



Students' Perceptions of Difficulties in Learning Basic Kanji at Pakuan University and Darma Persada University

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to examine the perceptions of Japanese Literature students at Pakuan University and Darma Persada University regarding the difficulties encountered in learning basic-level kanji. Kanji is a type of character originating from China that was introduced to Japan. It is also one of the subjects often considered a daunting and most challenging obstacle for Japanese language learners, particularly beginner students. The difficulties in learning kanji are generally caused by the students' background as users of the Roman alphabet (romaji), which poses challenges when studying kanji. This study employed a descriptive quantitative approach, with data collection techniques utilizing a Likert scale distributed via Google Forms to students from both universities. The research participants consisted of 31 students from the Japanese Literature Study Program at Pakuan University and 54 students from the Japanese Language and Culture Study Program at Darma Persada University who had completed the basic kanji course. The results indicated that students experienced primary difficulties in memorizing kanji forms and meanings, distinguishing between *onyomi* and *kunyomi*, and applying kanji within the context of *jukugo* (compound kanji). Furthermore, learning strategies, motivational factors, and the support of the kanji instructional materials used also influenced students' difficulties in learning kanji. These findings are expected to contribute to the development of more effective kanji learning strategies and serve as constructive input for educators in determining basic-level kanji learning models.

Informasi Artikel

Kata Kunci:

Persepsi mahasiswa, Pembelajaran kanji, Kesulitan belajar

ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengkaji persepsi mahasiswa Program Studi Sastra Jepang Universitas Pakuan dan Universitas Darma Persada mengenai kesulitan yang dihadapi dalam mempelajari kanji tingkat dasar. Kanji adalah jenis karakter huruf yang berasal dari Cina, dan diperkenalkan ke Jepang. Kanji itu juga merupakan salah satu matakuliah yang sering menjadi momok yang paling menyulitkan bagi mahasiswa pembelajar bahasa Jepang, terutama mahasiswa tingkat dasar. Kesulitan dalam pembelajaran kanji rata-rata diakibatkan latar belakang mahasiswa yang penggunaan hurufnya bertuliskan romaji. Sehingga hal ini menyulitkan saat mempelajari kanji. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan deskriptif kuantitatif dengan teknik pengumpulan data berupa skala likert yang disebarkan melalui google form kepada mahasiswa dari dua Universitas. Partisiapn penelitian terdiri atas 31 mahasiswa Program Studi Sastra Jepang Univeritas Pakuan, dan 54 mahasiswa Program Studi Bahasa dan Kebudayaan Jepang Universitas Darma Persadayang telah menempuh matakuliah kanji dasar. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa mahasiswa mengalami kesulitan utama pada aspek penghafalan bentuk dan makna kanji, perbedaan onyomi dan kunyomi, serta penerapan kanji dalam konteks *jukugo* (gabungan kanji). Selain itu, strategi belajar, faktor motivasi, dan dukungan bahan ajar kanji yang digunakan pun memberikan pengaruh terhadap kesulitan mahasiswa dalam mempelajari kanji. Temuan ini diharapkan dapat memberikan kontribusi dalam pengembangan strategi pembelajaran kanji yang lebih efektif, serta menjadi masukan pengajar dalam menentukan model pembelajaran kanji tingkat dasar.

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1. Background

Japanese is typologically a unique foreign language (Ryota, 2016). However, Japanese is also considered a difficult foreign language to learn. This difficulty is caused by the fact that Japanese has three types of writing systems, namely hiragana, katakana, and kanji (Rose, 2019; Ogawa & Fujita, 2017; Taele et al., 2015). According to Abdullah & Kadir (2021), the uniqueness of Japanese can be identified from its form, namely characters, sentence structure, vocabulary, and language usage. Another distinctive feature of Japanese is its writing system, which differs from other languages, making the language difficult to understand, because there are differences in meaning within sentences (Richardson & Richardson, 2020). Japanese is also one of the foreign languages that is quite difficult to learn, especially regarding the use of the three writing systems, katakana and kanji.

Hiragana is the original Japanese script, *katakana* is a script commonly used to write vocabulary originating from foreign languages, and writing names of countries outside Japan, while *kanji* is a script originating from China. Of these three writing systems, *kanji* is the most difficult type of script. As explained by Rasiban (2018), the *kanji* script is one of the factors that complicates the learning of Japanese. *Kanji* is also one of the causes of difficulties for Japanese language learners in various parts of the world. According to Kim (2018), *kanji* is a complex writing system that complicates Japanese language learning because of its high level of complexity. In the context of university students, these difficulties are seen in the process of memorizing *kanji* graphemes, understanding meanings, distinguishing *onyomi-kunyomi* readings, and applying them in *jukugo* or compound characters (Tsuji-mura, 2013).

Difficulties in learning kanji are also experienced by beginner-level Indonesian learners. Difficulties in reading and writing Japanese have become common problems among learners of foreign languages. As stated by Rasiban (2018), one of the causes of difficulties in learning Japanese among Indonesian learners is the use of kanji characters. This issue is also supported by previous research. Sulistiyani's study (2020), titled "*Analysis of Difficulties in Learning Kanji among Students of the Japanese Language Education Program, Class of 2018, at UNNES*", found that 28 students experienced difficulties in understanding kanji, because they had to distinguish between *onyomi* and *kunyomi* readings. Furthermore, according to Candra's research (2020), titled "*Difficulties of Japanese Language Education Students at Universitas Negeri Padang in Learning Kanji in the Basic Kanji Course*", students experienced difficulties in reading kanji and confusion in determining *onyomi* and *kunyomi* readings. This study also found that students tended to be lazy in memorizing kanji due to the large number of characters that had to be learned.

According to Candra (2020), the main factors causing students' difficulties in learning kanji include: (1) the large number of kanji characters that must be learned; (2) lack of motivation to learn kanji; and (3) the complexity of the Japanese language environment.

Based on previous studies discussing difficulties in learning kanji, this research focuses on identifying the difficulties experienced by students and the strategies used to overcome them. Previous studies only discussed the difficulties experienced by students without explaining the strategies used. For example, Khairunnisa's study (2014), titled "*Analysis of Difficulties in Learning Kanji among Students of the Japanese Language Education Program at Universitas Negeri Semarang*", only examined the causes of students' difficulties in learning kanji. Likewise, Evenson & Lester's study (2010), titled "*Perception and Practice of Japanese Language Students toward Kanji Learning*", only discussed students' perceptions of kanji learning and the learning process.

Based on this background, this study aims to identify students' perceptions in learning kanji and to examine the difficulties they face, factors causing these difficulties, and the learning strategies they use. This research is expected to contribute theoretically to studies on kanji learning.

The study was preceded by a preliminary interview regarding students' perceptions of learning Japanese. According to Abdullah & Kadir (2021), Japanese language learning at the university level is a process involving teaching and learning activities aimed at improving students' Japanese language skills. The learning process takes place through interactions between lecturers and students, as well as among students themselves. This study specifically discusses students' perceptions of difficulties in learning kanji, namely reading, understanding meaning, writing, and distinguishing between *onyomi* and *kunyomi* readings. Therefore, this research aims to identify the perceptions of students in the Japanese Language Education Program at Al Azhar University regarding difficulties in learning kanji.

Previous studies in Indonesia related to students' perceptions have been conducted by Yulianti (2013), in a study titled "*University Students' Perceptions of English Learning Problems at Al Azhar Indonesia University*."

The differences between this study and previous studies lie in the focus of the research and the variables examined. This study examines students' perceptions regarding difficulties in learning kanji among students of the Japanese Language Education Program, whereas previous studies focused on students' perceptions in foreign language learning.

2. Research Method

This study used a descriptive qualitative method aimed at describing students' perceptions of difficulties in learning kanji. The research approach used was descriptive qualitative, because the study was based on natural situations that occurred during the learning process. The research subjects were students of the Japanese Language Education Program at Al Azhar University. The research participants consisted of 50 students from the Japanese Language Education Program at Al Azhar University.

The data collection technique in this study used a questionnaire with Google Forms. The questionnaire employed a Likert scale to measure students' attitudes, opinions, and perceptions related to the research topic. The data collected were based on research indicators, namely: (1) factors causing difficulties in learning kanji; (2) difficulties faced by students in learning kanji; and (3) strategies used by students in overcoming difficulties in learning kanji. The data obtained were then analyzed descriptively using frequency tables and percentages to explain students' perceptions regarding difficulties in learning kanji.

Data analysis in this study used descriptive qualitative analysis to describe students' responses to each questionnaire item. The results of this analysis were interpreted to determine students' perceptions regarding difficulties in learning kanji based on both indicators.

3. Results and Discussion

Based on the questionnaire and interview results conducted with students of the Japanese Literature Study Program at Pakuan University and students of the Japanese Language and Culture Study Program at Darma Persada University, the findings are as follows:

Questionnaire Results of Pakuan University Students

a. Difficulty Factors

1) Saya kesulitan menghafal bentuk visual (radikal/struktur) kanji.
31 responses

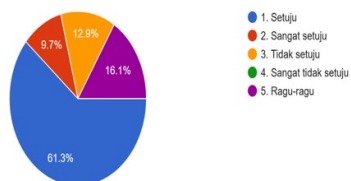


Figure 1. Pakuan University Students' Responses to Difficulties in the Visual Forms of Kanji

Table 1. Pakuan University Students' Perceptions of Difficulties in Memorizing Kanji Visual Forms

No	Response Category	Number of Respondents
1	Agree	19
2	Strongly Agree	3
3	Disagree	4
4	Strongly Disagree	0
5	Undecided / Neutral	5

Based on the responses to the statement "I have difficulty memorizing the visual form (radical/structure) of kanji," the following results were obtained. Out of a total of 31 respondents, 19 students answered "agree," and 3 students answered "strongly agree." These responses indicate that most students believe the visual aspect of kanji, particularly its radical and structural form, constitutes an obstacle during kanji learning. This aligns with Nakayama (2021), who stated that the effect of visual similarity is one of the hurdles in learning kanji. Furthermore, there were 4 student responses answering "disagree," and none answered "strongly disagree." Meanwhile, 5 student respondents answered "undecided." Based on these neutral survey responses, the author can infer that a small number of students do not fully understand what kanji radicals and structures are. Overall, from the questionnaire results above, it can be concluded that the visual similarity effect of kanji and the structure of kanji pose obstacles for basic-level students. This is because the average learner still has minimal knowledge about *kanji*, alongside the learner's background of using the Latin alphabet. This aligns with Paxton (2021), who explained that average learners find it difficult to learn kanji forms because the background of second language learners does not involve the use of *kanji* characters.

2) Saya Kesulitan memahami makna ganda dari sebuah kanji .
31 responses

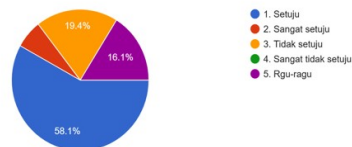


Figure 2. Pakuan University Students' Responses to Difficulties in Understanding the Multiple Meanings of Kanji

Table 2. Pakuan University Students' Perceptions of Difficulties in Understanding the Multiple Meanings of Kanji

No	Response Category	Number of Respondents
1	Agree	18
2	Strongly Agree	2
3	Disagree	6
4	Strongly Disagree	0
5	Undecided / Neutral	5

In the statement "I have difficulty understanding the multiple meanings of a kanji," most respondents indicated having difficulties. This is evident from the total of 31 respondents, where 18 students answered "agree" and 2 students chose "strongly agree." These findings show that the majority of students encounter obstacles when they have to understand a *kanji* that has more than one meaning. Meanwhile, there were 6 respondents who answered "disagree," and no respondents answered "strongly disagree." As many as 5 respondents stated "undecided," indicating that a small number of students have not yet formed a definitive stance regarding this issue. In conclusion, overall, these results demonstrate that multiple meanings in *kanji* represent a significant factor in *kanji* learning for most students. This aligns with the theory explained by Rodsuk (2018), which states that learning kanji is considered difficult because learners must simultaneously comprehend the form, pronunciation, meaning, and usage of kanji.

1) Penggunaan metode menghafal (flashcard, drilling, menulis berulang) membantu saya.
31 responses

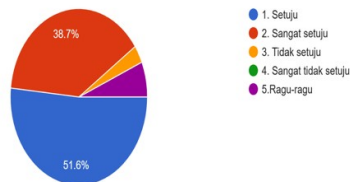


Figure 3. Pakuan University Students' Responses to the Effectiveness of the Repetition Method

Table 3. Pakuan University Students' Perceptions of the Use of the Repetition Method in Kanji Learning

No	Response Category	Number of Respondents
1	Agree	16
2	Strongly Agree	12
3	Disagree	1
4	Strongly Disagree	0
5	Undecided / Neutral	2

Based on the statement "The use of memorization methods (*flashcards*, *drilling*, repetitive writing) helps me," the results show that the majority of respondents expressed strong agreement. Out of a total of 31 respondents, 16 students chose "agree" and 12 students chose "strongly agree." These questionnaire results indicate that repetition-based memorization strategies—such as *flashcards*, *drilling*, or repetitive writing exercises—are considered highly effective by most students in assisting their *kanji* learning process. Only 1 student expressed disagreement and no respondent strongly disagreed, demonstrating that barriers to this method are almost non-existent. Meanwhile, 2 students chose "undecided,"

indicating a small number of students who remain uncertain about the effectiveness of the method. Based on these results, the author concludes that overall, repetition-based memorization methods are still regarded as an approach that can support most students in learning *kanji*. This aligns with Kim's (2018) research findings, which state that repetition strategies can help improve memory retention in kanji learning.

2. I find it easier to learn kanji with the help of pictures/illustrations. (31 responses)

1. Agree: **54.8%**
2. Strongly agree: **16.1%**
3. Disagree: **12.9%**
4. Strongly disagree: **0%**
5. Undecided / Neutral: **16.1%**

2) Saya lebih mudah belajar kanji dengan bantuan gambar/ilustrasi.
31 responses

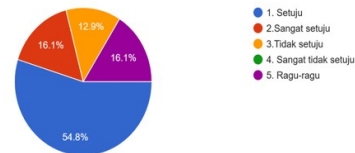


Figure 4. Pakuan University Students' Responses to the Use of Pictures/Illustrations in Kanji Learning

Table 4. Pakuan University Students' Perceptions of Using Pictures/Illustrations in Kanji Learning

No	Response Category	Number of Respondents
1	Agree	17
2	Strongly Agree	5
3	Disagree	4
4	Strongly Disagree	0
5	Undecided / Neutral	5

Based on the survey results for the statement "I find it easier to learn kanji with the help of pictures/illustrations," the majority of respondents expressed agreement with the statement. Out of 31 respondents, 17 students chose "agree" and 5 students chose "strongly agree." Based on these results, the author can explain that most students believe the use of visual media, such as pictures or illustrations, can assist them in memorizing and understanding *kanji*. Meanwhile, only 4 students chose "disagree." Furthermore, there were 5 students who chose "undecided," indicating that a small number of students have not yet formed a definitive stance regarding the effectiveness of visual aids in *kanji* learning. Generally, these results indicate that a *kanji* learning approach that utilizes visual support possesses positive potential in enhancing the ease of learning for most students. This aligns with the theory proposed by Everson (2011), who explained that educators need to

comprehend the characteristics of students' learning difficulties in order to determine appropriate learning strategies that correspond to the students' needs in learning kanji.

Questionnaire Results of Dharma Persada University Students

a. Students' Difficulty Factors in Learning Kanji

The factors causing students' difficulties in learning *kanji* can be observed from the following questionnaire results:

1. *I have difficulty memorizing the visual form (radical/structure) of kanji.*

(54 responses)

1. Agree: **38.9%**
2. Strongly agree: **9.3%**
3. Disagree: **22.2%**
4. Strongly disagree: [Data percentage cut off on chart / ~1.9%]
5. Undecided / Neutral: **27.8%**

1) Saya kesulitan menghafal bentuk visual (radikal/struktur) kanji.
54 responses

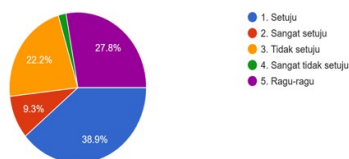


Figure 5. Dharma Persada University Students' Responses to Kanji Visual Form Difficulties

Table 5. Dharma Persada University Students' Perceptions of Difficulties in Memorizing Kanji Visual Forms

No	Response Category	Number of Respondents
1	Agree	21
2	Strongly Agree	5
3	Disagree	12
4	Strongly Disagree	1
5	Undecided / Neutral	15

Regarding the statement "I have difficulty memorizing the visual form (radical/structure) of *kanji*," most respondents indicated the presence of difficulties in the visual aspect of *kanji*. Out of a total of 54 respondents, 21 students answered "agree" and 5 students answered "strongly agree." This indicates that more than half of the respondents feel that the structure and radical forms of *kanji* pose a distinct challenge in the learning process. Meanwhile, there were 12 students who chose "disagree" and 1 respondent who answered "strongly disagree," which means a small number of students do not experience significant difficulties in remembering the visual forms of *kanji*. In addition, 15 students answered "undecided," demonstrating that some students have not yet formed a

definitive. those responses may be due to differences in proficiency levels or prior experience in learning *kanji*. Overall, these results indicate that the visual form of *kanji*, including its radicals and structure, constitutes a dominant source of difficulty in *kanji* learning for students. Consequently, a visualization-based learning strategy or semantic approach is required to help students memorize the forms and structures of *kanji* more effectively. This aligns with the theory proposed by Nakayama (2021), which states that the effect of visual similarity is one of the hurdles in learning *kanji*. Furthermore, Paxton (2021) also noted that learners with an alphabetical background experience difficulties in mastering the forms and structures of *kanji*.

2. *I have difficulty understanding the multiple meanings of a kanji.*

(54 responses)

1. Agree: **51.9%**
2. Strongly agree: **18.5%**
3. Disagree: **20.4%**
4. Strongly disagree: **0%**
5. Undecided / Neutral: **9.3%**

2) Saya kesulitan memahami makna ganda dari sebuah kanji.
54 responses

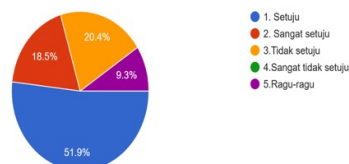


Figure 6. Dharma Persada University Students' Responses to Difficulties in Understanding the Multiple Meanings of Kanji

Table 6. Dharma Persada University Students' Perceptions of Difficulties in Understanding the Multiple Meanings of Kanji

No	Response Category	Number of Respondents
1	Agree	28
2	Strongly Agree	10
3	Disagree	11
4	Strongly Disagree	0
5	Undecided / Neutral	5

stance toward these difficulties. This that most students encounter obstacles in understanding polysemy or multiple meanings possessed by a single *kanji* character, which represents one of the complex characteristics within the Japanese writing system. Meanwhile, 11 students answered "disagree" and no respondents answered "strongly disagree". In addition, 5 students chose "undecided," indicating that a small number of students have not yet formed a definitive stance

toward the level of difficulty in understanding various *kanji* meanings.

Overall, these results demonstrate that multiple meanings in *kanji* serve as a significant source of difficulty for students because it demands contextual understanding and strong semantic association. Accordingly, a learning strategy that emphasizes the context of use and semantic relations between *kanji* can help mitigate difficulties in understanding ambiguous *kanji* meanings. This aligns with the theory explained by Rodsuk (2018), who stated that learning *kanji* is considered difficult because learners must simultaneously comprehend the form, pronunciation, meaning, and usage of *kanji*.

Kanji Learning Strategies of Darma Persada University Students

The learning strategies of Darma Persada University students can be observed from the following questionnaire results:

1. The use of memorization methods (flashcards, drilling, repetitive writing) helps me. (54 responses)

1. Agree: **53.7%**
2. Strongly agree: **35.2%**
3. Disagree: [Data percentage cut off on chart / ~3.7%]
4. Strongly disagree: [Data percentage cut off on chart / 0%]
5. Undecided / Neutral: **7.4%**

1) Penggunaan metode menghafal (flashcard, drilling, menulis berulang) membantu saya.
54 responses

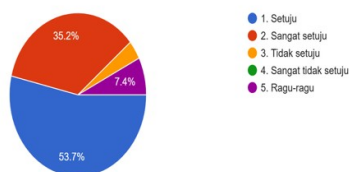


Figure 7. Darma Persada University Students' Responses to the Effectiveness of Repetitive Methods

Table 7. Darma Persada University Students' Perceptions of Using Repetitive Methods in Kanji Learning

No	Response Category	Number of Respondents
1	Agree	29
2	Strongly Agree	19
3	Disagree	2
4	Strongly Disagree	0
5	Undecided / Neutral	4

Based on the survey results for the statement "The use of memorization methods (flashcards, drilling, repetitive writing) helps me," the majority of respondents expressed agreement.

Out of a total of 54 respondents, 29 students answered "agree" and 19 students chose "strongly agree". These results indicate that the application of conventional or structured memorization strategies is considered highly effective in helping students master basic-level *kanji*. Meanwhile, only 2 students expressed disagreement and no respondent strongly disagreed, indicating that this method has minimum resistance among learners. Additionally, 4 students answered "undecided".

In general, these findings show that repetitive writing and direct memorization exercises remain relevant and supportive for most students at Darma Persada University. This aligns with Kim's (2018) research, which explains that mechanical repetition or drilling is one of the effective ways to strengthen cognitive retention when learning non-alphabetic characters like *kanji*.

1. Agree: **42.6%**
2. Strongly agree: **11.1%**
3. Disagree: **24.1%**
4. Strongly disagree: **0%**
5. Undecided / Neutral: **22.2%**

2) Saya lebih mudah belajar *kanji* dengan bantuan gambar/ilustrasi.
54 responses

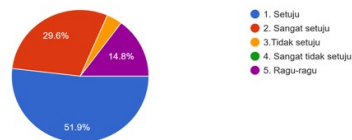


Figure 8. Chart of Darma Persada University Students' Responses to the Use of Pictures/Illustrations in Kanji Learning

Table 8. Darma Persada University Students' Perceptions of Using Pictures/Illustrations in Kanji Learning

No	Response Category	Number of Respondents
1	Agree	28
2	Strongly Agree	16
3	Disagree	2
4	Strongly Disagree	0
5	Undecided / Neutral	8

Regarding the statement "I find it easier to learn *kanji* with the help of pictures/illustrations," the majority of respondents expressed agreement. Out of a total of 54 respondents, 28 students answered "agree" and 16 students answered "strongly agree". These results indicate that more than 80% of the students feel that visual support, such as pictures or illustrations, helps them understand and memorize *kanji* more easily. This suggests that a visual-based *kanji* learning approach can enhance learning effectiveness, particularly in associating *kanji* forms with specific meanings or concepts.

Meanwhile, only 2 students answered "disagree" and no respondents chose "strongly disagree". A total of 8 students answered "undecided," indicating that a small number of students do not yet have a clear perception regarding the effectiveness of utilizing images in learning. Overall, these findings imply that visual and illustrative *kanji* learning strategies are very well received by students and are considered helpful in both the comprehension and memorization processes of *kanji*. This aligns with the opinion of Everson (2011), who explained that educators need to comprehend the characteristics of students' learning difficulties to determine appropriate learning strategies that correspond to the student's needs.

5. Conclusion

Based on the research findings, it can be concluded that students of the Japanese Literature Study Program at Pakuan University and Darma Persada University perceive *kanji* as one of the most difficult aspects of basic-level Japanese language learning. The main difficulties encountered by students include the complexity of *kanji*'s visual forms, the high number of stroke counts, the differences between *kunyomi* and *onyomi* readings, and the existence of multiple meanings (polysemy) within a single *kanji* character. These difficulties are influenced by the students' educational background; since they are accustomed to utilizing an alphabetic system, they are less familiar with logographic writing systems such as *kanji*. Nevertheless, students still demonstrate a relatively good learning motivation through the use of various learning strategies. These include repetition methods (*flashcards*, *drilling*, and repetitive writing exercises) as well as the utilization of visual media such as pictures, illustrations, and *kanji* animations. These findings indicate that visual-based and contextual learning approaches can help enhance students' comprehension and memory retention when learning *kanji*.

Research Implications

The results of this study indicate that the difficulties students face in learning *kanji*, particularly at the basic level, necessitate the implementation of a more meaningful and structured student learning approach. This approach should specifically focus on visual forms, *kanji* meanings, and *kanji* structures. Consequently, the learning process should not merely place an emphasis on rote memorization, but also on semantic comprehension, *kanji* functions, and the relationships between *kanji* forms contextually.

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