HEURISTIC METHOD FOR MOTIVATING STUDENTS TO DO ONEROUS KANJI LEARNING

漢字学習意欲向上のために

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Abstract: To overcome Kanji phobia that most learners of Japanese have, we tasked our early intermediate students a research project using the internet on a Kanji related topic of their choice, and they presented their findings in class to transfer knowledge to other students. This paper outlines the project implementation and reports the positive outcome. This heuristic method through various channels led our students to self-discover the wonder and necessity of Kanji in the Japanese language, and provided them a new perspective and strong motivation towards learning Kanji.

Keyword: Kanji, Japanese language, research project, heuristic method, internet

1. INTRODUCTION

Learning Kanji is undoubtedly one of the hardest tasks for most learners of Japanese at all levels, as evident from the array of teaching materials, technologies and methods that have been constantly proposed to make Kanji learning easier. This 'how to' study Kanji method is the predominant way of teaching Kanji at present.

There is another approach to it, that is, 'why' study Kanji. Our assumption was that the profound understanding of 'why' they need to study Kanji makes the learning process more meaningful and less onerous, and that when Kanji is taught by the two combined approaches, the effect is compounded. At the University of Melbourne we made this Kanji issue as the theme of a semester-long research project using the internet for our early intermediate students. This paper outlines the project implementation and evaluates the outcome based on the two student questionnaires: interim and final.

2. IMPLEMENTATION

The following describes the students who undertook the Kanji project:

- 98 students were enrolled in the early intermediate subject.

- Approximately 70% of them are in their first year and have studied Japanese for six-seven years at high school,[1] while others studied 24 weeks at our university.
- These students are assumed to have learned 200 Kanji at the entry and further 150 Kanji will be learned during the semester, 8 contact hours per week.
- Their native/second language is English.
- Students with Kanji background (Chinese/Koreans) are 36 out of 98 students.

Our instruction was three-fold: 1) choose an own research title (pair-work), 2) research on the title using internet and other traditional resources. 3) present the findings in class in Japanese to share the knowledge with other students.

2.1   Step 1: Choosing a title

Firstly, an overview of Kanji in Japan was lectured with recommended general reference on Japanese writing system from the internet (http://www.Kanji.org/Kanji/japanese/ writing/outline.htm). We then suggested varied Kanji related topics (see Table 1) relating to a wide range of disciplines from History, Education, Linguistics, Sociology, Computer Science, and Cognitive Science. Based on these, our 98 students approached the topic from any one aspect or a combination of aspects of Kanji and drew their own title. Their work was assessed on the basis of originality, creativity, and critical analysis.

2.2   Step 2: Research on the internet

As the students are early intermediate with assumed knowledge of only 200 Kanji, reading authentic published texts are a way too advanced for their comprehension. Hence, Kanji on-line dictionaries (e.g. JDIC http://www.csse.monash.edu.au/~jwb/wwwjdic.html, FOKS http://www.foks.info, Kansuke http://cantor.ish.ci.i.u-tokyo.ac.jp/kansuke/index.html) and Dictionary tools for online reading (e.g. RIKAI http://www.rikai.com/) were introduced.

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[1] The number of learners of Japanese in Australia is the third highest in the world 382,000 after Korea 894,000 and China 388,000, and the highest in terms of the number per capita, one learner per 52 people, followed by 53 of Korea, 2100 of USA and 3400 of China. 97% of learners in Australia study prior to tertiary education (see http://www.jpf.go.jp/j/japan_j/news/0407/07-01.html, http://www.jpf.go.jp/j/japan_j/ oversea/kunibetsu/index.html by Japanese Foundation 2003, 海外の日本語教育の現状、凡人社, 2003).

Table 1   Suggested topics for the project

- [Sociology]   Impact/influence of Kanji on the Japanese people / their language / language learners. e.g. What influence did/does Kanji have on the Japanese people (life, culture, way of thinking, education, etc) and/or their language?

- [Sociology/Education/Linguistics]   Future of Kanji in Japan: Can we abolish Kanji from the Japanese language, as is the case with Korean? Is it a good idea? What will happen then?

- [Linguistics/History]   History of Kanji (derivation of Kanji, import of Kanji from China, simplification and its process of Kanji, etc)

- [Education/Sociology]   How do the Japanese people study Kanji at school? What did they think of Kanji as a child and do now as a grown-up?

- [Education]   How can we make Kanji learning fun and easy? Create a system/lesson/ strategy to demonstrate this. (creative work)

- [Cognitive]   How are Kanji characters processed in our brain?   How different is it from processing alphabets or kana, which are sound symbols with little semantic contents?   Do the differences implicate anything: better ways of studying Kanji, or other aspects?

- [Linguistics]   Differences between Kanji used in Japanese and those in Chinese (various dialects or classical Chinese)   Are they mutually intelligible? Are there patterns of differences in pronunciation?   If so, how predictable is the pronunciation from Chinese to Japanese or vice versa?

- [History/Education]   What influence has the US occupation of Japan after the World War II had on the Japanese language, Kanji in particular?

These proved sufficient for their self-reading up-to-date authentic Japanese texts on the internet even for learners at this level, which suggests enormous potential computer-assisted systems have on language teaching/learning.

2.3   Step 3:   Presenting the findings

Every pair presented their findings for 8 minutes in class in Japanese, and all except 2 pairs used powerpoint. Their speech scripts were corrected prior to presentation, and the students were expected to memorise their scripts. The students were assessed also for asking meaningful questions as an audience.

3. RESULTS AND EVALUATION

The summary of chosen project titles is: *History/derivation of Kanji* (11 projects); *Future of Kanji, Abolition of Kanji replaced by kana* (8); *Importance of Kanji in Japan* (7); *How to study Kanji, Creating Kanji games/lessons* (7); *How differently Japanese and Australians study Kanji* (6); *Comparing Chinese (or Korean) Kanji with Japanese Kanji* (5); *Japanese personal names* (3), *Re/cognitive aspect of Kanji* (3), and others.

The quality of research findings was significantly high, making many of the work worthy of research papers. Despite students' initial reaction against the topic for disliking Kanji and the topic being felt too difficult, after completing the project most students found their work both enjoyable and rewarding.

The points learned from the project include: Importance of Kanji for the Japanese language and people; Knowing six types of Kanji composite (Rikusho) is a fun and productive way of learning Kanji; Japanese native speakers also have troubles learning Kanji; Chinese background speakers have advantages but not to the extent it was believed.

One question in the student questionnaires (75 returned) asked students to score their perceived progress (no progress 1 ~ 5 progress) in five areas during the semester. The average scores are: Speaking (2.93), Listening (3.39), Reading (3.69), Kanji (4.03), Writing (3.25). That is to say, Kanji was seen as the most progressed skill. Individually 21 out 75 students nominated that Kanji was their most progressed skill, and further 33 (i.e. 54/75 in total) felt the same but other area/s improved as much as Kanji. Only one answered that Kanji was less progressed than other skills. Moreover, 13 students descriptively commented the interest and usefulness of the Kanji project. Hence, it is plausible to conclude that this heuristic method provided the students a new perspective on Kanji and a strong motivation towards learning Kanji.

4. CONCLUSION

Kanji teaching has placed its focus on 'how to' learn, which is vitally important. This paper has shown that understanding 'why' they have to also enhances the learning process. Understanding and being convinced through their own research that Kanji is an indispensable part of the Japanese language as well as the culture made the learning less passive and onerous. Finally, the project also indicated the usefulness of the on-line tools that were sufficient even for early intermediate learners to comprehend on-line texts.