

# Reading Beyond the Curriculum

## Fostering Communities of L2 Chinese and Japanese Learners

By Jason Herlands and Meghan Cai



Students in an informal study group. Source: Stock photo. © Shutterstock.

**Editor's Note:** L1 refers to a first, or native language. L2 refers to a person's second language that is not the native language (first language or L1) of the speaker, but is learned later either as a foreign language or another language used in the speaker's home country.

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Reading need not be a solitary or passive activity, and indeed we have found that active, communal reading can be both productive and pleasurable for students. In this article, we discuss how our respective reading groups serve as low-pressure environments for students to approach challenging texts in Chinese and Japanese. As visits to on-campus counseling services continue to set records at universities nationwide, we have established spheres apart from the university curriculum and its pressures of targeted progress and measurable outcomes, places where students can apply their learning, acquire new skills, or simply gather among peers with a similar interest in foreign languages and cultures.<sup>1</sup>

We teach in small language programs at a regional public university in which our courses only reach intermediate American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) proficiency, so it is understandably daunting for students to approach authentic target-language materials despite the availability of online tools to assist in reading. Textbook materials are useful in providing reading passages carefully aligned to students' study of grammar, acquisition of vocabulary, and recognition of characters. However, these passages offer little guidance for those who wish to go beyond the cocoon of the curriculum and explore other types of writing, while enrollment pressures have thus far prevented convening upper-level courses to that end. To supplement our classroom work, we have created reading groups as spaces that empower learners through collaboration, opening up possibilities for students to build confidence and intrinsic motivation on a trajectory toward self-directed language study.

Reading communally and casually allows us to approach literary works and other authentic materials together that would be very difficult for learners to approach on their own. Reading group participants report high levels of satisfaction with our informal methods, encouraging us to continue exploring ways in which to productively engage and challenge students in the target language without increasing affective filters. Indeed, Professor Jing Zhou writes that there is a negative correlation between foreign-language reading anxiety and reading performance for elementary and intermediate learners.<sup>2</sup> Zhou

recommends strategies and practices that reduce the stress students feel, particularly in languages using unfamiliar scripts. Because our reading groups are extracurricular and have no formal assessment mechanism, participants indicate that reading together outside the classroom, separate from the anxieties of grades, made learning fun and increased their confidence, despite the more challenging level of the materials compared to the textbook-aligned curriculum. This strongly suggests that the addition of an assessment component could be detrimental to the goals and ethos of our groups.

Reading aloud combines the skills of reading and speaking—and, in a communal setting, listening—and is common practice for L1 Japanese and Chinese learners. The practice carries over to L2 learners of the languages, too, though ACTFL proficiency guidelines and performance descriptors do not specifically mention it.<sup>3</sup> For example, the teacher's guide to *Tobira*, an intermediate-level Japanese textbook, specifically encourages approaching reading passages in the classroom by having students “as much as possible read aloud (*ondoku*) in pairs, groups, or the entire class” as part of a comprehensive strategy to improve reading proficiency.<sup>4</sup> L1 readers in elementary school are expected to begin by voicing one character at a time, gradually shifting to the word and phrase level as proficiency increases.<sup>5</sup> As instructors of L2 Japanese and Chinese languages, we observe learners develop reading skills in a similar manner, beginning with the voicing of individual characters or syllables and increasing in length and complexity over time. We have observed that increased exposure to reading materials in reading groups, where we use materials as or significantly more complex than in the classroom, assists students in reading in a more natural cadence.

Facilitators can lead reading groups with little effort and still reap big rewards. We each dedicate one hour per week to our reading groups, which we count toward our university's service requirements. Our groups are flexible and ad hoc, with each group session tailored to meet the needs and goals of participants. For example, sometimes more advanced-level participants will want to try summarizing what they have read in the target language; others at the beginner or low-intermediate level may focus on pronunciation, simply reading the *pinyin* or *kana* and letting peers help with more difficult content. There is also flexibility in the selection of texts, depending on group needs and interests (e.g., fiction, nonfiction, media). Aside from selecting the readings and organizing meeting times and locations, the groups require little additional preparation and are thus possible for us to convene in addition to a full teaching load.

The loose structure makes quantifying proficiency gains nearly impossible—both for facilitators and for learners—and yet participants return week after week, attesting to their own perceived value in assembling to read. While some participants make it clear that they attend primarily for the purpose of improving reading skills, others recognize the value of belonging to a group of like-minded people from whom they can learn. Our choice of textual materials also feeds into the aspirations of the language-learner, as evidenced by a participant's excitement: “I am able to read an actual book in the language that I'm learning.” Anecdotal and observational evidence quite clearly shows us that increased exposure to target-language materials, a communal approach to challenging reading, and the laid-back atmosphere make learning fun and fulfilling for our participants.

### Chinese

Intermediate Chinese learners shared two common frustrations. First, small enrollment numbers meant a lack of classes in advanced Chinese, which signaled an end of formal study and the potential that hard-fought gains in proficiency would be lost. Secondly, they lamented that reading Chinese is hard—a sentiment tacitly shared by students at all levels—and felt overwhelmed by available resources and unsure how to improve their reading comprehension. These factors depleted students' confidence that they would ever achieve proficiency in Chinese. This lack of confidence often manifested in poor classroom performance.

In response, Meghan explored other methods of developing self-directed study skills and reading strategies through increasing exposure to authentic Chinese texts. Inspired by her own Chinese-language study as an undergraduate and graduate, Meghan recalled that reading aloud and translating a shared text in a group setting created a supportive community in which to learn, practice, make mistakes, and gradually build confidence. Participating in such reading groups taught her that it is through accrued mistakes that learning occurs and that no one, not even professors and scholars, gets everything right all the time. Learning that it is OK to not be perfect is especially important to students in this generation, with their increasing levels of anxiety.

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In winter 2017, Meghan started a contemporary Chinese fiction reading group (*Zhongguo xiandai xiaoshuo dushuhui*) to complement the curriculum. She chose a graded reader (*Graded Chinese Reader 1500 Words*), which is a collection of abridged short stories by contemporary Chinese authors that includes pinyin and a limited glossary, anticipating that such a text would not overwhelm students.<sup>6</sup> She chose this particular text because the Chinese program reaches mid- to high-intermediate level (approximately *Hanyu Shuiping Kaoshi* [HSK] 4–5), and as this text uses HSK 4 vocabulary and grammar, the stories reinforce grammatical patterns our higher-level students have already learned, and our lower-level students are able to preview these patterns before they learn them in class. Students of all levels encounter new vocabulary. In addition, dialogues in these stories give students a taste of colloquial Chinese, which they will not see in their *Integrated Chinese* textbooks.<sup>7</sup>

Over the first semester, the group met every other week for one hour but, due to student demand, began to meet weekly in subsequent semesters. As this is not a required activity, the size of the group varies. Students are polled each semester to determine which time will work for the greatest number of people. When the group meets, they sit together at a table and take turns reading out loud from the text. The amount of text read by participants is wholly dependent on individual participants. Usually, participants will read two to four sentences and then translate that into working English.

Students take the lead, while Meghan serves as the facilitator: she lets students know when their understanding is accurate and when it is not; and when they encounter difficulties, she encourages other students to help, rather than wait for the professor to provide answers. She also tries to point out when something they have learned in their formal curriculum shows up in the text and offers strategies for “attacking” more complex sentences. She only “teaches” when the students have exhausted their own resources, or when cultural or historical background is needed to understand the story. In this way, students learn to rely on one another. Students report that they enjoy learning more about Chinese culture through semi-authentic texts. Meghan has noted that those students who regularly participate improve their reading comprehension tremendously, become more comfortable making mistakes and correcting or teaching others, and consequently are more confident in class.

#### Japanese

The Japanese program faces limitations similar to the Chinese program and is developing its curriculum for the purpose of helping students become more self-directed in their language study. Jason established the extracurricular reading group, dubbed the *kyōdoku kurabu* (“reading-together club”), as a communal and social activity centered on reading aloud in Japanese. While the most active and self-motivated participants credit the group with significant gains in certain areas of proficiency—kan-

ji recognition, vocabulary familiarity, and reading speed among them—the flexible nature of the gathering allows students to have complete control over their degree of engagement, comprehension, and motivation.

The reading group is informal and extracurricular, so it is important that there be neither undue burden on the facilitator nor unnecessary requirements for participation. To make the texts approachable to even first-semester language students, the Japanese group focuses on reading primarily as an exercise in vocalizing the written language. For the texts we read, which are typically typeset vertically (read top to bottom, right to left), simply vocalizing what is written on the page can be quite challenging, and equally rewarding, for students at all the levels we teach. Those who can read characters help those who cannot, often by giving hints or sharing strategies for remembering pronunciation and meaning.

After determining times at which the greatest number of participants can attend, Jason selects a dozen pages of a contemporary Japanese novel to read across a semester. In fall 2018, he chose author Murata Sayaka’s *Convenience Store Woman* because it had just been translated into English, but any modern Japanese prose text would be suitable.<sup>8</sup> Jason creates and shares with participants a cloud-based file with difficult words or characters listed, in order, and participants crowdsource the readings of characters and meanings of the new words in the shared document prior to the weekly meeting. Not only do learners take a role in constructing this communal glossary, they can also download the communal document for future reference or for export into one of many flashcard applications, such as Anki or Memrise, that they already use. The most dedicated students come to the group already

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having written *hiragana* syllables next to unfamiliar kanji so that they can focus on fluency, but this is explicitly *not* a precondition for attending the reading group.

Participants can attend either of the two groups that assemble for approximately thirty minutes each per week, and some come to both even though the content is the same. Participants take turns reading passages according to their abilities and self-motivation. Elementary readers may start out reading only the syllables they have studied, but it is remarkable how quickly participants recognize and internalize new characters that appear repeatedly in a text. For example, in *Convenience Store Woman*, the terms *mise* (store) and *ten'in* (store clerk) appear on almost every page. Kanji like these that appear repeatedly are quickly acquired by even beginners, who also learn about the multiplicity of kanji pronunciation. Intermediate learners of Japanese may show improvement over time in kanji recognition and pronunciation, reading fluency, and identifying the natural breaks within sentences (sometimes referred to as *ma no torikata*), depending on their engagement.

Our group's method differs markedly from the *tadoku* (extensive reading) method, as well as the Chinese program's reading group, in that we do not use graded readers and do not explicitly aim for participants to understand the material as a component of our weekly meetings.<sup>9</sup> This activity works well for Japanese-language learners, as students learn to read syllables in the first few weeks of class, and so it is possible for students at any level to focus on orthographic and syntactic challenges instead of worrying about complex literary grammar. The loose structure of the group allows us to stop and address questions or talk about grammar or cultural background as necessary. But the primary focus is to practice giving voice to a text, and as such, participants can ascertain their own progress without reference to external assessment.

### Building Confidence and Fostering Self-Motivation

Why might students commit their limited time to this type of optional activity? Absent explicit learning objectives, what do participants feel that they gain? In December 2018, to gauge what motivates students to attend, we collected qualitative data through an anonymous survey on how participants felt about the groups, what they felt they got out of participation, and what kinds of changes they would like to see, as well as soliciting open comments. Responses were overwhelmingly positive, highlighting the "forgiving nature" of reading informally, lessened anxiety about making mistakes, an appreciation of working with challenging materials, and the rewarding aspects of peer-to-peer learning. Participants who were also enrolled in language classes remarked on how reading group materials reinforced their coursework and vice versa. One respondent, who described participation as "the highlight of my week" because it was "an escape from my normal class stresses," directly linked the low-pressure atmosphere to "help[ing] me become a bit more confident in my ability to read." As facilitators, we value being able to observe students improve reading speed and fluency and gaining confidence. As an extracurricular activity designed to enrich the language-learning experience, we gauge the success of the group primarily on the engagement of the participants. It is telling that the only significant suggestions for changes involved conducting longer or more frequent reading groups so that more learners could benefit!

Several common themes emerged from the survey and will guide us in serving our students' needs. Participants reported that they appreciate having a supportive, safe, low-stakes environment, one that allows for mistakes, in which to practice and learn, while indicating that the group increased their confidence in their language study. The small size of the group is also important in allowing greater opportunity to participate and more flexibility with regard to pacing. Furthermore, participants say that they enjoy bonding with others who are also struggling through challenging texts in the target language and who share an affinity for Chinese or Japanese culture. This helps explain why participants welcome the opportunities for peer-mentoring that stem from this type of group. Such feedback reinforces the value of our reading programs but also challenges us to consider how we might incorporate the groups' strengths into our respective language curricula.

The reading groups have already contributed to changes in our teaching. They have helped us integrate more materials directed toward increasing self-sufficiency in

### Reading Group Objectives (*Shh! Don't tell the students!*)

1. To provide a pressure-free zone for learners to approach authentic or semi-authentic materials.
2. To improve recognition of syllables and characters, as well as reading speed.
3. To increase fluency by reading aloud and listening to peers read aloud.
4. To acquaint learners with the flow of complex sentences.
5. To create an extracurricular space for students at different levels to interact.
6. To introduce resources available for independent study of authentic materials.
7. To provide strategies for reading.
8. To learn about culture through context.



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language-learning, including goal-setting, self-reflection, and assembling strategies and tools for future use. And they have spawned discussions on how to incorporate low-stakes, high-impact reading practice into our language offerings, whether informally in extra-curricular activities or more formally in one-credit classes, in which students could elect to read a novel, a manga, or a graded reader over the course of a semester or portion thereof. Adding reading-centered classes would further enable us to experiment with ways of addressing learner needs, but more importantly would help us identify successful ways in which building self-confidence and self-motivation can extend to all aspects of our pedagogy.

As nonnative speakers of the languages we teach, we appreciate that there are many paths to linguistic proficiency; that improvement requires dedication, practice, and feedback; and that errors and setbacks are essential components of the journey. As language educators in a twenty-first-century university, however, we recognize that foreign language study will always compete for time with students' other commitments, that learning will always be situated amid an interplay of individual study habits and external stressors beyond our control, and that advanced fluency will likely require self-directed learning beyond our students' time at university. We established reading groups to promote such a journey by creating low-pressure, supportive communities, centered around authentic reading materials, in which participants are encouraged to engage at their own levels of comfort and collaborate as peers. By eliminating counterproductive affective filters like anxiety over errors, promoting interaction among students of different levels, and removing preconditions for participation, we have provided motivated learners with the tools and confidence to extend their own language study beyond the classroom. We have also begun to adapt what we have learned into our everyday pedagogical practices. As a result, we are confident that instructors in small language programs with similar issues can effectively engage students, build peer-mentoring networks, and promote self-directed language-learning through low-pressure, participant-centered reading groups. ■

### NOTES

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