

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND

According to the survey of Overseas Organizations involved in Japanese-Language Education conducted by the Japan Foundation, the number of Thai people learning Japanese has increased significantly over the past 5 years, due to the country's economic relations with Japan. The survey indicated that the total number of Thai students learning Japanese language has increased from 39,882 students in 1998 to 54,884 in 2003, or a 37.8 % increase in 5 years, making Thailand the 7th ranking country of the most Japanese language learners in the world.

In addition, the survey pointed out that the purposes of learning Japanese language for Thai students, similar to students in the world's top-ten countries with the largest number of Japanese language learners, are 1) to communicate in Japanese in order to develop cross-cultural understanding, 2) to participate in exchanging activities in Japan and 3) to fulfill their interest in Japanese culture and the country itself. Especially, Thai students tend to focus more on some practical and utility based purposes, such as preparing for university entrance exams, or qualification exams for future employment.

Of all the 541,474 Japanese-studying students at 2,341 institutions in 103 countries (more precisely, 97 countries and 7 districts) most have been engaged in the study of Japanese at institutions of higher education that offer Japanese courses as major and elective courses. In Thailand, the total number of students studying Japanese language at the higher educational level in 2003 was 22,000 students, making Thailand the 5th highest country with the most academic Japanese language learners in the world.

For non-academic institutions, the survey indicated that of all the 287,906 students at 2,447 institutions in 100 countries (more precisely 96 countries and 4 districts), the total number of Thai students learning Japanese language at this level is 15, 000 students. That is to say, Thailand is ranked 4th in the world among countries with the largest number of Japanese language learners at this level.

The growing number of students learning Japanese language in Thailand is not a guarantee that there are no problems in learning and teaching Japanese language here. On the contrary, studies have shown that 46.6% of Japanese language teaching institutions in Thailand encountered a lack of adequate teaching materials, while 37.6 % lacked information on teaching materials and methods.

Compared with the results of the 1998 survey, the percentage of institutions stating inadequate teaching materials, facilities, and equipment as problems or concerns decreased, while the percentage of institutions citing inadequate information on teaching materials, methods, etc, increased.

In learning Japanese language, Japanese people, or students of Japanese, have noted that there are 3 essential systems of writing that they must learn; these are *Hiragana, Katakana and Kanji*. (*Kodansha's compact kanji guide*, 1996) Among the three systems, Kanji, or “Chinese characters used in Japanese language” (hereafter called “Kanji”), has always been considered as the most difficult to grasp. Nevertheless, we have to admit that the more students know Kanji, the better they know Japanese, since many Japanese texts offered at higher educational institutions and workplaces are often composed of Kanji. Thus, students who can demonstrate a better use and understanding of Kanji tend to get higher marks in tests, leading to better chances of being accepted by institutions or better chances of employment.

For Thai students who are familiar with languages with syllabic or alphabetic construction like Thai and English, Kanji, which belongs to a morphographic (meaning + symbol) or logographic (logo + symbol) system of writing in which a unit of representation signifying the meaning of the word (Taylor and Taylor, 1995:p.88) is especially difficult.

There are many methods of teaching, and techniques of learning Kanji, especially for learners of Japanese as a foreign language. Each technique might work and/or be of interest to each group differently, or might not be as effective in different groups of people.

This research attempts to figure out the strategies used by Thai learners of Japanese language that have helped them to remember Kanji, and consequently have led to effective enhancement of the learners' capabilities, and to identify appropriate techniques for teachers to adapt and use in their teaching.

1.2 STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

1.2.1 What kind of “Kanji” learning strategies are used by Thai learners?

1.2.2 What are target population’s attitudes/behaviors toward Japanese learning?

1.3 OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1.3.1 This study was conducted in order to find out what strategies in learning Kanji are used by high school students at Taweethapisek School.

1.3.2 This study was conducted in order to find out what are the target population’s attitudes/behaviors toward Japanese learning.

1.4 DEFINITIONS OF TERMS

Definitions of Terms of this study are as follows:

1.4.1 ‘KANJI’ refers to ‘Chinese characters’- those which were originally imported from China and used in the Japanese writing system

1.4.2. ‘SINGLE KANJI’ refers to a Chinese character which can be used independently in Japanese language such as 下 (under) , 私 (I) ,etc.

1.4.3. ‘COMPOUND KANJI’ refers to a single Kanji of more than 1 character used to represent one word.

1.4.4. ‘KANJI LEARNING STRATEGIES’ refer to techniques used in learning/memorizing kanji. In this study, Kanji learning strategies are divided into four main categories. These are Formal/ Drilling category, Peer group/ Communicative category, Associative/Cognitive category and Multimedia category.

1.4.5. ‘HIRAGANA’ refers to a kind of character used in the Japanese writing system to refer to Japanese words e.g. した (under) , わたし (I)

1.4.6. ‘KATAKANA’ refers to a kind of character used in the Japanese writing system used for loan words from other languages in particular e.g. トマト (To-ma-to) (Gamage, 2003)

1.5 SCOPE OF THE STUDY

The study of the learning strategies used by Thai students in learning Kanji was conducted within the following areas:

1.5.1. The students in the study were Japanese major students in a male high school who were in their second semester of the 2006 academic year at Taweethapisek School, Bangkok.

1.5.2. This is a specific study due to the limited number of students. Therefore, it may not be used to generalize about students majoring in Japanese in other schools.

1.5.3. The study focused on the language learning strategies only in Kanji, not other learning strategies.

1.5.4. Gender and GPA were not considered as criteria for analyzing the findings.

1.6 SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY

1.6.1. The objective of this study is to find out the Kanji learning strategies employed by Thai high school students at Taweethapisek School.

1.6.2 Instructors can keep track of learning habits, and learning strategies of students at high school level and keep these findings for consideration in designing their lesson plans to align with their students' aptitude and preference.

1.6.3. Also, the result of this study may be helpful in being useful information for teachers who aim to improve or develop other strategies that the students lack to make students become more successful learners in learning Japanese Kanji.

1.7 ORGANIZATION OF THE STUDY

The study of Kanji learning strategies of Thai high school students at Taweethapisek School, Bangkok is divided into 5 chapters as follows:

Chapter 1 begins with an introduction which consists of the background, a statement of the problem, the objectives of the study, definitions of terms, the scope of the study, and the significance of the study and organization of the study.

Chapter 2 is a review of literature.

Chapter 3 describes the methodology used in this study which comprises subjects, materials, procedures and data analysis.

Chapter 4 presents the results of the study and

Chapter 5 ends with conclusions, discussions, and the recommendations of the study.



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