

Perceived Effectiveness of Teaching Materials for Beginners of Japanese

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Abstract

This research aimed to study the effectiveness of teaching and learning material usage as perceived by Japanese language beginners. The study utilized teaching and learning materials such as stroke order practice, pictures, and activities to assist the learning process, which involves memorizing Hiragana, Katakana, and Kanji characters. A total of 35 respondents who registered for the Reading and Writing Japanese Scripts course participated in the study, and 80% of them passed the course with grades ranging from A to C. The study also showed that the teaching and learning materials used were overall very beneficial to students. The study recommends the use of teaching and learning materials and activities to enhance the learning process for beginners of the Japanese language. The students also provided feedback that can be used to modify and improve future teaching and learning materials.

Keywords: Teaching materials; Japanese scripts; Hiragana; Katakana; Kanji

Introduction

The relationship between Japan and Thailand has been mutually supportive, with frequent visits between the Royal Family of Thailand and the Imperial Family of Japan over the years. This has led to active exchanges and close cooperation in various areas, including trade, investment, cultural exchange, and political and security interaction in the international arena, as stated by a speech titled "Thai-Japanese Relations: its future beyond six hundred years" by His Excellency Mr. Koji Komachi, Ambassador of Japan to the Kingdom of Thailand in 2010.

Historically, there were as many as 45 ethnic groups in Ayutthaya, including Japanese, Chinese, Dutch, Portuguese, French, and British, as well as those from neighboring areas of today's Thailand (Ministry of Social Development and Human Security, 2023).

In addition, Damrongchai (2013) mentioned in her study of Japanese Speaking Personnel Proficiency Deficiencies: A Case Study of Japanese Education in Thailand that Japanese language education was first introduced in 1947 in Thailand. Since then, Japanese language courses at both secondary and tertiary levels have grown remarkably (Kakazu, 2010). According to statistics, Thailand is now ranked 7th in the world and 2nd in the Southeast Asian region after Indonesia in the number of Japanese learners, with nearly 720,000.

Despite the continuous interest in Japanese culture and language, learning Japanese as a third language is not easy, as it is not a language that is spoken daily in Thailand and has a complicated grammatical structure, equipped with three types of alphabets. Consequently, some Japanese language learners may give up in the middle of their studies due to the complexity of the language structure.

To address this issue, teachers need to combine knowledge and technology to develop new tools and materials that can motivate students to pursue Japanese language learning. In this study, the researcher aims to investigate the effectiveness of selected teaching and learning materials for Japanese language beginners who have no prior knowledge of the language.

Research Objectives

This study has three main objectives as follows:

1. To examine the perceived effectiveness of teaching and learning materials usage for Japanese language beginners.
2. To explore the level of benefits of teaching and learning materials for students
3. To find out the extent to which the materials can be used as a guideline for teachers in designing future teaching and learning materials.

Literature Review

Student-centered teaching models are popular in classrooms nowadays as they allow for interaction from students rather than one-way communication from teachers. Teaching and learning materials for classroom activities are essential for students or learners to achieve in their studies. According to Chaoha (1990), the opportunity for every student to interact and become a

part of teaching and learning can benefit teachers from feedback for future curriculum design and development. Chaoha (1990) also stated that teaching is a communication in which teachers act as messengers, and knowledge and content are the message delivered through teaching materials as a medium. These teaching materials may be in the form of pictures, sounds, or activities.

Teaching materials are in fact a tool or a procedure used as a medium for teachers to impart knowledge, attitude, and skills to students effectively. According to Chaoha (1990), teaching materials are a medium or a vehicle that communicates knowledge to learners, so that they can achieve the estimated objectives. Additionally, undoubtedly, teaching materials certainly help teachers manage their class and deliver better communication with students. Teachers can also use materials as a part of classroom activities to help students understand by practicing. Materials help reduce the time required to communicate ideas to students. Sang-ong (1983) added that teaching materials benefit students as follows:

1. Increasing their experience in interacting with knowledge.
2. Helping teachers design a variety of experiences for students.
3. Stimulating students' responses.
4. Supporting a variety of classroom activities.
5. Helping students visualize something that cannot be modeled or shown in the classroom.

6. Helping teachers communicate definitions to students.
7. Helping teachers diagnose and find solutions to solve problems.

Kemp (1985) states that teaching materials help teachers design an appropriate curriculum. By selecting and utilizing proper teaching and learning materials in the class or workshop, objectives can be achieved effectively and efficiently by the following benefits:

1. Motivating students to have a commitment and interest in learning.
2. Providing meaningful experiences to students.
3. Creating positive attitudes and impressions in learning experiences.
4. Explaining knowledge, skills, and systems efficiently.
5. Providing opportunities for students to be more interactive in learning.

According to Kemp (1985), academic scholars classify teaching materials by characters, experiences, or properties into the following four major types:

1. Classroom supplies are considered small materials, such as visual aids, sounds, or various prints. Examples include transparencies, recording tapes, printing materials, textbooks, pictures, models, maps, manuals, etc.

2. Classroom equipment is considered main materials. Examples include presentation and movie projectors, tape recorders, televisions, radios, slide projectors, etc.

3. Technical media and system models include demonstrations, group presentations, workshops, etc.

4. Computer and online media, including teaching aids (CAI), computer presentations, the internet, intranet, electronic mail, the use of the www, etc.

In modern days, there are many printing materials, such as books, that can help learners visualize and stimulate their interest, even for children, such as comic books, science cartoons, fictions, science simulation sets, DIY models, etc. These modern tools induce learners' interest in studying while entertaining them at the same time.

Teachers could select appropriate materials to help students achieve their objectives in studying foreign languages, which are considered difficult to master as they are not a daily spoken language to students.

As in this study, the researchers selected and applied various teaching and learning materials in the free elective course of Reading and Writing Japanese Scripts to help students memorize Japanese characters and content, the teaching and learning materials selected can be classified into three types:

1. Electronic media, Power Point presentation, and Websites.
2. Materials for activities, games, and exercises (drills).
3. Realistic materials for roleplays and simulations.

As noted by Neancharoensuk (2012), when memorizing a large amount of information, it is beneficial to use the keyword method to make connections. Vocabulary teaching in Japanese also requires recalling key words to make it more effective for learning Japanese for beginners (Du, 2003).

In this study, the researchers connected the sounds of Japanese Hiragana with Thai words to aid Thai students in memorizing the sounds and characters shown in Figure 1 such as:

A – Using the picture of a boy has been squeezed by a python making the sound of “Ah!” in Thai.

I – Using the picture of a boy has already finished his food and already felt full as “imm” in Thai.

U – Using the picture of a woman holding a baby as “Um” in Thai.

E – Using the picture of a boy leaning himself to another side as “En” in Thai.

O – Using the picture of a boy stepping on pointy nails as making a sound “Oh!” in Thai.



Figure 1: Sounds of Japanese Hiragana with Thai words

From: <http://www.koharutoisshoni.com>

Examples of PowerPoint slides shown in Figure 2 were used together with digital sounds, as well as websites for learning daily greetings, counting, and other simple Japanese daily expressions:



Figure 2: Greetings, counting, and other simple Japanese expressions

From: <http://www.koharutoisshoni.com>

Examples of visual aids for learning from real life in Japan include posters, leaflets, and signs, which can be studied through pictures (as shown in Figure 3)



Figure 3: Visual aids for learning from real life in Japan

From: <http://www.koharutoisshoni.com>

The literature review provides an overview of the importance of using appropriate teaching and learning materials to enhance student learning experiences. The review identifies the four major types of teaching materials: classroom supplies, classroom equipment, technical media and system models, and computer and online media. Overall, it emphasizes the importance of selecting and utilizing appropriate teaching and learning materials to improve learning outcomes. The study shows that the use of electronic media and other types of materials can be effective in teaching Japanese scripts to Thai students, highlighting the potential benefits of using different types of materials in the classroom.

Research Methodology

The study population consists of all undergraduate students at Assumption University who are non-Japanese major students and have registered for the free elective course "Reading and Writing Japanese Scripts" during the first semester of 2020. The purposive sampling includes 43 students from two sections of the course.

The research instrument used is a questionnaire with two sections. The first section is the demographic data which include the participants' gender, age, level of education, Japanese language background and reason(s) to register for the course as a free elective course as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Demographic Data of the Respondents

Demographic Data		Number of Respondents	Percentage (%)
Gender	Female	28	80
	Male	7	20
Age	19	2	5.72
	20	13	37.14
	21	10	28.57
	22	7	20
	23	2	5.71
	24	1	2.86
Year of Study	Sophomore	5	14.28
	Junior	10	28.57
	Senior	19	54.29
	5 th year of study	1	2.86
Having studied Japanese Before	Yes	8	22.86
	No	27	77.14

Out of the 43 students in the class, 35 respondents (81.40%) completed the questionnaires. Table 1 indicates that 28 of the respondents (80%) who registered for the free elective course were female. Additionally, 37.14% of the respondents were 20 years old, while 28.57% were 21 years old. Among the respondents, 54.29% were seniors (4th year of study), and 28.57% were juniors (3rd year of study). Moreover, 77.14% of the respondents had not studied Japanese language before.

The second section is the self-assessment questionnaire on a one to five Likert scale which was designed specifically for undergraduate students who have not previously studied Japanese and were enrolled in this free elective Japanese course. The questionnaire includes self-assessment questions that aim to determine the usefulness of the teaching materials used in the class. It consists of 16 questions on Hiragana, 7 questions on Katakana, and 19 questions on Kanji. Also, an open-ended question was included as the last question to ask the participants' opinions on the efficacy of the materials used.

The self-assessment scales are related to the effectiveness of teaching and learning materials. It consists of five scale levels. The contents in the questionnaire include:

1. Teaching and learning materials related to Hiragana (16 questions)
2. Teaching and learning materials related to Katakana (7 questions)
3. Teaching and learning materials related to Kanji (19 questions)

Research Results

The collected data were analyzed by calculating the mean scores. Table 2 shows the interpretation of the mean scores. According to the data presented in Table 2, it can be seen that out of the 16 teaching and learning materials used for Hiragana practice, the material with the highest score was item 1, "Hiragana Writing Orders," which received a rating of 4.43 on the 5-point scale. The next highest scoring materials were item 6, "Hiragana Chart," which received a rating of 4.29, item 14, "Vocabularies and pictures," also with a rating of 4.29, and item 8, "Reading practice with Power Point," which received a score of 4.26.

Table 2: Teaching and Learning Materials for Hiragana Practice

Item	Materials	$\bar{x}$	Interpretation
1	Hiragana Writing Orders	4.43	Highly beneficial
2	Japanese Alphabet Songs	3.71	Very beneficial
3	Association Cards	4.17	Very beneficial
4	Maze Games	3.77	Very beneficial
5	Flash Cards	4.14	Very beneficial
6	Hiragana Charts	4.29	Highly beneficial
7	Matching Games	4.20	Very beneficial
8	Reading Practices with PowerPoints	4.26	Highly beneficial
9	Drawing a face from Hiragana	4.09	Very beneficial
10	Reading Exercises with Pictures	4.17	Very beneficial
11	Sing Along Songs	3.80	Very beneficial
12	Learning Greetings from CDs	3.80	Very beneficial
13	Learning Greetings from YouTube	3.89	Very beneficial
14	Vocabulary and Pictures	4.29	Highly beneficial
15	Number Counting Songs	4.06	Very beneficial
16	Memorizing numbers from Stories	4.23	Highly beneficial

As for teaching and learning materials for Katakana practice shown in Table 3, the highest score among the 7 teaching and learning materials for Katakana practice was obtained by item 1, which was "Katakana Writing Orders" with a score of 4.40 on the 5-point scale. The next two items with the highest scores were item 7 "Reading Exercises from Pictures" with a score of 4.31 and item 4 "Katakana Chart" with a score of 4.26.

Table 3: Teaching and Learning Materials for Katakana Practice

Item	Materials	$\bar{x}$	Interpretation
1	Katakana Writing Orders	4.40	Highly beneficial
2	Memorizing from Pictures	4.11	Very beneficial
3	Flash Cards	4.14	Very beneficial
4	Katakana Charts	4.26	Extremely beneficial
5	Matching Games	4.20	Very beneficial
6	Reading Practices with PowerPoints	4.20	Very beneficial
7	Reading Exercises from Pictures	4.31	Highly beneficial

In addition, for teaching and learning materials for Kanji practice, according to the data presented in Table 4, the highest score among the 19 teaching and learning materials for Kanji practice was achieved by item 5 "Matching Prices with Banknotes and Tickets" (with a score of 4.46 out of 5). The second highest score was obtained by item 6 "Reading Practices with Power Points" (with a score of 4.40 out of 5). Other materials that received high scores include no.7 "Telling Prices from Pictures".

Table 4: Teaching and Learning Materials for Kanji Practice

Item	Materials	$\bar{x}$	Interpretation
1	Kanji Made from Pictures	4.23	Highly beneficial
2	Picture Cards	4.29	Highly beneficial
3	Explaining from Pictures	4.31	Highly beneficial
4	Questions and Answers from Pictures	4.34	Highly beneficial
5	Matching Prices with Banknotes and Tickets	4.46	Highly beneficial
6	Flash Cards	4.29	Highly beneficial
7	Telling Prices from Pictures	4.37	Highly beneficial
8	Looking at a Watch and Telling Time	4.37	Highly beneficial
9	Telling Telephone Numbers	4.37	Highly beneficial
10	Listening to Telephone numbers from CDs	3.80	Very beneficial
11	Memorizing Days in a Week through Songs	3.97	Very beneficial
12	Memorizing Dates through Songs	4.00	Very beneficial
13	Looking at a Calendar and Telling Days and Dates	4.20	Very beneficial
14	Telling Language from National Flags	3.86	Very beneficial
15	Picture Cards to Tell Positions	4.23	Highly Beneficial
16	Telling Nationality from National Flags	4.09	Very beneficial
17	Using a Kanji Stroke Order Diagram	4.37	Highly Beneficial
18	Filling up Kanji in the Table	4.37	Highly Beneficial
19	Reading Practices with PowerPoints	4.40	Highly Beneficial

Based on the feedback from the respondents in the last open-ended question in the questionnaire, several recommendations are as follows:

- *Katakana is particularly difficult with many rules to memorize.*
- *It may be worthwhile for teachers to consider reducing the difficulty level of the course, given that it is an elective course and not a major course.*
- *The course was already good and did not require any major changes.*

- *Hiragana and Katakana should be included in the midterm examination, while Kanji should be reserved for the final examination due to the level of difficulty involved.*
- *Certain exam questions, such as those related to greeting in Japanese, to be challenging for beginners.*

Discussion

Overall, the study found that the use of teaching and learning materials was effective for beginners learning Japanese, particularly for Hiragana, Katakana, and Kanji. Strokes orders and pictures were found to be beneficial for learning Hiragana and Katakana, and activities such as matching tickets and banknotes with prices and answering questions about things and telephone numbers were recommended for Kanji practice. Maier and Warren (2000) indeed support making optimal use of technology from various online and offline sources in learning and teaching for the 21st century learners who are more technologically inclined, making language learning overall enjoyable and interactive.

By utilizing the teaching and learning materials and activities mentioned earlier, 28 out of 35 respondents (80%) were able to pass the course. The grade distribution was as follows: 20 students received an A (85–100%), 1 student received an A– (82–84%), 2 students received a B+ (79–81%), 1 student received a B (75–78%), 1 student received a B– (72–74%), 1 student received a C+ (69–71%), and 2 students received a C (65–68%). These findings draw the focus on the importance of developing teaching materials that are practical and up to date. According to Bušljeta (2013), language teaching materials today make the educational process more attractive and interesting and encourage active learning, the development of skills and the acceptance of values and attitudes of foreign language learners.

The self-assessment questionnaire revealed that students found the teaching and learning materials to be very beneficial. Also, the study provided feedback from students, including suggestions for including Hiragana and Katakana in the midterm exam and focusing on Kanji in the final exam, as well as making exams more accessible for beginners. The study also recommended that teachers use a database to modify and make use of materials in class activities in the future.

Conclusion

Overall, the study found that the use of various teaching and learning materials was effective for beginners of Japanese, particularly for Hiragana, Katakana, and Kanji. Especially, the association method and pictures as a key mnemonic were found to be beneficial for remembering Japanese scripts for learners of Japanese as a foreign language. Furthermore, in-class activities such as matching tickets and banknotes with prices and answering questions about things and telephone numbers were reported beneficial for Kanji practices.

The self-assessment questionnaire revealed that students found the teaching and learning materials used to be very favorable. Also, the study provided feedback from students, including suggestions for including Hiragana and Katakana in making exams more accessible for beginners. The study also recommended that teachers use a database to modify and make use of materials for in-class activities in the future.

The use of picture and sound mnemonics for remembering Kana (Hiragana and Katakana) and Kanji would be an interesting alternative to use in teaching a foreign language. In addition, Japanese learners can be motivated to create their own Kana learning materials, which would help them to learn Japanese with fun and inspiration.

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