

Reflections from a Teachers' Perspective about the Challenges Faced by Students with Disabilities Majoring in Japanese as a Foreign Language

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Abstract

Learning to read and write the Japanese language is not an easy task. For the non-Japanese speaker this can be a struggle and a challenge. Some schools in Western Australia offer children the opportunity to learn Japanese as a foreign language. Consequently, Japanese as a foreign language unit is offered to all undergraduate students in Education. All undergraduate students face challenges in mastering Japanese as a foreign language because of the stringent requirements of the language. It appears that the recognition and writing of Kanji (logogram) is one of the most challenging learning task for the learners.

This paper is a reflective study based on the teacher's perspective about University students' challenges and problems in relation to writing and recognising Kanji.

In this study, the teacher reflected on three questions:

- (1) The identification of the challenges and problems that university students with disabilities face in writing and recognising the Kanji script;*
- 2) What are the adaptations that need to be considered in the delivery of the program while retaining the integrity of the unit?*
- (3) What changes should be made in the assessment requirements to include the learning needs of students with disabilities?*

Keywords: *Disability, Kanji Script, Japanese, teachers' perspective*

Introduction

All educational institutions provide various levels of counselling, support and other disability services, for any student who may be experiencing learning difficulties. It is not uncommon for undergraduate students to request additional learning support from the institution's counselling and disability services department. The requests vary from assessment requirements to course enrolment. More often, the changes are addressed by the lecturer and the undergraduate student concerned to meet the needs of the student. A method that is similar to the Individual Educational plan (IEP, Foreman & Arthur-Kelly, 2014). Reasonable adjustments can be made to meet the needs of the undergraduate students with special needs. This strategy of adapting the classroom programme, and in this case the undergraduate degree programme, to meet the needs of the learners has been addressed in other research (Mitchell, 2014). Mitchell (2014) suggested that for inclusive classrooms to be successful the following components need to be present and these included: Vision + Placement + 5 A's (Adapted curriculum, Adapted Assessment, Adapted teaching, Acceptance and Access) + Support + Resources + Leadership. Of interest to this study is the Adapted Curriculum and Adapted Assessment which Mitchell (2014) suggested should be flexible, relevant and adjustable to meet the needs of the learners. Educators are expected to pitch their content to the needs of the individuals in a growing diverse classroom. Such diversity in classrooms would mean that Educators would have to consider the different rates of learning and therefore adaptations become necessary (Mitchell, 2014).

The Disability Standards for Education, Australia (2005) were developed based on the Disability Discrimination Act 1992 and for which it clearly explains that the education provider is able to make any decisions in relation to the admission, enrolment and or participation for students with disabilities. This is done through what is called 'reasonable adjustments' (Disability Standards for Education, Australia, 2005).

Mitchell (2014) suggested that educators could enhance the accessibility of learners to curriculum by making modifications, substitution, omission and compensation to the curriculum. For example, making modification by expecting responses using computers or I-pads rather than oral responses from learners. An educator could expect braille for written materials for the student with visual impairment, omitting very complex work and allow for practical and functional activity in place of the written work (Mitchell, 2014).

Similarly, Tomlinson (2014), stressed the importance of differentiating classroom teaching based on the diversity of students and their differing needs. The author rationalises that in differentiating classroom content educators would give access to learning, motivate and engage learners. In addition, it would make the learning experiences relevant as the content takes the students interests, readiness and learning profile into consideration (Tomlinson, 2014). The consideration of the learning profile that Tomlinson (2014) writes about is similar to the IEPs that the field of Special Education Specialist would use when planning for learning activities in a classroom (Foreman & Arthur-Kelly, 2015; Hyde, Carpenter & Conway, 2016) Further, Tomlinson (2014) suggested that differentiation would also affect the efficiency of learning and challenge the individual at the appropriate level. An idea that was also suggested by Mitchell (2014).

Language acquisition and foreign language learning

Literacy and oral skills make up the fundamental macro skills in understanding Japanese as a foreign language. The four macro-skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing form the basis and are the core of modern language learning (Akram & Malik, 2010). Listening (L) and Speaking (S) are categorised as oral skills, and Reading (R) and Writing (W) as literacy skills. The research suggests that oral language serves as the foundation to the development of literary skills (Bayetto, n. d.). In addition that in language acquisition, literacy skills will require more time to master compared with oral language development (Hill, 2011). The literature suggests that to support and enhance the learning in the target language, class activities should focus on the students' understanding and mastering these skills with no isolation of each other but via integrated approaches leads to the effective enhancement in the other skills. This may eventually result in the improvement of the one's target language performance in general (Oxford, 1996), while the language teachers tend to concentrate on particular skill (Akram & Malik, 2010). Learning Japanese as a foreign language is no exception and improvement of one's proficiency in Japanese as a foreign language would require the mastery of the four macro skills (see Table 1).

Table 1. Four Macro skills

	Receptive skills (Passive/Input skills)	Productive skills (Active/Output skills)
Oral skills	Listening (L)	Speaking (S)
Literacy skills	Reading (R)	Writing (W)

The communication style is served by the foundation of the receptive skills, aka passive/input skills (L & R) and productive skills, aka active/output skills (S & W). The former (L & R) are perceived as the necessary skills for people to communicate with each other during any type of interactions occurring daily. In a foreign language class in which communicative teaching is the major influence, conversations as in the oral skills, in the foreign language tends to have a larger focus leaving the literacy skills at risk. Consequently, the literacy skills are often overlooked and under taught (Ayadogan & Aydogan, 2014). In other words, aiming at creating students with conversation and verbal performance in the target language may run the risk of producing students who do not have the literate skills of reading and writing (Ayadogan & Ayadogan, 2014). Given that both Oral and Literacy Skills (Receptive and Productive Skills) are linked, then one would expect that reading and writing be included in any foreign language education programme. Further, since writing can be categorised as part of the literacy receptive and productive skills, time and effort to master writing and in this case the 'kanji' script could be a difficult task for students.

In learning the Japanese language, one has to understand that unlike the Latin alphabet, the written scripts are based on three characters called Hiragana, Katakana, and Kanji. There is a total 46 basic Hiragana syllabaries (aka Kana in Japanese), representing sounds and utilised for the creation of any words. Katakana words are also expressed by the phonetics of the Japanese syllabaries, primarily of non-Japanese origin words. Hiragana and Katakana contain phonograms which is most students do not find difficult to comprehend.

However, Kanji which has its origins from the Chinese characters, is one of the major learning tasks in Japanese due to its logographic nature. This difficulty is faced by both native and non-native learners of the Japanese language. The total number of existing Kanji can be found in the Dai Kanwa Jiten, the largest Kanji dictionary (Morohashi, 2000). The Dai Kanwa Jiten has approximately 50,000 Kanji characters. However, the Agency of Cultural Affairs, Government of Japan (2010) lists 2136 of the Kanji characters for common use in the current society of Japan. These 2136 Kanji characters are to be learned through the nine years of compulsory school years. It is generally considered that individuals with an additional 1000 to 1500 Kanji knowledge could help with reading information in various written articles such as the newspapers and advertisements in daily life (Gottlieb, 2000).

However, the concerns about Kanji characters goes beyond the particular number of scripts to be mastered, rather, each Kanji character represents a meaning and its' interpretation depends on the multiple ways in which it can be read. For example, the Kanji character could be read by multiple quasi-Chinese pronunciations based on the original Chinese sound (referred to as *on* reading), as well as native Japanese translations indicating the meaning of characters (*kun* reading, Sugimoto, 2009).

A logogram system such as Kanji can be fostered through both receptive and productive skills. From the perspective of receptive skills, the learners' knowledge of Kanji can be obtained through reading and it can be assessed through human contact (such as teacher-developed instruments and feedback) as well as various media and technological devices. However, in the productive skill, assessing one's skill in writing Kanji characters cannot be demonstrated in the same way as receptive skills. There are two concerns. The first relates to Kanji typing which is primarily supported by computer devices which use phonemic orthography. The conventional practice for students learning Japanese as a foreign language is that they are allowed to type Hiragana/Katakana syllabaries, which is produced by the Roman alphabets. From here, the computer converts them to possibly multiple Kanji characters. The students then select the Kanji character that best fits their meaning in relation to their context. However, this process does not help students to practice the skill of writing the Kanji script and only caters to recognising the script. The second concern relates to the differences between typed syllabaries on a keyboard compared with hand written Kanji. Given that the Kanji script (logogram) contains more strokes than Hiragana/Katakana (phonograms), when students hand-draw with a pen or pencil, there is a greater risk of it becoming dissimilar or non-identical to the appropriate and/or acceptable written Kanji characters. In addition, the availability of multiple fonts on various computer programmes may enhance the differences when compared with the written form of the Kanji script.

It has become apparent to the researcher that students have a variety of challenges that arise as a consequence of the requirements of the understanding and learning Japanese as a foreign language. Japanese language is a non-Latin script language, containing Hiragana, Katakana and Kanji, and recognising, pronouncing and writing the Kanji character (logogram) requires learners to spend a large amount of time to master. Prior to that, learners with non-logographic language background need to acknowledge and are familiar with the concept of the logographic characters such as Kanji. Among the four macro skills, productive literacy skill which is writing expects learners to focus on their accuracy. Therefore, Kanji naturally forms one of the most integral part

of the learning process in Japanese. Anecdotal observations in classroom teaching suggests that undergraduate students will need more time to the skill of script writing the Kanji character. The problem arises when the undergraduate student is unable to write or type and will eventually fail to meet the full range of the literacy and the key productive skill as highlighted in this paper (see Table 1).

This paper is a reflective study from the teacher's perspective, of undergraduate student's challenges and problems in relation to writing and recognising Kanji characters. The first aim is to identify the challenges and problems that university students with disabilities encounter in writing Kanji. The reflection is guided by the questions which include firstly, the challenges faced by students with disabilities in relation learning the content requirements of Japanese as a foreign language. Secondly, the teacher reviews the adaptations that should be taken into consideration in the delivery of the programme while retaining the integrity of the subject. Lastly, from the reflections of the two questions, the research aims to review the current practice in the unit to assist undergraduate students with disabilities in undertaking the unit Japanese as a foreign language. Currently, there is a lack in university's understanding of such challenges students' with disabilities face in writing the Kanji character. This study hopes to fill this gap of knowledge in the field of learning Japanese as a foreign language.

Method

This study was based on the reflections of a university lecturer (teacher) with 23 years of experience of teaching and assessing undergraduate students in Japanese as a foreign language. Using a qualitative approach, a framework of specific questions was used to guide the reflection of experiences in teaching and assessing undergraduate students in the unit (Colomer, Pallisera, Fullana, Burriel & Fernandez, 2013).

The framework of the reflective questions included:

1. What are the challenges faced by students with disabilities in relation to the content requirements of Japanese as a foreign language?
2. What are the adaptations that should be taken into consideration in the delivery of the subject while retaining its integrity?
3. What changes are needed in the assessment requirements to address the learning needs of students with disabilities for the unit of Japanese as a foreign language?

The reflective process

The reflective process as a whole examined multiple emails, discussions with students with disabilities in class and meetings with students sometimes with their parents by the first author.

The Reflections and Discussion

1. What are the challenges faced by students with disabilities in relation to the content requirements of Japanese as a foreign language?

The physical requirement of writing “kanji”. It is anticipated that students who are unable to hand-write will not be able to fulfil the subject requirements and/or apply their skills in a classroom when teaching Japanese as a foreign language. The tertiary qualification awarded to students of Japanese as a foreign language is based on the students gaining specific skills and in this case the importance of writing the Kanji script. Students’ academic marks cannot be allocated fairly if they are unable to produce and provide evidence of their writing skill. The biggest challenge that students with a disability faced in studying Japanese as a foreign language is writing the Kanji Script. Kanji hand-writing plays an integral part, and many students need to spend an extremely large amount of time improving their knowledge (receptive skill) and writing (productive skill) of Kanji in order to have a broad understanding of the overall Japanese ability including Listening, Speaking and Reading. The authors recommend that students’ participation and record of the number of hours spent by the students to master writing the Kanji script in future studies.

In adapting the curriculum to the needs of the learners with disabilities (Hyde et al., 2016; Mitchell, 2014), the adjustment made in the unit to assist the individual would be to remove the requirement of writing the ‘kanji’ character script. The authors suggest that based on the reflection that students with disabilities have difficulty with writing the “kanji” script, this would be a reasonable requirement for the unit. However, it is also suggested that prior to enrolment of students, that this information is made transparent to all students with a clear understanding that while they could embark on the full requirements of the unit course, they would not be assessed on the requirement of the writing the “kanji” character. It is understood that the difficulty and inability to write the script of Kanji will limit the learning of Japanese as a foreign language as it forms the core area in the language. An alternative and depending on the degree of the disability, Mitchell (2014) suggested that other than omitting complex work, consideration could also be given to modify and substitute expectations in the programme. Using Mitchell’s (2014) suggestions, the researchers in this study suggest that while the writing of kanji is removed from the assessment, perhaps, and extension of the Listening, Speaking and Reading areas could be used as part of the assessment.

However, a major challenge arises from the recommended adjustment in omitting the requirement of writing “kanji” character from the unit requirement. The implication of an undergraduate teacher not being able to write ‘kanji’ would mean that they would have limited employment prospects in the schools. In the school system, Japanese as a second language for the ATAR (Australian Tertiary Admission Rank) course in 2016 has listed a total of 188 Kanji, including 86 productive ones (aka writing Kanji) and receptive (for one to read and comprehend) 102 Kanji in the Year 12 syllabus (Government of Western Australia, School Authority, 2016). In response to this requirement in the schools, the Japanese Language was introduced as part of a degree course at tertiary education level. The expectation is that university students are expected to allocate three to four years study in Japanese and to master the language thus knowledge of writing beyond 188 Kanji characters.

Writing Kanji takes a large portion of the time spent for learning Japanese learning and irreplaceable by other Information, Communication Technology supportive materials. The authors suggest that while this is a bold step in teaching Japanese in schools and if and when schools choose to employ and include individuals with disabilities to teach students in Japanese as a foreign language, they would have to review how to accommodate for these changes so that students in the school will be able to meet the curriculum requirements. The authors in this study suggest that the local school could allocate the task of writing Kanji to a part-time staff thus enhancing the employment opportunity for the individual with a disability in a school. The findings of this study suggest that a further investigation into understanding the perceptions and understanding of anticipated challenges of school leaders and teachers toward employment of teachers with a disability in Japanese as a foreign language.

2. What are the adaptations that should be taken into consideration in the delivery of the programme while retaining the integrity of the subject?

The challenges described above have brought about practical implications, which are motivated by theoretical insights. The following set of three factors have been proposed for assisting students with learning Japanese as a foreign language.

Analysing the student's challenge as temporary or permanent. The collaborative team working with the student with the disability plays a vital role to ensure the smooth start and end in any course and unit and this would involve the student and the parents. Determining the nature of the challenge as to a long term (permanent) or short term (temporary) problem could be identified and plans could be made to assist the student. It is anticipated that a student with a disability will have a case profile that could help understand the abilities of the student while also giving details about the individual's difficulties in learning and or physical challenges. Using this information and in consultation with the student and the parent, a unit plan for Japanese as a foreign language could be developed to meet the needs of the student concerned. It is noted that the plan is a working document and will need reviewing from time to time to meet the changing needs of the student. Adjustments and adaptations could continue based on the growing needs of the individual over the duration of their degree programme. This would mean that if and when a programme has proved to be working for the individual student, it could be enhanced. At this point the authors would stress that the lecturer has a large contribution as to the how this individual programme could be developed for the student.

Assessing the student's four-macro skills and the type of unit assessment tasks. In mastering the Japanese as a foreign language, it has been recommended that the four -macro skills, in parallel with micro-skills should be assessed. The assessment requirements will need to include these skills. It would be important to understand whether students have challenges in learning these skills and if so what these challenges are needs to be clearly identified. From here, the support team will need to work with the students to identify suitable strategies to assist the student with the challenges to assist with the completion of the assigned tasks. This could be suitable assistive devices and/or modifying the expected responses of the students to cater for their individual needs (Mitchell, 2014).

Understanding the student's purpose of study in Japanese as a foreign language. Despite some variations in personal motivations, obtaining a certificate/degree successfully is a common goal for all students to undertake specific higher education courses. If a student has a specific difficulty that might preclude him or her, the support team must investigate further the student's aim in taking higher education certificate and or degree with Japanese as a foreign language. It is necessary to consider which macro-skills are in demand, if the student's future desired profession can only be attained with the certificate/degree of Japanese as a foreign language. For example, an occupation such as a secretary using Japanese language would require the student to be fluent in all macro-skills in Japanese for oral and literacy purposes. However, a translator would need to focus more on his/her literacy skills (Reading and Writing). On the other hand, one would anticipate that a tour guide may only prefer to have an understanding of conversational Japanese and may not require the depth of the literacy skills as in Reading and Writing. A simultaneous interpreter, however, required to interpret from Japanese to another language or vice-versa at an official press conference, needs all four macro-skills, along with extra professional techniques including shorthand writing.

3. *What are the changes needed in the assessment requirements to include the learning needs of students with disabilities to certify their Japanese as a foreign language completed at higher education?*

Clarification of the students' eligibility in mastering Japanese as a foreign language. In order to accept as many students as possible, modifying the assessment requirements to include the individual with a disability is a challenge. One would recommend continued conversations to solve this dilemma of meeting the minimum requirements in mastering Japanese as a foreign language, school requirements and enhancing the inclusion of individuals with disabilities in enrolling in such a unit at any tertiary institution.

The importance of the unit content in Japanese as a foreign language. The realisation is that until local school systems change to accommodate for the changes that are made at the University level, the content requirements cannot change to include the individual with a disability in such a unit. However, if this is not the aim of the undergraduate student (i.e. to teach Japanese as a foreign language in a school or other educational setting) then changes to meet the needs of the individual as in excluding the script "kanji" for example, could be a possible learning outcome for the student. This must be made clear to the student prior to commencement of the unit.

Omission of the written Assessment (kanji script).

The Disability Standards for Education, Australia (2005), advocates that an education provider could make 'reasonable adjustments' to meet the needs of students with disabilities, a consideration that was taken in this paper. Consideration was given to omit the written assessment and to only include the other assessments with a recalculation of all other assessments up to a 100 percent. This may, however, not be a preferable option for the students with disabilities and further investigation in another study is warranted.

Conclusion

This paper has identified the challenges and problems that university students with disabilities encounter in learning the Japanese Kanji script in Japanese as a foreign language through the reflections of a professional with more than 23 years of teaching students in the subject area. The information obtained from the reflections can be used to help create an awareness of the problems experienced by students with disabilities undertaking Japanese courses in higher educational institutions, especially those facing obstacles in writing Kanji scripts. Specific modifications to course design and or delivery have been recommended here, in order to meet individual student needs. Furthermore, the reflection helps to inform the current body of knowledge relating to writing Kanji script, especially about the necessity to consider students with disabilities who wish to study Japanese as a foreign language and equip themselves with alternative strategies based on their individual needs.

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