



## **Exploring the Possibility of Incidental Grammar Learning through Extensive Reading: Effectiveness of Form-Focused Japanese Graded Readers**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*For elementary learners of Japanese, one of the main difficulties in reading is to distinguish words written in kana. This paper reports on a survey of elementary level learners with two different levels of proficiency to investigate the effectiveness of Japanese graded readers with parts of speech color-coded to distinguish nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs. Compared to those who read normal texts, the participants who used this form-focused text tended to obtain higher scores in the post-tests which tested word recognition, function word recognition, and the relationship between modifiers and modified words. In addition, based on the recording of reading activities, form-focused text readers tended to read faster than their counterparts.*

### **INTRODUCTION**

Extensive reading is a way to improve learners language proficiency through enjoying reading (Krashen, 1997; Nation, 2009). Especially, graded readers which are written so that target words appear repeatedly help learners to learn new words incidentally (Mikami & Harada, 2011; Nation, 2001; Pigada & Schmitt, 2006; Waring, 2006). However, when beginners start extensive reading, they do not know enough words to read well and therefore, they cannot learn vocabulary through extensive reading (Coady, 1996). Moreover, the character string of *kana* might prevent beginners from distinguishing word from word in Japanese extensive reading activities.

#### **Vocabulary for reading comprehension**

Previous research on vocabulary acquisition in one's second language (L2) suggested that quantitative knowledge of vocabulary is an important factor in promoting reading comprehension (Coady, 1997). Previous research on English vocabulary acquisition as an L2 stated that a rate of known words of more than 95%–98% in the target text is the threshold for promoting reading comprehension (Hirsh & Nation, 1992; Laufer, 1989, 1992; Liu & Nation, 1985; Nation, 2001). Especially for learners who do not have instruction from teachers, a known-word rate of 98% was comfortable enough to enjoy reading stories (Hirsh & Nation, 1992).

Previous research on vocabulary acquisition in Japanese as an L2 recognized that reading comprehension correlates with the number of known words, with 96% being the threshold for understanding texts (Komori, Mikuni, & Kondo, 2004). Ishiguro (2020) also mentioned that for

vocabulary for reading comprehension, not only is the quantity of vocabulary (a high rate of known words) required, but so is the quality of vocabulary (a good working knowledge of vocabulary to help learners to select the appropriate meaning of the words from the context). In addition, Matsushita (2017) argued that in order to learn grammar, the threshold of known words should be around 95%, because a text in which learners can guess the meaning from the context would enable them to intuit the structure and meaning simultaneously.

### **Grammar for reading comprehension**

The importance of vocabulary knowledge in reading comprehension is widely accepted. The next issue to be examined is what kind of grammatical knowledge is necessary for reading comprehension and the problems faced by learners of Japanese.

Noda (2019) distinguished “grammar for reading” from “grammar for writing.” “Grammar for reading” was defined as the grammar needed to understand the meaning of sentences. Noda (2019) explained that to understand the meaning of a sentence, learners need to understand its structure. Therefore, it is necessary to recognize function words, to understand which words modify which other words, and to guess which words have been omitted. These skills are difficult for learners of all levels to acquire. However, he also stated that the difficulties that learners have in understanding the grammar needed for reading Japanese depends on their level of Japanese. He also claimed that the difficulties for learners at the elementary level include distinguishing words written in *kana* and understanding the relationships between words by using function words and conjugation.

### **Vocabulary and grammar in Japanese graded readers**

The author released *SAKURA TADOKU LAB* (2017), an online support system for extensive reading in Japanese that provides Japanese graded readers, as well as the online *Vocabulary Level Test* (2020) for learners who start reading this material to learn Japanese autonomously.

*JGR SAKURA* (Reynolds et al., 2003) is written using “the JGR word list,” which consists of 4,500 words abstracted in the order of frequency from the story corpus. Modeled on English graded readers (Nation, 1990), the words in a text are modified to adjust the rate of known words for readers to be more than 95% in each of the eight levels from beginner to intermediate; this provides the conditions for incidental vocabulary learning to occur.

As Day and Bamford (1998, p.8) asserted, “reading materials are well within the linguistic competence of the students in terms of vocabulary and grammar,” and therefore, grammar at each vocabulary level of *JGR SAKURA* has been rewritten without using complex sentence structures so as not to impede learners’ reading. In the lower half of the elementary level, the following verb forms are used in addition to their dictionary form: *masu* form, *te* form, *nai* form, and *ta/tara* form. Moreover, the sentences presented are simple, even though the use of noun-modifying clauses is accepted. In the upper half of the elementary level, the following verb forms are used: passive, imperative, potential mood, intention, discontinuance, assumption, and honorific. Complex sentences are acceptable.

When it comes to Japanese graded readers, we must consider Japanese orthography, which includes three kinds of writing (two of these are phonetic scripts called *Hiragana* and *Katakana*; which together are known as *kana*), as well as Chinese characters. Given that Chinese characters

are ideographical, *JGR SAKURA* is written in the same style as books for native speakers of Japanese, but with *kana* written above Chinese characters. When a Chinese character appears in a text, learners are presumed not to know it; however, if the meaning of the word that includes the Chinese character can be guessed from the context, we can expect that the Chinese character can be learned incidentally (Reynolds et al., 2003).

Another merit of using Chinese characters in JGR is that they reduce the long strings of *kana* that might hinder reading comprehension. Most Japanese textbooks for non-native learners at this level use relatively fewer Chinese characters and consequently must use more *kana*; they therefore tend to have spaces between words to help beginners combat another difficulty, which is that words are not spaced out in Japanese orthography. However, *JGR SAKURA* is made without such a consideration in mind because it includes a normal number of Chinese characters; this makes parts of speech easier to understand.

### **Research subjects**

The author leads reading classes using *JGR SAKURA* at the elementary level, including beginners. Before starting to read, learners complete vocabulary activities for the first two weeks to acquire basic vocabulary. Then, in the reading activities, learners are provided with a list of new words for their text with English translations. Thus, the meaning of unknown words, which might be problematic for beginners, is considered.

However, beginners often mistake a character string that is not an actual word for a word, and therefore, they could not find it in the dictionary. The cause of this problem, as mentioned above, is that “learners cannot distinguish words within character strings written in *kana*,” according to Noda (2019).

As a solution, the author created reading materials in which content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs) are color-coded (red, green, blue, purple). The author hypothesized that (1) this style of text would enable beginners to distinguish words written in *kana*; (2) since content words are colored, function words, which are not colored, would stand out and show the structure of each sentence; and (3) color-coding would enable learners to notice parts of speech and help them understand which words modify which other words.

This study investigates the effectiveness of incidental grammar learning in this reading material, which has color-coded parts of speech, and which this author calls “form-focused text.” The experiment compared the form-focused text with a normal text by examining the post-test results on:

- (1) word recognition,
- (2) function word recognition,
- (3) the relationship between a modifier and the word that is modified.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Hypothesis**

To measure the effectiveness of the form-focused texts mentioned above regarding incidental grammar learning, the author gave reading activities to elementary learners with two

different levels of proficiency using both form-focused and normal texts, and compared the results of reading comprehension. The experimental hypotheses are as follows:

- (1) Learners who read the grammar-focused text will obtain a higher score on the post-test, which asks them “to distinguish words written in *kana*” compared to learners who read the normal text.
- (2) Learners who read the grammar-focused text will obtain higher scores on the post-test, which asks them “to underline function words” compared to learners who read the normal text.
- (3) Learners who read the grammar-focused text will obtain higher scores on the post-test, which asks them “to distinguish which words modify which other words” compared to learners who read the normal text.

## Participants

The participants were 16 students at University A—8 students from the lower elementary class and 8 students from the beginner class—all of whom participated in the survey voluntarily. The mean lengths of time spent learning Japanese were 13 months and 4.8 months, respectively. As for the first language (L1) spoken by the 16 participants, 10 speak English, 2 speak French, 1 speaks German, 1 speaks Italian, 1 speaks Spanish, and 1 speaks Ukrainian.

## Procedure

To assess their Japanese proficiency, the participants took a simple performance-oriented test (SPOT) (Kobayashi, 2003) beforehand. Both classes of eight were subdivided into two groups of four participants each according to their L1 and their proficiency in Japanese. Table 1 shows the design of the experiments regarding the participants and texts. To avoid subject factors, two texts, A and B, were prepared in two versions—one form-focused and the other a normal version, so that all the participants experienced both the form-focused and normal texts. Moreover, to avoid the factor of order, half of each group read texts A and B in reverse order. That is, half of Group 1 (hereafter, G1) read text A as the normal text and text B as the form-focused text, and half of Group 2 (hereafter, G2) read text A as the form-focused text and text B as the normal text. Furthermore, half of G1 read text B as the form-focused text and text A as the normal text, while half of G2 read text B as the normal text and text A as the form-focused text. After two sessions, all participants took a post-test and answered a questionnaire that asked them to compare the normal and form-focused texts.

**Table 1.** Subject Group and Text Type

	First session	Second session
Group1	A normal	B form-focused
	B form-focused	A normal
Group2	A form-focused	B normal
	B normal	A form-focused

The procedure of the experiment was explained before the reading began. In the experiment, the participants were required to perform two reading activities using both the form-focused and normal texts (readings 1 and 2). For both reading activities, they were provided with

a text and word list for each text along with English translations (at the elementary level, lectures were conducted in English). Following the procedure below, the participants read by themselves.

- (1) Participants were required to put a single underline beneath the words they did not know.
- (2) If they thought they would not be able to understand the story without knowing the meaning of unknown words, they were allowed to look it up in the dictionary. When they did so, they were required to double underline it.
- (3) After reading, they were required to fill out a “book review sheet” (time spent reading, difficulty of the text, and interest in the story).

### **Reading materials**

Texts were selected from the easiest level of *JGR SAKURA* (Level A: the lower half of the lower elementary level), the shortest text is *Kodomo-tachi to ike no tori*, which consists of 743 letters in length (a letter refers to one Chinese character or one *kana*), and the second shortest text is *Ookii kaban to chiisai kaban*, which consists of 2,200 letters in length; these were used as texts A and B, respectively. When used as the form-focused text, the content words (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs) were color-coded in different colors (red, green, blue, purple).

### **Post-test**

The post-test examined the three points mentioned above using 20 sentences, 10 from each text. Question 1 asked participants whether they could (1) distinguish words written in *kana* and (2) recognize function words. Question 2 asked the participants whether they could (3) understand which words modified which other words. The questions were explained in English with example answers. They were asked to:

Question 1-1: Place slashes (/) between words to mark individual words.

Question 1-2: Underline the function words (particles).

Question 2: Circle the word modified by the underlined word.

### **Questionnaire**

On the questionnaire, the participants were asked the following questions:

- (1) In comparing the form-focused and normal texts, which text did you think was better for understanding the story?
- (2) In comparing the form-focused and normal texts, which text do you think was better for learning grammar?
- (3) While reading the stories, what do you do when you do not understand the meaning of a sentence due to a lack of grammar knowledge?
- (4) Do you think grammar instructions for reading stories are necessary?

## **RESULTS**

### **Effectiveness of form-focused text on learning of grammar**

The average post-test results are shown in Table 2, where the cells with a gray background display the results from when the participants used the form-focused text.

**Table 2.** Scores for SPOT and Vocabulary Tests Administered to the Study Participants

		1-1. Word recognition		1-2. Function word recognition		2. Modifying word	
		A	B	A	B	A	B
Lower elementary	G1	29.5	34.8	12.0	13.0	3.8	2.5
	G2	31.0	34.0	12.0	12.3	4.0	1.8
Beginner	G1	28.5	34.0	12.5	12.5	2.8	1.8
	G2	28.5	31.5	13.3	12.5	3.3	1.8

As for “1-1. Word recognition,” at the lower elementary level, the average scores of both groups in which participants read the form-focused text (G1 read B and G2 read A) were 34.8 and 31.0, respectively. These scores were higher than the average scores of both groups in which participants read the normal text (G2 read text B and G1 read text A). This result suggests that form-focused texts were useful for distinguishing words. A participant who read text B as the normal text made the mistake of splitting a word string into individual words like “あなた / は / いつも / 僕にひ / どいこ / と / を / しました” (the correct answer for this is “あなた / は / いつも / 僕 / に / ひどい / こと / を / しました”). In contrast, at the beginner level, there was no difference in the average scores between G1 and G2 for text A. However, for text B, the average score of the participants who read the form-focused text (G1) was 34.0, which was higher than the 31.5 for those who read the normal text (G2).

Subsequently, looking at “1-2. Function word recognition,” at the lower elementary level, there was no difference in the average score between G1 and G2 for text A. However, for text B, the average score of the participants who read the form-focused text (G1) was 13.0, which was higher than the 12.3 for those who read the normal text (G2). On the other hand, at the beginner level, the average score of the participants who read text A in the form-focused format (G2) was 13.3, higher than the 12.5 of group that read the normal text (G1); however there was no difference in the average scores of the participants between the form-focused text (G1) and normal text (G2) when they read text B. The effectiveness of the form-focused text was only seen when the lower elementary level participants read the longer text (text B), and when the beginner level participants read the shorter text (text A). There was no negative outcome regarding the effectiveness of the form-focused text.

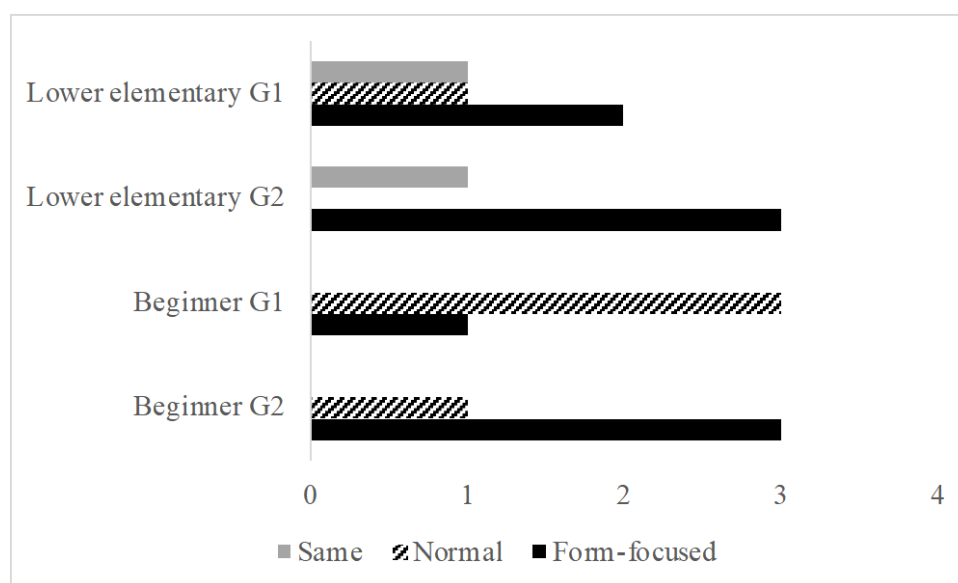
Looking at “2. Modifying word,” at the lower elementary level, the average scores of both groups in which participants read the form-focused text (the case in which G1 read text B and G2 read text A) were 2.5 and 4.0, respectively. These were higher than the average scores of both groups where participants read the normal text (G2 read text B and G1 read text A). This outcome also suggests that the form-focused text is useful for understanding the relationship between a modifier and the word that is modified. On the other hand, at the beginner level, the average score of the participants who read text A as the form-focused format (G2) was 3.3, which was higher than the 2.8 of those who read the normal text (G1). However, there was no difference in the average scores of the participants between the form-focused text (G1) and the normal text (G2) when they read text B.

From the results mentioned above, it can be suggested that the form-focused text was useful for the participants to understand grammar for (1) word recognition, (2) function word recognition,

and (3) the relationship between a modifier and the word that was modified, because in all the cases in which there was a difference between G1 and G2, the average score of the participants who used the form-focused text was higher than for those who read the normal text. The effectiveness of the form-focused text was more evident in the results of students at the lower elementary level than in the results of students at the beginner level. The reason for this might be that the text level was more appropriate for students at the lower elementary level than those at the beginner level.

### Results of questionnaire

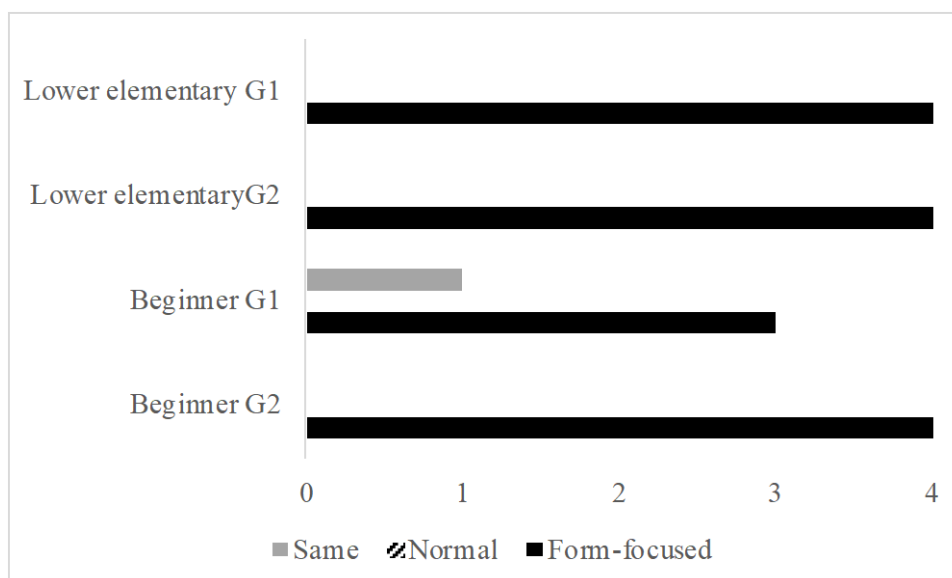
Figure 1 shows the answers to Question 1: “Which type of text do you think was better for understanding the story?” At the lower elementary level, five of the eight participants chose the form-focused text. Two participants chose “both were the same.” The one participant who chose the normal text had read text A and gave the following reason: “I’ve chosen this answer because overall, the text was shorter and easier, so it was easier for me to understand the story. Also, with the colored [form-focused] text, I am more likely to focus on separate words than on the story itself.” Contrastingly, participants at the beginner level who read the form-focused text were divided in their opinions depending on the text. Three of the four participants who read the form-focused text for text A (G2), which was shorter, chose the form-focused text. Three of the four participants who read the form-focused text for text B (G1), which was longer, chose the normal text. According to this outcome, we can assume that beginners were affected more by the length of the text than by whether or not the parts of speech were tagged.



**Figure 1.** Answers to the Questionnaire 1

Figure 2 shows the answers to Question 2: “Which type of text do you think was better for learning grammar?” As we can see from the figure below, almost all participants chose the form-focused text. The reason chosen by the largest number was “it tells where a word ends,” followed by the answers “it helps me to recognize grammatical patterns” and “it helps me to memorize words.” There were also other answers, such as “it helps me to recognize parts of speech,” “it helps me to distinguish particles and conjugation,” and “it helps me to read faster.” The only participant

who chose “both were the same” gave the reason as “I think the color-coded text is more helpful to know which colors refer to nouns, verbs, adjectives, etc. However, I feel that the normal text [text A] used easier vocabulary, so learning grammar would be easier [using the normal text].”



**Figure 2.** Answers to the Questionnaire 2

For the answer to Question 3—“What do you do when you do not understand the meaning of a sentence due to a lack of knowledge of grammar?”—the most frequent answer by students in the lower elementary and beginner levels was to look it up on the internet.

For the answer to Question 4—“Do you think that grammar instruction for reading stories is necessary?”—six of eight participants in the lower elementary and beginner levels chose “Yes.” The other two participants in the lower elementary level answered “No” and gave reasons such as, “I find grammar in Japanese classes to be excessive, so I think simply using texts with on-level grammar is all that’s necessary” and “It is very important, but in general you can understand the story without deep knowledge of grammar.” At the beginner level, one participant chose “I don’t know.” One participant chose “No” and gave the following reason: “If I understand enough vocabulary, then it is easier for me to understand the context and the story’s meaning.”

## DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

As seen above, the effectiveness of the form-focused text was observed more in the results of students at the lower elementary level than in the results of students at the beginner level. Although texts A and B were the two shortest texts in *JGR SAKURA*, they were 743 letters and 2,200 letters in length, respectively, which is a significant difference for beginners. Text A was specifically written with beginners in mind. Given this point, we will examine the relationship between the level of the text itself and the effect of the form-focused text based on the results of the book review sheets.

Table 3 shows the average scores collected from the answers given on the book review sheet, which is mentioned above. The cells with a gray background in Table 3 display the results from when the participants used the form-focused text.



**Table 3.** Average Scores from the Book Review Sheets

		Unknown words		Dictionary use		Time spent (min.)		Difficulty		Contents	
		A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B	A	B
Lower elementary	G1	4.5	6.3	0.8	0.8	12	19	2.3	1.8	4.0	4.5
	G2	4.3	3.5	0.5	1.0	11	26	3.0	3.0	4.5	3.5
Beginner	G1	15.0	25.0	3.8	4.0	23	39	4.0	4.5	4.0	2.8
	G2	12.0	20.0	1.0	1.8	26	52	2.5	4.0	4.3	3.8

**Note.** Unknown words: number of words; dictionary use: number of words; time spent: minutes; difficulty: 1. Easy; 2. A little easy; 3. Appropriate; 4. A little difficult; 5. Difficult, content: 1. Boring; 2. A little boring; 3. Average; 4. Slightly interesting; 5. Interesting.

Regarding the scores of the items, *Unknown words*, *Dictionary use*, *Time spent*, and *Difficulty*, (ie. every item except for *Content*, which is thought to be influenced by participants' Japanese proficiency), all of the lower elementary level participants scored better than the beginner level participants.

Most *Unknown words* at the beginner level were included in the vocabulary list. Therefore, when it came to *Dictionary use*, most of the words which the participants looked up were function words. From the number of *Unknown words*, the level of both texts was not appropriate for beginners. However, during this reading activity, *Unknown words* became known words and did not hinder the students' reading because the participants were given a word list for the text.

As for *Time spent*, for students at the lower elementary level, when they read the form-focused text, they took an average of 11 minutes for text A (G2) and 19 minutes for text B (G1) and read faster than when they read the normal text. In addition, at the beginner level, the form-focused text took them an average of 39 minutes to read, which is lower than the 51 minutes needed to read the normal text (text B). However, for text A, it took them an average of 26 minutes to read the form-focused text, which was slightly longer than the 23 minutes it took them to read the normal text. Although unknown words did not hinder reading, looking them up on a vocabulary list might be time-consuming at the beginner level.

Participants evaluated *Difficulty* and *Content* on a 5-point Likert scale. For students at the lower elementary level, all the scores for *Difficulty* were lower than 3, which indicates that the text was easier than "average." It was appropriate for the participants' level. Moreover, the score when they read the form-focused text (text B) was 1.8, which was lower than the 3.0 for the normal text (text B). In contrast, when they read the shorter text (text A), the score when they used the form-focused text was 3.0, which was higher than when they read the normal text. This means that the participants felt the longer text was easier when they read the form-focused text than when they read the normal text. At the beginner level, most of the scores for *Difficulty* were greater than 4, which means more than "a little difficult." It was not appropriate for the participants' level. However, the score when they read the form-focused text was 2.5, which was considerably lower than the 4.0 for the normal text (text A). This average score included two participants who gave scores of 3 for "average," and two participants who gave scores of 2 for "a little easy." Three of the four participants in this group chose the form-focused text for the answer to Question 1 on the questionnaire, which asked "Which text do you think is better for understanding the story?" For

this reason, one of them said, “The colors make it easier to read in general, but also match up with the categories [verb, noun], so the vocabulary is easier to look up.” The vocabulary levels of texts A and B were the same. However, text A, which is shorter than text B, is more appropriate for beginner students. Therefore, the participants judged the form-focused text to be easier than the normal text.

However, when it came to *Content*, the average of all participants at the lower elementary level was 4.1, and that for students at the beginner level was 3.7, which shows that participants of both levels felt the stories were somewhat interesting. At the lower elementary level, for both texts A and B, the scores when they read the form-focused text were higher than when reading the normal text. In contrast, at the beginner level, the score of the participants who read the form-focused text (text B) was 2.8, which is rather low. This included two participants who gave a score of 2 for “a little boring,” one participant who gave 3 for “average,” and one participant who gave 4 for “a little interesting.” These results also indicate that the longer text (text B) is not appropriate for students at the beginner level.

Nuttall (2005) stated that any factor from speed, enjoyment, and comprehension could provide the key to helping learners move out of a *vicious circle* of reading and into a *virtuous circle*. From the scores of *Time spent*, *Content*, and *Unknown words*, we might guess the participants’ speed, enjoyment, and comprehension. The results suggest that the form-focused text was helpful for participants at the lower elementary level to read in a *virtuous circle* because they enjoyed reading at speed and also with comprehension. The scores of students at the lower elementary level who read the appropriate text level were higher for the form-focused text than for the normal text. We can assume that participants at the beginner level could not enjoy reading because the text level was not appropriate for their Japanese proficiency. However, beginner level participants scored higher on the form-focused text than on the normal text when they read the shorter text (text A). Thus, if beginner level participants read a text in which vocabulary and text length were appropriate for them, they could read in a *virtuous circle*, and the effect of the form-focused text on incidental grammar learning would be expected. This is clear because almost all participants chose the form-focused text as the better text for learning grammar when answering Question 2.

## LIMITATIONS AND FURTHER DIRECTIONS

As the current survey had a fairly small sample size, it had some limitations. Nevertheless, Japanese graded readers with information on parts of speech will be useful for elementary level learners to understand grammar. The form-focused text might facilitate incidental grammar learning for beginners without the support of teachers when they start reading. Further work is required to increase the number of Japanese graded readers at the beginner level.

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