This paper examines the characteristics and the adoption system of logographic letters (characters) by students whose first language is based on an alphabetic system.

While it is clear that the writing system in cultures where it has become fully incorporated and entirely inseparable from the language itself, the mere connection between the writing system and thought, and its impact on human cognitive mechanisms, is still insufficiently understood. In addition, although it is common knowledge that mastering characters almost invariably represents the biggest problem in mastering Japanese and Chinese as foreign languages, this area, i.e., learning how to write a language whose writing as a typological system differs from writing of the learner’s mother tongue, which is the case with Serbian and all other European students of the Japanese language, remains almost entirely unexplored.

We partake of this opportunity to point out which cognitive processes lie at the foundation of Japanese system of non-phonetic writing In other words, (a) how the simple characters formed and how they evolved towards more complex ones; and (b) how the characters affected the creation of new words, a process that is in alphabetical cultures unknown. This paper analyses a textbook aimed at teaching characters, entitled Kanji, aimed at learners of Japanese language at A1 and A2 levels, whose mother tongue is Serbian. This book was created in collaboration and co-authorship with Dr Divna Trickovic and students of the Japanese language at the Faculty of Philology in Belgrade. It represents an innovative project in both the methodological and methodical sense, directly contributing to the autonomous learning process and enables students learning Japanese as a foreign language.

Key Words: Japanese Writing System, autonomous learning, kanji, word-creation, cognition.

1. INTRODUCTION

This work will present the elementary characteristics of the Japanese script, then proceed to an explanation of the principles of learner autonomy, so that, as an example of this, analysis may be made of the approach towards the learning of ideographs in the teaching of the Japanese language based on the methods used in the textbook Kandi (Marković, Tričković, 2013).
Ideographs in the Japanese Language

The use of ideographs, known as kanji in the Japanese language, in which they are one of the character types, in the Japanese language, has left a very deep trace on all of the languages of the Far East, including Japanese. Foreigners may have difficulty understanding why such a complicated writing system is used, but following preliminary study of the language and script, the conclusion is reached that it is so connected to today’s language that to transition to a different, easier script would lead to problems in communication, primarily because of polysemy.

Examples may be found, like in Vietnam and Korea, where language reform extended to the adoption of an alphabetic script, which functions very well. In Korea, however, ideographs, though not used on a daily basis, continue to be taught in school. Scholarly work on language learning is written in a combination of ideographs and the Korean alphabet (Hangul), very much like the Japanese use of a mixture of scripts.

Considering the complexity of writing with ideographs, with the development of the syllabic script (kana), the Japanese conceived the idea of writing exclusively in kana, without ideographs (kanji), but this idea did not mature.

As literacy progressed in Japan and through the adoption of ideographs (kanji), many Chinese words entered the Japanese language when writing them in the syllabic script would have been impractical. Ideographs lexically enriched the Japanese language where there was no kana equivalent. Besides this greatest problem in language reform are those words that are pronounced the same but written differently and accordingly have different meanings. If those words were to be written in kana or the Latin script (rōmaji), it would be very difficult, impossible actually, to determine which word was meant if the word did not appear within the context of a sentence.

Majiribun

Today the Japanese employ a combination of three scripts: ideographs (kanji), hiragana, and katakana (the latter two being types of kana, the syllabic script). Majiribun denotes the mixture of these three scripts, but primarily indicates the mixture of kanji and hiragana. With the development of the syllabic script, it became easier for the Japanese to write characters this way, because of the nature of Japanese grammar. Hiragana made it possible for the grammatical endings in the Japanese language, which is agglutinative, to be written easily, and therefore enabled the further development of the Japanese language (if only ideographs had been employed, this would have been impossible because a simple and clear enough way to indicate grammatical changes would not have existed). Also written in kana are auxiliary
words and other lexical units, for which ideographs may exist but that have become grammaticalized, and are written in kana.

Although ideographs (kanji) are an inseparable part of the Japanese language, the kana script has enabled foreigners who embark on learning Japanese to master the language quickly. Many textbooks are written in characters from the very first chapters, with pronunciation written above, which is a good way to learn how to read a large number of characters promptly insofar as where the same characters appear in later chapters, their pronunciation no longer appears above so that memorization of pronunciation is subtly encouraged. Of course, over the progression of chapters, an ever greater number of characters is added, so that those studying the material can quickly enlarge their vocabulary.

2. METHOD

The theoretical foundation of learner autonomy was laid out in work by David Little in the 1990’s. The goal of learner autonomy was the efficient attainment of knowledge in the acquisition of language skills in a second, i.e. non-native, language, through the recognition of the three principles of autonomous learning: (1) The acceptance of responsibility for personal learning, (2) continual self-assessment during the learning process, (3) the complete integration of learning into the being and personality of the learner. We applied this new didactic paradigm in the teaching of the Japanese language in an elective subject at the Faculty of Philology in the University of Belgrade and in an optional course at the 8th Belgrade Gymnasium. The tool of applied didactics according to which the principles of autonomy in learning are to carry over to teaching methods was represented by the textbook Kandī: udžbenik za japanski jezik i pismo, by Ljiljana Marković, Divna Tričković, Marina Erdeljan, and Simon Marić, published by the Faculty of Philology, University of Belgrade, Belgrade, 2013. The textbook is divided into 15 lessons and aids both class work as well as guided individual learning through a framework that develops an awareness of the knowledge attained and linguistic skills acquired in each of the 15 methodological units. Each methodological unit facilitates effective associative and mnemonic memorization of the Japanese ideographic script through examples of compounds and common syntactical constructions that incorporate newly-introduced conceptual characters, along with both on- and kun-readings, as well as exercises, quizzes, and riddles with an answer key, which strengthen the associative memory and assist in the acquisition of new material. The textbook makes successful work possible through the principles of autonomous learning, cumulating in an A1 level of knowledge in spoken and written Japanese.

3. FINDINGS

Ideographs and vocabulary
A shared characteristic appears in almost all instances of the use of ideographs: the meaning of the words can be more precisely determined depending on the ideographs. Each ideograph has a fixed pronunciation, and in Japanese there can be several: it can have several *kun*- or *on*-readings, it can have only one *kun*- or only one *on*-reading, and additionally it has its own meanings. At first, the Japanese employed several ideographs to compose their words, in which the first would comply with both meaning and sound values, while the others would enter the compound only to complete the sound value of the word that needed to be written—regardless of meaning. As a result, today there are Chinese compounds in which the first ideograph most commonly bears the meaning while the others have only a sound value.

The basic characteristics of the Japanese language and Japanese writing system

Japanese grammar has specific characteristics and as such is not particularly unique in terms of the grammar of other world languages. Although the Japanese language is an isolate, the morphology and rules of syntax are similar to those found in other languages. There are points of contention, rather, various different approaches, when it comes to the study and classification of grammatical units and these approaches certainly differ depending on whether the grammar is studied in Japan or overseas and whether it is written for the Japanese or for foreigners. In some situations the approaches are very similar to each other, i.e. where the course of study is more serious, so that even for foreigners the approach does not differ much from that taken by the Japanese.

In today’s age, with the development of the internet and various computer applications that may assist in the learning of Japanese, the study materials on offer are far more plentiful than was the case earlier. While this facilitates and expedites the learning process of all students, caution is advised as much of the material available on the internet presented on sites run by volunteers is frequently unreliable.

*Hiragana* is used to denote *furigana*—the pronunciation character written above the ideograph (in horizontal text, which is written from top to bottom, from right to left), but according to the rule, *hiragana* are to be written, in the form of *okurigana*, in such a way as to denote the *kun*-reading in sentences and in some instances words of older origin.

*Katakana* is used to write words of foreign origin, the names of countries (although these can also be written in ideographs), foreign words, the names of flora and fauna (all the names of flora and fauna can also be written in both ideographs and *hiragana*), the denotation of *on*-readings in sentences, as well as indicate the accenting of certain parts of text or emphasis of important information (such as in newspapers). *Katakana* in Japan has a wider application than it would appear to have to foreigners who learn Japanese outside of Japan, but even in daily newspapers it may be seen that *katakana* nonetheless has broad applications.

Learning ideographs in Japan and ideographs in the modern age

Regardless of disagreement and arguments over whether or not ideographs should be employed in the Japanese language, they are in use at present and given the state of things in Japan, no radical changes will be decided on in the near future. Given the popularity of the Japanese language and the number of foreigners studying it, the teaching methods used in Japan are ever more frequently compared with those used in other countries. In Japan, exposure to ideographs proceeds very slowly, and this is perhaps logical given that children
begin to learn ideographs in Japan at an earlier age than is the case with students who learn Japanese as foreigners. In the first six years of schooling, i.e. during the course of the elementary school education, children in Japan master a total of 1,000 ideographs. The remainder, up to over 2,000 ideographs, are taught during the remaining school years, in the three grades of junior high school and then in upper-secondary school. Japanese children master all ideographs only by the end of secondary school. As far as teaching standards overseas are concerned, the optimum number of ideographs to be mastered per year is deemed to be 650, but consideration here must be given to the fact that it is easier for these students to learn a larger number of ideographs because they are older.

Regardless of how slowly the Japanese learn ideographs in their schools, this system has been very well developed and entails frequent testing and evaluation of students. The rules for writing are strictly observed. In the beginning, just as they are in all schools outside of Japan, too, ideographs are written in squares, which are divided by dotted lines into four quadrants. As all of the more complicated ideographs are composed of several simpler ones, students must take care that each part fits into each quadrant. This later develops into writing in imagined squares, all with the goal of the precise mastery of writing. Japanese teachers are very strict regarding the observance of these rules.

Japanese culture is fascinating, and probably one of the most interesting means by which to gain familiarization with the language, through watching television shows and anime, and listening to music. Together with the advances offered by technology and the increased interest in the language, new teaching methods have been developed with the goal of the ever more expeditious mastery of the language of this Far Eastern country.

Today it is possible to write ideographs on any computer, i.e. on any operating system, on mobile phones, on internet sites, etc. Various internet search engine add-ons exist that can translate each individual word, printed foreigna, etc. Numerous programmers and linguists have developed other computer software offering various learning options. They pertain primarily to the learning of ideographs, because the Japanese writing system presents the greatest hindrance to expeditious progress in the mastery of the Japanese language.

Modern methods of learning that are technology dependent have their shortcomings, which are most conspicuous in Japan. The use of computers and ever more-advanced mobile telephones is so prevalent that the use of pen and paper has been reduced to a minimum in almost all spheres. As a result, there are Japanese students who write ever less frequently by the end of their school years and ideographs are slowly being lost from memory. At least from that which is responsible for writing and which is formed through many years of painstaking work. Technological inventions aside, students continue to practice writing in schools but by the end of their schooling, this practice ends. Perhaps it is more difficult to impress the importance of this problem upon people from places where the writing system is less complex, so it may be remembered that in Japan many parents begin to teach their children to write when they are as young as five years of age in order to prepare them for the very difficult learning process ahead of them.

**Learner autonomy in the learning process**

We may begin before all else with a definition by an eminent expert in this field, David Little: "In this definition autonomy is a capacity for a certain range of highly explicit (that is, conscious) behavior that embraces both the process and the content of learning. Essentially,
the definition rests on three arguments: (i) learners cannot help but do their own learning; (ii) this being the case, learning will be more efficient when learners are critically aware of goals and methods; and (iii) it is through the development of such critical awareness that learners are empowered to transcend the limitations of their learning environment” (Little, 1999: 11).

In the context of formal education, the most successful students are autonomous in the sense explained in Little’s working definition. That is, they take responsibility for their learning; they constantly go over what they are learning, why they are learning, and to what degree of success; their learning is totally integrated into the rest of their personality. In other words, all successful scholars and researchers fit this working definition of the autonomous student.

The panopticon method of teaching and monopoly over knowledge and sources of knowledge was until recently the most accessible method, but that has changed with the development of the applied sciences and technology and increased access to sources of literature, such as the open access repositories available on the internet. Sources of information have become accessible to everyone, both for learning and for checking material already presented in all kinds of literature.

In the context of formal education, the basis of learner autonomy is the acceptance of responsibility for individual learning; the development of learner autonomy depends on the manifestation of that responsibility in a continuous effort to understand that which is being studied, why it is being studied, how it can be learned, and to what degree of success; while the effect of learner autonomy removes barriers so that students might raise themselves up between formal learning and the larger environment in which they live.

The work, Autonomy and Foreign Language Learning (Holec, 1979) represents the first example of this among adult students. Holec takes as a starting point the claim that the point of adult education is to prepare students as individuals for participation in democratic processes. He writes in his work that education had been foreseen as an instrument for an ever greater sense of awareness and liberation in people and, in some cases, an instrument for changing the environment itself. From the idea of man as the “product of his society”, we move towards the idea of man as the “producer of his society”.

The idea of learner autonomy appears regularly in the European philosophy of education. In recent decades, an increasing number of national and regional school curriculums in Europe have expressed a renewed dedication to the development of “critical thought”, “student independence”, and learner autonomy, which is defined by the CEFR, the European Language Passport, and the European Language Portfolio.

Learner autonomy can be found in ancient Chinese philosophy. Chu Hsi, a Song Dynasty (12th century) scholar, writes: “If there are points you are not clear about, think about them yourself, don’t rely on others or wait until you can ask questions. If there is no one to ask, you might give up. People advance in their learning when they can rid themselves of the desire to depend on others.”

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Autonomy in teaching the Japanese language through the example of teaching ideographs

The goal of learning a foreign language at a higher level means mastery of the language above the B2 level. Such learning means increased competency among speakers and more fluent expression and communication of personal stances and opinions, which requires knowledge of the language on a level above that of basic understanding.

To that end, students must be encouraged to do autonomous work and study, which no longer has the classroom as the central source of knowledge. Students themselves become the center of their knowledge and organize their study praxis, while teaching, in this case the teaching of the Japanese language, serves only to assist students in keeping their course in the direction in which learning should be pursued.

Through the example of a lesson in the Kandi textbook, we shall see a way in which students can be encouraged to do autonomous work and study.

The lesson primarily familiarizes students with the ideographs that will be dealt with. Following this, listed in order are: a translation, other ways of writing the ideographs in calligraphic styles, *on*- and *kun*-readings, as well as the basic meaning of the ideographs. After that, the order of strokes in which the ideographs are written is given. The main part of the lesson comprises associative and visual representations of the meaning of the ideograph. This is most often an association that is directly related to the meaning of either the ideograph or the grapheme.

Indispensable to every ideograph lesson are also the individual examples given that are followed by concrete usage of the words in simple sentences, which are suitable for a beginner's level of learning.

The textbook is divided into 15 lessons that present ideographs in such a way as to encourage students to continue with their learning: the ideographs are divided as wholes, but every succeeding chapter represents a logical continuation of the consideration of more advanced ideographs, which serves as a motivating factor. For example, ideographs that stand for family members are not dealt with in the same lesson; rather, each is dealt with in a lesson that follows, and all of the lessons progress in this manner.
In addition to traditional lessons, found in the textbook are various logic riddles, and crosswords in which it is necessary to write ideographs, link ideas in order to arrive at a picture, etc. In this way, student interest is motivated for further learning.

4. CONCLUSION

The technical and technological developments of the 21st century have formed the basis of the changing paradigms in learning. This trend is continuing to develop, and as evidence we have examples in which the most prestigious universities in the world are serving as open access repositories, by which their students, whether pursuing research in the natural or social sciences, are enabled to determine for themselves the course along which they will develop in terms of their learning, while learning material serves as a signpost along that path towards the acquisition of new knowledge.

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