

Mastery of Kanji Character Meanings through Visual Image Methods among Japanese Language Learners in North Sumatra

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to investigate the difficulties Japanese language learners face in understanding and mastering the meanings of kanji characters, as well as to evaluate the effectiveness of the image-based visual method in helping learners comprehend and master *kanji*. A qualitative approach with a descriptive method was employed in this study. The data were collected through pre-tests and post-tests administered to 12 Japanese language learners at Universitas Harapan Medan. The results indicate that prior to the image-based visual learning method, students encountered difficulties in mastering the meanings of kanji characters. The pre-test scores revealed challenges in recalling the meanings of kanji, the correct order of strokes, and the pronunciation associated with kanji. However, after the implementation of the image-based visual learning method, there was a significant improvement in the post-test scores. The average score increased from 37.92 in the pre-test to 80.42 in the post-test. Based on these findings, it can be concluded that Japanese language learners struggle to master kanji meanings. However, the image-based visual learning method proved effective in helping them understand and master kanji, with significant improvements observed. This learning method helped learners recall and understand kanji characters and overcome the difficulties they faced previously.

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1. Introduction

Kanji characters are graphic symbols used in the Japanese language, and they originate from Chinese civilization. In Japanese, kanji is used alongside hiragana and katakana. Kanji represents nouns, adjectives, and expressions (Gapur & Mulyadi, 2018, p. 111). There are approximately 2,136 basic kanji characters that serve as the standard to be mastered in the Japanese language, and those designated as essential for education (from elementary school to junior high school in Japan) are known as *jouyou kanji* (常用漢字), totalling about 1,945 characters (Lensun, 2017, p. 107). Japanese language learners often encounter difficulties learning many kanji characters (Paxton &

Svetanant, 2013; Visiaty & Yulianti, 2013), particularly those from alphabetic language backgrounds, such as Indonesian.

Kanji characters convey meaning through shapes that mimic the form of objects or represent signs indicating the meaning of an object, attribute, action, or other indicators. Thus, kanji is also called a writing system based on pictographic characters (Pujiono, 2022; Rose, 2017). Kanji is formed through countable strokes or lines, and the number of strokes in a kanji is referred to as *kakusuu*, which can amount to dozens of strokes. Within kanji, there are components known as *bushu*, which denote the character and meaning of the kanji. Some kanji share the same *bushu*, allowing identification of their meanings through these components (Mori, 2020; Sudjianto & Ahmad, 2014).

In North Sumatra, Universitas Harapan Medan is the only private higher education institution that offers a Japanese Language Study Program. The Japanese Language Study Program at Universitas Harapan Medan includes courses on kanji, ranging from basic to advanced levels. These courses aim to introduce one of the Japanese scripts, which plays an essential role in supporting two language skills: writing and reading.

However, based on the observations, the teaching methods employed by most kanji instructors at Universitas Harapan Medan remain conventional. They teach kanji writing in sequence and pronunciation based on textbooks. Students are expected to memorize the writing order of kanji characters without any methods to facilitate memorization. This has led to poor retention of kanji characters, resulting in students not fully mastering kanji writing. Inadequate mastery of kanji writing has caused students to feel less confident in writing and reading kanji. Additionally, instructors still use Teacher-Centered Learning, which often leads to student boredom in kanji lessons, potentially diminishing their interest in the subject (Fitriana, 2019; Rasiban, 2013).

Given the challenge of thousands of kanji characters and their complex writing system, memorizing the meanings of each kanji is not an easy task. Furthermore, learners face the issue of ineffective kanji instruction. Therefore, a specialized method is needed to strengthen memory in learning kanji meanings. One potential solution is to memorize kanji meanings through visual images. The visual image method involves directly associating the kanji character with a tangible object that it represents. For example, the kanji for 'tree' (木, *ki*) can be visualized as follows.

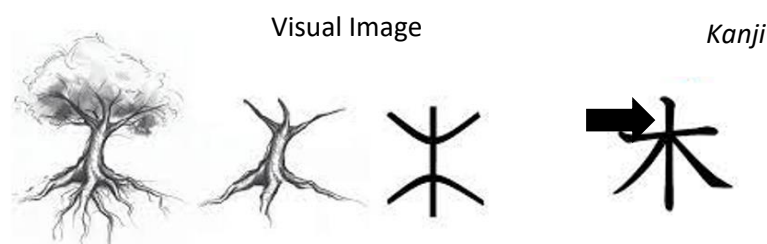


Figure 1. Visual images of the meaning of *kanji* letters

Using the visual image method, also known as pictograms, learners will find it easier to remember the meaning of the kanji character 木 (*ki*). This method transforms kanji, a visual symbol often tricky for human memory to retain, into a form easier for the brain to process by converting it into a vivid or static image (Yulia, 2023). Therefore, it is crucial to conduct research focused on applying this visual image method to Japanese language learners in North Sumatra, particularly at Universitas Harapan Medan.

Previous studies have highlighted various challenges faced by Japanese language learners in mastering kanji. For instance, research by Visiaty & Yulianti (2013) shows that learners from non-kanji countries, such as Indonesia, encounter difficulties due to differences in script typology. This study provides valuable insights into the challenges faced by Japanese language learners. Additionally, Yulia's (2023) research discusses the visual kanji method using pictogram images to enhance kanji writing skills. Her experimental study, involving 17 students from the Japanese Language Education Program at Universitas Negeri Padang, found that using pictogram images significantly assisted learners in memorizing the writing of basic kanji characters. Moreover, Fitriani & Ginanjar's (2022) study is also relevant, as they identified the difficulties in learning kanji and proposed strategies to minimize these challenges. Their study emphasizes the importance of providing references to kanji meanings, which can aid in understanding each kanji component, making this approach effective.

Based on these previous studies, the current research is titled "Mastery of Kanji Meaning Using the Visual Image Method Among Japanese Language Learners in North Sumatra". It focuses on exploring the application of visual image methods, such as pictograms, to help Japanese language learners in North Sumatra understand and master the meanings of kanji characters.

The research questions for this study are as follows:

1. What difficulties do Japanese language learners at Universitas Harapan Medan face in learning and mastering the meaning of kanji characters?
2. To what extent is the visual image method, such as pictograms, effective in helping Japanese language learners at Universitas Harapan Medan understand and master the meaning of kanji characters?

Based on these research questions, this study aims to identify and understand the challenges Japanese language learners face at Universitas Harapan Medan face in mastering the meaning of kanji characters. Furthermore, the study will evaluate the effectiveness of the visual image method, particularly pictograms, in aiding learners in understanding and mastering the meanings of kanji. Finally, this study provided practical recommendations or solutions to enhance learners' understanding of kanji meanings through the visual image method.

2. Method

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive method (Moleong, 2014; Sutopo, 2006). The qualitative approach is employed to gain an in-depth understanding of the experiences of Japanese language learners in studying and mastering the meanings of kanji characters. The descriptive method describes and analyses the data obtained from the respondents. This study employs pre-test and post-test analysis techniques to assess the method's effectiveness (Gapur & Taulia, 2023). The study was conducted on October 30, 2023, in the Japanese Language Study Program classroom at Universitas Harapan Medan. Numerical calculations in this study are limited to simple scoring to explain the phenomena and facts obtained in the field, which are helpful in answering the research problem.

The data sources in this study come from the respondents involved, namely Japanese language learners at Universitas Harapan Medan. A total of 12 second-year students participated in the study.

The data were obtained through pre-test and post-test tests. The pre-test and post-test used the same questions, consisting of 20 items related to the meanings of kanji studied in class. Respondents were asked to write the meanings of each kanji. Each

correct answer was awarded 5 points, so if all answers were accurate, the respondent would receive a score of 100. Below is an example of the pre-test and post-test items.

Table 1. Examples of pre-test and post-test items

No	Kanji	Meaning
1.	東
2.	寒
3.	灯
4.	沖
5.	流

After the pre-test, the respondents were given 60 minutes for learning using the kanji memorization method through visual images, as taught by the instructor. The research team observed the learning process to collect data regarding the use of the visual image method in understanding the meanings of kanji characters.



Figure 2. Stages of Pre-test and Post-test Implementation

To assess the improvement in scores from each respondent, the research team prepared a post-test with the same questions as the pre-test. The results from the post-test will be used to analyze the effectiveness of the visual image method in helping Japanese language learners understand and master the meanings of kanji characters.

3. Result and Discussion

3.1. Pre-test and Post-test Results

The results of this study show the pre-test results of Japanese language learning students at Universitas Harapan as follows:

Table 2. Pre-test Results

No.	Responden (Nama)	Skor
1.	Respondent 1	35
2.	Respondent 2	40
3.	Respondent 3	30
4.	Respondent 4	50
5.	Respondent 5	45
6.	Respondent 6	35

7.	Respondent 7	40
8.	Respondent 8	30
9.	Respondent 9	45
10.	Respondent 10	40
11.	Respondent 11	30
12.	Respondent 12	35

The data from the pre-test in Table 2 shows the total correct scores from each kanji-meaning response provided by each respondent. The highest score achieved is 50, while the lowest is 30, with an average score of 37.92 points across the twelve respondents.

The respondents' post-test results were recorded after kanji instruction using the visual image method.

Table 3. Post-test Results

No.	Nama	Skor
1.	Respondent 1	80
2.	Respondent 2	85
3.	Respondent 3	80
4.	Respondent 4	95
5.	Respondent 5	95
6.	Respondent 6	75
7.	Respondent 7	80
8.	Respondent 8	75
9.	Respondent 9	85
10.	Respondent 10	80
11.	Respondent 11	70
12.	Respondent 12	70

The post-test data in Table 3 indicates that, out of the 12 respondents, the highest score achieved was 95, attained by Respondent 4 and Respondent 5. The lowest score recorded was 70, achieved by Respondent 11 and Respondent 12. The average score across all respondents, calculated from the data in Table 3, is 80.42.

3.2. Discussion

3.2.1. Challenges Faced by Japanese Language Learners in Mastering Kanji Meanings

While observing the learning process, researchers noted that Japanese language learners at Universitas Harapan Medan encountered difficulties mastering kanji meanings. This challenge was evident from the pre-test scores, reflecting students' struggles remembering kanji meanings. Throughout the teaching session, students frequently expressed their difficulty with kanji characters, which differ greatly from the familiar alphabetical characters they are used to. Additionally, students had trouble recalling the stroke order (*bushuu*) and the phonetic sounds associated with each kanji, leading to frequent lapses in remembering kanji meanings even after explanations from the lecturer.

These findings align with previous studies by Visiaty & Yulianti (2013) and Fitriani & Ginanjar (2022), which similarly revealed kanji as a major obstacle in learning

Japanese. Their research highlighted similar difficulties faced by learners from non-kanji-using countries, such as Indonesia, who often struggle with the distinct typology of kanji characters.

Thus, mastering kanji meanings is a significant challenge for Japanese language learners at Universitas Harapan Medan, as observed by the researchers and corroborated by prior studies.

3.2.2. Effectiveness of the Visual Image Method in Assisting Japanese Language Learners

Following the introduction of the kanji memorization method using visual images, there was a notable improvement in students' scores, with the average score rising from 37.92 on the pre-test to 80.42 on the post-test. This substantial increase suggests that the visual image method effectively aided learners in grasping and retaining the meanings of kanji characters.

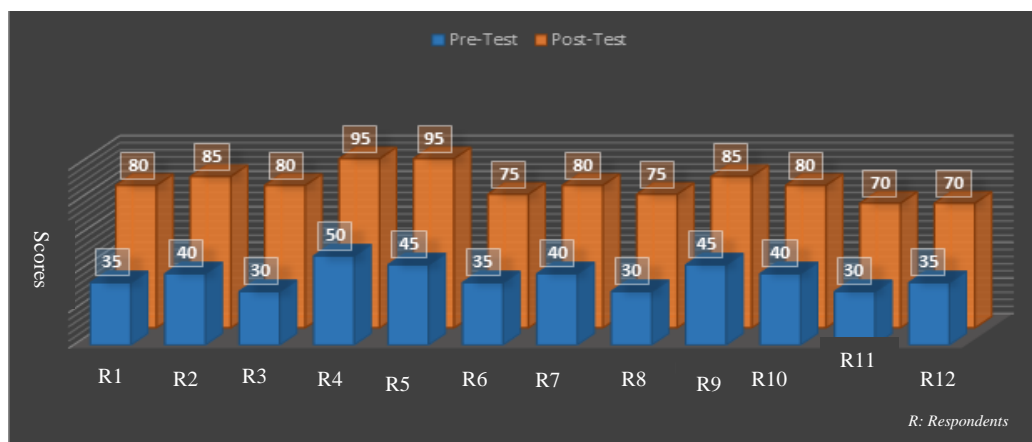


Figure 3. Analysis Based on Comparison of Pre-Test and Post-Test Results







In Figure 3, the bar graph illustrates the comparison between the pre-test and post-test scores, showing the positive impact of using visual images in kanji learning. Initially, all 12 students scored relatively low on the pre-test, indicating difficulties memorizing and writing kanji characters.

However, after the instructional session incorporating visual images, each student improved their scores. This result highlights that visual aids can enhance students' abilities to remember and write kanji more effectively. The graph supports the view that visual imagery plays a crucial role in helping learners remember and understand kanji, thus alleviating some of the challenges they encounter in the learning process.

The post-test results reveal a notable score increase for each student, suggesting that the visual image method made it easier for them to recall kanji characters. The instructor utilized kanji visual representations inspired by real-life objects to aid memory retention, as shown in the examples provided in Table 4.

Table 4. Examples of Kanji Visual Images Taught to Student Respondents

KANJI	MEANINGS	VISUAL IMAGES
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東	Sunrise through the trees in the east	
灯	Lighting a lamp with fire	
沖	A ship in the middle of the open sea	
淵	Deep water swallows trees.	
災	Flood and fire disasters	
伝	People transmit clouds of infectious diseases.	

In this context, visual images, such as pictograms or other illustrative aids, can significantly enhance the speed at which individuals absorb information. Most people tend to remember visual information more quickly than written text, making visual-based learning an engaging and effective approach for students. This visual method simplifies the recall of kanji meanings, offering a memorable and enjoyable learning experience. Yulia's 2023 study also supports this, indicating that pictogram use aids learners in remembering how to write basic kanji characters, reinforcing the effectiveness of visuals in kanji mastery.

4. Conclusion

This study concludes that Japanese language learners at Universitas Harapan Medan face significant challenges in mastering kanji characters. These difficulties were evident in the low pre-test scores, reflecting challenges in remembering kanji meanings, writing sequences, and associated phonetic sounds. Mastering *kanji's* meaning is thus a primary challenge for Japanese language learners.

The findings also demonstrate that learning through visual imagery is highly effective in helping Japanese language learners understand and retain kanji meanings. Following the instruction with visual images, there was a significant improvement in the students' post-test scores.

However, the study's limitations include a small sample size, limited to 12 Japanese language learners at Universitas Harapan Medan, which restricts the generalizability of these findings. This study did not account for other factors influencing learning outcomes, such as individual motivation and aptitude.

The implications of this study suggest that the visual image-based learning method can be an effective alternative for facilitating kanji learning among Japanese language students. This suggests that visuals, such as pictograms and other imagery, can significantly impact learners' comprehension and recall of kanji characters. These findings could support the development of more effective and efficient Japanese language learning methods in the future.

For future research, it is recommended to involve a larger sample size for more representative results. Future studies could also consider additional factors influencing kanji learning, such as student's motivation levels, alternative teaching techniques, and other visual media.

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