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Post study abroad investigation of kanji knowledge in Japanese as a second language learners

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the change in Japanese as a Second Language (JSL) learners' kanji knowledge after returning from a study abroad in Japan to an English dominant environment. Owing to the orthographic nature of kanji, it was predicted that the learners' kanji knowledge would decrease over time, especially among learners whose first language is alphabet-based. Using a mixed-method approach of test, questionnaire, and interview, the data were collected over the course of five months from 42 undergraduate students who had recently returned from a one-year study abroad program in Japan. The scores on the kanji test showed a significant improvement over time, despite the learners being removed from the target language environment. The interview results underlined the importance of autonomous learning—the language experience in Japan allowed learners to attain positive feedback from multiple language sources. In addition, the study abroad experience may have enabled learners to find learning strategies suitable to their learning style and needs.

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1. Introduction

The Japanese language is regarded as one of the most difficult languages to acquire, largely owing to the complexity of the writing system, specifically, the acquisition of kanji. Kanji are adopted from morphographic Chinese characters and a single kanji is used to express one or more meanings and has several different readings. Due to these characteristics, kanji are especially difficult to acquire for learners whose first language (L1) is alphabet-based. Japanese as a second language (JSL) learners with alphabetic background encode information differently from those with Chinese character background and rely heavily on phonological rather than visual information (Chikamatsu, 2006; Mori & Mori, 2011). Thus, the difficulty of the Japanese written script may contribute to high rates of attrition amongst students from non-kanji backgrounds (Grainger, 2005). Learners of Japanese may especially be prone to losing their kanji knowledge after returning to a L1 environment upon second language (L2) immersion, as the exposure to Japanese decreases dramatically. In light of this context, the present study examines how the kanji knowledge of JSL learners changes over time upon return from the target language to the home language environment.

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2. Literature review

2.1. Study abroad effects on learner

Previous studies have shown study abroad programs to have multiple benefits on the part of the learner. This includes development of L2 oral proficiency (Hernández, 2010), gains in vocabulary (Coleman, 1997), production in formulaic languages (Bardovi-Harlig, 2013; Taguchi, 2011), and development in grammatical competence (Collentine, 2004; Isabelli, 2007). A study conducted by Milton and Meara (1995) found that 53 students from four different nations (Germany, Spain, Italy, and France) studying abroad in the UK for a minimum of six months experienced a dramatic increase in their vocabulary, at a rate of over 2500 words per year. Tanaka and Ellis (2003) examined the effect of studying abroad on the overall English proficiency of Japanese learners, measured by TOEFL scores. There was a significant increase in the TOEFL scores after 13.5 weeks of studying abroad, which suggests that even short periods of studying abroad can bring about a great improvement in the learners' L2 proficiency.

The benefits of study abroad do not limit themselves to L2 proficiency—studies reported positive affective factors such as gain in confidence (Tanaka & Ellis, 2003; Xu, 2011), decrease in language anxiety (Thompson & Lee, 2014), higher willingness to communicate (Kang, 2014), and change in learning attitude and beliefs (Amuzie & Winke, 2009; Benson, Barkhuizen, Bodycott, & Brown, 2012; Chieffo & Griffiths, 2004). Amuzie and Winke (2009) conducted a survey study on ESL learners studying abroad in the United States, in order to investigate how their language beliefs changed from before and during their study abroad. The results demonstrated underlying factors in learner belief: teacher's role, learner autonomy, and self-efficacy. Out of these dimensions, beliefs in teacher's role and learner autonomy changed significantly after studying abroad. The learners believed that through studying abroad, they were able to “take charge of one's own language learning” (p.374) and accept a degree of personal responsibility for achieving language goals. The authors call for a further examination into: “whether learners will continue to hold these changed beliefs after they return to their home country” (p.376).

While many studies have investigated the study-abroad effects on L2 development, the progress of L2 development after learners returned to the home country has been under-investigated, particularly that of JSL learners. For example, Campbell (2015) examined the post-study abroad interaction and language use of four learners of Japanese through in-depth interviews. The findings revealed that JSL learners make more effort in maintaining relationships established during their study-abroad, rather than building new social networks after coming back to their home country. Moreover, the participants reported being more comfortable in speaking Japanese with native speakers of Japanese, and they continued to do so even after returning to their L1 environment. Similar results in regards to post-study abroad language use have been found in Campbell (2011) and Kurata (2004). However, to our knowledge, there is no study that has investigated the maintenance of L2 knowledge—specifically kanji knowledge—after the study abroad period. Given the limited amount of research conducted within this field, it is of particular interest to see whether the learners are able to maintain their L2 proficiency even after being removed from the immersed L2 environment.

2.2. Kanji learning

Past studies have shown that learners' kanji knowledge is influenced by factors such as kanji learning strategies and learning attitude. Learning strategies is perhaps the most studied area in kanji acquisition research. The effectiveness of several learning strategies has been examined: mnemonic learning, defined by Anderson (2005) as “a method for enhancing memory performance by giving the material to be remembered a meaningful interpretation” (p.461), rote learning (i.e., repetitive learning) (Gamage, 2003; Shimizu & Green, 2002), and metacognitive strategies (i.e., “strategies used to become aware of one's own learning process”) (Mori & Shimizu, 2007, p.475). Rose (2013) investigated the effect of mnemonics on kanji learning. The data were collected longitudinally over the course of a year qualitatively and quantitatively through interviews, stimulated recalls, and questionnaires. The result showed mnemonic strategy to be effective only when applied in a meaningful way with a clear association between the structure and meaning of a kanji. In fact, Rose found that use of mnemonic strategy may have the danger of over-emphasising the meaning and ignoring the reading of the kanji. The importance of mnemonic strategy has also been confirmed in a study by Toyoda (2000), suggesting that JSL learners are indeed able to use component information to analyse and process kanji. Moreover, using a mnemonic strategy has also been found to contribute to positive kanji learning attitude (Manalo, Mizutani, & Trafford, 2004). Also in the context of Chinese as a second language, mnemonic strategy was found to be the most commonly used learning strategy, followed by metacognitive strategy (Shen, 2005). Despite the introduction of various learning strategies, the body of literature suggests that rote learning—a conventional learning method—is the most common and effective method of learning kanji (Mori & Shimizu, 2007; Shimizu & Green, 2002).

Repetitive learning, however, is a mundane and tedious task and students often experience difficulties in self-regulating their learning of kanji. In fact, a case study by Rose and Harbon (2013) found JSL learners to struggle with controlling their emotions, as well as overcoming boredom and procrastination, and setting realistic goals when learning kanji. There is indeed a relationship between kanji knowledge and learners' individual factors, with attitude being the most studied area of research. For example, Shimizu and Green (2002) administered a large-scale survey to more than 1000 teachers of Japanese. They identified six attitudinal factors relating to kanji teaching: cultural tradition, difficulty of kanji, affective orientation, aptitudes, usefulness of kanji, and expectation for the future of kanji. More specifically, the teachers believed that their

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