

## **The reader-text-writer interaction: L2 Japanese learners' response toward graded readers**

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### **Abstract**

This paper reports on two projects which investigated graded readers (GRs) as meaningful input for learners of Japanese as a foreign language (JFL). Project One examined the intentions of six writers of Japanese GRs. A focus group interview demonstrated that the writers had a genuine communicative intent in the writing process. Project Two investigated how fourteen learners of JFL responded to the GRs produced by these writers. Most participants welcomed lexical simplification in the GRs and their think-aloud protocols indicated that they experienced an effortless reading process with the GRs. This implies that GRs can be productive reading materials for JFL reading fluency development. In the affective domain, the less proficient participants tended to react favourably to the writers' communicative intent, whereas advanced participants demonstrated negative perceptions toward reading the GRs. The paper argues that the potential of GRs as meaningful input for learners of JFL is maximized when their efficacy is explicitly taught.

**Keywords:** graded readers (GRs), extensive reading, fluency development, learners of Japanese as a foreign language (JFL), writers of Japanese GRs

Numerous studies have reported on the benefits of extensive reading in the second and foreign language (L2) reading pedagogy. Those studies indicate that extensive reading develops L2 learners' reading proficiency and enhances L2 learners' reading motivation (e.g., Asraf & Ahmad, 2003; Beglar, Hunt & Kite, 2011; Cho & Kim, 2004; Cho & Krashen, 1994; Day & Bamford, 1998; Elley & Mangubhai, 1983; Macalister, 2008; Mason & Krashen, 1997; Takase, 2004). However, most of them were conducted in the context of English as a second language (ESL) or English as a foreign language (EFL). Although extensive reading is gaining more attention and some studies have been conducted in this incipient scholarly field (e.g., Fukumoto, 2004; Goda, Iijima, Noda & Yoshida, 2005; Hitosugi & Day, 2004; Ikeda, 2003; Tabata-Sandom & Macalister, 2009), more empirical endeavors are needed in the context of Japanese as a second language (JSL) and JFL.

Graded Readers (GRs) play an important role in extensive reading. There are many series of GRs

available for learners of ESL and EFL (e.g., Heinemann Graded Readers, Oxford Bookworms Library, and Penguin Graded Readers). In contrast, academic and practical efforts to publish Japanese GRs are only beginning. Only a limited number of researchers and practitioners such as the Japanese Extensive Reading Research Group have embarked on this mission. Therefore, it is important to examine what makes good Japanese GRs before production of Japanese GRs becomes more active.

There are two types of texts which form GRs in terms of text modification. One is unmodified texts specially written for L2 learners and the other is modified rewritten texts of original texts written for native and native-level readers. Unmodified or modified, well-written GRs should contain the characteristics which Day and Bamford (1998) designate as ingredients of “language learner literature” (p. 64). One of the most essential ingredients is “complete-in-itself act of communication between author and audience” (p. 64).

In order to examine whether or not this complete-in-itself act of communication is taking place through GRs, the author’s intent first needs to be investigated. Swaffer (1985) asserted that an authentic text has “an authentic communicative objective in mind” (p. 17) whereas the goal of a non-authentic text “is a pseudo intent to teach language per se rather than to communicate information” (p. 17). We can see whether or not a GR is worthy of being called language learner literature by means of investigating whether the author has a pseudo intent or aims to create an authentic communicative objective.

Similarly, readers’ responses toward GRs need to be investigated. Breen (1985) claimed that “regardless of whatever genuine communicative purposes the writer may have had, the learner may perceive the text in meta-communicative or meta-linguistic terms.... The learner will re-define any text against his own priorities, precisely because he is a learner” (p. 62). Senior (2005) echoed Breen’s claim and mentioned that “when we give out authentic materials, we sometimes notice students engaging with them in ways we hadn’t anticipated.... authentic communication involves communicating information that’s personally meaningful—and it doesn’t necessarily happen just because we’re using authentic materials” (p. 71). Their argument makes it clear that it is necessary to examine how learners respond to GRs: Do they engage with GRs in a meaningful way or do they treat GRs as materials from which they learn discrete linguistic items?

In the current paper what kind of intent writers of Japanese GRs have is delved into. The paper also examines how learners of JFL respond to GR versions of two Japanese literary works. Their response to the original texts is also examined for comparison. It is hoped that corroborating the findings gained from the two parties will give us an insight into the reader-text-writer interaction created by GRs in the context of JFL reading.

The nature of the current study tends to be exploratory since there have not been many similar studies conducted to date. In particular, not many empirical findings about writers of GRs are reported. Therefore, interviews were conducted in order to allow the participating writers of Japanese GRs “to express tentative or exploratory opinions, ideas, and speculation” (Brown, 2001, p. 78). Regarding investigation of learners’ response to GRs and their original texts, Everson and Kuriya’s study (1998) was the model for the current study. Their study investigates the reading process of L2 Japanese learners by means of a think-aloud task with an unmodified

newspaper excerpt.

It is hypothesised that if a writer creates a GR with a genuine communicative intent rather than a pseudo intent, such a GR has the potential of offering meaningful input. This gives L2 Japanese learners an authentic reading experience, as they can read for meaning and engage with a writer's message rather than try to learn discrete linguistic items.

## **Method of Project One: Investigation of Writers' Intent**

### *Participants*

The participants of Project One are six writers of Japanese GRs. They are either teachers of Japanese or former teachers of Japanese. The average duration of teaching is 22 years. Five of them have 9.5 years of experience as a writer of Japanese GRs and one has 3 years of experience. They teach L2 Japanese learners mainly at private language schools. They have come to have an interest in extensive reading because they had doubts in the traditional teaching approach (i.e., intensive reading).

### *Time and location of research*

Project One was conducted at the main office of the Japanese Extensive Reading Research Group in August, 2011. First, the researcher met the chairperson of the organization in order to explain the current study to her. Questionnaire sheets were given to the chairperson so that she could distribute them to the other five writers prior to the main meeting. The chairperson also joined the project as a writer.

### *The main meeting*

The six writers had been given a questionnaire sheet prior to the meeting with the researcher. The meeting took the form of a focus group interview and was conducted following each question of the questionnaire.

### *Questionnaire survey*

As mentioned above, the current study had an exploratory nature. Therefore, there was no appropriate model for the stage of constructing the questionnaire. The researcher then sought rationales for some questions from theoretical foundation to enhance the construct validity (Brown, 2001, p. 177). The following are the three main questions given in the questionnaire to examine the six writers' intent for creating GRs:

1. What do you find are the most difficult things when you write GRs?
2. What do you think is the key to success in writing GRs?
3. What do you think of the reading texts which are typically included in widely used structural language textbooks?

In the questionnaire, the researcher avoided using words such as language learner literature and communicative intent in order not to implant possibly unfamiliar perceptions in the writers' minds. Also, "the impression that they ought to know the answer to each question" (Brown, 2001, p. 51) needed to be avoided. That is, the researcher avoided situations in which, given potentially new perceptions, the writers would be aroused to contemplate things they would not normally do.

### *Focus group interview*

The current group of six writers was thought to be desirable candidates to form a focus group. The members were homogeneous in crucial ways so that they would feel comfortable enough to "facilitate more open responses" and "feel at ease" (Williams and Katz, 2001, para. 28). It was hoped that the researcher would see "tiny glimpses of worlds [of GR creation] that we otherwise do not experience" (Krueger & Casey, 2009, p. xv) from this particular focus group. The main questions in the questionnaire were the main topics which were discussed in the focus group interview.

The questionnaire was written in Japanese and the focus group interview was conducted in Japanese. The results were later translated into English.

## **Method of Project Two: Investigation of Learners' Response**

### *Participants*

Fourteen learners of Japanese participated in Project Two. They were either students of or graduates from the same Japanese course in a New Zealand university. The average age of the participants was 21 years and their average time studying Japanese was 6.6 years. The participants received limited L2 reading instruction (i.e., only intensive reading instruction in a fragmental way). The participants read for fun in Japanese on average 1 to 2 hours per week with one participant doing so for 5 to 6 hours per week. *Kanji*, logographs used in Japanese writing, was viewed as the biggest obstacle in L2 Japanese reading by most of the participants, except for one L1 Chinese participant.

### *Time and location of research*

Project Two was conducted in the end of 2011 at the university where most of the participants were enrolled. Each participant was given an individual session.

### *Three methods used*

A think-aloud task, the text comparison procedure and unstructured exit interviews were employed in order to deduce how the participants responded to GRs and their original texts.

*The think-aloud task.* Verbal reports "offer a unique, if sometimes less than transparent, window for viewing cognitive processes" (Afflerback & Johnston, 1984, p. 320). The think-aloud task is one type of verbal reports. The participants carried out the think-aloud task with an original text

and its GR version.

*Text comparison procedure.* Each participant and the researcher compared a small segment of an original text and its GR version which were placed next to each other. They read aloud the two text segments and each participant was encouraged to comment on whatever he or she felt or noticed from the two texts. Thus, this procedure is a type of pair think-aloud procedure (Haastrup, 1987; Morrison, 1996).

*Unstructured exit interview.* Unstructured interviews are suitable to explore emergent patterns in participants' minds (Mackey & Gass, 2005; McDonough & McDonough, 1997). Therefore, they were used in this study to find out what the participants thought about Japanese GRs, extensive reading, and L2 Japanese reading. Generally, unstructured interviews do not have a rigid question agenda but some questions which were commonly asked in these unstructured exit interviews were: if they preferred to read, the original text or the GR version, thought that reading many GRs would improve their reading ability in Japanese, could imagine themselves as a master of L2 Japanese reading, and so forth.

#### *Texts used*

Two pairs of texts were used. One pair was the original and the GR version of *Chuumon no ooi ryooriten*, written by Kenji Miyazawa and originally published in 1924. The other was the original and the GR version of *Hashire Merosu*, written by Osamu Dazai and first published in 1940. Both of the GR versions are from the Japanese Extensive Reading Library (the Japanese Extensive Reading Research Group, 2006a, 2006b). The researcher's text analysis<sup>1</sup> and level designation by the Japanese Extensive Reading Research Group indicate that the first pair was linguistically easier (see Table 1). The second more demanding pair was used only for advanced participants. Only the prelude of the two stories was used due to time constraint.

Table 1. *Linguistic features of the four text excerpts used in Project Two*

Text	Vocabulary level	Letters	Words	Sentences	Sentence length*	Kanji**	Hiragana**	Katakana**
<i>Chuumon no ooi ryooriten</i>								
Original	Average	540	210	16	33.7	18	79	1
GR	Very easy	1452	591	60	24.2	18	79	1
<i>Hashire Merosu</i>								
Original	A little difficult	973	425	53	18.3	27	66	6
GR	Very easy	1245	368	72	17.2	24	66	8

*Note.* The four excerpts used in the current project are only the prelude of the two stories.

\*Sentence length is measured by an average number of words per sentence.

\*\*These indicate a proportion of each character and syllabary in the whole text.

#### *Scoring the think-aloud protocol data*

The researcher first examined the participants' think-aloud protocols for emergent patterns and themes, by looking for anything pertinent to the research question or problem (Mackey & Gass, 2005). Then the researcher and an academic from a Japanese-culture-related discipline who had acquired a native level proficiency in Japanese coded the protocol data independently to divide it into three types based on the "three broader categories" used by Everson and Kuriya (1998, p. 5) for further analysis. Everson and Kuriya's three broader categories are explained in the results section.

## **Results of Project One (Writers' intent)**

### *The writers' understanding of extensive reading*

Overall, the six writers' (referred to as W1, W2, W3, W4, W5 and W6) answers to the questionnaire and comments during the focus group interview demonstrated a perfect accord. They all fully understood principles of extensive reading (Day & Bamford, 1998, 2002), as W6 commented as follows:

I used to think that it was not good for learners to try to read something too difficult. They would have to look up words in a dictionary and replace original Japanese words with their first language equivalents. Then they might think that they understood the text. It is not right. I agree with the concept of extensive reading that you understand English texts in English and Japanese texts in Japanese.

### *The responses given to the three main questions*

In this section, these six writers' comments on the three main questions are presented.

#### 1. What do you find are the most difficult things when you write GRs?

For this question, they pointed out factors such as (a) selecting suitable topics for rewriting and finding appropriate topics for learners, (b) writing a comprehensible GR, (c) writing in natural Japanese, (d) maintaining nuances of the original when there is one, and most importantly, (e) writing an interesting GR. These answers were somewhat unexpected to the researcher since more technical difficulties such as grading vocabulary and simplifying sentence structures were assumed to cause most difficulties in writing Japanese GRs. However, these writers' concern was not how to fit their writing into discrete linguistic conformity even though they had the prescribed linguistic grading. They employed an intuitive writing approach which Cramer (2005) describes as the most commonly used approach among simplifiers of English material. They were mainly concerned about the contents and styles of GRs, which reflected their determination to give learners GRs with interesting contents that are a pleasure to read.

#### 2. What do you think is the key to success in writing GRs?

Most of the writers' comments to this question contained words with positive affective meanings such as interesting and happily keep on reading, which probably reflected the overall stance of

these six writers. That is, their goal was to create “interesting GRs which learners do not want to put down but to keep on reading happily” (W6). Three of the writers commented as follows:

- W1. If my ideas to attract learners work or not [is the key to success].
- W2. To know learners’ responses.
- W4. If I find a story which I find interesting, I can write an interesting reader!

W2’s answer was a reflection that these writers were willing to get feedback from learners to make their GRs interesting from learners’ perspectives.

3. What do you think of the reading texts which are typically included in widely used structural language textbooks?

Some scholars (e.g., Granena, 2008; Honeyghan, 2000; Neikova, 2005; Swaffer, 1985; Young, 1993) claimed that passages contained in structural language textbooks often lacked a genuine communicative intent, forced learners to practice certain linguistic items and as a consequence fail to present learners with an authentic reading experience. The six writers’ perceptions toward the reading texts contained in structural Japanese language textbooks were echoes of what these scholars claimed. The following comments by three writers demonstrate this:

- W3. There aren’t many interesting stories [in structural textbooks]. Learners don’t want to read them in particular. Me neither.
- W5. Because reading texts contained in general language textbooks usually aim to teach sentence structures, they are not interesting as readers [i.e., reading material]. The amount of texts they contain is small. They do not develop reading proficiency.
- W6. Those texts are controlled by grammar and sentence structures. They only try to teach such features, and as a result they are not written from learners’ perspectives.

The results of the questionnaire and the focus interview revealed that these six writers have noticed that reading passages of structural language textbooks were written with the pseudo intent of teaching certain grammatical items. They hoped that they could create GRs which learners read for meaning and for pleasure. Taking a holistic, intuitive writing approach, these writers aimed to create something different from reading passages contained in structural language textbooks. In short, these writers have a genuine communicative intent.

The focus group interview, however, revealed that these writers perceived themselves somewhat differently from authors of language learner literature described by Day and Bamford (1998). W6 dismissed the notion of being called authors of language learner literature, saying:

You [referring to the researcher] just said that we were authors [of language learner literature]. I suppose it’s alright for you to call us authors. But ultimately, I just want to make something that students read and want to read in its original.

These writers viewed themselves as writers who created something which could be good as a foretaste of original literature pieces. In their opinion, GRs do not have to be acclaimed as language learner literature pieces in their own right, but rather as a means to nurture learners’

reading habits and pleasure. At the same time, they saw GRs as materials that prepare learners for reading unmodified Japanese texts.

## Results of Project Two (Learners' response)

*Findings from the think-aloud task and the text comparison procedure of Chuumon no ooi ryooriten*

In the following, three noteworthy points from the two tasks are presented.

1. Fourteen participants' responses toward the GR version of *Chuumon no ooi ryooriten* (the easier GR) indicated the following factors.

- (a) The reduced difficulty of vocabulary and *kanji*, i.e., logographs used in Japanese texts, was welcomed by most participants.
- (b) Slightly more participants gave negative reactions for *furigana* (ruby annotation)<sup>2</sup> added to all *kanji*. The following two participants' comments exemplify this factor:

Robyn <sup>3</sup>	It's so much quicker not to read <i>furigana</i> .
Daniel	When <i>furigana</i> is in a text, I cannot try hard.

- (c) Not many participants noticed syntactic modification, which was an indication that learners probably cannot evaluate syntactic features while being preoccupied with unknown lexical items. But some students noticed that sentences in the GR version were very short.

2. The participants' responses toward the original version of *Chuumon no ooi ryooriten* (the easier original) indicated the following factors.

- (a) Demotivation commonly felt through reading the original literary piece was detected, as exemplified by the following two participants' comments:

Naomi	Ok, it doesn't make sense to me because I couldn't read <i>kanji</i> .... I didn't understand most of that, because of <i>kanji</i> .... Probably lost now.
Jake	This is very difficult.

- (b) Most of the participants struggled to understand unique stylistic conventions, as is represented by the following comment given by Kate:

Kate	いやんがらん? [Iyangan?] What is this? Is this serious?
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3. The participants' reactions toward particular factors were divided in support and opposition equally when they compared the two texts.

- (a) About half of them preferred reduced descriptions in the GR version whereas the other half



of them preferred rich descriptions of the original.

- (b) The GR used had elaboration such as provision of clear background explanation of the protagonists and the setting. Some participants welcomed such support while others found it unnecessary.

*Comparing the triadic categorization patterns of the think-aloud data of the original and the GR version from Chuumon no ooi ryooriten (the easier pair)*

Everson and Kuriya (1998) divided their participants' think-aloud protocol data into three categories. These three categories reflect readers' three reading processes and strategies: bottom-up processes, top-down processes, and metacognitive processes. While Everson and Kuriya's categorization was referred to as a model, in the current study the participants' protocol data was divided into different categories: 'vocabulary-related comments,' 'top-down process-oriented comments,' and 'metacognitive comments.'

Vocabulary-related comments are the comments which reflect the participants' trying to decode unfamiliar *kanji* and having difficulty in doing so. Top-down process-oriented comments illustrate the participants' top-down process such as inferencing and engaging with the content. Metacognitive comments were uttered when the participants monitored their own behaviours and understanding. The results of the triadic categorization of the two protocol data from *Chuumon no ooi ryooriten* are presented in Table 2.

Table 2. *The triadic categorization of the think-aloud protocol data of the GR and original versions of Chuumon no ooi ryooriten*

Text	Proportion (%) or Actual number (N)	Vocabulary-related	Top-down processing oriented	Metacognitive
GR version	%	36	40	24
	N	32	36	21
Original	%	72	8	20
	N	108	12	30

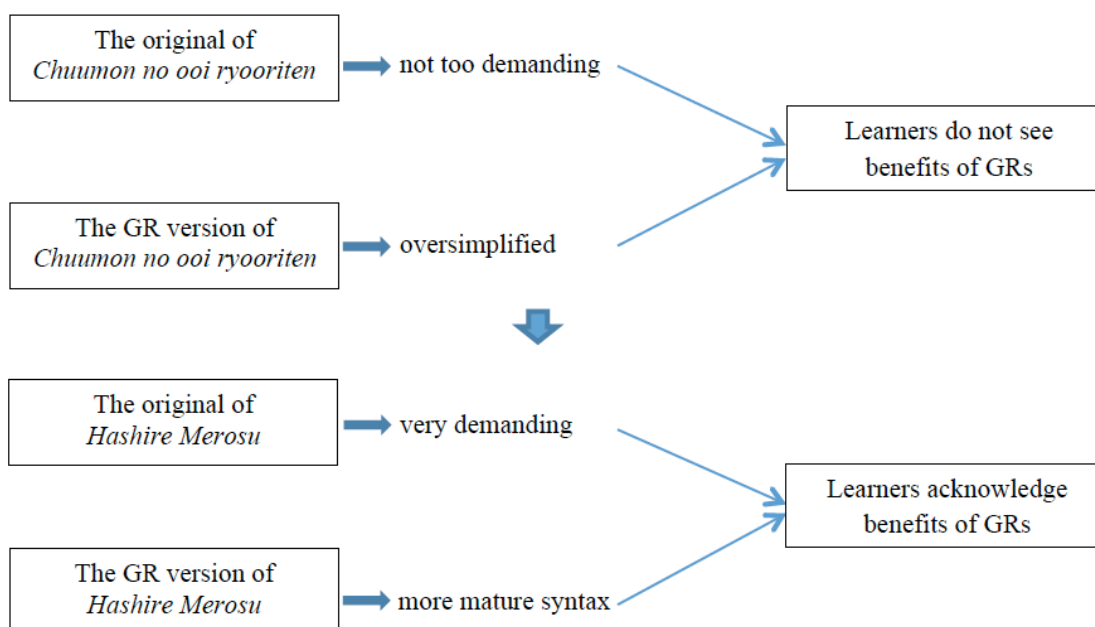
The marked difference of the two protocol data is the ratio of vocabulary-related comments versus top-down process-oriented comments. The participants made many top-down process-oriented comments when reading the GR version, which implies their deeper engagement with its content. In contrast, they did not make many such comments during reading the original text. Instead, with the linguistically demanding original text, they made disproportionate vocabulary-related comments. This reflects that the participants struggled due to numerous unfamiliar words contained in the original text and their cognitive resources were not sufficiently freed up to conduct top-down process when they tried to read the original text.

Of these two patterns, the pattern of the original text is more similar to the triadic pattern obtained by Everson and Kuriya (1998). Everson and Kuriya's triadic pattern is 37.4% (bottom-up), 8.1% (top-down) and 54.5% (metacognitive). In their study, participants read an unmodified Japanese newspaper excerpt. From this, it can be said that the GR used in this study apparently gave the current participants a different reading process from a reading process occurring with

demanding unmodified Japanese texts. The process which the current participants experienced during reading the GR version was a fluent one in which they managed to conduct more top-down processes and engage with the content deeply.

*Results of the reading by five advanced participants on the other pair of texts from Hashire Merosu (the more difficult pair)*

Five advanced participants briefly carried out the think-aloud task and then examined the linguistic features, using the original and its GR version of *Hashire Merosu*. Both texts are more demanding than the equivalents of the first story, *Chuumon no ooi ryooriten*. From this experiment, a meaningful result was obtained as Figure 1 schematizes.



**Figure 1.** Five advanced learners' change of perceptions towards GRs

The comments made in the exit interviews explain this meaningful finding in detail. These learners mentioned that they found the simplified GR version of *Chuumon no ooi ryooriten* somewhat demotivating. On the other hand, they found the original of this story was not unconquerable. As a result, they did not see benefits of reading such an oversimplified GR version because they thought that they were probably able to read the original. Jake's comment represents their reaction:

Yeah, I feel like a, by reading it, I can understand it [the GR text]... but... It makes me feel like, really unconfident of my Japanese ability. When I read an original, I think my Japanese is definitely good enough for that. When I can read this [the GR text], I can understand it, there is not any sense of satisfaction because I don't feel a challenge anyway. I feel like, "ah, my Japanese is only good enough to read children's level." I know you have to start somewhere and you have to get better at learning languages, but it

is a kind of disheartening to know my Japanese is such a low level.

However, when they read the other pair of texts from *Hashire Merosu*, they found benefits of reading GRs. The original of *Hashire Merosu* has much more demanding linguistic features according to the researcher's text analysis (see Table 1). Its *kanji* proportion in a text and vocabulary difficulty are higher than that of the original of *Chuumon no ooi ryooriten*. At the same time, its GR version is one level up, compared to the GR version of the other story. Thus, the writer of this more difficult GR was allowed to use more sophisticated syntax and more mature vocabulary. Also, the writer tried to maintain the sharp tone of the original story (M. Awano, personal communication, May, 2012). Reflecting these factors, the five advanced participants reacted to this more difficult GR in a much more favourable way. Here again, Jake's comment illustrates such a change of their attitudes:

- Jake: [judging the GR text of *Hashire Merosu*] Yeah, I think that this is a lot more appealing, better style [compared to that of *Chuumon no ooi ryooriten*].
- Researcher: Do you think that you will read the *Hashire Merosu*'s original straight away?
- Jake: In my current level of Japanese, probably not. Because, ah, after a while of reading Japanese, if I am going for quite a while, like, a half of a page or something and I don't understand it, I get really frustrated. So, something, I think that I can read something like this level [higher level GR] and probably understand most of it, but, I think it will be still probably challenging enough to stay interesting.
- Researcher: So, there are some benefits of reading graded readers?
- Jake: [Convincing voice] Definitely. Definitely. I think, this, this was... a lot more, it was more genuine than a previous graded reading about boys and Mountain. It felt really really condensed to me.

Disheartened with the difficulty of the original text of *Hashire Merosu* and attracted by the more sophisticated syntactic and lexical characteristics of its GR version, these advanced participants found benefits in reading GRs.

#### *Further investigation of how learners perceive GRs from exit interview comments*

Exit interview comments reveal that the participants' affective factors toward GRs differ according to their developmental stages. Overall, the affective factors of the less proficient participants are more straightforward: The more they understand a text, the more they enjoy and like it. They welcomed the easier vocabulary and *kanji* of the GR version better. There were also a few students who welcomed the simplified syntax in the GR. Johnny commented as follows:

Sentences are a lot longer [in the original]... in Japanese grammar, where, you have to wait till the very end, sometimes, before, to find out, you know, what they are talking about. If it's a very long sentence, it makes very difficult to understand. Because by the time you get to the end of the sentence, um, you've forgotten the first half of the sentence... whereas the graded reader version, it's kind of concise sentences, easy, easy

structures as well. So, like, subject, you know, subject, object, verb, nice and easy, so, it makes it easier to read.

Similarly, the most struggling participant, Mike, praised the GR version wholeheartedly, saying that “it’s [the GR version] more meaningful, if you can understand it, or it’s more relevant to the situation. And it keeps your interest more, probably, which is important.”

In short, the developing learners in this study enjoyed their increased comprehension and resultant engagement produced by reading the GR version. Thus, it can be said that the writers’ goal of creating interesting and comprehensible GRs succeeded with these learners.

In contrast, advanced participants’ affective factors were complex. Their reaction to and perception of the easier GR is in line with what Lotherington-Woloszyn (1992) reported, in that: “What is considered to be easy to read is, evidently, not necessarily preferable” (p. 464). That is, advanced participants did not enjoy their enhanced comprehension wholeheartedly. After reading the GR of *Chuumon no ooi ryooriten*, Naomi said that it was “a dry story when it’s that simplified, and then at the same time, if it’s easy, you feel like, why am I reading this? You know, it’s not helping me improve.” The harshest opponent against extensive reading, Lynn, responded to the researcher in the following exchange:

- Researcher: Do you find the original still fascinating?  
 Lynn: Yes. It [the original] is not the one written for students who study Japanese, but what Japanese people read. That’s why I would like to read it.  
 Researcher: So...an advanced level student like you, is the desire to read the exactly same thing as what Japanese people read very strong?  
 Lynn: Yes, it’s strong, actually.  
 Researcher: That means, if you know that graded readers are the texts which have been rewritten, do you have negative feelings to read them?  
 Lynn: Yes.  
 Researcher: Can you clarify the reasons?  
 Lynn: I feel like that I was looked down on. I can read more difficult things. If I always read easy things, nothing will go ahead. I want to take more challenges.

As reported above, advanced participants managed to find reading GRs beneficial after examining the more demanding pair of texts from the other story, *Hashire Merosu*. However, when they first tried to read the easier GR from *Chuumon no ooi ryooriten*, their responses towards such a simplified GR were negative.

## Discussion

The current study first investigated what intent the six writers of Japanese GRs had in the process of writing their GRs. The questionnaire survey and the focus group interview found that the writers sensed existing problems in the traditional reading instruction approach, i.e., intensive

reading, and problematic issues contained in reading passages of structural language textbooks. Then they have come to obtain a good understanding of extensive reading as a breakthrough method. Such backgrounds have made these writers envisage a clear goal of creating interesting GRs which can be distinguished from boring textbook reading passages written with a pseudo-educational intent. In short, these six writers have “an authentic communicative objective in mind” (Swaffer, 1985, p. 17). What these writers think of as good GRs is precisely what one of the finest GR writers in English, Jennifer Bassett, described as: “a story so fascinating, so beguiling, so unputdownable, that it draws reluctant readers into its fictional universe and holds them there, willy-nilly, until the end” (2005).

However, these writers are more teachers than authors. While they have a genuine communicative intent to create interesting GRs, their intent has a strong pedagogical motive which is to make their GRs bridging readers. Their motive meets the last two of the four-stage operational requirements for well-written modified texts suggested by West (1964) in that they: (a) introduce the learner to reading for pleasure, (b) build habits of reading for pleasure, (c) give a foretaste of the original, and (d) provide a lead-in to unadapted books.

Similarly, these writers want to develop learners’ fluency to the level at which they can taste the pleasure of reading original Japanese texts. In short, they acknowledge an important factor that “simplifications [general text modification measures in the current context] are also not intended to be used indefinitely or haphazardly, but in appropriate ways that allow readers to be presented with new and challenging material that will help them to progress” (Cramer, 2005, p. 11).

However, it should be noted that these writers’ strong pedagogical motive may possibly interfere with their ultimate goal of creating interesting GRs. GRs need to be within the learners’ current linguistic level and thus need to fit into the grading scales in order to be comprehensible bridging materials. Moreover, while the writers mentioned that they took a holistic approach in the process of writing their GRs, their long experiences as teachers of Japanese probably enable them to fit their writing to the predetermined vocabulary and syntactic grading scales without attending to such features consciously. These factors may prevent the writers’ genuine communicative intent from being manifested fully in the end products.

So, how did the participants respond to the intentions of the six writers of Japanese GRs? The two GR versions were written by one of the six writers with support of the other writers’ feedback in the process of polishing drafts. In the current study, fourteen learners of Japanese read and examined the two GR versions and their original texts.

The participants’ think-aloud protocol data indicate that they could experience a fluent reading process with the GR version of *Chuumon no ooi ryooriten*. That is to say, with the GR excerpt, their process tended to have a vigorous top-down process. In contrast, their think-aloud of the original text was a laborious plodding with many vocabulary-related and metacognitive comments, which reflected their struggle in and disheartened reaction to the difficulty of the original text.

The fluent reading experience created by the GR version made the less proficient participants more engaged with the content. Compared to problematic textbook reading passages, the most

struggling participant, Mike, describes the virtues of GRs as follows:

Um, maybe textbooks, the, language is usually, specific about lessons, and usually emphasizes something in particular. I can't think of examples, but, you know, sort of, usually textbook lessons are very forced, or unnatural situations, just, which is created specifically so that language can be used in those situations. Which is why authentic text transformed from graded readers seems more engaging.

Mike calls the text of GRs authentic. The current GR version probably gave some participants, in particular, less proficient participants, an authentic reading experience. Such students enjoyed their increased comprehension with the GR version and engaged with its content better. In this case, the writer's authentic communicative objective was met with the learner's positive response. Thus, such a GR can be viewed as meaningful input.

On the other hand, exit interview comments of advanced participants demonstrated their negative attitudes toward reading GRs. Such negative reactions were more evident when they read the easier GR. They found the easier GR version oversimplified and disjointed. The average sentence length of this easier GR version is rather short compared to that of its original as shown in Table 1, which can be viewed as the reflection of the writers' pedagogical intent to make their end products comprehensible. While the higher comprehensibility of the GR version was welcomed by less proficient participants, and led them to better engagement, it was not responded to positively by advanced participants and was counter-productive to them.

Although the five advanced participants' experience of an attitude change toward GRs after reading the more sophisticated GR is a good sign, we have to be aware that some L2 learners may be prone to "the cult of authenticity" (Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 53). As reported above, the comments of Jake, Naomi and Lynn indicate that reading simplified texts such as the GR version of *Chuumon no ooi ryooriten* created stigma or demotivation. That is, these participants felt either that they had to read such childish texts due to their insufficient linguistic capability or that reading such simplified texts could not develop their level to a native-level fluency.

Providing modified texts without enough justification disheartens and demotivates some advanced learners, which is the opposite of what extensive reading research often claims. Various extensive reading studies claim that learners' affective factors are positively influenced after they experience extensive reading (e.g., Asraf & Ahmad, 2003; Cho & Kim, 2004; Cho & Krashen, 1994). Those studies may imply that learners just have to do it to find out that reading a large amount of easier, modified material does them good, without worrying about the benefits of GRs initially. However, learners such as the current participants, i.e., mature, autonomous and dedicated learners, deserve to be given the rationale initially and to be shown what the empirical findings demonstrate. It is a teacher's role to dispel learners' misconceptions. Widdowson (1990) confirms that "the whole point of pedagogy is that it is a way of short-circuiting the slow process of natural discovery and can make arrangements for learning to happen more easily and more efficiently than it does in natural surroundings" (p. 163). Moreover, when learners hold a negative feeling and a doubt against a text that they are about to read, such a reading act cannot easily be authentic (Lee, 1995).

Surprisingly, there are not many studies that emphasize initial reasoning of extensive reading to learners. But Dupuy, Tse and Cook (1996) do not slight the importance of this aspect:

It is important to convince students of the value of extensive reading because they may not see the benefits of pleasure reading in a second language.... The typical student's idea of reading in English [English is an L2 in their context]...is often quite different from what is offered in an extensive reading course. Therefore, we find it important to inform students of the rationale behind this approach and share with them some of the research...documenting the benefits of pleasure reading in increasing language and literacy development. This information, which often comes as a surprise to many of our students, gives them a sense of understanding and confidence that the kind of reading they are about to do will be helpful for their language learning. (p. 10)

The current study similarly confirms the importance of enlightening learners about the efficacy of GRs and the benefits of extensive reading. It is more important in the context when a language is learnt as a foreign language and a target country is remote such as in the current case. In such a context, learners lack the opportunity to see and hear alternative approaches (e.g., extensive reading), and thus they need explicit guidance from teachers about alternative approaches.

### **Limitations**

There are some limitations in the current study. The data from only six writers is not sufficient to determine whether or not writers of Japanese GRs commonly have a genuine communicative intent. However, there are not many writers of Japanese GRs. The organization which the participating writers belong to is probably the only active and committed group in terms of creating Japanese GRs. In short, they can be viewed as the pioneers of Japanese GRs. Larger-scale studies with more writers of Japanese GRs, when there are more of them, are awaited.

Similarly, in order to explicate learners' responses toward GRs and extensive reading, studies of a longer duration and studies in which learners read the whole story both in the original and its GR version are necessary. Such studies may unfold whether or not Japanese GRs will meet the first two of the four-stage operational requirements for well-written modified texts suggested by West (1964) in that they: (a) introduce the learner to reading for pleasure, and (b) build habits of reading for pleasure. Since fourteen learners only read short preludes of the two stories in the current study, their real engagement could not be fully portrayed.

### **Conclusion**

Despite these limitations, the current study provides some meaningful findings.

First, the participating writers of Japanese GRs have a genuine communicative intent in creating their products: They strive to create interesting GRs which learners want to keep on reading. However, they are more teachers than authors. Their writing should be viewed as writing for a pedagogical purpose just as L2 reading should be viewed as a "real-world reading but for a

pedagogical purpose” (Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 5).

One product of such writing with a real life pedagogical purpose, i.e., the easier GR version, was a success because it was a desirable text for fluency development. Reading researchers (e.g., Grabe, 2009; Koda, 2005; Perfetti, 2007; Perfetti, Van Dyke & Hart, 2001) assert that lower processes have to be automatic for reading to be fluent. Grabe (2009) explains that automaticity in reading processes results from extensive exposure to meaningful input. That is to say, after reading easy, relatable input for a relatively long time, learners’ lower-level processes will be proceduralized and then automatized (p. 28). The current study demonstrates that Japanese GRs have potential as meaningful input. The process of reading the GR version of *Chuumon no ooi ryooriten* was effortless for the participants, which implies that even developing learners can read GRs at a faster than normal speed, and with better comprehension and engagement.

In terms of reading instruction, the findings of the current study signal an important warning: Simply providing learners with assumingly well-written GRs is not enough to make such GRs meaningful input. Learners have to be given the initial explicit guidance about the aforementioned efficacy of GRs and extensive reading. Some advanced learners had an urge to read unmodified Japanese texts even though their think-aloud protocol of both the originals (even the easier original of *Chuumon no ooi ryooriten*) demonstrated that their current level was not high enough to read original Japanese texts. These learners simply believed that reading unmodified texts was a way to gain native-level fluency.

Such advanced learners need to know that they are mixing means with ends as discussed by Bamford and Day (1997). They have to be explicitly taught that reading relatively easier GRs can actually help them achieve their goal, i.e., being able to read unmodified texts fluently. Thus, the current findings recommend that L2 teachers have to enlighten their learners regarding the reasons why reading modified GRs is efficacious.

Mastering L2 Japanese reading is thought to be more demanding than mastering other L2 reading (Chikamatsu, 2003). Therefore, more solid guidance is required to support L2 Japanese learners in order to help them achieve mastery of it. Extensive reading has just begun drawing the attention of scholars and practitioners in the context of JSL and JFL. In order to convince sceptical learners and create unputdownable well-written Japanese GRs, more empirical endeavours are keenly awaited.

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## Notes

1. The online ‘reading tutor tool box’ (Kawamura, Kitamura & Hobara, 1997) was used to examine the vocabulary difficulty of the four text excerpts used in the current study. Similarly, Microsoft Office Word 2007’s readability statistics were used to examine the other linguistic characteristics of the excerpts.
2. *Furigana* (ruby annotation) is added next to, above or under *kanji* characters in order to indicate the reading of them. It is usually written in *hiragana*, one of the two syllabaries used in Japanese. Example: 昨日から<sup>きのう</sup>関東一円<sup>かんとういちえん</sup>では雪<sup>ゆき</sup>が降<sup>ふ</sup>った。(In this sentence, all *kanji* has *furigana* [ruby annotation] written in smaller-font *hiragana*.)
3. The participating learners are referred to with pseudonyms in this paper.

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