

# A Study of L2 Kanji Learning Process

Analysis of reading and writing errors of Swedish learners  
in comparison with level-matched Japanese schoolchildren

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# ABSTRACT

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The present study investigated the characteristics of the kanji learning process of second language (L2) learners of Japanese with an alphabetic background in comparison with level-matched first language (L1) learners. Unprecedentedly rigorous large-scale experiments were conducted under strictly controlled conditions with a substantial number of participants. Comparisons were made between novice and advanced levels of Swedish learners and the respective level-matched L1 learners (Japanese second and fifth graders). The experiments consisted of kanji reading and writing tests with parallel tasks in a practical setting, and identical sets of target characters for the level-matched groups. Error classification was based on the cognitive aspects of kanji. Reading errors were classified into phonological, circumstantial, orthographic and semantic types, and writing errors into the same four types and an additional pseudokanji type. The error type occurrence patterns were analysed according to skill (reading/writing), level (novice/advanced) and the learner groups' L1 (Swedish/Japanese), with a focus on the kanji processing unit, preferred methods of character/pronunciation retrieval from the mental kanji lexicon and reading and writing difficulties.

This study made a number of new findings and verified various observations made in previous studies. Some of the findings that are unique to this study are: (i) L1 phonological transfer for Swedish novice learners and its decrease at the advanced level; (ii) L2 learners' less developed configurational awareness and lesser degree of inter-level development than L1 learners; and (iii) a shift in inter-level characteristics for L2 learners, while these remained consistent for L1 learners. The hypotheses confirmed include the following characteristics of L1 alphabetic learners: phonological approaches to retrieval, component-based units of processing, predominance of pseudokanji type writing errors, and greater inter-writing system differences in reading but greater inter-level differences in writing. This study demonstrated that the challenges experienced by L1 alphabetic learners stem from the shift from phoneme-based to component-based processing of graphemes, taking the less familiar lexical route in the decoding and encoding of grapheme-sound correspondences, and the use of less efficient strategies in reading and writing.

**Keywords:** Kanji, L2, L1 transfer, alphabetic writing system, error analysis, Swedish, reading and writing, cognitive aspects, level matching, schoolchildren.