EFFECTS OF ROMAJI TASK IN THE COURSE OF BASIC JAPANESE FOCUSING ON ERRORS IN WRITING HIRAGANA

PREMVADEE NA NAKORNPANOM

Assistant Professor, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences,
Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, Bangkok, Thailand,
E-Mail: premvadee.na@ssru.ac.th

Abstract—This study aimed to identify the error characteristics of hiragana writing among novice JFL students, and to explore the sources of the errors. Fifty students were tested on their writing skills in hiragana and /words . Students were asked to convert thirty Japanese words written in romaji to hiragana. The result indicated that students made mistakes on hiragana based on the similarity of the shapes between hiragana and another hiragana. Certain hiragana could be confused with each other. Most writing errors of students (30 %) occurred to a syllabary "め" in which it was transliterated to "ゆ" in the word *yume*（ゆめ）and *musume* （むすめ）. It could observe that writing errors occurred most frequently in the context of attempting to write a word made of hiragana syllabary in *ra*-row (ら-row).

Keywords: Hiragana, Katakana, Romaji, Writing Error

I. INTRODUCTION

The first step to learn Japanese for JFL learners is generally learning to read and write hiragana (ひらがな) before katakana（カタかな）and kanji (漢字) or Chinese characters. Hiragana are the basic Japanese phonetic syllabaries which represent every sound in Japanese language [1], in which each symbol represents only one sound [2]. Therefore, by learning hiragana, students will learn the basic of Japanese pronunciation and have the foundation for further reading and writing. In ancient Japan, hiragana was developed from simplified kanji with the same pronunciation written in a style of Chinese calligraphy while katakana was based on part of kanji with the same pronunciation. Hiragana characters are basically cursive versions of katakana characters. A few pairs there is little resemblance between hiragana and katakana, and certain kana may be confused with each other. In practice, the written language of Japanese uses a mixture of the three scripts, and roman letters (romaji) and Arabic numerals can also be mixed. Romaji is not a pedagogical subject in the same way that kana syllabaries (hiragana and katakana) are, although the romaji chart was introduced at the early stages of learning in Japanese textbooks.

Romaji was developed to describe the sound of Japanese in Roman alphabet. In other word, romaji is a direct conversion of hiragana therefore its usage is limited to the sounds of spoken Japanese. It should be used for what it was designed for: encoding spoken Japanese [3]. In addition, romaji is using an alphabet students already know to write and read Japanese and to convert to kanji, hiragana and katakana when typing Japanese on computer. It is useful for students to know the romaji form of some Japanese words and want to see how to write it in higaraga, katakana and kanji. [4] indicated that students must know the correct pronunciation of kanji from the beginning level of study otherwise they must face the problems in integrating between shape and pronunciation of kanji. This means that teaching romanization skills to JFL students at the beginning level, students could reduce the burden of learning Japanese words and have the foundation for further reading and writing in hiragana, katakana and kanji.

Accurate Romanization skill would be one of the important factors to type words in Japanese correctly but it is not the case of inputting Japanese text, especially when input a particle "は". In addition, the transcription of long vowels in romaji could cause problem for students who are unfamiliar with romaji system. Maruyama [5] conducted Romanization task to test 42 JFL learners and 8 Japanese native speakers in order to test whether JFL learners make typing errors because they are unable to use appropriate romaji to input Japanese words correctly to computers. It clearly revealed that improving romanization skill is faster and more effective way to avoid Japanese typing errors, and the most common errors of transcription tasks was the wrong spelling of long vowels. The inability of Romanization causes the incorrect converting and leads to typing and writing errors.

Ann [6] had 58 JFL students (intermediate and advanced learners) dictate 20 Katakana words, and she found that students made mistakes on katakana based on the similarity of the shapes between katakana and the corresponding hiragana. In addition, the similarity of the shapes between katakana and another katakana was found. For instance, two students wrote hiragana せ (se) instead of katakana セ (se) for the word センター(sentaa/center). This result showed that students confused katakana and hiragana, and particularly in the case of syllabaries with similar shapes.

It indicated that there are close relationship between romanization capability and accurate Japanese typing

[7]. The presenting romaji could show the pronunciation of hiragana words, and is an aid for learners of Japanese to transcribe words to hiragana. Romaji cannot be overlooked for students wishing to improve their capability and accurate Japanese writing at early stage of learning Japanese scripts. However, a few studies examined the issue of effects of romaji task for Thai beginners of Japanese focusing on errors in writing hiragana thus it is worth to investigate.

II. METHODOLOGY

Romaji transcription task was designed to test 50 second year students of Tourism Industry and Hospitality Management Program in converting romaji words to hiragana words. Forty seven (18 male and 29 female) were novice learners of Japanese, and only three female had some experience in learning Japanese at Japanese language school. All students enrolled the basic Japanese course in the second semester 2018 at Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University.

In order to assist students to learn how to read and write Japanese at the beginning level, romaji tasks were used to train students three hours a week for two weeks. Firstly, students learnt to read and write the letters a, i, u, e, o (あ、い、う、え、お). Next, only five of these letters will be combined to form a word as in words "ai" あい (love), "ue" うえ (up/upper) and "aoi" あおい (blue). Then the all the rest of hiragana were introduced in the same way. This speaking writing combined method could make students associated hiragana shapes, its pronunciation and its usage. Lastly, in the third week of the class, the vocabulary test was conducted.

This vocabulary test was developed from the vocabularies introduced in the textbook used in the classroom. Students were asked to transcribe 30 Japanese words contained 2-4 moraes long in romaji form to hiragana. The 30 words used to test students were aoi, ashita, osoi, inu, kaku, kasa, tsukue, hana, hito, chikatetsu, kotoshi, takai, fuyu, nori, tenki, sora, rekishi, niwa, hoshi , yoru, yume, sekai, hon, suki, mise, machi, minami, musume, yoku and yama.

The given words in the test were not sequenced in their orderly row of hiragana chart in order to prevent students guessed their pronunciation. It took 20 minutes to have students completed the test, including a questionnaire which used to collect student's demographic characteristics, previous experience with Japanese as a second language, and an opened-end question about methods they used in learning hiragana beyond the classroom. In order to examine the effect of the romaji task on the transliterating of romaji words to hiragana, descriptive statistic were used.

III. RESULTS

The results showed that all students had no problem at all in transliterating 20 romaji words, namely, *aoi*（あおい）, *ashita*（あした）, *kaku*（かく）, *kasa*（かさ）, *tsukue*（つくえ）, *hito*（ひと）, *chikatetsu*（ちかてつ）, *takai*（たかい）, *fuyu*（ふゆ）, *tenki*（てんき）, *rekishi*（れきし）, *niwa*（にわ）, *sekai*（せかい）, *hon*（ほん）, *suki*（すき）, *mise*（みせ）, *machi*（まち）, minami（みなみ）, *yoko*（よこ）*and yama*（やま）. In contrast, 10 words were mistranslated by using incorrect hiragana syllabaries to convert them. The most difficult words for students were *yume*（ゆめ）and *musume*（むすめ）since only 15 students (30%) could write their corresponding hiragana correctly. The word *kotoshi*（ことし）could be translated to hiragana word by 45 students (90%), and 10% of students used に(ni) instead of こ(ko) to transliterate the word.

It revealed that the source of the errors that affected students in converting romaji to hiragana was their inability to remember their correct shapes of the hiragana. The similarity of the shapes between hiragana and the corresponding hiragana made them confused. For instance, students wrote hiragana ゆ (yu) instead of め (me) in the words ゆめ (yume/dream) and in the word むすめ (musume/daughter). The similar mistakes were also occurred to こ、そ、な、ぬ、ら、り、る、ほ and め. For hiragana ら, there is the similarity of the shapes to another hiragana, such as そ、な、ら and ろ therefore it was easy to confuse on regular basis among novice JFL students. It was found that Hiragana る and hiragana ら confused 10% of students (shown in Table 1).

Only one student seem to have difficulty with memorizing hiragana script since he/she could not write many hiragana scrip and used the wrong hiragana syllbary to substitute it.

When asking the students how did you learn and remember hiragana shapes beyond the classroom, the result from questionnaire showed that most students used Hiragana Writing Practice Book since there is grid lines for correct while 4 students stated that often played games and watched anime.

Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Transliterating Romaji Words to Hiragana Words and Misapplication of Hiragana by Students

Hiragana	Correct		Fault		Misapplication of Hiragana
	N	%	N	%	
こ	45	90	5	10	に
そ	49	98	1	2	ろ
な	49	98	1	2	ら
ぬ	49	98	1	2	ね
ら	49	98	1	2	る
り	49	98	1	2	け
る	45	90	5	10	ら
る	49	98	1	2	ろ
ほ	49	98	1	2	ま
め	48	96	2	4	ぬ
め	35	70	15	30	ゆ

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

The finding of this study revealed that romaji tasks could reduce the burden of students in learning Japanese at the beginning level. Romaji can be used as an aid for students to comprehend the sounds of Japanese since it represents every sound in Japanese language like every other kana. However, romaji's usage should be limited to learning the sounds of Japanese. With knowledge of romaji does not guarantee that students could write Japanese with hiragana script correctly unless they master hiragana script. This is different from the case of inputting appropriate romaji to computer and it was converted to correct hiragana as Murayama [8] found in her study. By handwriting, it could not convert romaji to hiragana automatically as computer did, therefore students must be developed their skill in writing hiragana as well. Never the less, the inability of romanization causes the incorrect converting and leads to typing and writing errors.

In general, the present study implied that the use of romaji tasks in teaching basic Japanese for beginners had some affects for facilitating and preparing students to further learning to read and write Japanese. The basic understanding of Japanese pronunciation is the foundation of understanding other scripts like Kanji as Rudeemad Rodsuk [9]'s suggestion. When students comprehend the sounds in Japanese, they can further study the other interesting things related to support their Japanese study such as watching Japanese games and anime as students suggested in the questionnaire.

However the errors in transliterating romaji to other Japanese scripts could occur to inexperienced students since certain characters are almost identical in both hiragana and katakana as Ann [10] found in her study and also revealed in the present study. Therefore the students' ability to distinguish the similar kana should be focused in teaching Japanese kana.

In order to see if romaji tasks have an effect on improving students' writing Japanese kana, the accuracy and errors on writing hiragana and katakana by other groups of students are interesting to study. It hoped that the present study will provide researchers, teachers of Japanese with information and suggestion to further study to help students improve their learning Japanese.

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