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LEARNING A LANGUAGE OF TWO ALPHABETS: PRACTICAL APPROACHES IN HIRAGANA AND KATAKANA ACQUISITION FOR BEGINNER LEARNERS OF JAPANESE LANGUAGE

APRENDIENDO UN LENGUAJE DE DOS ALFABETOS: ENFOQUES PRÁCTICOS DE APRENDIZAJE EN HIRAGANA Y KATAKANA PARA PRINCIPIANTES DEL IDIOMA JAPONÉS

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ABSTRACT

The Japanese language has a 128 million speakers and has around 4 million learners in the world. In Ecuador, however, there are only six institutions offer Japanese classes to 150 learners. This small number of learners may be due in part to geographic and cultural distance, as well as the economic and political circumstances separating Ecuador and Japan. Furthermore, the uniqueness of the linguistic characteristics of Japanese is also a major factor influencing learner reluctance. One of the principal characteristics of this language is its three writing systems: *hiragana*, *katakana* and *kanji*. This paper outlines the linguistic characteristics of Japanese, focusing on *hiragana*, *katakana* and *kanji*, and sets out the difficulties which learners experience in this area. In the second part, with reference to these characteristics, the study introduces class activities to show how learners may acquire the basic characters of the writing systems as an important first step in learning Japanese, with the aim of reducing the burden on the language acquisition process. Through this research, the importance of peer-learning and collaboration between learners and teachers is highlighted as a means of facilitating approaches to the teaching and learning of Japanese.

Key words:

Japanese Language, Writing system, hiragana/katakana, Class Activity

RESUMEN

El idioma japonés tiene 128 millones de parlantes nativos y aproximadamente unos 4 millones de estudiantes en el mundo. En Ecuador, sin embargo, solamente seis instituciones ofrecen clases de japonés con 150 estudiantes. Este pequeño número de estudiantes puede deberse en parte a la distancia geográfica y cultural, así como las circunstancias económicas y políticas que separan Ecuador y Japón. Sin embargo, la singularidad de las características lingüísticas del japonés es también un factor que influye en la reticencia del alumno. Una de las principales características de esta lengua es sus tres sistemas de escritura: *hiragana*, *katakana* y *kanji*. Este artículo describe las características lingüísticas del japonés, centrándose en *hiragana*, *katakana* y *kanji*, y expone las dificultades que los estudiantes experimentan en esta materia. En la segunda parte, con referencia a estas características, el estudio presenta actividades de clase para mostrar cómo los estudiantes pueden adquirir los caracteres básicos de los sistemas de escritura como un primer paso importante en el aprendizaje de japonés, con el objetivo de reducir la carga en el proceso de adquisición. A través de esta investigación, se destaca la importancia del aprendizaje entre pares y la colaboración entre estudiantes y profesores como medio de facilitar los métodos de enseñanza y el aprendizaje del japonés.

Key words:

Japanese Language, Writing system, Hiragana/Katakana, Class Activity

INTRODUCTION

Japanese is a language spoken by almost 128 million people within and outside of Japan, and has around 4 million learners around the world (Ethnologue, 2018). For Ecuadorian people, however, it is not a popular language compared to other languages, such as English, French or Italian. From this perspective, the main objective of this paper is to describe the principal characteristics of Japanese as experienced by

beginner learners, focusing on acquiring *hiragana* and *katakana*, along with an explanation of the activities used in class with Ecuadorian learners of the language. Additionally, with the aim of encouraging a more academic discussion about Japanese in Ecuador in the future, it is hoped that this report will serve as a first step in this process.

JAPANESE LANGUAGE ALPHABETS

The Japanese language is considered typologically unique and, therefore, fundamentally different from Spanish: as Comrie (2010) states, “Japanese is no less typical overall than English.” Kageyama (2010), on the other hand, argues that “Japanese is not ‘special’, but a rather common type of language in terms of word order and other macro-parameters.” This section, through these studies, introduces the basic characteristics of Japanese as encountered by beginner-level students, focusing on its phoneme and word order systems.

Phoneme

The Japanese language has 23 phonemes: 5 vowels and 18 consonants (Iori, 2007, p. 25). Every phoneme of a word is, in addition, normally created by a combination of a consonant with a vowel, and one phoneme corresponds to one character as shown in Example (1).

Vowels:

/a/, /i/, /u/, /e/, /o/

Consonants:

/k/, /g/, /s/, /z/, /t/, /d/, /ts/, /n/, /h/, /b/, /p/, /m/, /r/, /j/, /w/, /N/, /Q/, /:/

(1) エクアドル(Ecuador): エ/e/ ク/ku/ ア/a/ ド/do/ ル/ru/

Word order

It is considered that the word order of Japanese is normally subject (S)-object(O)-verb(V) (Takami, 2010, p. 149), in contrast to Spanish S-V-O order (Terasaki, 1987, 2005). Examples (2) and (3) mean, “I eat sushi” in Japanese and Spanish respectively. It is observed, however, that this frequently changes at random in real conversation. Japanese has several particles that inflect

each word to identify its function in sentences, allowing this flexible word order. For example, (2) has two particles *は*[wa] and *を*[wo]. The former marks the topic/subject, and the latter the object of transitive verbs. Therefore, Examples (4) and (5) have the same particles as (2), expressing “I eat sushi” in alternative formulations. The Japanese sentences in Examples (2), (4) and (5) were constructed by the author based on Sato (2015, p 1, 2) and the Spanish in Example (3) is based on Terasaki (1987, p 28).

Table 1: Japanese language word order

(2)	私は S: watashi wa	すしを O: sushi wo	食べます V: tabemasu
(3)	I S	eat V	sushi O
(4)	すしを O: sushi wo	私は S: watashi wa	食べます V: tabemasu
(5)	食べます V: tabemasu	私は S: watashi wa	すしを O: sushi wo

Source: developed by the author based on Takami (2010)

Although Examples (2), (4) and (5) all mean “I eat sushi”, there are different implicatures. The sentence information is delivered and understood depending on the information level, the speaker’s perspective, and/or empathy between the participants in the conversation (Takami, 2010, pp. 142-149, 166-173). Nishimitsu (2010) refers to a pragmatics perspective, whereby meaning in sentences has both the literal and the conveyed meaning, or conversational implicature. In a conversation or discourse, therefore, a sentence should be considered within its context. For example, in (4), “sushi” comes first, since the speaker would like to emphasize: “what I want to eat is sushi, not other dishes that you have recommended”. In (5), on the other hand, the

emphasis is on whether s/he eats sushi or not. Both of these are different in form and implicature to (2), and these meanings all require a context to be understood naturally.

Writing system

The previous sections observed the Japanese language briefly from two perspectives: phonemes and word order. This part will introduce the three-fold writing system of *hiragana*, *katakana* and *kanji*, which defines “Japanese as a very rare language in the world.” (Shinozuka and Kubota, 2012, pp. 98-97) Figure 1 exemplifies the use of these three character systems.

Figure 1: Japanese language writing system

私 は エクアドル が 好き です。 watashi wa ekuadoru ga su ki desu.	
<p><u>Hiragana</u> (は, が, き, です): Native Japanese words, conjugation endings and function words not covered by <i>Kanji</i>.</p>	③ ② ① 好 エ 私 き ク ア は で ド ル す 。 ル が
<p><u>Katanaka</u> (エクアドル): Loanwords and foreign names, onomatopoeia and mimic words.</p>	
<p><u>Kanji</u> (私, 好): Nouns and stems of verbs and adjectives</p>	

Source: elaborated by the author, based on Banno et al. (2011)

“*Hiragana* and *katakana* work as the alphabet in Japanese and each represents a sound.” (Banno, Ikeda, Ohono, Shinagawa and Tokashiki, 2011, p. 24) There are 46 characters of *hiragana* and *katakana* used to transcribe all Japanese syllables. *Kanji*, “the logographic and ideographic characters which originally come from Chinese characters” (Okada, 2016, p. 7) represents sounds, ideas, meanings and/or notions, and is mainly used for the stems of verbs, adjectives and nouns. In addition, every *hiragana*, *katakana* and *kanji* character has a correct order and direction of strokes when written. Sentences in Japanese may be written in two directions: horizontal and vertical. Vertical direction

sentences are read from top to bottom and right to left, following the sequence ①-②-③ in Figure 1, and horizontal sentences are read the same as in English or Spanish, from left to right as shown at the top of Figure 1. Horizontal direction sentences are often seen in science books and computer magazines, whereas vertical direction sentences appear generally in Japanese literature. In magazines, advertisement posters, newspapers and many other products, however, a mixed style of the two directions may be observed, such as that used in the text shown in Figure 2, which is a page from a text book on Japanese.

Figure 2: example of the sentences: horizontal and vertical

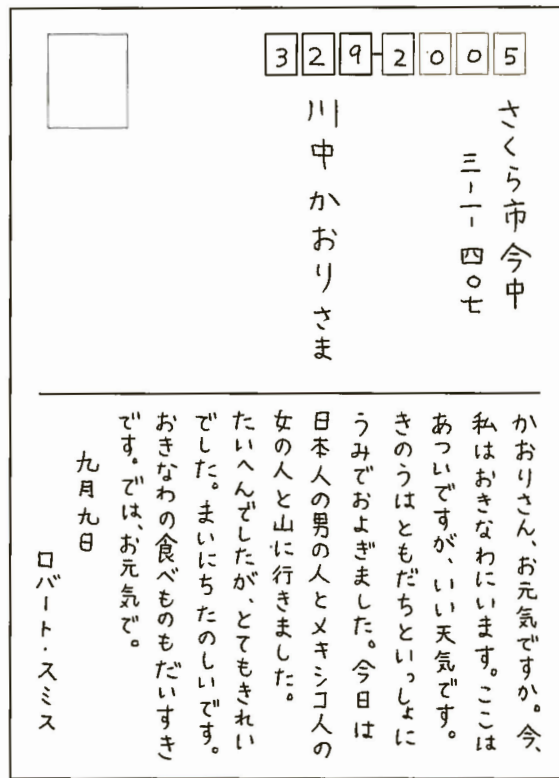
310▶▶▶読み書き編

C. ロバートさんともだちにはがきをかきました。

Read the postcard below and answer the following questions in Japanese.

1. ロバートさんは今どこにいますか。
2. どんな天気ですか。
3. きのはなにをしましたか。
4. 今日はなにをしましたか。だれとしましたか。

Y05-2



Source: taken from Banno (2011, p. 274)

This section has provided a brief overview of the characteristics of the Japanese language from three perspectives: phonemes, word order and the writing system, all of which are required in order to have a basic knowledge of the language. The following part will show, through the description of two class activities, how learners start to learn the Japanese language, focusing especially on *hiragana* study.

Hiragana learning

In language teaching, there are two main methods: Direct Method and Indirect Method. The former is a method in which only the target language is used, even in first level lessons. On the other hand, the latter allows the teacher and learner to utilize language common to both as a vehicle for learning. The use of these two methods depends on the class situation and policies

in place in the learning context. Each method has positive and negative aspects and should be used to optimal effect by achieving a certain balance, as Tanimori states:

In Japanese language education, the direct method is recommended in many cases. On the other hand, it is effective to utilize the vehicular language to some extent. Moving forward, it will be useful to diversify the methods of instruction that maximize learning outcomes, by utilizing the vehicular language flexibly, while combining various teaching methods (2016 p. 81).

In Japanese language learning, however, there is one element that must be learned as a first step before deciding which method to follow: *hiragana* and *katakana*.

Figure 3: Lesson 1, first level

38*** 会話・文法編

第1課 L E S S O N 1
あたらしいともだち New Friends

かいわ Dialogue

Mary, an international student who just arrived in Japan, talks to a Japanese student.

① ㊦ K01-01/02

1 メアリー: すみません。いま なんじですか。
Mary: Sumimasen. ima nanji desu ka.

2 たけし: じゅうじはんです。
Takeshi: Juuniji han desu.

3 メアリー: ありがとう ございます。
Mary: Arigatoo gozaimasu.

4 たけし: いいえ。
Takeshi: Iie.



Source: taken from Banno (2011, p. 10)

Figure 3 is a page from the first lesson of a language learnign textbook. The Latin alphabet is used under each sentence to help

the learners to identify and pronounce the Japanese characters. After several lessons, sentences then appear as shown in Figure 4.

Figure 4: Lesson 5, first level

128*** 会話・文法編

第5課 L E S S O N 5
沖縄旅行 A Trip to Okinawa
おきなわ りょこう

会話 Dialogue

① Robert and Ken are vacationing in Okinawa. ㊦ K05-01/02

1 ロバート: いい天気ですね。
Robert: Ii tenki desu ne.

2 けん: そうですね。でも、ちょっと暑いですね。
Ken: Sou desu ne. Demo, chotto atsui desu ne.

3 ロバート: ええ。わあ、きれいな海!
Robert: Ee. Waa, kirei na umi!

4 けん: 泳ぎましょう。
Ken: Uki mashou.


5 けん: ロバートさんはどんなスポーツが好きですか。
Ken: Robert-san wa donna supootsu ga suki desu ka.

6 ロバート: サーフィンが好きです。
Robert: Saafin ga suki desu.

7 あした一緒にやりましょうか。
Ashita issho ni yari mashou ka.

8 けん: でも、難しくないですか。
Ken: Demo, muzukashiku nai desu ka.

9 ロバート: 大丈夫ですよ。
Robert: Daijoubu desu yo.



Source: taken from Banno (2011, p. 96)

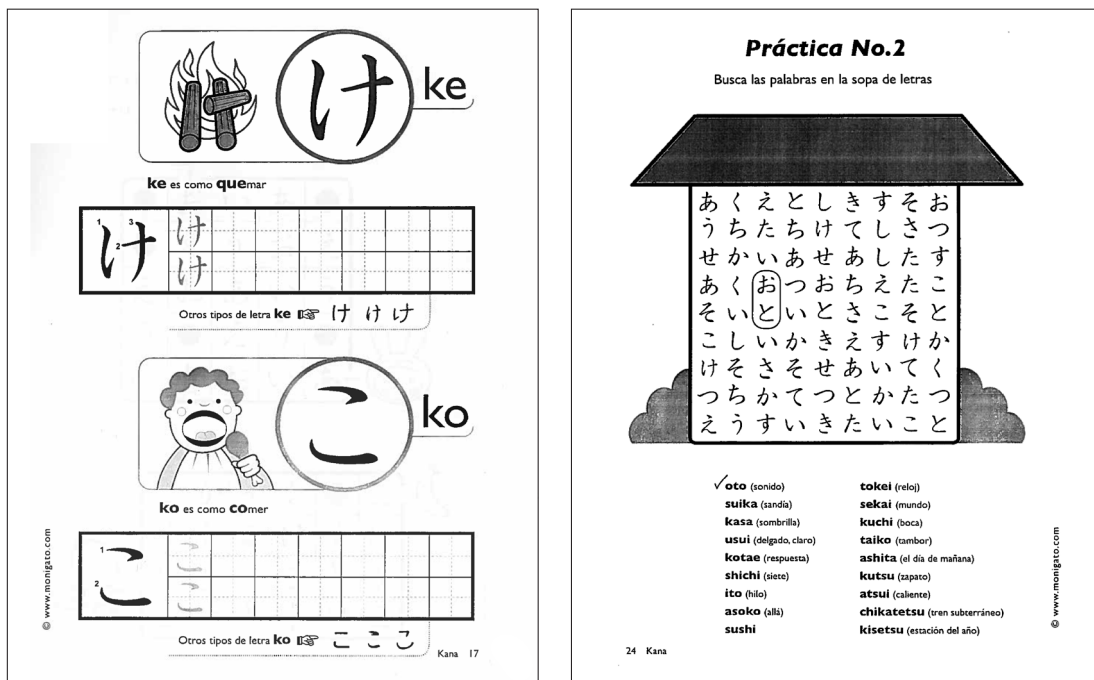
There is no Latin alphabet on this page. This means the learners are forced to read without support, utilizing the characters more adequately, as a result. Therefore, it is essential to introduce *hiragana* and *katakana* at the very beginning of the learning process. Through the same approach, learners start to practice *kanji* later on. This means, as Kobayashi and Zenyoji (2011) contend, *hiragana* and *katakana* are an important part of the whole learning process. The following section focuses on *hiragana*, the most basic character set, with several practice patterns and class activities.

Hiragana learning: practice and exercise

To acquire *hiragana*, it is clear that learners must make a considerable effort, such as writing repeatedly and/or mechanically. Tsujimura (1995) argues, on the other hand, the importance of communicative games and productive activities for alphabet learning.

Figures 5 and 6 are examples of *hiragana* practice and a small exercise from a textbook.

Figure 5 and 6: example of *hiragana* practice



Source: taken from Fernández Gutiérrez (2008, p. 17, 24)

Practice in Figure 5 uses a simple and mechanical pattern. Learners are able to identify *hiragana* with images to help memorize it. Figure 6 shows a word-search exercise in which learners try to find words by combining *hiragana* shapes with its sounds. Once the learners have completed these initial practices and exercises, the class moves on to other activities, as described below.

Hiragana learning: activities

The positive effects of using activities for *hiragana* learning have been presented in various studies. Mitani (2013) and Tsujimura (1995) claim that game activities stimulate the motivation of learners and create a more positive atmosphere in the classroom. Tsujimura (1995) refers to the psychological burden for learners in *hiragana* learning, and suggests activities which help to reduce

stress and smoothly guide learners to the next step. Tsuru (2005) experiments with several games focused on *hiragana* acquisition and mentions the effectiveness of dynamic activities in the classroom. With reference to these studies, this section will introduce two activities that are practiced in real classes.

The first activity is *hiragana* concentration. This is a simple card game, known alternatively as Match-Match or Pairs, in which all cards are initially put face down on a surface and participants flip over two cards to find pairs of the same number. In class, it is preferable that learners participate in the preparation of the game, making *hiragana* cards and organizing rules. Each turn, the learners flip two cards, and they pronounce the *hiragana* written on the cards. Even when a correct pair of *hiragana* cards is flipped over and matched, the learners only obtain points if they are able to produce a correct pronunciation.

The procedure of the game is:

1. *Hiragana* cards are prepared by Learners: two cards per character;
2. Two cards are flipped to find a pair and pronounce the hiragana written on it;
3. If the pronunciation is not correct, the cards are turned back;
4. If the pronunciation is correct, the cards are retained as one point;
5. The game continues until all cards are taken.

Picture 1: The learners playing *hiragana* concentration in a class



Source: photograph taken by the author (2016)

The second game is the *hiragana* back writing game. First, learners form a line facing the board, and the teacher shows a card exclusively to the learner in the last row. S/he identifies the *hiragana* on the card, then starts to write it on the back of the next person. During the game, talking or looking back is prohibited. Ultimately, the person in the front row writes the

hiragana on the board and pronounces it. The game ends when they complete all the hiragana that are introduced. This game is effective for learning the right order of hiragana strokes, because every character has its proper order of writing. Therefore, it is impossible for the character to be communicated to the next person if one student writes it incorrectly.

The procedure of the game is:

1. Participants form a line from the board back and facing it;
2. The teacher shows one hiragana card to the person in the last row;
3. Each participant writes the character on the back of the person in front of them;
4. The front row student writes the hiragana on the board which has been passed forward by every member of the line, and pronounces it correctly;
5. The game continues until all characters for that day have been completed.

Picture 2: The learners playing Hiragana Back Writing Game in a class



Source: photograph taken by the author (2016)

Two class activities for *hiragana* learning have been introduced in this section. Successful gameplay depends on the teacher introducing *hiragana* clearly. Mitani (2013) observes through her experiment using card games, it was observed that there are a certain number of learners who made mistakes because of the similarity of figures such as [る/ru]-[ろ/ro] and the pronunciation between [し/shi]-[ち/chi] and [す/su]-[つ/tsu]. Miyamoto (2001) mentions in his investigation about the *hiragana* learning process of American children. There is a tendency for errors to occur in both the morphological (figure of alphabet) and syllabic (pronunciation) resemblance found in *hiragana*. In view of this, it is important to highlight to learners common points of confusion for learners, such as those described above, both before and after the activities.

All of these games may equally be applied to *katakana* practice. However, Shinozuka & Kubota (2012) and Okada (2016), in discussing the relative difficulty of the three writing systems and the balance of practice of each, conclude that *katakana* is the most complex. Shinozuka & Kubota (2012) designed a visual-input test for native Japanese speakers, showing words of eight syllables in *hiragana*, *katakana* and *kanji*. Their findings indicate that *katakana* is the most difficult to recognize, followed by *hiragana* and *kanji*. The study argues that to recognize the meaning of *hiragana* and *katakana* words, two processes are needed, which are phonological recognition and subvocalization. *Kanji* word-recognition, on the other hand, requires a simpler process because it uses logographic and ideographic characters which are recognizable by visual resemblance.

The reason why *katakana* recognition is more difficult than *hiragana*, according to the study, is that most words in daily use are

written in *hiragana* or *kanji*. Okada (2016) argues that *katakana* learning is treated as less important compared with *hiragana* and *kanji*, because of the lack of an effective method and/or material for instruction. Nonetheless, it is acknowledged that “the number of *katakana* words are increasing rapidly.” (MEXT, 2011, par. 3). Mistakes in the use of *katakana* are observed more frequently than *hiragana* in the classroom: learners confuse its figures and break the rules of adaptation of foreign words to the Japanese phonetic system. From this perspective, an effective introduction of both *hiragana* and *katakana* is needed in the classroom.

Peer learning

For the purposes of this study, class activities introduced were limited to two. Both of which are communicative and practical activities for beginner-level classes. These two games, among others not mentioned in this article, are effective because of their simplicity, and it is possible for learners to participate in their preparation. In this regard, Tsujimura (1995) states that the making of materials and helping in class preparation increases learner motivation and allows the best learning method to be identified. According to Tateyama (2007), on the other hand, from the peer learning perspective, it is important and effective that learners share their language acquisition process with each other to help build independent learning habits.

Peer learning is an approach whereby learners progress in their acquisition through mutual conversation and the sharing of their experience in the class. In Japanese language acquisition, peer learning has been applied mainly to reading and writing practice for intermediate students. This is due to the “strong trends of Direct Method in Japanese teaching.” (Tanimori, 2016, p. 82)

There is no prohibition, however, on using it correctly with any level and any group of learners. Ikehara (2012) argues that peer learning works positively in *hiragana* and *katakana* teaching

even at the absolute beginner level, especially when compared to the teacher-centered style. Hence it is important to develop a collaborative mindset for both the learners and teachers.

CONCLUSION

In this article, two principle topics have been set out: Japanese language characteristics and hiragana learning. The first part shared basic information of the Japanese language from the perspective of phonemes, word order and the writing system, highlighting key differences between Spanish and Japanese. The second part dealt with the process of learning Japanese language at beginner-level, with reference to the importance of learning the characters as the first step in Japanese language acquisition, facilitated by peer learning approaches.

Within that process, two basic class activities were introduced: *hiragana* concentration and *hiragana* back writing game. However, there are, as yet, no reliable results on the use of these techniques in the real classroom. Therefore, more integrated studies with statistical data and quantifiable results are required from future research in order to corroborate the approaches outlined in this paper. In addition, there are no existing studies of the problems of *hiragana* and *katakana* acquisition focused on native Spanish speakers. From that perspective, there are ample opportunities for future research.

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and has started to play a role. The Japan Foundation of São Paulo (2017) informs, however, that in Ecuador there are just six universities and one private school that have Japanese classes and almost 150 learners in total, so expansion is needed and the provision of greater opportunities of learning. The demand for Japanese may be not as great as for other languages, but it is clear that it exists. Therefore, it will be an honor for this paper to be a part of this movement, allowing Japanese to be ever