

# Strategies for Teaching Japanese Kanji from an Intercultural Perspective



Ke Lu<sup>1,\*</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Yibin University, China

**Abstract:** Teaching Japanese kanji from a cross-cultural perspective has become particularly important in the context of globalisation. Kanji is not only an important writing system of Japanese language, but also carries rich cultural connotations. Teaching Japanese kanji from a cross-cultural perspective is not only conducive to promoting students' understanding and cognition of different cultures, but also able to enhance students' interest in learning through a wide variety of teaching methods, thus achieving an improvement in the effectiveness of teaching. Therefore, this paper explores how to teach kanji effectively in order to improve students' language proficiency and cultural understanding from four strategies: contextual teaching, comparative analysis, multimedia resources and cross-cultural discussion. Through these teaching strategies, students will be able to gain a deeper understanding of the application of Chinese characters in Japanese and the cultural significance behind them, which will in turn promote the exchange and understanding of Chinese and Japanese cultures.

**Keywords:** intercultural perspective; Japanese language; Chinese characters; teaching strategies; value

## Introduction

With the deepening of international exchanges, students studying Japanese are becoming more and more aware of the importance of Chinese characters in language learning. Kanji are not only the cornerstone of Japanese writing, but also contain a deep historical and cultural background. However, traditional teaching of kanji often focuses on memorisation and writing, failing to fully utilise the potential of kanji in cultural communication. Through a cross-cultural perspective, more effective teaching strategies can be explored to help students deepen their understanding of Chinese and Japanese culture while mastering kanji.

## 1. Importance of Kanji in Japanese Language Learning

### 1.1. Strengthening semantic understanding

Kanji is not only an important writing system in Japanese, but also carries rich semantic connotations. Learning kanji can help students understand the roots and composition of vocabulary in a deeper way, thus enhancing their vocabulary. The construction of kanji

usually consists of radicals, which often reveal the basic concepts of the meaning of the character, and glyphs, which show the phonetic characteristics and historical evolution of the character (Ma, 2022). For example, the Chinese character “水” (Water), as a radical, can be combined with other characters that represent liquids, such as “河” (River) and “湖” (Lake), and students can appreciate the intrinsic connection between different words by analysing the Chinese characters. Through analysing the Chinese characters, students can appreciate the intrinsic connection between different words. In addition, the polyphonic and polysemantic nature of Chinese characters also enables students to discover more vocabulary usage while mastering the basics. For example, the kanji “行” can mean either “to walk” or “to perform a certain activity,” and this diversity provides language students with a wealth of associations. In everyday communication, many Japanese words are derived directly from kanji, which makes mastery of kanji the key to understanding and using the Japanese language. By learning kanji, students can not only improve their reading and writing skills, but also use these vocabularies more naturally in listening and speaking.

**Corresponding Author:** Ke Lu  
Yibin University, China

Email: 427781341@qq.com

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### **1.2. Developing reading skills**

Kanji are an important part of Japanese writing, and their use in Japanese has led to a significant improvement in the reading ability of Kanji students. Mastery of kanji not only helps students to recognise and understand vocabulary, but also dramatically improves their reading comprehension of a wide range of texts. The Japanese writing system consists of a combination of kanji and kana (hiragana and katakana), and kanji are commonly used for core vocabulary such as nouns, verbs, and adjectives, making proficiency in kanji the foundation of fluent reading. Students will be able to recognise words quickly by the shape and structure of the kanji and increase their recognition speed, thus reducing pauses in the reading process and enhancing overall reading fluency. Kanji are semantically condensed in Japanese, and many of them can convey a wealth of information in a single character shape. For example, the kanji “学” represents concepts such as learning and education, and by understanding the kanji, students are able to better grasp the theme and key points of a text. With the mastery of Chinese characters, students can read news, literature, academic articles and other materials more easily, thus broadening their knowledge and horizons (Wang et al., 2022).

### **1.3. Enrichment of cultural background**

Learning Chinese characters is not only a way to improve language ability, but also an important way to deeply understand the cultural connection between China and Japan. Originating from ancient China, Chinese characters have a long and rich history, and with the spread of Chinese characters, they have gradually influenced the language, culture and social development of Japan. Therefore, through learning Chinese characters, students can better understand Japanese history and traditions, and reveal the deep connection between Chinese and Japanese cultures. For example, many Japanese vocabularies are directly derived from kanji, and these vocabularies not only linguistically carry the ideas and philosophies of ancient China, but also reflect cultural exchanges and interactions

throughout history. When students are exposed to these vocabularies, they not only learn the language itself, but also understand the cultural stories and historical background behind the kanji. The process of the construction and evolution of Chinese characters also reflects the cultural interactions between China and Japan. By analysing the composition of kanji, students can understand how they have changed at different stages of history and how these changes have intertwined with the social, economic and cultural contexts. For example, many kanji related to nature, life and ethics, such as “和” (Peace) and “善” (Kind), convey values and philosophies of life that are unique to Eastern cultures. By mastering these kanji, students will be able to gain a deeper appreciation of the importance placed on harmony, etiquette and ethics in Japanese culture, and thus a fuller understanding of the way Japanese society operates.

## **2. The Value of Teaching Japanese Kanji from an Intercultural Perspective**

### **2.1. Facilitating cultural exchange**

Through learning kanji, students can not only master the basic composition of the Japanese language, but also gain a deeper understanding of the cultural connotations behind kanji, thus promoting cultural exchange and understanding between China and Japan. Kanji, as an important part of the Japanese writing system, carries rich historical and cultural information. While mastering kanji, students are able to come into contact with ancient Chinese philosophy, art and moral concepts. Such learning is not only an enhancement of language ability, but also a cross-cultural exploration. The Chinese characters themselves have unique pictograms and multiple meanings, and through analysing them, students can feel the thoughts and emotions contained in them. For example, the Chinese character “爱” not only expresses the meaning of “love”, but also reflects a multi-level understanding of affection, friendship and love, which encourages students to have a deeper understanding of cultural differences in the expression of emotions. The study of kanji provides

students with a key to understanding Japanese culture and traditions. Many words related to daily life, festive customs and social values are conveyed through kanji. Through the study of these kanji, students can better understand the cultural characteristics of Japan. For example, the kanji “春” is closely related to the Japanese culture of cherry blossoms, and students can experience the unique emotions and cultural identity of the Japanese people towards spring while understanding the kanji. In this process, cross-cultural awareness is enhanced. Students not only learnt about the writing and pronunciation of kanji, but also explored the use of language and expressions in different cultures in interaction with classmates or teachers. This interaction promotes mutual understanding and respect, enabling students to develop a more open and tolerant mindset in the process of language learning (Li, 2013).

## **2.2. Favourable to the promotion of cognitive development**

The multiplicity of shapes, sounds and meanings of Chinese characters greatly promotes students' cognitive development, enabling them to develop stronger logical thinking and problem-solving skills in the learning process. First of all, the structure of Chinese characters usually contains multiple elements, such as radicals and glyphs, and this morphological diversity requires students to analyse and generalise when understanding Chinese characters, which promotes the development of their logical thinking skills. By identifying and disassembling the components of a Chinese character, students can more effectively understand the meaning of the character and its variations, and form a systematic framework of knowledge, which not only improves their ability to memorise Chinese characters, but also fosters the habit of rigorous thinking. The phonetic nature of Chinese characters also provides students with a multi-dimensional learning experience. The pronunciation of Chinese characters is often linked to their meanings, and this combination of phonetics and meaning makes it necessary for students to

recognise and apply phonetics in the learning process, thus enhancing their linguistic sensitivity. Many Chinese characters can have multiple pronunciations and meanings in different contexts, and students have to learn to use them flexibly in different situations. The development of this ability directly contributes to their problem-solving skills, and enables them to be more confident and relaxed when facing complex language environments. More importantly, learning Chinese characters also encourages students to compare and analyse them in different cultural contexts. During the learning process, students often discover the similarities and differences between Chinese characters and similar vocabulary in their mother tongue, which stimulates them to think about language and cultural differences. Such cross-cultural comparative analyses not only enhance their cultural awareness, but also help them to better adapt and communicate in a multicultural environment.

## **2.3. Facilitating language acquisition**

Kanji occupy a crucial position in Japanese, and mastering them is not only the foundation of language learning, but also helps to improve the effectiveness of language learning. Firstly, as an important part of the Japanese writing system, kanji directly affect students' understanding of Japanese grammar and vocabulary. Many Japanese words are made up of kanji, and by recognising and mastering these kanji, students can quickly expand their vocabulary. For example, the kanji “食” and “飲” mean “eat” and “drink” respectively, which are not only independent words, but can also be combined with other words. They are not only independent words, but can also be combined with other words to form more complex expressions, which enables students to use the language more freely in daily communication. The use of kanji helps students to better understand the grammatical structure of the Japanese language. Many verbs and adjectives in Japanese are based on kanji, and mastering these kanji makes it easier for students to recognise their grammatical features and patterns of change. For example, the verb “行く” is closely related to the meaning of the kanji “行”, and by understanding the

meaning of the kanji, students can more clearly grasp the use of the verb in different contexts. This understanding of the Chinese character not only enhances the understanding of the meaning of the verb, but also enhances the understanding of the meaning of the Chinese character. This understanding of the Chinese characters not only enhances students' language ability, but also improves their clarity of expression. Mastering Chinese characters can also enhance students' language application skills. In daily life, Chinese characters often appear in signs, advertisements, books and news. Being familiar with Chinese characters can help students acquire information quickly and improve their information processing skills.

### **3. Japanese Kanji Teaching Strategies from a Cross-Cultural Perspective**

#### **3.1. Conducting situational teaching and strengthening contextual understanding**

Situational teaching is an effective teaching method that helps students understand and use Kanji in real contexts by combining real-life scenarios and specific cultural backgrounds (Zou, 2012). This teaching method can not only improve students' interest in learning, but also enhance their ability to use Kanji in practice. Teachers can introduce scenarios that are closely related to students' daily lives in class, such as shopping in a supermarket or ordering food in a restaurant. In this scenario, teachers can help students identify Kanji that are closely related to life by showing them an actual shopping list or menu. For example, in a class with the theme of "shopping", the teacher can first show a supermarket shopping list that lists Kanji for some common commodities, such as “米” (Rice), “牛奶” (Milk), “蔬菜” (Vegetables), etc. By explaining the meaning, pronunciation and usage of these Kanji characters one by one, the teacher can help students understand the practical application of these words in shopping scenarios. Then, the teacher can simulate a shopping conversation and ask students to role-play in pairs. One student plays the role of a customer and

the other plays the role of a clerk. They use the Kanji they have learned through conversations such as asking prices and confirming products. Such interactions not only enable students to consolidate their memory of Chinese characters in practice, but also cultivate their oral expression and social skills. Combining cultural background can make the learning of Chinese characters more vivid and interesting. For example, when explaining Chinese characters related to festivals, teachers can let students understand the cultural significance behind Chinese characters such as “福” (happiness), “寿” (Longevity), and “月” (Lunar) by introducing traditional customs in "Spring Festival" or "Mid-Autumn Festival". By showing relevant pictures or videos, teachers can make students more intuitively understand the importance of these Chinese characters in specific cultural contexts. Afterwards, students can share their understanding of these festivals and their manifestation in daily life through writing or group discussions.

#### **3.2. Using comparative analysis to enhance learning interest**

Comparative analysis is an effective strategy for teaching Chinese characters. By encouraging students to compare Chinese characters with similar characters or concepts in their native language, it can enhance their interest in learning and help them to better remember the meaning and usage of the characters (Zhu, 2008). This method makes use of students' existing linguistic knowledge and allows them to learn by contrast in familiar contexts, thus deepening their understanding of new knowledge. For example, many students learning Chinese characters may find that certain characters are similar in shape or pronunciation to those in their native language, and this connection can motivate them to learn. In practice, teachers can design a classroom activity based on the theme of “Comparison between Chinese Characters and Mother Tongue”. For example, when introducing the Chinese character “山”, the teacher can first show the written form of the character and then compare it with the character for “mountain” in the mother tongue. If the students'

native language is Chinese, the teacher can point out the similarities between the two characters and emphasise their commonalities in shape and meaning. In addition, teachers can introduce relevant cultural contexts, e.g. explaining the symbolism of “山” in Chinese and Japanese cultures, such as nature, resilience and height. Through this comparison, students can not only remember the basic meaning of the Chinese character, but also understand its far-reaching influence at the cultural level. Next, teachers can guide students to have group discussions, encouraging them to share words in their mother tongue that are similar to the Chinese characters and to explore the usage and meaning of these words. For example, students can compare the Chinese character “水” with the corresponding words in their mother tongue and discuss their specific applications in life. Through such discussions, students can understand the usage of Chinese characters from different perspectives and deepen their memory of the characters.

### **3.3. Enriching multimedia resources to promote students' participation**

The use of multimedia resources, such as videos, animations and games, can greatly enhance the vividness and fun of learning Chinese characters, thus increasing students' engagement and motivation to learn. Multimedia tools can effectively attract students' attention and make them more engaged in the learning process through both visual and auditory stimulation. For example, in the classroom, teachers can use animated short films to introduce the origin and evolution of Chinese characters. Through vivid animation, students can intuitively see the composition and shape changes of Chinese characters, and this visual way of learning can help them better understand the meaning of Chinese characters and their cultural background (Li, 2005). Taking the Chinese character “鱼” (fish) as an example, the teacher can play a short video showing various kinds of fish underwater and the cultural practices related to fish, for example, in Chinese culture, the fish symbolises a good year's harvest. The vivid images and explanations in the video can make students

visualise the Chinese character “鱼”. After watching the video, teachers can organise a discussion, asking students what they saw in the video and guiding them to express their understanding of the Chinese character for “鱼”. Such interaction not only makes students more familiar with the use of Chinese characters, but also encourages them to participate in active communication. Teachers can also use online Chinese character learning games to make learning more interesting. For example, a game called “Chinese Character Puzzle” can be designed to allow students to match Chinese characters with their corresponding images or definitions through the use of puzzles. In the game, students need to identify the characters quickly and match them correctly, which is challenging and not only improves their concentration, but also develops their reflexes and memory. In this way, students learn in the game, which is not only relaxing and enjoyable, but also consolidates the learned Chinese characters in a subtle way (Yu, 2024).

### **3.4. Conducting cross-cultural discussions to promote cultural understanding**

Cross-cultural discussion is an effective teaching strategy that can promote understanding of cultural differences and deepen knowledge of Chinese characters by setting up discussion and sharing sessions in which students exchange elements related to Chinese characters in their respective cultures (Lin & Yu, 2022). In this process, students can not only share their cultural backgrounds, but also explore the meaning and usage of Chinese characters in different cultures through comparative analyses. For example, the teacher can start a discussion around the Chinese character “家” (Family). In the classroom, the teacher can first introduce the composition and basic meaning of the character “家” and emphasise its importance in Chinese culture. Then, the teacher can invite students to share words and concepts related to “家” from their own cultures. For example, students from different countries may come up with expressions of “home” in their mother tongue, sharing the symbolism of family, family structure and related

festivals in their culture. Such exchanges not only enable students to have a deeper understanding of the emotional and cultural value of the Chinese character “家”, but also make them aware of the importance of family and the diversity of ways in which it is expressed in different cultures. Teachers can organise group activities in which students discuss other Chinese characters related to “家”, such as “父”, “母”, “子”, etc. and explore these characters. Students can discuss other Chinese characters related to “family”, such as “father”, “mother”, “son”, etc., and explore how these characters reflect the concept of family in their respective cultures. During group discussions, students can exchange ideas and compare family roles, responsibilities and values in different cultures, thus deepening their understanding of the characters and their cultural contexts. Such activities not only promote interaction among students, but also stimulate their thinking about language and culture.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, teaching Japanese Kanji in a cross-cultural perspective not only helps language learning, but also serves as an important bridge for cultural exchange. Through strategies such as contextual teaching, comparative analyses, multimedia resources and cross-cultural discussions, teachers are able to stimulate students' interest in learning and improve their language proficiency and cultural literacy. This comprehensive approach makes the learning of Chinese characters no longer a single task of memorisation, but a rich cultural experience, laying a solid foundation for students' communication in the era of globalisation.

### Conflict of Interest

The author declares that she has no conflicts of interest to this work.

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