Internal and External Factors Influencing Kanji Learning among Japanese language Students in Indonesia

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Abstract

This study investigates the factors influencing kanji learning among students of the Japanese Language and Culture Study Program, Class of 2022, at Darma Persada University. The research employs a qualitative descriptive approach, combining field observations, literature review, and questionnaire-based data collection. The analysis identifies two major dimensions, internal and external factors that affect students' kanji learning. The average score for internal factors is 3.77, categorized as "high", while external factors show a slightly higher average of 4.15, also in the "high" category. These results indicate that both dimensions significantly influence kanji learning, with external factors exerting a stronger impact. The most influential external indicators include parental support, peer support, study environment, teaching methods, teacher-student relationships, study time allocation, and the availability of learning materials and media. These findings suggest that successful kanji acquisition is shaped not only by students' individual motivation and cognitive readiness but also by the surrounding social and instructional context. This study contributes to understanding how learning environments and interpersonal dynamics enhance kanji learning outcomes among Japanese language students in Indonesia.

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INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Japanese has become one of the most popular foreign languages studied in Indonesia. This growing interest is evident from the increasing number of Japanese language learners, which reached 711,732 individuals in 2021(The Japan Foundation, 2021). The enthusiasm for learning Japanese extends beyond the industrial sector—where Japanese proficiency is often a valuable skill—into the academic sphere. Many educational institutions, from secondary schools to universities, have incorporated Japanese into their curricula and have established scholarship programs in collaboration with universities and organizations in Japan..

The same survey by The Japan Foundation (2021) reported that the number of institutions offering Japanese language education in Indonesia had risen to 2,958, reflecting the sustained expansion of Japanese language education across the country. This growing demand is closely linked to Japan's continued partnership with Indonesia in education, culture, and labor exchange. To qualify for scholarships or employment opportunities in Japan, learners are expected to demonstrate adequate proficiency in Japanese—an essential foundation for both academic and professional success.

Table 1. A survey on Japanese language teachers and learners in Indonesia

Number of institutions	Number of teachers	Number of learners
2.958	6.617	711.732

The data from The Japan Foundation (2021) reveal a striking imbalance between the number of Japanese language learners and qualified instructors in Indonesia. While there are 711,732 learners and 2,958 institutions, the number of teachers stands at only 6,617, representing less than one percent of the total learner population. This disparity reflects the growing demand for Japanese language education, which is largely driven by Indonesia's expanding economic and cultural ties with Japan. At the school level, Japanese is typically offered as an elective subject, whereas at the university level, it is often available as a major field of study.

Learning Japanese, like acquiring other foreign languages, requires mastery of four essential skills—listening, speaking, reading, and writing. A particularly challenging component is the writing system, which consists of romaji, hiragana, katakana, and kanji. While hiragana and katakana are phonetic syllabaries learned at the early stages of study, kanji represents a more advanced and complex aspect of written Japanese. As Fitriana (2019) observes, kanji poses significant difficulty for foreign learners due to its multiple readings—onyomi (Chinese-derived pronunciation) and kunyomi (native Japanese reading).

Every language presents unique challenges in pronunciation and orthography, yet kanji remains one of the most demanding elements of Japanese. According to Dahidi and Sudjianto (2018), Japanese students begin studying kanji in elementary school and are expected to master approximately 1,200 characters. Vorobov (2017) further explains that the difficulty lies in kanji's intricate structure, the large number of components per character, and the often unpredictable correspondence between form and pronunciation. Currently, there are 2,136 standardized kanji characters, with the most complex containing up to 29 strokes. These features illustrate the cognitive and linguistic complexity involved in learning kanji, particularly for non-native learners.

In the process of learning, both internal and external factors play a vital role in determining learning outcomes. According to Westwood (2004, as cited in Putri, 2019), internal factors include motivation, self-confidence, learning attitude, and self-esteem, while external factors encompass teachers, learning facilities, and the overall learning environment. Both types of factors are essential to the success of the learning process. However, studies that specifically examine the factors influencing kanji learning remain relatively limited.

Sihombing (2022) reports that the general difficulty level for students in mastering kanji is

approximately 46.15%, with the main challenges being the meaning and significance of characters, their form and writing, and their pronunciation or readings. Similarly, Sutedi (2019) explains that foreign learners often struggle with kanji due to its dual readings, onyomi and kunyomi.

Several previous studies have investigated different aspects of kanji learning. Maryani (2018) compared student responses to kanji courses under the old and new curricula at Universitas Darma Persada, revealing differences in learning approaches and teaching methods. Fitriani and Ginanjar (2022) explored strategies to minimize difficulties in kanji learning, identifying common challenges related to onyomi and kunyomi readings. They suggested that effective instruction should include stroke order, readings, meanings, and kanji composition. Meanwhile, Dewi (2020) analyzed students' difficulties in learning Kanji Enshu and found that problems in writing accuracy, stroke order, and reading comprehension were influenced by both internal and external factors.

From these studies, it can be concluded that the main difficulties in kanji learning arise from multiple readings, the complexity of character meanings, and writing accuracy. Although previous research has explored these challenges and proposed teaching strategies, most have been limited in scope—focusing on specific aspects such as learning strategies, curriculum comparisons, or reading proficiency. Few studies have provided a comprehensive analysis of how internal factors (such as motivation, self-confidence, and learning attitudes) and external factors (such as teaching quality, learning environment, and available facilities) interact to influence kanji learning outcomes.

Therefore, the present study seeks to fill this gap by offering a more holistic understanding of the factors influencing kanji learning among students in the Japanese Language and Culture Study Program at Universitas Darma Persada.

Accordingly, this research addresses the following questions:

1. What internal factors influence students' ability to learn kanji effectively?

2. What external factors contribute to students' success or difficulty in learning kanji?

3. Which type of factor—internal or external—has a greater influence on kanji learning outcomes?

The findings of this study are expected to provide valuable insights for educators, curriculum developers, and language program administrators in designing more effective and learner-centered approaches to kanji instruction. By understanding the interplay between internal and external factors, Japanese language educators can better tailor teaching methods to enhance student motivation, engagement, and proficiency.

METHODS

This study adopts a qualitative descriptive design, which aims to systematically describe and analyze the factors influencing kanji learning without seeking to generalize beyond the studied population. As Sugiyono (2005) explains, the descriptive method is used to present data as they are, emphasizing accuracy and depth rather than prediction. In line with Bogdan and Taylor (as cited in Moleong, 2008), qualitative research involves procedures that produce descriptive data in the form of written or spoken words and observable behavior.

Data for this study were collected through field research and literature review. The field research provided primary data through questionnaires distributed to students, while the literature review offered secondary data by drawing on theoretical frameworks and findings from previous studies. Among these, Dewi's (2020) undergraduate thesis, Analysis of Difficulties in Learning Kanji Enshu, serves as a key reference due to its relevance to the present study's focus.

The research participants consisted of active third-semester students in the Japanese Language and Culture Study Program, Class of 2022, at Universitas Darma Persada. This cohort was selected because third-semester students have already completed basic Japanese courses and have begun learning more complex kanji, making them suitable respondents for examining the

challenges and influencing factors in kanji acquisition..

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION
Analysis of Japanese Language Learning Background

An analysis of the Japanese language learning background of third-semester students in the Japanese Language and Culture Study Program at Universitas Darma Persada produced the results illustrated in the following diagram..
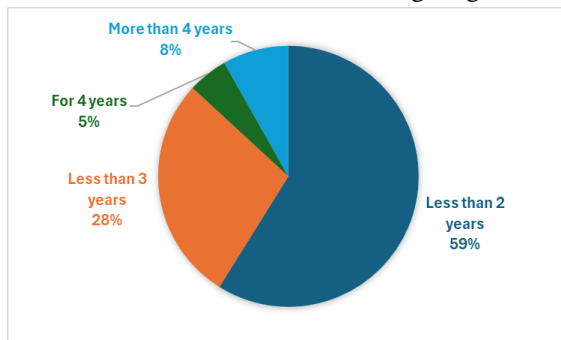

Diagram 1. Duration of Respondents' Japanese Language Learning

As shown in the diagram above, among the 64 third-semester students in the Japanese Language and Culture Study Program at Universitas Darma Persada, 56% have studied Japanese for less than two years, 26.6% for less than three years, 7.8% for more than four years, and 4.7% have studied for exactly four years. These findings indicate that the majority of students have relatively limited experience in learning Japanese, which may influence their level of proficiency and approach to kanji acquisition..

The following section provides an overview of the factors that motivate respondents to study Japanese, as illustrated in the subsequent diagram..
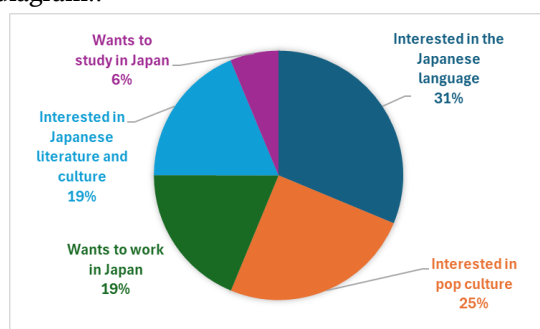

Diagram 2. Respondents' Motivation for Learning Japanese

The diagram indicates that 31.3% of students are motivated by an interest in the Japanese language itself, while 25% are driven by an appreciation for Japanese popular culture. Meanwhile, 18.8% of students express motivation related to career aspirations in Japan, and 18.7% are inspired by an interest in Japanese literature and traditional culture. A smaller proportion, 6.3%, report being motivated by the desire to pursue higher education in Japan. These findings suggest that students' motivation to learn Japanese is shaped by both cultural and instrumental factors, reflecting a combination of personal interest and practical goals.

The subsequent diagram presents data on respondents' participation in the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT).
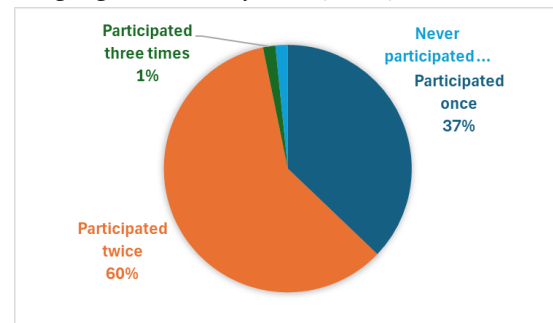

Diagram 3. Respondents' Frequency of Participation in the JLPT

The diagram above shows that 59.4% of students have taken the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (JLPT) twice, 37% have taken it once, and 1.6% each have taken it either three times or have never taken the test. These results indicate that most students actively participate in JLPT examinations as part of their learning process, suggesting a strong commitment to evaluating and improving their Japanese proficiency.
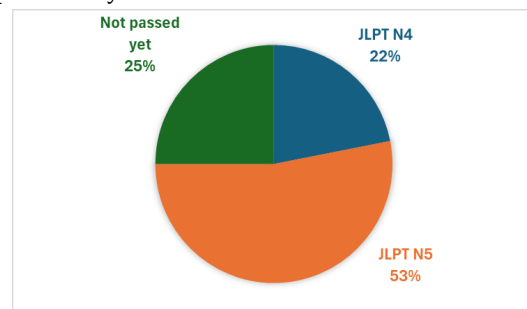

Diagram 4. Respondents' JLPT Levels

As illustrated in the subsequent diagram, 53.1% of students currently hold a JLPT N5 certificate, 21.9% hold a JLPT N4 certificate, and 25% have not yet obtained any certification. This distribution reflects that a majority of students remain at the beginner to lower-intermediate proficiency levels, which aligns with their relatively short duration of language study.

The following diagram illustrates the relationship between the length of study and motivation to study in Japan, providing further insight into how learning experience correlates with students' academic and career aspirations.
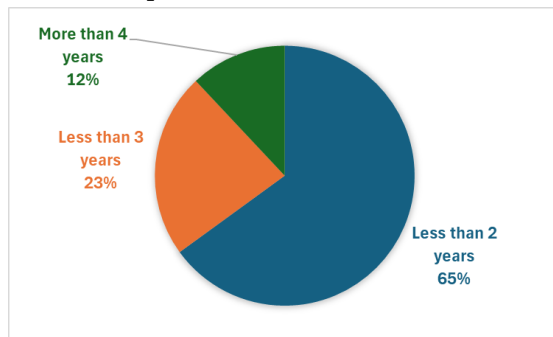
Diagram 5. Relationship Between Study Duration and Motivation to Study in Japan

The diagram above shows that among respondents motivated by an interest in the Japanese language, 65% have studied Japanese for less than two years, 23% for less than three years, and 12% for more than four years. These findings suggest that most students' enthusiasm for learning Japanese emerges at the early stages of their language-learning journey, possibly driven by curiosity and a desire for linguistic exploration.

The subsequent diagram illustrates the relationship between study duration and motivation stemming from an interest in Japanese pop culture. As shown, 73% of students who expressed an interest in Japanese pop culture have studied Japanese for less than two years, 14% for less than three years, and 13% for more than four years. This trend indicates that exposure to Japanese popular culture—such as anime, manga, and music—often serves as an initial motivational factor that
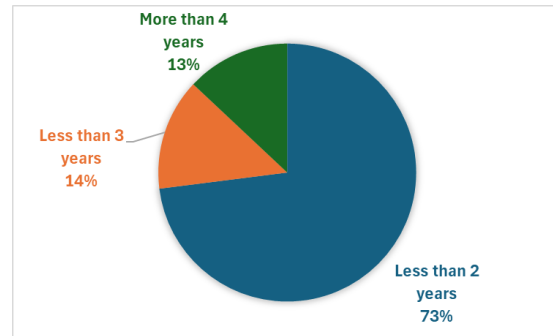
encourages beginners to start learning the language.

Diagram 6. Relationship Between Study Duration and Interest in Japanese Pop Culture

Internal and External Factors Influencing Kanji Learning

The results of respondents' responses regarding the internal and external factors influencing kanji learning are presented below.

1. Internal Factors

The analysis of responses to the ten questionnaire items related to internal factors is summarized in the following charts. These items measured aspects such as motivation, learning attitude, concentration, self-confidence, and interest in learning kanji. The data were analyzed to identify how these psychological and affective components contribute to students' overall learning outcomes.
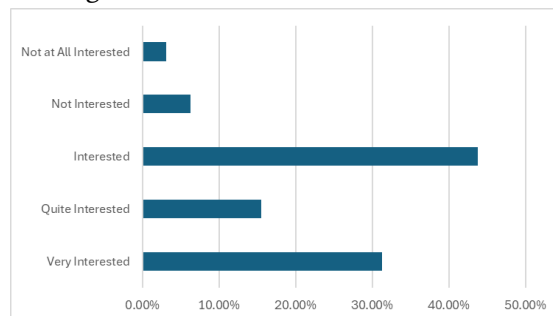

Diagram 7. Students' Level of Interest in Learning Kanji

The chart above shows that 50% of students have very high expectations regarding their achievement in learning kanji, 32.8% have high expectations, 10.9% hold moderate expectations, 10.9% hold moderate expectations,4.7% report No. particular expectations, and 1.6% express very low expectations. These findings suggest that the

majority of students maintain a strong sense of optimism and motivation toward mastering kanji, which reflects a generally positive internal disposition toward the learning process.

The next chart illustrates data related to students' planning and time management in studying kanji, providing insight into how effectively learners allocate time and organize their study routines to achieve their learning goals
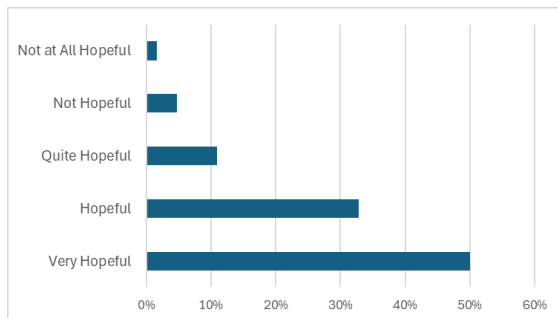

Diagram 8. Students' Level of Expectation in Learning Kanji

The chart above indicates that 50% of students have very high expectations for their achievement in kanji learning, 32.8% have high expectations, 10.9% report moderate expectations, 4.7% have no specific expectations, and 1.6%express very low expectations. These results suggest that most students possess a strong sense of confidence and motivation in mastering kanji, reflecting positive internal attitudes that can enhance their learning performance.

The next chart presents findings on students' planning and time management in studying kanji. The data reveal that while a considerable number of students demonstrate awareness of the importance of consistent study habits, variations exist in how effectively they manage their time. Students who plan regular study schedules and allocate sufficient time for review tend to show higher engagement and retention in kanji learning. Conversely, those with irregular study patterns may struggle to maintain steady progress, highlighting the critical role of disciplined time management as an internal factor influencing learning outcomes.
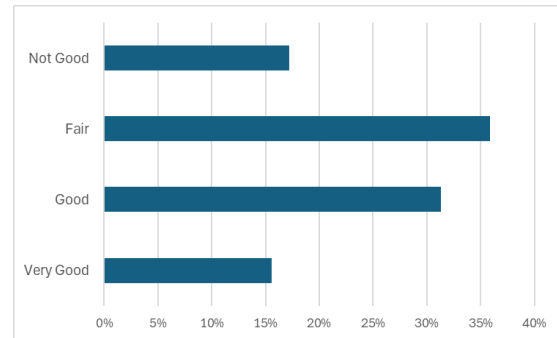

Diagram 9. Students' Planning and Time Management for Learning Kanji

The chart above shows that 35.9% of students rated their planning and time management for learning kanji as adequate, 31.3% as good, 17.2% as poor, and 15.6% as very good. These results indicate that while most students have developed some level of organization in managing their study schedules, there remains room for improvement in maintaining consistent and effective time management strategies.
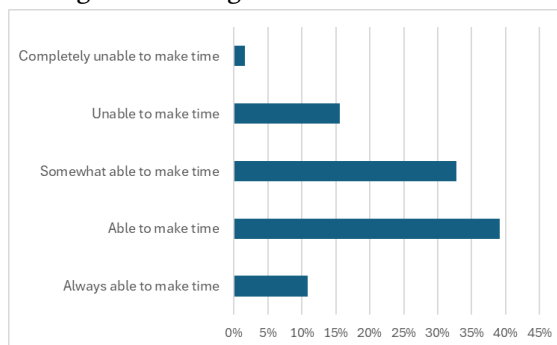

Diagram 10. Students' Use of Free Time for Independent Kanji Practice after Class

The following chart illustrates how students use their free time for independent kanji practice outside of class. From the data, 39.1% of students reported spending time practicing kanji after class, 32.8% reported a moderate amount, 15.6% indicated no practice, 10.9% devoted a significant amount of time, and 1.6% reported no practice at all. These findings suggest that although the majority of students recognize the value of independent study, a considerable proportion still lack regular practice habits that could strengthen their kanji mastery.

The next chart presents data on students' perceptions of the importance of

reviewing and taking notes on key points at the end of each class session. This indicator helps reveal how reflective learning habits contribute to deeper understanding and long-term retention of kanji characters.
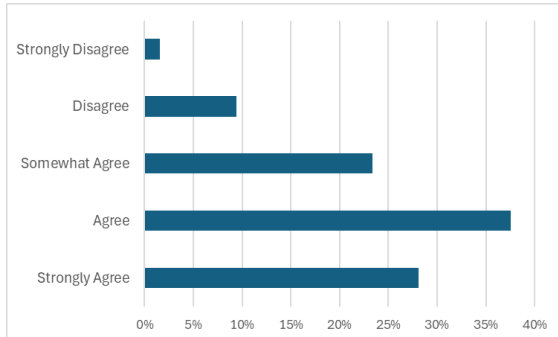

Diagram 11. Students' Perception of the Need to Review and Record Key Points after Each Class Session

The chart above shows that 37.5% of students agree that reviewing and taking notes on key points is necessary, 28.1%strongly agree, 23.4% somewhat agree, 9.4% disagree, and 1.6% strongly disagree with the importance of reviewing and recording key points at the end of each class session. These findings indicate that the majority of students recognize the value of reflective learning activities—such as reviewing and note-taking—as effective strategies for reinforcing understanding and improving retention of kanji. However, the presence of a small group of students who do not engage in these practices suggests that not all learners fully integrate reflective study habits into their learning routines.

The next chart illustrates the frequency with which students consult additional references after kanji classes. This measure reflects students' initiative and curiosity in expanding their learning beyond classroom instruction, which serves as another important indicator of internal motivation and self-directed learning.
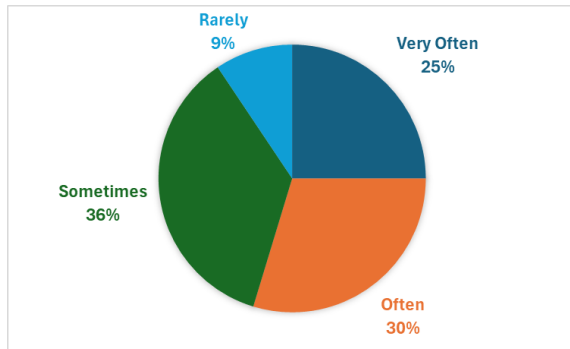

Diagram 12. Frequency of Searching for Additional References after Kanji Classes

The chart above shows that 35.9% of students reported quite often looking for additional references after kanji classes, 29.7% do so often, 25% very often, and 9.4% not often. These findings indicate that most students demonstrate initiative in supplementing classroom instruction with external learning resources, reflecting a generally strong intrinsic motivation to deepen their understanding of kanji. However, the relatively small proportion of students who seldom seek additional references suggests that not all learners adopt proactive study habits, which may influence differences in kanji proficiency across the group.

The next chart presents data on how regularly students read textbooks or other sources related to kanji. This indicator provides insight into students' consistency in engaging with structured materials, which is crucial for reinforcing memory and comprehension of kanji characters.
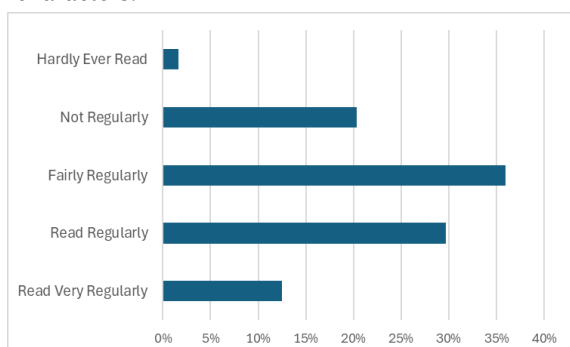

Diagram 13. Routine of Reading Textbooks or Other Sources Related to Kanji

The chart above indicates that 35.9% of students read moderately regularly, 29.7% read regularly, 20.3% read irregularly, 12.5% read very regularly,

and 1.6% read very irregularly when engaging with textbooks or other kanji-related sources. These results suggest that most students maintain a consistent reading routine, which supports steady progress in kanji acquisition. However, a notable portion of students still display irregular reading habits, which may hinder their long-term retention and understanding of kanji. Developing greater consistency in exposure to kanji texts could therefore enhance learning outcomes.

The following chart presents data on how students apply what they have learned in kanji classes. This indicator reflects the extent to which students are able to transfer classroom knowledge into practical use an essential component of effective language acquisition and internalization.
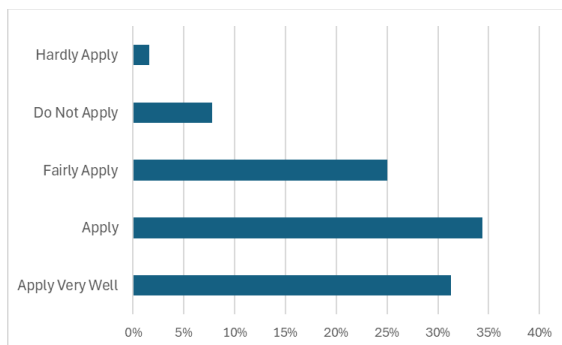

Diagram 14. Application of What Has Been Learned in Kanji Classes

From the chart above, 34.4% of students apply what they have learned, 31.3% apply it very well, 25% apply it moderately, 7.8% do not apply it, and 1.6% do not apply it at all.

Next is a chart depicting how students maintain high levels of motivation while studying kanji.
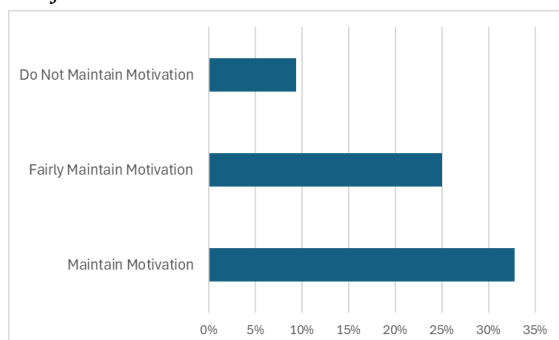

Diagram 15. Maintaining Motivation While Learning Kanji

From the chart above, 32.8% of students maintain motivation, 25% moderately maintain motivation, and 9.4% do not maintain motivation but remain motivated while learning kanji.

Finally, the chart illustrates the influence of physical and mental health on students' kanji learning.
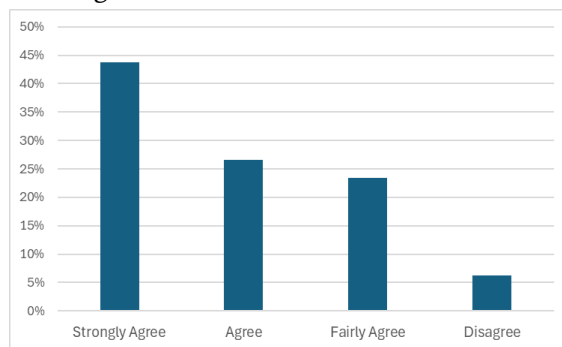

Diagram 16. Influence of Physical and Mental Health on Kanji Learning

From the chart above, 43.8% of students strongly agree that physical and mental health affect kanji learning, 26.6% agree, 23.4% somewhat agree, and 6.3% disagree.

2. External Factors

This section presents several charts illustrating the external factors that influence students' learning of kanji. External factors refer to environmental and social conditions beyond the learner's internal disposition—such as the learning environment, teaching methods, instructional materials, peer and family support, and teacher-student interactions—that play an essential role in shaping students' motivation and achievement in kanji learning. These variables provide valuable insights into how the external learning context either facilitates or hinders students' engagement and performance in mastering kanji characters.

The following chart presents data on the extent of parental support received by students in their kanji learning process.
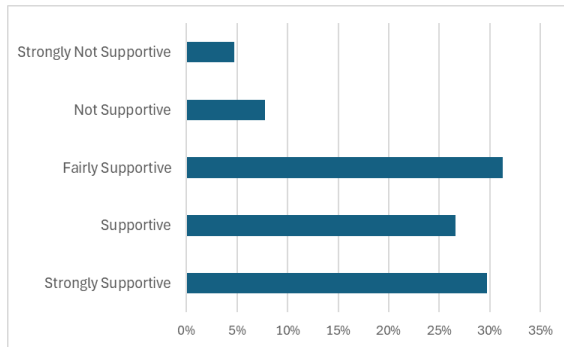
Diagram 17. Influence of Parental Support

From the data, it can be understood that 31.3% of students stated that their parents were moderately supportive, 29.7% stated that their parents were very supportive, 26.6% stated that their parents were supportive, 7.8% stated that their parents were unsupportive, and 4.7% of students stated that their parents were strongly unsupportive in their kanji learning process.

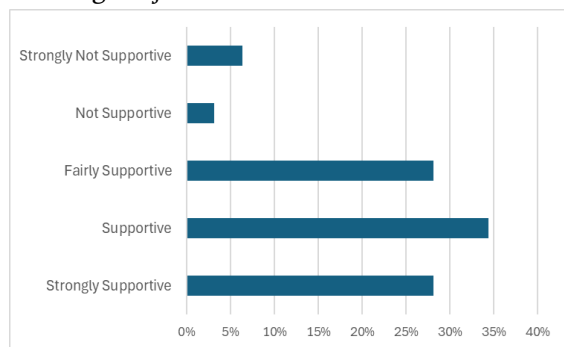Next is a diagram related to peer support in learning kanji.

Diagram 18. Influence of Peer Support

From the diagram above, it can be understood that 34.4% of students stated that their peers were supportive, 28.1% stated that their peers were very supportive, 28.1% stated that their peers were moderately supportive, 6.3% stated that their peers were strongly not supportive, and 3.1% stated that their peers were not supportive in learning kanji.

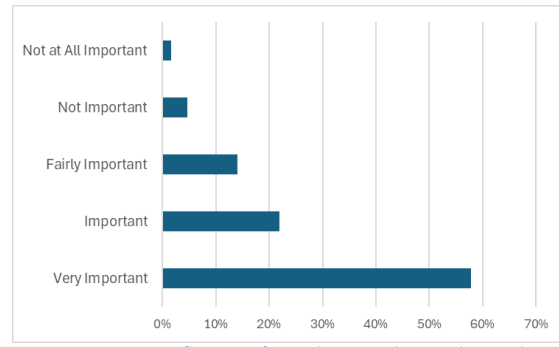Then, a diagram regarding the importance of the teacher–student relationship in learning kanji.

Diagram 19. Influence of Teacher–Student Relationship

From the diagram above, it can be understood that 57.8% of students stated that it was very important, 21.9% stated that it was important, 14.1% stated that it was moderately important, 4.7% stated that it was not important, and 1.6% stated that the teacher–student relationship in learning kanji was very unimportant.

Next is a diagram related to how open communication with lecturers affects learning kanji.
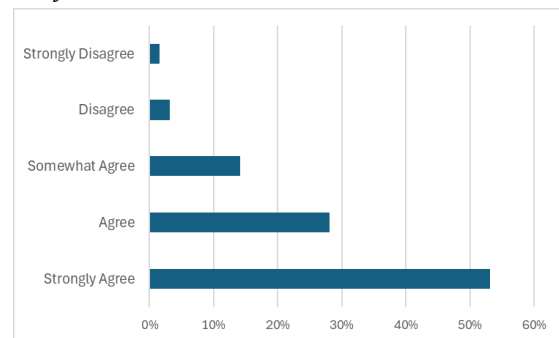

Diagram 20. Influence of Communication with Lecturers

From the diagram above, it can be understood that 53.1% of students strongly agreed, 28.1% agreed, 14.1% somewhat agreed, 3.1% disagreed, and 1.6% strongly disagreed.

Then, a diagram illustrating the influence of lecturers' teaching methods on learning kanji.
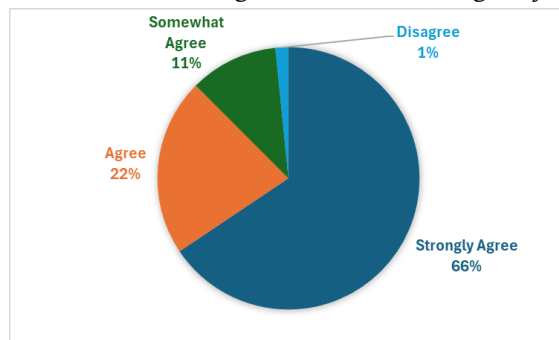

Diagram 21. Influence of Lecturers' Teaching Methods

From the diagram above, it can be understood that 65.6% of students strongly agreed, 21.9% agreed, 10.9% somewhat agreed, and 1.6% disagreed.

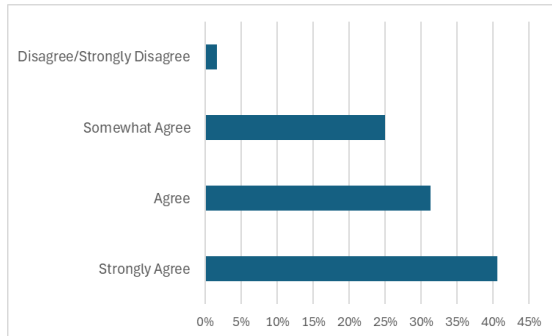Next is a diagram related to how the classroom atmosphere affects learning kanji.

Diagram 22. Influence of the Learning Environment and Its Atmosphere

From the diagram above, it can be understood that 54.7% of students strongly agreed, 32.8% agreed, 7.8% somewhat agreed, 3.1% disagreed, and 1.6% strongly disagreed.

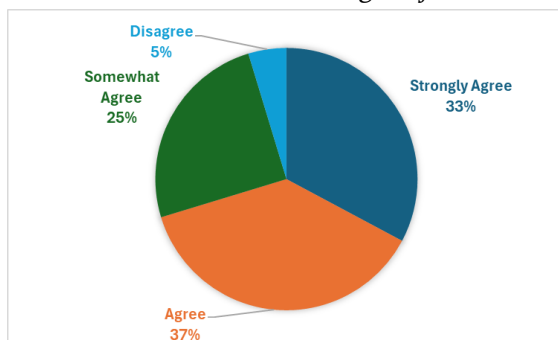Next is a diagram related to how peers' achievements influence learning kanji.

Diagram 23. Influence of Peers' Academic Achievement

From the diagram above, it can be understood that 37.5% of students agreed, 32.8% strongly agreed, 25% somewhat agreed, and 4.7% disagreed.

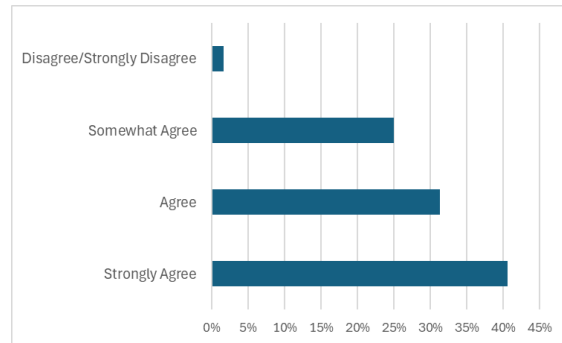Then, a diagram related to the influence of the module book in learning kanji.

Diagram 24. Influence of Module Books

From the diagram above, it can be understood that 40.6% of students strongly agreed, 31.3% agreed, 25% somewhat agreed, and 1.6% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Next is a diagram related to the influence of sufficient study time on learning kanji.
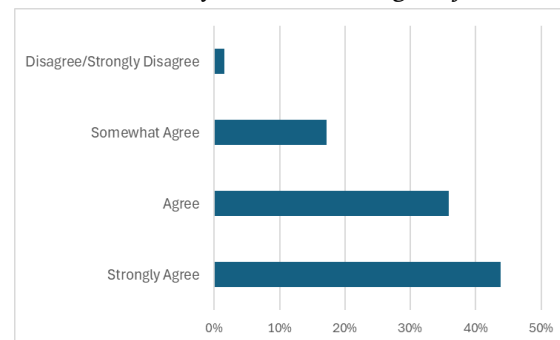
Diagram 25. Influence of Study Time Sufficiency

From the diagram above, it can be understood that 43.8% of students strongly agreed, 35.9% agreed, 17.2% somewhat agreed, and 1.6% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Finally, a diagram related to the influence of a clean and comfortable learning space.
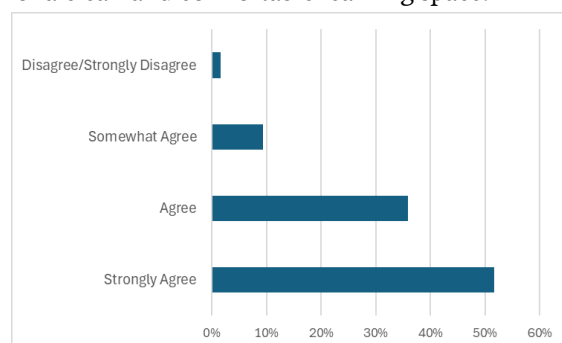

Diagram 26. Influence of a Clean and Comfortable Learning Space

From the diagram above, it can be understood that 51.6% of students strongly

agreed, 35.9% agreed, 9.4% somewhat agreed, and 1.6% disagreed or strongly disagreed.

Descriptive Analysis of Respondents' Answers

Based on the interval classification, each category range was determined by sequentially adding a value of 0.8 to the lowest category value of 1.00 until reaching the highest value of 5.00.

The analysis of the relationship between study duration and motivation shows that students who have studied Japanese for less than two years exhibit the highest motivation to learn, primarily driven by interest in the Japanese language, desire to work in Japan, and enthusiasm for Japanese popular culture. In contrast, students who have studied for longer periods (less than three years or more than four years) tend to show relatively lower motivational levels.

Regarding internal factors influencing kanji learning, responses in the "Agree" (category 4) option totaled 216, and "Strongly Agree" (category 5) responses totaled 180 across ten questionnaire items. Among these, the most influential internal factor was students' expectations to achieve specific goals through kanji learning, with 50% (32 students) identifying this as their strongest motivator. For external factors, respondents who selected "Agree" numbered 196, while those who selected "Strongly Agree" totaled 293. Among the ten external indicators, the most influential was lecturers' teaching methods, identified by 65.6% (42 students) as the most significant factor in their kanji learning experience.

Based on these results, external factors demonstrated a stronger influence on kanji learning than internal factors. The key external indicators include:

1. Parental support
2. Peer support
3. Learning environment conditions
4. Teaching methods
5. Teacher–student relationship
6. Availability of study time
7. Learning modules and media

The average score for internal factors (ten indicators) was 3.77, placing it in the High category, while the average score for external factors was 4.15, also in the High category. Although both are significant, the higher external factor score suggests that environmental and pedagogical conditions have a greater impact on students' kanji learning outcomes.

Overall, both internal and external factors play essential roles in influencing kanji learning. Internal factors—such as motivation, expectations, time management, and learning attitudes—represent intrinsic drives that sustain students' engagement. Meanwhile, external factors—such as teaching quality, social support, and classroom environment—serve as contextual enablers that enhance learning effectiveness. The findings indicate that a supportive external environment combined with well-developed internal motivation leads to more successful kanji acquisition. Therefore, future instructional strategies should aim to balance these two dimensions to optimize students' learning outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The results of this study on the factors influencing kanji learning among students of the Japanese Language and Culture Study Program at Universitas Darma Persada indicate that both internal and external factors play a significant role in shaping students' learning outcomes. The average score for internal factors was 3.77, categorized as high, suggesting that students' motivation, interest, expectations, time management, study habits, and overall physical and mental readiness strongly support their engagement in kanji learning. These internal aspects reflect learners' intrinsic capacity to sustain focus, manage learning routines, and remain motivated despite the complexities of kanji.

Meanwhile, the average score for external factors was 4.15, also categorized as high, indicating an even greater influence. External variables such as teaching methods, teacher–student relationships, peer and parental support,

and learning environment conditions were shown to be particularly impactful. The findings highlight that effective pedagogy and supportive learning environments substantially enhance students' motivation and comprehension in mastering kanji. Among these factors, teaching methods emerged as the most influential, emphasizing the importance of interactive and context-based instruction in facilitating kanji acquisition.

Overall, the study concludes that while both internal and external factors are crucial, external factors exert a stronger influence on students' success in learning kanji. This suggests that improving the quality of instructional design, providing adequate learning resources, and fostering a collaborative and supportive environment are essential steps toward optimizing learning outcomes.

The findings carry several pedagogical implications. For educators, understanding the interplay between internal and external factors can inform the development of teaching strategies that balance personal motivation with structured support. For institutions, the results underline the need to invest in teacher training, curriculum enhancement, and the provision of effective learning media. Finally, for future researchers, it is recommended to conduct broader studies that integrate quantitative and qualitative approaches to explore how these factors interact over time and across different learning contexts. Strengthening both the internal and external dimensions of kanji learning will contribute to more holistic and sustainable Japanese language education in Indonesia.

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