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Author : Khansa Belva Salmawan, and Bembi Mulia Ramadhani
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Japanese Language Beginner Student Perspective on Reading Lesson/*Dokkai* Using Marugoto A1 Starter Books: Case Study of Al-Azhar University Indonesia

Khansa Belva Salmawan, Bembi Mulia Ramadhani

Universitas Al-Azhar Indonesia, Jakarta, 12110, Indonesia

khansas0202@gmail.com, bembi.mulia@uai.ac.id

Abstract

Reading a language fluently is a skill that needs to be trained and used and is essential to support other basic language skills, especially speaking and writing. In the current educational context, mastering a foreign language—specifically, Japanese—has become crucial. Marugoto A1 Starter textbooks are popular options for teaching the Japanese language in numerous educational institutions. This research will use a qualitative descriptive with a questionnaire for primary data collection. This research intends to analyze problems during the Japanese Language reading learning process using Marugoto A1 Starter books, viewed from the Japanese beginner-level student's perspective at Al-Azhar University Indonesia. The result of this study indicates that Romaji letters are still used in Marugoto A1 starter beginner-level books, which deters learners from reading Hiragana and Katakana. Results show that the students responded positively to using the Marugoto A1 Starter book by adding romaji letters, comprehensible connections between sentences, and illustrations supporting reading material comprehension. The audio is also considered helpful in pronunciation and understanding spoken Japanese language. However, from a student's perspective, there are highlighted limitations in the Marugoto A1 Starter book, particularly the absence of Kanji characters in the reading materials. This gap corresponds to a specific course within the curriculum dedicated to teaching Kanji and Japanese vocabulary. Additionally, students desire longer or more varied reading materials, such as diaries, short stories, manga, and recipes. Based on these findings, recommendations for instructors using the Marugoto A1 Starter book are provided. Integration of Kanji teaching with reading lessons and developing Kanji-inclusive texts are suggested. Moreover, diversifying classroom activities, such as shared reading and discussion, can boost student engagement and interest. Gathering student feedback is also encouraged to tailor teaching and discovery learning methods effectively. Implementing these approaches will enrich Japanese language learning, particularly in reading proficiency.

Keywords: Reading material; Japanese beginner learner; Marugoto A1 Starter

1. Introduction

Language conveys meaning and shares ideas, information, and perspective (Clarke, 2014). From ancient times, language has been used to communicate or express oneself. To learn a language, there are four basic language skills that learners need to acquire: speaking, reading, listening, and writing. These basic language skills can not be separated. But, the role of reading in learning language skills is essential as a support to learning a language.

Reading is one of the basic language skills to understand the meaning of a message from the write (Evenddy, 2021). Reading is an activity to convey meaning from a message through letters and symbols. Reading a language fluently is a skill that needs to be trained and used. However, the ability to read itself is influenced by different factors. Trahutami (Trahutami, 2017) states that affective, cognitive, and linguistic factors influence reading skills. Reading skills are essential to support other basic language skills. Suppose someone wants to speak or write fluently in another language. In that case, they need to understand the knowledge of the language, like how to use a particular word or grammar, the expression, or other information they can get from reading. This thing also applies when learning to read in the Japanese language, usually called *Dokkai*, because of the use of letters that don't use the usual alphabet.

Japanese Language uses three different letters: hiragana, katakana, and kanji. For Japanese language learners, the learning process starts with mastering the hiragana, katakana, and kanji letters. At the beginner level, using kanji in teaching materials is common, but only a little is written so the students can get used to hiragana and katakana letters. Other than those three letters, there are also romaji letters, namely written in the Japanese Language using the Latin alphabet, that are used to provide accommodation for the learners to read in the Japanese language. Despite using the romaji letter is very helpful for reading in the Japanese language, using this romaji can also hinder the Japanese language beginner learner from reading hiragana, katakana, or kanji.

In the Department of Japanese Language and Culture at the University of Al-Azhar Indonesia (UAI), the Japanese language courses are divided into six language skills courses that all students must take. These six language skills courses are reading the Japanese language, listening to the Japanese language, Japanese language writing practice, Japanese language speaking practice, Japanese language grammar, kanji, and vocabulary. The primary teaching materials used are Marugoto A1-B1.2, published by the Japan Foundation. Marugoto book consists of four primary Japanese language skills sections that provide a complete guide according to Japanese language teaching standards or JF standards. Using hiragana, katakana, and basic kanji letters in the Marugoto A1 Starter book provides convenience for beginner-level learners to read the text in Japanese. This book also includes audio to help the learners to pronounce the Japanese language correctly. Furthermore, a vocabulary list can be downloaded from the Marugoto website page to know the vocabulary used, how to read it, and its meaning.

From the description above, it is evident that in implementing language teaching in the Department of Japanese Language and Culture at the UAI, the Japanese language reading course predominantly utilizes the beginner's Marugoto A1 Starter book. This choice reflects a specific pedagogical approach, aligning the curriculum with materials designed to cater to the foundational needs of beginner-level students in Japanese language acquisition. Therefore, the researcher needs to analyze how the Marugoto A1 Starter book is used for the *dokkai*/reading materials for beginner-level learners at the Department of Japanese Language and Culture at the UAI. From a student's perspective, this analysis will delve into the various aspects of using the Marugoto A1 Starter book, focusing on the benefits and challenges we experience. Additionally, the researcher will discuss recommendations for instructors on effectively integrating the Marugoto A1 Starter book into the curriculum, particularly considering the existence of a separate Japanese language reading course. This will involve exploring how to align the book with the broader educational goals and the specific needs of the students, ensuring that it complements and enhances the learning experience in the specialized reading course.

2. Method

This research will use a qualitative descriptive with a questionnaire and Likert scale as the method for primary data collection. This research intends to analyze the uses of reading materials during the Japanese Language reading learning process using Marugoto A1 Starter books, viewed from the Japanese beginner-level student's perspective at Al-Azhar University Indonesia. Questions: Understanding Japanese Letters and Vocabulary, Understanding Expressions in Reading Material, Comprehension of Reading Material, Evaluation of Marugoto A1 Starter Reading Material, and Visualization of Illustrations and Audio in Marugoto A1 Starter Reading Material.

3. Results and Discussions

The data collection in this research was done through distributed questionnaires with Google Forms to 21 1st year beginner-level students at the Department of Japanese Language and Culture at the UAI. The researcher will also interview five students to understand further the conveniences and difficulties the students face. The results from the questionnaires are as follows:

Table 1. Student questionnaire results

No	Question	Answer				
		SS	S	KS	TS	STS
Understanding Japanese Letters and Vocabulary						
1	I feel that the alphabet/romaji letter is needed in the Marugoto A1 Starter books' reading material.	6	11	4	-	-
2	I think more kanji letters in the Marugoto A1 Starter books must be added.	3	15	2	1	-
3	I feel that the new vocabulary in the Marugoto A1 Starter books' is hard to comprehend.	1	3	8	6	3
4	I find it hard to find and see the vocabulary list on the Marugoto website.	-	8	6	4	3
5	I think that the vocabulary list needs to be added under the reading materials section.	6	12	1	2	-
Understanding Expressions in Reading Material (author's feeling, reading objectives, connection between the reading material)						

6	I feel that the reading material for the Marugoto A1 Starter books is inadequate, so it feels hard to understand the writer's feelings.	1	10	8	1	1
7	I find it hard to understand the reading objectives of each chapter in the Marugoto A1 Starter book.	-	5	9	5	2
8	I find it hard to comprehend the connection between sentences in the Marugoto A1 Starter books' reading materials.	-	4	9	7	1
Comprehension of Reading Material						
9	I feel that the reading materials in the Marugoto A1 Starter book are difficult to comprehend.	1	3	8	7	2
10	I feel that the reading materials in the Marugoto A1 Starter book can be studied alone.	3	14	3	1	-
11	I feel that the reading materials in the Marugoto A1 Starter book can have more variations.	5	15	1	-	-
12	I feel that the question given in the Marugoto A1 Starter books' can be answered quickly.	7	13	1	-	-
13	I think more reading materials in the Marugoto A1 Starter book must be added.	3	15	2	1	-
Evaluation of Marugoto A1 Starter Reading Material						
14	After the class, I reread the <i>dokkai</i> reading material by myself.	2	14	3	2	-
15	After reading the materials, I can explain the content of the reading material again.	4	12	5	-	-
16	I always do the <i>Can-do</i> section after reading the materials.	3	11	6	-	1
Visualization of Illustrations and Audio in Marugoto A1 Starter Reading Material						
17	I find that the illustration in the Marugoto A1 Starter books makes it difficult to comprehend the reading materials.	-	6	5	2	8
18	I think there are too many illustrations in the Marugoto A1 Starter book, so I can't focus on reading.	1	2	8	5	5
19	I feel that the illustration in the reading materials does not depict Japanese culture.	1	3	6	4	7
20	I think that there is no need to play the audio material in <i>the dokkai</i> reading material.	2	4	7	6	2

3.1. Understanding Japanese letters and vocabulary

The first statement about the alphabet/romaji letter is needed in the Marugoto A1 Starter books' reading material, which received the most affirmative responses from 11 respondents, 52.4%. The second statement about kanji letters in the Marugoto A1 Starter books needs to be added more received the most affirmative responses from 15 respondents, or 71.4%. The third statement about the new vocabulary in the Marugoto A1 Starter books' is hard to comprehend and gets slightly disagreeing responses from 8 respondents, or 38.1%. The fourth statement about how it is troublesome to find and see the vocabulary list on the Marugoto website got agreed responses from 8 respondents or 38.1%. The fifth statement about the vocabulary list needing to be added under the reading materials section received affirmative responses from 12 respondents, or 57.1%.

From the data above, the students point out that adding alphabet/romaji letters in the reading materials helps them, especially beginner-level learners who still need to be proficient in reading hiragana and katakana. This is considered to be supportive in helping the students remember Japanese letters. However, in this study program curriculum, the students commented about the mandatory courses related to kanji and vocabulary in the Japanese language. The students express that using kanji in the Marugoto book feels inadequate, considering the particular courses to learn kanji. In this case, to facilitate understanding and use of the curriculum in a specific Kanji course, the instructor is suggested to make a vocabulary list based on the vocabulary list provided in the Marugoto A1 Starter book and transform it into suitable kanji. Thus, the students will be able to learn kanji that is relevant to the theme in the Marugoto A1 Starter book.

Furthermore, in the particular reading course, the instructor can develop the reading material based on the Marugoto A1 Starter book material using the kanji taught in the Kanji course. This will help the student to improve their reading and comprehension skills using the Japanese text. Then, the vocabulary list for the reading materials or *dokkai* must be written in the Marugoto books. Instead, the vocabulary list is provided on the Marugoto website. In this case, the students can print the vocabulary list from the Marugoto website and insert it into their book before the classes. Besides that, the instructor is expected to hold discussions before the class to discuss the critical vocabulary that may appear in the text. This discussion may also be a chance for the students to give their opinions on the reading material so that it can help them understand and connect with the material better. The instructor can also encourage the students to develop their skills in searching and understanding the vocabulary independently.

3.2. *Understanding expressions in reading material*

The sixth statement about the Marugoto A1 Starter books' reading material is inadequate, so it feels hard to understand the writer's feelings received the most affirmative response from 10 respondents, or 47.6%. The seventh statement about how hard it is to understand the reading objectives of each chapter in the Marugoto A1 Starter book received slightly disagreeing responses from 9 respondents, or 42.9%. The eighth statement about how hard it is to comprehend the connection between sentences in the Marugoto A1 Starter books' reading materials received slightly disagreeing responses from 9 respondents, or 42.9%.

From the data above, beginner-level students from the Department of Japanese Language and Culture at the University of Al-Azhar Indonesia assess that the reading materials on the Marugoto book feel inadequate. From this student's perception, the instructor can increase the effectiveness of reading material in the Marugoto A1 Starter book by combining discussion of intercultural contrasts and similarities. Another option is for the instructor to add some additional and suitable narratives using the provided theme in the book. Furthermore, the instructor can plan class activities to encourage more active student engagement with the text. For example, acting simulation, debate, reiterating the contents of the text, or writing activity to some creative text based on the reading materials. Lastly, constant feedback can be implemented, allowing the students to express their obstacles and suggestions regarding the reading materials. This approach is expected to contribute to continuously improving and renewing the student's reading skills.

3.3. *Comprehension of reading material*

The statement about the reading materials in the Marugoto A1 Starter book is challenging to comprehend and receives slightly disagreeing responses from 8 respondents, or 38.1%. The statement about the reading materials in the Marugoto A1 Starter book can be studied alone. It received affirmative responses from 14 respondents, or 66.7%. The statement about the reading materials in the Marugoto A1 Starter book could have more variation and received affirmative responses from 15 respondents, or 71.4%. The twelfth statement about the question given in the Marugoto A1 Starter books' can be answered quickly by 13 respondents, or 61.9%. The thirteenth statement about the reading materials in the Marugoto A1 Starter book needs to be added more; it received affirmative responses from 13 respondents or 71.4%.

From the data above, the students find the reading materials content in the Marugoto A1 Starter for elementary beginners to comprehend. However, the students feel that the reading materials in the book need to be more varied and have shorter sentences in the form of a basic introduction for the theme. Some students state that reading materials like a diary, manga, or short novel story can be more diverse and exciting. As explained before, to improve students' reading skills, the instructor can increase the reading material in the Marugoto A1 Starter book by adding some discussion activities in the class where the students can talk and share their understanding of the reading materials. Moreover, the instructor can ask the students to explain the content of the reading materials they have read once more. This activity can help the students to comprehend the text more deeply and increase their communication skills. This approach can also make the learning process feel more interactive and appealing.

3.4. *Evaluation of Marugoto A1 starter reading material*

The statement about respondents who reread the *dokkai* reading material after class received affirmative responses from 14 respondents, or 66.7%. The fifteenth statement about the respondents can explain the content of the reading material received affirmative responses from 12 respondents or 57.1%. After reading the materials, the sixteenth statement about the respondents always doing the Can-do section received affirmative responses from 11 respondents or 52.4%.

From the data above, the students generally review reading material after the course session. The students who have already read the reading materials can also explain the content and do the Can-do part provided in the Marugoto A1 Starter book. So, the students can use the Marugoto A1 Starter book to evaluate the reading materials learned.

3.5. Visualization of illustrations and audio in Marugoto A1 starter reading material

The statement about the illustration in the Marugoto A1 Starter books makes it difficult to comprehend the reading materials, and the most strongly disagreeable responses were received from 8 respondents, or 38.1%. The statement about too many illustrations in the Marugoto A1 Starter book, so the respondents can't focus on reading, received slightly disagreeing responses from 8 respondents or 38.1%. The following response about the illustration in the reading materials does not depict Japanese culture. It received intensely disagreeable responses from 7 respondents or 33.3%. The last statement about there is no need to play the audio material in *dokkai* reading material received slightly opposing responses from 7 respondents or 33.3%.

From the data above, the illustrations in Marugoto A1's Starter book benefit the students in understanding the reading material and can be used to predict the reading content. The students also felt that with the illustration in the Marugoto A1 Starter book, the contents of the reading material were easier to understand. The purpose of using illustrations in reading material is to help students understand the reading material and be able to analyze and explain the reading material in their own words (Hiromi Kijima, 2016). On the other hand, the audio recordings included in Marugoto A1 Starter book are also very good at clarifying how to read things that are still difficult to understand, getting the students used to listening to how the Japanese people speak, and helping the students learn the correct Japanese pronunciation so they can comprehend the author's intended expression. Before reading the story, the instructor should start the class by exploring the illustration in the book and then playing the audio recording. With this approach, the students could listen to the pronunciation of the vocabulary and phrases in the proper context.

4. Conclusions

The results of the data above show that the primary teaching material, The Marugoto A1 Starter book, had a positive response from the beginner-level students at the Department of Japanese Language and Culture at the UAI, as the reading material is made more accessible for students to comprehend the content of the reading material. Adding alphabet/romaji letters also benefits beginner-level students who initially had difficulty with the hiragana and katakana letters. Furthermore, the students can also comprehend the connection between sentences, and the illustrations on the reading materials help predict the reading content. Additionally, the audio recordings included are also accommodating to increase students' pronunciation, clarify the reading material, and get them used to hearing a conversation and pronunciation from a native speaker.

However, the students found several areas for improvement in using the Marugoto A1 Starter book in the reading section. One of the areas for improvement is the need for more use of kanji letters in the reading material. As previously explained, a specific course within the Department of Japanese Language and Culture curriculum at UAI focuses on teaching kanji and Japanese vocabulary. In addition, the students feel that the Marugoto A1 Starter book reading materials could be extended or have more variation, such as a diary, short novel, manga, recipe, etc. Advice to the instructor regarding using the Marugoto A1 Starter book is that the reading courses can be combined with the kanji course by developing the reading text and adding some kanji letters.

Additionally, the instructor can add some activities focusing on using kanji in the reading contexts. Furthermore, providing additional reading material and implementing various class activities like reading and discussing the text will increase students' involvement and interest. Developing student feedback is essential to understanding their needs and adjusting more effective learning methods. This implementation of approaches is expected to increase the Japanese language learning process, especially in reading skills.

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