

THE ANALYSIS OF KNOWLEDGE AND ABILITY OF UNDERSTANDING KANJI IN THAI STUDENTS AT THE BEGINNING LEVEL: THE CASE STUDY OF THE KANJI PROFICIENCY TEST AMONG UNDERGRADUATE STUDENTS AT SUAN SUNANDHA RAJABHAT UNIVERSITY

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ABSTRACT

The object of this research was to study the orthographic processing skills in shape, pronunciation, meaning and usage among the 40 freshmen learners in Japanese major in Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences at Suansunandha Rajabhat University.

The research indicated that the learners were able to recognize the overall Kanji and also able to match the kanji with the correct meaning in Thai. However, the main problems were 1) the learners had problems in recognizing the structure and the component of the Kanji, 2) the learners had problems in recognizing the pronunciation of Kanji and compound Kanji, and 3) the learners had problems in using radicals and Kanji. As the result, the hypothesis was that the learners didn't see the important of the Kanji components, so the learners didn't gain the skills in compounding and decompounding the radicals of the Kanji characters. Moreover, the learners were lack of Kanji vocabulary usage especially the usage of the Kanji vocabularies in the sentence level. In addition, the learners were unable to understand both grammars and vocabularies in the sentence.

As the result, the researcher finally understood the problems occurring in Kanji learning among the learners. The result were analyzed and applied as a guideline to improve the teaching method in study of Kanji Course.

Keywords- Kanji Proficiency Test, Thai beginner, Kanji information processing

INTRODUCTION

The learning of Kanji is considered one of the most challenging subjects for learners of Japanese due to its complexity including shape, pronunciation, meaning and usage, which needed to be remembered. Kano (2001) indicated that foreign learners of Japanese who had no alphabetical background found it hard to recognize the Kanji's shape, structure, pronunciation, meaning and usage. Thus, it would take a long time to better the skills. On the other hands, the study of Choladda (2011) revealed the Kanji learning strategies of high school students in Thailand. A survey was conducted among the high school learners who applied learning strategies in learning Kanji and found that the learners applied the repeated reading and writing strategies to remember Kanji's shape, meaning and pronunciation altogether and kept applying those strategies in the university. However, Kanji contains structure and component of both Chinese pronunciation and Japanese pronunciation including meaning, and usage variety. With the large numbers of Kanji to be learnt in the university, the learners would take a long time to recognize new radicals and words.

As the result, it is important to check the Kanji proficiency of 40 freshmen learners in Japanese major at Suansunandha Rajabhat University. With the Kanji proficiency test, the cause of the problems based on the orthographic processing skills of shape, pronunciation, meaning, and usage will be analyzed. The result will show the weakness of the learners and the researcher can use it as an insight to develop the teaching methods of Kanji courses.

LITERATURE & THEORY

According to the previous research, the content is divided into 2 parts as follows

2.1 The related studies of the Kanji learning methods of learners in high school and undergraduate learners in the university

Kanji course is considered one of the required courses that every learners of Japanese must take in both school and university. The key of learning Kanji is the frequency of practice in shape, pronunciation and meaning. Choladda (2011) revealed that the learners tended to apply the repeated reading and writing strategies to remember Kanji's shape, meaning and pronunciation altogether. On the other hands, Somchai (2008) concluded that the learners in university level employed furigana writing above the unknown Kanji strategy and rote writing strategy. It showed that most of the Kanji learning strategies were based on writing. Moreover, Thienchai (2016) presented Kanji memorizing method via mind mapping by arranging an experiment on 70 freshmen learners in Japanese major. The learners had to group Kanji with the same meaning together, and then created a mind mapping. The study showed that the learners tended to memorize more Kanji through mind mapping. However, the teaching methods can be adjudged to fit the learners' problems if the instructor knows the causes. Thus, the study of Rudemas (2016) indicated that Kanji's learning system in high school were based on writing, stroke order, and meaning of each Kanji. Due to the lack of Kanji course, the instructor was unable to effectively teach the learners Kanji. Therefore, it is necessary for an instructors to create a tool to evaluate kanji knowledge and competency among learners in the university level in order to measure the proficiency level of Kanji's shape, pronunciation, meaning, and usage. The tool is called "the Kanji Proficiency Test" conducted in the study of Bussaba and others (2010).

2.2 The related studies of the Kanji Proficiency Test

There are many research and studies related to the Kanji proficiency test revealing that the studies of Kano and Shimisu (1992), Kano (2001), Kano and Sakaii (2003) have consistently improved and developed the topic of the proficiency test for the learners without alphabetical background in the beginning level.

In the field of Kanji education in Thailand, Bussaba and others (2010) explored the Kanji proficiency of the Thai learner in the beginning level by focusing on the high school learners. The Kanji Proficiency Test of Kano and Sakaii (2003) was used. The results indicated that Thai learners had problems in using Kanji in the sentence level. They were lack of skills to use Okuringa Kanji, identify the type of words, and use Kanji in a proper context.

Consequently, the researcher is interested in developing the Kanji teaching method for a better learning outcome of the learners majoring in Japanese at Suansunandha Rajabhat University. The teaching method should help the learners understand Kanji components including shape, pronunciation, meaning, and usage. Thus, the research will be considered successful if only the learners are familiar with the Kanji shape and structure as well as able to recognize the structure of pronunciation and the structure of meaning.

METHOD

1. Participants

The participants in this research were 40 Thai learners who were in Japanese major and studying in the first year in faculty of Humanity and Social Science at Suansunandha Rajabhat University. The researcher wanted to know the level of Kanji knowledge and skills of the learners who had Kanji learning background from high school in order to analyze for the occurrence of the learning problems and develop the most suitable teaching method.

2. Instruments

This research was conducted based on a questionnaire. The questionnaire used in this research was divided into 2 sections: general information of the participants and the Kanji Proficiency Test. The test was

designed with the same test topic as the research of Bussaba and others (2010). The objective of the test was to evaluate the proficiency of radicals and Kanji of the learners by focusing on 4 Kanji orthographic processing skills including shape, pronunciation, meaning, and usage. The researcher arranged and had the students do the questionnaire for 40 minutes during the class time.

3 Statistic for analysis

Statistic used in this research was percentages with the formula as follows.

$$\text{Percentage} = \frac{s \times 100}{N}$$

S is the correct answer score of the participants; for example, the correct answer of the test topic II or the topic of Kanji structure is 43, so S equals 43

N is the amount of questions in the test; for example the amount of questions in test topic II or the topic of Kanji structure is 50 questions, so N equals 50.

RESULTS

According to the Kanji Proficiency Test, the result of 26 participants who had Kanji learning background in high school was divided into 4 parts: 1. The Kanji orthographic processing skills in shape, 2. The Kanji orthographic processing skills in meaning, 3. The Kanji orthographic processing skills in pronunciation, and 4. The Kanji orthographic processing skills in usage.

1. The Kanji orthographic processing skills in shape

Table 1
The Kanji orthographic processing skills in shape

Kanji Orthographic Processing Skills in Shape	Percentage of Learners with Correct Answers
1) Question related to Kanji recognition	91.53%
2) Question related to Kanji structure recognition	63.84%
3) Question related to Kanji components recognition	45.38%

According to the survey in Table A, It showed that 91.53 percentage of the learners were able to recognize Kanji matching with the given Kanji and 63.84 percentage of the learners could correctly choose the structure of Kanji. However, there were only 45.38 percentage of the learners could recognize the Kanji components while more than half of learners were unable to decompound the Kanji 村 pronouncing むら meaning "village" and the Kanji 働 pronouncing はたら (く) meaning "work". Both Kanji characters had radicals of tree (木) and man (人). Due to the lack of understanding the radicals, they were unable to connect or integrate the words.

2. The Kanji orthographic processing skills in meaning

Table 2
The Kanji orthographic processing skills in meaning

Kanji Orthographic Processing Skills in Shape	Percentage of Learners with Correct Answers
1) Question related to the integration between shape and meaning in Thai	54.61%
2) Question related to the recognition of Kanji with opposite meaning	50%

According to the survey result in Table B, it was found that only 54.61 percentage of the learners were able to apply the skills in integration between shape and meaning. They didn't have enough skills to deal with the individual character including between 待(wait) and 持(hold) and between 苦(bitter) and 薬(drug). Because the learners were unable to recognize Kanji with similar components, they misuse them.

Referring to question related to the recognition of Kanji with opposite meaning, it was found that only 50 percentage of the learners could correctly recognize Kanji with opposite meaning. As the result, most of the learners had problem with matching Kanji 暑 meaning “hot” to Kanji 寒 meaning “cold”, instead they matched with Kanji 冬 meaning “winter”. In conclusion, the learners were still lack of skill in memorizing individual Kanji

3. The Kanji orthographic processing skills in pronunciation

Table 3

The Kanji orthographic processing skills in pronunciation

Kanji Orthographic Processing Skills in Shape	Percentage of Learners with Correct Answers
1) Question related to the integration between shape and pronunciation	57.69%
2) Question related to the integration between pronunciation and shape	57.69%
3) Question related to the recognition of Kanji with the same Chinese pronunciation	29.23%

According to the survey in Table C, It indicated that 57.69 percentage of the learners could understand the relation between shape and pronunciation of Kanji and between pronunciation and shape of Kanji. Most of the learners incorrectly answered to the question of selecting the pronunciation of Kanji 世界中 (せかいじゅう meaning around the world) where most learners mistakenly selected せかいちゅう because the differenced in じ(ji) ち(chi) were not obvious when pronouncing.

For the question related to the integration between pronunciation and shape, it was found that 57.69 percentage of the learner could see the relation between pronunciation and shape of Kanji. Most of the learners incorrectly answered to the question of matching Kanji with the pronunciation りょうしん. The correct answer was 両親 but learners mostly selected 両新 because both Kanji had similar shape which could confuse the learners with its structure. If the learners don't have enough knowledge in terms of shape and meaning of 新 and 親, they will fail in selecting the correct word with appropriate meaning to fit in the sentence.

For the question related to the recognition of Kanji with the same Chinese pronunciation, only 29.23 percentage of the learners were able to recognize Kanji with the same Chinese pronunciation. Most of the learners memorized Kanji as a word rather than radicals and didn't practice memorizing the meaning of the radicals. They tended to remember only a complete Kanji for applying in a sentence. Therefore, it led to the lack of pronunciation and meaning recognition of the certain Kanji among the learners.

4. The Kanji orthographic processing skills in pronunciation

Table 4

The Kanji orthographic processing skills in usage

Kanji Orthographic Processing Skills in Shape	Percentage of Learners with Correct Answers
1) Question related to the usage of Okurigana Kanji	68.46%
1) Question related to the recognition of the types of radicals and Kanji	51.53%
2) Question related to Kanji choice of selection from contextual information based on grammar structure	46.15%
3) Question related to Kanji choice of selection from contextual information based on meaning	46.15%

According to the survey in Table D, it showed that almost 70 percentage of learners were able to handle the skill of the using Okurigana Kanji, whereas only half of learners were able to deal with types of words, which was considered as 51.53 percentage. Referring to the analysis of the learner's mistake, the

learners were confused with the form of noun and adjective な because the adjective な had the same shape as noun. Therefore, it was also necessary to understand the sentence structure in order to know the suitable words to place in the sentence.

For the question related to Kanji choice of selection from contextual information based on grammar structure and Question related to Kanji choice of selection from contextual information based on meaning, it was found that only 46.15 percentage of the learners were able to overcome the skills and more than 60 percentage of the learners were lack not only the skill in understanding Kanji in the sentence, but also lack of the skill in using grammatical related Kanji. As the result, the learners had a hard time to select the correct words. If the learner have enough knowledge in Kanji with grammatical conditions or helping words, they will be able to select the a suitable word fitting the contextual information with grammatically correct conditions.

After the Kanji Proficiency Test result of freshman learners in Japanese major at Suansunandha Rajabhat University was analyzed in terms of Kanji shape, meaning, pronunciation and usage. The researcher perceived the Kanji learning problems among the Thai learners in the beginning level as follows;

1. The learners had problems in recognizing the Kanji structure and Kanji components.
2. The learners had problems in memorizing radicals and compound Kanji with Chinese pronunciation.
3. The learners had problems in integrating between shape and pronunciation of Kanji.
4. The learners had problems in applying the types of word with other Kanji words in the sentence level.
5. The learners had problems in integrating the meaning of each word in the sentence.
6. The learners had problems in applying Kanji related with grammar or helping words in the sentence.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORKS

This research was conducted to evaluate the Kanji proficiency level of the freshman learner in Japanese major at Suansunandha Rajabhat University in order to gain a deep insight of the Kanji learning problems of the leaners in the beginning level. The results showed that the learners had 3 main problems in using Kanji in the sentence level. Thus, the researcher see the important of the teaching tool, “syllabus”, to plan the teaching methods.

Consequently, for the future research, the researcher will present topics of the Kanji learning, which conforms to the learners' problems in the form of syllabus including examples of exercise for the learners to practice radicals and Kanji in every orthographic processing skills of shape, meaning, pronunciation and usage.

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