

Re: Newbie stuff: Kanji. The Heisig-way or the Highway?

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Soren Svendsen <immacolata2@xxxxxxxxxxx> wrote:

> I just began on Heisig's unorthodox method of learning kanji. To my
> delight I make progress way faster than I had expected.

To hopefully forestall too much repeat of old arguments: Note that Soren almost certainly means Heisig's "Remembering the Kanji, volume I" which deals *only* with linking the underlying meaning of a kanji with its written form. No other aspect of kanji or language is covered in that volume. I'll assume that's the volume we're talking about.

> Anyone here who did their first kanji memorization trying Heisig's
> method and stuck with it? What is your verdict?

My verdict:

Heisig's method is sound, if you follow it as he suggests in his introduction and through the lessons (as opposed to how others might summarise his method). If you have a good knowledge of English language already, and can manage abstract concepts — i.e. if you are an adult with English as a primary language — then the method of starting with strong, existing knowledge (one or more English keywords) and connecting that to the new learning (the writing of a kanji) is a very reliable way of getting the kanji into your head as a body of knowledge.

I believe he's also right that the meaning-writing connection in kanji is significantly organised and robust, and of such value in learning the rest of the language, that studying it in itself is very helpful. The readings of kanji, the forming of compounds, the conjugation of words — none of these link very strongly to the meaning-writing connection.

Yet it is this meaning-writing connection that is so very foreign for Westerners to absorb when learning Japanese: unless we're very fortunate, we've never experienced such a concept in learning other languages in childhood, so while it's very structured and valuable, it's a significant barrier trying to learn the meaning-writing connection haphazardly as we encounter each kanji. Having learned to

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connect a meaning and a written form together as a separate process, it's much simpler to learn other things about a kanji, since you're then building on existing knowledge.

Heisig's keywords and stories leave something to be desired; many of them are of dubious value. What many seem to miss is that in the introduction to the book, Heisig encourages the reader to invent their own stories, that have much more imaginative impact for the individual reader. On the other hand, Heisig cautions strongly against changing the keywords; since he has gone to pains to make each keyword unique among the kanji, this would be good advice, if a better source of keywords were not available.

I made a set of flashcards, based on Heisig's ordering and primitives in volume I, but changing all the keywords to those found in Halpern's "Kanji Learner's Dictionary", supplemented by the older but more extensive "New Japanese-English Character Dictionary" by the same editor. The core meanings there are as useful as Heisig's keywords, and perform the same function; but they were not chosen by a single person, instead being the result of a lot of linguistic research and study to find an underlying concept to tie all of a kanji's meanings together.

To each card, I added a single most-frequent ó and reading, for when I want to turn around and systematically learn the readings as a separate exercise. This was simply to save the effort of sorting through the cards later to add that information; I'm not using it in conjunction with this method.

So, my current learning, which I undertake as time allows, uses Heisig's method with these custom cards. For each card, I do the following steps:

- Read the core meaning as a concept with particular connotations
- View the kanji as a sequence of components as they are written
- Close eyes
- Create an imaginative scene linking the meanings of the components to the core meaning of this card
- Watch the scene play out in my mind as an observer
- Restate the core meaning and sequence of components to affirm the scene's significance
- Visualise each component in spatial relation corresponding to the kanji
- Open eyes
- Write a summary of the scene in my notebook
- Write the kanji slowly next to the summary while viewing the scene again in my mind

This gives a specific, imaginative experience strongly linked to the writing of a particular kanji; and the writing of a kanji is, of

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course, simplified by being the writing of whatever components make it up.

Reviewing the kanji is a matter of:

- Select some amount of cards from those already learned
- Shuffle well
- For each card:
 - View the core meaning
 - Try to write the kanji within a minute
 - Confirm the kanji's writing against my attempt

Cards which I get right progress toward the back of the box, while those I get wrong stay at the front. Nothing leaves the box; all cards are candidates for review.

Recently I've had some difficulty with some kanji; the most recent fifty or so just don't seem to stick in my mind. When I realised this, I looked in my notebook for the scenes against these kanji; most of them were bland and undistinguished, or vague with no strong images. That was a period of stressful work, and I realised that I'd been rushing through the creation of scenes, with the result that nothing had really stuck in my mind to connect the kanji to the meaning.

This was an interesting realisation, because it showed me that it was the efficacy of the method outlined above which was helping me remember all the *other* kanji I'd learned. When the scenes weren't powerful, the learning was poor.

The method Heisig describes is a good one, and I've found it to be very effective at building a kanji vocabulary (note: *not* a Japanese vocabulary, which is an independent thing) starting with no good understanding of kanji. A vocabulary of kanji meanings and writings is a great aid in learning the rest of the language, since the huge distraction of trying to tie an abstract character to a word or phrase which itself is unfamiliar, is gone.

Make no mistake, though: the reason Heisig's method is good is not that it makes anything any easier. It's still darned difficult to sort out all those kanji into a system in your mind, and takes long hours of work over an extended period. The reason it's a good method is that it isolates the difficult, yet well-structured, meaning-writing connection of kanji and allows that to be learned as simply as possible without other confusion.

Thus, it's a good method because it stops you wasting time repeatedly trying to get the kanji into your brain in the first place and keeping them there. When the method works, you learn each new kanji once only, which is much more efficient. Everything else is then working with kanji you already know and have strong, useful associations for.

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- > It seems radical, pardon the pun, but as I haven't got any teacher
- > to spoil my self studies I figured I would give it a try.

My teacher has been very happy that I'm studying kanji by myself; she knows of no better way to teach them other than drilling and rote memorisation, which both she and the student find dull and frustrating.

She's been pleasantly surprised at my growing knowledge of kanji meanings (currently at 800 kanji and slowly rising), and finds it very easy to teach me new words (and new usages of existing words) since I now frequently know the meaning of the kanji involved before seeing the word.

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"I bought a self learning record to learn Spanish. I turned it |
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on and went to sleep; the record got stuck. The next day I |
o) could only stutter in Spanish." — Steven Wright |
Ben Finney

• **Follow-Ups:**

- ◆ **Re: Newbie stuff: Kanji. The Heisig-way or the Highway?**
◇ From: Soren Svendsen
- ◆ **Re: Newbie stuff: Kanji. The Heisig-way or the Highway?**
◇ From: Chris Kern
- ◆ **Re: Newbie stuff: Kanji. The Heisig-way or the Highway?**
◇ From: necoandjeff

• **References:**

- ◆ **Newbie stuff: Kanji. The Heisig-way or the Highway?**
◇ From: Soren Svendsen

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