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INCIDENTAL LEARNING OF JAPANESE READING THROUGH THE VIDEO GAME *BOKUJOU MONOGATARI*

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ABSTRACT
In the digital era, video games function not only as entertainment but also as environments where unintentional language acquisition, or incidental learning, may occur. This study describes Japanese learners' experiences and perceptions of incidental reading learning while playing *Bokujou Monogatari: Olive Town to Kibou no Daichi*, and identifies the reading strategies employed to understand Japanese texts within the game. A qualitative case study approach was adopted, involving four Japanese-learner players with varying proficiency levels, from beginner to JLPT N2. Data were collected through a pre-interview questionnaire and semi-structured interviews, then analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase thematic analysis. The findings show that participants experienced incidental reading learning through repeated, contextual exposure to functional in-game texts, including NPC dialogues, item descriptions, mission instructions, and interface elements, and that this learning was generally recognized only through retrospective reflection after gameplay. Participants naturally employed contextual guessing, scanning, and skimming strategies, with more advanced learners applying a wider range of strategies than beginners, who relied more heavily on visual cues. The study concludes that video games such as *Bokujou Monogatari* can function as an informal, low-pressure, and contextually rich environment that supports incidental Japanese reading development, complementing rather than replacing formal instruction.

Keywords: *incidental learning; Japanese reading; video games; reading strategies; case study*

INTRODUCTION
In the digital era, video games are among the most popular entertainment media, particularly among young people. Beyond entertainment, however, research shows that games can foster incidental exposure to foreign-language vocabulary and meaningful interaction with in-game content (Islam, Awais, & Naveed, 2025; Prastiwi & Lestari, 2025; Sze-to & Jung, 2022). Such exposure allows players to acquire new knowledge as a by-product of play, a phenomenon known as incidental learning, defined as learning that occurs indirectly as a consequence of another ongoing activity, such as completing a task, interacting with others, or adjusting to an environment (Marsick & Watkins, 1990). This form of learning often unfolds within everyday routines rather than formal instructional frames, and as a result frequently goes unnoticed by the learner until reflected upon afterward (Kerka, 2000). In

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other words, learning proceeds without deliberate intent and is often recognized only after the individual reflects on the experience.

Incidental learning is particularly relevant to language education, since language acquisition depends heavily on exposure to and processing of linguistic input in meaningful situations. Among the four language skills, reading is frequently reported as especially challenging, including for Japanese learners. In second-language reading, *dokkai* (reading comprehension) is understood as an active process of constructing meaning from written text by linking textual content to the reader's context and prior knowledge (Tanaka, 2018). Recent research by Dirgandini et al. (2025) found that Japanese Language Education students at several West Java universities struggle with *dokkai*, particularly regarding vocabulary, grammar, and *kanji* recognition, underscoring reading as a persistent obstacle in Japanese-language learning. Common strategies for improving reading, such as intensive reading, extensive reading, and speed-reading techniques (Grabe & Yamashita, 2009; Tarigan, 2021), are typically applied within formal, textbook-based instruction, which is often perceived as monotonous and unengaging (Udjaja et al., 2022), motivating the search for alternative approaches such as Japanese-language video games.

To gauge this potential, a preliminary survey of 45 Japanese Language Education students at Universitas Negeri Jakarta (2019–2024 cohorts) was conducted. Results showed that *kanji* was rated the most difficult reading component, followed by grammar, vocabulary, and *hiragana*/*katakana*; among informal reading sources, anime/film subtitles ranked first and video games second; 75.6% of respondents reported enjoying Japanese-language video games; 73.3% reported having deepened their Japanese reading ability through games; and 80% reported acquiring new vocabulary through gameplay. These findings support Gee's (2003) view of video games as engaging learning media and align with Udjaja et al.'s (2022) critique of textbook-based instruction as monotonous.

One game series considered to hold particular potential for foreign-language development is *Bokujou Monogatari*, internationally known as *Harvest Moon* (1997–2012) and, following a publisher change, as *Story of Seasons* (2015–present). Originally developed by Marvelous Inc., this farming-simulation role-playing series combines agricultural activities with social interaction, including befriending non-playable characters (NPCs), marriage, and raising a family, and is rich in functional, everyday Japanese text such as NPC dialogue, item descriptions, mission instructions, and interface elements. Putra (2024) found that playing *Harvest Moon* incidentally improved high school students' English vocabulary. However, that study centered on English vocabulary alone, whereas the present study addresses a broader range of Japanese reading components (character recognition, vocabulary, grammar, and text comprehension) within the specific series *Bokujou Monogatari: Olive Town to Kibou no Daichi*, framed using the reading-component structure of the *JF Standard for Japanese-Language Education* (The Japan Foundation, 2010).

A further point of contrast is Peterson's (2016) mixed-methods study of incidental Japanese learning through manga, online texts, and a commercial video game, in which media exposure occurred within a structured learning setting accompanied by reflective tasks; although incidental in nature, that learning therefore remained situated within a formal instructional frame. By contrast, the present study examines incidental learning that arises purely from entertainment-oriented gameplay, without any instructional framing or explicit language-learning objective, thereby addressing a gap in understanding how incidental

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Japanese reading learning unfolds in an entirely informal, recreational context. Based on this background, this study aims to describe respondents' experiences and perceptions of incidental Japanese reading learning while playing *Bokujou Monogatari: Olive Town to Kibou no Daichi*, and to identify the reading strategies employed to understand the game's Japanese texts.

METHOD

This article is derived from the first author's undergraduate thesis (Fadhlillah, 2026). This study employs a qualitative descriptive method with a case study design. The scope of the study is the incidental learning experience of Japanese reading that emerges through gameplay of *Bokujou Monogatari: Olive Town to Kibou no Daichi*. Four participants, all players of the game and Japanese learners with varying proficiency levels (beginner, N3-equivalent, and N2-equivalent), were selected following the information power principle for qualitative case studies, whereby sample adequacy is judged by the richness and relevance of information rather than by statistical generalizability (Malterud, Siersma, & Guassora, 2016). Incidental learning was operationalized according to three criteria adapted from Hulstijn (2013) and Webb, Uchihara, and Yanagisawa (2023): (a) the absence of explicit learning intention, as participants engaged with texts solely to complete in-game objectives; (b) acquisition as a by-product of gameplay activity rather than deliberate study; and (c) retrospective awareness, whereby recognition of learning emerged only after reflection during or following gameplay.

Data were collected through a pre-interview questionnaire followed by semi-structured interviews, with instrument blueprints validated by an educational-psychology expert. The questionnaire elicited participants' background, gameplay habits, and initial reading experiences and helped ensure their understanding of the research questions so that the subsequent interviews could proceed more relevantly and in depth (Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2018), while the semi-structured interviews, chosen for their flexibility within a guiding question framework (Kallio, Pietilä, Johnson, & Kangasniemi, 2016), probed participants' incidental learning experiences and perceptions of the game as a trigger for incidental reading in greater depth. Data were analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2021) six-phase thematic analysis: familiarization with the data, initial coding, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Trustworthiness was maintained following Nowell, Norris, White, and Moules (2017) through credibility (methodological triangulation of questionnaire and interview data), transferability (thick description of context, participant characteristics, and gameplay situations), dependability (transparent documentation of each research stage), and confirmability (grounding interpretation in participants' direct quotations rather than researcher assumption).

Regarding participant protection, all four respondents consented to their questionnaire and interview responses, including direct quotations, being used and cited in this academic publication, on the condition that their real names not be disclosed. In accordance with this condition, respondents are referred to throughout this article using the anonymized codes R1–R4 rather than their real names.

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RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 presents the profiles of the four respondents, who represent a range of Japanese proficiency levels and learning backgrounds.

Table 1. Respondent Profiles

Respondent	Age	Education/Occupation	Length of Japanese Study	Japanese Proficiency
R1	22	Student, Japanese Language and Culture	6 years; self-taught via games/anime, later formal schooling	≈ JLPT N2 (fluent daily conversation; can read *hiragana*, *katakana*, and *kanji*, though still forgets some *kanji*)
R2	22	Student, Japanese Language Education	4 years; self-taught via hobbies (books, games, anime), later formal study	≈ JLPT N3 (all skills fairly good except *kanji*)
R3	30	Informatics graduate	1 year; self-taught	No certification (can hold daily conversation, can read *hiragana*/*katakana*, but struggles greatly with *kanji*)
R4	21	Student, Japanese Language Education	4 years; started upon entering university	≈ JLPT N3 (all skills fairly good except *kanji*)

Questionnaire Findings

The pre-interview questionnaire showed that all respondents played primarily for leisure and entertainment rather than deliberate language study. R1 and R3 played relatively frequently (3–4 times per week), while R2 and R4 played less often (1–2 times per week). Attentiveness to in-game text varied: R1 always attended to on-screen text, R2 and R3 did so only occasionally, and R4 rarely did. All four respondents relied on contextual guessing when encountering unfamiliar vocabulary, and all attributed their vocabulary retention primarily to the repeated appearance of the same text. All respondents perceived at least a slight improvement in character recognition and vocabulary, and most only realized they had been learning after the fact rather than during play itself.

Gameplay as a Trigger for Incidental Learning

Consistent with the questionnaire findings, the interviews showed that respondents played with entertainment-oriented motivations, filling free time, relaxing, or revisiting nostalgia, rather than any explicit intention to study Japanese. Their attention centered on completing in-game objectives such as farming and interacting with characters. This condition satisfies Hulstijn's (2013) central criterion for incidental learning, in which learning arises as a by-product of another meaningful activity. The functional need to understand mission instructions in order to progress compelled respondents to engage with Japanese text, consistent with Gee's (2003) argument that video games situate language within authentic, meaningful contexts. A similar pattern was reported by Putra (2024) for *Harvest Moon* players; although that study concerned English vocabulary rather than Japanese reading, it likewise found that recreation-oriented play could trigger incidental learning, reinforcing the present finding that emotional engagement, such as curiosity about the storyline or the desire

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to obtain an item, sustains repeated engagement with text without any instructional pressure, consistent with Laufer and Hulstijn's (2001) view that motivation and interest strengthen the effectiveness of incidental learning.

Exposure and Repetition as Supporting Factors

A significant finding concerns the role of repeated textual exposure in supporting recall. Respondents reported that instructional text, item names, and greeting dialogue recurred frequently, gradually becoming familiar in both visual form and meaning without conscious memorization. This finding evidences Grabe and Yamashita's (2009) Exposure and Repetition factor in reading development: repeated exposure to the same vocabulary within a consistent visual context helps transfer knowledge from short-term to long-term memory. R1 and R4, for instance, reported no longer needing to consciously process frequently encountered text, suggesting the early formation of automaticity in word recognition.

Reading Strategies Employed during Gameplay

In response to the second research question, respondents were not passive readers; they applied Strategic Processing (Grabe & Yamashita, 2009), the ability to monitor comprehension and select strategies appropriate to their purpose, adaptively through three main strategies summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Reading Strategies Employed in Gameplay

Reading Strategy	Description in Gameplay Context	Theoretical Basis
Contextual guessing	Using visual cues (item icons, character expressions, scene situations) to infer the meaning of unfamiliar vocabulary without consulting a dictionary; the most dominant strategy across all respondents	Grabe & Yamashita (2009); Patel (2008, as cited in Siregar, 2019)
Scanning	Searching for specific information (item names, quantities, statistics) within interface menus and inventory screens without reading full descriptions	Banditvilai (2020)
Skimming	Briefly skimming or skipping repetitive or low-priority dialogue considered irrelevant to game progress	Tarigan (2021)

Contextual guessing was the most dominant strategy across all respondents, allowing even lower-proficiency participants such as R3 to grasp the functional meaning of text through visual support alone. Scanning was evident in how respondents interacted with interface menus and inventory screens, searching for specific information without reading full descriptions, consistent with Banditvilai's (2020) definition of scanning as locating known types of information efficiently. Skimming appeared in respondents' treatment of dialogue deemed repetitive or unimportant to progress, with R1, R2, and R4 reporting that

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they skimmed or skipped lengthy dialogue when it did not affect gameplay, reflecting metacognitive control over which information warranted attention.

Exposure to Moji, Goi, and Bunpou through Gameplay

Following the *JF Standard for Japanese-Language Education* (The Japan Foundation, 2010), reading competence rests on three linguistic components: *moji* (script), *goi* (vocabulary), and *bunpou* (grammar). Respondents did not acquire these components separately but absorbed them simultaneously as an integrated part of gameplay context. Vocabulary exposure was the most intensive component, particularly for R3 and R4, who encountered numerous concrete nouns (vegetables, fruits, tools, and cooking ingredients) accompanied by clear icons that facilitated form-meaning mapping without dictionary use, consistent with Grabe and Yamashita's (2009) Vocabulary Knowledge principle. For script, advanced respondents such as R1 used *furigana* in dialogue to confirm *kanji* readings, while R4 relied on visual recognition of *kanji* as symbols representing meaning in *furigana*-free interface text, even without recalling their phonetic reading, suggesting that in incidental learning, semantic recognition of script may precede phonological recognition. For grammar, R2 specifically noticed regional dialect (e.g., Kansai-dialect) forms and casual sentence patterns used by NPCs that differed from the formal masu/desu forms taught in textbooks, indicating exposure to pragmatic, native-speaker grammar beyond standard classroom structures.

These findings align with Peterson (2016) in showing that incidental Japanese-language acquisition can occur through digital media exposure in meaningful contexts. However, a key contextual difference distinguishes the two studies: Peterson's participants encountered media within a structured learning setting accompanied by reflective tasks, whereas in the present study, incidental learning arose entirely within an entertainment-oriented activity with no instructional framing, underscoring that incidental Japanese reading learning can occur not only in controlled learning environments but also in everyday activities that demand functional language comprehension.

Synthesis: Patterns of Incidental Learning across Proficiency Levels

Across respondents, a common pattern emerged regardless of proficiency level: all relied on contextual guessing supported by in-game visual cues, and all benefited from repeated exposure that eased recognition of Japanese-language components without conscious effort. A proficiency-based difference was nonetheless evident: intermediate-to-advanced respondents (R1, R2, R4) more frequently applied scanning and skimming, efficiently filtering information and focusing on mission-critical points given their stronger grammatical foundation, with incidental learning for this group concentrated on vocabulary extension and exposure to spoken-language nuance. The beginner respondent (R3), by contrast, rarely skimmed or scanned lengthy dialogue due to the cognitive load involved, more often bypassing such text through trial and error, yet still experienced strong incidental learning at the level of concrete-noun vocabulary through image-dependent contextual guessing rather than sentence-structure processing. In sum, greater language proficiency was associated with a wider repertoire of reading strategies, while beginning learners relied more heavily on visual meaning-mapping.

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CONCLUSION

Respondents experienced incidental learning of Japanese reading while playing *Bokujou Monogatari: Olive Town to Kibou no Daichi* through exposure to functional, contextual text, with vocabulary (*goi*) and script (*moji*) acquisition emerging as a by-product of the need to understand instructions, dialogue, and interface elements rather than from any explicit learning goal. This process was perceived as intuitive and low-pressure, since respondents experienced themselves as engaged in meaningful play rather than formal study. In understanding the game's Japanese texts, respondents drew on reading strategies that formed naturally according to their proficiency levels, namely contextual guessing, scanning, and skimming, supported by visual interface elements that helped compensate for lexical limitations without instructor guidance. Awareness of this learning generally emerged only through post-gameplay reflection, driven by emotional engagement such as curiosity about the storyline and the desire to complete missions, which in turn fostered greater reading confidence and motivation to continue engaging with Japanese beyond an academic context.

These findings should be interpreted in light of several limitations: the small number of participants (four) limits generalizability; reliance on interview and self-reflection data means findings depend on participants' subjective experience and articulation ability; the focus on a single game title means results may not generalize to other genres; and the study describes experiences and perceptions rather than measuring reading improvement quantitatively. Future research is recommended to examine other game titles and language skills, employ larger samples or longer play durations, and consider mixed-methods designs to obtain a more comprehensive picture of incidental Japanese learning through video games.

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