

A Study on use of Katakana Letters by Learners of Japanese as a Foreign Language

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INTRODUCTION

Japanese language is known as one of the languages which contain a large number of characters and more than one system of writing. There are three main types of writing systems in Japanese Language namely Hiragana, Katakana and Kanji. Kanji are a set of logographic/ideographic scripts and both hiragana and katakana are phonetic syllabaries. Having three types of characters in one language, using two characters as Hiragana and Katakana to write the same sound and large number of Kanji characters is a major challenge for students of Japanese as a Foreign Language. Sinhala native speakers have to learn a large number of letters in comparison to first language. They have to learn how to write letters correctly and have to memorize the stroke order of letters.

BACKGROUND

Students who are learning many other languages i.e. German, French, and Spanish do not need to give a special priority to learn a new alphabet as the alphabet of those languages are much similar to the English alphabet. Sri Lankan students learn English since preschool and English is known as the Second Language in Sri Lanka. When comparing with these languages a special consideration should be given to the writing system of Japanese. Katakana letters plays an important part in Japanese language which is mainly used to write loan words and for transcription of foreign language words. Moreover, Katakana is unconventionally used to write Japanese words for the purposes of emphasis, to write Onomatopoeias, indication of reading of Kanji, to write technical and scientific terms and so forth.

PURPOSE

This research is focused on the use of Katakana letters in comparison to other two main types of writing systems in Japanese of first year students who are following Japanese as a main subject in the University of Kelaniya. The aim of this research was to find out whether the use of Katakana letters causes any difficulties to the students and if yes, what these issues are when using Katakana letters compared with other two types of Japanese alphabets. The research was done with first year students who study Japanese at the University of Kelaniya. The students were asked to write 30 Japanese words in Katakana. They were also given a questionnaire on the use of Katakana. A random sample of students was also interviewed.

The students have been learning Japanese for 4-7 years. The time duration taken by them to learn Hiragana and Katakana are similar. Approximately they have taken 1-3 months to learn one alphabetic system. They have learned 350-450 Kanji characters up to now. First they have learned Hiragana alphabet, after Katakana they have started to learn Kanji. The methodology they have used most to practice letters are writing again and again. While learning letters teachers have given Dictation or to write words written in Roman letters in kana characters. It has become very useful for the students to memorize letters.

RESULTS

The main finding of the research was that although Kanji Characters are considered as the most difficult type of characters for Sri Lankan Students to master, the use of Katakana by them is also not in a much satisfied condition. English words which are transliterated into Katakana are made to conform to the more restrictive rules of Japanese phonology. It takes more time to recognize and to write words in Katakana than Hiragana. Furthermore, there are some Katakana characters which look alike. Therefore, students make errors sometimes when writing and reading certain Katakana words. Katakana is not used very often. Hence, they take some time to memorize Katakana when writing and reading those words.

Hiragana letters are the mostly used letters. Therefore, students practice those letters effortlessly when reading and writing. Some students believe that Katakana letters are not useful when comparing with Hiragana and Kanji as Katakana letters are not used very often. Nevertheless, writing and reading Katakana letters incorrectly makes the conversation unsuccessful. Also at examinations students lose points in essay writing by writing Katakana words incorrectly. Although there is a large number of Kanji characters students can use Hiragana words to write those words. However, they cannot use Hiragana instead of Katakana where writing some words in Katakana is a must. To overcome this issue, students could be advised to practice letters more often and to memorize letters. Encouraging students to study new Katakana words and encouraging them to read Japanese reading materials would improve their proficiency in Katakana.

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KEYWORDS

Japanese as a Foreign Language, Japanese writing systems, Katakana

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