

CommonLit in a Japanese EFL Course: An Exploratory Study of Self-Perceived Language Abilities

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1. Introduction

One of the goals of learning a language is to be able to consume and produce information in a language that is secondary to one's native language. To put it differently, the ability to understand authentic materials, such as movies, books, and articles that are made and intended for native speakers, and the ability to discuss them with others in that second language. These authentic materials enable language learners to be exposed to how the foreign language is used in real-world contexts and the cultural aspects behind it (Treve, 2023; Owiti & Suleh, 2023). Additionally, students' motivation when using authentic materials can encourage further reading, provided the materials are comprehensible to the language learner (Treve, 2023; Berardo, 2006). Similarly, Guo (2012) noted that at the appropriate level, authentic reading materials may encourage language learners to continue reading. While the use of authentic reading materials has been examined as a source for extensive reading (Guo, 2012; Albiladi, 2019), it has been noted that, despite the limited available studies, the use of authentic reading materials in an intensive reading environment still has positive benefits, such as improved reading comprehension (Shobeiry, 2020).

Nation (2020) notes that, "intensive reading involves the detailed reading of texts with the two goals of understanding the text and learning language features through a deliberate focus on these items." One challenge to these intensive reading goals is the availability of authentic materials for instructors, especially in areas where obtaining them at low cost is difficult for both instructors and students. (Owiti & Suleh, 2023). However, this has become easier over time with online readers such as CommonLit that cater to classroom reading. Another challenge to achieving the two goals is ensuring that

the material given to students to read and analyze is appropriate for their level. Krashen's Input Hypothesis (i+1) states that the material given to students should be slightly more difficult than their current level, so that the language learner can comprehend most of the material in the text (Krashen, 1989). This can be more challenging for foreign language instruction when using authentic reading materials, particularly when the native language is used, such as imagery or everyday slang that may not be as clear and straightforward to the learner (Berardo, 2006; Owiti & Suleh, 2023). Additionally, students' ability to acquire vocabulary from the reading needed for discussion and analysis in the foreign language may be hampered if the selected text is too challenging for their comprehension. However, texts that tend to be selected for intensive reading are ones that readers would require assistance with (Nation 2020). Thus, it may require the instructor to provide more explanation of these terms before students commence reading (Nation, 2020). Lastly, there is the challenge of aligning the student's interests with the required reading. In extensive reading, students are allowed to choose areas that interest them, which motivates them to continue reading (Guo, 2012; Krashen, 1989). This is not always the case with intensive reading in the classroom, as the texts are usually selected by the instructor or another group for students to read. Thus, the text may not be engaging enough for students to take the time to understand its meaning and discuss it.

In Japan, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) has required students to develop their discussion and critical thinking skills as part of their education (MEXT, 2025). Additionally, the required reading course in which this study took place followed the department's standardized syllabus and aimed to help students (1) develop basic strategies for reading English efficiently, (2) understand and extract

necessary information from coherent texts, (3) use their knowledge of vocabulary, grammar, and discourse to grasp the overall structure and main ideas of a text rather than reading word by word, (4) express their own ideas in English based on what they had read, and (5) strengthen the vocabulary needed to support further gains in reading ability. In other words, instructors must consider these skills when developing their courses. However, the ability to discuss matters of importance to students has been noted as a challenge for instructors to implement, despite its benefits (Yuit & Thai, 2010; Kitsuno & Kobayashi, 2016).

For language learners and instructors, several factors may contribute to these challenges. The first of these is the inability to discuss matters in both their native language and the language they are learning. As noted by Kitsuno and Kobayashi (2016) regarding teaching in Japan, using discussion as a teaching tool is not a widely adopted method for developing critical thinking skills. As a result, students may need to be taught to deeply analyze and discuss matters before being asked to do so as part of a broader project in a second language. Another factor is the student's self-perception of their own abilities. This includes a lack of self-perceived ability in their English abilities, a fear of expressing their opinions, and being conscious of their peers' reactions to their English (Jung et al., 2012). In Japan, this is compounded by the fact that even in their native language, Japanese students feel their discussion skills are lacking (Kitsuno & Kobayashi, 2016).

Nevertheless, given the benefits of using authentic materials in language and the need for students to develop their discussion and critical thinking skills, as well as their self-perception of their abilities, instructors need to find resources that help them meet these needs. In this context, CommonLit was selected because it provides leveled authentic texts with built-in comprehension and discussion questions, making it suitable for intensive reading in a course with mixed reading proficiency levels. Its free access and wide range of genres allowed the instructor to choose passages that aligned with the required textbook and supported the weekly reading and discussion tasks.

This exploratory study had two aims: (1) to investigate whether students felt that their reading abilities, vocabulary growth, and discussion skills were influenced by using CommonLit, and (2) to examine whether these perceived influences of using CommonLit were correlated with how students felt about their overall English,

reading, and discussion abilities after using CommonLit.

2. Methodology:

2.1 Research Design:

This 10-week exploratory study used quantitative survey data collected on a five-point Likert scale after students used the CommonLit readings during a 15-class, 10-week English reading course for first-year students at a national university in Japan that met twice a week. The researcher collected both qualitative and quantitative data through two online surveys, administered at the beginning and end of the course. Due to the anonymity of survey participants and the differing numbers of respondents across the two surveys, matching individual responses was not possible. Comparisons are between independent cohorts rather than within-person change. As a result, independent group comparisons were used in all analyses.

2.2 Participants:

The study participants were first-year university students enrolled in a compulsory English reading course at a national university in Japan. A total of 57 students completed the pre-course survey, and 64 students completed the post-course survey. The participants were students who were taught by the researcher and came from a variety of disciplines. However, the university separated each discipline into its own class. The students were approximately 18-20 years old and had varying levels of English education before enrolling at the university. All participants were informed about the study and its purpose. Each participant completed and provided written consent before the course, and gave further consent before completing each online survey, in accordance with the university's ethics committee guidelines and approval. Participation in the research was voluntary, and neither their participation nor non-participation affected the students' grades.

2.3 Instruments:

2.3.1 Pre / Post-Course Survey

Students completed a self-assessment survey at the beginning of the course (weeks one and two) and at the end of the course after the Final Test (week ten).

The pre-course survey consisted of seven questions. (Four questions were open-answer, and three questions were five-point Likert-scale questions.) The post-survey

consisted of 15 questions. (Eight questions were open-answer, and seven questions were five-point Likert-scale questions.) Each five-point Likert-scale question utilized a scale ranging from 1 (Strongly Disagree) to 5 (Strongly Agree). The open-ended questions asked why the students responded as they did. The only open-ended question that was different from the others was how long the participant had studied English. One construct for the Likert-scale questions, 'ability', consisted of three questions. The scale had a high level of internal consistency, as determined by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.700.

In addition to the matched questions from the pre- and post-course surveys that asked respondents about their self-perceived English abilities, the post-course survey included additional questions designed to gauge their perceptions of CommonLit and its perceived influence on their learning. The questions related to CommonLit consisted of three questions. The scale had a respectable level of internal consistency, as determined by a Cronbach's alpha of 0.683.

To make the survey more straightforward to understand, the questions were asked in the participant's native language of Japanese, with the original English questions placed after. A professional service translated the questions from English into Japanese.

2.3.2 CommonLit

CommonLit is a nonprofit website based in the United States that provides English reading materials at no cost to students or individual faculty members. For this course, the readings included a mix of short stories, informational texts, and poems, and were accompanied by comprehension questions and a discussion prompt that was later addressed on Moodle were selected to match the weekly themes in the main textbook and to be compatible with the CEFR level of the textbook passages by mapping the Lexile levels on the CommonLit website to CEFR levels using the MetaMetric concordance (Wei, 2021).

These materials were intended to support intensive reading, vocabulary development, and preparation for the online discussion tasks used in the course.

2.3.3 Moodle

The discussions and word definition assignments took place on the university's learning management system (LMS), Moodle.

2.3.4 Data Collection

These surveys were sent to participants via their university Moodle accounts as direct messages. The pre-course survey was sent to participants before their second class and before they completed their first assignment using the CommonLit reading material. The post-course survey was sent to the students after they had completed their final test, and all their homework had been collected and graded.

The surveys were conducted via Microsoft Forms and could be accessed only with their university log-in. This method was chosen to prevent non-participants outside the university from accessing the survey. However, no personal data was collected during the log-in process or during the surveys themselves. After data collection, some responses were removed because they all had straight-line Likert responses with blank open-ended items, and there were no responses to the short-answer questions. As a result, there were 56 valid responses for the pre-course survey and 61 valid responses after the cleaning.

2.3.5 SPSS and Excel

All data was entered and cleaned in Microsoft Excel, then imported into IBM SPSS Statistics (Version 30) for statistical analysis. No qualitative coding was performed in SPSS.

2.4 Procedure

During the first week of the quarter, participants were asked to complete a pre-course survey to establish a baseline of their self-perceived English reading and discussion abilities, as well as the reasoning behind these abilities.

As part of their homework throughout the course, each week, students were first required to read a list of words from their assigned CommonLit reading and define them in Japanese equivalents to prepare for the assigned reading and improve their vocabulary. Students then completed the assigned CommonLit reading, which included comprehension questions at various points to assess their comprehension of the passage.

After completing the reading, the students returned to Moodle and completed a discussion prompt based on the reading. Each student was required to write a minimum of 150-word response to the initial prompt and a 100-word response to at least two other students' postings to reinforce their readings and practice discussions in

English. All interactions with other students on Moodle were done asynchronously.

After their final reading test, participants were asked to complete a post-course survey to determine whether any changes had occurred since the pre-course survey. Additional questions were asked to determine if they felt that CommonLit had any influence on their abilities. All responses were anonymized and stored securely to maintain confidentiality.

3. Results

To address the first aim, an independent-samples Mann-Whitney U test was performed to determine if there was a difference in responses between the pre-course and post-course survey questions (Question 2 – self-perceived ability about overall English abilities, Question 4 – self-perceived ability about reading abilities, and Question 6 – feeling about online discussion abilities), specifically those concerning their abilities. Two-tailed asymptotic p-values are reported (See Table 1).

Distributions of responses to all three questions in the pre- and post-course surveys were similar, as assessed by visual inspection. All three questions were significantly higher in the post-course. For all questions, the significance level was set at $\alpha = .05$. Question 2 was statistically significantly higher in the post-course (Mdn = 3.00, mean rank = 64.67) than in the pre-test (Mdn = 3.00, mean rank = 52.82), $U = 2054$, $z = 2.21$, $p = .027$. Next, Question 4 was also statistically significantly higher in the post-course (Mdn = 3.00, mean rank = 66.39) than in the pre-test (Mdn = 3.00, mean rank = 50.95), $U = 2159$, $z = 2.74$, $p = .006$. Finally, Question 6 was statistically significantly higher in the post-course (Mdn = 2.00, mean rank = 64.54) than in the pre-test (Mdn = 2.00, mean rank =

52.96), $U = 2046$, $z = 2.055$, $p = .040$.

To address the second aim, additional Mann-Whitney U tests were conducted to compare students who rated the influence of CommonLit more highly (4–5) with those who rated it lower to neutral (1–3) on the post-course survey items across three separate groupings (Question 8 – Influence of CommonLit on Reading Abilities, Question 10 – Influence of CommonLit on Vocabulary Growth, and Question 12 – Influence of CommonLit on Discussion Abilities) to their self-reported self-perceived ability in their English (Q2), reading (Q4), and discussion abilities (Q6), Mann-Whitney U tests were performed. For all groups, the significance level was set at $\alpha = .05$, and the distributions of the responses for all three groupings and questions were similar, as assessed by visual inspection. Two-tailed asymptotic p-values are reported.

For the Question 8 grouping, there was a statistically significant difference in Question 2 between groups, $U = 536.0$, $z = 2.242$, $p = .025$. Students in the group that rated CommonLit more highly (Mdn = 3.00, mean rank = 33.90) reported higher self-perceived abilities than the group that rated CommonLit lower (mean rank = 25.48). Furthermore, Question 4 also showed there was a statistically significant difference in ability between groups, $U = 547.5$, $z = 2.177$, $p = .029$. Again, students in the group that rated CommonLit more highly (Mdn = 3.00, mean rank = 34.19) reported higher self-perceived abilities than those in the group that rated CommonLit lower (mean rank = 24.93). However, for Question 6, it was not shown that there was a statistically significant difference between the two groups, $U = 464.000$, $z = .732$, $p = .464$ (See Table 2).

For the Question 10 grouping, there was no statistically significant difference between the two groups for all three questions (All $p > .05$). Similarly, the Question 12 grouping results also show that there was no statistically

Table 1: Independent-samples Mann-Whitney U tests comparing pre-course vs. post-course

<i>Hypothesis Test Summary</i>				
	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig. ^{a, b}	Decision
1	The distribution of Q2 Percieved English Ability is the same across categories of Group.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	0.027	Reject the null hypothesis.
2	The distribution of Q4 Percieved Reading Ability is the same across categories of Group.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	0.006	Reject the null hypothesis.
3	The distribution of Q6 Percieved Discussion Ability is the same across categories of Group.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	0.040	Reject the null hypothesis.

a. The significance level is .050.

b. Asymptotic significance is displayed.

Table 2: high vs low group comparisons (Mann-Whitney)

	Null Hypothesis	Test	Sig. ^{a,b}	Decision
1	The distribution of Q2 Perceived English Ability is the same across categories of Q8 Commonlit Group. U = 538.0, z = 2.242, p = .025.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	0.025	Reject the null hypothesis.
2	The distribution of Q4 Perceived Reading Ability is the same across categories of Q8 Commonlit Group. U = 547.5, z = 2.177, p = .029.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	0.029	Reject the null hypothesis.
3	The distribution of Q6 Perceived Discussion Ability is the same across categories of Q8 Commonlit Group. U = 464.000, z = .732, p = .464.	Independent-Samples Mann-Whitney U Test	0.464	Retain the null hypothesis.

a. The significance level is .050.

b. Asymptotic significance is displayed.

significant difference in all three questions (All $p > .05$).

The second aim was also examined using Spearman's correlations between self-perceived abilities and perceptions of CommonLit (See Appendix 1). Overall, there was a moderate positive correlation between self-perceived ability in their English abilities and self-perceived ability in their reading abilities, $\rho(117) = .643$, $p < .001$, and a moderate positive correlation between self-perceived ability in their English abilities and self-perceived ability in their discussion abilities, $\rho(117) = .447$, $p < .001$. There was also a statistically significant but weak correlation between reading abilities and discussion abilities, $\rho(117) = .267$, $p = .004$.

Regarding the associations between CommonLit and perceived abilities, there was a weak correlation between perceived English abilities and the effect of CommonLit, $\rho(61) = .262$, $p = .041$. Furthermore, there was a weak correlation between the effect of CommonLit and reading self-perceived ability, $\rho(61) = .287$, $p = .025$. However, there was a moderate correlation between CommonLit and vocabulary learning $\rho(61) = .424$, $p < .001$, and CommonLit and perceived self-perceived ability in discussions, $\rho(61) = .362$, $p = .004$. Finally, vocabulary learning from CommonLit was statistically significant, but weakly correlated to those who said CommonLit influenced their discussion abilities, $\rho(61) = .291$, $p = .023$.

4. Discussion

This exploratory study had two aims. The first was to investigate whether perceived use of CommonLit influenced their reading abilities, vocabulary growth, and discussion skills. The second aim was to determine whether these perceived influences were correlated with their self-perceived overall English, reading, and discussion abilities. Overall, these results suggest that CommonLit

has a generally positive influence on students' perceptions of their own abilities to varying degrees. The first set of results showed a statistically significant increase in students' self-perceptions of their overall English, reading, and discussion abilities in the post-course compared to their pre-test baseline (all $p < .05$). This indicates that students felt the course positively influenced their self-perceived ability levels.

For the second set of Mann-Whitney results, those who rated CommonLit more positively also had higher self-perceived ability in their overall English abilities and their reading abilities (Both $p < .05$). However, the connection to their discussion abilities was not statistically significant ($p = .464$). This could mean that their discussion abilities are more reliant on other factors, such as learning skills in discussion methods, group dynamics, and vocabulary acquisition.

The correlation results also showed weak positive correlations between CommonLit and self-perceived ability in overall English abilities. There was also a weak, positive correlation between CommonLit and self-perceived reading ability. However, there was a moderate positive correlation between CommonLit and vocabulary learning, as well as between discussion self-perceived ability and vocabulary learning. These results indicate that CommonLit has a positive influence on vocabulary acquisition, and consequently, the acquired vocabulary enables students to feel more confident in discussions. These results suggest that using CommonLit as a free resource in university-level classrooms may positively influence students' self-perceived ability levels through exposure to authentic reading materials, particularly in overall English self-perceived ability and reading self-perceived ability. These findings align with previous research on the use of authentic materials, which shows that authentic texts that match the reader's level can help

motivate and support language development (Berardo, 2006; Guo, 2012; Treve, 2023).

However, instructors may need to use more explicit classroom instruction to build students' discussion strategies in addition to using a platform such as CommonLit to help students acquire the vocabulary and lexicon needed to participate in such discussions, in line with previous research on Japanese university students that noted that may not have the skills or lexicon to discuss topics in a second language in part because of the lack of explicit instruction (Kitsuno & Kobayashi, 2016; Yuit & Thai, 2010).

Finally, instructors should always take notice of their students' self-perceived ability levels by providing assessments and materials that allow students to build their self-perceived ability over time. This is consistent with previous research showing that a student's belief in their own efficacy has a substantial impact on their motivation to complete a task (Bandura & Adams, 1977; Dörnyei, 1998). When it comes to learning, the instructor is the key source, model, and designer of tasks that help students build the belief that they can accomplish a task and, thus, the motivation to complete it (Bandura & Adams, 1977; Dörnyei, 1998; Little et al., 2017).

It is worth noting that this study had several limitations. The first is that participants have different faculties with varying degrees of English ability required for entrance into their programs. As a result, this study examined whether membership in a faculty influenced their self-perceived ability levels.

The second limitation was the small size of the exploratory study. Since this study was limited in scope, the results may not be duplicated outside the participants in this study. Additionally, the anonymous nature of this study and the unmatched pre- and post-course groups may skew the results, as they are independent groups and should be interpreted as cohort comparisons.

Finally, the survey's self-reported nature may not fully capture the actual skills development over the course of instruction. This is because any positive changes in their beliefs would only reflect how they feel about their abilities, not any objective improvement in their actual skills.

5. Conclusion and Suggestions for Future Research.

Self-perceived ability is a crucial factor in sustaining language learning. Although this small-scale exploratory study focused only on first-year students in a single national university, it showed that exposure to authentic materials via low-cost platforms, such as CommonLit, may have positively influenced students' self-perceptions of their own abilities. This could be directly (reading abilities) or indirectly (discussion abilities via vocabulary acquisition). Thus, future studies should expand the research to examine whether the influence of CommonLit on students' self-perceived ability levels can be replicated longitudinally with a larger sample.

Additionally, pre- and post-course assessments of their abilities may be beneficial for demonstrating how, and whether, platforms such as CommonLit directly influence their skills. It would also be beneficial for future research to examine platforms such as CommonLit, which incorporate explicit discussion-based instruction, and determine whether this approach has a pedagogical enhancement on students' reading and communication self-perceived ability.

Finally, an in-depth qualitative approach could be used to understand how students interact with each text and how they approach discussing it with their peers.

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Appendix 1

Spearman Correlations

		Q2 Perceived English Ability	Q4 Perceived Reading Ability	Q6 Perceived Discussion Ability	Q8 Influence of CommonLit on Reading Abilities	Q10 Influence of CommonLit on Vocabulary Growth	Q12 Influence of CommonLit on Discussion Abilities	
Spearman's rho	Q2 Perceived English Ability	Correlation	1.000	.643**	.447**	.262*	-0.047	.322*
		Coefficient						
		Sig. (2-tailed)		0.000	0.000	0.041	0.720	0.001
		N	117	117	117	61	61	61
Q4 Perceived Reading Ability	Q4 Perceived Reading Ability	Correlation	.643**	1.000	.267**	.287*	0.111	0.153
		Coefficient						
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000		0.004	0.025	0.394	0.238
		N	117	117	117	61	61	61
Q6 Perceived Discussion Ability	Q6 Perceived Discussion Ability	Correlation	.447**	.267**	1.000	0.027	-0.228	0.143
		Coefficient						
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.004		0.835	0.077	0.272
		N	117	117	117	61	61	61
Q8 Influence of CommonLit on Reading Abilities	Q8 Influence of CommonLit on Reading Abilities	Correlation	.262*	.287*	0.027	1.000	.424**	.362**
		Coefficient						
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.041	0.025	0.835		0.001	0.004
		N	61	61	61	61	61	61
Q10 Influence of CommonLit on Vocabulary Growth	Q10 Influence of CommonLit on Vocabulary Growth	Correlation	-0.047	0.111	-0.228	.424**	1.000	.291*
		Coefficient						
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.720	0.394	0.077	0.001		0.023
		N	61	61	61	61	61	61
Q12 Influence of CommonLit on Discussion Abilities	Q12 Influence of CommonLit on Discussion Abilities	Correlation	.322*	0.153	0.143	.362**	.291*	1.000
		Coefficient						
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.011	0.238	0.272	0.004	0.023	
		N	61	61	61	61	61	61

** . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* . Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).