

DIFFICULTIES IN LEARNING JAPANESE KANJI AMONG STUDENTS AT NGUYEN TAT THANH UNIVERSITY: CURRENT SITUATION AND SOLUTIONS

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ABSTRACT: Kanji is an important component of Japanese language learning, but it also poses many difficulties for learners, particularly students learning Japanese at Nguyen Tat Thanh University. This study aims to investigate the current situation of Kanji learning, identify the main groups of difficulties, the learning strategies currently being used, and learners' support needs. The analyzed dataset consists of 155 valid responses, including 80 students specializing in Japanese Studies and 75 students studying Japanese as a Second Foreign Language. The results show that the overall difficulty level reached $M = 3,78/5$. The most prominent difficulties were quickly forgetting Kanji without review ($M = 4,18$), difficulty remembering multiple readings of the same character ($M = 4,05$), confusing characters with similar shapes ($M = 4,00$), and difficulty remembering characters with many strokes or complex structures ($M = 3,99$). The most frequently used strategy was repeated writing ($M = 4,07$), whereas spaced review was used the least ($M = 2,64$). The highest support need was for more exercises connected with vocabulary, sentences, and real-life contexts (90,3% agreed or strongly agreed). The comparison between the two

groups showed that students studying Japanese as a Second Foreign Language had a higher overall level of difficulty than those specializing in Japanese Studies ($p = 0,002$). Based on these findings, the article proposes strengthening the teaching of Kanji through character structure, placing characters in vocabulary and context, providing guidance on spaced review, applying technology, and organizing frequent short tests.

Keywords: *Kanji, Japanese language, students learning Japanese, learning difficulties, Nguyen Tat Thanh University, teaching solutions.*

1. Introduction

In the context of increasingly developed Vietnam-Japan cooperation in many fields such as education, economy, culture, and labor, the demand for learning Japanese in Vietnam has tended to increase. Japanese is now not only a foreign language for communication but also an important tool that helps students expand opportunities for study, internships, and careers in international environments.

In the process of learning Japanese, Kanji plays a particularly important role. Kanji appears frequently in vocabulary, texts, textbooks, Japanese-language proficiency examinations, and authentic materials. Mastering Kanji helps learners improve reading comprehension, expand vocabulary, and enhance their ability to use Japanese in both study and work.

However, Kanji is also considered one of the most difficult areas for learners of Japanese. Unlike Hiragana and Katakana, Kanji is a logographic writing system in which each character may have multiple readings, multiple meanings, and be used in different contexts. According to Gamage, learners of Japanese as a second language often face many challenges in learning Kanji because of the complexity of character forms, readings, meanings, and the writing-system background of their first language (Asian-Pacific Journal of Second and Foreign Language Education).

For students learning Japanese at Nguyen Tat Thanh University, Kanji learning presents both advantages and difficulties. One advantage is that Vietnamese has a system of Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary, which allows students to relate some Kanji to corresponding meanings in Vietnamese. However, differences between Sino-Vietnamese readings and

Japanese readings, especially On and Kun readings, can easily cause confusion during learning.

From the practice of teaching and learning Japanese at Nguyen Tat Thanh University, it can be observed that many students encounter difficulties in remembering, reading, writing, and applying Kanji. Therefore, investigating the current situation of students' Kanji learning at the university is necessary in order to propose appropriate solutions and contribute to improving the quality of Japanese-language education.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. The Concept of Kanji in Japanese

Kanji, known in Japanese as Kanji, is a writing system originating from Chinese characters that was introduced into Japan from China and gradually adopted and modified by the Japanese to suit the characteristics of their language. In modern Japanese, Kanji is used alongside two phonographic writing systems, Hiragana and Katakana. Hiragana is commonly used to write grammatical elements, particles, verb endings, adjective endings, and native Japanese words; Katakana is commonly used for foreign loanwords; Kanji primarily serves to represent the meanings of words.

Unlike the Latin alphabet or Kana, Kanji is logographic in nature. Each Kanji character is usually associated with one or more specific meanings. For example, 山 means mountain, 川 means river, and 人 means person. However, in Japanese, a Kanji character not only has meaning but may also have multiple readings. These readings are generally divided into two main types: On readings and Kun readings.

On readings originated from ancient Chinese pronunciations when Chinese characters were introduced into Japan. Kun readings are native Japanese readings used to express the corresponding meaning of a Kanji character using a native Japanese word. For example, 山 has the On reading san in 富士山, but the Kun reading yama when standing alone. The simultaneous existence of multiple readings makes Kanji a complex area for learners of Japanese.

Therefore, when learning a Kanji character, learners must not only remember its visual form but also understand its reading, meaning, writing, combinations with other characters,

and use in specific contexts. This is a major difference between learning Kanji and learning phonographic writing systems such as Hiragana or Katakana.

2.2. The Role of Kanji in Japanese Language Learning

Kanji plays a particularly important role in learning Japanese. First, Kanji helps learners expand their vocabulary. In Japanese, many words are formed from one or more Kanji characters. For example, 学生 consists of the two characters 学 and 生 and means pupil or student; 電話 consists of 電 and 話 and means telephone; 日本語 consists of 日, 本, and 語 and means Japanese language. If learners understand the basic meaning of each Kanji character, they can infer meanings or remember vocabulary more easily.

Second, Kanji plays an important role in reading comprehension. Japanese texts, from textbooks, books and newspapers, signs, and emails to specialized documents, use Kanji with high frequency. Learners without a certain Kanji vocabulary will face many difficulties when reading texts even if they have mastered basic grammar. Therefore, Kanji proficiency is closely related to Japanese reading-comprehension ability.

Third, Kanji is important in Japanese-language proficiency examinations such as the JLPT. At levels from N5 to N1, vocabulary and reading-comprehension sections require learners to recognize, understand, and use Kanji. For students majoring in Japanese, learning Kanji well not only serves classroom study but also directly supports foreign-language certification, internships, work, and communication in Japanese-using environments.

Fourth, Kanji helps learners gain a deeper understanding of Japanese culture and linguistic thinking. Many Kanji characters reflect how Japanese people perceive, classify, and express the world around them. For example, characters related to nature, people, time, society, and emotions contain cultural elements and logographic ways of thinking. Therefore, learning Kanji is not only learning a writing system but also a process of approaching Japanese linguistic culture.

2.3. Characteristics of Kanji That Cause Difficulties for Learners

Kanji has many characteristics that make it difficult for learners of Japanese, particularly students at Nguyen Tat Thanh University, to acquire and use.

First, the number of Kanji characters to be learned is relatively large. Learners at the elementary level already have to encounter many basic Kanji, while at higher levels the number of characters increases rapidly. Having to remember a large number of Kanji within limited study time creates considerable pressure for students.

Second, Kanji forms are complex and easily confused. Many Kanji have a large number of strokes or similar structures. For example, students often confuse 日, 目, and 田; 土 and 士; 未 and 末. Without a clear understanding of character structure, stroke order, and radicals, learners can easily remember or write characters incorrectly. Third, one Kanji character may have multiple readings. This is a major difficulty for learners of Japanese. For example, 生 may be read as sei, shou, ikiru, umareru, or nama depending on the specific word. 日 may be read as nichu, jitsu, hi, or ka. This makes it difficult for students to determine the correct reading if they learn characters in isolation rather than through vocabulary and context.

Fourth, Kanji may differ in meaning when used alone and when used in compounds. A Kanji character standing alone may carry a certain meaning, but when combined with another character it may form a new meaning. For example, 電 is related to electricity and 車 means vehicle, but 電車 means electric train. If students learn only the isolated meanings of individual characters, they may encounter difficulties when comprehending compound words.

Fifth, writing Kanji requires learners to remember the correct number of strokes, stroke order, and balanced character structure. In practice, many students may be able to recognize Kanji when reading but cannot reproduce them accurately in writing. This shows that Kanji recognition ability and Kanji writing ability are not entirely the same and need to be trained through different methods.

2.4. Difficulties Faced by Students Learning Japanese at Nguyen Tat Thanh University in Learning Kanji

For students learning Japanese at Nguyen Tat Thanh University, Kanji learning has particular characteristics. Vietnamese currently uses Quốc ngữ, a writing system based on the Latin alphabet, so students are not accustomed to a logographic writing system such as

Kanji. When beginning to learn Japanese, students must simultaneously encounter three writing systems: Hiragana, Katakana, and Kanji. Among them, Kanji is often considered the most difficult because, as presented above, it is complex in form and diverse in readings and meanings.

A common difficulty is that students easily forget character forms after learning them. This is because many students learn Kanji by repeatedly writing the characters many times without understanding their structure or knowing how to connect new characters with previously learned ones. This learning method may support temporary memorization but does not ensure long-term retention.

Another difficulty is that students have trouble remembering and selecting appropriate Kanji readings in vocabulary/context. Because one Kanji may have multiple readings, students often do not know which reading should be used in a specific word. Learning readings separately from vocabulary can lead to fragmented memory and difficulty applying them when reading texts. For example, 生 is read as sei in 学生 (gakusei - student), but as i in 生きる (ikiru - to live) and u in 生まれる (umareru - to be born). 日 is read as ni in 日本 (Nihon - Japan), but as hi when it means day or sun. These cases can easily confuse students if they learn readings separately without placing Kanji in specific vocabulary and contexts.

In addition, students may be influenced by Sino-Vietnamese readings. This is both an advantage and a limitation. The advantage is that students can use Sino-Vietnamese readings to infer the meanings of some Kanji. For example, 学 can be associated with “học,” 電 with “điện,” 国 with “quốc,” and 語 with “ngữ.” However, if students depend too heavily on Sino-Vietnamese readings, they may misunderstand or misuse Kanji because the readings, meanings, and ranges of use in Japanese are not completely the same as in Vietnamese.

Moreover, some students have not yet developed proactive learning habits. Kanji learning requires regular and long-term review, but many students study only before tests or according to classroom requirements. This leads to a pattern of learning and then forgetting, without forming a sustainable Kanji knowledge system.

2.5. Factors Affecting Kanji Learning

Students' Kanji learning is influenced by many different factors.

The first factor is the characteristics of Kanji itself. As presented above, Kanji is large in number, complex in form, has multiple readings, and has many combinations in vocabulary. This is an objective factor that causes difficulty for most learners of Japanese.

The second factor is students' learning methods. If students learn only by copying characters repeatedly without analyzing character structure, learning in context, or reviewing periodically, retention will not be highly effective. Conversely, if students know how to combine multiple methods such as learning through radicals, learning through vocabulary, using flashcards, practicing reading, and spaced review, their ability to remember and apply Kanji will improve.

The third factor is lecturers' teaching methods. Lecturers play an important role in guiding students on how to learn Kanji. If lessons stop at providing lists of Kanji, readings, and meanings, students may find the content dry and difficult to absorb. Conversely, if lecturers guide students to analyze radicals, relate Kanji to Sino-Vietnamese readings, place characters in context, and organize diverse practice activities, Kanji learning will become easier to understand and more systematic.

The fourth factor is the amount of study and review time. Kanji is content that requires frequent repetition. If classroom time is limited and students do not review independently outside class, Kanji knowledge is easily lost. Therefore, developing an individual study plan and maintaining regular review habits are very important.

The fifth factor is learning motivation. Students with clear goals such as taking the JLPT, interning at Japanese companies, studying abroad, or working in Japanese-using environments tend to invest more in Kanji learning. Conversely, students who lack motivation may easily view Kanji as difficult content and develop an avoidance mentality.

2.6. Some Effective Methods for Learning Kanji

Research on Kanji learning strategies and the practice of Japanese-language teaching show that effective Kanji learning requires a combination of different methods.

First is learning Kanji through radicals. Radicals are components that form many Kanji and often suggest part of a character's meaning. For example, the 氵 radical is often related to water, 木 to trees, and 言 to speech or language. Learning through radicals helps students analyze character structure, reduces rote memorization, and increases their ability to distinguish characters with similar forms.

Second is learning Kanji through vocabulary. Learners should not learn only individual characters but should place Kanji in specific words. For example, when learning 学, students should learn it together with words such as 学生, 学校, 大学, and 学习. This method helps learners understand how Kanji is used in practice and remember readings more accurately.

Third is learning Kanji in context. Placing Kanji words in sentences or passages helps students understand meaning and usage more naturally. For example, instead of learning only the word 電車, students can learn the sentence 毎日電車で大学へ行きます。 This approach helps connect Kanji with reading-comprehension and communication skills.

Fourth is using Sino-Vietnamese readings appropriately. For students learning Japanese at Nguyen Tat Thanh University, Sino-Vietnamese readings can be a tool to support the memorization of Kanji meanings. However, lecturers need to guide students to use Sino-Vietnamese readings as a reference channel rather than treating them as Japanese readings.

Fifth is applying spaced review. Kanji is very easy to forget without regular review. Students should review in cycles, for example after 1 day, 3 days, 1 week, and 1 month. Applications such as Anki, Quizlet, Mazii, or Kanji Study can support this process.

Sixth is combining recognition and handwriting. In the technology era, learners may write by hand less often, but handwriting practice remains necessary at the initial stage because it helps learners remember character structure, the number of strokes, and stroke order. However, writing practice should be combined with understanding meaning, readings, and usage, rather than relying on mechanical repetition.

2.7. Significance of Researching Difficulties in Kanji Learning at Nguyen Tat Thanh University

Researching the difficulties in Kanji learning among students learning Japanese at Nguyen Tat Thanh University has both theoretical and practical significance. Theoretically, the study contributes to clarifying the characteristics of Kanji learning among students learning Japanese at Nguyen Tat Thanh University in the context of higher education. These learners have a background in Quốc ngữ, possess a certain understanding of Sino-Vietnamese vocabulary, but are not familiar with the logographic writing system of Japanese.

In practical terms, the study helps lecturers identify more clearly the difficulties students are experiencing and thereby adjust teaching methods appropriately. The findings may also provide a basis for developing supplementary materials, designing learning activities, innovating assessment methods, and supporting students in more effective independent Kanji learning.

For students, clearly recognizing difficulties and their causes helps them select appropriate learning methods, develop regular review habits, and reduce anxiety about Kanji. As a result, students can improve reading comprehension, expand vocabulary, and enhance their Japanese-learning outcomes.

Overall, Kanji is an important component but also poses many challenges for students learning Japanese. Establishing a theoretical foundation concerning Kanji, difficulties in learning Kanji, and appropriate learning methods is necessary for investigating the current situation and proposing solutions to improve the effectiveness of Kanji learning for students at Nguyen Tat Thanh University.

3. Research Subjects, Scope, and Methods

3.1. Research Subjects and Scope

The article focuses on difficulties in the acquisition, retention, and application of Japanese Kanji among students at Nguyen Tat Thanh University. The analyzed dataset includes 155 students studying Japanese at the Faculty of Foreign Languages, including 80 students in Oriental Studies specializing in Japanese Studies (51,6%) and 75 students studying

Japanese as a Second Foreign Language (48,4%). Dividing the sample into these two groups makes it possible to examine both intensive learners and learners studying Japanese as an additional foreign language.

The scope of the study focuses on six groups of difficulties: remembering character forms; remembering and selecting readings; writing Kanji; distinguishing characters with similar forms; understanding Kanji compounds; and applying Kanji in reading comprehension. In addition, the study examines eight learning strategies and six support needs in order to provide a direct basis for proposing teaching and self-study solutions.

The scope of the study is defined within the context of Japanese-language education at Nguyen Tat Thanh University. The analyses focus on the sample of 155 students from the two aforementioned training-program groups, thereby reflecting differences in difficulty levels, learning strategies, and support needs within the scope of the study.

3.2. Research Methods

The study uses a quantitative method through a questionnaire survey. Data were processed using descriptive statistics including frequency, percentage, mean (M), and standard deviation (SD). The proportion of responses at levels 4 and 5 on the Likert scale was used to indicate the proportion of agreement or frequent use, depending on each section of the questionnaire. The internal consistency of the scales was examined using Cronbach's alpha. In addition, Welch's independent-samples t-test was used to compare difficulty levels between the two student groups; statistical significance was set at $p < 0,05$ and effect size was expressed using Cohen's d.

Section B of the questionnaire uses a 5-point Likert scale from 1 - strongly disagree to 5 - strongly agree and includes 18 observed variables (D01-D18) belonging to six groups of difficulties. Section C includes 8 variables (S01-S08) measuring the frequency of using Kanji learning strategies, from 1 - never to 5 - very often. Section D includes 6 variables (N01-N06) measuring support needs using a 5-point agreement scale.

The reliability test results show that the scales have good internal consistency: Cronbach's alpha = 0,841 for the difficulty scale, 0,810 for the learning-strategy scale, and 0,843 for

the support-needs scale. All values exceed the threshold of 0,80, indicating that the observed variables within each scale are sufficiently related for further analysis.

3.3. Survey Instrument and Data Processing

The survey questionnaire consists of four sections. Section A contains 6 questions about student group, year of study, Japanese proficiency level, length of time studying Japanese, time spent on independent Kanji study, and frequency of technology use. Section B includes 18 statements about difficulties in learning Kanji; Section C includes 8 statements about currently used learning strategies; and Section D includes 6 statements about support needs.

Table 1. Structure of the Survey Questionnaire

Section	Survey content	Purpose
A	6 general-information questions	Describe learners' background characteristics and study habits
B	18 variables D01-D18 on difficulty level	Measure six groups of difficulties in Kanji learning
C	8 variables S01-S08 on learning strategies	Identify methods currently used frequently
D	6 variables N01-N06 on support needs	Provide a basis for proposing teaching and self-study solutions

Data were coded by variable, checked for valid values from 1 to 5, and then descriptive statistics were calculated for the full sample and for each student group. For the six groups of difficulties, each group score was calculated as the arithmetic mean of the corresponding three observed variables. Comparisons between the two groups were performed using the mean score of each difficulty group and the overall difficulty score.

After coding and data cleaning were completed, the variables were aggregated by content group for descriptive analysis and tests of differences between the two student groups.

4. Research Results

4.1. General Information on the Survey Sample

The analytical sample consists of 155 students, including 80 students specializing in Japanese Studies (51,6%) and 75 students studying Japanese as a Second Foreign Language (48,4%). The distribution by year of study is relatively dispersed: first-year

students account for 29,0%, second-year students 30,3%, third-year students 24,5%, and fourth-year or above students 16,1%. In terms of proficiency, N5 and N4 account for the largest proportions, at 34,2% and 34,8%, respectively; the N3 group accounts for 20,6%.

Time spent on independent Kanji study remains limited: 61,3% of students spend less than 2 hours per week on Kanji. This proportion is 73,3% in the Second Foreign Language group, higher than the Japanese Studies specialization group (50,0%). Regarding technology use, 47,1% of the total sample use technology often or very often; the corresponding proportions are 55,0% in the specialization group and 38,7% in the Second Foreign Language group.

Table 2. General Information on the Survey Sample

Criterion	Response group	n	Percentage (%)
Student group	Japanese Studies specialization	80	51,6
Student group	Japanese as a Second Foreign Language	75	48,4
Year of study	Year 1	45	29,0
Year of study	Year 2	47	30,3
Year of study	Year 3	38	24,5
Year of study	Year 4 or above	25	16,1
Proficiency level	N5	53	34,2
Proficiency level	N4	54	34,8
Proficiency level	N3	32	20,6
Proficiency level	N2 or above	9	5,8
Proficiency level	Not yet determined	7	4,5
Independent Kanji study/week	Less than 1 hour	45	29,0
Independent Kanji study/week	From 1 to under 2 hours	50	32,3
Independent Kanji study/week	From 2 to 4 hours	44	28,4
Independent Kanji study/week	More than 4 hours	16	10,3

study/week			
Frequency of technology use	Never	9	5,8
Frequency of technology use	Rarely	20	12,9
Frequency of technology use	Sometimes	53	34,2
Frequency of technology use	Often	52	33,5
Frequency of technology use	Very often	21	13,5

The above structure shows that the sample covers both intensive learners and those studying Japanese as an additional foreign language. However, differences in proficiency level and independent-study time between the two groups should be taken into account when interpreting difficulty levels.

4.2. Overall Level of Difficulty in Learning Kanji

The mean difficulty score for the 18 variables in the full sample is 3,78/5, showing that students generally experience a relatively high level of difficulty. Twelve of the 18 variables have M values of 3,70 or above. The four most prominent manifestations are quickly forgetting Kanji without review (D01, M = 4,18), difficulty remembering multiple readings of the same Kanji (D04, M = 4,05), frequently confusing characters with similar forms (D10, M = 4,00), and difficulty remembering characters with many strokes/complex structures (D02, M = 3,99).

The proportions selecting levels 4 or 5 also reflect the prevalence of these difficulties: D01 reaches 80,6%, D02 78,1%, D10 76,8%, D04 74,8%, and D05 72,9%. In contrast, difficulty inferring the meaning of a compound despite knowing the meaning of each character (D13) and difficulty writing characters in a balanced form (D09) have lower M values, at 3,42 and 3,46 respectively, but both remain above the neutral level.

Table 3. Difficulty Levels for Individual Observed Variables

No.	Difficulty statement	M	SD	Levels 4-5 (%)
1	D01. I quickly forget Kanji after learning them if I do not review them regularly.	4,18	0,73	80,6
2	D04. I have difficulty remembering multiple readings of the same Kanji.	4,05	0,78	74,8
3	D10. I often confuse Kanji that have similar shapes.	4,00	0,72	76,8
4	D02. I have difficulty remembering Kanji with many strokes or complex structures.	3,99	0,72	78,1
5	D05. I have difficulty selecting the appropriate reading when a Kanji appears in specific vocabulary.	3,98	0,79	72,9
6	D11. I have difficulty recognizing small differences between similar Kanji.	3,90	0,75	70,3
7	D07. I can recognize Kanji when reading but have difficulty writing them accurately from memory.	3,87	0,74	70,3
8	D17. I spend a lot of time processing Kanji in reading passages.	3,85	0,75	71,0
9	D03. I have difficulty remembering the structure and positions of components within a Kanji.	3,83	0,75	68,4
10	D12. I need a lot of time to distinguish Kanji that are easily confused.	3,81	0,76	66,5
11	D06. I often confuse the readings of Kanji words that I have learned.	3,75	0,75	63,2
12	D08. I have difficulty remembering the correct number of strokes and stroke order of Kanji.	3,65	0,68	60,0
13	D18. I have difficulty applying learned Kanji to understand authentic texts.	3,61	0,72	56,8

14	D14. I have difficulty remembering the meanings of Kanji compound words.	3,60	0,71	56,1
15	D15. I have difficulty connecting the meaning of Kanji with the actual meaning of words in each context.	3,59	0,70	57,4
16	D16. I have difficulty quickly recognizing Kanji when reading sentences or passages.	3,55	0,74	52,9
17	D09. I have difficulty writing Kanji with balanced structure and layout.	3,46	0,70	47,1
18	D13. I have difficulty inferring the meaning of a compound word even when I know the basic meanings of each Kanji.	3,42	0,81	43,9

The results show that difficulties are not concentrated in a single skill but occur simultaneously in memory, readings, visual-form recognition, and Kanji processing in texts. This suggests that solutions need to combine memory techniques with contextual application activities.

4.3. Difficulty Levels by Content Group

When the variables are grouped into six categories, remembering character forms is the group with the highest difficulty level ($M = 4,00$), followed by remembering and selecting readings ($M = 3,93$) and distinguishing similar-looking characters ($M = 3,90$). The two groups with lower scores are applying Kanji in reading comprehension ($M = 3,67$) and understanding Kanji compounds ($M = 3,54$). Nevertheless, all six groups have M values above 3,5, indicating that the difficulties are systematic rather than being limited only to writing characters.

Table 4. Difficulty Levels Across Six Content Groups

Difficulty group	M	SD	Rank
Remembering character forms	4,00	0,60	1
Remembering and selecting readings	3,93	0,64	2

Distinguishing similar-looking characters	3,90	0,60	3
Applying Kanji in reading comprehension	3,67	0,58	4
Writing Kanji	3,66	0,57	5
Understanding Kanji compounds	3,54	0,60	6

4.4. Kanji Learning Strategies Currently Used

The most common strategy is repeatedly writing Kanji many times (S01, M = 4,07; 80,6% often/very often). This is followed by using Kanji-learning applications (S07, M = 3,76), learning Kanji together with specific vocabulary (S03, M = 3,70), and relating Kanji to Sino-Vietnamese readings/words (S05, M = 3,68). In contrast, spaced review (S08, M = 2,64), radical analysis (S02, M = 2,93), and learning in contextualized sentences/passages (S04, M = 2,94) are not used frequently.

Table 5. Kanji Learning Strategies Currently Used

Code	Strategy	M	Often + very often (%)
S01	Repeatedly write Kanji many times to remember them.	4,07	80,6
S07	Use Kanji-learning applications on a phone or computer.	3,76	62,6
S03	Learn Kanji together with specific vocabulary.	3,70	58,7
S05	Relate Kanji to Sino-Vietnamese words or readings to support meaning retention.	3,68	60,0
S06	Use flashcards or tools such as Anki and Quizlet for review.	3,23	38,1
S04	Learn Kanji in contextualized	2,94	20,0

	sentences or passages.		
S02	Analyze radicals and Kanji structure.	2,93	22,6
S08	Review Kanji in cycles or using spaced-review methods.	2,64	12,3

4.5. Support Needs in Kanji Learning

Support needs are generally very high, with an overall M of 4,20/5. The highest needs are for more Kanji exercises connected with vocabulary, sentences, and real-life contexts (N02, M = 4,39; 90,3% agree/strongly agree) and more short reading passages using previously learned Kanji (N06, M = 4,31; 89,0%). The needs for guidance on radicals, topic-based materials, and more frequent testing/review all have agreement rates above 80%.

Table 6. Students' Support Needs

Code	Support need	M	Agree + strongly agree (%)
N02	I would like more Kanji exercises connected with vocabulary, sentences, and real-life contexts.	4,39	90,3
N06	I would like more short reading passages using Kanji that have been learned.	4,31	89,0
N01	I would like lecturers to provide clearer guidance on radicals and Kanji structure.	4,21	83,9
N03	I would like supplementary Kanji materials organized by topic and proficiency level.	4,19	84,5
N04	I would like more frequent short tests and Kanji review activities.	4,13	81,9
N05	I would like guidance on how to use applications and spaced-review methods.	3,98	74,2

4.6. Comparison of Difficulty Levels Between the Two Student Groups

The results show that the Second Foreign Language group has a higher overall difficulty score than the Japanese Studies specialization group (3,88 compared with 3,69). Welch's test confirms that this difference is statistically significant ($t = -3,22$; $p = 0,002$; Cohen's $d = 0,52$), with a medium effect size. By content group, students in the Second Foreign Language group have significantly greater difficulty in remembering and selecting readings ($p = 0,006$), distinguishing similar-looking characters ($p = 0,009$), understanding Kanji compounds ($p = 0,020$), and applying Kanji in reading comprehension ($p = 0,034$). In contrast, differences in remembering character forms ($p = 0,128$) and writing Kanji ($p = 0,548$) do not reach statistical significance. The results show that the gap between the two groups is concentrated more in processing readings, distinguishing forms, and applying Kanji than in writing skills alone.

Table 7. Comparison and Testing of Difficulty Levels Between the Two Student Groups

Difficulty group	Japanese Studies specialization	Second Foreign Language	p	Cohen's d
Remembering character forms	3,93	4,08	0,128	0,24
Remembering and selecting readings	3,79	4,08	0,006	0,45
Writing Kanji	3,63	3,69	0,548	0,10
Distinguishing similar-looking characters	3,78	4,03	0,009	0,42
Understanding Kanji compounds	3,43	3,65	0,020	0,38
Applying Kanji in reading comprehension	3,58	3,77	0,034	0,34
Overall difficulty	3,69	3,88	0,002	0,52

5. Discussion

The analysis results show that the three most prominent clusters of difficulties are remembering character forms, remembering/selecting readings, and distinguishing characters with similar forms. At the observed-variable level, 80,6% of students agree or strongly agree that they quickly forget Kanji without review, and 74,8% have difficulty remembering multiple readings of the same character. These results are consistent with the

characteristics of Kanji presented in the theoretical background: learners must simultaneously process form, reading, meaning, and combinations in vocabulary. Therefore, teaching characters as isolated lists makes it difficult to establish durable retention.

A noteworthy issue is the mismatch between the methods currently used and methods with the potential to support long-term retention. Repeated writing has the highest M (4,07), while radical analysis (2,93), learning in context (2,94), and spaced review (2,64) are used less frequently. At the same time, 90,3% of students would like more exercises connected with vocabulary, sentences, and context, while 89,0% would like more short reading passages containing previously learned Kanji. This shows that the need for innovation lies not in increasing the number of characters to be learned but in organizing activities so as to move from mechanical memorization to structured retention and application.

The test results show that students in the Second Foreign Language group have a higher overall difficulty level than those in the specialization group, with a statistically significant difference and a medium effect size. Notably, the differences are concentrated in remembering/selecting readings, distinguishing similar-looking characters, understanding compounds, and application in reading comprehension, while the two groups do not differ significantly in remembering character forms and writing Kanji. These results suggest that the difference between the two groups lies not only in the quantity of characters to be learned but also in the degree of continuous exposure to vocabulary, texts, and contexts of use. Therefore, the Second Foreign Language group should be given priority in activities supporting readings, compound words, and contextual reading comprehension, while the specialization group can increase depth in character structure, vocabulary systems, and application in authentic texts.

6. Solutions to Improve the Effectiveness of Kanji Learning

6.1. Guiding Kanji Learning Through Radicals and Character Structure

Lecturers need to guide students in recognizing common radicals and their role in suggesting meaning or classifying characters. Learning through radicals helps students avoid viewing Kanji as isolated symbols and instead recognize the internal structural patterns of characters. For example, the 氵 radical is often related to water, as in 海, 洗, 酒;

the 言 radical is often related to speech and language, as in 話, 語, 読; and the 木 radical is often related to trees or wooden materials, as in 林, 森, 机.

In lessons, lecturers can ask students to break a Kanji character into smaller components, compare it with previously learned characters, and create their own illustrative examples. This approach helps learners remember systematically and also supports the distinction of characters with similar forms.

6.2. Selective Integration of Sino-Vietnamese Readings

For students learning Japanese at Nguyen Tat Thanh University, Sino-Vietnamese readings are a notable source of support. Lecturers can make use of the relationship between certain Kanji and Sino-Vietnamese words to help students remember meanings. For example, 学 can be associated with “học,” 電 with “điện,” 国 with “quốc,” 語 with “ngữ,” and 校 with “hiệu.”

However, it should be emphasized that Sino-Vietnamese readings serve only as a memory aid and are not Japanese readings. Lecturers should point out cases that are easily confused and guide students to learn readings through specific vocabulary. Appropriate integration of Sino-Vietnamese readings will help students take advantage of their first-language background without depending on it mechanically.

6.3. Teaching Kanji Through Vocabulary, Sentences, and Reading Passages

Kanji should be taught in connection with vocabulary and context. Instead of requiring students to learn an isolated character together with multiple readings, lecturers should introduce the character through commonly used words and sentences. For example, when teaching 食, lecturers can introduce 食べる, 食堂, 食事, 外食 and place them in sentences such as 毎日食堂で昼ご飯を食べます。

This teaching approach helps students understand the relationship between character, reading, meaning, and usage. At the same time, integrating Kanji into short reading passages helps students move from passive memorization to active use in reading comprehension.

6.4. Applying Technology and Spaced Review

Students need guidance in using digital tools to support Kanji review. Applications such as Anki, Quizlet, Mazii, or Kanji Study can help students create flashcards, practice readings, practice meanings, and track learning progress. In particular, spaced review helps students revisit Kanji at appropriate intervals, reducing rapid forgetting after learning.

Lecturers can design Kanji card sets for each lesson or assign students to create their own personal flashcard sets. This not only increases learner autonomy but also helps students personalize the learning process according to their own ability and pace.

6.5. Innovating Kanji Assessment

Assessment should be conducted frequently and in diverse forms. Instead of testing Kanji only at midterm or final examinations, lecturers can organize short quizzes at the beginning of class, exercises for recognizing characters in texts, matching characters with meanings, selecting correct readings, or writing words according to context. Short but regular assessments help students maintain continuous review habits.

In addition to assessing memorization, attention should be paid to assessing application. Students need not only know how a character is read and what it means, but also know in which words it appears, how it is used in sentences, and how it can support reading comprehension. Therefore, Kanji assessment should combine recognition, writing, reading, and understanding meaning in context.

6.6. Developing Supplementary Kanji Materials by Topic

The university and lecturers can develop supplementary Kanji materials by topic and proficiency level. The materials should systematize Kanji into groups familiar to students, such as family, school, time, places, daily activities, occupations, and Japanese culture. Each character should be accompanied by its radical, basic readings, meaning, illustrative vocabulary, and example sentences.

Table 8. Suggested Thematic Systematization of Kanji

Topic	Representative Kanji	Illustrative vocabulary
School	学, 校, 生, 先, 本	学生, 学校, 先生, 本

Time	日, 月, 年, 時, 分	今日, 来月, 今年, 時間
Family	父, 母, 兄, 姉, 家	父, 母, 兄弟, 家族
Places	駅, 店, 国, 外, 中	駅, 店, 外国, 中国
Activities	食, 飲, 見, 行, 来	食事, 飲み物, 見学, 行く

Supplementary materials should be concise, easy to use, and directly connected to the main textbook. If the materials rely too heavily on lists, students may easily feel pressured. Conversely, if each lesson contains a clearly organized systematization section and short application exercises, students will find it easier to maintain their learning.

7. Conclusion

Kanji is an important component of the Japanese writing system and directly affects students' vocabulary, reading comprehension, and learning outcomes. In the sample of 155 students, the overall difficulty score reached 3,78/5. The most prominent manifestations were quickly forgetting Kanji without review ($M = 4,18$), difficulty remembering multiple readings ($M = 4,05$), confusing similar-looking characters ($M = 4,00$), and difficulty remembering characters with many strokes ($M = 3,99$).

The results also show that current learning methods still tend to emphasize repeated writing, while strategies such as radical analysis, contextual learning, and spaced review are not used frequently. Students' support needs strongly focus on exercises connected with vocabulary-sentences-context, short reading passages, systematic materials, and guidance on learning methods. Comparison of the two groups shows that students in the Second Foreign Language group have a higher overall level of difficulty than those specializing in Japanese Studies, particularly in readings, distinguishing similar-looking characters, understanding compound words, and application in reading comprehension.

Based on these findings, the article proposes the following solutions: guiding learning through radicals and character structure; selectively integrating Sino-Vietnamese readings; teaching Kanji through vocabulary, sentences, and reading passages; applying technology combined with spaced review; innovating assessment toward more frequent evaluation; and developing supplementary materials by topic, proficiency level, and learner group.

The study has several limitations. The sample is concentrated at a single educational institution, so its generalizability to all students learning Japanese in Vietnam remains limited. The study uses a cross-sectional design and relies mainly on self-reported data; therefore, it does not directly reflect Kanji proficiency through practical tests. Future studies may expand the sample to multiple educational institutions, combine survey data with Kanji test results, and implement pedagogical experiments to evaluate the effectiveness of each proposed solution.

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