
Feature Article

Challenges in Learning kanji: The Perspective of Persian-speaking Learners of Japanese

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This study aims to examine the problems involved in learning kanji for Persian-speaking students learning Japanese as a foreign language (JFL). Students' interest in learning kanji was investigated as an effective variable in learning Japanese. Two questionnaires, including multiple-choice and open-ended questions were administered. Results showed that learning difficulties are caused by different factors: the kanji script itself, how kanji is taught, and the learning environment. Among the most problematic issues in reading kanji for Persian-speaking students is the negative effect of the Persian language. In contrast to the findings of previous research, writing kanji was found not a major problem for participants in the present study thanks to the positive effect of the Persian language. Persian-speaking JFL learners are interested in learning kanji. However, their interest decreases over the years. As their language level increases, learning kanji becomes easier, but learning kanji does not necessarily become easier with increasing years of studying Japanese. Results also revealed a lack of time spent in class, a lack of practical resources for kanji teaching, and not requiring students to use kanji. Based on these findings, practical suggestions are made to improve kanji teaching and minimize kanji learning difficulties for JFL learners from non-kanji regions of the world.

本研究ではペルシア語母語話者日本語学習者の漢字学習における課題や漢字学習への関心度を検討した。多肢選択式と自由回答式の質問を含むアンケートの結果、漢字学習の課題として漢字そのもの、漢字の教授法、学習環境の3つの原因が明らかとなった。イラン人日本語学習者にとって、漢字を書くことよりも、読むこ

とが最大の課題である。その理由はペルシア語による影響である。イラン人学習者は漢字学習に興味があるものの、彼らの関心は年々減少傾向にある。語学レベルが上がれば漢字の習得は容易になるが、日本語の学習年数が長くなるほど漢字の習得が容易になるとは限らない。さらに、学習環境の課題として、漢字の授業の時間が限られていること、漢字学習への実践的な教材が少ないこと、学習者が漢字の使用を要求されていないことである。最後に、これらの結果に基づいて非漢字圏学習者の漢字学習の課題を最小限にするために実践的な方法を提案する。

Learning kanji is one of the most challenging aspects for non-Japanese students wishing to learn Japanese because of the complex shapes and varied sounds (readings) of each kanji. Learning kanji can be particularly challenging because kanji characters often have multiple readings: *onyomi* and *kunyomi*. *Onyomi* represents the Chinese-derived readings, while *kunyomi* represents the native Japanese readings. Understanding when to use each reading and the associated exceptions can pose difficulties for learners. In addition to *onyomi* and *kunyomi*, there are exceptions in reading kanji known as *Ateji*. *Ateji* refers to the use of kanji characters for their phonetic sound rather than their meaning. This can be confusing because the kanji's meaning may not align with the word it represents. *Ateji* can be tricky for learners to grasp since it involves memorizing readings that don't follow the kanji's typical meanings. With the aim of assisting beginner Japanese learners in understanding various kanji readings, furigana is used. Furigana refers to the small kana characters (hiragana or katakana) placed above or beside kanji characters in written text. It provides the pronunciation or reading of the kanji, especially in texts aimed at learners or when the kanji characters might be challenging or unfamiliar. Furigana serves to clarify pronunciation and enhance text comprehension, making it particularly valuable for Japanese learners. According to research conducted by the Japan Foundation (2018), more than nine million students are learning Japanese worldwide, over half of them in non-kanji regions of the world. Ivarsson (2016) pointed out that when the first (L1) and second language (L2) use different writing systems, learning becomes difficult. For non-kanji language learners, the large number and complexity of kanji, along with the extensive information to be memorized about each one, including its shape, meaning, sound, and use, create a significant burden. This

can make learning kanji challenging and potentially tedious due to the limited time available for this process.

The Ministry of Education of Japan announced that the number of common kanji every Japanese or foreign adult needed to know in order to read and write Japanese is changed from 1,945 to 2,136 (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology [MEXT], 2010). This kanji inventory was designed to establish a minimum standard of literacy for Japanese who have fulfilled their compulsory education requirements. Therefore, native Japanese speakers learn this number gradually from elementary to high school, but foreign learners have to master that number over a very short period of time, a burden that can cause stress for these learners. Haththotuwa (2006) pointed out that the situation of learners of Japanese outside Japan is different from that of learners under pressure of need in Japan. Unlike learners who may benefit from living in a kanji-using environment, learners who have few opportunities to look at kanji except in their textbooks may spend more time acquainting themselves with kanji (Kaiho & Haththotuwa, 2001). Regarding optimal methods for learning kanji for users of alphabetic scripts, Tollini (1992) argued that since learners understand the difference between an alphabetic system and kanji, they know that a different approach is needed to analyze kanji but lack the necessary tools for doing this. This suggests that an appropriate method for learning kanji should be introduced at an early stage.

Persian L1 Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) learners, whose mother tongue uses a systematic script consisting of a limited number of letters, may feel confused when beginning to learn the Japanese writing system. Some may find it difficult to understand that kanji consists of a set of complex characters representing both multiple sounds and meanings. In the conventional method for teaching kanji in Iran, regardless of the linguistic background or personality of the learners, this is often done based on frequency of use. The question is whether this approach is suitable for Iranian JFL learners who do not deal with kanji in daily life or on a continuous basis in their learning environment. To understand this issue and provide an effective way of teaching kanji that would suit the individuality of Persian language learners, it will be necessary to consider

the problems regarding learning and teaching kanji from the perspective of these learners.

Issues Related to Kanji Learning

In addressing the problems involved in learning kanji, the first aspect to consider is the students' L1. Research shows that the problems faced by students from kanji and non-kanji backgrounds are different. Machida (2013) conducted research with 13 learners from kanji-using countries and 23 learners from non-kanji-using countries regarding the difficulty of learning kanji. Results showed no difference in the performance of the two groups regarding the reading of previously taught kanji but that learners from kanji backgrounds performed better in reading new kanji or writing both new and previously taught kanji. Results also showed that the presence of kanji in the writing system helps students from kanji-using areas in learning kanji because these students have experience of learning it in their mother tongue and are therefore able to visually identify kanji and know its rules of writing. In contrast, learners from non-kanji-using regions will have no knowledge of newly introduced kanji unless they have already seen similar kanji. This lack of familiarity may cause significant anxiety and difficulty for these learners. However, as Rose (2017) explained, JFL learners, whether beginners or advanced, regularly experience stress and anxiety while learning the Japanese writing system. While beginners worry that they cannot read texts written in *hiragana* (Japanese syllabary for native words) and *katakana* (Japanese syllabary for foreign words), advanced learners worry that they may not be able to acquire the essential kanji skills needed to read and write like advanced students of Japanese. This suggests that JFL learners face different issues and difficulties in kanji learning at different stages of learning Japanese.

Studies have investigated the problems Japanese learners with an alphabetic L1 face in learning kanji (Rose, 2017; Haththotuwa, 2006; Novarida, 2011; Yuki, 2009). For L1 English learners of Japanese, meaning is more challenging than sound (Rose, 2017). However, reading kanji was the most problematic issue for Sri Lankan students (Haththotuwa, 2006). Haththotuwa investigated the kanji learning problems of 116 Sri Lankan learners of Japanese from four

different educational institutions using a questionnaire. The results showed that contrary to previous research on language learners from non-kanji regions, which considered the use of a method that emphasizes meaning rather than the sound of kanji to be effective in learning, the sound of kanji was more important than meaning. However, these students also found it challenging to read kanji because understanding its form was a significant problem, even though distinguishing and writing similar kanji was more difficult.

Research also shows that learners with different language proficiency levels experience different problems in learning kanji. Yuki (2009) examined the problems in learning kanji of Japanese as a Second Language (JSL) learners from non-kanji countries. These learners were divided into two groups. The first group consisted of learners who had never studied Japanese before coming to Japan and learned *kana* (*kana* refers to Japanese syllabaries: hiragana and katakana) and about 100 kanji during the study period (one semester). In the second group were learners who had learned *kana* and about 100 basic kanji before this study began and had also learned about 110 new kanji during the study period. Results showed that almost all participants found learning the writing of kanji difficult. In particular, no difference was found in responses from either group regarding dealing with kanji with similar forms and the order of writing strokes in kanji. However, when participants were asked about reading and decoding the meaning of each kanji, the difference between the two groups was significant. As the level of kanji learning increases, learners become aware that each kanji may have multiple readings, and depending on the context, learners need to understand which reading of kanji they should use. Low-proficiency learners know only one meaning for each kanji and are not yet aware of the difficulty involved in understanding multiple meanings, but as the level of learning increases, it becomes more difficult to differentiate between multiple meanings. In other words, as the level of language proficiency increases, reading becomes easier for language learners, but understanding the meaning of kanji becomes more difficult.

In other learning environments with different learners, the problems are varied from the learners' point of view. The results of Novarida's (2011) research

on Indonesian students' kanji learning problems showed that the most important problem is the large number of kanji, the presence of similar characters, and complex forms. Regarding kanji reading, the presence of kanji with the same sound and a large number of readings for each kanji were the most important issues for these students.

Relationship between Interest, Language Proficiency, the Experience of Learning, and Gender

Learning experience (i.e., years of studying), interest, and gender play an important role in Japanese language learners' beliefs, attitudes, and difficulty in learning Japanese (Fujiwara, 2018a, 2018b; Yuki, 2009; Osumi, 2019; Miyahara & Fujimori, 2020; Cai & Cai, 2010). Fujiwara (2018a) examined Japanese language learners' beliefs about Japanese language learning by using the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI), which was developed for English as a Second Language (ESL) learners. He found that learning JSL is different from learning ESL. Instead of the five factors presented in the BALLI model, Fujiwara found four factors: foreign language aptitude, difficulty of language learning, nature of language learning, and motivations and expectations. Fujiwara (2018b) explained that depending on cultural or ethnic background, learning different foreign languages as well as different proficiency levels causes different beliefs regarding language learning. In particular, students' beliefs and difficulty in learning Japanese is strongly influenced by their personal experience of studying Japanese. Fujiwara argued that the experience of studying Japanese itself changes students' beliefs.

Research also shows that the perspectives, attitudes, and goals of language learners are affected by their proficiency level. In Miyahara and Fujimori's (2020) research, elementary-level Japanese language learners sought to learn to read kanji and be able to write kanji by hand. These learners believed that if they could write or type kanji, this meant they would have learned kanji. In contrast, intermediate and advanced JFL students believed that they need to learn kanji in order to read Japanese texts in full or even to pass exams (Rose, 2017).

Yuki (2009) investigated interest in learning kanji among JSL learners. He

found that although these students were fully aware of the difficulty involved in learning kanji, they were also aware of the benefits of learning doing so and thus had an interest in learning kanji. Yuki found that most students were interested in knowing the origin of kanji along with its abstract images. However, the interest of language learners changes with changes in their language proficiency levels and their environmental conditions. In this regard, Osumi (2019) examined the reasons for learning and motivations of JFL learners in the US. She found that various factors affect learners' interest. While there was a correlation between an interest in the culture and Japanese language learning, as students progressed to higher levels and the longer they learned Japanese, their interest in cultural factors diminished.

In addition, Osumi's research also showed that gender plays a role in interest in learning Japanese, and it is related to the length of time students spent learning Japanese. She argued that compared to female students, males are more interested in games, and the less time they have dedicated to learning Japanese, the greater their interest in pop culture, anime, and manga. On the other hand, female students have higher career orientation and motivation to learn Japanese (Cai & Cai, 2010).

Challenges in Teaching Kanji

The problems involved in learning kanji are related not only to learners and kanji itself but also to how kanji is taught. Research shows that problems in teaching kanji may be due to the lack of appropriate teaching methods (Shimizu & Green, 2002; Rose, 2019). Rose (2019) argued that teaching kanji in JFL classrooms tends to copy the way Japanese students learn and practice kanji in Japan. Memorizing kanji, writing kanji again and again, and focusing on the form are the norms in teaching and learning kanji. Shimizu and Green (2002) investigated the teaching of kanji with 251 Japanese teachers in the US. Results showed that most of the teachers used methods that pushed students toward rote learning (i.e., repetitive tasks, quizzes, and drills) in their writing classes. Although research emphasizes the process approach for L2 writing, focusing on rote learning shows that Japanese writing still relies on the product-based approach (Rose, 2019).

Nakamura (2019) argued that in the past, a parallel model centered on a single kanji character used to teach kanji. Thus, all the information related to a single character, including all its possible readings, was taught to learners at once. This approach likely burdened the learners and reduced their motivation to learn Japanese. Meanwhile, criticism was also leveled at another conventional teaching method, in which the learners were expected to write all the kanji they could read. In this method, instruction aimed to develop the ability to read and write kanji by introducing vocabulary. Given the pressure of learning generated by these methods, teaching reading and writing kanji step by step and listing kanji meant only reading and not writing may be effective (Ito & Nakamura, 2021; Nakamura, 2019).

Research Questions

Previous research shows that language learners from non-kanji regions face problems in learning kanji, which will differ according to their length of studying Japanese, Japanese language proficiency, and learning environment. In addition, gender may also affect the level of interest in learning Japanese, including students' perspective, as well as the difficulty involved in learning Japanese. Previous studies conducted surveys on topics such as the kanji learning problems of non-kanji language learners in Japan or other countries. However, it is still needed to investigate the problems of JFL learners, including Iranian learners, who only deal with Japanese and kanji in their classrooms. Japanese education is not widespread in Iran, with only one institution (the University of Tehran) where Japanese is taught academically to Iranian learners. Yet no comprehensive research has been conducted regarding these learners, including the problems involved and their interest in learning kanji in terms of variables such as years of studying Japanese, Japanese language proficiency, and gender. In response, the present research aims to reach a deeper understanding of the challenges involved in learning kanji from the perspective of Iranian language learners of Japanese.

RQ1. What problems do Persian-speaking Japanese language learners face in learning kanji?

RQ2. What is the level of interest of Persian-speaking Japanese language learners toward learning kanji and to what extent does this level of interest

vary according to years of learning Japanese, Japanese language proficiency, and gender?

RQ3. What challenges impact the instruction of kanji in Iran, and do these challenges differ based on the duration of Japanese language study from the perspective of Persian-speaking Japanese language learners?

Methodology

Participants

Since the University of Tehran is the only university in Iran where the Japanese language is taught academically, 60 Persian-speaking Japanese learners (mean age = 23.5) drawn randomly from about 100 students studying at this university (at the time of data collection) participated in this research. These students had been studying Japanese in university for periods varying from one to four years. Twenty of the participants took the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) earlier and hold certificates at different proficiency levels from JLPT N1, the highest level, to N5, the lowest level. More details are shown in Table 1.

Instruments

Two researcher-made questionnaires were used to collect data for this study. The first questionnaire consisted of a three-point Likert scale (3 = disagree; 2 =

Table 1

Participants' Background

Number of participants		Experience of learning Japanese		JLPT participation	
Total	$N = 60$	1 year	$n = 26$	Participated	$n = 20$
Female	$n = 40$	2 years	$n = 10$	N1	$n = 3$
Male	$n = 20$	3 years	$n = 12$	N2	$n = 3$
		4 years	$n = 12$	N3	$n = 7$
				N4	$n = 4$
				N5	$n = 3$

neither agree nor disagree; 1 = agree) with a total of 34 statements. To prepare this questionnaire, the questionnaires in Hamakawa (2017), Haththotuwa (2006), and Novarida (2011) were used. First, statements related to kanji learning problems were extracted, and an initial draft of the questionnaire was prepared for Persian students learning Japanese in Iran. The draft was then validated by two professors who had majored in Japanese, and a final version was compiled based on their suggestions. The validity of the questionnaire was evaluated as very high ($r = .91$). The second questionnaire consisted of two open-ended questions, with two goals in mind: 1) to clarify whether the students were facing other problems in learning kanji that were not mentioned in the first questionnaire; and 2) to uncover any problems involved in the teaching of kanji in Iran from the perspective of Iranian Japanese language learners. The two open-ended questions were: 1) Do you face any problems in learning kanji? and 2) Do you see any problems in how kanji is taught in your classroom? The students' answers to these two questions were then analyzed through open-coding analysis.

Results

To answer RQ1, the responses of the learners to the multiple-choice questions in the questionnaire were evaluated. These responses are shown in ascending order in Table 2.

The ten major problems reported by Iranian learners in learning kanji are as follows. More than 80% of learners believe that their biggest problem is that learning kanji takes up too much time, and about 80% of them believe that there are too many kanji with similar readings. In addition, more than 75% of learners consider that there are many readings for each kanji and forgetting the kanji they have memorized. Although the number of kanji words with special pronunciation (e.g., *ateji*) may not be very large, more than 70% of learners saw the existence of such special cases as the fourth problem. The fifth problem, reported by 62.7% of learners, was that they could remember the *kunyomi* pronunciation of kanji but not the *onyomi* pronunciation of the same kanji. The sixth problem was the large number of kanji, forgetting half of the kanji form despite knowing the other half. Some 54.2% and 52.5% of learners listed

Table 2

Problems Faced by JFL Learners in Learning Kanji (multiple-choice questions)

Rank	Statements	Agree (%)	Neither (%)	Disagree (%)
1	20. It takes time to learn kanji	81.4	6.8	11.9
2	13. It is difficult because there are many kanji with similar readings	79.7	6.8	13.6
3	10. It's complicated because there are many ways to read one kanji	76.3	10.2	13.6
3	21. Even if I memorize kanji, if I don't use them, I will forget them quickly	76.3	10.2	13.6
4	14. It is difficult because I don't know how to read kanji with a specific reading (i.e., ateji)	72.9	20.3	6.8
5	12. Even if I remember the kunyomi, I forget the onyomi	62.7	20.3	16.9
6	1. It is difficult because there are many kanji	59.3	20.3	20.3
7	8. Even if I remember only part of the kanji, I can't remember the rest	59.3	16.9	23.7
8	19. It is difficult to memorize kanji for a long time	59.3	15.3	25.4
9	9. I'm not sure if the kanji I wrote is correct	54.2	32.2	13.6
10	18. It is difficult because there are various meanings for one kanji	52.5	13.6	33.9
11	5. I write kanji with similar shapes incorrectly. (e.g., 犬・大・太)	50.8	11.9	37.3
12	6. I read kanji with similar shapes incorrectly. (e.g., 犬・大・太)	49.2	18.6	32.2
13	3. There are many lines and it is complicated	47.5	20.3	32.2
14	2. It is difficult because the shape is complicated	45.8	22.0	32.2
15	7. I write kanji with the same sounds incorrectly. (e.g. 自信・自身)	44.1	30.5	25.4
16	22. I don't know how to learn kanji properly	37.3	22.0	40.7
17	4. While I am writing, I forget the order of the strokes	35.6	20.3	44.1
18	11. Even if I remember the onyomi, I forget the kunyomi	32.3	15.3	52.5
19	17. Even if I remember the kanji, I'm in trouble because I don't know how to use it	30.5	30.5	39.0
20	15. I read only sentences with furigana	28.8	18.6	52.5
21	16. I can't read long sentences and give up on them halfway	22.0	23.7	54.2

uncertainty over correct kanji writing and polysemy of kanji as the seventh and eighth problems, respectively. The ninth and tenth problems faced by Iranian learners were incorrectly writing (50.8%) and reading (49%) kanji with similar forms.

After answering the Likert scale questions, the learners answered the open-ended question regarding whether they encountered any problems when learning kanji. Students wrote their answers in Persian. The data was coded and translated into English, and a native English speaker checked their accuracy. These results are shown in Figure 1 and Table 3. Since the four elements of shape, reading, writing, and meaning are very important in learning kanji, to better understand the learning problems faced by Persian learners, the answers were grouped into these four categories. Figure 1 shows Japanese learners' kanji learning problems categorized by the four above elements in addition to "others" and "no problem." Table 3 shows a sub-categorization of any such problems in each of these categories. Although 7.7% of learners reported having no particular problems in learning kanji, among the four components of shape, reading, writing, and

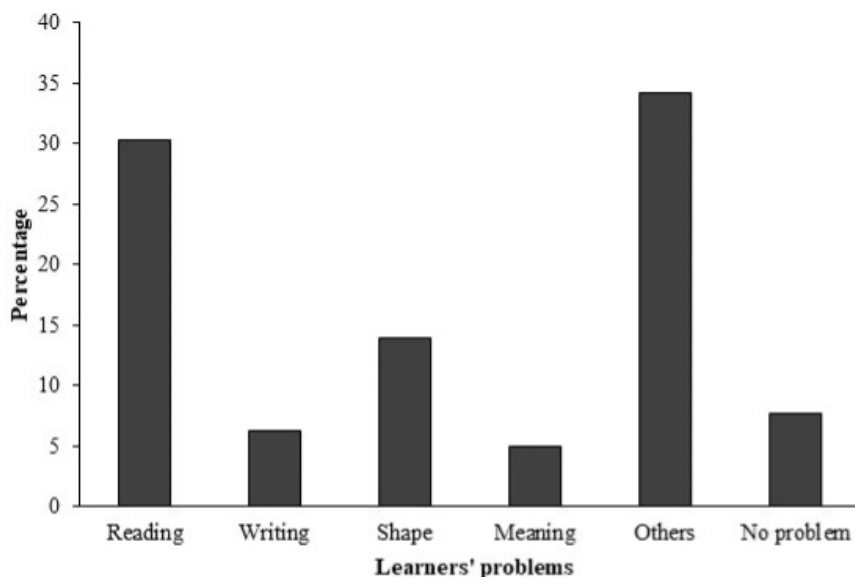


Figure 1. Problems with learning kanji

Table 3

Problems with Learning Kanji (Open-ended Question)

Explanations	%	Category
Too many readings and sounds of kanji	16.8	Reading
Lots of kanji with similar pronunciation	7.7	
<i>ateji</i>	3.3	
Forgetting how to read kanji	2.5	
Lots of kanji with similar shapes	10.2	Shape
Complex forms of kanji	2.5	
Mistaking similar kanji	1.2	
Writing order (I forget the order of writing when I write)	6.3	Writing
Multiple meanings	2.6	Meaning
The meaning is based on how the kanji is read	1.2	
Similar meaning	1.2	
Memorizing kanji in long-term memory (even if I memorize it, when I don't use it, I forget it soon)	9.0	Others
Learning kanji takes time	8.4	
Lack of time to learn	5.8	
Finding appropriate texts	2.9	
The teaching method is not interesting	2.9	
A large number of kanji	1.3	
kanji expressions (i.e., <i>jukugo</i> *)	1.3	
Lack of proper dictionary	1.3	
Using hiragana instead of kanji	1.3	
No problem	7.7	

**Jukugo* refers to compound words or multi-character expressions formed by combining two or more kanji characters. These combinations can create words with specific meanings that may not be readily deduced from the individual characters.

meaning, the most frequently-mentioned problem was reading, and the least problem was meaning. Regarding the reading of kanji, most learners (30.3%)

reported problems with a large number of kanji readings (pronunciation).

In response to RQ2, it was found that about 90% of JFL learners found learning kanji interesting, and more than 80% of them were interested in learning kanji despite the difficulties involved (Figure 2). Table 4 shows what these learners found especially interesting in learning kanji.

About 90% of learners believe that the manner of writing kanji is the most interesting aspect of learning kanji. More than 80% of them believe that even though a kanji is a written character, it is interesting because it conveys both pronunciation and meaning. Learners think that kanji is interesting because its shape is similar to a painting (76.3%) and its radicals themselves have meaning (62.7%). In addition, 55.9% find learning kanji fun because the same kanji can be read in different ways (Table 4).

Table 5 shows the components that create interest in kanji in Iranian learners of Japanese based on their years of learning Japanese. Although about 26% believe that kanji is difficult, in the early years of study, especially the first year, students think that learning kanji is easy, but this belief fades as the years

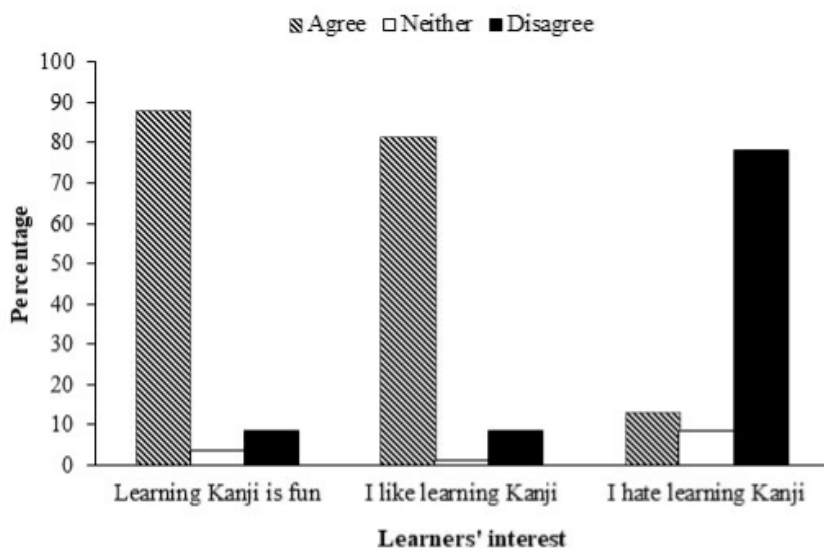


Figure 2. Interest in learning kanji

Table 4

Interest in Sub-components of Learning Kanji

Rank	Statements	Agree (%)	Neither (%)	Disagree (%)
1	28. Learning how to write kanji is fun	88.1	5.1	6.8
2	30. Although kanji is a written character, it is interesting because it expresses both sound and meaning	81.4	15.3	3.4
3	29. It's interesting because the kanji shapes are similar to painted pictures	76.3	15.3	8.5
4	32. It is interesting because the kanji radicals have meaning	62.7	25.4	11.9
5	31. Learning kanji is fun because it has different readings	55.9	16.9	27.1

of learning Japanese increase. Using Spearman's correlation test, it was found that there is a negative correlation between years of learning Japanese and ease of learning kanji ($r_s(98) = -.31, p < .05$). Furthermore, a negative correlation was observed between years of learning Japanese and interest in kanji ($r_s(98) = -.29, p < .05$), with level of interest in kanji decreasing as years of learning Japanese increase. However, no significant correlation was observed between years of learning Japanese and enjoyment of learning kanji ($r_s(98) = .06, p > .05$). This result shows that enjoyment of learning kanji changes only a little over the years of study but remains enjoyable overall.

Table 5 shows the level of interest among learners who took the JLPT and passed at different levels (N1-N5). The higher the language proficiency level of the learners, the easier it is to learn kanji. A Spearman's test also showed a positive correlation between language proficiency and ease of learning kanji ($r_s(18) = .32, p < .05$). On the other hand, a negative relationship between proficiency level and interest in kanji was observed ($r_s(18) = -.35, p < .05$). This means that the lower the proficiency level, the more they are interested in learning kanji. Conversely, as the proficiency level of learners increases, kanji becomes less interesting. However, no significant correlation was observed between language level and kanji learning enjoyment ($r_s(18) = .22, p > .05$). These results show that learners are not averse to learning kanji, whether at the beginning or near the end

Table 5

Interest of Iranian JFL Learners Based on Years of Study, Japanese Language Proficiency, and Gender

		Statements				
		23. kanji is easy to learn (%)	24. kanji is difficult to learn (%)	25. I like learning kanji (%)	26. I hate learning kanji (%)	27. Learning kanji is fun (%)
Years of study	Total	27.1	55.9	81.4	13.5	88.1
	1 Year	14.9	26.6	41.9	4.9	26.5
	2 Years	6.7	9.9	18.4	3.5	16.3
	3 Years	5.5	4.5	16.6	1.6	21.6
	4 Years	0.0	14.9	4.5	3.5	23.7
Gender	Total	27.1	55.9	81.4	13.5	88.1
	Female	15.3	37.3	52.5	10.1	57.6
	Male	11.8	18.6	28.9	3.4	30.5
Japanese language proficiency (JLPT Level)	Total	8.5	14.9	23.6	6.6	23.3
	N1	3.6	0.0	1.6	0.0	3.3
	N2	1.6	3.3	1.6	5.0	1.6
	N3	3.3	6.7	3.6	0.0	8.4
	N4	0.0	1.6	6.7	0.0	6.7
	N5	0.0	3.3	10.1	1.6	3.3

of their studies.

Regarding the interest of learners by gender (Table 5), although no significant correlation was observed between the interest in kanji of male and female learners ($r_s(98) = .04, p > .05$) and their enjoyment of kanji ($r_s(98) = .05, p > .05$), women (Statement No. 27) enjoy kanji more than men and are more interested in learning it (Statement No. 25).

To better understand the situation of students learning kanji and the possible problems involved in teaching kanji in Iran (RQ3), participants in this study

were asked to freely write about the problems they faced while being taught kanji. Their answers are summarized and shown in Figure 3.

A general look at the problems related to kanji teaching shows that although one-third of the students were satisfied with the way kanji is taught, the students expressed a number of problems in this regard. Among the problems they mentioned, the three major ones were: 1) Lack of time in class to teach kanji (18.2%); 2) insufficient use of phrases and texts related to the kanji that has been taught (14.9%); and 3) Lack of time for solving all kanji exercises in class (14.9%).

A more detailed look at these problems (Table 6) shows that the percentage of problems raised changes according to the learners' years of studying Japanese. Learners with one (10%) to two (5%) years of Japanese language learning experience are more likely to face the problem of lack of time in class, while students with three to four years of Japanese language learning experience do not find class time to be a problem (1.6%). Learners who have been studying

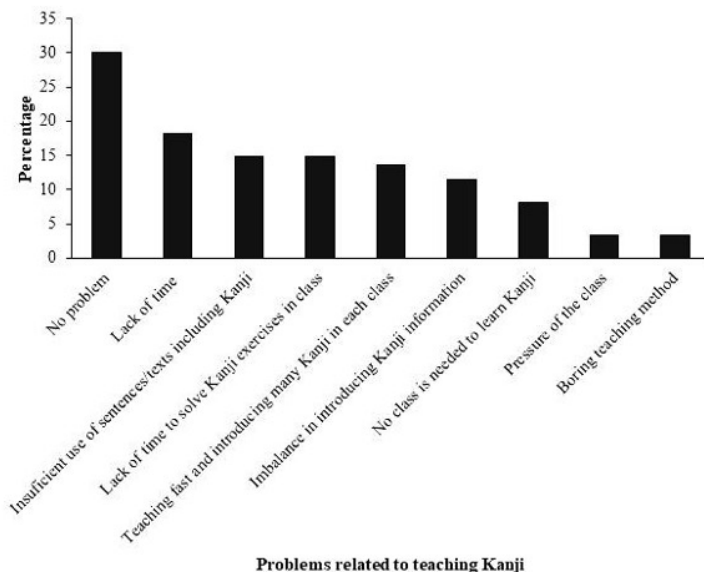


Figure 3. Problems related to teaching kanji from the perspective of JFL learners

Table 6

Problems Related to Learning Kanji, by Years of Studying Japanese (Open-ended Question)

Explanation	Total	1 year	2 years	3 years	4 years
		(%)	(%)	(%)	(%)
No problem	29.9	8.3	5.0	8.3	8.3
Lack of class time	18.2	10.0	5.0	1.6	1.6
Insufficient use of sentences/texts including kanji	14.9	1.6	3.3	5.0	5.0
Lack of time to solve kanji exercises in class	14.9	8.3	5.0	1.6	0.0
Teaching fast and introducing many kanji in each class	13.3	10.0	3.3	0.0	0.0
Imbalance in introducing kanji information	11.5	6.6	3.3	1.6	0.0
No class is needed to learn kanji	8.2	0.0	3.3	3.3	1.6
Pressure of the class (stress)	3.3	3.3	0.0	0.0	0.0
Boring teaching method	3.2	0.0	0.0	1.6	1.6

Japanese for one year consider the speed of teaching kanji to be high (10%). Moreover, learners with one and two years of studying Japanese were dissatisfied with the lack of time available to solve kanji exercises in class (8.3% and 5%, respectively) as well as the imbalance in teaching kanji information (6.6% and 3.3% respectively). In contrast, language learners with more experience (three and four years) considered the main problem to be insufficient use of phrases and texts in teaching kanji (5%), and a small number of them (1.6%) also mentioned dull kanji teaching methods as one of their problems. However, some learners believe that there is no need to take kanji classes to learn kanji.

Discussion and Conclusion

This study investigated problems perceived by Persian language learners in learning kanji. The findings show that students' problems are caused by three factors: kanji itself, the teaching method, and the learning environment.

The problems caused by kanji itself derive from the cognitive burden faced by language learners, who must learn several steps at the same time

when learning kanji: glyph recognition, understanding the meaning of single kanji, understanding the meaning of vocabulary formed by multiple kanji, pronunciation of single kanji, reading kanji vocabulary, writing single kanji, and writing kanji vocabulary (Nakamura, 2019). Taking all these steps together adds to the load on the learners' memory. In terms of learning kanji, students complete five kanji courses (Introduction to Kanji, Elementary Kanji, Intermediate Kanji, Advanced Kanji 1 & 2) as part of the curriculum. The curriculum aims to cover approximately 1,200 kanji characters across these courses. Consequently, each course is expected to introduce at least 225 new kanji in total. These courses are held once a week, with each session lasting approximately 90 minutes, and they typically introduce around 16 new kanji characters per session. However, this pace of learning, with 16 new kanji in a single session, can place a significant burden on students. As the language learners in the study also stated, they may memorize kanji but then forget it. These findings show that the load on learners' memory is high. However, in addition to character recognition, learners must also be able to read and write kanji correctly, an additional learning load for them. Solutions should therefore be found to reduce this learning load. Since even Japanese speakers cannot read every kanji they can write (Nakamura, 2019), it is suggested that the stage of reading and writing kanji be separated from each other to alleviate the burden of learning kanji. In other words, it would be better to assess kanji reading and writing ability independently.

Looking at the "others" category of kanji problems for Iranian learners, it is noteworthy that these learners also faced problems in addition to problems caused by shape, reading, writing, and meaning. These include problems arising from the teaching of kanji that were not reported in previous research. Some of those issues include lack of interest in how kanji is taught, forgetting and not using kanji. These problems originate from how teaching informs students about how to use kanji. As students have mentioned, due to the lack of time, teachers in the kanji class introduce a large number of kanji characters in each lesson without providing sufficient training on their usage, meanings, or readings within words, phrases, and texts. Therefore, it is crucial for teachers to inform and guide students on how to use kanji effectively and provide them with opportunities

to write and apply the kanji they have been taught. However, kanji is not only related to kanji classes but also other Japanese classes (reading, writing, etc.). It is therefore necessary to pay attention not only to teaching and learning kanji but also to practicing reading and writing kanji and making students feel the need to use kanji widely. The feeling reported by some students that they can replace *hiragana* with kanji should be changed in order to help them understand the usage of kanji instead of saying: “I don’t know the correct way to use kanji.” This indicates that kanji teaching primarily centers on kanji-specific classes, despite kanji being an integral part of the Japanese language and its writing system.

As mentioned above, the biggest problem for Iranian learners of Japanese is the complexity of reading kanji characters, including their multiple readings. This confirms Haththotuwa’s (2006) finding regarding Sri Lankan learners. However, it differs from Novarida’s (2011) finding regarding Indonesian learners in that their problem was mostly about kanji shapes. The problems Iranian learners report concerning kanji reading can be explained from the perspective of the phonetic and writing systems of the Persian language. Although the Persian alphabet has 33 letters, individual readers may face more than 100 forms (Academy of Persian Language and Literature, 2014), which may be written differently depending on the placement of the letter in the word. In contrast, in the Latin alphabet, in which the shape of letters does not change in words, Persian speakers encounter variations in the shapes of letters in the Persian alphabet based on their position within words when writing in Persian. This complexity differs from the distinction between uppercase and lowercase letters in the Latin script, where readers encounter approximately 100 variations depending on their placement within words. Moreover, the written shape of each Persian letter is more complex than that of Latin letters (Academy of Persian Language and Literature, 2014). This L1 experience helps Persian speakers cope with the problem of the complexity of kanji forms when writing kanji. Considering the issue of kanji pronunciation, Persian speakers, used to a one-letter, one-pronunciation system in their language, may find it challenging to understand that individual kanji characters, despite having a single form, can have multiple pronunciations.

Although related environmental problems may be few, they cannot be ignored. Iranian JFL learners have different problems such as lack of a suitable dictionary for kanji in the Persian language and lack of access to suitable texts at the same level as the kanji they have learned. This is due to the fact that Iranian JFL learners use Japanese-English resources and feel less comfortable with applying them to kanji. Thus, needing to seek help from an intermediary language (English) imposes an additional burden on these learners. This confirms the necessity of preparing materials in the learners' L1 (i.e., Persian). Furthermore, the problem of quickly forgetting kanji may also be caused by the environment because Iranian learners of JFL have few opportunities to communicate directly and frequently with kanji users in their daily lives. It would therefore be better to require students to use kanji in different situations, such as when taking notes in class, writing essays, or taking exams. From the point of view of cognitive science, it is suggested that when students are reading texts, they may find it effective to pay attention to the kanji and read the sentence without looking at *furigana* which would greatly increase the chance of visual recognition and memorization of the kanji form.

Overall, Iranian learners of Japanese reported learning kanji enjoyable and claimed to be interested in learning it. Perhaps this can be related to Persian script. Because in the Persian alphabet, relatively complex curved lines are used and the shape of Persian letters changes depending on their position in words (Academy of Persian Language and Literature, 2014), writing kanji may be less of a challenge for Persian speakers. This may be seen in the fact that more than half of the Iranian students responded positively to the statement "Because kanji has different readings, it is fun to learn."

Regarding the relationship between interest in kanji, years of studying Japanese, and Japanese language proficiency, the findings show that interest in kanji decreases slightly over the years, even if it remains interesting. While it is possible to consider that environmental variables, such as the learning environment and teacher behavior, may influence students' interest in kanji and kanji learning, this possibility is weak. This is because students were specifically instructed to focus solely on the kanji itself when responding to statements like

“I like learning kanji” and “Learning kanji is fun,” excluding any considerations of environmental variables that could affect their interest. In fact, there is a negative relationship between Japanese language proficiency and interest in kanji. This may be because Iranian students at lower levels have not yet encountered serious problems in learning kanji, and the attractiveness of learning Japanese and external stimuli such as anime, etc. may keep them interested in kanji. In contrast, students at higher proficiency levels, who have struggled with the difficulties of learning kanji for much longer, find that their interest in kanji decreases as their proficiency level increases. Moreover, the same finding was observed for years of learning Japanese. The relationship between language proficiency and ease of learning kanji is the opposite of the relationship between years of studying Japanese and ease of learning kanji. As language proficiency increases, students learn kanji more easily, but with increasing years of study, learning kanji might not necessarily become easier. This finding can be explained by the possibility that an increase in the number of years studying Japanese does not necessarily correlate with improved Japanese *language* proficiency. This could be attributed to a decrease in students’ motivation over time or the relevance of the specific kanji they studied diminishing for their specific needs.

Although about a third of the students believe that the teaching of kanji in Iran presents no particular problems, some believe that too little time is devoted to kanji in Japanese classes, which may lead to many kanji being introduced in each kanji class without enough practice. These conditions combined with the fact that students are not required to use kanji in other classes leads to students using kanji less. As a result, when they encounter a text containing many kanji at high levels, they may experience stress and anxiety. However, while lack of time is a problem for learners with less experience, for the learners with more experience, not only was time not a problem, but some of them believe that there is no need to hold classes for teaching kanji. The possible reason for this conclusion can be seen from the availability of mobile applications and software that enable learners to independently learn the radicals, meaning, reading, and writing of kanji. More experienced learners of Japanese also raise the problem of underusing phrases and texts containing taught kanji. These findings indicate

that the needs of language learners are different in different years of learning Japanese. It may therefore be effective to change the method of teaching kanji according to the proficiency level of learners and their needs.

In this research, issues related to learning kanji were evaluated from the perspective of language learners. However, to better understand these issues and to examine them more closely, the teachers' point of view should also be analyzed in further research. Finally, a more objective examination of these problems would involve observing a class while kanji is being taught and in-depth analyses of the findings conducted.

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