

## **Can Beginner JFL Learners do ER? Text Comprehension, Reading Rate, Materials, and Reading Targets for Beginner JFL Reading**

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### **Abstract**

L2 extensive reading (ER) research primarily studies intermediate and upper-intermediate learners, but few studies investigate beginners. This study addresses this gap by reporting on beginner Japanese as Foreign Language (JFL) learners' attempts to do ER according to Waring and McLean's (2015) ER principles. In this study, 13 second-semester undergraduate JFL learners were tasked with doing ER as homework for 18 weeks, self-reporting their comprehension and reading time for a total of 190 texts. Their data indicated a preference for graded readers ( $k = 187$ ) over children's literature ( $k = 3$ ) and that a 45-text reading target over 18 weeks was unattainable with these materials. On average, learners reported understanding about 78% of what they read and spending seven minutes to complete a reading, with variations influenced by material, text genre, and student. The results demonstrate how materials, text genre, student reading speed, and reading habits impact the effectiveness of beginner ER and the attainability of reading targets.

**Keywords:** Extensive Reading, Japanese as a Foreign Language, foreign language reading, second language reading, reading programs, graded readers, reading target attainability, beginner learners, materials selection

Numerous studies report the benefits extensive reading (ER) has for L2 reading, including vocabulary acquisition, fluency, and motivation (Day & Bamford, 1998; Grabe, 2009; Krashen, 2004; Nation & Waring, 2020). However, most ER studies investigate intermediate and advanced learners, especially in L2 Japanese pedagogical contexts (de Burgh-Hirabe & Feryok, 2012, 2013; Goda et al., 2005; Kumada & Suzuki, 2015; Nakano, 2016; Peterson, 2022; Tabata-Sandom, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2018; Tabata-Sandom & Macalister, 2009). Tabata-Sandom (2017) found resistance to ER in intermediate Japanese as Foreign Language (JFL) learners who previously received grammar-focused instruction, and she hypothesized their elementary instruction may have influenced the resistance (Tabata-Sandom, 2015). To address learner biases early and encourage a balanced approach to reading, Tabata-Sandom (2017) suggested integrating fluency development, like ER, into lower-level classes. However, few studies have explored ER among beginner JFL learners (Hitosugi & Day, 2004; Leung, 2002; Takahashi & Umino, 2020), and most of these studies focused on learners' gains in vocabulary, perceptions of ER, and affective stance towards their Japanese-language study. Currently, no studies have investigated the degree to which beginner JFL learners can read in observance of ER principles.

Furthermore, we know little about reading targets for beginner Japanese ER beyond children's literature (Hitosugi & Day, 2004).

This study contributes to ER research by examining if beginner JFL learners can adhere to Waring and McLean's (2015) ER principles, which require (a) "sustained, meaning-focused fluent comprehension" of (b) "large volumes of text" (c) "at the discourse and ideas level" (d) "over an extended period of time" (p. 164). This study also reports on what student performance can inform us about the attainability of reading targets and effective ER materials for beginner JFL reading programs. The analysis reports reading data of 13 second-semester university JFL learners who were assigned a 45-text reading target across 18 weeks as homework. The data includes the number of texts completed, learners' self-reported comprehension, reading time, and summaries of the texts. Results are discussed in the context of ER definitions, availability of Japanese ER materials, and beginner reading targets, which are explored in the following literature review.

## Literature Review

### *Defining ER for Research*

Day and Bamford's (1998, 2002) ten principles for teaching ER are often cited to define ER (Hitosugi & Day, 2004; Peterson, 2022) despite them only being "description[s] of the characteristics that are found in successful extensive reading programs" (Day & Bamford 2002, p. 7). While useful for guiding ER instruction, these principles lack definitiveness for research. Waring and McLean (2015) found several studies that used the term ER ambiguously, violating the above principles or variably conceptualizing the defining features of ER. For example, two studies erroneously suggested that they had done ER because participants read graded readers (Kirchhoff, 2013; Yamashita, 2013). Additionally, they noted the amount of reading in ER studies varied from "as few as nine books or 140 pages over the duration of the study, or 5 books over a year" (p. 160).

To disambiguate the term and provide a construct to compare ER across studies, Waring and McLean (2015) identified four core elements of ER. They claimed the ER label applies when researchers provide evidence that participants focused on developing (a) "sustained, meaning-focused fluent comprehension" (b) "of large volumes of text" (c) "at the discourse and ideas level" (d) "over an extended period of time" (p. 164). Furthermore, they emphasized the first principle, contending that "whether subjects are reading extensively or not, is a matter of how the text is processed, i.e., smoothly and with high, fluent comprehension" (p. 162). Regarding the third principle, they suggested that comprehension should be at the discourse level because the distinction between intensive reading (IR) and ER is on a spectrum, where ER focuses more on the meaning of the text and less on language features. Finally, Waring and McLean (2015) discouraged using the term ER when researchers "require students to read very few words over an extended period... as its use will only weaken the construct we are trying to disambiguate" (p. 165).

Waring and McLean (2015) noted the minimum threshold for 'fluent' comprehension or 'large' volume of text is unclear and may vary by learner proficiency. In questioning what counts as

‘fluent comprehension,’ they mentioned two possibilities for a threshold: “will 90% comprehension or 98% comprehension suffice?” (p. 162). For reading volume, they suggested an appropriate amount might be determined by basing “weekly, monthly and semester-long reading targets on students’ reading speeds, and then extrapolat[ing] the number of words that can be read over a given period of time” (p. 164). Additionally, when determining if participants engaged in ER, they advised researchers to verify the presence of core ER principles by measuring “reading speed, comprehension rate, participants’ lexical knowledge, the lexical load of the text and providing self-reports of whether or not the subjects were reading at a high comprehension level” (p.165). Finally, although Waring and McLean (2015) believed ER should be attributed to “processing students do that allow[s] them to focus on developing fluent comprehension of texts for meaning, and not on language features excessively” (p. 164), they did not suggest reading must be quick for proper comprehension of the text as meaning-focused input. Instead, they argued that even beginning learners who have yet to develop quick, fluent reading ability can still be said to be doing ER if their reading is meaning-focused and with high comprehension, as this is a transitional step until they develop fluency (p. 164).

Building on this, Nation and Waring (2020) defined ER as involving, “the learner independently and silently reading lots of material which is at the right level for them” (p. 4). Reading at the ‘right level’ refers to participants’ familiarity with at least 98% of the vocabulary and most of the grammar of the text, allowing the opportunity to read with high comprehension. Reading with comprehension is important because it allows the learners to get comprehensible input, which “will directly determine how much vocabulary they learn, how well their reading fluency develops, and how other aspects of language knowledge develop” (p. 3). The 98% threshold for vocabulary knowledge has been supported as necessary to facilitate unassisted comprehension of materials for ER (Hu & Nation, 2000; Nation & Waring, 2020; Schmitt et al., 2011).

### *Japanese ER Materials*

Japanese ER studies have utilized various materials, including children’s picture books (Hitosugi & Day, 2004; Leung, 2002), graded readers, magazines, manga, and novels (Takahashi & Umino, 2020), and digital text databases (Peterson, 2022). The term *graded readers* (GRs), or *language learner literature*, refers to materials “produced especially for second language learners” (Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 97). Language learner literature differs “from other books in that they are written with strict vocabulary control and with consideration of other factors affecting comprehensibility, such as grammatical difficulty, sentence complexity, use of illustrations, and simplicity of plot” (Nation & Waring, 2020, p. 17). Additionally, GRs are written at progressing difficulty levels to support learners in reading increasingly challenging texts. Surveys have reported that JFL learners typically prefer physical texts over digital texts (Tabata-Sandom, 2016; Yoshimura & Kobayashi, 2018). However, recent research has also provided evidence of learners’ positive attitudes toward online ER (Bui & Macalister, 2021; de Lozier, 2019; Puripunyanich, 2021; Zhou & Day, 2021).

Different materials impact learners’ ability to read at Nation and Waring’s (2020) ‘right level.’ For instance, English corpus analysis has suggested children’s literature “may be more appropriate for intensive rather than extensive reading” (Webb & Macalister, 2013, p. 318) due to its high proportion of lower frequency vocabulary items (Nation, 2006; Webb & Macalister,

2013), and GRs are considered more suitable for ER as they require less vocabulary to achieve 98% coverage of the text (Webb & Macalister, 2013). The challenges of using children's literature for ER are also reported in studies of Japanese. Leung (2002), a beginner JFL learner who self-studied her ER, discussed her difficulty finding children's texts appropriately within her linguistic competence. For instance, as an adult learner, she reported a tendency to feel demotivated when she had trouble understanding language in children's books. She concluded that "if appropriate reading materials are available, it is possible that a beginning foreign language learner can reap the benefits that extensive reading can offer" (p. 13). The availability of a variety of materials is described by Day and Bamford (1998) as one of the defining characteristics of successful ER programs, and the importance of material variety is emphasized in various JFL contexts (de Burgh-Hirabe & Feryok, 2013; Leung, 2002; Peterson, 2022).

Peterson (2019) recently created the Japanese Extensive Reading Resources Database (JERRD), which recorded character, vocabulary, and morpheme counts, text genres and mediums, and information regarding the difficulty of Japanese ER resources. The database uncovered discrepancies in Japanese GR lengths compared to publishers' reported standards, particularly for online texts. For example, a book in the category 'Level 0' on the publisher's website, which is typically expected to have 200 to 400 characters, was found to only be 40 characters long.

At least one study has investigated JFL learners' perceptions of GRs. Tabata-Sandom (2013) had 14 JFL learners compare literary texts with their GR counterparts and found learner perceptions varied by developmental stage. Advanced learners preferred the original text and held negative attitudes towards lower-level GRs, but they did show positive attitudes towards the higher-level GRs. In contrast, the lower-proficiency learners showed overall positive attitudes towards GRs and welcomed the additional comprehension afforded to them by the easy texts.

Finally, vocabulary is not the only factor affecting the comprehensibility of materials. Anderson and Pearson (1988) defined *comprehension* as the "interaction of new information with old knowledge" (p. 37). Using Bartlett's (1932) schema theory, Anderson and Pearson (1988) discussed how a reader's *schemata*, i.e., their "knowledge already stored in memory" (p. 37) plays a role in comprehending new information. This interaction of knowledge is not only limited to vocabulary. For instance, Gillis-Furutaka (2015) showed several aspects of English GRs that present difficulties for learners. These included "illustrations, cultural differences, pronouns and their referents, idiomatic expression, onomatopoeia, inferences and other literary devices, and unexpected changes in the flow of the narrative" (p. 9).

### *Reading Targets*

The term *reading target* has been used to refer to an amount of reading expected of learners (Day & Bamford, 1998) and has also been referred to as a *reading goal* (Peterson, 2022). A reading target has been said to serve the purpose of motivating and guiding learners towards fluency development and is measured by a number of books, pages, time spent reading (Day & Bamford, 1998, p. 84), or the number of words or characters a learner has read (e.g., Peterson, 2022).

Peterson (2022) recruited eight intermediate-level JFL learners and investigated the feasibility of a 12,000-character weekly reading target within 100 minutes. The researcher met with

participants individually to monitor their reading for ER principles and characters read.<sup>1</sup> Results found that the reading of participants varied from 11,838 characters to 19,180 characters within 100 minutes, with an average of 15,126 characters. Given the results, Peterson suggested a weekly reading target of 12,000 characters over 100 minutes may be feasible for intermediate-level learners in a primarily reading-focused class.

Working with a beginner population, Hitosugi and Day (2004) implemented ER in a second-semester JFL class of 14 students and tasked students with a reading target of 40 children's picture books over 10 weeks for homework. The results showed that only three could achieve the target, with an average of 32 books read.

### **Aims of This Study**

While prior research has significantly contributed to our understanding of ER, beginner JFL learners' ER remains largely unexplored. Given the limited vocabulary and fluency of beginner JFL learners, it remains unclear to what degree Waring and McLean's (2015) definition can be met in these learners' attempts to read for meaning-focused input. Furthermore, research has not determined an appropriate 'large volume of text' for beginner learners or whether existing Japanese ER materials facilitate high comprehension. Additionally, while research determined GRs are more appropriate for ER than children's literature, those studies focused on English. Unfortunately, no recent research has explored ER in beginner JFL university courses since Hitosugi and Day (2004), nor has any examined GRs in this context. Consequently, the influence of these materials on learners' comprehension and reading rates remains unclear. More research is required to understand beginner JFL learners' ER and the influence of materials, and to determine attainable beginner reading targets. To address these gaps, this study examined the reading of 13 second-semester JFL learners and asked the following research questions:

- RQ1. Can beginner JFL learners do ER?
- RQ2. What reading materials contribute to an effective beginner JFL reading program?
- RQ3. What can student performance tell us about the time needed to attain reading targets for beginner JFL reading in this study?

In this study, 'doing ER' was defined as achieving (a) fluent or high comprehension, as defined by Waring and McLean's (2015) lower threshold of 90% comprehension; (b) reading a minimum of 15 texts; (c) reading discourse-level texts, where texts were qualitatively assessed as being at the 'discourse-level' based on their length and organization beyond the sentence level; and (d) reading over an extended period, which was qualitatively assessed by learners' commitment to reading consistently throughout the semester.

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<sup>1</sup> Peterson refers to the ER principles established by Awano et al. (2012) and Day and Bamford (2002). Awano et al.'s (2012) principles recommend that learners (a) start with easy books; (b) do not use a dictionary; (c) skip over parts they do not understand; and (d) choose another book if the current one is too boring or difficult.

## Method

### Participants

The participants were 14 students in the author's second-semester Japanese course at a public university in the United States, which met for 50 minutes four times per week. In the course, students were asked to engage in ER for homework. All 14 learners signed IRB-approved consent forms to share their reading data. A survey revealed that the learners' prior classroom experience with Japanese varied from zero to five years (Table 1) and that all participants were native speakers of English, with one English-Vietnamese bilingual (S5).

Table 1. *Years of Prior Instruction in Japanese of Each Student*

S1	S2	S3	S4	S5	S6	S7	S8	S9	S10	S11	S12	S13	S14
0	2	2	1	4	4	0	0	3	3	3	5	2	4

### Materials

A library of 480 books (consisting of 386 texts and 94 duplicates) was available, including 241 texts inherited from Hitosugi and Day's (2004) collection of children's literature.<sup>2</sup> Initially, 89 GRs were borrowed from the university library, and 150 additional GRs were obtained with department funding 11 weeks into the semester from three publishers: ASK Publishing (86 books), Taishukan (55 books), and NPO Tadoku Supporters (9 books). Level criteria for the GRs were based on the Japanese Language Proficiency Test standards for vocabulary and grammar (Awano et al., 2012; Takahashi et al., 2022).<sup>3</sup> Table 2 displays the seven GR levels and the publisher standards for vocabulary and word counts.

Table 2. *Publisher Standards for the Japanese Graded Readers (GRs) Used in the Study*

	Starter	Level 0	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
Vocabulary range	200	350	350	500	800	1,300	2,000
Character count	0–200	200–400	400–1,500	1,500–3,000	2,500–6,000	5,000–15,000	8,000–25,000

The GRs were written in three scripts: *hiragana*, *katakana*, and *kanji*. *Hiragana* and *katakana* are syllabic scripts, with *hiragana* used for native Japanese words and *katakana* for loanwords. *Kanji* are logographic characters originating from Chinese. To help learners read *kanji*, the GRs include *furigana*—pronunciation aids. Additionally, many illustrations were included in the GRs to assist with comprehensibility (Awano et al., 2012; Takahashi et al., 2022). In contrast, the lower-level children's picture books were typically written in *hiragana*, and sometimes

<sup>2</sup> Hitosugi and Day (2004) reported 266 books. As of the date of this submission, there are 241 books in the collection. Five of these were copies.

<sup>3</sup> Additional criteria, descriptions, and samples of each level of GR text are available here:

<https://tadoku.org/japanese/en/levels-en/>

*katakana*.<sup>4</sup>

In addition to these GRs, the author also created a digital resource list, primarily sourced from recommended resources by NPO Tadoku Supporters and web searches.<sup>5</sup> The list was shared with the learners via the learning management system, organized in a Google spreadsheet by order of text level using the standards in Table 2. Included in the list were digital versions of the physical GRs, accessible through the university's library database. Most of the resources followed the level system in Table 2. When the level system was different or did not exist, the author categorized resources based on observations of their length, vocabulary, and grammatical complexity, aligning them with the existing level system (from levels 0 to 5). The author chose not to categorize any texts into the 'Starter' level as it was a newly introduced level.<sup>6</sup>

During the study, only eight print Starter books existed. However, after this study was completed, seven online resources originally labeled as Level 0 were reclassified into the Starter category by NPO Tadoku Supporters. To maintain consistency with students' perceptions of the materials during the study, the results included these seven books in the Level 0 category. Peterson's (2019) database showed more of these Level 0 texts should be recategorized as Starter books given their length, but these were reported according to the labels available to students during the study. Moreover, students also had access to an online resource called 'Mini Books' by the Japan Foundation.<sup>7</sup> These are short, 8-page stories designed as practice for reading *hiragana* and *katakana*. For this study, one series (9 Mini Books), was counted as one reading.

Throughout the study, the author brought a bag containing all the GRs (Table 3) and a rotating selection of 10 children's books to each class session. These texts were then displayed on a table at the front of the classroom alongside a check-out notebook.

Table 3. *Number of Physical Graded Readers Available for Each Level*

Weeks available	Starter	Level 0	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5	Total
1–10	0	21	19	22	16	10	1	89
11–18	8	28	34	28	24	26	2	150

### *Procedure*

Drawing on the design of Hitosugi and Day (2004), this study implemented a required 45-text reading target over an 18-week period (three readings per week, calculated as if the period were

<sup>4</sup> Hitosugi and Day (2004) provided detailed criteria for the book levels in their collection. They specified that the lowest level books in their collection are written in only *hiragana* and *katakana*, but higher-level books also included *kanji*, both with and without *furigana*. My observation is that most of the lower-level books were written mainly in *hiragana*.

<sup>5</sup> Specifically, I referenced this list: <https://tadoku.org/japanese/en/other-grs-en/>

<sup>6</sup> Before the Starter category was introduced, the publisher standards for Level 0 text lengths ranged from 0 to 400 characters. This was the standard available to me when I created the online list of resources.

<sup>7</sup> The Mini Books may be accessed at the following link: <https://jpf.org.au/classroom-resources/resources/nihongo-flipbooks/>

15 weeks),<sup>8</sup> worth 5% of the students' final grade.<sup>9</sup> Additionally, students could earn 1% extra credit for every four books read beyond the reading target, up to a maximum of 20 books, or a total of 5% extra credit (see Appendix A for the syllabus and ER grade scheme).<sup>10</sup> The choice of three readings per week was influenced by Hitosugi and Day's (2004) finding that only three out of 14 learners successfully completed a target that required four readings per week. Students had the freedom to choose readings, as long as the material met a minimum length of 150 characters. This requirement was based on the author's observation that a random sampling of the low-level books from Hitosugi and Day's (2004) collection typically had a length of 150 characters.

On the first instructional day, the author discussed the benefits of ER for input, output, and fluency, and learners were reminded that ER should be enjoyable and easy, with the focus on understanding the text content rather than mastery of grammar and vocabulary. ER guidelines were provided to the learners for selecting suitable readings, such as starting with the lowest level, choosing texts you believe you can understand most of the content (i.e., one's perceived comprehension of 90% to 98% of the text), and picking another book if the current one is too difficult.

Learners recorded each reading in a Google Form (Appendix B), which prompted students to record the title of the text, date read, and to self-report their comprehension and time spent actively reading. Additionally, the form included an open-ended question that asked learners to summarize the reading or share something they learned, which was originally included for the instructor to assess whether learners completed the reading.<sup>11</sup>

### *Analysis*

The results related to the first research question, "Can beginner JFL learners do ER?" examined learners' ability to do ER as demonstrated through their (a) self-reported comprehension of texts; (b) total reading volume; and (c) reading over the period. This study adopted a 90% comprehension threshold for defining 'doing ER,' aligning with Waring and McLean's (2015) lower threshold for 'fluent comprehension.' The lower threshold was justified by the participants' novice status, as learners in their early developmental phase understandably encounter challenges in attaining fluent comprehension. Furthermore, this study defined 15 books as the minimum ER reading volume based on the results of Hitosugi and Day's (2004) study, which found that second-semester JFL learners read an average of 30 children's picture books over 15 weeks. Given the observation that the lower-end texts were typically 150 characters long, the learners in Hitosugi and Day's (2004) study might have read about 4,500 characters over 15 weeks. Assuming a median length of 300 characters for Level 0 texts, learners

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<sup>8</sup> The semester runs for 18 weeks; Two weeks were cut from the target in consideration of final exams, spring break, and for two federal and two state holidays. If not cut, the reading target would have been 54 texts over 18 weeks to maintain the same three weekly readings.

<sup>9</sup> In Japanese 102, 10% of the final grade is left to the instructor's discretion for 'daily performance.' This study assigned 5% of the daily performance grade to ER.

<sup>10</sup> One anonymous reviewer suggested the results should include how reading affected students' grades to assess the impact of ER on class performance. However, as this study focused on assessing beginner ability to engage in ER, it did not obtain permission to collect data related to grades and is unable to report these results.

<sup>11</sup> Learners could respond to the open-ended question in either English or Japanese.



must read at least 15 texts to reach 4,500 characters. This estimate, while not perfect, served as a reference point given the limited research on beginner JFL learner materials and reading speeds. Finally, reading over the period was qualitatively assessed by the students' commitment to regularly reading throughout the period.

For the second research question, "What reading materials are effective for beginner JFL learners?" the results examined the materials learners read, which materials learners reported with 90% comprehension, and learners' responses in reading summaries.

Finally, the third research question, "What can student performance tell us about the time needed to attain reading targets for beginner JFL reading in this study?" analyzed the learners' reading rates across materials.

## Results

### *Research Question #1 Can beginner JFL learners do ER?*

*Reading volume.* In total, 190 readings were recorded by 13 students, with an average of about 15 texts read.<sup>12</sup> Table 4 categorizes students' reading into three groups based on reading volume: low (1 to 6 texts), medium (17 to 19 texts), and high (30 or more texts).<sup>13</sup>

About half ( $n = 6$ ) of all the students (Groups 2 and 3) contributed 163 (85%) of the readings, ranging from 17 to 42 books, with a median of 24.5. The remaining ( $n = 7$ ) students from Group 1 made up the last 27 (15%) readings. Thus, roughly half the learners met the 15-book minimum reading volume.

*Self-reported comprehension.* Students' average self-reported comprehension ranged from 47.65% (S1, Group 2) to 100% (S9, Group 1), with 10 of the 13 learners averaging 80% or above. Only six learners (S6, S8, S9, S10, S5) reported comprehension at 90% or above, but these students completed six or fewer readings. S5 was the only student who read at least 15 texts and reported an average comprehension of over 90%. Conversely, Group 3 students completed the most readings (38 to 42 texts) but had average self-reported comprehension rates below 90% (S7 was just below at 89.62%). Learners' overall reported comprehension deviated around the mean by as much as 19.33%, from as low as 0% (S9, Group 1) to as high as 23.33% (S1, Group 2). Students' maximum and minimum reported comprehension rates sometimes differed by as much as 80%.

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<sup>12</sup> Of the original 14 participants, one student was omitted because they did not complete any readings.

<sup>13</sup> Notably, S10 reported to have read upwards of 30 texts they did not record in the Google Form.

Table 4. *Student Reading Data*

Table 1. Student Reading Data												
Student	<i>k</i>	Text Comprehension (%)					Reading Time					
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>R</i>	Min	Max	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>R</i>	Min	Max	Total
Group 1—Low Participation (1 to 6 Texts)												
S2	6	92.00	06.32	17.00	80.00	97.00	07:40	02:15	05:00	05:00	10:00	0:46:00
S3	1	80.00	--	--	80.00	80.00	10:00	--	--	10:00	10:00	0:10:00
S6	4	99.75	00.50	01.00	99.00	100.00	10:00	00:00	00:00	10:00	10:00	0:40:00
S8	5	97.00	04.47	10.00	90.00	100.00	03:54	01:15	02:30	03:00	05:30	0:19:30
S9	4	100.00	00.00	00.00	100.00	100.00	10:15	03:18	07:00	08:00	15:00	0:41:00
S10	1	90.00	--	--	90.00	90.00	02:20	--	--	02:20	02:20	0:02:20
S13	6	69.17	22.68	65.00	25.00	90.00	13:24	10:01	25:00	05:00	30:00	1:07:00
Overall	27	89.67	15.93	75.00	25.00	100.00	08:41	05:30	27:40	02:20	30:00	3:45:50
Mean	3.86	--	--	--	80.57	93.86	--	--	--	06:11	11:50	0:32:16
Group 2—Medium Participation (17 to 19 Texts)												
S1	17	47.65	23.33	70.00	20.00	90.00	11:46	04:59	20:00	05:00	25:00	3:10:00
S5	17	93.24	02.46	05.00	90.00	95.00	09:19	02:38	10:16	02:33	12:49	2:38:23
12	19	83.68	16.82	50.00	50.00	100.00	05:47	02:37	08:00	02:00	10:00	1:50:00
Overall	53	74.90	25.66	80.00	20.00	100.00	08:49	04:20	23:00	02:00	25:00	7:48:23
Mean	17.66	--	--	--	53.33	95.00	--	--	--	03:11	15:56	2:36:08
Group 3—High Participation (30 to 42 Texts)												
S4	38	69.21	17.61	75.00	20.00	95.00	11:52	08:12	23:00	04:00	27:00	5:08:34
S7	42	89.62	11.79	50.00	50.00	100.00	05:31	02:48	17:00	03:00	20:00	3:52:00
S11	30	80.00	06.57	30.00	60.00	90.00	06:36	02:07	11:00	04:00	15:00	3:18:00
Overall	110	79.95	15.66	80.00	20.00	100.00	05:00	05:03	17:00	03:00	27:00	12:18:34
Mean	36.67	--	--	--	43.33	95.00	--	--	--	03:40	20:40	04:06:11
All Students												
Overall	190	78.50	19.35	80.00	20.00	100.00	07:35	05:09	28:00	02:00	30:00	23:52:47
Mean	14.62	--	--	--	65.69	94.38	--	--	--	4:55	14:49	01:50:13

*Note.* *k* = Number of texts read; *M* = Mean; *SD* = Standard Deviation; *R* = Range

Table 5 categorizes the 190 texts into percentile groups according to students' self-reported understanding. Among them, 85 (45%) were reported at 90% or above, 69 were reported within the range of 70–89% (36%), and 36 (19%) were reported with 69% or lower comprehension.

Table 5. *Number of Student Readings by Self-Reported Understanding*

Self-Reported Understanding (%)									
100–98	97–90	89–80	79–70	69–60	59–50	49–40	39–30	29–20	Total
31	54	49	20	13	7	6	3	7	190
(16%)	(28%)	(26%)	(11%)	(7%)	(4%)	(3%)	(2%)	(4%)	(100%)

Although the students did not average 90% comprehension overall, they reported 90% or higher comprehension in 85 (45%) instances, and Table 4 indicates that all but one learner (S3) reported a maximum of 90% comprehension at least once. Thus, most learners were able to report 90% comprehension per text but struggled to maintain it overall.

*Reading completed over the period.* Table 6 illustrates how students completed readings over the 18-week period. Group 1 students had significant gaps in their reading: some read only at the start (S3, S6, S9, S10), near the end (S8), or at both the start and towards the end (S2, S13). Group 2 students read near the start, with some completing most of their texts within the first two weeks (S1, S12) or spread across several weeks (S5). Most of these learners continued until about a week before the midterms (week eight). At that point, the course had three upcoming grade-bearing assessments: a lesson test, a listening test, and an oral test (see Appendix C for the course schedule).

Group 3 learners' reading was most spread across the period. However, they did not consistently meet the weekly 3-text target. They both exceeded or fell short of the target across the period. These results demonstrate that not all students, particularly those in Group 1, adhered to Waring and McLean's (2015) fourth principle, which required sustained reading over an extended period.

Overall, the results suggest that beginner learners struggled to engage in ER while maintaining a 90% average reported comprehension, reading at least 15 texts, and reading throughout the period. However, learners also demonstrated the ability to engage in ER to some degree. Six learners read at least 15 texts, and three were able to read as many as 30 while continuing to read throughout the period. In particular, S7 demonstrated evidence of the capability of a beginner JFL learner to engage in ER, with a total volume of 42 texts, near-high average comprehension (89.67%), and continuous reading throughout the period. Finally, while learners struggled to maintain an average reported comprehension of 90%, they achieved the threshold for individual readings.

Table 6. *Students' Weekly Reading Over 18 Weeks*

Week	Group 1							Group 2			Group 3		
	S2	S3	S6	S8	S9	S10	S13	S1	S5	S12	S4	S11	S7
1	1	1	3		3	1		6		11	3	3	2
2			1				1	5	2	4	4	3	7
3							2	2	4	2	4	4	3
4					1				3		2	3	1
5							1	2	2	1	4	1	5
6									2		2	3	
7								1	1		1	3	1
8											1		
9									1	1	4	3	1
10							1					1	3
11				1							4	1	1
12	1			3			1		2		3	1	4
13	2			1							1	1	1
14											2	2	1
15											1		4
16											2	1	5
17	2							1					3
18													
Total	6	1	4	5	4	1	6	17	17	19	38	30	42

*Note.* Blank spaces indicate the student recorded no readings for the week.

*Research Question #2 What reading materials contribute to an effective beginner JFL reading program?*

*Materials read by students.* Students read seven types of material during the study: Mini Books ( $k = 12$ ), five different levels of GRs ( $k = 187$ ),<sup>14</sup> and children's picture books ( $k = 3$ ). Table 7 summarizes the materials read by each student.

Most of the texts read were language learner literature ( $k = 187$ ; 98%) over children's picture books ( $k = 3$ ; 2%), and most were physical books ( $k = 152$ ; 80%) rather than digital books ( $k = 38$ ; 20%). In the first week, I brought about 20 children's books and observed many learners borrowing them. However, the learners soon returned them without completing a reading report. When asked why they did not submit a report, the learners responded that the children's texts were harder than expected and that GRs were easier to understand. By the end of the first week, students preferred borrowing GRs. Consequently, I reduced the proportion of children's books I brought to each class to 10 for the remainder of the semester.

<sup>14</sup> These included the books with the levels of 'Starter' ( $k = 4$ ), Level 0 ( $k = 89$ ), Level 1 ( $k = 68$ ), Level 2 ( $k = 12$ ), and Level 3 ( $k = 2$ ).

Table 7. *Materials Read by the Students*

Material Type	Group 1							Group 2			Group 3			Total
	S2	S3	S6	S8	S9	S10	S13	S1	S5	S12	S4	S7	S11	
Mini Books			4		2							6		12
Starter	1			3										4
Level 0	5	1		2		1	3	15	1	15	15	17	14	89
Level 1					2				13	2	18	19	14	68
Level 2							1		3	1	5		2	12
Level 3							1			1				2
Picture Books							1	2						3
Total	6	1	4	5	4	1	6	17	17	19	38	42	30	190

*Note.* Blank spaces indicate the student recorded no readings for the material type.

Most learners started with the easiest available material at the start of the semester (Mini Books or Level 0) and progressed to more difficult texts. Only two learners (S5, S9) started with more difficult texts. S5 primarily read Level 1 books throughout the study, and S9 started with a Level 1 GR, read two Mini Books, and then returned to Level 1. Group 3 learners spent more time with lower-level GRs (Level 0 and Level 1) before transitioning into higher-level GRs. In contrast, two learners, one from Group 1 (S13) and one from Group 2 (S5), started reading higher-level GRs earlier than Group 3.

*Reported comprehension for the materials read by students.* Further analysis revealed students perceived certain materials as more accessible based on their reported comprehension. Table 8 reports the students' average self-reported comprehension of each material.

Table 8. *Students' Self-Reported Comprehension by Material Type*

	Mini Books	Starter	Level 0	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Picture Books
Mean	99.83%	99.25%	77.56%	82.94%	69.17%	62.50%	45.00%
Standard Deviation	0.39%	01.50%	21.09%	12.25%	24.11%	17.68%	26.46%
Total Read	12	4	88	68	12	2	3

*Note.* Individual student's comprehension and reading times (including mean, standard deviation, and range) for each text type is presented in Appendix D.

On average, Mini Books (99.83%), Starter (99.25%), Level 1 (82.94%), and Level 0 (77.56%) GRs had the highest reported understanding. Higher-level GRs, such as Level 2 (69.17%) and Level 3 (62.50%), had lower average comprehension rates. Picture books had the lowest reported comprehension rates (45%), but only three readings contributed to this data. Individual student readings deviated from the mean by as much as 21.09% for Level 0 books and 12.25% for Level

1 books. Some variation resulted from different students' reported comprehension rates, but similar deviations were observed learners' individual reading (summarized in Appendix D). For example, when it came to Level 0 texts, S1 had a deviation of 21.73%, and S4 had a deviation of 20.94%.

Thus, there were instances where individual self-reports for each text varied considerably from the mean. For instance, Level 0 readings ranged from 20 to 29% in five cases and were above 98% in 11 cases. Additionally, there were 25 instances where Level 2 books were reported at 80% or higher comprehension, while both Level 3 and picture books were reported with as high as 75% comprehension. Table 9 displays the percentile of comprehension reported for each material read.

Table 9. *Number of Readings for Each Material Type by Self-Reported Comprehension*

Material	Self-Reported Comprehension (%)									Total
	100–98	97–90	89–80	79–70	69–60	59–50	49–40	39–30	29–20	
Mini Books	12									12
Starter	3	1								4
Level 0	11	24	28	6	5	5	3	2	5	89
Level 1	4	26	20	10	6	1	1			68
Level 2	1	3	1	2	2		2		1	12
Level 3				1		1				2
Picture Book				1				1	1	3
Total	31	54	49	20	13	7	6	3	7	190

*Note.* Blank spaces indicate no readings were recorded for the range.

While the Mini Book and Starter materials were reported with high comprehension, they consisted of shorter texts, often written in fragments of vocabulary or one short sentence per page. Consequently, their suitability as reading material might be questioned according to Waring and McLean's (2015) requirement that ER texts should occur at the discourse level.

*Student summaries.* Students' summaries indicated that variations in comprehension resulted not only from text level but also from text content and genre. In one instance of the Level 0 books, S4 self-reported understanding only 20%, the lowest reported comprehension in the study, of *Tokyo no Densha*, a book about trains in Tokyo, because S4 could not "recognize a lot of vocabulary," including "difficult movement verbs." Similarly, S4 reported 40% comprehension of a Level 1 text, *Kimono*, and wrote that it, "was a hard read since I don't know much about clothing-type words in Japanese. It reminds me of when I first read about trains—a lot of the verbs and nouns were new since I didn't know transportation-based vocabulary." In contrast, learners also reported a higher understanding of the higher-level GRs or children's stories due to previous knowledge.

S5 reported understanding 90% of the Level 2 book *Momotaro*, a classic Japanese folktale, and

wrote they “read the story before.” Similarly, S13 reported a 75% understanding of the Japanese translation of the picture book *Where the Wild Things Are* and the Level 3 GR, *Princess Kaguya*, stories which S13 reported being familiar with; the first was a text they read during their childhood and the second was a story they were currently reading in a Japanese literature class. Contrastingly, the other two picture books reported with under 40% comprehension were Japanese children’s literature unfamiliar to S1, who borrowed the two books from a local library to read to his children. In one case, S4 also demonstrated growth in familiarity with Level 2 books. Her comprehension for the last Level 2 books she read was much higher than when she started (80% vs. 40%), and she wrote that “after struggling through the last Level 2 book, this one felt a lot easier. Since I took a lot of time to look up the grammar and some words previously, there were quite a few familiar stuffs here.” Although looking up the words and grammar is indicative that S4 had likely read the previous texts intensively to a degree, it seems this ‘language-focused learning’ (Nation & Waring, 2020, p. 7) allowed S4 to become more familiar with the genre of expressions used in Level 2 books, to the benefit of reading with higher comprehension for meaning-focused input for ER.

Overall, the results indicate evidence that the Mini Book and Starter levels contribute to an effective beginner ER program by supporting readers to report an average comprehension rate as high as 99%. However, the resources might be questioned as discourse texts due to their fragmented nature, and there was only a limited amount of data regarding these texts. In some instances, the other materials also proved to be beneficial for beginner ER as they allowed learners to achieve 90% or higher reported comprehension. Furthermore, the student summaries revealed that the effectiveness of these materials for ER may vary depending on learners’ experiences and knowledge of genres and text content.

*Research Question #3 What can student performance tell us about the time needed to attain reading targets for beginner JFL reading in this study?*

According to Table 4, it took the average student about seven minutes to complete a reading. Thus, on average, it should take about 22 minutes per week to meet the weekly three-text reading target, with some variation. However, this overlooks variations in reading times for different materials. Table 10 displays the mean reading times reported for each GR alongside publishers’ text length standards.

Table 10. *Students’ Reading Times for Graded Reader Levels*

	Starter	Level 0	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3
Characters in text (According to publisher)	0–200	200–400	400–1,500	1,500–3,000	2,500–6000
Mean reading time	03:30	06:40	09:24	12:47	20:00
Standard Deviation	01:00	03:56	04:51	06:54	14:09
Range	02:00	23:00	24:00	19:00	20:00

*Note.* Individual students’ reading data for each level are available in Appendix D.

According to this data, to complete the weekly reading target, the average learner might spend 10 minutes per week using Starter GRs, 20 minutes using Level 0 texts, 28 minutes with Level 1 texts, 38 minutes with Level 2, and 1 hour per week using Level 3 texts. Some of these results are influenced by the students' different reading speeds. For instance, the mean reading time for Level 0, the most read material type ( $k = 89$ ), varied considerably around the mean with a range of 23 minutes. Table 11 illustrates this variance by showing how many minutes were taken to complete each reading for each material.

Table 11. *Reported Reading Times for Each Material Type*

Material	Self-Reported Reading Time (in Minutes)												Total
	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11–15	16–20	21–30	
Mini Books			1	5			2		4				12
Starter		3		1									4
Level 0	3	10	9	27	8	5	6	1	14	3	2	1	89
Level 1		1	2	4	7	15	8	2	5	10	3	2	59
Level 2				1			1	1	2	1		2	8
Level 3									1			1	2
Picture Book									1	2			3
Total	3	14	12	38	15	20	17	4	27	16	5	6	177

*Note.* The total readings are 177 and not 190 because, for some readings, learners responded that they were not sure how much time they spent. These values were omitted.

For Level 0 books, 93% ( $k = 83$ ) of readings were completed within 10 minutes, and all students who read Level 0 books contributed to this range. The mode response for Level 0 GRs was 5 minutes, representing all students' data except for S3, who completed only one reading in 10 minutes, and S2 and S5, who both only read one reading in two minutes. Comparable results were seen with Level 1 books, except that most students read within 15 minutes (91% of the readings), with a reported mode of seven minutes.

Therefore, assuming the longer reading times at these upper limits (10 minutes for Level 0; 15 minutes for Level 1), students' reading rates in this study suggest that to meet a weekly reading target of three texts, learners might have to spend 30 minutes reading Level 0 books or 45 minutes reading Level 1 books. However, limited data makes it challenging to conduct a substantial analysis of the other material types.

## Discussion

### *Graded Readers versus Children's Literature*



The learners' preference to select GRs ( $k = 187$ ) over children's literature ( $k = 3$ ) suggests GRs were more accessible. This is interesting when considering past studies exclusively used children's literature due to a lack of Japanese GRs (Hitosugi & Day, 2004; Leung, 2002). Although learners were exposed to both children's literature and GRs, the proportion of children's literature brought to each class (10 texts) may have influenced the outcome. Future studies should provide an equal proportion of texts to control for any variance. Nonetheless, the decline in interest in children's literature after week one, attributed by the learners to comprehension difficulties, suggests learners perceived GRs as preferable to the children's literature for comprehensible input. Similar difficulty is expressed by Leung (2002), a beginner JFL learner who engaged in ER using children's literature: "it can be frustrating if I open a children's book and find that it is too difficult for me to read" (p. 75). Likewise, Tabata-Sandom's (2013) observation that lower proficiency learners enjoyed low-level GRs the more they understood them also highlights the importance of text comprehension and learner perceptions of materials.

The learners' difficulty with children's literature aligns with our understanding of how vocabulary coverage affects comprehension in ER. The consensus among ER research suggests that familiarity with 95% (Laufer, 1989) to 98% (Hu & Nation, 2000; Nation & Waring, 2000; Schmitt et al., 2011) of the words in a text is necessary to facilitate unassisted comprehension. Children's literature tends to contain more lower-frequency vocabulary compared to GRs in English (Nation, 2006; Webb & Macalister, 2013). Publishers of Japanese GRs also claim to control for grammar and vocabulary, and use high-frequency vocabulary terms from the Japanese Language Proficiency Test (Awano et al., 2012; Takahashi et al., 2022). However, Peterson's (2019) database suggests some Japanese GRs may also include low-frequency vocabulary, with the publishers allowing such cases when the difficult word is accompanied by illustrations (Awano et al., 2012; Takahashi et al., 2022). Besides Peterson's (2019) database of Japanese ER resources, it appears no study has conducted a comprehensive corpus analysis of both Japanese GRs and children's literature. Thus, the findings related to English cannot be assumed for Japanese. Furthermore, the effectiveness of illustrations as comprehension aids in children's literature and GRs in this context remains unclear. Finally, this study did not control for participants' lexical knowledge, making it unclear how learners' knowledge affected their comprehension and, consequently, their choice of material.

Orthography differences between GRs and children's literature can also influence learners' perception of comprehensibility. Children's literature primarily uses *hiragana* to accommodate children who have not learned the other scripts. In contrast, the GRs use *hiragana*, *katakana*, and *kanji* with *furigana* aids. Using only *hiragana* removes contextual clues from other scripts. For example, *kanji* carry specific meanings, and *katakana* usually signifies non-Japanese loan words. Because comprehension involves one's prior knowledge (Anderson & Pearson, 1988), learners familiar with the uses of the scripts will have more information to work with when reading GRs than children's literature. For instance, Leung (2002), whose L1 is Chinese, reported difficulty reading Japanese children's books as a beginner learner because of the lack of *kanji*. L2 learners like Leung, whose L1 is logographic or morpheme-based, have been shown to exhibit more visual reliance in processing words and less phonological reliance when compared to the learners in this study, whose L1 is alphabetic or sound-based (Mori & Mori, 2011). However, Chikamatsu (2006) also found that learners with higher L2 Japanese proficiency whose L1 was

alphabetic began relying more on visuals than lower proficiency alphabetic L1 learners. In this study, S4, one of the more advanced of the beginner learners, having read the second most texts ( $k = 38$ ), welcomed the inclusion of *kanji* in the GRs because it helped in distinguishing word meaning:

Something interesting I found when reading was that sometimes I'd forget certain words, looking at the *kanji* helped me remember more than the *hiragana* reading. The *kanji* was more distinctive and especially in words with multiple *kanji*, just knowing one helped make the whole word more understandable.

In this case, S4 exhibited a visual reliance on *kanji* like that of an advanced JFL learner. Unlike children's literature, GRs allow learners the opportunity to use their prior knowledge of the different scripts as clues in distinguishing the meaning of words in the text. Such an ability is favorable for ER, as it allows learners to infer meaning, a skill which aligns with general ER principles like those which suggest avoiding dictionary use (Awano et al., 2012; Day & Bamford, 1998; Takahashi et al., 2022).

Another reason adult learners may avoid children's literature is the cognitive appropriateness of the text. In research involving a similar population of second-semester JFL learners, Hitosugi and Day (2004) noted that "[children's] literature ... is not at the appropriate cognitive level for university students" (p. 23) and displayed concerns that the learners would perceive the books as "childish and ... be insulted by having to read them" (p. 24). It is possible learners in this study felt similarly, but we cannot be certain. Future research could explore this using an ethnographic approach, interviewing learners to understand their material preferences.

Interestingly, two learners chose to read children's literature. The first read a translation of *Where the Wild Things Are*, one of their favorite children's stories. The second was a parent who borrowed two picture books from their local library to read with their children. Children's literature offered the first learner an appropriate cognitive stimulus, motivated by their interest in the story (Day & Bamford, 1998), and the learner likely reported higher comprehension (75%) due to their prior knowledge (Anderson & Pearson, 1988). For the second learner, their sociocultural environment (i.e., interacting with their family) motivated them to read children's literature (Day & Bamford, 1998), but their unfamiliarity with the texts led to low self-reported comprehension (25% and 35%). In addition to factors such as interest in the materials, reading ability, attitudes towards reading, and sociocultural environment (Day & Bamford, 1998, pp. 27–30), learners' decision to read these texts is also influenced by their prior schematic knowledge (Anderson & Pearson, 1988).<sup>15</sup> Thus, it may still be relevant for educators to offer a selection of familiar children's literature materials to leverage learners' reading motivations (Day & Bamford, 1998, pp. 27–30) and their prior knowledge (Anderson & Pearson, 1988). Additionally, future research could explore how beginner JFL learners' schematic knowledge (Anderson & Pearson, 1988), experiences, and shared social histories (Aebbersold & Field, 1997) may be utilized to motivate learners to care about reading and share reading with others in another language.

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<sup>15</sup> In hosting an ER club at the university, I have observed learners express similar excitement for books with characters familiar to them, such as Winnie the Pooh, Mickey Mouse, and Where's Waldo.

### *Physical Versus Digital Materials*

Most of the texts read by the learners were physical ( $k = 152$ ) rather than digital ( $k = 38$ ), which aligns with literature reporting that JFL learners tend to prefer physical texts over digital ones (Tabata-Sandom, 2016; Yoshimura & Kobayashi, 2018). However, the outcome may have been affected because the digital texts were less actively presented to the learners than the physical texts. Moreover, with the COVID-19 pandemic necessitating a shift to online learning (Askari & Chen, 2021; Bentahar & Alalou, 2022), more studies have demonstrated the benefits of online ER, such as learners' improved reading attitudes and easier access to materials (Bui & Macalister, 2021; de Lozier, 2019; Puripunyanich, 2021; Zhou & Day, 2021). Therefore, it is difficult to claim that JFL learners still prefer physical texts over digital texts due to fast-changing trends regarding online reading. Despite their less active presentation, 38 digital texts were read by four learners, with S6 having read exclusively digital texts. These preferences may also have been influenced by the different content of GRs in print versus digital form. Although learners had access to the digital versions of printed GRs, a cross-comparison of the Google Form, where learners submitted their reading for grading, and the checkout book, which recorded the physical books they borrowed, indicated that learners only submitted a reading report in the Google Form for books they checked out. This suggests that the learners used the physical versions rather than the online versions. Instead, all the online readings reported in the study were free online GR resources. Peterson's (2019) database suggests that certain free online GRs are typically shorter in length than the paid print GRs categorized at the same level. Future research could investigate the impact of these materials on ER by comparing the content between paid print GRs and free digital GRs.

### *Learner Reported Comprehension and Materials Selection*

Learners' data indicated some instances of high comprehension, but on average, self-reported comprehension was below 90%. The most effective materials for higher average reported comprehension were Mini Books (99.83%), Starter (99.25%), Level 1 (82.94%), and Level 0 (77.56%). While the Starter and Mini Books seem most accessible, due to their short, fragmented content, their effectiveness as ER resources is questionable according to Waring and McLean's (2015) qualification that materials should be at the "discourse and ideas level" (p. 164). On the other hand, they serve the purpose of assisting beginner learners in developing their fluency skills, and as Waring and McLean (2015) note, if the input is meaning-focused, beginner learners can "still be said to be 'doing ER'" (p. 164). The GR series used in this study advises learners to "start with easy books" (Awano et al., 2012; Takahashi et al., 2022), but even Level 0 books might be too difficult for some learners. Although fragmented, these lower-level books offer an alternative starting point for comprehensible input.<sup>16</sup> After introducing the Starter books into the curriculum in week 11, learners in Group 1 (S2, S8) briefly began to read again using these materials, perhaps because they saw another opportunity for a place to start. Thus, even if shorter

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<sup>16</sup> In my experience hosting ER workshops, beginner learners often express the belief that they do not know enough Japanese yet to read anything. However, after sharing with them some of easiest resources, such as Mini and Starter books, they notice that there are texts within their ability and will start to read with these texts.

than typical discourse-level texts, the Starter and Mini Books can be effective resources to aid students struggling to start reading.

A crucial takeaway is the large deviations in reported comprehension within the same levels of GRs. The learners' reading summaries suggest these deviations are partly influenced by students' prior knowledge (Anderson & Pearson, 1988). Despite the controlled grammar, vocabulary, and text length of GRs (Awano et al., 2012; Takahashi et al., 2022), learners' reported comprehension can vary significantly (as much as 80%), influenced by the content or genre of the text (i.e., informative narrative about trains vs. a story narrative of a Japanese folk tale). Learners' reported comprehension can vary despite books being labeled at the same difficulty level. An area of future research might be to conduct an analysis of the content and genres of Japanese GRs and how they affect learners' reading. Peterson (2019) has begun to identify genres in his database of Japanese ER resources, but it would be interesting to see if the availability of these genre labels may also help scaffold learners to proficiency in these genres, in addition to gaining proficiency in reading at the controlled level. Furthermore, Gillis-Furutaka's (2015) findings, as discussed earlier in the literature review, indicate that there are more difficult aspects of GRs beyond vocabulary. A more comprehensive corpus analysis might uncover similar aspects in Japanese GRs.

It must be noted that the measurement of comprehension in this study was limited due to the use of self-reported data, which is subjective and unreliable as a measurement of comprehension. Furthermore, this study did not assess learner proficiency, making it difficult to ascertain how previous language experience impacted learners' performance. Finally, high reported comprehension does not necessarily indicate learners read extensively. According to Waring and McLean (2015), the main difference between ER and IR is that ER focuses on the meaning of the text rather than on language forms. Therefore, reporting comprehension alone does not reveal whether learners focused more on meaning or forms. As Waring and McLean (2015) write, it may not "be possible given our current battery of research tools to strictly determine the threshold for when learners are reading 'extensively' (p. 163). However, the reports here serve as a starting point for investigating materials that were likely not read extensively, such as those with low reported comprehension (e.g., Level 2—69.17% and Level 3—62.50%), as low comprehension suggests learners experienced more 'reading pain' (Day & Bamford, 1998) and focused on language forms while reading. Conversely, texts with higher reported comprehension might indicate the texts were easy enough to be read extensively, but without additional interviews or coding of learners' reading summaries for evidence of meaning-focused processing, it is unclear whether the texts were read intensively or extensively.

Learner performance in this study has implications for assigning reading targets for the most-read material types: Level 0 and Level 1. Table 11 showed that most of the Level 0 texts (93%) were reportedly completed within 10 minutes, while most of Level 1 (91%) texts were reportedly completed within 15 minutes. Although these findings cannot be generalized due to limited convenience samples of learners, they provide insights into how long learners might take to read these materials. Future studies might gather more extensive samples for increased generalizability. Additionally, if future research conducts a text analysis to count characters per text (e.g., Brierly et al., 2020), this will allow for reading targets to be assessed by the exact number of characters read by learners, such as the target proposed for intermediate JFL learners

by Peterson (2022). Peterson (2019) has started to count characters for Japanese GRs, but there are still many texts to count. Thus, one variable potentially influencing the lower reading volume in this study, compared to the 32-text average reported by Hitosugi and Day (2004), could be the variance in character count between children's picture books and GRs. However, these texts need an in-depth comparative analysis to confirm if such a variance exists. Additionally, the variance may be due to extrinsic motivation. For instance, it may be argued that Group 2 and 3 students in this study read solely for grades, which might not be the best motivator. Future research should consider additional motivators, such as using class time for ER (Hitosugi & Day, 2004) or showing students how reading impacts their performance on tests, quizzes, or other aspects of learning.

### *Estimating Reading Targets*

More broadly, the reading rates recorded here may help address students' and teachers' concerns about the time needed for ER. Macalister (2010) found teachers were worried that they did not have enough time to include ER in an already demanding curriculum. Mohar (2024) notes similar concerns in doing ER from teachers and students at the university where the present study was done. Teachers must carefully observe their institution's expectations for how much study learners are expected to do outside of class per course credit, how many of those hours are currently assigned to students through existing assignments, and how much time may be left for ER. Once clarified, these reading rates could serve as a baseline for estimating reading targets for student homework. Additionally, to alleviate the pressure of out-of-class activities competing for ER time, educators could allocate class time to ER, and such inclusion of in-class ER may also help in motivating students to do out-of-class ER (Hitosugi & Day, 2004; Nation & Waring, 2020). However, it is not practical to generalize the reported reading times here to all beginner JFL learners, as appropriate reading targets will depend on learners' abilities, the institutional setting, and learners' available time to do ER, among their other responsibilities.

### *The Need to Monitor Students*

Finally, the results underscore the importance of monitoring students' reading habits to identify learners who may need more encouragement. As shown in Table 6, learners inconsistently completed readings, occasionally skipping weeks or cramming readings near the end. Similar reading behavior was observed in a case study of an ER program at Kyoto Sangyo University, where learners "tended to cram the reading towards the end of the semester" (Nation & Waring, 2020, p. 41). In a comparable context, Dixon (2023) found that JFL learners were less likely to complete weekly flashcard review goals without assigned deadlines, often cramming reviews near the semester's end. Thus, requiring a weekly reading target could help encourage consistent reading habits.

## **Conclusion**

This study contributes to the field of ER research by investigating the reading of beginner JFL learners. Overall, most learners read GRs ( $k = 187$ ) over children's literature ( $k = 3$ ), and physical books ( $k = 152$ ) over digital books ( $k = 38$ ), but further study is needed to confirm whether the results were affected by the proportion of texts offered, the degree digital texts were

actively presented, or content differences between physical and digital texts. The quantitative results show learners occasionally followed Waring and McLean's (2015) principles, including high reported comprehension (90% or above), reading large volumes of text (ranging from 15 to 42 texts), and reading across the period (Group 3 learners). Furthermore, learners' summaries suggest that reported comprehension is influenced by familiarity with vocabulary and text genres. Overall, the lower-level GRs were generally more accessible than other materials, but the Mini Books and Starter GRs may not meet Waring and McLean's (2015) discourse-level requirement for ER materials. Future research should investigate the efficacy of these materials and the impact of genres on beginner JFL learners' ER.

A limitation of the quantitative results is that they do not clarify whether learners focused more on language features (IR) or text meaning (ER). Future research could explore this by coding book reviews to verify whether learners focus more on language forms or text meaning. However, the instructions given to learners must be carefully considered, as they influence learners' summaries. In this study, prompting learners to summarize the story or share something they learned may have led them to produce meaning-focused reports. Interviews could also help assess learners' text processing. Finally, self-reports are unreliable for measuring learners' true comprehension, so future studies should include assessments of comprehension in addition to self-reports.

The findings of this study suggest that teachers implementing ER for JFL learners at lower levels should include various introductory GR materials. Furthermore, the reading rate outcomes can serve as a baseline for setting reading targets: JFL learners in this study typically finished Level 0 texts in 10 minutes and Level 1 texts in 15 minutes. Nevertheless, it is crucial that educators consider their own local institutional context when establishing reading targets for beginner JFL learners. Lastly, teachers should carefully monitor learner participation to identify and encourage low-participating students to continue in their efforts to read in the second language.

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## Appendix A

### *Syllabus Section for Extensive Reading Homework*

#### Extensive Reading (5%):

Extensive reading (ER) is reading a lot of readings you find easy. ER should be enjoyable and not too difficult like intensive reading we often do in class. The purpose of reading extensively is to build our reading fluency. More info [here](#).

#### What you need to do for your grade:

Read books (or online readings of at least 150 characters long) extensively. Some time will be given to read in class, but most reading must be done outside of class. After reading, record the book in the reading [form](#).

#### Grading information:

The target reading goal is 45 readings over 15 weeks. (Average of 3 short readings per week). Reading more will earn you bonus points towards your final grade:

Readings Completed	Credit for Final Grade
46-66	1% bonus for every 4 readings
45	5%
35-44	3.5%
25-34	2.5%
24 or fewer	1.5%

#### What can I read?

You can select from: (1) the list of online readings, (2) the books I bring to class, or (3) your own texts (at least 150 characters, if online). Chapters or segments of longer readings (manga, light novels, etc.), may also count as “one reading.”

## **Appendix B**

### *Google Form*

1. Name of the text and the date read.
2. How long did it take to read? If unsure, enter “0.” Record time spent actively reading.
3. Roughly, how much of the text did you understand? (e.g., 0-100%)
4. Give a summary of the reading and your thoughts of it (it doesn’t have to be very long). Or share something from the reading you learned or found interesting.

## Appendix C

### *Weekly Schedule for Assessments in Japanese 102*

	<b>M</b>	<b>T</b>	<b>W</b>	<b>TH</b>	<b>F</b>
<b>01</b>	Orientation	Review	Review		Review
<b>02</b>	MLK Jr. Day	Begin Lesson 5			
<b>03</b>					
<b>04</b>					Lesson 5 Test
<b>05</b>	Begin Lesson 6				
<b>06</b>					
<b>07</b>	Presidents' Day				Lesson 6 Test
<b>08</b>	Listening Test 1	Oral Test 1	Oral Test 1		Oral Test 1
<b>09</b>	Begin Lesson 7				
<b>10</b>	<b>SPRING RECESS</b>				
<b>11</b>					
<b>12</b>	State Holiday				
<b>13</b>					State Holiday
<b>14</b>	Lesson 7 Test	Begin Lesson 8			
<b>15</b>					
<b>16</b>			Listening Test 2		Oral Test 2
<b>17</b>	Oral Test 2	Oral Test 2	Last Class	Study Period	Study Period
<b>18</b>			FINAL EXAM		

Holiday / Non-class day

## Appendix D

*Mean (M), Standard Deviation (SD), and Range (R) of Reading Data for Each Material*

**Table 1D**

*Mini Book Series*

Student #	Texts Read	Text Comprehension (%)			Reading Time		
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>R</i>
S6	4	99.75	00.50	01.00	10:00	00:00	00:00
S7	6	99.83	00.41	01.00	04:50	00:24	01:00
S9	2	100.0	00.00	00.00	08:00	00:00	00:00
Overall	12	99.83	00.39	01.00	07:05	02:28	06:00

**Table 2D**

*Starter*

Student #	Texts Read	Text Comprehension (%)			Reading Time		
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>R</i>
S2	1	97.00	--	--	0:05:00	--	--
S8	3	100.0	00.00	0.00	0:03:00	0:00:00	0:00:00
Overall	4	99.25	01.50	0.30	0:03:30	0:01:00	0:02:00

**Table 3D**

*Level 0*

Student #	Texts Read	Text Comprehension (%)			Reading Time		
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>R</i>
S1	15	50.00	24.73	70.00	11:40	05:25	20:00
S2	5	91.00	06.52	15.00	08:12	02:03	05:00
S3	1	80.00	--	--	10:00	--	--
S4	15	68.00	20.94	70.00	07:34	04:00	14:00
S5	1	95.00	--	--	02:33	--	--
S7	17	88.82	14.09	50.00	04:04	00:58	03:00
S8	2	92.50	03.54	05.00	05:15	00:21	00:30
S10	1	90.00	--	--	02:20	--	--
S11	14	82.14	05.45	20.00	05:26	01:01	04:00
S12	15	86.67	14.96	50.00	05:00	02:04	07:00
S13	3	80.00	10.00	20.00	07:20	02:31	05:00
Overall	89	77.56	21.09	80.00	06:40	03:56	23:00

**Table 4D**

*Level 1*

Student #	Texts Read	Text Comprehension (%)			Reading Time		
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>R</i>
S4	18	73.60	13.37	55.00	16:27	06:56	21:00
S5	13	93.46	02.40	05.00	09:40	02:10	07:33
S7	19	87.11	09.90	40.00	07:03	03:30	17:00

S9	2	100.0	00.00	00.00	12:30	03:32	05:00
S11	14	78.93	07.12	30.00	07:17	02:16	09:00
S12	2	70.00	07.07	10.00	10:00	00:00	00:00
Overall	68	82.94	12.25	60.00	09:24	04:51	24:00

**Table 5D***Level 2*

Student #	Texts Read	Text Comprehension (%)			Reading Time		
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>R</i>
S4	5	57.00	17.18	40.00	23:30	00:42	01:00
S5	3	91.67	02.89	05.00	10:04	01:30	02:59
S11	2	72.50	03.54	05.00	10:00	00:00	00:00
S12	1	100.0	--	--	05:00	--	--
S13	1	25.00	--	--	--	--	--
Overall	12	69.17	24.11	75.00	12:47	06:54	19:00

**Table 6D***Level 3*

Student #	Texts Read	Text Comprehension (%)			Reading Time		
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>R</i>
S12	1	50.00	--	--	10:00	--	--
S13	1	75.00	--	--	30:00	--	--
Overall	2	62.50	17.68	25.00	20:00	14:09	20:00

**Table 7D***Picture Books*

Student #	Texts Read	Text Comprehension (%)			Reading Time		
		<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>R</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>R</i>
S1	2	30.00	7.07	10.00	12:30	03:32	05:00
S13	1	75.00	--	--	15:00	--	--
Overall	3	45.00	26.46	50.00	13:20	02:53	05:00

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