



Understanding Reading Themes and Question Types in JLPT N5: Insight from Practice Books

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Abstract

This qualitative study reports on the investigation of theme or topics and types of questions in the reading section of the JLPT N5. Drawing on 37 texts and 46 questions from three different book sources of JLPT N5 practices, this research reveals three main findings. First, apart from informational texts, which are realized in the forms of short notices such as announcements, timetables, food labels, and memos, most topics in the short and longer texts tend to be personal and descriptive. Second, all topics in the reading section are related to everyday life, involving 11 topics related to personal life and to the surroundings. Personal-related topics include activities (past, present, and future), family, future dreams, houses, friends, pets, and simple experiences, whereas surroundings-related topics are composed of announcements, timetables, instructions, and food labels. The most dominant topic is descriptions of activities (past, present, and future), while the second highest topic is related to the announcement content (including the name of the place, operational hours, contact numbers, lists of products, prices, discount information, and warnings about something). Third, the types of questions in the reading section of JLPT N5 involve three categories: easy, moderate, and difficult. Easy types of questions include locating certain information, such as names, objects, activities, and basic facts within a text and/or simple matching visuals with texts. Moderate questions cover matching texts and visuals, reasoning, and finding details. The difficult types of questions involve conclusion, prediction, and inference, in which the examinees are required to understand what is not explicitly stated to answer.

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INTRODUCTION

Assessment is an essential component of the teaching and learning process and an inseparable part of evaluation (Gardner, 2010; Thomas, 2012; Sheehan & Munro, 2017; Unal & Unal, 2019). It plays a crucial role in measuring learning outcomes and assisting all parties involved—particularly teachers—in understanding what students have or have not achieved, whether learning objectives have been met, identifying the strengths and weaknesses of the methods used, and enabling assessors to determine actions or solutions to address shortcomings and improve the learning process as a follow-up to promote student progress (Brown, 2001, 2004; Brandl, 2008; Thai, 2009; Emilia, 2011; Joyce & Feez, 2012).

In the Japanese language learning context, one way to assess students' proficiency is through the *Nōryoku Shiken*, or the Japanese-Language Proficiency Test (hereafter JLPT). The JLPT was first introduced in 1984 under the joint organization of the Japan Foundation and Japan Educational Exchanges and Services (formerly the Association of International Education, Japan) to assess and certify the Japanese language proficiency of individuals whose first language is not Japanese (The Japan Foundation & Japan Educational Exchanges and Services, n.d.; Sato, 2011; Japan Foundation, 2018). The test consists of five levels, ranging from N5 (the lowest) to N1 (the highest), covering various aspects of the Japanese language, including three components of language knowledge—vocabulary (*mojigoi*), kanji, and grammar (*bunpō*)—and two language skills: reading (*dokkai*) and listening (*chōkai*) (Yamate Japanese Language School, n.d.; Sato, 2011; Japan Foundation, 2018).

Among these components, reading (*dokkai*) is the main focus of this study. Reading can be particularly challenging for non-native learners of Japanese. The difficulties mainly lie in two aspects. The first concerns the understanding of content or meaning, which is closely related to context (both situational and cultural), as texts are always constructed within a specific context (Freire, 1981; Gerrot & Wignell, 1995; Droga & Humphrey, 2002; Knapp & Watkins, 2005;

Emilia, 2011; Thomson et al., 2017). Freire (1981) explains that reading is not limited to decoding written symbols or language but extends to understanding the world. He argues that *reading the world precedes reading the word*, emphasizing that language and reality are dynamically intertwined; thus, critical reading requires perceiving the relationship between text and context.

The second difficulty involves recognizing the textual features that construct meaning through grammatical and lexical choices, including the Japanese writing systems (Kaneko, 2011; Kuwana, 2016; Hasegawa & Nonis, 2018; Wahidati & Rahmawati, 2019; Quintos, 2021; Wijayanti, 2021; Ide et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2023; Nakano, 2023; Rahayu et al., 2023; Dirgandini et al., 2025). These complexities suggest that mastering Japanese reading skills requires a long and demanding learning process, as learners must work simultaneously on meaning, text structure, and the writing systems of kanji and kana. These challenges affect not only the learning process but also students' performance in assessments and their overall reading proficiency.

A study by Wahidati and Rahmawati (2019) found that 88% of students experienced difficulty answering reading questions in the JLPT N3 level. Compared to other language components, reading had the highest percentage of difficulty. The primary problems involved limited vocabulary mastery and insufficient familiarity with the types of questions commonly found in the test.

This issue is directly related to the focus of the present study. As mentioned earlier, this research examines the reading component of the JLPT, specifically at the N5 level. The aims are to investigate the themes (or topics) of the texts and the types of questions presented in the reading section. Previous research on Japanese reading, particularly in Japanese as a foreign language contexts, has been conducted across various languages and with differing focuses (Kuwana, 2016; Hasegawa & Nonis, 2018; Wahidati & Rahmawati, 2019; Quintos, 2021; Ide et al., 2023; Liu et al., 2023; Nakano, 2023;

Rahayu et al., 2023; Dirgandini et al., 2025), to name a few.

Of these studies, only Wahidati and Rahmawati's (2019) research is to some extent relevant to the current study, as both examine the JLPT and share a similar research setting in Indonesia. However, the present research differs in scope and focus. While Wahidati and Rahmawati (2019) examined the N3 level of the JLPT, this study focuses on the N5 level. The choice of N5 is based on the consideration that it represents the most fundamental stage of the JLPT. Test-takers who possess a better understanding of the types of questions and the topics or themes are likely to build a stronger foundation of knowledge and confidence, which may, in the long term, enhance their comprehension and performance at higher proficiency levels.

In addition, while the previous study explored students' perceptions of difficulties in the JLPT as a whole, this research focuses specifically on the reading section. It analyzes the topics or themes of all texts in the reading section and identifies the types of questions associated with them in the JLPT N5. Understanding the topics or themes of texts helps learners grasp what the texts are about, forming a basis for answering questions effectively. Similarly, familiarity with question types assists test-takers in locating relevant information within a text. It is expected that awareness of these aspects will contribute to improved reading proficiency among learners at the N5 level. Given its potential to enhance comprehension and performance, analyzing the themes and question types in the JLPT N5 reading section is a valuable and worthwhile endeavor.

METHOD

This qualitative research analyzes the themes and types of questions in the reading section (dokkai) N5. JLPT N5 reading, assesses basic Japanese understanding of reading skills on everyday topics that are composed of sentences and/or clauses written in hiragana, katakana, and kanji (Sato, 2011; Japan Foundation, 2018).

There are 6 questions in total in the reading section distributed in three different forms of texts: short, longer, and informational. Short texts consist of 80 characters of simple language on topics related to learning, daily life, and profession. This text offers three questions in a multiple-choice form. Longer texts are composed of 250 characters written in simple language on daily issues. It usually provides two questions in the form of multiple choice. Informational texts are 250 characters of short notices, such as announcements, memos, and timetables. It consists of one question in a multiple-choice form (Sato, 2011; Japan Foundation, 2018)

The data were collected from three different source books of JLPT practice books for N5 learners, including '*Nihongo Nouryoku Shiken N5 [koushiki mondaishuu]*.' (Official Collection of Practice Tests) JLPT N5, published by the Japan Foundation in 2018, '*Zettai Goukaku! Nihongo Nouryoku Shiken N5 [Kanzen Moshij] (San Kai Bun)*' (Definitely pass!) Complete Simulation Test for Japanese Language Proficiency N5 (3 practice tests) Japanese Language Proficiency Test N5—Complete Mock Exam by Watanabe et al. (2013), and '*Nihongo nouryoku shiken n5 [yosou mondaishuu]*' (Collection of Predicted Questions for the Japanese Language Proficiency Test N5) by Sato (2011). For the ease of the data collection, the year of publishing is not the main concern of the study, yet it is limited to those sources that can be accessed easily and considered to be current (Elder, 2009). It is because the focus is to describe the phenomena investigated as it is (Berg, 2007; Liamputtong, 2009) without any intention for generalization (Travers, 2001). Further, from those three sources, 37 texts and 46 questions were collected in total. The detail can be seen in the following table.

Furthermore, in relation to the type of question, the level of questions is also varying from easy to moderate to difficult. This research refers not only to the classification of question types by Philips (2012) but also to Bloom's taxonomy in Alderson (2000) on higher-order thinking and Munby (1978) in Alderson (2000) on reading micro skills. The question is categorized as easy when it requires the

examinees to remember through recognition and identification. In relation to this, CEFR A1 reading framework highlights what constitutes an easy, moderate, and difficult questions, as follows. The realization in the question is asking 'where,' 'when,' and 'what' for things and for activities, and 'who' or 'with whom' in which the answer can be directly found or explicitly stated. This type of level of question highly suggests the examinees look for the answer in the passage by scanning. The moderate-level question usually asks the examinees to understand through comprehension, skimming or scanning through the whole text to find, for example, the main idea, the purpose of the text, or the purpose of the writer writing the text. It is also when the question relates to the search of the right object, picture, or statement from a series of statement as the background to the questions. Meanwhile, difficult questions require the examinees to analyze, involving prediction of what comes from the text, inference and conclusion. Examples of each type of question can be seen below.

Table 1. Examples of Questions (Japan Foundation, 2018)

Easy level question	「わたし」は今日、何をしましたか (<i>Watashi wa kyō, nani o shimashitaka</i>) What did I do today?
Moderate level question	今のへやはどれですか。 (<i>Ima no heya wa dore desuka</i>) Which one is the room right now?
Difficult level question	どうしてこまりましたか。 (<i>Dōshite komarimashitaka</i>) Why did she/ he feel difficult?

Afterwards, the texts were categorized based on similar themes or topics. Likewise, the question was also categorized based on the same category (type of question and level). Finally, the data were analyzed by referring to two different frameworks. After the data were analyzed, the data were interpreted by referring to the informing theories and the previous studies.

RESULT & DISCUSSION

The study is concerned with the topics and types of questions in the reading section of JLPT N5. This investigation is done by exploring the topics in all texts in the Reading section and finding out the types of questions that all types of

texts have in the Reading section of JLPT N5. To maintain clarity, the results of the study are outlined in the separate section.

1. Themes or Topics of Reading in the JLPT N5

As stated earlier, there are 37 texts of N5 that are analyzed. Of these 37 texts, informational text is the most dominant, containing 7 types, including 9 announcements, 3 emails, 3 timetables, 2 personal letter, 2 memos, 1 personal diary, and 1 food label. Meanwhile, short texts and longer texts have the same number, 8 texts in each type.

Further, in these 37 (TXT1–TXT37) data sets, all topics in the reading section are related to everyday life, aligned with the characteristics of reading for N5 learners as stated in the JLPT reading guideline for N5 learners (Sato, 2011; Japan Foundation, 2018), highlighting that N5 reading is generally related to everyday topics in simple, longer, and informational texts. This is also in congruence with the CEFR A1 framework, particularly in the reading competency standard, that A1 (equal to N5) learners must understand simple information, words, and sentences about known/everyday topics, including information from short notices, including posters, messages, forms, and timetables.

In this study, there are two major topics found spread in three different types of texts (short, longer, and informational) involving topics related to personal and to the surroundings. Personal-related topics include activities (past, present, and future), family, future dreams, houses, friends, pets, and simple experiences, whereas surroundings-related topics are composed of announcements, timetables, instructions, and food labels. The percentage of the whole topic can be seen in Table 3 below.

Table 3. The percentage of the topics present in the Reading Section (short, longer, and informational texts) of JLPT N5.

Topics	Percentage
Description of Activities (past, ongoing, future)	40.5%
Announcement (information in different places)	24.3%
Timetable	8.1%
Description of Family	5.4%
Memo (instruction in workplaces)	5.4%
Description of Public place	2.7%
Description of people (friend)	2.7%
Description in a food label	2.7%
Email (requesting information of the number of product)	2.7%
Description of pet	2.7%
Description of house	2.7%

The table above illustrates the most common topics that are present in the reading section of JLPT N5 within this study. The data reveals that there are 11 topics found in all types of texts (short, longer, and informational). All are in the forms of simple description and information. The most dominant topic present in the reading section of JLPT N5 is descriptions of activities (40.5%). The activities are all personal, done by a specific participant, who in this case is represented by 'watashi' or 'I,' and are carried out in the past (past activities), at the moment (present and ongoing activities), and in the future (future activities). The contents are varied, such as hiking, birthday celebrations, weekend activities, daily schedules, and one specific day in a specific place.

The second highest topic, as also illustrated in the table, is announcement, with 24.3% in its percentage. The settings for the announcement are mostly in public places, such as in a school, shop, club, zoo, library, or canteen of a company. Most information covered in the announcement include the name of the place, operational hours, contact numbers, lists of products, prices, discount information, and warnings about something. Timetable, with the percentage of 8.1%, comes in third place among the topics that are tested in the reading section of the JLPT N5. Within this study, the timetable covers three types

of information, including movie time, trash pickup, and transportation.

Further, the study also highlights that there is description about family (5.4%) and instruction written in the memo (5.4%) used as the topic in the reading section of JLPT N5. The topic about family contains information on the number of the members within the family, their position in the picture, their profession, hobbies, and living places. Within the memo, there is information about the receiver of the memo and the content of the memo (providing information/situation before the instruction is given), and although there is no explicit information on the sender/writer of the memo, in the instruction preceding the memo, it is stated who the sender/writer is. Therefore, there is a possibility that the memo will be ended with the name of the sender/writer. Descriptions about public places (libraries), people (friends), and food (cake in the food label) emerge in 2.7% of the reading section of JLPT N5. The description about the place includes its location and the ways to get there, while that about people reveals information on the name, how they meet, their similarities, their hobbies, activities they are doing together, their future plans, and how they are going to maintain their friendship. Likewise, information about food on the food label provides some suggestions on how to enjoy certain sweet.

Similarly, the other topics that are also present in the reading section of JLPT N5 with the same number as those descriptions of public places, people, and food (each is 2.7%) include information requests on certain products within an email and descriptions about pets and houses. The content of the email, in which information requests on certain products are solicited, is initiated by providing the names of the receiver and sender of the emails. It is then continued with the content of the email, illustrating the condition or situation in relation to the topic before the request for information is stated. In the email, within the study, there is no closure as no parting expressions were found there. Further, the description about the pet, in this study, is started with a simple introduction on the topic the writer is going to describe and is continued with a

general description including its name and its type. The text is ended with a specific description of how the pet is found. The description about the house contains information on things in the house.

The results of analyses reveal that apart from informational texts, which are realized in the forms of short notices such as announcements, timetables, food labels, and memos, most topics in the short and longer texts tend to be personal and descriptive, confirming what Knapp & Watkins (2005) have stated that describing is one of the fundamental functions of any language system, one of the first skills emergent language users learn to control, and one of the most widely used text types across all of the learning areas (in this case including Japanese language), K-6 and beyond. It is also aligned with most theorists of foreign language teaching and learning, such as Feez & Joyce (1998a), Alderson (2000), Brown (2001, 2004), Richards (2001), Brandl (2008), and Sundayana (2014). Most confirm that topics to learn language for beginners are closely related to the self, which is usually personal, concrete, and simple, and gradually move into a more complex and abstract one as their levels are higher.

2. Types of Questions in the Reading section of JLPT N5

The results of the analyses reveal that 46 questions analyzed under this study can be categorized into three different levels of questions, as illustrated in Table 4 below.

Table 2 Categories of Question levels

Types of questions	Number of questions	Percentage
Easy	40	86.9%
Moderate	4	8.7%
Difficult	2	4.3%

The table above describes the category of question level found in the study. It shows that the easy type of question has the highest number of all, with 86.9%, while the difficult type of question has the smallest number (4.3%). In between is the moderate type of question with the percentage 8.7%. The disproportional number does not mean that JLPT questions are not comparative since there is very likely no fixed

proportion on JLPT reading, even in JLPT as a whole, in which, for example, easy questions must be X% and so on (Japan Foundation & JEES, 2020). Yet, from the arrangement of the text itself, it can be seen that the questions are sequenced in difficulty, starting easier and gradually getting harder (Hasegawa, 2012; Nihongo-Pro, n.d.; Boutwell & Boutwell, 2019; Japan Foundation & JEES, 2020). Further, since the proportion of type of question is not the concern of the study, it will not be regarded further here, and thus the explanation stops here.

Even so, the division of those types of questions by level assists the study in allocating types of questions, the second aspect to investigate in this study. The results of the analyses reveal that the number of the easy type of question is the highest. In the study, mostly, the focuses of questions are to identify name, date, activity, or basic facts both from short and informational texts that the answers are explicitly stated in the texts and are easy to be found through scanning or in Philips' TOEFL strategies (2012); this type of question is known as a stated detail question. For example, わたし」は今日、何をしましたか。(Watashi wa kyō, nani o shimashitaka. What did I do today?) or わたし」はだれとCDを聞きましたか (Watashi wa dare to CD o kikumashitaka. With whom do I listen to the CD?) These two questions entail the examinees to search for the answer for activities and persons as objects by remembering through recognition and identification, as Bloom's taxonomy in Alderson (2000) has outlined that the basic level of the taxonomy is remembering done through recognition and identification. This recalling types of questions also provides an opportunity for the examinees to locate information according to their strengths of memories by scanning, one reading technique to use when the readers make an attempt to process micro skills (Munby, 1978, in Alderson, 2000).

The second type of question level, the moderate type of question, in this study, is realized through the understanding of short descriptions that require the examinees to take their comprehension to a higher level because it tests slightly more complex knowledge, such as

matching descriptions and visuals and finding details. Here, the examinees are provided with statements or descriptions that they need to conclude by choosing the right visuals. For example, examinees must answer 図書館はどこですか (Toshokan wa doko desuka. (Where is the library?) or 今のへやはどれですか. (Ima no heya wa dore desuka? Which room is it now?) from descriptions. In this case, examinees need to exert their understanding through identification and recognition, matching the right visuals with the descriptions provided. For example, in the latter case, the examinees are asked the correct room based on the description below.

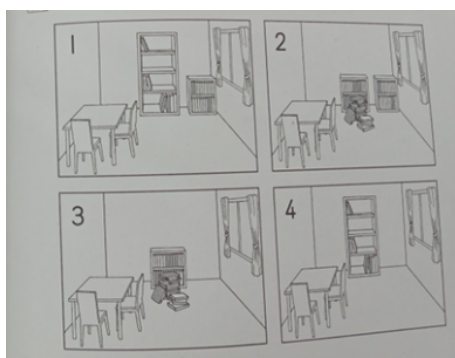
わたしのへやに つくえが 一だい、
いすが 二だい、そして 本だな が 一だい
あります。本が たくさん あるので、もっ
と 大きい 本だなが ほしいです

(Japan Foundation, 2018)

(Watashi no heya ni tsukue ga ichi dai, isu ga ni dai, soshite hondana ga ichi dai arimasu. Hon ga takusan aru node, motto ôkii hondana ga hoshii desu. In my room, there is one desk, two chairs, and one bookshelf. Because I have a lot of books, I want a bigger bookshelf.).

Then, they are given the following alternative choices.

Fig. 1 An Example of Alternative Choices on Matching Description and Visual



In order to be able to answer this kind of question, the examinees must read the entire description. It is different from the easy type one in which the answer can be directly found (explicitly stated) even without reading the whole text as long as examinees can identify the type of the question. This is similar to the strategies suggested by Philips (2012) in the TOEFL test,

particularly in the stated detail question (easy type of question). In relation to matching text to visual types of questions, there may be some other opinions that consider this kind of question to be an easy type of question rather than a moderate question since it also highly depends on whether the answers demand the whole description so that examinees need to understand the whole text to answer, or the answer is explicitly stated so that examinees can directly find the answer without having to understand the whole text.

Finally, the last type of question is the difficult one. This study found that a difficult type of question is asking the examinees either to predict or to conclude or to draw an inference, realized by the 'doushite' or 'why' question word. For example, in the question どうしてこまりましたか (Dôshite komarimashitaka. Why does she/he feel difficult?) And わたしはどうして「どうぞ」と言いませんでしたか (Watashi wa dôshite "dôzo" to iimasendeshita? Why did I not say please?). Both demand the examinees to predict or conclude the answers because they are not explicitly stated or cannot directly be found in the text. This difficult type of question is quite similar to that type of question in TOEFL: conclusion, prediction, and inference (Philips, 2012). Bloom's taxonomy framework for that difficult type of question needs higher-order thinking, in this case analysis level, and Munby's (1987) micro skills of reading of inferring implicit meaning and reading to understand what is not explicitly stated.

That said, the types of questions in the reading section of JLPT N5 involve three categories: easy, moderate, and difficult. Easy types of questions require the examinees to locate certain information, such as names, objects, activities, and basic facts within a text and/or simple matching visuals with texts. The answer can be directly found in the text, as it is explicitly stated through recognition, scanning strategies, and identification. Moderate questions test the examinees slightly more complex comprehension by matching texts with visuals with a more complex structure. The answers are also directly stated, yet the examinees need to make more attempts to answer the questions, as they demand

to read the whole description to be able to provide the answer. In this study, the moderate questions highly involve matching texts and visuals, reasoning, and finding details. Finally, the difficult type of question found in the study involves conclusion, prediction, and inference, in which the examinees are required to read between the lines and understand what is not explicitly stated to answer.

CONCLUSION

The study has looked into the themes or subjects and different kinds of JLPT N5 reading questions. Three key insights are highlighted. The first is that, although the test contains a variety of informative texts, including announcements, schedules, food labels, and memos, the vast majority of the reading passages, both short and long, concern personal and descriptive subjects. Second, there are eleven major themes that are continually relevant to daily life: seven of them are personal in nature (e.g., daily activities, family, friends, and basic experiences), and four are related to one's environment (e.g., announcements and directions). Of these, announcement-based material and activity descriptions appear most frequently. Third, the reading questions vary in difficulty, categorized into easy, moderate, and difficult. Easy questions focus on identifying explicit information, moderate ones involve visual-text matching and reasoning, while difficult questions require higher-order thinking skills such as making inferences, predictions, and drawing conclusions. These findings offer valuable insights for learners and educators aiming to better understand the content and the level of understanding of the JLPT N5 reading section.

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