Kanji Matters in a Multilingual Japan

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Abstract: For Learners of Japanese as a Second Language (JSL), the Japanese writing script can present particular difficulties due to its inherent complexity. This complexity is due, in part, to the incorporation of kanji, the Chinese characters that make up one of the three main scripts in the Japanese language. In response to Japan's increasing immigration, on June 21, 2019, the Upper House committee on education and science unanimously approved the "Japanese language education promotion bill" (*nihongo kyōiku no suishin ni kansuru hōritsuan*), a bill aimed at supporting Japanese language education for foreign residents in Japan. Japanese language education for foreign residents in Japan has hitherto been inadequate and left in the hands of volunteer teachers in community centers. More adequate provision of Japanese language education services may serve to promote a more inclusive society consistent with government initiatives such as *tabunka kyōsei* or "mutual co-existence". This paper looks at kanji and considers their development, education, complexity, and whether they are a potential barrier to a more inclusive society.

Keywords: Tabunka kyōsei, Multiculturalism, Multilingualism, Kanji education

Introduction

There has been a major shift in the international perception of Japan, from being seen as a society that is homogeneous with little ethnic diversity to one which is characterized as being multi-ethnic and having greater domestic diversity (Sugimoto, 2009). Japan's ageing society and increasing immigration have further progressed this view of Japan. In response to this change, government initiatives and concepts such as *tabunka kyōsei*, or "mutual co-existence", promoting a more inclusive society have emerged. One area in particular where greater proactive support for foreign residents in Japan is required is in the area of Japanese language education. Language can act as a barrier to an inclusive society. In the case of the Japanese language, the Japanese writing script has a complex nature which can present difficulties for learners of Japanese language as a second language (JSL). Kanji, the Chinese characters that make up part of the writing script, are inherently complex and make mastering the Japanese writing system a seemingly insurmountable task. This paper focuses on kanji, and looks at their nature and history in the context of the Japanese language and to what extent they may present a barrier to a more inclusive society based on initiatives such as *tabunka kyōsei*.

Mutual Co-existence in a Linguistically Diversifying Japan

Since the late 1980s, there has been a marked increase in the number of foreign residents in Japan. This increase in foreign residents can be attributed to a number of factors, including the revision of the 1951 Immigration Law in 1990 which encouraged foreign descendants of Japanese emigrants to work in Japan, and the greater encouragement of students to study in Japan through Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone's 'Plan to Accept 100,000 Foreign Students' in 1983, a plan to increase the number of foreign students in Japan tenfold within a span of twenty years. With additional government initiatives, such as the new "specified skills" visa status policy, the number of foreign residents is expected to continue to rise.

While *kokusaika* (internationalization) and other terms became prominent in the 1980s, the concept of *tabunka kyōsei*, or "multicultural coexistence", emerged as the most common concept for mutual respect and equality between Japanese and foreign residents. With the growing number of foreign residents in Japan, the concept of *tabunka kyōsei* has increased in significance. The term *tabunka kyōsei* first emerged out of a need to provide information to foreign residents in times of need such as in times of natural disasters.

One of the prominent tenets of the concept of *tabunka kyōsei* is equality; and therefore, the Japanese language needs of foreign residents would, by implication, be a priority. However, till now, very little support has been provided in terms of Japanese language education for immigrants, and the modicum of support provided has consisted mostly of volunteer language teachers at community centers in Japan. On June 21, 2019, however, the Upper House committee on education and science unanimously approved the "Japanese language education promotion bill" (*nihongo kyōiku no suishin ni kansuru hōritsuan*), a bill aimed at supporting Japanese language education for foreign residents in Japan. This bill represents a dramatic shift in the discourse on public language policy.

The Japanese Language

The Japanese language has long been regarded as one of the most difficult languages to learn, particularly for those learners whose native language (L1) does not incorporate the use of kanji, the Chinese characters that make up part of the Japanese script (Bourke, 1992; Douglas, 1992). Kanji number in the thousands and present a multitude of difficulties for JSL learners due to the sheer number required to be learned as well as their inherent complexity. For non-kanji-background JSL learners, acquiring proficiency in the reading and writing of kanji is perhaps the greatest obstacle to overcome in mastering the language (Tollini, 1994).

The reasons the Japanese writing system poses problems for JSL learners become much more apparent when we consider the adoption and adaption of the Chinese writing system to the Japanese language. It is not the purpose of this paper to propagate the uniqueness of the Japanese writing system, nor will it be suggested that kanji have

an irreplaceable quality that makes them essential to the Japanese writing system. Clearly, there are convincing arguments that suggest that the Japanese writing system would function equally as well without kanji, and in some respects, it could even be argued that kanji impede the accessibility of the Japanese language (Ezaki, 2010). Nevertheless, the process of adapting the Chinese written script to the Japanese language has produced some unique elements to the language that will be perceived by JSL learners, particularly from non-kanji background learners, to be difficult. Consequently, the usage and education of kanji for both native and non-native learners of Japanese present many questions such as on the importance of kanji and how they should be taught to foreign residents in Japan.

The *Nihon Shoki* (日本書記、Chronicles of Japan, 720) and *Kojiki* (古事記、Chronicles of Ancient Matters, 712) are the two oldest chronicles in Japan. According to *Nihon Shoki*, Chinese books were first brought to Japan between the late third and early fifth centuries A.D. (Hannas, 1997). The exact date Chinese entered Japan, however, is unknown. Unger (2006) asserts that Chinese writing probably first came to Japan in the fifth century by way of visitors from an area located in the south-west quadrant of the Korean peninsula known as the kingdom of Paekche. Until the fifth century Japan didn't have a writing system of its own, and Chinese became the written language used in Japan. The Chinese language therefore also became the language employed for centuries for literary composition and bureaucratic documentation (Miller, 1982). As Miller (1982) notes, writing as an invention has only occurred a few times in the history of mankind, and borrowing is more the norm than an exception. What is therefore of greater significance in respect to the Japanese writing system is not that the Japanese borrowed the Chinese writing system but the way in which they adapted it to fit their own language. Due to the differences between the Chinese and Japanese languages, the process of adapting the written language occurred over several centuries and was somewhat of an awkward process, which has resulted in the unique and complex system in use today.

History and Development of the Japanese Writing System

As the Japanese did not have their own script, the natural progression was for them to use the Chinese writing to write their own language as well. The Chinese characters, *hanzi* in Chinese and kanji in Japanese, were used for their phonetic function in writing Japanese. From this, the *manyōgana* (万葉仮名), a phonetic system of the kanji, was developed. The *manyōgana* were used in the writing of the *Manyōshu* (万葉集/Collection of Myriad Leaves) (759 A.D.), which was an anthology of Japanese poems.

Initially kanji were used to write all Japanese, including particles. However, this was awkward due to the difference between Chinese and Japanese languages. Japanese verb inflections and the polysyllabic nature of the language made writing Japanese in kanji alone somewhat clumsy. Around the 9th century, *hiragana* (平仮名) and *katakana* (片仮名), phonetic scripts based upon the kanji, were developed to augment kanji (Gottlieb,

2005). *Hiragana* and *katakana*, collectively referred to as *kana*, are syllabaries and therefore ideally suited to writing verb inflections and other parts of the language. This evolutionary process of adapting the Chinese writing into syllabaries is an impressive historical development. Crowley (1968) goes so far as to say:

> This further development of the syllabaries, which included the organization of the Man'yoogana was, to my mind, one of the most versatile and sophisticated, linguistically significant adaptions of writing in the history of language. (p.3)

As impressive as this adaption of the Chinese writing system to the Japanese language is, it is also arguably one of the reasons why the Japanese writing system has a reputation for being complex and challenging to learn.

The Impact of Technology on the Japanese Writing System

Some scholars argued that the advent of technological inventions such as computers might cause kanji to fall into misuse. However, this has not been the case, and the Japanese writing system has been able to transition to technology-based communication. This successful transition means that, for the JSL learner and teacher, kanji are still an important part of learning and teaching the Japanese language. With the widespread use of computers and mobile phones there is, however, less opportunity to handwrite kanji in everyday life. When using kanji on a computer, the alphabet is used to input the syllable; this is then displayed in *hiragana*. One is then required to convert the *hiragana* character into the correct kanji from a number of homophones. As noted by Chikamatsu (Cook, 2005), writing kanji on computer requires recognition skills rather than production skills, which suggests the importance of recognition skills over production skills. With less opportunity to actually write kanji in everyday life, from the perspective of a JSL learner at least, more emphasis should be placed on improving recognition skills. Chikamatsu suggests that one possible solution is to encourage students to concentrate on a limited number of kanji for writing and a much broader variety for recognition, noting that there is a wide gap between L2 kanji recognition and production skills.

Rapid technological advancements may affect the necessity of kanji in the future, as increased use of computerised technology minimises the need to handwrite kanji. Nevertheless, not teaching kanji—an integral part of the language—is neither desirable nor practical. Students of Japanese therefore require better learning strategies and teaching methodologies to assist them in the kanji learning task.

Recent developments in technology have also added another dimension to Japanese language teaching, with the development of Computer Assisted Language Learning (CALL) and the emergence of learning tools such as online flash cards. Traditional flash cards consist of kanji written on one side of a card and the meaning and the pronunciation on the back. Such tools, however, are frequently being replaced by simulated flash cards

on personal computers and phones. Online tools offer a convenient and practical way to assist in the study of the Japanese language. Such developments are of great interest to Japanese language teachers, and it is expected that technology will have even larger and more important implications for Japanese language education in the future. Technology, although still largely underused, offers many possibilities with regard to language teaching and learning. Properly utilised, technology has the potential to offer exciting developments in the arena of Japanese language teaching and to make the student learning process both enjoyable and more practical.

In order to understand why kanji present difficulties, one must understand the unique aspects about their composition and function. The next section examines some unique aspects of the writing system and the difficulties they present learners.

The Everyday Kanji

Chinese characters in traditional Chinese are called *hanzi,* and in traditional Chinese they are written as 漢字. In Japanese, Chinese characters are called kanji but share the same Chinese characters and are also written as 漢字. One of the unique aspects of kanji is that they are used to represent both meaning and a phonetic sound. It is this aspect of kanji that distinguishes it from *hiragana* and *katakana* which are syllabaries and represent only sounds. Furthermore, as kanji represent meaning as well as sounds, this results in a script that has many characters and characters which are much more visually complex. If we examine the actual meaning of the characters that form the word "kanji", this reveals more about their history. If we look at the two characters separately, we see that the first character 漢 actually means "Han Dynasty" and the second character 字 means character or letter. Logically, kanji then translates as characters from the Han dynasty.

The kanji themselves vary in visual complexity, with some kanji consisting of just one stroke, such as the kanji 一 (*ichi*) meaning "one", or kanji with upwards of thirty strokes such as the kanji 鬱 (*utsu*) meaning "depression".

Kanji can have multiple readings, and most kanji will have both *on* and *kun* readings. "*On*" readings are the reading of the kanji taken from the Chinese and "*kun*" readings are a reading allocated to that kanji from Japanese. For example, the kanji for house in Japanese is "家" and the *kun* reading for the kanji is "*ie*" while the *on* reading is "*ka*". Kanji can also be used to form compound words where two or more kanji are used together. For example, if we use the kanji from the previous example, the word "家庭" (*katei*/household) can be formed. Notice that, when the kanji is used in a compound word, it takes the *on* reading, which is how it will mostly occur.

There are six different categories of kanji, referred to as *rikusho* (六書). Table 1 outlines the characteristics of each of these categories.

Table 1: The six categories of kanji (*Rikusho*) (Henshall, 1988)

Pictographs (*shōkeimoji*/象形文字)	These characters are kanji which have developed from pictures of the objects they represent. Many of these characters bear little resemblance to the objects they originally represented. Examples of pictographs: 人– person, 口– mouth, 目– eye
Ideograph (*shijimoji*/指示文字)	These characters are kanji that represent abstract concepts such as numbers and directions. Examples: 一– one, 上– above, 下– below
Semantic Composite (*kaiimoji*/会意文字)	These characters are a combination of two or more existing kanji to make a single character. Examples: 森– *mori*/forest (a combination of the kanji 木), 鳴く *naku*/ animal cry (a combination of 鳥 *tori*/bird and 口– *kuchi*/ mouth)
Semantic-phonetic composite (*keiseimoji*/形成文字)	These characters are the most common of the *rikusho* categories. In these kanji one part represents meaning and the other part represents sound. Example: 詩 *shi*/ poem (a combination of 言 and 寺)
Derivative characters (*tenchūmoji*/転注文字)	This group of kanji refers to kanji that have taken on a new meaning related to and derived from their original meaning. For example, the kanji, 楽 used for music, ease etc., has also taken on the new meaning of "fun," and is therefore used for both music and fun.
Loan *Kanji* (*kashamoji*/仮借文字)	These characters are called loan characters and are used for cases where a word is spelled out phonetically. For example, the writing of America as 亜米利加 (*a-me-ri-ka*).

In addition to the categories of kanji outlined above, there are several other types of kanji. Some of these kanji may also fall within one of the *rikusho* categories but have a special form of usage or characteristic that warrants mentioning. Some of these categories are examined as follows.

Kokuji (国字)
In addition to the Chinese characters borrowed from China, some *kokuji*, or 'national characters' (characters native to Japan), have also been developed. One example of *kokuji* is 峠 (*tōge*) (Unger, 2006, p.97). *Kokuji* have no *on* reading (Chinese reading). One exception to this is the kanji 働く (*dō /hataraku*) formed in Japan on the basis of the kanji 動く (*dō/ugoku*) (Pye, 1971, p.255).

Ateji (当て字)
Ateji are those kanji which are used for their phonetic value only, without reference to their meaning (Pye, 1971, p.255). One example is the kanji for the word "coffee": 珈琲 (usually written in *katakana* as コーヒー).

Jukujikun (熟字訓)
Jukujikun is a type of kanji where the word is generated from the meaning of the kanji used and the actual phonetic values of the characters are ignored. For example, the word 煙草 combines the kanji 煙 (*kemuri*/smoke) and 草 (*kusa*/grass) to make 煙草

meaning "tobacco."

Jinmeiyō kanji (人名用漢字)

Jinmeiyō kanji are those kanji that are used for writing Japanese names. There are currently 861 kanji that make up this group of kanji. Many of the *jinmeiyō* kanji are also included in the everyday kanji.

Some dictionaries contain up to 50,000 *kanji*, but most scholars agree that somewhere between 2,000 and 3,000 kanji are sufficient to read most things in Japanese (Seeley, 1991). In Japan, the writing system has been subject to a number of orthographic reforms by which kanji usage has in some way been affected. One of the most significant developments from the perspective of this paper is the introduction of a limitation on the number of kanji. Native Japanese are expected to learn the 2136 kanji that make up the *jōyō kanji* (常用漢字), or "everyday kanji", designated by the Japanese Ministry for Education. This is important as it clearly establishes a set number of kanji that native Japanese students are expected to learn while at school in Japan. As we will see, the number of kanji included in the everyday kanji has changed at various times. In all cases the number of kanji has gone up, suggesting that kanji are treated as an integral part of the writing system and are unlikely to drop out of use. In the history of the Japanese writing system, a number of important script reforms and movements have emerged that relate to kanji specifically. Considering the complex nature of kanji and the effort required to master them, it is not surprising that they have given rise to controversy.

Efforts have been made during the post-war occupation of Japan to reduce the number of kanji; while some Japanese have advocated against studying kanji altogether: *Kanji fuyōron* (漢字不要論) was the movement that took the stance that kanji were unnecessary; while *kanji haishiron* (漢字廃止論) was the movement that advocated for the abolishment of kanji altogether (Gottlieb, 1995). Neither of these movements took hold and kanji are still treated as a major component of the Japanese writing system.

For the purpose of this paper, the most significant kanji reforms are those that relate to the restriction on the number of kanji to be taught in the education system. Several developments have taken place in the establishment of the list of everyday kanji, the most recent being the amendment on 30 November, 2010 which saw five kanji removed and 196 added. Table 2 outlines the major stages in the post-war development of the everyday kanji.

Table 2: Outline of major events in the development of the everyday kanji (*jōyō kanji*)

Year	Development
1946	In the early post-war period, there was support for script reform. A governmentally authorised list of 1850 characters, *tōyō kanji* (当用漢字), capped the number to be used in official documents, educational curricula, and to a large extent in the public media. (Unger, 2006)
1981	The policy of limiting the number of kanji in general use was greatly weakened, and a modified list of 1945 characters, the *jōyō kanji* (everyday kanji) was released. (Unger, 2006)
2010	Everyday kanji were amended. Five kanji were removed and one hundred and ninety six kanji were added. The total number of *jōyō kanji* now stands at 2136

One further recent development involving kanji was the naming of the new era (1st May, 2019), officially named 令和 (*reiwa*). The unveiling of the new name for the new era created a great deal of interest and excitement amongst the Japanese public, and this further ignited interest in kanji. The kanji for the new era were adopted from the *Manyoushu*. Soon after, local culture schools and community centers started running courses on the *Manyoushu*, signalling, once again, just how entrenched kanji are within Japanese society.

Kanji Education in Japan

Despite the difficulty attributed to learning kanji for native and non-native Japanese learners alike, Japan boasts one of the world's highest literacy rates. One theory for this is that it is due to the "perceptual process involved in learning to read in Japanese" (Makita, as cited in Sheridan, 1982, p.326). Parental influence and the availability of suitable reading materials have also been cited as possible reasons for the high rate of literacy (Sakamoto, as cited in Sheridan, 1982). Literacy rates are, however, are disputed by some scholars (See:Galan, 2005). In any case, the seemingly paradoxical situation of a difficult writing system with high literacy rates piques interest in kanji education in Japan. Furthermore, a look at kanji education in Japan provides a useful context from which we can examine kanji education in a JSL setting.

At school in Japan, students start studying kanji from grade one. The Japanese Ministry of Education (*monbukagakusho*) has arranged the *Jōyō kanji* or everyday kanji into a specific order for which they are to be taught in the Japanese educational system. By the end of their sixth year of primary school, students have learned the 1006 *kyōiku kanji* recognized as the most commonly used of all 2136 kanji in use. It is estimated that these 1006 kanji alone make up 95% of actual kanji usage in print (Kess, 1999). Table 3 below outlines the number of kanji learned in elementary school by year in Japan.

Table 3: Number of kanji learned per grade in the Japanese educational system (*kyōiku kanji*)

Grade	Number of kanji
1	80
2	160
3	200
4	200
5	185
6	181
Total	**1006**

(Source:http://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/new-cs/youryou/syo/koku/001.htm)

Despite Japan having one of the highest literacy rates in the world, Japanese native speakers spend twelve years of their education studying the *jōyō kanji*, and even Japanese people sometimes struggle to remember the correct kanji. According to Mainichi Shinbun newspaper (March, 2008), of the third-year high school students taking level 2 of the Japanese Kanji Aptitude Test—the high school graduate level which includes the reading and writing of the *jōyō kanji*—there has been a pass rate of below twenty percent for ten consecutive years. Considering that kanji presents difficulties for native Japanese speakers, it is no surprise that mastering kanji is a complex and daunting task for JSL learners.

Are Kanji Indispensable?

Are kanji really necessary? This question has no doubt crossed the mind of many learners of Japanese as a foreign language, and not too few Japanese native speakers as well. At first glance, it would seem that kanji are indeed an indispensable part of the Japanese language. However, with increasing immigration and rapid globalization, there are equally convincing arguments that suggest that kanji may not be indispensable after all. Historically, as we have seen, there have been attempts at script reform, with Japanese proponents for the removal of kanji from the writing system. To date, these reforms have failed. The massive cultural loss that would occur if kanji were to be removed from the Japanese language ensures that for the foreseeable future at least, kanji will endure.

As all Japanese can be written in *hiragana*, you might be inclined to think that kanji are not necessary and therefore Japanese would be much simpler if it abolished kanji altogether. The emergence of script reform movements, including those that advocate abolishing kanji, illustrates that these sentiments are also shared by some Japanese, although motives for abolishing kanji go beyond just simplifying the written language. There is no doubt that abolishing kanji would reduce the burden of learning kanji for both native Japanese and JSL learners alike. Nevertheless, kanji still remain an integral part of the Japanese writing system and will likely continue to do so.

There are two issues here: one is the role of kanji in the Japanese writing system and debate as to whether they are an indispensable part of the writing system; and the other

is the importance of learning kanji for foreign residents in Japan, particularly in a society where precepts espoused by policies such as *tabunka kyōsei* are a goal.

Perhaps one of the most persuasive arguments for preserving kanji is the fact that kanji indicate meaning, making Japanese easier to read. Although it would be easy to assume that reading Japanese written in *hiragana* script without kanji would be easier to read than in a script that includes kanji, this is in many cases not the case. For example, if we consider the sentence below, you can see that, if it was not for the kanji, you would not be able to decipher the meaning:

<p align="center">くるまでまっててください。(Hiragana Only)</p>
<p align="center">***Kuruma de mattete kudasai/Kuru made mattete kudasai***</p>

In spoken Japanese, the above sentence would be easily understood, as meaning can be deciphered from the context in which it is used and vocal inflection. In written Japanese, however, the absence of vocal inflection means that deciphering the meaning of this sentence is problematic. The Japanese sentence above could be interpreted in two possible ways:

<p align="center">① 来るまで待っててください。(hiragana and kanji)</p>
<p align="center">Please wait till I get there.</p>
<p align="center">② 車で待っててください。(hiragana and kanji)</p>
<p align="center">Please wait at the car.</p>

If the sentence is written with kanji, as above, the meaning of the sentence becomes instantly clear to the reader and no confusion arises. The absence of kanji in the above example means that the reader does not know whether the intended meaning is "*kuru made*", literally meaning "till I come", or "*kuruma de*", literally meaning "at the car." Therefore, confusion arises as it isn't clear whether the syllable "*ma*" is part of the noun "*kuruma*" meaning "car" or whether it is intended to accompany "*de*" to form the conjunction "*made*" meaning "till".

Ironically, the large number of homonyms in Japanese is a contributing factor to the difficulty of kanji, and is also an equally valid reason for why kanji are important to learn (Suzuki, as cited in Ezaki, 2010). The large number of homonyms in the Japanese language means that it can be difficult to know the correct kanji to use, consequently making them troublesome for native and non-native Japanese alike. For example, the morpheme *sei* has no less than 47 kanji which can be assigned to it (Richmond, 2005). Therefore, faced with the prospect of writing a word in which the morpheme "*sei*" is present, one must know which kanji from the 47 kanji available is the correct one. Furthermore, faced with the task of writing the word "*seikatsu*", or "lifestyle", the student must know which is the correct kanji for "*sei*" in this particular word. This is much easier in some cases than in others. In this case "*seikatsu*" is used as an example, but in reality, as it is a high frequency word, it is a relatively easy task to know which is the correct kanji. The task becomes somewhat more troublesome when faced with less

frequently used words. For example, if we consider a compound word in Japanese such as こうしょう/*kōshō*, it can seen that there are several possible meanings and consequently several ways to write this kanji. *Kōshō* could be written as 交渉、高尚、公証、考証、口承、鉱床、厚相、哄笑, as well as several other possibilities, and in the absence of any contextual clues as to the meaning, the meaning would be dependent on the particular kanji used. Consequently, the absence of kanji can make deciphering the meaning of Japanese script difficult, and the large number of homonyms in the language, therefore, is a frequently used argument for preserving kanji as a part of the written language.

Initially, it would seem that there is a strong argument for regarding kanji as an "indispensable" part of the Japanese writing system, but there are equally convincing arguments on both sides of this debate. If we consider the above example in which Japanese is written in *hiragana* in the absence of kanji, it is easy to see how it could be argued that kanji may facilitate the process of reading Japanese rather than hindering it. In reality, however, this issue could easily be resolved by effective use of spaces when writing in *hiragana*.

For those scholars who dismiss the notion that kanji are indispensable, there is the view that the semantic function of kanji is overemphasised and that kanji users also rely heavily on sound in reading and writing kanji (Ezaki, 2010). Ezaki also suggests that kanji can create language-related barriers for foreigners living in Japan, and that if Japan is to maintain relations and accept foreign workers, then there is "little room for insistence upon the indispensability of kanji" (Ezaki, 2010, p. 183). Ezaki's point is a valid one and raises issues of equality for foreign workers and foreigners in the Japanese education system. If kanji are to be treated as an "indispensable" part of the language, then clearly foreign residents who otherwise have fluency in spoken Japanese may be disadvantaged if they are unable to read kanji.

Despite Ezaki's position against the indispensability of kanji, Ezaki does acknowledge two important factors which support continued kanji usage, albeit to a modified degree: firstly, the aesthetic nature of Japanese writing and how kanji "may be strategically applied to express a certain level of creativity" (2010, p. 200); and secondly, that kanji play a "critical role in enabling us to read the extensive corpus of archives accumulated throughout history in various fields" (2010, p. 200). Ezaki does proffer a solution in relation to kanji usage, in the form of a two-tiered approach in which kanji usage is different for literary and non-literary works. Ezaki suggests that, for non-literary works such as newspapers and other mediums for practical communication, kanji be reduced or subject to compulsory application of *furigana*, *hiragana* used above kanji to indicate their phonetic reading, thereby making the Japanese to easier to read and understand.

Kanji as a Hurdle to *Tabunka Kyōsei*

An examination of kanji highlights both their importance and difficulty, thus calling for the need to consider their place in the context of mutual co-existence. As noted, kanji presents one of the biggest hurdles for foreign learners of the Japanese language.

Inadequate mastery of kanji, therefore, may be a barrier to equality for foreign residents in Japan. What then can be done to reduce the burden of learning kanji on foreign residents, thereby improving their standing in Japanese society? Clearly, removing kanji from the Japanese language, in the forseeable future at least, is an unlikely scenario. In light of that, what measures can be taken to ensure that kanji don't become a barrier to foreign residents in achieving equality in Japan?

As the recent law passed by the Japanese government indicates, improvements to Japanese language education for foreign residents are expected to come into fruition. However, the extent with which improvements will be made are still not clear. For foreign residents who have migrated to Japan as adults, mastery of kanji to the level of a native-born Japanese is, perhaps, an unrealistic goal.

One alternative to improving kanji proficiency in foreign residents is to make Japanese "easier" by including *furigana*. This type of approach is often used to assist Japanese children in things such as warning signs. This is to some extent already being implemented in parts of Japan. The problem with this approach is that there are limitations to its use. Furthermore, this approach can be perceived as being a form of forced assimilation, rather than a means of linguistically enabling foreign residents.

Technological innovation may also play a part in reducing the hurdle that kanji presents for foreign residents in Japan, thus helping to further the success of mutual co-existence. With rapid technological advancements expected in future years, one wonders what role technology will play in language learning and teaching in the future. Increasing the accessibilty of Japanese language education via online courses for foreign residents may be the most effective way to make such services accessible to a broad spectrum of foreign residents.

Japan might look to how other countries providing language education services to foreign residents as a model for improving their own services. In Australia, for example, the Adult Migrant English Program (AMEP) provides eligible foreign residents with up to 510 hours of free English education.

Conclusion

Evidently, treatment of kanji in the Japanese language is not without its difficulties; however, it is unlikely that kanji will fall out of use in the foreseeable future. From the perspective of Japanese language teachers and Japanese language learners, issues regarding the indispensable nature of kanji do not override the fact that they still comprise a major part of the writing system, and for a Japanese language learner to achieve a high level of fluency in Japanese and have access to authentic Japanese texts, they are an essential element of any Japanese curriculum. For immigrants to Japan, learning kanji is essential if they are to achieve equality in terms of initiatives such as *tabunka kyōsei*. Providing adequate language instruction that produces kanji-literate foreign residents, then, should be a major consideration in curriculum design. At this stage, it is too soon to tell whether language instruction provided by the Japanese

government will prove to be sufficient in this respect.

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