

“Lesen Sie!” ——Students’ Perception of ER Activities in the German Language Classroom ——

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Reading can be a joyful activity. Besides the fantastic worlds that await the reader, it can also give satisfaction to a learner of reading or a new language. Especially the latter can profit from reading in manifold ways, be it vocabulary, grammar, reading comprehension or motivation (Day 2011, pp. 14-15). To facilitate the student's interest in and habit of reading, as well as to get them ready for the German lesson, the author has implemented an in-class ten to 15 minute extensive reading time in her second-year German language classes. This research tries to reflect on this in-class reading activity by analyzing the participants’ feedback, in order to improve the activity itself, and to elaborate the students’ needs and desired reading materials.

1. Introduction

Reading is considered a very effective way to learn languages (Day & Bamford, 1998; Krashen, 2004; Nishizawa, Yoshioka & Fukada, 2010; Takase, 2012). Graded readers are designed to meet the needs of people who have not yet mastered the language fully (Day, 2011). Needless to say, the aim of graded readers is to foster reading extensively. Unfortunately, university students who emerge into a new language still lack not only language skills such as vocabulary or grammar, but also the time and general interest necessary to pick up a book on their own (Takase, 2012; Chang & Renandya, 2017). Reading as a learning tool works best if it is an enjoyable activity, free of stress and interruption. Thus, the aim of the reading activity, which could be considered “sustained silent reading” (Krashen, 2004, p. 2; Takase, 2012, p. 2), was to get the students to read as much as possible, as relaxed as any “enforced” classroom activity may be.

Since the graded reading activity is not the only activity the students undertake, and some students attend further German language classes as well, it was considered inappropriate to test and compare the language skills before and after the reading activity, because the language skill of the participants is not only influenced by this reading activity. Further, it was not practical to test groups who attended classes with reading activities and others without, since the number of students is too limited.

2. The in-class reading activity

In the first unit of each course, the students were introduced to the fact that there will be a reading activity in their class. They were informed that the purpose of the reading is mainly to get the mindset into “German”, but also to activate known vocabulary and grammar structures. The students were told to get any book from the library’s “German easy reader” section, that

they consider interesting and not too difficult, thus the level should be one level below (Day & Bamford 1998, p. 91; Brierley, 2015, p. 46) their German language ability – in general a level A0-A1 book. They were also instructed that they should stop reading a book that they do not enjoy because of its difficulty or contents (Sakai, 2002). They were supposed to bring a book each time, but those who forgot their book could get a book from the teacher. The students received a reference-sheet (*Protokoll*) from the teacher (Figure 1: The reference-sheet for the students), in which they wrote the book number, their progress, how easy it was to understand, number of looked up words¹, how interesting it was and their satisfaction after each reading time. There was also space for comments after a book was completed or put aside².

科目名 Leichte Lektüre

Protokoll Name:

学籍番号:

	例	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15
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ページ数 ¹	1.5	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
理解度 ²	4	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
調べた単語数	10	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
内容の面白さ ³	3	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
満足度 ⁴	4	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

	Titel	Level	進め / コメント
Buch 1	<input style="width: 150px;" type="text"/>	<input style="width: 50px;" type="text"/>	<input style="width: 150px;" type="text"/>
Buch 2	<input style="width: 150px;" type="text"/>	<input style="width: 50px;" type="text"/>	<input style="width: 150px;" type="text"/>
Buch 3	<input style="width: 150px;" type="text"/>	<input style="width: 50px;" type="text"/>	<input style="width: 150px;" type="text"/>
Buch 4	<input style="width: 150px;" type="text"/>	<input style="width: 50px;" type="text"/>	<input style="width: 150px;" type="text"/>
Buch 5	<input style="width: 150px;" type="text"/>	<input style="width: 50px;" type="text"/>	<input style="width: 150px;" type="text"/>

1 読んだページのページ数を教えてください：0.5 / 1 / 1.5 / 2 / ...
 2 理解度：今回読んだテキストは分かりやすく、スムーズに読めましたか？（1 <非常に分かりやすかった> - 5 <全く分からなかった>）
 3 内容の面白さ：このテキストは面白かったですか？（1 <非常に面白かった> - 5 <全く面白くなかった>）
 4 満足度：今回の満足度及び達成感について教えてください。（1 <非常に満足している> - 5 <全く満足していない>）

Figure 1: The reference-sheet for the students

The reading activity was set at the beginning ten to fifteen minutes of each lesson, so that the students did not have any additional homework. Naturally, the students were told that it is highly recommended that they continue reading at home – but it was not obligatory. The reading activity was neither graded, nor part of their final grade in any way. Each student read at his or her own pace. Even though the participants were informed that the aim was to read as many books as possible, it was clear from the beginning that they would not reach the amount necessary to consider this activity “extensive” reading, complying with e.g. Sakai’s (2002) targets.

In 2019 the reading activity was carried out in the classes (1) ドイツ語中級 I・II³ and (2) ドイツ語演習 I・II⁴ (at the School of General Education; both for students in the second year, the former being an elective course for all faculties, the latter an obligatory class for

students from the Faculty of Arts who have chosen German as their second foreign language) and (3) ドイツ語コミュニケーション中級 I・II⁵ and (4) ドイツ語コミュニケーション上級 I・II⁶ (at the Faculty of Arts – elective classes aimed at students who major in German and who are in their second or third year) over the period of one academic year (two semesters). In 2021⁷ the activity was carried out in the corresponding⁸ four classes during the spring and fall term, but at this point only the questionnaire of the spring term is available.

In the academic year 2019, about 2-3 times during the term, the students talked to each other for an additional 5-10 minutes about the books they were reading. During this exchange time they could use any language, thus they usually spoke in their native language Japanese. Further, the teacher also had a look at the reference-sheets once in a while and restated the idea of reading an easy and enjoyable book to those students who had marked their progress as unsatisfactory or their book as very difficult. Due to the Corona-virus pandemic restrictions, these activities were not carried out in the spring term of the academic year 2021.

3. Questionnaires

3.1 Setup of questionnaires

At the end of the winter semester 2019, the students were asked to answer an online questionnaire concerning the reading activity. The questionnaire was anonymous, and available online on the University's moodle platform eALPS. It consisted of 26 questions on the students' status, the German language classes (with in-class reading activity), on the books they read, on the impact on their German language skill and on the activity in general (time setting, grading, etc.). Twenty-two of the questions were multiple choice and four were open. Depending on the class the questionnaire was open from January 29th or 31st to February 4th or 5th 2020. The students were informed in class and via email about the questionnaire. Each student who filled in the questionnaire received one additional grade point for each class he or she undertook the reading activity. Thirty-six students were originally enrolled in the four participating classes, out of which four students dropped out early and another five students were enrolled in two classes with “in-class-reading activity”. Thus 27 students (12 male and 15 female) were expected to answer the questionnaire. By the deadline, 15 students (six male and nine female) answered the questionnaire (turnout rate 55.6%). The sex-ratio of students who replied reflects approximately the sex-ratio of participants. Most participants (25) were from the arts faculty. The law/economics faculty and the medical faculty were represented by one student each. Twenty-three students who replied were in their 2nd year, three in their 3rd year and one in the 5th year.

In 2021, at the end of the spring term, the students enrolled in the respective classes were asked to answer an online questionnaire concerning the reading activity. Again, the questionnaire was anonymous, and available online on the University's moodle platform eALPS. It consisted of the same 26 questions as the questionnaire 2019, plus two additional questions on their reading preferences (one multiple choice and one open). Depending on the class the questionnaire was open from July 26th, 27th or 29th to August 2nd, 3rd, 5th or 10th 2021. The students were informed via mail about the questionnaire. Each student who filled in the questionnaire received one additional grade point for the class he or she answered the

questionnaire. 30 students were originally enrolled in the four participating classes, out of which three students dropped out early and another four students were enrolled in two of the participating four classes. Thus, 23 students (12 male and 11 female) were expected to answer the questionnaire. By the deadline, 19 students (nine male and ten female) answered the questionnaire (turnout rate 82.6%). The sex-ratio of students who replied reflects approximately the sex-ratio of participants. Almost all participants (22 out of whom 18 replied to the survey) were from the arts faculty. The medical faculty was represented by one student. Thirteen students who replied were in their 2nd year, five in their 3rd year and one in the 4th year.

In both surveys, in the section about the enrolled classes and classes with graded reader activities, it seems that the wording of the questionnaire was not clear enough, thus the data from that section are not reliable and will not be presented.

3.2 Findings concerning the books read and the activity

According to the replies, the students read between one and eight books during the academic year 2019. The third-year students read three to six books, and thus not more than the second year students. Four students, more than one fourth of the students, read six books. The mean is 4.87 books per student.

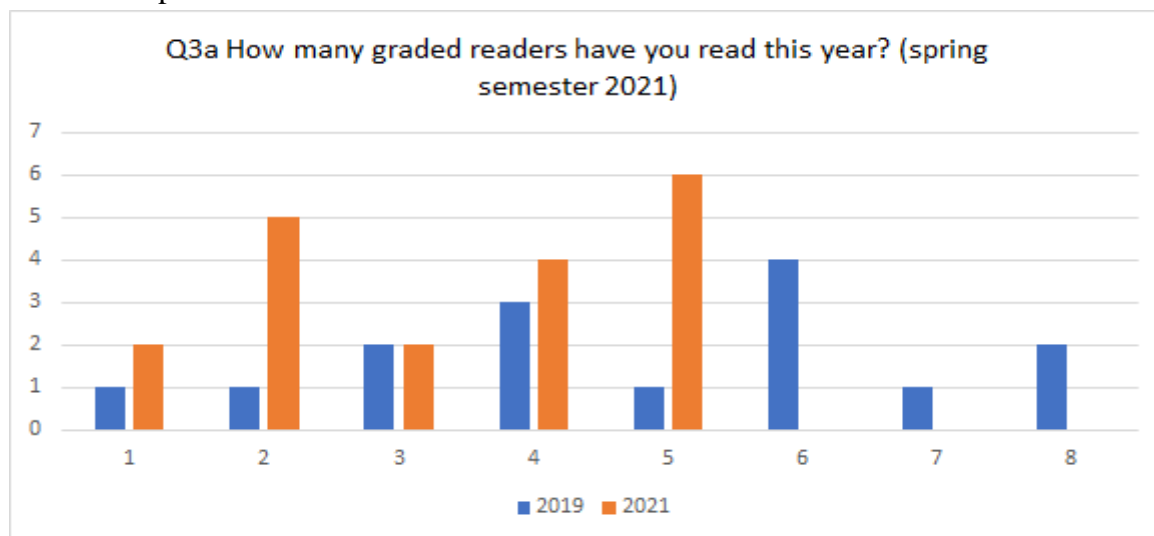


Figure 2: Number of read books (2019 & 2021)

According to the replies in 2021, the students read between one and five books during the spring term. The third-year students read three to five books (mean 3.67) and thus not significantly more than the second-year students (mean 3.31). Six students (almost one third of the replies) read five books. The majority read more than 4 books, which is more than expected. The overall mean is 3.37 books per student.

Consistent with the idea to only read enjoyable books (Sakai, 2002; Day & Bamford, 2002), the students in both years were asked to stop reading a book as soon as it became boring or too difficult. According to the survey 2019 no student read all books he or she borrowed until the end. Between one and six books (on average 2.67 books) were put aside because they were too difficult (11 replies), not interesting (6 replies), the class finished (6 replies) or the borrowing

time finished (7 replies).

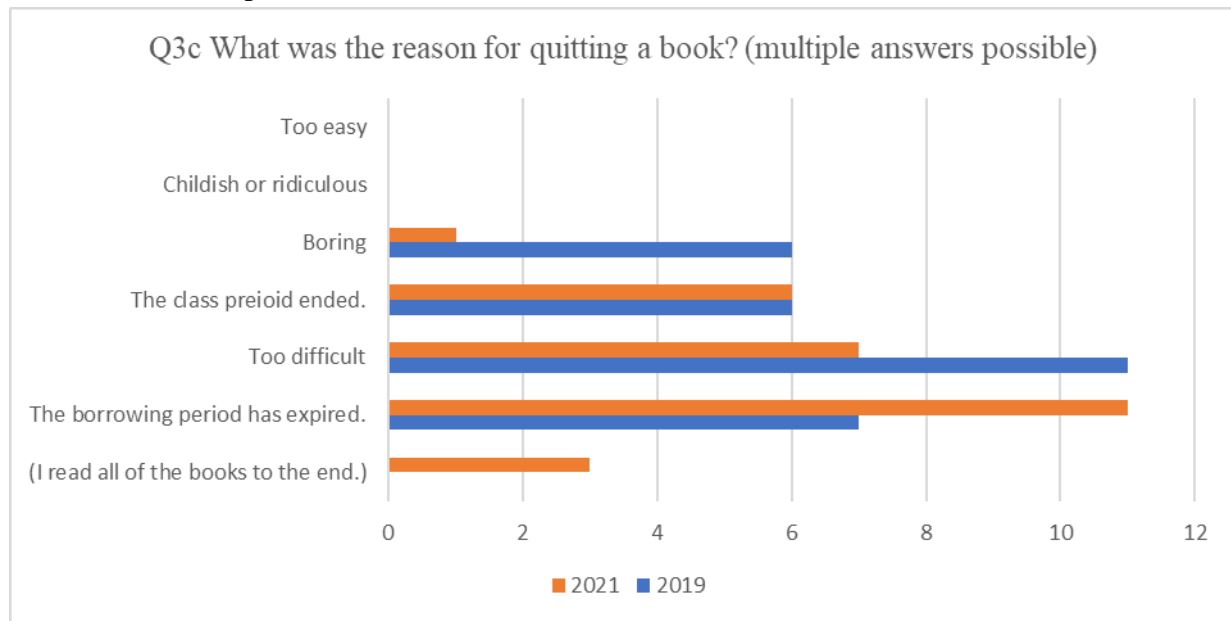


Figure 3: Reasons for quitting a book. (2019 & 2021)

On the other hand, in 2021 three students read all books they borrowed until the end. Most books (39%) were put aside because the borrowing time finished. Between one and seven books were put aside because they were too difficult (7 replies), not interesting (1 reply) or the class finished (6 replies).

In both surveys, no student considered the books as too childish, even though the A0 and A1 Level German graded readers available in the library consist to a large percentage of teen readers or books for kids.

In 2019, all but two students (86.7%) say that the selection of books available in the library was satisfactory. Only one student mentions that there are not enough Level A1 books. He or she further mentions a wish for more books with many illustrations and easy to understand settings. The other students mention that the books which interested them are too difficult. And they would like a genre-based order in the library. In the additional comment section, another student mentions that he or she had the feeling that there are few books with an appropriate level of difficulty.

Even though the selection of graded readers has increased, in 2021 fewer (84%) of the participants considered the selection of books available in the library as satisfactory. Two students say, that there are not enough interesting-looking (面白そう) books. Two participants mention that they would like more or more recent manga, while another asks for more fairy tales or children's stories (童話系). At this stage, the author questions whether manga like *Rurouni Kenshin*, *Vagabond* or *Demon Slayer: Kimetsuno yaiba*⁹ qualify as reading material, proper for the German level of the target group. Sakai (Kerr, 2011) considered manga in the target language as useful and easy to get hold of and following Maxim (2002) a (culturally) familiar text eases the cognitive load while reading. Thus, for the Japanese target group, manga seem to be appropriate reading material. On the other hand, manga (and other authentic easy literature and comic books) besides being longer than graded readers, contain numerous

unknown and low-frequency words as well as difficult syntax (Krashen, 2004, p.104; Day, 2011, pp. 16-18). Therefore, especially the examples mentioned above seem to conflict with the idea of easy and therefore appropriate material (Day & Bamford, 2002).

The above-mentioned preference for fairly well-known books, like manga, fairy tales or German versions of famous books, was further reflected in the answers to the newly added question (4g) in which the students were asked to specify and if possible even name titles of books they would like to read or like to be added to the library.

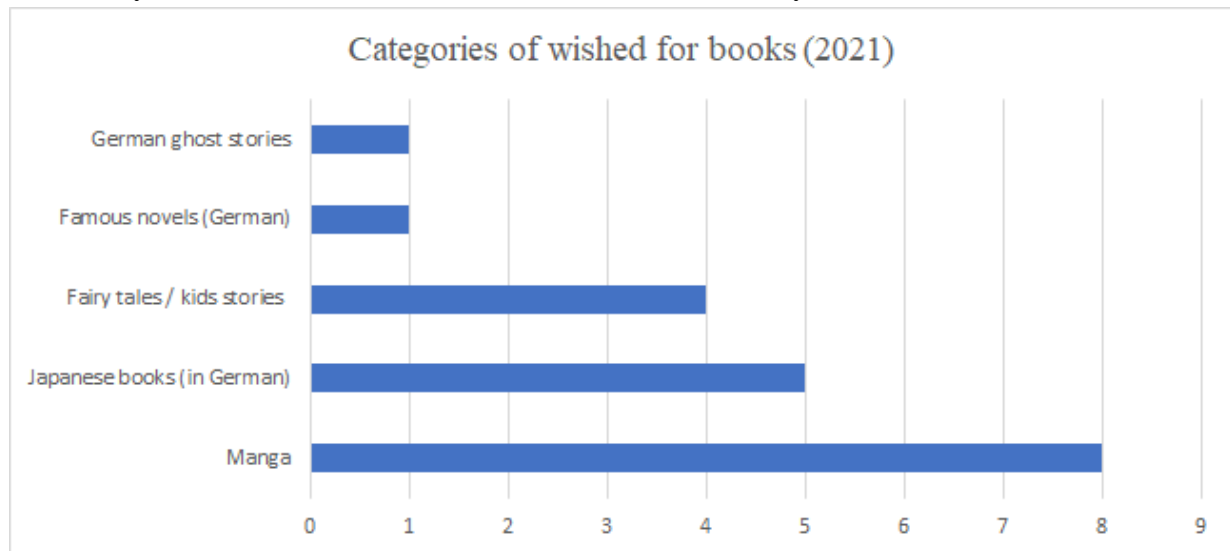


Figure 4: Categories of wished for books (2021)

Irrespective of the “inconveniences” like going to the library, carrying the book etc., all students mentioned that they would rather read paper books than e-books¹⁰.

Concerning the implementation of the reading activity, all but one student¹¹ in 2019 and all students in 2021, approve of reading 15 Minutes at the beginning of each class. In both surveys, most students consider it better if the activity is no part of the grade for future classes.

According to the answers concerning the opinion exchange about the read books, most students in 2019 only slightly agree that the opinion exchange about their book was appropriate. Referring to their additional comments, it seems that they had problems grasping the activity, reflecting on what they had read or even thought that speaking in German would have been better. But many wrote that this activity was helpful to decide on the next book and to reflect on the content of the book they were reading.

Even though there was no opinion exchange activity held in the classes in spring term 2021, it seems that some students did exchange their experiences with their colleagues and stated that this exchange was good for their motivation or for choosing the next book. Those who had no opinion-exchange either answered that they would appreciate an exchange or more guidance from the teacher, or that a real opinion exchange activity (in German) might be difficult.

4. Significance and impact on the language skill

The most important finding is that all students in both surveys considered the in-class reading activity as meaningful. In 2019 about one fourth of the students considered the activity “very meaningful”. In 2021 on the other hand, even though the group of students who considered the

activity merely “somewhat meaningful” increased, the percentage of students considering it “very meaningful” also increased from one fourth to almost one third.

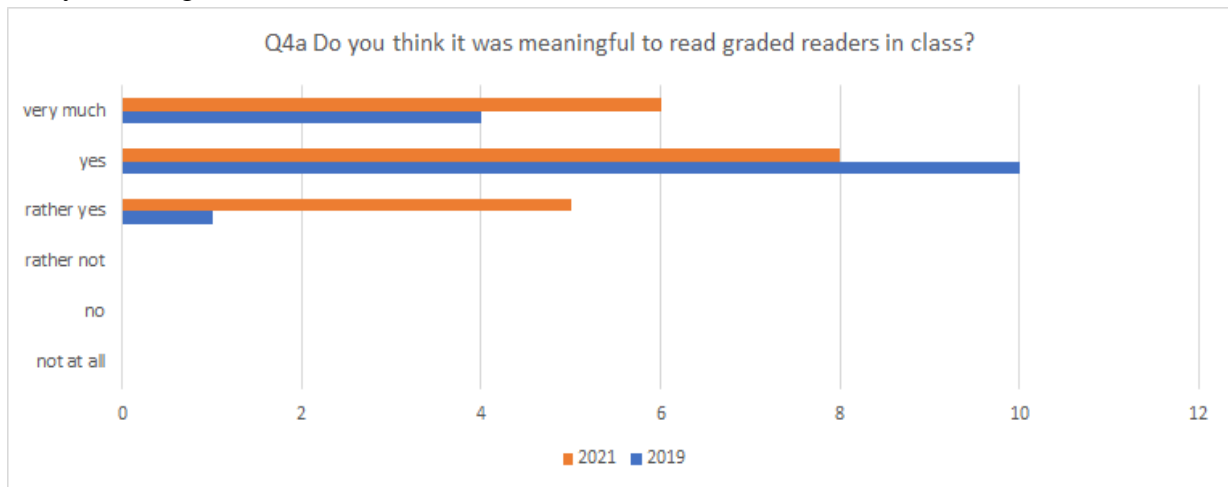


Figure 5: : "Do you consider reading graded readers in the class as meaningful?" (2019 & 2021)

Similarly, all students in 2019 considered reading graded readers as interesting and enjoyable (面白!). Nevertheless, the students did not fully agree that the graded readers are easy to understand and read. Even though they show a tendency to approve, it became clear that the books they read were still challenging for them.

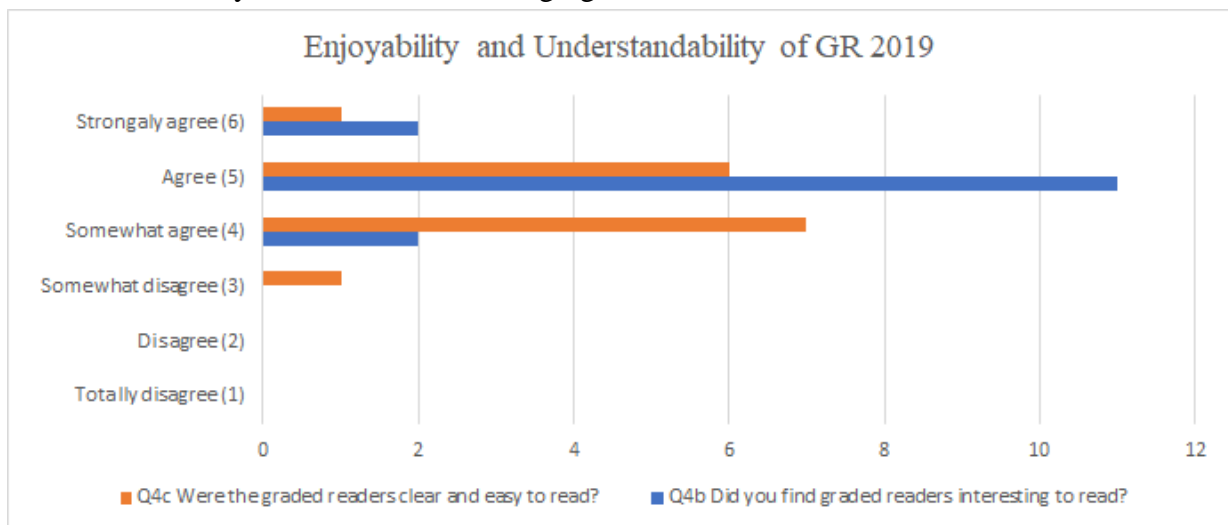


Figure 6: Were the graded readers interesting and clear and easy to read? (2019)

On the other hand, all but two students in 2021 considered reading graded readers as appealing. And even though most students tend to consider graded readers as easy to read and understand, they seemingly choose books that are very challenging for them.

In both surveys, all students agree that reading graded readers has a positive effect on their overall German proficiency, though they do differ in which skill is most positively influenced.

In general, the participants think that their reading skill (gray) has improved, followed by their vocabulary (blue) and grammar proficiency (orange). Last is their writing skill (yellow), but unlike the first survey, in which two thirds of the participants answered that they believed their writing skill had not improved, in the second survey the students had a slightly more

positive impression of the influence of reading graded readers on their writing skill as shown in Figure 8: Influence of GR by Skill (2019 & 2021) below. Nine out of nineteen participants in 2021 felt a rather positive or positive influence on their writing skill.

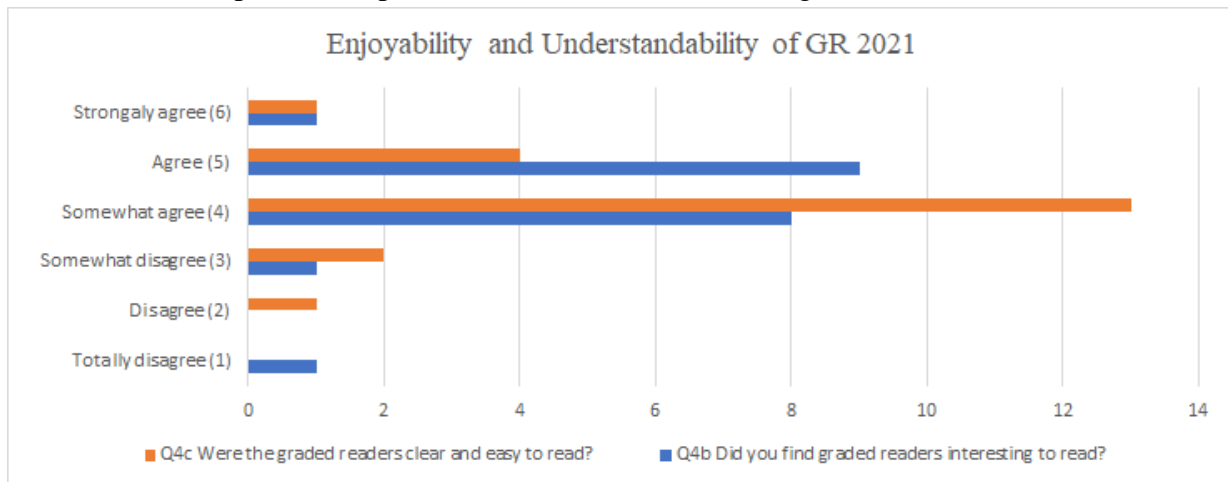


Figure 7: Were the graded readers interesting and clear and easy to read? (2021)

5. Concluding remarks on the reading activity

According to the answers of the questionnaire, in general the reading activity can be considered a success. The positive impact on the German language learning that the students perceive would need further verification. In the given context however, this appears to be hard to obtain, since the students do not only read but also participate in other class activities – or even in further German language classes, therefore their progress can never be tied solely to the reading activity.

The author noticed that the students in 2021 seemed to read too difficult books. There are more students who consider the graded readers only rather easy to read (about 63 percent), or even not easy to understand (three of 19 participants). It seems that the participants also tend to continue reading rather than putting the difficult or not interesting books down. The reason for this might be the lack of feedback (Takase, 2012, p. 9), which was provided by peers or the instructor in 2019.

The fear of the author that many of the books available would be considered too childish, could not be confirmed. On the other hand, the students rather seem to prefer books that they considered interesting – like manga, or fairy-tales – irrespective of the fact that those might be beyond the students' proficiency level. Even though this tendency is understandable, it might not lead to the best results from an extensive reading perspective and in the given setting¹². Nevertheless, the selection of new books for the library should not only consider the Level, but also the content and genre.

Finally, the author plans to have at least one more year of testing the in-class reading activity. A more “extensive approach”, setting targets of books read or words read (Sakai, 2002; Nishizawa, Yoshioka & Fukada, 2010), as well as a revised questionnaire after each semester are planned. The author considers making the questionnaire anonymous but obligatory, and the awkward wording of some questions will be rephrased. Setting a target will shift the activity from a sole “in-class-activity” into a mix of in-class and at-home reading. According to

Takase's research (2012, p. 11), as long as there is in-class reading time provided, the students might not develop a negative attitude towards reading independently at home, but rather a positive one. It will be necessary to monitor the attitude towards independent reading as well as the shift to reading at home through the questionnaire. Furthermore, the author will revitalize the opinion exchange activity and guidance, as they seem to have a crucial impact on the success of choosing books from the right level (Chang & Renandya, 2017, pp. 52-53).

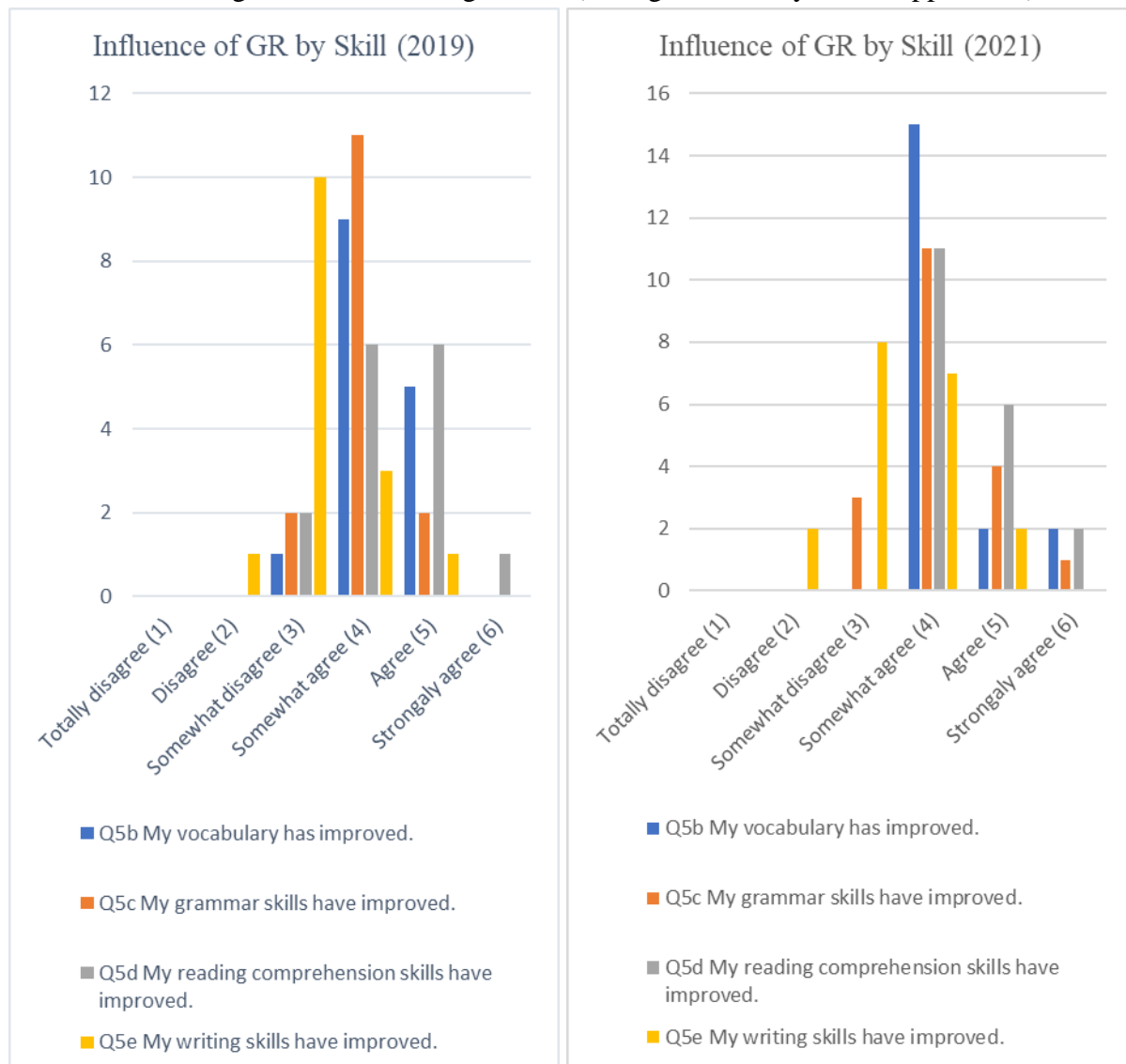


Figure 8: Influence of GR by Skill (2019 & 2021)

At last, there shall be additional questions on whether the students consider reading further books, even after the classes have finished. This question is especially dear to the author's heart, since most second-year students will not continue learning German in a classroom in their third year.

¹ Unlike Sakai (2002; Kerr, 2011) the author considers the use of a dictionary, as long as it is minimum, or in Brierley's words (2015, p.42) an emergency, as helpful. In the reference-sheet, the number of looked up words were used as an indicator, and helped to identify books that were too difficult.

- ² On page two of the reference sheet in 2021 were comments and recommendations from the students in 2019, which should help to choose a book.
- ³ German: Intermediate Level 1 & 2
- ⁴ German Exercise 1 & 2
- ⁵ Intermediate course of German Oral Communication 1 & 2
- ⁶ Advanced course of German Oral Communication 1 & 2
- ⁷ Due to the obligatory online teaching and the initial difficulties concerning borrowing books from the library, the reading activity was suspended during the academic year 2020.
- ⁸ The name of the class “ドイツ語演習” changed to “ドイツ語中級” in 2021, thus there are two classes with the same name, one for students from the arts faculty and one for students from all other faculties.
- ⁹ The first two are examples of manga available in the Shinshu-University library at the moment, the third one is a manga, that students specifically named as a wished for book.
- ¹⁰ The preferences of content and book-category were taken into account for ordering new books and graded readers for the library.
- ¹¹ The one exceptional student mentioned that he or she would rather read at home than in class.
- ¹² As Maxim (2002) points out authentic literature can be used even for first year learners, but at the same time he recommends more guidance and follow-up activities from the instructor.

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2022年2月1日受理 2022年2月12日採録決定