

A Message for KANJI Learners

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This is a message for learners and teachers of Japanese language, who regard Kanji as the most troublesome characters in the world and as an insurmountable barrier both for learning and teaching.

1. Is Kanji really troublesome?

For many learners, Kanji is difficult, complicated and troublesome because of the following reasons;

- (1) Very large numbers.
- (2) Difficult to write.
- (3) Difficult to read.

There are more than fifty thousand Kanji, among which 1,945 are listed as Joyo-Kanji, that is, Kanji in common use. About 3,300 Kanji are necessary to read newspapers and magazines and to understand ninety percent of what is read.

Besides, there are so many rules for strokes such as stroke-orders and calligraphical techniques,¹ which look so complicated to memorize and to write.

Reading Kanji is also troublesome, primary because Kanji has **at least** two ways of reading; **On-yomi**, sound-reading and **Kun-yomi**,² note reading. And a preference for a great many homonyms³ makes it more tiresome for learners.

These characteristics of Kanji make learners feel helpless and hopeless.

However, 'characteristics' are neutral. They have a bad side, and they have a good side. If they have drawbacks, they also have

advantages. Only our perspective and attitude toward these features decides which aspect prevails.

Following are the advantageous features of Kanji;

- (1) Kanji conveys meanings, which makes it easy to guess a new word.
- (2) Kanji is made of constituents expressing sounds and meaning,⁴ which helps learners to infer its reading and meaning.
- (3) You can express and comprehend nuances of meaning by using homonyms. These advantages are derived from the same drawbacks mentioned earlier.

The former cannot exist without the latter. You, Kanji learners, are free to focus on whichever aspect you like. And if you decide to focus on the former, then you are proceeding into the following passages.

2. The way to efficient learning

The best advice: Relax.

Kanji is not only a character or a script but is a word-constituent. (Some of them can be a word) You do not have to remember two thousand **characters** but two thousand **words**.

Every language in the world requires thousands of words in order to acquire some fluency in the language. Japanese is not an exception. You need thousands of words, as any other language in the world.

But here, Kanji will help you to conquer this problem.

Kanji is a word in the sense that it con-

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veys concepts and meanings. Each Kanji is a productive word-constituent, which forms various vocabulary by affixation and combination with each other.⁵

To put it a different way, many Japanese words consist of Kanji, which conveys concepts and meanings, and because of this, it is easier for learners to guess the meaning and to memorize them.

Here are some suggestions for kanji-learners;

(1) In learning Kanji, you should distinguish reading from writing. You do not need to write all the Kanji that you can read or comprehend. Your first aim should be to increase the Kanji that you can read as much and as fast as possible.

(2) The most efficient way to build up your Kanji vocabulary is through reading. Make use of intermediate-level textbooks and authentic materials as well. Learning Kanji out of context makes your study dull and inefficient. However it is recommended that you review some Kanji after reading over several paragraphs of the texts.

(3) Kanji is a symbol, a concept, an icon and a word-constituent which is highly productive. As your learning progresses, it will be easier and easier. The more Kanji you learn, the more vocabulary you acquire and the better the feeling of Kanji (**Kanji no kanji**)⁶ you get. The progress is geometric, not arithmetic.

Never be afraid of the numbers.

Kanji react and interact and multiply themselves.

It is much easier to consult a dictionary when you do not know how to write than how to read.⁷ Not so many Japanese people can write all of the Joyo-Kanji. Do not be discouraged if you forget how to write, let a dictionary remember them for you.

All you need to learn Kanji is to read. The more you read, the more you encounter the same Kanji, and the more naturally you can remember them.

3. Kanji learning and advanced Japanese

The most bothering, annoying and troublesome fact in learning a language lies not in phonetics, morphology, syntax, pragmatics or semantics, but in vocabulary. You can get a basic knowledge of sounds system and grammar within three months at the longest. But if you want to climb up the ladder and get more fluency and good command in the language, building up the vocabulary is indispensable. For example, English needs approximately six thousand words, and French, about three thousand, to understand 90 percent of the language in daily use.

We do not live on bread alone. We exchange views, explain, complain and talk about politics, economy, religions etc. We read newspapers, magazines, novels, cartoons and books on various topics to broaden our knowledge, make common ground for conversations and to enjoy. You can survive with a few hundred words in hand. But you cannot engage in true communication with such a small number of vocabulary.

Language is not just a means of transmitting our will and needs such as asking the way, ordering food and asking for assistance, but a manifestation and an expression of thought, concept and mind. You need a great deal of vocabulary to express and exchange your thoughts, ideas and opinions.

Learning vocabulary is a long process, which takes time and patience. You need about ten thousand words to converse, read and write fluently in Japanese.

The Japanese, are heavily dependent on the written language. It is inconceivable for us to separate the spoken language from the written.⁸ You cannot learn Japanese and avoid the written language of which Kanji is a part.

I am discussing this not to discourage you but to encourage you.

Kanji helps you to build up your vocabulary. Once you go through about two thousand Kanji, your knowledge of vocabulary

leaps. Remember that Kanji is a word, not a character. A few hundred Kanji make a few thousand words through combining and affixing. It can be much easier to acquire ten thousand Japanese words than six thousand English words.

Compared with Indo-European languages, Japanese is much more simple in morphology and compared with Sino-Tibetan languages, is simple in phonetics. Only the writing system looks difficult.

But as I have been arguing here, this pseudo-drawback could be transformed into advantageous strategies for learning Japanese.

I conclude that Kanji leads learners to an advanced level more easily than other lan-

guages do and makes study interesting.

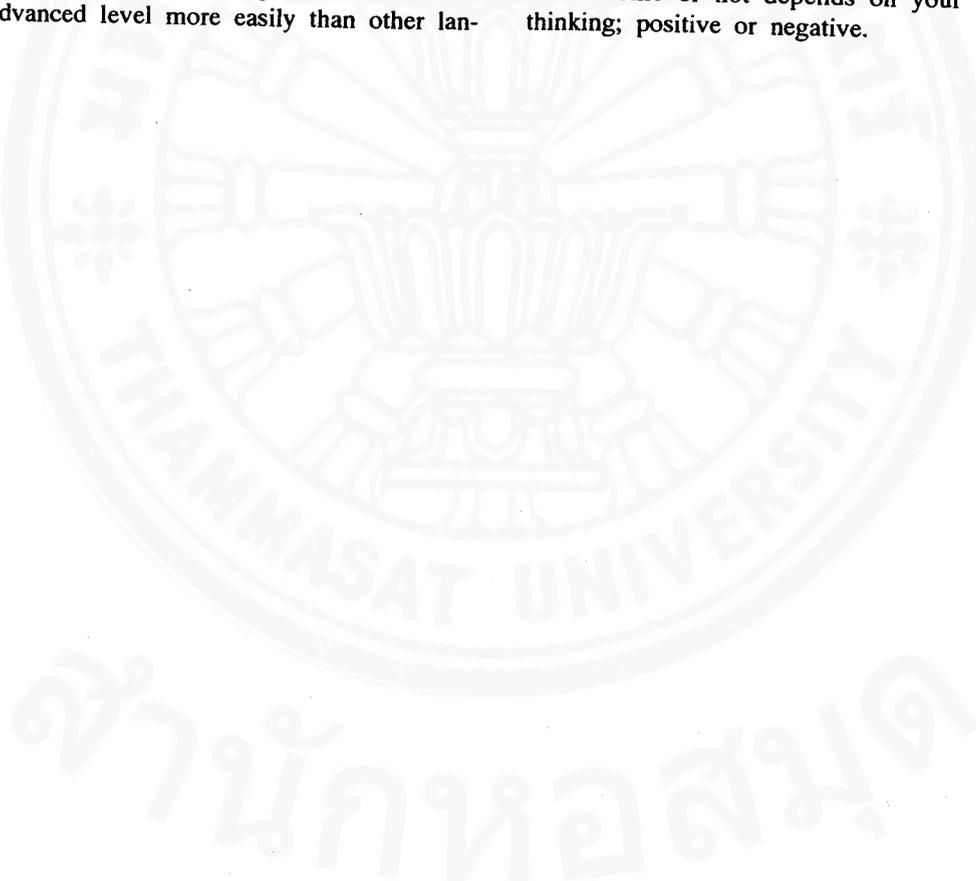
Though the initiation is hard, graduation is easy.

The last advice;

"Get the whole view of the system in a short period, but do not make haste. Progress is spiral, not straight"

You are advised to become familiar with a considerable amount of Kanji in a short span of time. But do not be afraid of forgetting. Read a lot, see the same Kanji many times, then it will be impressed in your memory without effort.

The script is neutral. Whether Kanji is troublesome or not depends on your way of thinking; positive or negative.



Footnotes

1. Kakijun (stroke order) and Tome-Hane (calligraphic techniques) are strictly taught in school in Japan. They are not dealt strictly when Japanese as a second language is taught. However, they still have some orthographical importance in the language.

2. For instance, "SUI" is an approximate sound of the original character meaning "water", which is, in turn, translated "MIZU" in Japanese. The former is called On-yomi, and the latter, Kun-yomi.

3. Do-on-igi and Do-Kun-igi, Kanji homonym are frequently used.

See the word, say, "haku" in dictionary. You will find various Kanji to write it.

4. Most of Kanji is made of two parts. One represents the meaning, and the other the sound. So you can guess not only the meaning, but the sound also.

5. A Kanji word is a compound word.

For instance, Kokusaikoryukikin, "The Japan Foundation" is made up as follows.

This word consists of six Kanji;

koku	sai	ko	ryu	ki	kin
nation	inter	to exchange	to flow	base	money, gold

And they make themselves more meaningful through combining;

koku-sai	ko-ryu	ki-kin
international	exchanging	fund

And finally, combining altogether, they make one compound word;

Kokusaikoryukikin

The Japan Foundation

6. An example of homonym, pun.

The latter "kanji" means "feeling", "a sense of touch". This kind of rhetoric is intentional.

7. Kan-wa Jiten, Kanji-Japanese dictionary is used much less than Kokugo Jiten, Japanese dictionary. One of the reasons is its complicated procedure for reference.

8. We often visualize Kanji words while we talk.

Meta-Notes To define the usage of terms, Kanji is one of the three **script** systems of Japanese language. Kanji is **character** in the sense that it conveys meanings as well as sounds. Kanji affixates and combines with each other and make **Kanji word**, which constitute a large part of the Japanese **vocabulary**.

Two of the other script systems, Katakana and Hiragana, derived from Kanji separately, lost their meanings and express the sound alone. In this sense, they are **letters**.

*I would like to thank Mr. Gwyn Williams for commenting and refining my works. However, any faults which remain are of course mine.