The Japanese language learner in the digital age: Re-evaluating the need for handwriting kanji

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In traditional Japanese as a Foreign Language (JFL) classrooms, learners spend a considerable amount of time learning to write numerous, formally complex kanji characters (Rose, 2019). In the context of increasingly digitalised learning environments, however, the pedagogical need for handwriting kanji among undergraduate learners warrants critical re-examination (Miyahara and Fujiwara, 2020; Itō, 2021). This study explores the relevance of manual kanji writing for JFL students at Dublin City University (DCU), where learners anecdotally report devoting up to 70% of their study time to mastering kanji—despite the availability of digital tools that render the handwriting of kanji optional in many contexts.

The research investigates whether the memorisation of stroke order and composition remains necessary for learners expected to acquire in excess of 1,000 kanji characters over the course of their degree. It comprises three participant groups: 1) current first- and second-year undergraduates; 2) students spending a study-abroad year at Japanese universities; and 3) graduates working in Japanese language environments. Data collection methods include self-reported study logs, situational journals, online surveys, and focus groups.

This case study aims to identify the real-world situations in which handwriting Japanese characters is required, both during and after formal education. By incorporating perspectives from graduates actively using Japanese in professional settings, the study will assess whether the current focus on handwriting aligns with the reality of workplace demands.

Findings from this research will contribute to a broader conversation on curricular design in JFL education, particularly in light of technological advancements that have shifted the skill set necessary for language proficiency. The study seeks to inform whether handwriting kanji should remain a central component of undergraduate Japanese language instruction or whether pedagogical priorities should be rebalanced to reflect evolving communicative realities.

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