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Why 'kanji learning' is a relevant topic.

In this paper Dallas Nesbitt reports on four specific teaching practices she uses in a Japanese kanji class. She discusses how these practices can influence student motivation and performance in areas such as self-efficacy beliefs, attitudes towards teacher, task satisfaction, preparedness to practise regularly and perceived opportunity to practise. Preliminary evidence suggests that learner motivation can be kept high with judicious teacher input.

The teaching and learning of the Japanese written scripts is a hugely complex area. Kanji learning doesn't stop with the mastery of the 200 or so mainly pictorial characters introduced at secondary school just as katakana learning doesn't stop with the introduction of the 'table of characters'. It is important for smooth academic stair-casing that all secondary level teachers of Japanese have a full understanding of how, how many and in what context kanji characters are taught at tertiary level and vice versa for all tertiary level teachers of Japanese. The 21st century has brought a clear understanding of the base learning strategies needed to master Japanese writing and a sharing of the resources and knowledge in both sectors may go some way towards removing student unwillingness to tackle the huge tasks of both language learning and, in the case of Japanese, the learning of a challenging script.

Precisely because the learning is challenging student motivation is an essential part of the learning process. Without a clear understanding of the orthographic script and without knowledge of necessary learning strategies the student may be unable to 'activate' or 'maintain' the motivation that he or she brought to the kanji class initially. It is this aspect of motivation that I discussed in my conference paper 'Teacher-Modelled Motivation'.

The Content of the Presentation.

I am completing a research project on motivation 'modelling' or teaching the learners to sustain motivation rather than 'lose' motivation as so often happens.

The hypothesis I am testing in the classroom is:

4 teaching strategies can facilitate improved motivation and learning rate within a specified time frame, increase the range of learning strategies that students draw on and improve the successful completion rate for students undertaking the course.

The 4 teaching strategies are:

- Demonstration of a positive attitude and attention to the learning circumstances and experiences of individual students with the intention of positively influencing their 'self-efficacy' beliefs.
- Introduction of 3 modified forms of rote learning strategies (My Own Cards, Kanji Maru, Context Writing Practice)
- 'Story-telling' techniques (including graphemic awareness) to increase student interest and motivation to learn.
- Meta-cognitive strategy modelling.

I will introduce each strategy and give a few examples of how I use it in the classroom.

Strategy One: Demonstration of a positive attitude and attention to the learning circumstances and experiences of individual students with the intention of positively influencing their 'self-efficacy' beliefs

This sounds like the sort of thing any good teacher would do and why would I bring it to conference level but to get it to a point where it is going to influence and motivate potentially very unmotivated students then it has to be a real art form. If you are not familiar with tertiary level kanji classes then picture if you can some students who have a kanji background and have some small instrumental motivation to gain a qualification but because they assume their superior knowledge will allow them to pass the paper without engaging to any extent do not participate significantly in the classes. My main job is to get them to class so that they will be exposed to the other strategies and tools I wish to introduce. Therefore I celebrate lateness [来てくれてありがとうございました。 I encourage students to come to class in every way within my power including cooking muffins for them on the first day so they think there will be more to come.

I never assume the student who is doing a full time job while being a full time student is going to fail the paper. In fact I never give up on a student until the final Exam Board meeting. I have them in finishing that final piece of an assignment helping to keep the doors open.

I use a student file sheet to learn relevant background information – has the student been to Japan before, country of birth, name they would like to be called, what grade they would like to get in this paper. What things they are going to do differently to get the grade they want etc.

I try to clearly identify each student's strengths and I highlight these to the other students – even strengths separate from the field (eg if a student is good at drawing manga I read from a passage and ask that student to illustrate the main points on the whiteboard in cartoon form so we can summarise Simple things - I have removed the word 'fail' from classroom vocabulary.

I enjoy each class but I have started letting the students know how much I enjoy it and my greatest tools are the love heart and the chocolate fish.

Once they are engaged a little with the class I employ Strategy 2:

Strategy 2: Provision of useful learning tools.

Heath Rose, currently at Sydney University wrote an unpublished doctorate thesis which showed evidence that unsuccessful learners used few learning strategies and concentrated on rote learning methods. Responding in a questionnaire 80% of the students in my kanji classes say they use rote learning methods (writing kanji characters again and again) to learn kanji – some out of those 80% are very successful learners.

This is strange because rote learning doesn't appear to significantly improve their results and I have been telling them it is a pretty useless way to learn for a long time. But the research project I plan to do must show results within one semester so I have decided not to dismiss what the students do but to try and understand why they do it, to work with it, unpack it, repackage it and simply give it back to them.

I have a theory supported by psycholinguistic studies (Yamashita & Maru 2000) that learning unorganised random entries is difficult. I have discovered that rote learning works well if you can 'own' the result. So working with an existing but very dated concept developed for learning English vocabulary by Dutch professors Mondria and Mondria-De Vries. I made a sort of 'rote-learning' box for learning to write a large number of semi-isolated entries (I use compounds so they can at least be linked to background knowledge). The box, divided into five sections works on the principle that if you repeat a learning task 5 times then you will know it. If at any of the 5 stages you pick up the card, look at the hiragana word and can't write the kanji for that word, then that card must go all the way back to the first section of the box, thus ensuring that more difficult to learn kanji or kanji the

When the students have basic confidence with the kanji I move to give them a life-long interest in kanji learning:

Strategy 3: Story telling Techniques

1. Graphemic Awareness/ Component analysis

A kanji learning method whereby kanji are broken down into their smallest units and those units are seen as building blocks to help one understand other kanji with the same components.

This is a necessary method but it is neither stable nor consistent and there is the added problem of kanji-background students lacking interest in it (they learned kanji like this at elementary school level).

Some students have to big a job ahead of them learning the basic pictorial units and they find it difficult to add an extra learning burden even if it will be helpful in the future.

2. Mnemonics

A common teaching method is to relate kanji to some picture the shape resembles. This helps a non-kanji background learner to set the shape in memory but research (particularly that of Chen & Tsoi 1990) shows that Chinese students process pictures and logographic characters with different sections of the brain. Non-kanji background learners tend to process them as similar items so one group is not going to relate to this technique.

Key word or story mnemonic can be used but many students have a limited understanding of the English language which in turn limits this method

3. History and Origin of characters

This is a great strategy but unfortunately there is little historical consistency in how most characters have developed and changed. The teacher cannot become a historical researcher when working at the coal-face 25-30 hours a week.

So I use a primary motivator – entertainment to communicate all of the above in a low intensity fashion. First I provide an ‘escape clause’ so that those who think it is not a useful way of learning can spend the time completing exercises in the text book or revising characters. I use a variety of techniques to draw the students in, gain their interest, improve their cultural knowledge and give them strategies for remembering the characters they are introduced to.

I use:

- **Strong visuals**

飛行機 ひこうき
飛ぶ とぶ

Used to be a long-necked crane
with spread wings, flying



- Historical embellishment to get basic cultural interest up

橋 wood + an old character meaning tall (similar to 高) - old bridges had a tall wooden structure above them.



- Humour

声 こえ セイ

- Gentleman + snake????
well you would use your voice too if a snake was after you



音声学 phonetics

- Mnemonics (not many – suggest they make their own)

集 あつーめる あつーまる シュウ

Chickens in a tree (gather in a group)



Don't shoo them away

- **Anecdote** (I tell them stories about my experience in Japan)

By this time it is to be hoped that the learners are attending class and enjoying what they do. Every day I use effective meta-cognitive strategies to give them good models to follow.

Strategy 4: Metacognitive Strategy Modelling

This is the most important way I can reach students. It helps give structure to the overwhelming task of learning many kanji. There are so many strategies – it is a huge challenge to remember to ‘model’ these while teaching.

self-rewarding	giving choc fish, choc fish vouchers. If students pass all the tests and assignments they are not required to sit the final exam (a great motivator), Clapping for all small in-class successes.
focusing and precision	Point out small details. Ask questions, especially after all the students have indicated they understand - show them they need to understand <i>precisely</i>
practising regularly	quizzes, a process notebook for all daily exercises so they can see how they are improving and they can see a visual record of all kanji they have mistaken, rote learning tools
maximising opportunities to use language	We have a club run by native speakers of Japanese called ‘Ocha no Jikan’ for cultural events, conversation classes and student exchanges. The local Japan Society has a kanji club.
evaluating the learning process	The learners reflect weekly on their progress (good things I bring to the kanji classroom, bad things I bring etc) – After each unit test we ask ourselves. What learning tools/strategies did I use? Were they successful?
identifying own needs	I have introduced some mastery lessons so learners can identify their own weaknesses and strengths.
planning	the learners are asked to add other necessary kanji to the ones we are studying if they feel they will be useful in the future.

Where to From Here?

It has long been my desire to work closely with secondary schools to clarify the place of kanji teaching and learning within the wider subject area and to introduce more time-effective learning methods to the ‘community of learning’. The Japanese lecturers at AUT University have developed two successful types of software for the mastery of Kanji, ‘Kanji Maru’ and ‘My Own Cards’. Unfortunately we have been hampered for over a year by copyright issues and the changeover from a dated file-type, suitable for Mac computers only, to PC friendly Flash files. Work is underway to address these issues and we hope to have more to offer secondary school teachers the next time we meet.

The Wednesday afternoon ‘Ocha no Jikan’ sessions are open to all local secondary schools in the Auckland area and in September I hope to be running workshops for secondary school students along the lines of the ‘Afternoons at AUT’ sessions I held throughout 2007.

My Experience at the Conference

The conference was a lively and valuable showcase of refreshing new ideas and a very positive outlook for languages in the new curriculum. I met creative and hard-working teachers who are determined to build a strong base for language learning and carry it right through the school years. It was an uplifting and indeed *motivating* time and I am sure everyone came away with new materials and plenty of new ideas.

At the conference many dilemmas were exposed and it would be interesting to discuss these in some future forum: The dilemma of being introduced to lots of new technology and websites that are wonderful teaching resources but not being able to book a computer room at many schools so preferring simple resources which at the same time are not so useful for the highly sophisticated secondary school with great IT support; the dilemma of city and country schools. City schools have many resources available for them in the community and in the local universities whereas some teachers in rural areas need to put in a huge effort to provide their students with similar experiences; the dilemma of wonderful resources and a 'maturity' in the subject at the same time that student numbers are decreasing so perhaps the energies that have been put into resources should now be turned towards trying to increase the numbers of students studying Japanese and trying to maintain those numbers at higher levels.

I would like to thank the organisers, the teachers and the Sasakawa Fellowship Fund for Japanese Language Education for providing this valuable experience for me.