

Students' Perspectives on Jukugo Kanji Learning Difficulties in Indonesia

Alo Karyati¹, Endry Boeriswati², Muhammad Kamal³

Doctoral Program in Applied Linguistics, Jakarta State University, Jakarta, Indonesia

Corresponding email: alokaryati_9906921007@mhs.unj.ac.id

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Abstract This research focuses on how students perceive the difficulty of learning kanji. Kanji are the most difficult characters to learn. There are many things to learn in learning kanji, one of which is jukugo kanji. Learning jukugo kanji is one of the challenging aspects of mastering the Japanese language, especially for foreign students. The complexity of the structure, similar meanings, and limited learning strategies cause many students to have difficulty understanding and memorizing the jukugo kanji. The formulation of the problem in this study consists of: (1) what are the difficulties faced by Japanese language students in learning jukugo kanji? (2) What strategies do students use to deal with Jukugo Kanji learning difficulties? The approach used is a mixed method, which combines qualitative and quantitative data. The subject of the study was to interview students of the Japanese study program from various universities in Indonesia. The number of respondents for the questionnaire was 130 students, and for open questions there were 89 respondents. Data collection techniques through questionnaires and open-ended questions. The data analysis technique in this study is carried out by integrating quantitative and qualitative analysis in accordance with a mixed-methods approach. The results of the research are expected to provide a real picture of the challenges faced by students and become a reference in designing strategies or teaching materials that are more effective and in accordance with the needs of learners.

Keywords: Jukugo Kanji; Learning Difficulties; Student Perception; Japanese Learning

INTRODUCTION

Japanese is a unique and interesting language to learn. The uniqueness of learning Japanese lies in the three types of characters studied: hiragana, katakana, and kanji. The existence of these three alphabets often makes Japanese considered the most difficult foreign language to learn in the world (Paxton & Svetanant, 2013; Rasiban, 2018; Wamuti et al., 2022). Of these three alphabets, kanji is the most difficult to learn (Rasiban, 2018). Therefore, many people consider kanji to be the most frightening threat in learning Japanese (Karyati, Alo & Rahmawati, 2019; Quoc & Huan, 2019).

Kanji is often an obstacle for students in learning Japanese (Danh, 2021). Meanwhile, (Kandráč, 2020) stated that Japanese kanji is still a major obstacle for students in understanding Japanese, the effect of the similarity of the visual form of kanji also often causes obstacles in learning kanji, because one kanji character has several ways of reading and pronunciation (Nakayama, 2021; Yulianto & Nurhadi, 2018). Difficulties in learning kanji are generally caused by the existence of two reading methods, namely the Japanese reading method and the Chinese reading method (onyomi), the many sequences of writing kanji, the existence of bushu/kanji roots, compound kanji (jukugo). Regarding the complexity in learning kanji, (Gamage, 2003) explains that the complexity in learning kanji is caused by the existence of reading methods, and the large number of kanji that must be learned, thus resulting in difficulties in learning kanji for learners with an alphabet background. Paxton (2019) also stated that kanji is often problematic for learners with an

alphabetic background, as is the case for Japanese language learners in Indonesia who also have an alphabetic background.

Of the various difficulties students face in learning kanji, *jukugo* is one that often causes difficulties for students when learning kanji. The causes of difficulties in learning *jukugo* are several things. As explained (Ramadhani et al., 2022), one of the main obstacles in learning *jukugo* kanji is because students have difficulty understanding the meaning of kanji. Difficulty in understanding meaning is also explained (Rose, 2017) that the difficulty in learning kanji is because learners must understand the meaning, structure, and relationships between kanji simultaneously. In addition, difficulties in understanding *jukugo* are caused by the Japanese reading method (*kunyomi*) and the Chinese reading method (*onyomi*). This is as explained (Aneros et al., 2025), which said that the main difficulty students have in understanding *jukugo* is the difficulty in distinguishing between *kunyomi* and *onyomi*. In addition, learners also experience difficulties in learning *jukugo*, especially understanding the relationships between the constituent kanji (Chieko, 2000).

From the various difficulties in understanding *jukugo* kanji found from several opinions, it can be concluded that the difficulty of students in learning *jukugo* kanji is due to the presence of *onyomi* and *kunyomi*, the difficulty of students in understanding the meaning of each kanji studied, and there are still difficulties for students in combining kanji, from compound kanji to single kanji. So that a strategy is needed so that these difficulties can be overcome.

Difficulties in learning *jukugo* kanji are also experienced by many learners not only in Indonesia, but also in Japanese language learners in various countries. As explained in the study (Gamage, 2003) that difficulties in learning *jukugo* occur in Japanese language learners in Australia, this is due to Japanese language learners due to the presence of ethnic Chinese who have a background in Chinese character kanji, with native Australian Japanese language learners who have an alphabet background, it is explained that differences in learner backgrounds result in less effective understanding of *jukugo* kanji. Meanwhile, (Shekarabi, 2023) explains that difficulties in learning *jukugo* kanji are also faced by Japanese language learners in Iranian universities due to factors such as differences in writing systems, teaching methods, and learning environments, thus causing students' learning motivation to decrease. The number of *jukugo* in kanji learning also causes students' difficulties in understanding *jukugo*. Difficulties in understanding *jukugo* are also faced by Japanese language learners in Spain, this is explained in his research (Fukuda, 2024) that learners' difficulties in learning kanji are due to the complex and different kanji structure from the alphabet system, so this causes difficulties in understanding kanji-based vocabulary, including *jukugo*.

From the various difficulties in learning kanji *jukugo* that occur in various countries, the author can conclude that the difficulties faced by students in some countries are caused by the background of the letters that students learn in various countries, which are mostly alphabets, while when learning Japanese, students must be faced with complex kanji letters both in how to write and how to read them. So that automatically causes students to have difficulty in understanding kanji, in this case kanji *jukugo* (compound kanji). Students find it difficult to combine kanji, from single kanji to compound kanji. Because of the many complexities in combining kanji, this results in a decrease in student learning motivation in learning kanji. For this reason, students must have high cognitive abilities, to remember the various kanji they learn, and be able to combine them. This is in accordance with cognitive theory (Atkinson & Shiffrin, 1968) that human memory consists of short memory and long

memory, short memory students are expected to be able to memorize onyomi and kunyomi of each kanji studied, long memory students can combine the kanji they study with other kanji, and can understand the meaning of the combination of kanji. Based on the difficulties described in the study, the author conducted research on student perceptions of learning kanji jukugo at various universities in Indonesia.

Previous research discussing the difficulties of learning jukugo has been done a lot, such as in research (Chieko, 2000), in his research Kano discussed the difficulties of intermediate level learners in Korea, namely the difficulty of how to form single kanji into compound kanji, this is caused by the large number of jukugo kanji that must be learned. Furthermore, the difficulty of learning jukugo kanji is also explained in research from (Machida, 2013), this difficulty is caused by the background of students who use the alphabet, so that when combining jukugo kanji, students have difficulty combining their kanji. Another study discussing the difficulties of learning jukugo kanji is also found in the article (Egashira et al., 2022), in their research Egashira and colleagues explained how native Japanese students misread the way combined kanji (jukugo kanji) are written, from 150 native Japanese students made mistakes in reading between left kanji and kanji on the right kanji, thus affecting their reading style. Another study that examines the difficulties of learning jukugo kanji, explained in the research (Akbar et al., 2018) Akbar and colleagues in their research focused on how to measure students' abilities and understanding of the structure and meaning of jukugo, in the discussion also explained how the difficulties in understanding jukugo kanji.

The difference between this study and the previous study is the focus of the research, in this study the focus is on how students view the difficulties in learning the jukugo kanji that they face and how the students' strategies to deal with these difficulties, as well as other differences in the students who are respondents from various universities in Indonesia, namely those that have Japanese study programs. From the results of this research, it is hoped that the author can be used as a reference when the author will teach jukugo to students in the writer's teaching place. So that the author can come up with an innovative learning model when explaining the jukugo kanji.

RESEARCH METHODS

1. Research Type and Design

This study uses mixed methods with sequential explanatory design. In the initial stage, quantitative data was obtained from the results of a questionnaire distributed to Japanese language learners. The questionnaire was aimed at finding out the extent of students' difficulties in learning jukugo kanji. Furthermore, qualitative data was obtained through open-ended questions to clarify the in-depth nature of the data obtained from the survey results.

2. Research Subject

The subjects in this study were 130 Japanese language learners from 15 universities in Indonesia. Respondents are students who have studied kanji or are studying kanji. Of the 130 respondents, 89 students answered open-ended questions, and the results of the answers will be used as qualitative data.

3. Data Collection Techniques

The data was collected through the distribution of questionnaires to Japanese language learner students in Indonesia. The questionnaire consists of closed-ended questions to obtain quantitative data and open-ended questions to explore qualitative data. The scale used is a frequency-based four-point Likert scale. Data collection was conducted online and resulted in 130 responses for closed questionnaires and 89 responses for open-ended questions.

4. Data Analysis Techniques

The data in this study was analyzed using a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative data from the questionnaire were analyzed descriptively through frequency and percentage to identify patterns of learning difficulties. Qualitative data from open-ended questions were analyzed and interpreted. From 89 open-ended answer results, the author selected 10 responses from respondents as a rando, then the results were analyzed as to what difficulties students faced in learning Japanese jukugo kanji. The results of the two analyses were then integrated to provide a comprehensive understanding of the difficulties of learning jukugo kanji.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Results of the Questionnaire

To find out more about the difficulties of Japanese language learners in Indonesia in learning jukugo kanji, the author also distributed a questionnaire to students from several universities in Indonesia. From the results of the questionnaire, the results of 130 respondents from 15 universities in various regions in Indonesia were obtained. The questionnaire was created on a likert scale with a choice of answers: (1) Ever, (2) Sometimes, (3) Often, and (4) Very often.

1. Difficulty factors in learning jukugo kanji

In this section, a questionnaire is given to the respondents in the form of a statement related to what factors cause difficulties in learning difficulties in learning jukugo kanji. The results can be seen from the following responses:

1) Difficulty in understanding the meaning of starch

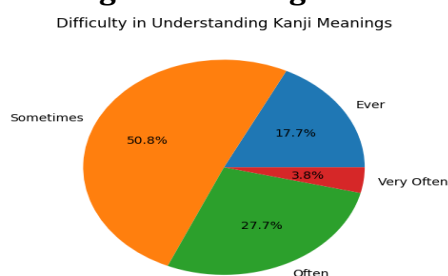


Figure 1. Graph difficulty in understanding the meaning of starch

Table 1. Results of the questionnaire difficulty understanding the meaning of kanji

Numbers	Answer Choice	Number of Responses
1	Ever	23
2	Some times	66
3	often	36
4	Very often	5

Based on the results of the questionnaire responses to 130 respondents, the author can conclude that the level of difficulty in understanding the meaning of kanji is in the medium category. This can be seen from the results of the response to the answer that chose "sometimes" as many as 66 respondents or reached 50.8%. Meanwhile, 36 respondents or 27.7% chose the answer "often", and as many as 5 students or 3.8% chose the answer "very often". From the frequent and very frequent answers, when combined, it can be concluded that as many as 31.5% of students have difficulties in the high category. Meanwhile, from the results of 23 respondents or 17.7% chose the answer "never", meaning that students have experienced difficulties. From these results, it was identified that a small number of students experienced difficulties in relatively low frequencies.

Based on the overall results of responses related to difficulties in understanding the meaning of kanji, the author can conclude that the difficulties of Japanese language learners in Indonesia in understanding the meaning of kanji, in general, are in the medium category and are not experienced by all students. The difficulty in understanding the meaning of kanji is in line with the theory put forward (Rose, 2017) that the difficulty in learning kanji in terms of including jukugo is because learners must understand the meaning, structure and relationship of meaning between kanji at the same time.

2) Difficulty in memorizing kunyomi and onyomi

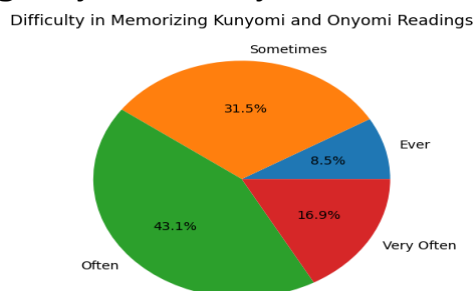


Figure 2. Graph of the difficulty of memorizing onyomi and kunyomi

Table 2. The results of the questionnaire response to difficulties in memorizing onyomi and kunyomi

Numbers	Answer Choice	Number of Responses
1	Ever	11
2	Some times	41
3	often	56
4	Very often	22

Based on the results of the questionnaire on 'difficulties in memorizing how to read kunyomi and onyomi' revealed that this obstacle was widely experienced by the majority of respondents. Based on 130 responses, 43.08% of students chose the category 'Frequent' and 16.92% stated 'Very Frequent', which indicates that this problem is persistent and not just an occasional obstacle. The fact that only 8.46% of respondents rarely encounter this difficulty reinforces the conclusion that the diversity of reading in kanji is a major challenge. These findings confirm that the need for instructional strategies that focus on contextual use and association of meaning is far more crucial than just mechanical memorization methods." This is in line with the theory described (Aneros et al., 2025), that

it is said that the main difficulty students have in understanding jukugo is the difficulty of distinguishing between kunyomi and onyomi.

3) Difficulty in combining compound starches

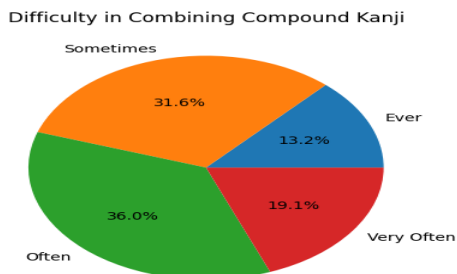


Figure 3. Difficulty combining compound starch

Table 3. Students' Difficulties in Combining Compound Kanji

Numbers	Answer Choice	Number of Responses
1	Ever	18
2	Some times	43
3	often	49
4	Very often	26

The results of the data analysis revealed that the majority of respondents tended to often face obstacles in the formation of jukugo, with a significant cumulative percentage in the categories 'Frequently' (36.03%) and 'Occasionally' (31.62%). The fact that 19.12% of students stated that they experienced this difficulty very often emphasizes that these obstacles are persistent, not just sporadic cases. Given that only 13.24% of respondents rarely experience difficulties, it can be concluded that the challenges in understanding the semantic and structural integration of kanji are very real. Therefore, a pedagogical shift is needed from the memorization of isolated kanji to an approach that emphasizes semantic relationships and structured contextual use.

2. Kanji learning strategies for learning jukugo kanji

To find out how strategies students carry out to overcome difficulties in learning jukugo kanji. The author also made a Likert scale questionnaire statement, the statements were made into four choices, namely: (1) Never, (2) Sometimes, (3) Often, and (4) Very often. The following are some sentences of his statement:

1) Searching for jukugo before kanji processing

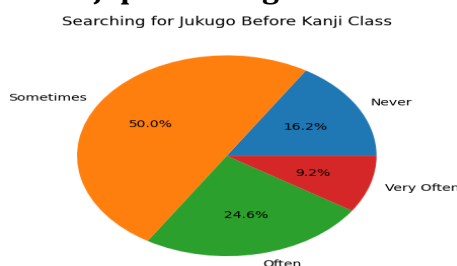


Figure 4. Graph of students' opinions looking for jukugo before learning

Table 4. Student Responses to Jukugo Learning Strategies

Numbers	Answer Choice	Number of Responses
1	Never	21
2	Some times	65
3	often	32
4	Very often	12

Based on the results of the questionnaire on the activity of 'looking for *jukugo* before the kanji class starts' shows that students' independent learning behavior is still in the early stages and has not been carried out consistently. The data shows that exactly half of the total respondents (50.00%) only make occasional preparations. Meanwhile, a high level of engagement was only found in a small percentage of students, with details of 24.62% in the 'Frequent' category and only 9.23% in the 'Very Frequent' category. The fact that there are 16.15% of students who have never prepared at all indicates that self-exploration before lectures has not become a strong academic habituation. These findings emphasize the importance of designing structured assignments or pre-study guides to improve students' readiness to understand kanji material more deeply.

2) Memorize kunyomi and onyomi from each kanji studied

Memorizing Kunyomi and Onyomi of Learned Kanji

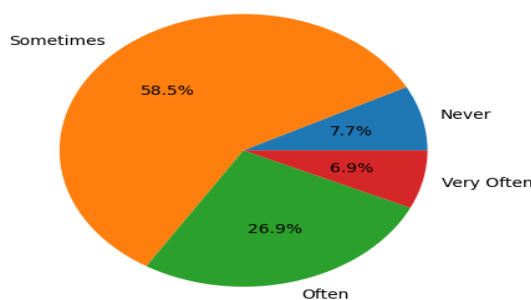


Figure 5. Graph memorizing kunyomi and onyomi

Table 5. Results of the number of responses to memorizing kunyomi and onyomi

Numbers	Answer Choice	Number of Responses
1	Never	10
2	Sometimes	76
3	Often	35
4	Very often	9

Based on the results of the questionnaire "Memorizing kunyomi and onyomi from the kanji that has been studied", the results were obtained from 76 students or 58.5% who chose answers sometimes, 35 students or 26.9% chose often, 10 students or 7.7% answered never and 9 students answered very often. Based on the results of the questionnaire, the author can conclude that the majority of students only relearn kunyomi (how to read Japanese) and onyomi (how to read Chinese) once after the learning process. So this causes students to often have difficulty in combining *jukugo*, as a result of which students cannot understand the meaning of the kanji. Because ideally to be able to combine

compound kanji (jukugo), you must first understand how to read the kanji, especially the onyomi.

3) Discuss jukugo with friends outside of lectures

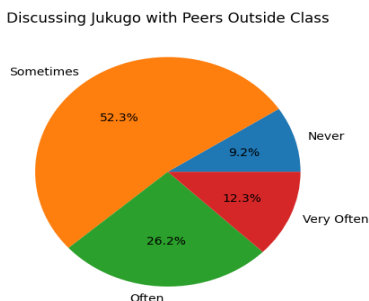


Figure 6. Jukugo learning discussion chart

Table 6. Results of Responses regarding the jukugo learning discussion

Number	Answer Choice	Number of Responses
1	Never	12
2	Some times	68
3	often	34
4	Very often	16

Questionnaire data on '*jukugo* discussions with peers outside the classroom' showed that student involvement was at a moderate level but had not reached a high intensity. Most respondents (52.31%) chose the 'Occasional' category, which suggests that collaborative discussions have not been conducted consistently. Meanwhile, regular active involvement was only seen in a small percentage of students (26.15% 'Frequently' and 12.31% 'Very Frequently'). These findings indicate that peer discussion has not yet become a culturalized or systematic learning strategy. Therefore, further encouragement is needed for collaborative learning practices to optimize the potential for interaction between students in strengthening the understanding of the structure and context of *jukugo*.

B. Open-ended Question Results

To get in-depth information about the difficulties of learning jukugo kanji experienced by students from various universities in Indonesia, the researcher distributed questionnaires in the form of open-ended questions. Of the 130 respondents, 89 answered open-ended questions. From 89 open-ended question answers, the author selected 10 answers that were taken at random. In this section, the questionnaire is given in the form of an open-ended question sentence, with the question "**Please explain what causes the difficulty in forming compound kanji (jukugo) during kanji learning**". The following is the answer to the question:

Table 7. Results of answers to open questions

Numbers	Question answers
1	Because there are differences in how to read and what it means when it becomes a compound kanji, you have to memorize the kanji often

Numbers	Question answers
2	The way it is read is sometimes onyomi or kunyomi and is a bit difficult to interpret
3	I don't think Jukugo is too complicated because I read it not from kunyomi and onyomi. I always memorize it.
4	The difficulty is also in the way of writing which must start from the right or left.
5	Difficulty understanding kanji that can be combined with one that cannot
6	Due to the change in the meaning of kanji, the way it is read and the number of jukugo that must be remembered, when memorizing new ones, sometimes the old ones are forgotten.
7	Difficulty understanding kanji that can be combined with those that cannot be combined.
8	Complex forms of kanji, when combined, will have different meanings than other kanji.
9	It is difficult if jukugo contains a combination of kunyomi and onyomi kanji. Unless jukugo contains a combination of kunyomi and onyomi kanji, it's a little easier.
10	In my opinion, the thing that makes it difficult to combine compound kanji when learning kanji is the large variety of jukugo readings (on-on, kun-on, on-kun, etc.) that have to be memorized.

Based on the results of the responses to the open-ended questions above, the average difficulty in learning jukugo kanji faced by students is due to onyomi (Chinese reading) and kunyomi (Japanese reading). Students also have a hard time because of the many combinations of kanji that have to be combined. Students also have difficulty distinguishing kanji that can be combined into compound kanji. From these difficulties, the author can conclude that the main difficulty for students in understanding jukugo kanji is due to their weak mastery of onyomi and kunyomi. Therefore, there needs to be a learning strategy that can make it easier for students to memorize onyomi and kunyomi for each kanji they learn. In order for students to be able to remember onyomi and kunyomi, so that they can combine single kanji into compound kanji, and be able to understand their meaning, this is in accordance with the cognitive theory put forward by (Atkinson & Shiffrin, 1968) that every human being has two memories, namely short memory and long memory, from Atkinson and Shiffrin's theory, the author can explain that students must have both memories, Both short memory and long memory in learning jukugo kanji.

CONCLUSION

Based on the results of the questionnaire analysis, it can be concluded that the difficulties in learning *jukugo kanji* mainly lie in cognitive and linguistic aspects, namely difficulties in combining kanji into compound forms, understanding the relationship between meaning between kanji, and memorizing various ways of reading (*kunyomi* and *onyomi*) that are different in each character. These difficulties tend to arise with fairly high frequency, which suggests that the understanding of *jukugo* depends not only on mastery of a single kanji, but also on the ability to relate the meaning and context of its use. On the other hand, in terms of learning strategies, the results of the questionnaire showed that students had applied various strategies such as memorization, repetitive exercises, and

discussions with friends, but most of them were still done at the "occasional" level so it had not become a consistent learning habit. In addition, independent learning activities such as looking for *jukugo* before lectures are also still relatively low. Thus, it can be concluded that although students have an awareness of the importance of learning strategies, reinforcement is needed through a more structured, contextual, and collaborative learning approach so that difficulties in *learning jukugo kanji* can be optimally minimized.

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