Calligraphy as a pedagogical tool for teaching Japanese writing

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Introduction

It is a misconception that Japanese is a particularly difficult language to master. Shibatani (1990 : 91) affirms that "Japanese is a very typical human language as far as its overall grammatical structure is concerned". However, it is true that the Japanese writing system presents a certain difficulty to both first language [L1] and second language [L2] learners due to its complexity with two sets of phonetic syllabaries, *hiragana* and *katakana*, as well as more than two thousand Chinese characters, *kanji*, each of which often has multiple pronunciations. The challenge can be particularly significant for learners who are not familiar with the use of logographic characters. The struggle in writing Japanese can lead to linguistic and motivational problems. Firstly, learning to write is itself an essential part of language acquisition and thus the lack of writing competence is an obstacle to the overall language learning experience. Furthermore, the challenge posed by writing Japanese may hamper the overall motivation and interest of learners. Thus, effective teaching of the writing is indispensable in teaching Japanese as a foreign language [TJFL]. As one of the possible supplementary activities to help L2 learners master the Japanese writing, this paper examines the potential role of Japanese calligraphy, using some data collected in a workshop designed for English-speaking L2 learners in the United Kingdom.

1 Japanese writing as an obstacle for L2 learners

Japanese is a widely studied language. While not being one of the most studied foreign languages in Europe, it is included in the second group of languages available in school education defined by the Education, Audio-visual and Culture Executive Agency of the European Commission together with Arabic, Latin, Chinese, Turkish,

Dutch, Polish, and Classical Greek [1]. In terms of course enrolment, Japanese was the most studied foreign language in Australia in 2006 (Bianco, 2009 : 40) and the fourth most studied foreign language in American institutions of higher education in 2013 after Spanish, French, and American Sign Language (ASL) [2]. The fact that more and more foreigners are studying Japanese is a justification for enhancing available methods for teaching the language.

At the same time, however, a number of assertions have been made regarding obstacles to learning Japanese. Komiya Samimy (1994 : 29) points out, for instance, that the attrition rate among the students of Japanese in the U.S. is high due to "the perceived degree of difficulty of the Japanese language". She explains that according to the Education Testing Service Oral Proficiency Testing Manual, it takes 2 400-2 760 hours for American students to attain Level 3 in oral skills in Japanese while it takes only 720 hours to achieve the same level in French or Spanish (*ibid.*). Similarly, according to the estimate of the U.S. Foreign Service Institute, it takes "almost three times as long to attain a minimum professional level of competence in Japanese (1 320 hours) as it does in French or Spanish (480 hours)" (Omaggio, 1986 : 21, in *Washington State Japanese Language Curriculum Guidelines Committee*, 2000 : 13). This is considered to be partly due to the fact that Japanese is not cognate with English unlike other commonly studied European languages.

In particular, the Japanese orthographic system can create major barriers for L2 learners due to its complexity. In order to read and write Japanese, one needs to know three types of scripts : Chinese characters (*kanji*) and two sets of syllabaries (*hiragana* and *katakana*). In addition to these scripts, the Roman alphabet is also used in some cases such as acronyms and measurement units. For speakers of other European languages, learning *kanji* is one of the most challenging aspects of learning Japanese while for those who are familiar with the Chinese characters the problem may be mitigated to some extent. The list of *kanji* in regular use (*jōyō kanji*) contains 2 136 characters that are to be covered in compulsory education in Japan. For L2 learners as well, learning *kanji* is a key to reading and writing Japanese. For example, in order to pass the JLPT N1 (CEFR C1-2) examination, one is expected to know 2 000 characters, 1 000 characters for N2 (B2-C1), 650 characters for N3 (B1-B2), 300 characters for N4 (CEFR A2-B1), and 100 characters for N5 (CEFR A1-2) [3].

Each *kanji* often has at least two pronunciations, Japanese pronunciation (also known as the '*kun*' reading) and Chinese pronunciation (also known as the '*on*' reading). Furthermore, in quite a few cases, there is more than one variation in the Chinese pronunciation due to the fact that characters were imported from various Chinese dynasties with different phonetic features. For example, the character 明 can be read '*myō*' (Ming Dynasty), '*mei*' (Han Dynasty), and '*an*' (Tang Dynasty) as well as '*aka*(*rui*)' [Japanese adjective for 'bright'] and '*a*(*keru*)' [Japanese verb for 'to begin']. To understand a word containing a character with multiple readings, one therefore needs to have prior knowledge of which reading should be used.

1. http ://eacea.ec.europa.eu/education/eurydice/documents/key_data_series/143en.pdf.
2. http ://www.mla.org/pdf/2013_enrollment_survey.pdf.
3. http ://www.tanos.co.uk/jlpt/aboutjlpt/

Such difficulties can raise the level of anxiety and fear among L2 learners. The impact of anxiety in foreign language learning has been studied by a number of scholars including Horwitz, Horwitz, and Cope (1986), Ely (1986), as well as Hashimoto (2002) who points out that anxiety and fear can cause a decline in motivation in learning a foreign language. Busse (2013 : 951) also stresses that there is a great risk of losing students' motivation when students feel overly daunted by the difficulty of the language they are learning. In fact, the latter author shows that one of the most common reasons for first-year German students losing their motivation has been that they have found the class "too challenging" for them. As motivation is observed to be the most significant predictor of achievement in foreign language learning (Gardner and Lambert, 1972 ; Khodadadi and Khajavy, 2012), it is important to foster "a secure and non-threatening atmosphere" in order to reduce anxiety and increase the level of motivation (Komiya Samimy, 1994 : 30).

In order to motivate students to study Japanese, Komiya Samimy (*ibid.* : 31) has suggested various strategies including inviting past successful students to share tips, asking guest speakers to discuss possible benefits of learning the language, encouraging Japanese students to share their language learning experiences, and organizing a field trip to a local Japanese restaurant. These methods are all seen to be effective because giving a socio-cultural context is essential in language classrooms (Gardner and Lambert, 1972 ; Gardner, 1985). It is to further corroborate this latter point that our study seeks to highlight the important role a calligraphy workshop could play as a supplementary pedagogical tool in TJFL.

2 Calligraphy as a pedagogical tool

Calligraphy is widely taught in schools in Japan to L1 speakers and many children take extracurricular lessons of calligraphy in order to improve their handwriting while also deepening their knowledge of a traditional culture of their country. Japanese calligraphy thus plays both pedagogic and cultural roles in the Japanese society. By adopting a calligraphy workshop in a TJFL classroom, three possible benefits stand out : linguistic, motivational, and structural.

2.1 Linguistic benefits

A calligraphy workshop can be used to teach learners the shape, structure and strokes (order, direction, and types) of Japanese scripts for both characters (*kanji*) and syllabaries (*kana*). While the acquisition of communicative competence is the most important goal of language learning, the *Washington State Japanese Language Curriculum Guidelines Committee* (2000 : 58) admits the necessity of orthographic instructions by stating that students should be "instructed in basic stroke order, stroke direction, and stroke types in *hiragana*, *katakana*, and *kanji*" as well as "the cultural value assigned to these mechanical aspects of the writing system". Similarly, Okita (1997 : 73-74) argues for the necessity of Japanese orthography in teaching Japanese as a foreign language, invoking a survey result in which a majority of students of Japanese answered that Japanese orthography should be taught from the beginning rather than focusing only on oral expression.

Despite the importance of learning correct orthography, L2 learners often pay little attention to stroke details, focusing too much on the overall shape of characters. As stroke orders and directions are difficult to rectify once incorrect strokes become a habit, it is recommended that such details be instructed thoroughly from an early stage of learning. In calligraphy, students can learn words with a particular focus on their stroke orders, directions and types through brushwork. The six basic brushworks in calligraphy, *tome* (stop), *hane* (jump), *harai* (sweep), *ore* (bend), *magari* (curve), and *sori* (warp) make students highly aware of stroke details. By keeping to the right brushwork, the correct stroke order and direction is naturally sustained with the shape of characters also improved as a result.

Calligraphy can also give students an opportunity to reflect on the radicals and etymological roots of characters. Some characters are based on the shape of what they represent, such as *hi* (日 sun), *tsuki* (月 moon), *ki* (木 tree), and *yama* (山 mountain). The etymological roots of such characters can be made more recognizable through calligraphy that focuses on the shape and structure of each character. Similarly, characters with various components can be studied in a conceptual manner. For example, the character for *haru* (春 spring) is the combination of a component referring to the sun (日 *hi*) below and a component referring to a bud above (Tōdō *et al.*, 2001). Such story-based instruction can be interesting to learn and easy to remember and students can build their vocabulary in an efficient and enjoyable manner.

Furthermore, students are given the opportunity to think about the historical development of Japanese writing through physical activities. Both *hiragana* and *katakana* syllabaries were developed based on the shapes of characters that had similar pronunciations. By learning how the characters were made into syllabaries by writing them with a brush and tracing the change of their shapes, students can learn how the contemporary Japanese writing came into being through a long history. Therefore, through both intellectual and physical activity, a calligraphic workshop offers a number of benefits from a linguistic point of view.

2.2 Motivational benefits

With its intermediary characteristics between art and writing, a calligraphy workshop can be used to raise the motivational level of L2 learners. As was discussed earlier, the exposure to the culture of the country can be an important motivational factor in foreign language classrooms. To give socio-cultural context, the use of art has been recognized as an effective tool for second language teaching and learning. For example, Spina (2006) has suggested that art-based curricula provide cognitive advantages for English learners based on comparative experiments while Knapp (2012 : 20) argues for the benefits of using visual art in teaching German as a second language "to enrich language acquisition, cultural competency, and critical thinking skills". Similarly, Ortuño (1994 : 500-501) discusses the use of paintings in teaching Spanish, based on the findings of recent studies that show positive effect of visual materials "in acquiring language and forming cultural attitudes" while also reducing anxiety and shyness in speaking a foreign language.

The practice of Japanese calligraphy has a long history. It originated in China and became a common practice in Japan during the Asuka Period (592-710) to record Buddhist scriptures. The practice was then adapted by the priests of Zen Buddhism during the Kamakura Period (1185-1333) and developed with the Zen traditions. Japanese calligraphy is generally known as '*shodō*' (literally the 'way of the brush') and it entails a particular cultural conception. The second character in the term '*dō*' means 'the way' and it is believed to represent a way of life, involving the combination of skills and self-observation through concentration of body and mind. All actions related to the practice including preparation and cleaning are thus considered as important as the end result. The character '*dō*' is also used for other Japanese cultural traditions such as '*kendō*' ('way of the sword'), '*jūdō*' ('gentle way'), '*sadō*' ('way of tea'), '*kadō*' ('way of flowers'), and '*bushidō*' ('way of the worrier'). These cultural practices are thus considered to have not only practical aspects but also spiritual, meditative, and artistic aspects associated with the Zen doctrines. Each movement in calligraphic production is therefore considered to be an integral part of the art. Brush strokes need to be practiced continuously until it holds together as a whole and one cannot stop or redo any stroke, which is even synonymous to music that cannot be redone in the middle of the performance (Reed, 1989 : 9).

Calligraphy has thus historically been a key element of Japanese culture and tradition. The involvement in such a cultural activity is expected to ease classroom anxiety and encourage students to learn the language through enjoyment. This is an important aspect in a language learning experience. It can also be exemplified by the outcome of the study conducted by Busse (2013 : 956) that the most frequently cited reason for studying German by first-year students was "enjoyment of learning". Thus, as "culturally loaded visual material", a calligraphy workshop can "transform a language class into a cross-disciplinary course which not only combines language, art, literature and history, but also helps students to take a major step toward reaching proficiency standards" (Ortuño, 1994 : 500).

The enjoyment felt by students can be observed in the course feedback survey conducted for the Japanese calligraphy workshop course offered in the United Kingdom in the year 2013/2014, an extract of which is cited below.

> *Q :* What did you like about the course ? If the course is to be held again, what would you like to be kept in the course ?
>
> — Overall approach, very good interesting background history / info, as well as good time for practice.
>
> — Even with limited time we were able to learn, by practice, the basic strokes to communicate words.
>
> — Very clear instructions, highly interesting and informative material, fantastic feedback and helpful advice on the practical work.
>
> — Everything ! The tutor explained concepts clearly and informatively, providing inspiring examples of calligraphy.

The feedback was thus predominantly positive with a high level of satisfaction and sense of achievement. This confirms that calligraphy is an effective tool in increasing learners' motivation.

2.3 Structural benefits

A calligraphy workshop can be used to diversify classroom activities for all phases of teaching and at all levels of competence. One of the basic language teaching models called the "PPP method" (presentation, practice, and production) is typically used at elementary levels of language teaching (Harmer, 2009). The structure of this method consists of a gradual shift from more teacher-led activities to more student-led activities. The 'presentation' part includes warming-up activities, the teacher's explanation of the key points, as well as demonstration. The 'practice' part includes various types of exercises such as repeating the teacher's pronunciation, reading out a text in turns, and solving grammatical questions using a workbook in groups or pairs. The 'presentation' part includes activities in which students use the language freely and independently, such as speaking about themselves or writing about their opinions, using the items covered in the lesson.

In terms of course design, a calligraphy workshop can be well adapted to all of the three stages in the PPP method. The historical and background information as well as the explanation of the structure of characters and syllabaries can be used for the presentation stage while students can practice writing and produce calligraphic pieces in the practice and production stages respectively. Accordingly, a typical ninety minute workshop would consist of three parts, a lecture on the history and key concepts in Japanese calligraphy (thirty to forty-five minutes), a workshop for students to practice writing words introduced in the lecture part using a brush and ink on rice paper (thirty minutes), and student presentations to share their favorite work by explaining why they chose the piece both in terms of the word and the technique applied (fifteen to thirty minutes).

Furthermore, a calligraphy workshop can be introduced at all levels of language proficiency. For a beginners' class, a workshop can be used as a cultural introduction and designed particularly to teach syllabaries in the early part of a first year course. At this stage, the lecture and students' presentations can be conducted in learners' L1 (English, French, etc.) for a solid understanding of the background information and to keep students comfortable. For an intermediate class, a workshop can be used as an opportunity for students to develop their *kanji* practice and to increase their vocabulary through the knowledge of *kanji*. At this stage, part of the lecture and students' presentation can be switched to Japanese while the explanation on detailed technique and concepts can remain in the learners' L1. For an advanced class, a workshop can be used as an opportunity for students to enrich their understanding of the Japanese culture and tradition by discussing various aspects of Japanese aesthetics. At this stage, the lecture, presentation, and the technical instructions can be conducted in Japanese. The students' presentations can be extended to more in depth cultural and aesthetic discussions with question and answer sessions in which students are expected to develop not only their writing skills but also their oral skills.

A calligraphy workshop is thus an efficient pedagogical method to develop students' linguistic skills at various levels. Thanks to the structural benefit that allowed the course to be both informative and participative, the calligraphy workshop under study received positive feedback from the director of studies after a class visit. Below is an extract of the report :

> A stimulating introduction to the historical and cultural issues surrounding the Japanese writing systems : hiragana, katakana and kanji, and their use in literary texts and art, provided academic knowledge to back up the practical skills developed during the lesson. The class activities seem to have increased the student's curiosity to learn Japanese words and how characters, symbols and calligraphic styles are used to express cultural meaning. To sum up, the success of the workshop resulted from a combination of interesting activities, friendly atmosphere, group work and interaction, the enthusiasm of the teacher and business-like approach to each task, and the highly motivated students.

This exemplifies a successful use of calligraphy as an effective structuring device in language teaching.

3 Possible limitations

While there are many expected benefits, it should also be pointed out that there are some practical limitations in adopting calligraphy in TJFL classrooms. A workshop-based course is significantly more time-consuming than those with other teaching methods. The doctrine of Zen Buddhism adopted in calligraphy focuses on finding truth in oneself through meditation and self-enlightenment rather than external teaching. Thus, as with the case with many other cultural traditions in Japan, self-observation is essential in every part of the practice, including preparation before and cleaning up after writing. Particularly, the preparation of ink with an ink stone and an ink stick takes a long time and has a distinctive meditative element. As the class time for instruction is limited, there is a potential risk of running out of time. From a longer-term perspective, however, a cultural experience would enhance the overall motivation level. This 'quality-based' approach has also been suggested by the *Washington State Japanese Language Curriculum Guidelines Committee* (2000 : 13), proposing that with a relatively limited set of linguistic components covered in class, students would be able to achieve higher degree of mastery of what is covered in class. Thus through the unique experience of calligraphy, students are given an opportunity to enrich their understanding of the Japanese writing, culture and history that can be a motivating factor throughout their learning of the language.

There have also been concerns over a teaching methodology that focuses excessively on Japanese writing. The *Washington State Japanese Language Curriculum Guidelines Committee* (2000 : 50) warns that students who learn *kanji* in isolation may result in a situation in which they cannot make sense of a text or communicate sufficiently with others in Japanese. Furthermore, *kanji* are logographs that represent linguistic units and not ideographs that represent ideas (De Francis, 1984 ; Unger, 2004). Therefore, in

teaching characters, one should not focus too much on the meaning of each character. It is therefore suggested that in a calligraphy workshop, the teaching of characters should be contextualized with a list of vocabulary that includes the same character. With the above points taken into consideration, it can be said that the incorporation of a calligraphy workshop in TJFL is possible but that a solid framework to teach other linguistic components would be essential to maximize the effects of the experience.

Conclusion

In this study, a calligraphy workshop has been proposed as a potential pedagogical tool for teaching Japanese writing to speakers of European languages, particularly at the higher education level. Having reviewed the characteristics of the Japanese orthographic system and calligraphy, it has been suggested that by incorporating a calligraphy workshop in Japanese language classes, a number of benefits can be expected. These include linguistic benefits such as improving handwriting, learning stroke details, shape, structure, and etymological root of each character, and increasing vocabulary. As far as motivational benefits are concerned some of the key points include the experience of a traditional cultural activity, the understanding of the aesthetical value of a Zen-influenced practice, learning about the historical development of the Japanese orthographic system, as well as a reduction of anxiety and shyness in speaking the foreign language through enjoyment. Some of the structural advantages of the pedagogical tool we are advocating include the fact that it can be adopted for all phases of teaching and all levels of competence. It can also be used to diversify classroom activities. Since calligraphy is a linguistic, artistic, and cultural practice, a calligraphy workshop is expected to be an efficient aid for motivating students while enriching their knowledge about Japanese culture and history, and enhancing their understanding of Japanese writing and orthography. It should also be mentioned that similar calligraphy workshops can be introduced in the classroom of other languages, particularly Chinese and other Eastern Asian languages such as Korean, Vietnamese and so on. The pedagogical tool can also be used for languages such as Arabic or Latin among others from regions where there is a calligraphic tradition.

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