Current Issues with Kanji Education - a Culturally Integrated Approach

Nobuyoshi Asaoka
Grinnell College
asaokan@grinnell.edu
Overview

• Background
• Current Issues with Kanji Education
  - frequency-based approach
  - need, motivation & desire
  - in comparison with Chinese
  - why is writing kanji important?
• A New Approach
  - homonyms & associated chunks
  - American-style Japanese calligraphy
  - potential benefits to Japanese program
• Practical Syllabus
• Conclusion
Background

- Grinnell College in the middle of nowhere between Iowa City and Des Moines.
- No language requirement
- High attrition rate towards advanced level
- Cultural integration
Current Issues with *Kanji* Education

1. The learning of *kanji* poses multiple challenges to students of Japanese, especially those from an alphabetic background (Ishida, 1984).

2. *Kanji* has been extensively studied from various perspectives because of its unique characteristics, such as its high visual for *kanji* complexity and logographic nature (Kaiho & Nomura, 1983).

Current Issues with *Kanji* Education 2

- Frequency-based Approach

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nakama 1 Chapter 12</th>
<th>元気入薬休体病院住所語好毎回度</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td># of chapters</td>
<td>Chapter <em>kanji</em> appear</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Genki 1</em></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Nakama 1</em></td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Yookoso 1</em></td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Current Issues with *Kanji* Education 3

- Need, Motivation, & Desire

  - Extinct & intrinsic motivation.

  - Toyoda (1995) conducted a survey among students of Japanese from an alphabetic background at a Japanese university with a result of the largest number of students of intermediate Japanese feeling learning *kanji* very difficult.
Current Issues with *Kanji* Education 4

- In Comparison with Chinese
  - 700 Chinese characters vs about 150 Japanese *kanji* a year at Grinnell College
  - Learning a much larger number of *kanji* is not by no means impossible but perhaps requires more motivation and commitment.
Current Issues with *Kanji* Education 5

- **Why Is Writing *Kanji* Important?**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th>Temporal visual memory</th>
<th>Kinetic movement</th>
<th>Confirmation after writing</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Viewing</td>
<td>✓</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing in space</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Writing on paper</td>
<td></td>
<td>✓</td>
<td>✓</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A New Approach

- Element-based Approach (Heising, 1986)

For example, before 「語」 is learned, the radical, 「言」, 「五」 and 「口」 is introduced so that learners can make a smooth transition.
A New Approach 2

• Homonyms & Associated Chunks

Samuels (1973) found pre-training for visual discrimination effective with American children trying to learn English letters, “p”, “d”, “g”, and “q” and concluded that the pre-training facilitated the subsequent learning by sensitizing children to visual features of letters.

Sugimura & Kubo (1975) conducted a similar experiment with Japanese children trying to learn the pronunciation of katakana, and found that their pre-training for visual discrimination facilitated their subsequent association between hiragana and their sounds.

Kaiho & Nomura (1983) propose that as learners have to learn a huge number of kanji, the pre-training for visual discrimination of kanji is necessary before learners recognize useful kanji patterns.
A New Approach 3

Systematic *kanji* learning is needed, for instance, *miru* can be written as 「見る」「看る」「診る」「観る」or 「視る」.

For alphabetic-habituated learners, without knowing radicals, some *kanji* are so similar to others that they can’t make clear distinctions, especially when writing. Examples are 「四/西」 「良/食」「大/天」 「小/少」 「元/先」 「各/名」 「字/学」 「映/英」 「大/本」 「理/野」 「牧/枚」
A New Approach 4

• American-style Japanese Calligraphy
  The ancient traditional art needs to be revised to fit into the American university curriculum.
  Critique of each other’s calligraphic work can be introduced to quickly develop better appreciation of the art
  Two calligraphy projects: 「永」 with all the basics & a word of student’s choice to make the activity enjoyable for students.
A New Approach 5
A New Approach 6
A New Approach

- Potential Benefits to The Japanese Program
  - Aims to ease the burden of those learners, who feel *kanji* is very tough to learn and the hope is that more of them go up to advanced level better-prepared.
  - Extended to the other skills, better *kanji* recognition leads, for example, to better reading comprehension.
  - Alleviate instructors for the extra headache of trying to read students’ illegible handwriting.
Practical Syllabus

• Kanji Section
  - “Remembering The Kanji” by James Heisig but with an additional reading list and those beyond the official 1,850 official kanji excluded.
  - A comprehensive workbook
  - Introduce rikusho (六書), compositional units, and radicals at the very beginning of the course so that students understand how kanji is basically formed.
  - Teach how to use kanwajiten (kanji dictionary).
Example exercises to develop graphic memory by Tollini (1991).

Exercise 1:
Divide the following kanji in two parts.
Example: 細 = 糸 + 田
「鎮」「習」「梅」「語」「張」「答」「悲」「晴」「現」「仕」

Exercise 2:
To which decomposed series do the kanji in the list belong?
Example: 田 + 糸 = 累
「士 + 心」「安 + 木」「耳 + 口 + 王」「竹 + 木 + 目」「言 + 刃 + 心」
Exercise 3:
Choose the common components of the following kanji.
Example: 奈奥太奄 大
「勉努勤務募」「謀諮誓」「念恥愛感」「岩峠島獄」「守寺導謝」

Exercise 4:
Which parts are contained in the following kanji?
Example: 侍 j + f
1. 明 2. 時 3. 品 4. 加 5. 吉 6. 含 7. 念 8. 志
Parts: a. 月 b. 口 c. 力 d. 心 e. 土 f. 寺 g. 日 h. 今 i. 生 j. 人

Exercise 5:
Choose from each list the kanji that does not belong.
Example: 技持功抗：功
「梅桜料柏」「鮎蛤鯨」「罵雪雲電」「都影郊郵」「虫忠念愁」
Conclusion

The frequency-based approach might work better for JSL or at the very beginning levels for JFL where the selection of *kanji* is closely related to the theme of each chapter.

This study argue that this may be counterproductive in the long term as the current approach often forces learners to depend on ad hoc rote memorization in a one dimensional way.

This new approach aims to stimulate learners with Japanese calligraphy and motivate them to tackle *kanji* positively.

The task, especially writing *kanji* with native proficiency is not easy. It requires a great deal of stamina, concentration, and commitment. However, I hope this new approach is a way to eliminate a great deal of wasted efforts and can better facilitate learners of Japanese struggling towards success with *kanji*. 
References


