Kanji* can be divided in four major categories: pictograms, ideograms, ideographic compounds, and phonetic compounds. Pictograms are derived from drawings that represent concrete objects or phenomena, such as 月 (moon). Ideograms represent abstract concepts, such as 上 (above). Ideographic compounds are characters that combine two or more *kanji* to represent meaning, such as 明, which combines 日 (sun) and 月 (moon) to mean "brightness". Phonetic compounds are associations between a radical that conveys semantic information and a component that represents the pronunciation, such as 時 (time), which combines 日 (sun) and a character pronounced /ji/. In other words, characters in the first three categories can be easily associated with images, but this strategy is of limited use to learn characters in the last category, which incidentally represents around 60% of the *kanji* (Tamaoka, Kirsner, Yanase, Miyaoka, & Kawakami, 2002). Nishida and Barnett (2010) posited the hypothesis of the "500 hundred characters barrier", because the first 500 characters learned at the beginner and pre-intermediate levels of Japanese mostly pertain to the first three categories. At the intermediate and advanced levels, students encounter an increasing number of phonetic compounds and cannot solely rely on picture association. Hence, it seems crucial that the teachers provide the students with new tools to learn *kanji*.

During the interview, the participant mentioned that she had overcome challenges in *kanji* learning "recently". She gave more details in the follow-up interview where she explained that she was now using a new method that consists in regrouping characters that have a similar pronunciation. She also added: "I prefer the new method that I'm using now". However, because the participant also talked about the importance of applying previously learned characters, it is not possible to draw conclusions regarding what aspect of instruction is more efficient. Further research is needed to determine which of the following aspect has a deeper effect: providing the student with many opportunities to reuse *kanji* that have been learned, or employing a teaching methodology that takes into account the type of characters (pictograms, ideograms, ideographic compounds or phonetic compounds). By the same token, evaluating the effects of

different teaching methodologies on *kanji* acquisition with JFL learners from different levels would contribute to the advancement of knowledge on JFL acquisition.

5. LIMITATIONS

Although the research questions of the current study could be answered, there are several limitations that must be acknowledged before concluding this paper.

The main limitation comes from my insider role. First, as the participant's Japanese teacher, I may have had an impact on the responses that were gathered during the interviews. In order to limit this threat to trustworthiness, the interviews were conducted (a) in English, a language that we do not usually use to communicate, and (b) at her house. The goal was to emphasize the shift between my role as a practitioner (teaching in Japanese at my house) and my role as a researcher (interviewing in English at her house). Although the interview questions were open-ended to allow the participant to elaborate freely and present her lived experience, it is possible that she tried to please me, for example by saying that she prefers the method that she is currently using. However, the fact that she has mastered more than 800 characters in the past eighteen months – despite her busy schedule as a Ph.D. student in Ophthalmology – shows that there has been a change in her learning and that her comments were not mere compliments. As mentioned in the discussion section, further research is needed to determine what aspect has the deeper effect on *kanji* acquisition: the application of prior knowledge or the teaching methodology.

Second, as a former student of Japanese, I could often relate to what the participant was saying, and it may have affected my interpretations. For instance, I have always had fun learning Japanese and when the participant presented Japanese as “*a hobby*”, I did not try to investigate the reasons that led to this view, whereas a researcher who has not had such a positive experience or simply has never studied Japanese may have asked more questions regarding this aspect. Conversely, there were certain discrepancies between the participants' and my own learning experience that may have led me to focus more on other aspects. Unlike the participant, instruction had less impact on my acquisition of *kanji* as I was mostly self-taught. As a result, I interpreted instruction as being one of the main factors that affected the participant's experience, where a researcher who has an outsider role may have focussed on intrinsic motivational factors. Nonetheless, the numerous responses that refer to teachers during the interview leave little doubt on the importance of instruction in the participant's experience.

Unfortunately, due to time constraints, triangulation by another researcher has not been possible, but has been compensated by member checking and by considering multiple theories in the interpretation of the findings. Despite the aforementioned limitations, I believe that the strong rapport that already existed prior to the first interview allowed me to gather rich data, and that my knowledge of the Japanese language helped me with the interpretation of the emerging themes. In that sense, the present study falls along the lines of Mercer's (2007, p. 13) description of insider research: “freer access, stronger rapport and a deeper, more readily-available frame of shared reference with which to interpret the data”.

6. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this preliminary study was to explore an advanced JFL student's perceptions of *kanji* and her strategy use. Through a semi-structured interview, completed with a follow-up, the phenomenological framework allowed the emergence of an unanticipated theme, namely the value of instruction in *kanji* acquisition. Although further research involving students from different levels is needed, the findings suggest that teaching methodologies have a deep impact on *kanji* acquisition. Given the recent increase in the number of characters included in the official *List of Commonly Used Kanji* published by the Japanese Ministry of Education, it is urgent to test various teaching methodologies in order to shed light on the all-important question of maintaining learners' motivation to take on challenging material.

7. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my sincere gratitude to the participant of this study for her cooperation and her continuous trust, as well as Professor Hariclia Petrakos, Professor Mary Elizabeth Horst, and Professor Laura Collins for their precious help.

REFERENCES

- Anderson, S., & Bourke, B. (2007). Beyond the classroom: SILK for promoting autonomous *kanji* learning. Proceedings of the Independent Learning Association 2007 Japan Conference. Chiba, Japan.
- Dewey, D. P. (2004). Connections between teacher and student attitudes regarding script choice in first-year Japanese language classrooms. *Foreign Language Annals*, 37, 567-583.
- Gamage, G.H. (2003a). Perceptions of *kanji* learning strategies: Do they differ among Chinese character and alphabetic background learners? *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics*, 26(2), 17-31.
- Gamage, G.H. (2003b). Issues in strategy classifications in language learning: A framework for *kanji* learning strategy research *ASAA e-journal of Asian Linguistics & Language Teaching*, 5, 1-15.
- Hays, D. G., & Singh, A. A. (2011). Qualitative inquiry in clinical and educational settings. New York: Guilford Press.
- Mayer, R. E. (2012). Information processing. In K. R. Harris, S. Graham, T. Urdan, C. B. McCormick, G. M. Sinatra, & J. Sweller (Eds), *APA educational psychology handbook, Vol 1: Theories, constructs, and critical issues* (pp. 85-99). Washington, DC, US: American Psychological Association. doi:10.1037/13273-004
- Mercer, J. (2007). The challenges of insider research in educational institutions: Wielding a double-edged sword and resolving delicate dilemmas. *Oxford Review of Education*, 33(1), 1-17. doi:10.1080/03054980601094651
- Mori, Y., Sato, K., & Shimizu, H. (2007). Japanese language students' perceptions on *kanji* learning and their relationship to novel *kanji* word learning ability. *Language Learning*, 57(1), 57-85.
- Mori, Y. & Shimizu, H. (2007). Japanese language students' attitudes toward *kanji* and their perceptions on *kanji* learning strategies. *Foreign Language Annals*, 40(3), 472-490.

- Nishida, M., & Barnett, J. E. (2010). Innovating a pedagogically effective *kanji* learner's dictionary: A semantic and structural approach. Proceedings of the 17th Princeton Japanese Pedagogy Forum. NJ, United-States.
- Saldaña, J. (2012). The coding manual for qualitative researchers. London, UK: Sage.
- Schunk, D.H. (2012). Learning theories: An educational perspective. Boston, MA: Pearson/Allyn-Bacon.
- Shimizu, H., & Green, K. E. (2002). Japanese language educators' strategies for and attitudes toward teaching *kanji*. *Modern Language Journal*, 86, 228-241.
- Tamaoka, K., Kirsner, K., Yanase, Y., Miyaoka, Y., & Kawakami, M. (2002). A Web-accessible database of characteristics of the 1,945 basic Japanese *kanji*. *Behavior Research Methods, Instruments, & Computers*, 34(2), 260-275.