
The Word Processor and the Writing of Japanese for Non-Natives

The Word Processor and the Writing of Japanese for Non-Natives learning to write the Japanese language has been traditionally viewed as a very tedious, time-consuming process for native and non-native alike. However, the advent of the Japanese word processor has removed one of greatest burdens for non-native speakers: the necessity of memorizing the writing of over 2,000 Chinese characters. In this article, the author elaborates on the significance of the Japanese word processor for non-native students of Japanese and Japanese language program administrators; in addition, the author discusses several ways in which the Japanese word processor acts as a natural teaching device for several structural aspects of language.

Background

In recent years, much attention has been focused on the benefits of the word processor on the writing process. Many authors have noted the fact that this tool allows the writer more freedom and flexibility throughout the composition process. In addition, there has been considerable interest in how the computer and word processor can be used in language teaching. To date, however, relatively little has been written on how the word processor can facilitate the writing of languages which do not use the Roman alphabet.

In Japan, word processors have literally revolutionized writing of all kinds. Prior to the advent of the word processor, the Japanese language was usually written by hand or with cumbersome typewriters, the use of which required extensive operator training and practice.

Today, however, the word processor has so completely replaced the conventional Japanese typewriter that the use of the latter is no longer taught in most business schools.

I have been using Japanese word-processing software for several years and find it a bit ironic that this tool, originally designed for native speakers, may have even greater potential for non-natives like myself.

Putting the Task into Perspective

Learning to write the Japanese language has been traditionally viewed as a very tedious, time-consuming process for native and non-natives alike. At present, over 2,000 Chinese characters or *kanji* are used in everyday writing, along with two phonetic scripts consisting of 46 symbols each. Within the Japanese educational system, over 900 characters—along with both phonetic systems—are learned during the first six years of school. The remaining characters are learned during junior and senior high school, and many hours are spent in memorizing the characters—their various meanings and pronunciations—as well as practicing the correct way to write each.

The fact that the Japanese spend approximately 12 years to learn the system brings into perspective the difficulty that a non-native would have in learning to read and write Japanese. Students majoring in Japanese at American universities spend countless hours in memorizing this same system of characters (or a slightly abbreviated version of it).

Personal Perspective

A student of the Japanese language for over 15

years, I have resided in Japan for 10 of those years. However, I have spent relatively little time as a student in formal Japanese language classrooms. Before coming to Japan as a teacher of English as a Foreign Language (EFL), I took one introductory course in conversational Japanese at a junior college in Hawaii. I also took a course in Japanese syntax while getting a Master's Degree in English as a Second Language (ESL). The bulk of my study in Japanese has been with tutors on a one-to-one basis.

Throughout my years of study, I have paid relatively little attention to the skill of writing Japanese. This has been due to the fact that 1) I perceived the writing of Japanese to be very difficult, and 2) I have had little need to write more than my name and address, and perhaps the name of the institution where I teach. From time to time, however, I would become very ambitious and promise myself to learn the writing of at least ten new Chinese characters per day. Such ambitious periods lasted from three to four days. Be that as it may, I have continued to expand my receptive knowledge of *kanji*, so that I can read more than 1,500 of them—quite adequate for taking care of daily matters, including the reading of newspapers with about 90% comprehension.

Enter the Japanese Word Processor

Several years ago, I purchased a computer primarily for the word processing of English. Also given word processing software for Japanese, I quickly realized that the advent of the Japanese word processor had, in effect, removed one of the great barriers to the writing of Japanese; with the use of the word processor, it is, of course, unnecessary to know how to write the characters by hand. If one has the ability to input the pronunciation of the desired word in Roman letters or Japanese phonetic symbols—and the ability to read and select the correct character or characters from a list the computer provides—one can produce written documents in Japanese. With the word processor, the ability to produce written Japanese instantly expands from the number of characters one can actually write by hand to the number one can read!

The Japanese word processor uses a standard computer keyboard. The user has the option of

inputting the words in either Roman letters or Japanese *kana*, that is, phonetic symbols. If the user inputs in Roman letters, the computer converts these to *kana*. When the user wishes to convert a word or even a short phrase to Chinese characters, the Return Button is pressed. The computer automatically inserts its best “guess” into the sentence and offers the writer several other possibilities on another part of the display screen. The writer simply looks at the screen and selects the correct characters by pressing the appropriate number keys. This eliminates the need to know the exact number of strokes and the correct stroke order for writing the characters.

Learning from the Word Processor

The Japanese word processor can be used to provide immediate feedback on certain structural points of the language. In Japanese, vowel length is a phonetic feature which carries meaning. For non-native speakers, words such as *shōjo* (young lady), *shojō* (formal letter), and *shōjō* (symptom) sound very similar in a stream of speech. Likewise, it is difficult for the student of Japanese to remember which vowels should be elongated when speaking. Another similar problem is the presence or absence of glottal stops. For example, consider the word *itte* and *ite*. The former is the gerundive form of the verb *iku* meaning *go*, and the stop occurs between the two *t*'s; the latter is the gerundive form of the verb *iru* meaning *be* or *stay*. In writing these words with a word processor, the user must input them correctly to get the desired characters. If the user makes a mistake, the computer will not give the appropriate characters.

The Effects on Curriculum

It is tempting to speculate about how the word processor will, or rather, should affect curriculum design for Japanese language programs for non-native speakers. The study of Chinese characters has traditionally been one of the main activities for students of Japanese. There is no way that this can or should change. However, as Japanese word processors and word-processing software become more available, curriculum designers must consider whether requiring the non-native learner of Japanese to memorize the writing of a large number of characters is actually

in such learners' best interests. To take full advantage of the word processor's power, non-native learners of Japanese would, perhaps, be better served in spending more time in learning to read as many *kanji* as possible and less in learning to write the characters by hand. The reading power of non-native learners of Japanese using the word processor can now do double duty.

Granted, the writing requirement should not be completely eliminated; however, I do feel that the power of the word processor cannot be ignored if program and curriculum requirements are to reflect current conditions. Perhaps, a compromise should be considered: Reduce the number of *kanji* required for memorization and substitute courses in the writing of Japanese using word processors. Satisfying those who do not wish to make a program appear too lenient, the implementation of such a compromise would provide non-native learners of Japanese a valuable tool which they can use outside the classroom.

Conclusion

Even with the assistance of the word processor, the writing of Japanese is a formidable task. One must still have the ability to read *kanji*; in addition, one must possess a large productive vocabulary, as well as a knowledge of syntax and the conventions of the writing system. Nevertheless, for those who possess competence in these areas, the Japanese word processor eliminates a significant stumbling block in the writing of Japanese. Selling for about \$100-\$1000 in Japan, portable word processors with appropriate electrical adapters or batteries are a little like travellers' checks: One need not leave home without them.

Contributor Profile

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