

## Boosting students' motivation to read in Japanese using reading journals

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Key words : Motivation, Reading in Japanese, Reading journal, Japanese language education

### Abstract

Reading skill plays an integral role in furthering one's Japanese learning. To foster students' motivation to read, the effects of extensive reading using journal entries have been examined in past studies. This paper examines the relationship between reading journals and students' motivation to read, through a 5-week period reading project. Participants were given multiple short reading materials for Japanese learners and tasked to take notes of their learning outcomes in detail. Data from journal entries and surveys before and after the project were analyzed to observe any internal changes participants experienced. The pre-study survey illustrated mixed feelings towards reading in Japanese: while the majority expressed positive attitudes towards reading in Japanese, their level of confidence in reading in Japanese was not high. Participants identified limited grammatical and Kanji knowledge as reasons for their low confidence. The 5-week reading project gave participants an opportunity to read all on their own, using contexts and illustrations as clues. The post-study survey showed that the majority of the participants enjoyed being part of the project, and now feel motivated to continue reading in Japanese, despite still facing difficulties with Kanji. Their confidence level saw an overall increase.

### 1. Introduction

Reading is an essential ability for Japanese-language students. To further their Japanese studies, students are required to actively seek information or data in Japanese, as Fukumoto and Indoh <sup>[1]</sup> point out. An active attitude towards learning helps students to expand the scope of their interests, as well as their knowledge. Though students exhibit diverse language learning experiences, learning beliefs and approaches, Park <sup>[2]</sup> notes that "how to encourage and enable our students to engage in the learning process" is a constant challenge that teachers face.

One way to look at this challenge is to design self-reflective learning with which students can actively engage. Umeda <sup>[3]</sup> argues that "because the learning process takes place within each individual learner, it is essential for learners to take control of

their studies."

A journal is commonly used to assess students' active engagement in the learning process <sup>[4][5]</sup>. According to Fabriz et al <sup>[6]</sup>, journals facilitate students' reflection on learning content and their own learning behavior. With this self-focused approach, students become more aware of their learning styles, and therefore this method is ideal for enabling autonomous learning by students. In Japanese studies, Kawana <sup>[7]</sup> and de Burgh-Hirabe and Feryok <sup>[8]</sup> conducted extensive reading using journals in search of factors influencing students' motivation.

This paper explores the relationship between reading journals and students' motivation, examining students' attitude towards reading in Japanese before and after a 5-week reading period. There is a significant potential for more effective use of reading journals to help

learners achieve positive outcomes and attitude towards learning. Combining a reflective journal and reading exercise, this paper aims to analyze the following question: Would students' motivation to read be affected by keeping reading journals?

This study differs from the studies highlighted above because it was conducted outside of class as a completely voluntary project. Furthermore, with the use of the reading journal that prompts self-reflection, this study was designed to shed light on positive learning experiences.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. Participants

18 Japanese language students participated in this voluntary study. The participants were enrolled in Level 2 (Lower-Intermediate) and Level 3 (Intermediate) Japanese language courses at the Centre for Language Learning (CLL), University of the West Indies (UWI), St. Augustine Campus, in Trinidad and Tobago. While the CLL belongs to the university, Japanese language courses are open to the public including but not limited to university students. The project was conducted during the 5-week Christmas break of 2019, between December 9th, 2019 and January 12th, 2020. During this period, there were no Japanese classes at the CLL. The project period was carefully coordinated to fall into this period, so that the project would not get in the way of participants' regular Japanese class preparation or revision. The participants were classed into two groups based on their enrollment level: 11 participants from Level 2 (Group 1), and 7 participants from Level 3 (Group 2). Table 1 summarizes the background information on the participants from both levels.

Table 1 Project participants and background information  
Group 1 (Level 1 students)

Participant Number	Student/Non-student	Age	Years of learning Japanese
Participant No.1	University student	28	1-2 years
Participant No.2	Non-student	24	1-2 years
Participant No.3	University student	21	2-3 years

Participant No.4	Non-student	24	1-2 years
Participant No.5	Non-student	22	1-2 years
Participant No.6	Non-student	24	1-2 years
Participant No.7	University student	23	5 years +
Participant No.8	Non-student	26	1-2 years
Participant No.9	University student	21	1-2 years
Participant No.10	Non-student	24	1-2 years
Participant No.11	Non-student	Unknown	Unknown

### Group 2 (Level 3 students)

Participant Number	Student/Non-student	Age	Years of learning Japanese
Participant No.12	University student	22	2-3 years
Participant No.13	Non-student	25	2-3 years
Participant No.14	Non-student	29	2-3 years
Participant No.15	Non-student	21	2-3 years
Participant No.16	Non-student	25	2-3 years
Participant No.17	University student	21	3-4 years
Participant No.18	University student	21	2-3 years

### 2.2. Project details

Participants were encouraged to read one new book per week, so that they read 5 books during the period of this project. However, they were also allowed to read two books in the first 4 weeks (read half of a book in a week), and read one new book on the final week. This was to give participants choices, so that they could pace themselves if they needed to.

In order to understand participants' existing motivation towards reading in Japanese, as well as their take on reading in both English and Japanese, participants were asked to fill out the "Reading Awareness Survey" before the start of the project. At the end of the week 5, they were asked to fill out the "Post-project Survey". The purpose of this survey was

to get feedback from participants about their project experience and also to find out if the project affected their overall motivation in reading in Japanese. Prior to the start of the 5-week period, participants were informed that these two surveys were part of the project, and were instructed to complete the Reading Awareness Survey to confirm their participation. The findings from these surveys can be found in later chapters.

While the authors kept track of the participants' engagement in the project by the reading journal, the authors communicated with participants on WhatsApp to send them reminder for each weekly deadline to encourage participants timely submission of journals. Reminders were sent only once at the end of every week, on Sundays. Reminders were kept minimal so that the message from the authors would not make the participants feel obligated to complete the weekly tasks, which otherwise could defeat the purpose of enhancing their autonomous learning.

The journal was administered in Google Sheets format (See Table 2), and featured 4 fields for data entry:

1. Book Title
2. Weekly Frequency of Reading Sessions
3. Reading Method: Participants were given examples of methods that would assist in reading the texts (e.g. guessing unfamiliar words from context, reading aloud) and asked to note which methods were used in each week. They were also encouraged to explore further methods for themselves.
4. Learning Outcomes and or Questions: Participants were encouraged to note their learning outcomes in detail, including new Kanji learnt, new vocabulary acquired, and grammar rules assimilated. They were also instructed to take note of any difficulties understanding the material due to cultural differences.

Table 2 Format of the reading journal

	Examples suggested by the authors as a reference to the participants	<b>Week 1 12/9(Mon) - 12/15(Sun)</b>
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Which book did you read?	したきりすずめ	
How many times did you read the material?	3	
Please explain your reading method	<i>First time I tried to read from start to finish without using looking up any words. Second time I looked up some words that I had absolutely no idea. Third time I looked up all the words I couldn't remember well.</i>	
Things you've learnt (ex: new Kanji, grammar, phrases etc)	<p><i>• I learnt several new adjectives such as 大きい (large, big), 小さい (small). Also learnt that チュンチュン represents sparrows' sound in Japanese.</i></p> <p><i>• I thought I wasn't good at remembering verbs but I was able to recognize and understand several grammars such as うたいます, おどります, いいます, たべます etc.</i></p>	

As for the reading method, there were no specific regulations about the usage of translation software or dictionaries. This was to give participants as much choice as possible, to aid their motivation.

To enforce the reading schedule and the writing of the journal, participants were required to submit the journal every week to the authors. In return, they received acknowledgement or feedback from the authors, especially when they noted questions or in-depth observations about Japanese culture. Responses to the questions were sent by email.

This project adapted reading materials targeted for beginners to intermediate Japanese language learners: ①KC Yomu Yomu<sup>[9]</sup>, ②Yomimono Ippai<sup>[10]</sup> and ③Japanese Graded Readers<sup>[11]</sup>. The first two series were accessible from their official website, and the third series was accessible from the Self-study facility in the CLL. These materials featured colorful illustrations and furigana for Kanji. Some materials featured vertical writing (tategaki) while others were formatted horizontally. Reading materials for each group were chosen based on the word count and targeted language levels suggested by publishers. Tables 3 and 4 summarize the list of reading materials for each group.

Table 3 List of reading materials for Group 1

Title	Word count	Source
お菊さん (Okiku-san)	300	①
マンホール (Manhole)	550	①
釣り日記 秋の大阪湾編 (Fishing diary: Autumn in Osaka)	640	①
インドネシアおめでとうの日 (Indonesian birthday)	1641	②
若返り川 (Rejuvenating river)	1115	②
西町交番の良さん「にわにわに？」 (Ryosan from Nichi-machi police station: A crocodile in the garden?)	386	③
舌切り雀 (Tongue cut sparrow)	1428	③
バス (Bus)	1138	③

Table 4 List of reading materials for Group 2

Title	Word count	Source
絵姿奥さん (Portrait wife)	1404	③
かぐや姫 (Princess Kaguya)	3858	③
クリスマスプレゼント (Christmas present)	2196	③
桃太郎 (Momotaro)	1700	③
注文の多い料理店 (The restaurant of many orders)	3371	③
インドネシアおめでとうの日 (Indonesian birthday)	1641	②
清姫 (Princess Kiyo)	500	①
左腕のあざ (A birthmark on the left arm)	3648	②
兵どもが夢のあと (The summer grasses—Of brave soldiers' dreams the aftermath)	1671	②
マンホール (Manhole)	550	①
夏海とルーク, そして Kiri (Natsumi, Luke and Kiri)	3641	②

### 3. Findings

#### 3.1. Reading Awareness Survey

The pre-project survey was called “Reading Comprehension Awareness” and divided into two major sections: reading habits in their native language, and reading habits in Japanese. The native language in this case was English, the official language of Trinidad and Tobago. This Awareness survey was conducted to assess participants’ general stance towards reading, and to explore their self-image of their reading proficiency in Japanese.

This Awareness survey gathered 18 responses in total, and revealed that while participants held positive attitudes toward reading in both English and Japanese, they had little confidence in their Japanese reading ability. The high level of reading interest is not unexpected, given that the project was conducted on a voluntary basis and would therefore be expected to attract for highly enthusiastic participants.

To the question “Do you like reading in your native language?”, nearly 90% responded favorably, with 9 participants (50%) answering that they “love reading” and 8 (44%) answering that they “like reading”. See Figure 1 below.

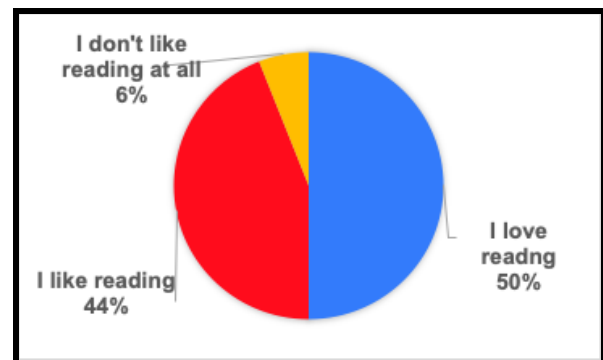


Fig.1 Participants’ attitude towards reading in their native language

When asked if they like reading in Japanese, two-thirds of participants responded favorably, with 2 (11%) answering they “love it”, and 11 (61%) answering they “like it.” 5 (28%) answered that they don’t have any particular feelings or they have neutral feelings toward reading in Japanese. See Figure 2 below.

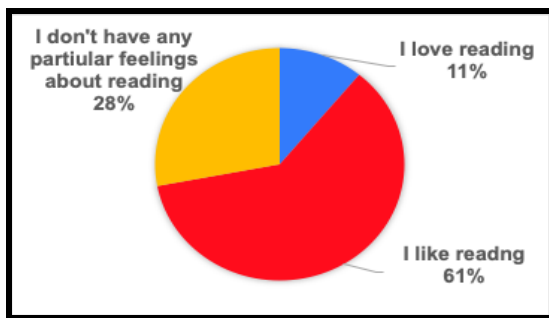


Fig.2 Participants' attitude towards reading in Japanese

While participants generally showed positive attitudes toward reading in Japanese, the question about their confidence in reading exhibited diverse responses. They were asked to express their confidence on a scale of 0 (least confidence) to 5 (most confidence). As shown in Figure 3, only 2 (11.1%) participants expressed relatively strong confidence in reading. These participants were from Level 3, and it can be said that they generally had more exposure to Japanese texts compared to Level 2 participants. 6 (33.3%) answered they have a scale 3 level of confidence in reading (some confidence), and 7 (38.9%) showed a scale 2 level (little confidence). 3 (16.7%) participants showed a scale 1 level.

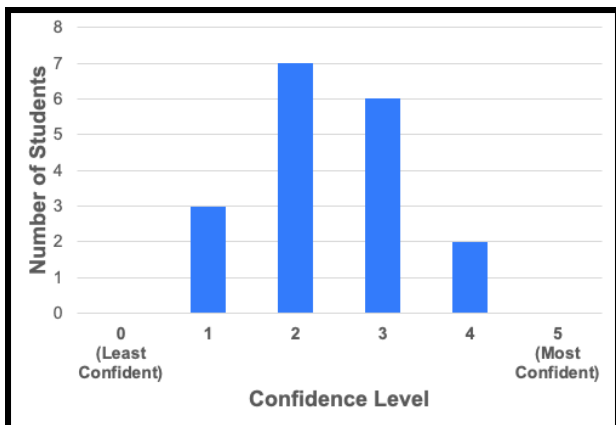


Fig.3 Participants' confidence level in reading in Japanese

The final question on the Awareness survey was about the types of problems they encounter in reading in Japanese (see Figure 4), and 12 (66.7%) pointed out Kanji as their main issues. This is a common challenge for students with no logographic language background, as discussed in studies [12][13]. The second most

common difficulty was with grammar, which garnered 2 responses (11.1%).

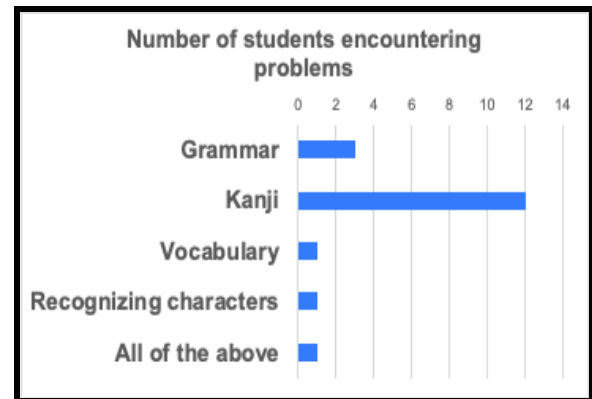


Fig.4 Types of problem participants encounter in reading in Japanese

### 3.2. Reading Journals

This section explains the findings and observations based on the reading journals that were submitted by the 18 participants.

When it comes to the amount of times they read the books, it was between 1 and 4 times. Three trends were observed in the data:

1. 3 participants read each book with fixed weekly frequency (e.g. the chosen book was read once during any given week), whereas the other 15 participants varied their reading frequency from week to week.
2. For 15 participants, the difficulty of the books affected their weekly reading frequency.
3. 2 participants increased their reading frequency in certain weeks, to read the books for pure leisure. They reported that the engaging nature of the stories motivated them to pursue these extra readings.

Participants often detailed the reasons for their weekly reading frequency in the “reading method” section of the journal. For example, when Participant No.15 from Group 2 read a book twice in a given week, they reasoned that “it was fairly simple to understand. [They were] able to read it with not much trouble”, and Participant No.6 from Group 1 read a book once, explaining that “[the] majority of the sentences were easy and straightforward to read and understand,



except for the new words [they] had to look up in order to understand.”

As for the reading method, the most common way was to read without relying on any external resources first, then look up words on second reading and then read again to make sure if they can understand everything. The following are excerpts from participants' journals:

“For the first read, I read it from start to finish without looking up the meanings. For the second read I looked up all the words that I didn't know. I waited a day and reread the book for the third time. For the third read I was able to remember the Kanji and the words that I didn't know at first.” (Participant No.16 from Group 2)

“In the first reading, I read through the story in its entirety without using a dictionary. For the second reading, I used a dictionary to search for unfamiliar words. Lastly, the third time, in order to have a fluid read-through of the story, I read it from beginning to end, having had a better understanding of vocabulary.” (Participant No.5 from Group 1)

This kind of careful approach was especially observed in weeks 1 and 2, when participants were adjusting to reading books in Japanese. As the weeks went by and the participants felt more comfortable reading, their weekly reading frequency tended to be reduced.

“1st reading: I read the book without looking up any unknown or unfamiliar words. 2nd reading: I looked up unknown words and unfamiliar Kanji whilst reading the book.” (Participant No.7 from Group 1)

“I read the book once without looking up any new words/areas of difficulty. I then read it again and searched for any new words/areas of difficulty. After I read the story a second time, I wrote a summary of the story in Japanese.” (Participant No.17 from Group 2)

Table 5 shows other methods that were observed in participants' journals.

Table 5 Other observed methods

Other observed methods	person(s)
Translate each line by line as they read to get a full understanding of the content	2
Read the text out loud	2
Read in one sitting while looking up unfamiliar words	2
Dissect each sentence into words to figure out the flow and the meaning of the sentences	1
Write a summary of the book in Japanese	1
Keep a list of unfamiliar words/phrases, memorise them, and read the book again to check the retention of the new knowledge	1
Read with the help of Google Translate	1

For the learning outcome section, many participants detailed newly encountered Japanese knowledge, including Kanji, new words, colloquial phrases, particles and grammar. Some participants also happily noted that they were able to recognize the words and phrases they learnt in class and also from their previous week's reading, which often helped them understand the stories.

In addition to these learning outcomes, attention to onomatopoeia was also commonly observed in the journals. Flyxe notes that onomatopoeias are easily recognizable as they are written in Hiragana (in some cases Katakana) and often reduplicated, so it is possible that the participants showed interest in learning these sound-words <sup>[14]</sup>.

Some of the folklore-based books confused the participants due to cultural differences, and these were usually pointed out in the learning outcome section. For instance, Participant No.11 from Group 1 read a short version of Bancho Sara Yashiki "Okiku-san". The story is about a miserable servant who broke an important dish that belonged to her master by mistake. This participant didn't expect her punishment to be so extreme, thinking that some sort of light torture would be sufficient. In returning to their feedback, the authors explained the power dynamics between servants and masters in previous eras.



Fig.5 The cover of Okiku-san (from KC Yomu Yomu)

Participants reported that the colorful illustration and flow of the stories helped them guess the meaning of words that they didn't know. For example, Participant No.18 from Group 2 “the context filled in for me” or Participant No.14 from Group 2 commented “I was able to infer the meaning of many words and sentences as a result of understanding the context.”

### 3.3. Post-project Survey

Upon the completion of the 5th week, participants were requested to fill out the Post-project Survey to reflect on their performance over the 5-week period. This section explores their answers in comparison with the findings from the Reading Awareness Survey.

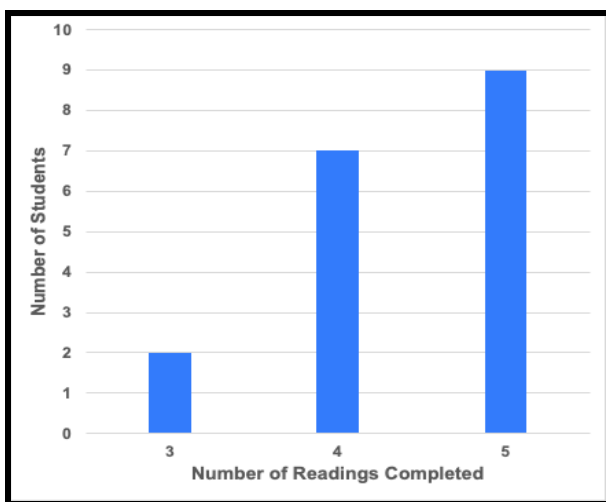


Fig.6 Amount of the completed reading assignments during the project

Figure 5 above details responses on the amount of completed reading assignments during this project. 9 participants (50%) answered that they submitted all 5

journals, 7 (38.9%) submitted 4 times, and 2 (11.1%) submitted 3 times. While half of the participants were able to complete all 5 weeks, some participants were unable to schedule sufficient reading and journaling time, as the project was conducted during the busy Christmas season. Nearly half of the population of Trinidad and Tobago is Christian, and Christmas is a major celebration throughout the country. Coupled with New Year’s celebrations, the authors often received apology messages from the participants with the reason given above. However, participants’ willingness to participate in the exercise is still noteworthy, given that this was a voluntary project.

To the question about the types of difficulties they encountered during the project (see Figure 6 below), the range of responses was greater than those mentioned in the Reading Awareness Survey. For example, three participants stated that the vertical writing system caused some challenges, as they were not previously introduced to this system in class. Coupled with the lack of spacing between words (in their class textbooks, words are spaced), the tategaki system made it more difficult for them to distinguish between parts of speech such as verbs, subjects and particles.

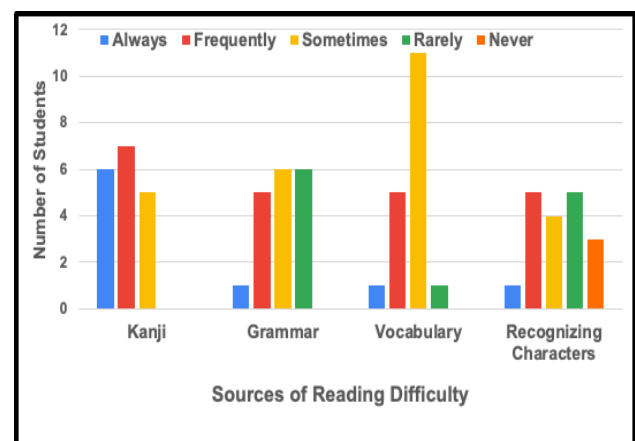


Fig.7 Types of difficulties encountered during the project

Two participants indicated that the combination of unfamiliar words and grammar in one sentence threw them off, which means that they were lacking clues to

decipher the context. Participant No.11 from Group 1 also stated that when a verb is used in plain form with *～だ* or *～だな* ending, it was hard to recognize as they were more used to the polite form.

Participant No.17 from Group 2 described the challenges they encountered as an opportunity to learn: “I encountered many verbs I was not familiar with. However, I think this is good because I expanded my vocabulary with regard to verbs. Many of the verbs I saw were in other stories so I was able to see them being used again and again”.

Participants showed a drastic increase in confidence after the 5-week project. As shown in Figure 7, participants indicated a range of confidence levels in their reading ability. In the pre-project survey, the average reading confidence score was 2.4, whereas in the post-project survey it increased to 3.3. Additionally, the range of responses in the pre-project survey spanned from 1 - 4, while the range of responses in the post-project survey spanned from 2 - 5. On an individual basis, 14 out of 18 participants (77.8%) reported an increase in their reading confidence, while 4 (22.2%) reported no change.

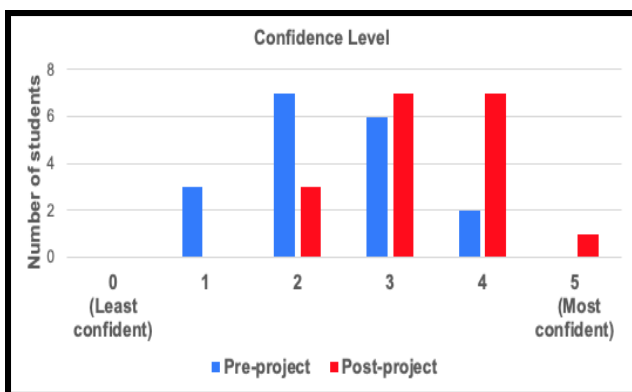


Fig.8 Changes in the confidence level before and after the project

Participants observed two major positive changes during the 5-week period. First, five participants pointed out that their reading pace increased, and Participant No.9 from Group 2 described that “I feel like my reading ability has improved because my brain recognises the characters faster, making reading words easier.” Second, three participants pointed out that they

could now ascertain the general meaning of sentences using context and illustrations as hints.

However, six participants indicated that Kanji still pose a challenge when they read in Japanese. One reason for the limited impact of the project on Kanji learning could be that passages including Kanji were always supplemented by furigana. While participants appreciated the furigana to compensate for their lack of knowledge of Kanji, Participant No.6 from Group 1 noted “If not for the furigana I might not have been able to read much of anything.”

Figure 8 shows the responses on the effectiveness of the reading journals in boosting one’s motivation in Japanese reading. Participants who found the journals’ motivational effectiveness offered varying reasons for this conclusion. In particular, two participants who chose scale 0 (no increase in motivation) explained that their motivation to read in Japanese was already high even before the project, so doing this extra task didn’t particularly change their attitude. Another two participants pointed out that their motivation usually gets boosted when they apply newly attained knowledge to answer quizzes or for more interactive practice, not by keeping track of their learning outcomes. Participant No.14 from Group 2 suggested a different format to the journal, as follows:

“Rather than a leading topic like what did you learn I would prefer what did you think, thoughts, opinions I would like a journal that I could write what I liked about the story because it would make me feel positive about the fact that I understood enough to even give an opinion.”

Those who rated the motivational effectiveness of the reading journal highly focused on the visibility of their learning outcomes. For instance, Participant No.1 from Group 1 answered “It kept me motivated as I had my notes to compare from where I was before and seeing where I made improvements and used new words from previous stories.” Similarly, keeping track of their learning progress can be considered a way to draw attention to one’s struggles, including what needs to be improved. Participant No.14 from Group 2 explained, “It’s a good way to track problem areas and it encouraged me to pay attention to the problem areas so I could improve my reading ability.” Another



common reasoning was that submitting journals on a weekly basis gave them accountability for the reading and also consistency, and Participant No.9 from Group 1 described that “Having a journal made me consistent in the reading habit.”

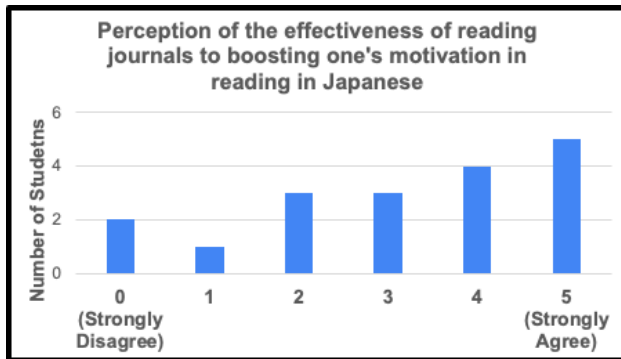


Fig.9 The effectiveness of the reading journals in boosting one's motivation in Japanese reading

At the end of the survey, participants were asked to share comments, suggestions, and feedback about the 5-week project. The overall response was positive, and majority of the participants stated that they enjoyed being part of it. Some answered that this project filled a long gap for a holiday season and helped them stay updated on their Japanese studies. Others answered that the project inspired them to read in Japanese more, and some further requested that the authors recommend more books to read for their continuing studies. Participant No.6 from Group 1 stated that “[they] never read any Japanese short story novels before and only relied on textbooks to study. But this project has introduced [them] to another useful mode of study [they] can use to broaden [their] Japanese language ability.”

#### 4. Conclusion

This project was designed to assess the relationship between reading journals and participants' motivation to read. Over the 5-week period, participants read multiple reading materials exploring effective reading methods. Overall, the results seem to indicate that participants enjoyed the autonomous nature of the project. For many participants, the reading journal served as a monitor to reflect their reading styles and

learning process. Park <sup>[15]</sup> explains the usefulness of the journal as a means to make participants “more self-aware of how they learn as well as what they learn and enhance the overall learning experience for them.”

To validate the effectiveness of reading journals, more detailed approaches of assessing participants' motivation in reading would be suggested. For example, implementing a control group would be necessary, to see if continuous reading habits alone would make any difference in participants' motivation level. Moreover, due to the voluntary nature of this project, it is not difficult to suspect that participants had some level of motivation to read even before the project. Therefore, it can be assumed that the project received favorable feedback from participants because they were already willing to learn more. In order to diversify participants' motivation level, a more inclusive project can be suggested, where participants with a wider range of ability and motivation levels can participate.

From the participant's perspective, a future reading journal project would require two additional aspects of improvement. One is to adopt reading materials without furigana on Kanji so that eager participants would have more opportunities to learn. This is because taking some time to recognize and guess the reading of Kanji would help them memorize them better. Another is to simplify the format of the journal as much as possible, so that they can freely design the format they would like to pursue. But in this case, as Park <sup>[16]</sup> case indicates, detailed guidelines and criteria would play a significant role in assisting participants' work.

This reading journal project provided valuable findings about participants' motivation levels and nurtured participants' willingness to continue reading. While more careful and well-coordinated studies are required to validate the relationship between reading journals and students' motivation to read, it is possible to note that the exposure to Japanese reading materials and the self-reflective reading journal gave participants a boost to continue their Japanese studies.

#### Acknowledgments

We appreciate all the Japanese students from the

CLL who willingly participated in the 5-week reading project.

Our gratitude also goes to Mr. Robert Martinez, who generously extended his insightful feedback and inspirational comments in completing this research paper.

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(Received August 5, 2020; accepted November 30, 2020)

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### Abstract (Japanese)

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日本語学習を進める上で、読解力は欠かせない。学習者の読解意欲を高めるために、学習記録を用いた多読の効果が過去の研究で報告されている。本稿では、読書日記と読解意欲の関係性について、5週間のプロジェクトを通して明らかにするものである。プロジェクト参加者は、日本語学習者向けの短い本を複数読み、本を読んで学んだことを詳細に記録するという課題を与えられた。プロジェクト前後に行ったアンケートと、日記の記録内容を分析して、読解意欲の変化があったかどうか分析を行った。プロジェクト前のアンケートでは、参加者の大半が日本語での読解に前向きな感情を抱いているものの、読解に対する自信はあまり高くなかった。漢字や文法の知識の不足を自信の低さと結び付けるものが多かった。5週間のプロジェクトでは、イラストや文脈をヒントにしながら日本語の本を読み進めたという記録が多く観察された。大半の参加者はプロジェクトに楽しんで取り組めたこと、漢字の知識不足は解消されなかったものの、引き続き日本語の読解を進めることに意欲を持ったことを報告した。読解に対する自信も、全体的に向上が見られた。

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Key words : 読解に対する意欲, 日本語の読解, 読書日記, 日本語教育

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