

EFFECTIVE METHODS OF TEACHING THE JAPANESE WRITING SYSTEM

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Abstract: This article explores effective methods for teaching the Japanese writing system — hiragana, katakana, and kanji. The Japanese writing system poses significant challenges for foreign learners due to its complexity and multiple scripts. The study examines both traditional and modern approaches, including the use of visual aids, technological tools, and cognitive methods. The focus is on how innovative teaching strategies can enhance students' motivation and retention.

Keywords: Japanese writing system, kanji, hiragana, katakana, teaching methodology, innovation, visual learning, memory.

Introduction

The Japanese language is distinguished by its complex writing system consisting of three scripts: hiragana, katakana, and kanji. Each script has its specific function: hiragana for native Japanese words, katakana for foreign loanwords, and kanji for conveying meaning through logographic characters. For teachers, one of the primary challenges is to help learners master these scripts effectively while maintaining their motivation. Recent developments in language pedagogy emphasize the integration of interactive, technological, and visual techniques to improve learning outcomes.[6, 78]

Traditional approaches in teaching Japanese writing - traditional methods of teaching Japanese writing focus on repetition, handwriting practice, and memorization. Students are typically asked to write each kanji multiple times and recite its meaning and pronunciation. Although this reinforces memory and motor skills, it often leads to decreased motivation. Teachers' demonstrations, stroke order practice, and oral repetition have proven effective but rely heavily on mechanical memory. Therefore, newer cognitive and visual approaches are gaining more attention in modern pedagogy.

The Japanese writing system has been traditionally taught through highly structured and repetitive methods, emphasizing memorization, correct form, and discipline. These approaches originate from classical Japanese education and continue to influence modern teaching practices, especially in formal school settings.

Rote Memorization (暗記学習 anki gakushū) - purpose: to develop automatic recall through repetition.

– Students repeatedly copy characters until they can write them from memory.

- Emphasis is placed on mastering stroke order, balance, and form.
- Commonly used for both hiragana/katakana and kanji.
- Traditionally done in special writing notebooks (*renshū-chō*), with squares that guide character proportion.

Calligraphy Practice (書道 shodō) - educational benefit: Enhances concentration, muscle memory, and awareness of stroke direction.

- An artistic yet disciplined practice using brush, ink, and rice paper.
- Historically considered a spiritual and cultural discipline.
- It teaches kanji not only as symbols of meaning but also as expressions of beauty and order.

Copying Texts (写経 shakyō and 書き写し kakiutsushi) - effect: improves writing fluency and reinforces kanji retention in context.

- Learners copy classical texts, poems, or passages from literature.
- Traditionally used in Buddhist monasteries and later in formal education.
- Strengthens reading comprehension and writing accuracy.

Oral Dictation (書き取り kakitori) - advantage: trains memory and correct orthography through auditory input.

- The teacher reads words or sentences aloud, and students write them down.
- Focuses on listening comprehension and recall of the correct script (especially kanji vs hiragana usage).

Stroke Order Instruction (筆順指導 hitsujun shidō) - reasoning: Order affects balance and recognition in handwritten and printed forms.

- Students must learn the correct order of strokes, not just the final visual shape.
- Traditional teaching emphasizes that correct stroke order improves readability and writing speed.

Radical-Based Kanji Breakdown (部首学習 bushu gakushū) - outcome: builds deeper understanding and aids memorization through logical grouping.

- Kanji are taught through their radicals (semantic components).
- Ancient scholars categorized kanji into families based on shared radicals.
- Traditional textbooks often organized kanji according to radicals and etymological meaning.

Repetition Through Textbooks (教科書スタイル) - Method: Learn → review → test → repeat (spiral learning).

- Traditional Japanese elementary textbooks introduce characters gradually.
- Kanji lists are repeated across grades with increasing complexity.

Use of mnemonic poetry and songs - these poems contained every Japanese syllable exactly once, helping memory. Historically, poems such as the Iroha poem (いろは歌) were used to teach hiragana.

Example:

いろはにほへとちりぬるを... (Used for memorization before the modern 五十音 order).

Traditional methods of teaching the Japanese writing system focus heavily on memorization, repetition, precision, and visual form. While these methods are effective in building strong

foundational skills and character recognition, they often lack engagement and communicative context. However, they remain fundamental in Japanese education due to their proven success in literacy development. [3, 56]

Associative and visual approaches have shown to be highly effective in teaching Japanese writing. Connecting each kanji character with an image or concept helps learners remember both the shape and meaning. For example, the character 山 (mountain) resembles mountain peaks, and 木 (tree) looks like a trunk with branches. Such visual association techniques engage memory and creativity simultaneously. Modern digital tools such as Kanji Study, Obenkyo, Anki, and Nihongo no Mori allow students to learn interactively through sound, images, and gamified exercises, making the process both engaging and efficient.

For Uzbek learners, mastering the Japanese writing system presents unique challenges due to the phonetic nature of the Latin alphabet. Unlike Japanese, where kanji conveys meaning, Uzbek script is sound-based. Thus, teachers should emphasize the connection between sound, meaning, and symbol when explaining kanji. In practice, using story-based explanations, group activities, and flashcards has proven effective. Gamified exercises and associative storytelling techniques help learners remember kanji more naturally.

At present we can identify several dominant strands in worldwide kanji pedagogy. Yet even inside Japan itself no single consensus on how to teach the characters has emerged. The main reason is that, across different periods and in different classrooms, instructors keep selecting different methods for presenting kanji to learners. In our view, external and internal resources, together with the objective and subjective conditions of both teacher and students, constantly shape those choices.

Moreover, adopting a “radical-element-based approach” for learning kanji demands far more than a simple reordering of presentation sequences. It forces teachers to re-examine many long-held assumptions about what “knowing a character” means.

1. The strategy promoted by Japan’s Ministry of Education (MEXT) is not the most efficient for Uzbek-speaking university students.

2. Time invested in uncovering radicals and in teaching “fuzzy” or partially transparent kanji is considerable; initially it steals classroom hours from the list of “high-frequency” characters. Nevertheless, the pay-off in long-term retention and speed of acquisition is measurably higher.

We argue that, compared with a purely frequency-based sequence, the radical-element-based route enables students to learn and, crucially, to keep a larger inventory of kanji, because it respects the morphological logic that moves learners from simple to complex forms.

When we piloted the two approaches in parallel groups, our six-year classroom experiment showed that students grasp simple, transparent radicals and clear compositional parts very quickly. Mnemonic stories do demand extra time for more complex characters, yet even here retention rates improved. Over those six years we never saw the radical approach fully integrated into a standard Japanese curriculum; it has barely been trialled.

Conclusion

The effectiveness of teaching the Japanese writing system depends on the teacher’s

methodological creativity, interactive involvement, and students' motivation. The most successful approach combines traditional handwriting practice with visual, technological, and associative learning techniques. This not only enhances comprehension and retention but also transforms the learning process into an enjoyable and creative experience. Mastering kanji and, by extension, any language requires understanding their graphic, semantic, phonetic and determinative subsystems. Familiarity with these dimensions at an advanced stage allows learners to anchor new characters to previously acquired components, making recall more reliable and the overall writing system less intimidating.

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