

# Reading *The Gruffalo* in Another Language: Assessing Non-Graded Children's Picture Books for Extensive Reading

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Nowadays, language learners can choose from an enormous variety of graded-reader titles as extensive reading has become more popular with learners and teachers not only of English but also of the major European languages, such as French, German and Spanish. Nevertheless, the curious learner - and teacher - tends to peek at authentic literature for enjoyable reading experiences as well. Considering the pros and cons of graded readers, especially in the Japanese setting, how should a teacher approach an authentic children's book like *The Gruffalo*. Can it be considered appropriate extensive reading material for low-to-intermediate-level learners? This study conducted a qualitative survey among students of English and German in order to explore the difficulties they experienced in reading an authentic book and to suggest how that reading could best be supported. The aim was not only to analyse the book in question but to develop strategies to identify appropriate reading material. It was found that difficult vocabulary was a challenge for readers, but that pictures and repetition helped comprehension, and even low-level students can enjoy certain kinds of books in a foreign language despite the presence of some very low-frequency words.

## 1. Introduction

Extensive Reading (ER) is the practice of reading many easy and enjoyable books. Rather than focusing on specific language items, the aim is to consolidate knowledge of vocabulary and grammar, and build fluency. Research has shown that it is essential to read easy books (Takase, 2012), and that fluent reading is impossible if the reader knows fewer than 98% of the running words in a text (Waring & Nation, 2004). It is therefore important to know how difficult a text is before teachers recommend it to students, or before students choose it from the library.

Publishers have sought to meet this need among learners of English as another language by producing graded readers targeted at learners at different levels of reading proficiency. Different publishers use different criteria for their levels, and since David Hill's EPER (Edinburgh Project on Extensive Reading) levels in the 1970s there have been various scales which aim to comprehensively gauge the level of difficulty of graded readers published in English, including the Extensive Reading Foundation's ERF levels and YL (*Yomiyasu* levels) devised by Akio Furukawa in 2003. Graded readers are also available in other languages, with learners of German perhaps being able to choose from the second largest range after learners of English. There is not yet a comprehensive scale for levelling German graded readers, but the CEFR (Common European Framework of References) levels are often used.

Another avenue for learners seeking easy texts is children's literature. At first sight this seems an obvious source of reading material. However, there are two problems that often arise. First, while vocabulary in children's books is limited to consist of high-frequency, simple words, by the time they start reading, children who are native speakers of English have much larger vocabularies than many non-native learners of English. They will be familiar with a wide range of grammatical forms and have a good understanding of colloquial language. Second, older learners often find the content of children's books to be childish, which can have a negative impact on their motivation to read. This problem is acute among teenagers, especially those taking compulsory classes in a foreign language which they feel no intrinsic motivation to learn. Of course, well-written children's fiction can appeal to readers of all ages (Pengg-Bührlen, 2019), and publishers and authors realize that a book will sell better if it also appeals to the parents who will be reading it to their children, and who usually buy books for them. One such book is *The Gruffalo*, published in English in 1999 and translated into German in the same year, which was chosen for this study.

*The Gruffalo* was written by English writer Julia Donaldson and illustrated by Axel Scheffler, who is from Germany. It has sold over 17.7 million copies (Chandler, 2021), and has been translated into over 100 languages (and dialects), including Japanese. While a bestseller in English and German, the Japanese translation has not been so popular. As a highly compelling book, likely unknown to our students, this made *The Gruffalo* attractive to investigate what makes books difficult for learners to read. At around 700 words, the book can be read and feedback given within twenty or thirty minutes, making it suitable for classroom research.

## 2. Teaching contexts

The teacher-researchers authoring this study conduct Extensive Reading as part of their university English and German courses, although there are several differences between the classes in the two languages. The students have studied English for at least six years before coming to the University but most have not chosen English as their major. English classes are compulsory and large, with between 30 and 50 students. German classes are smaller and elective, or for students who have chosen German as a major, and typically students have not studied German before they begin classes at university.

During English classes, a strong form of ER was adopted and students encouraged to follow Sakai Kunihide's three rules: no dictionaries while reading; ignore words you don't know; and stop reading any book that has become boring (2002). This encourages students to choose easier books, which it is hoped will increase motivation. The teacher believes this to be a priority since the students are not enrolled in their English classes out of choice and in many cases seem to have had a negative experience of high-school English language education, which sometimes focuses on complex grammar forms and low-frequency lexical items at the expense of fluency-building. During English classes the students are encouraged to spend the first fifteen or twenty minutes of class reading paper books or ebooks they have borrowed or downloaded from the library. Students are not tested on the books they have read but are instructed to keep a record on an online system developed by the University.

During German language classes for second-year students, a weaker form of ER was adopted, where the students were still strongly encouraged to put down books that were too

difficult or uninteresting. However, they were allowed to use dictionaries, since the instructor considers the short and limited exposure to the target language achieved through the study of textbooks at that stage to be insufficient to enable students to acquire the level of vocabulary necessary to read most of the books available in the University's library. Due to the fact that German is an elective class, the intrinsic learning motivation of the students is believed to be high, and the students' use of a dictionary might result in positive reading and learning experiences. As with the English classes, the first fifteen minutes of the German language class are reserved for silent, in-class reading of books the students have borrowed from the library or the teacher. There is no testing on the books, but two to three times a term the students get a chance to share their books with the other students in small group discussions.

### 3. Questionnaire

A questionnaire was designed to elicit student impressions immediately after reading the book. The questionnaire was designed to be anonymous and consisted of in total sixteen questions on the time it took the students to read the book in minutes and seconds, their evaluation of the book in general, as well as in detail, and their language background. The last two questions of the questionnaire asked the students' consent to use the data for research as well as their cooperation for follow-up interviews, which all the participants agreed to. The questions were in Japanese, and Google Forms was used to deliver the questionnaire.

Six of the nine multiple choice questions provided a scale of six to rank: the book's difficulty (question 2: どのくらいの難しさでしたか?); the amount of unknown or unfamiliar words (question 3: わからない単語はいくつありましたか?); frequency of translating in the mind (question 4: 頭の中で何回翻訳しましたか?); the felt reading speed (question 5: 読書のスピードはどれくらいでしたか?); whether the participants understood the story (question 6: 話は理解できましたか?); and whether the participants enjoyed reading the book (question 7: 楽しんで読むことができましたか?). Seven questions were open, out of which five asked for details about: the reading time (question 1: 本を最後まで読むのにどのくらいの時間がかかりましたか。); to name unfamiliar words (question 8: わかりにくかった言葉は?); to name other things that made the book difficult to comprehend (question 9: 内容を理解するのが難しかった理由は何ですか?); to name what was of help in understanding the story (question 10: 本の内容を理解しやすかった理由は何ですか。); and provided space for additional comments (question 11: この本に関して、そのほかに何か思ったことはありますか?). (See Appendix for the full questionnaire.)

The students were further asked if they had read or heard of this book before (question 12: この本のことは以前から知っていましたか?). Since some students in the study read the book in English and some in German, two versions of the questionnaire were created to ask how many years they had learned the language (question 13: 英語/ドイツ語を何年間学んでいますか?), and how many books they had read in that language so far (question 14: 英語/ドイツ語で何冊くらい本を読んだことがありますか?).

The German version of the questionnaire was trialled with one student, then the questionnaire on the German version of the book was conducted on December 22nd as an in-class activity, with 8 out of 10 students from the class "German Intermediate Level II (ドイツ語中級II)" participating. At that time, one student had already dropped out of the class, and the

other non-participating student had trialled the questionnaire on the German book, and now answered the questionnaire of the English version on that day. The quantitative data for that student are not included in this research. Nevertheless, the qualitative answers are included in our analysis. The “German Intermediate Level II” class is a compulsory elective class for second-year students from the arts faculty only, and the largest class with ER taught by the author teaching German in the 2022 winter semester.

Before answering the questionnaire, students were each handed one German version of *Der Gruffelo* and instructed to read the book without using a dictionary, to measure and make a note of their reading time and then to access the online questionnaire through a link that was provided on the class's website of the university Moodle platform (eALPS). Students who had finished the reading and the questionnaire were allowed to use the remaining class time to look up unknown words in a dictionary and talk with other students.

For the English version, at the time of the research, there were not enough copies of the English edition of the book to conduct a whole class study, so students were invited to volunteer to help with the research. Eight students were chosen from four classes and they were instructed to read the book while timing themselves, then to answer the questionnaire which was sent to them by email. This took place between 22nd December and 23rd January.

## 4. Analysis

### 4.1 Quantitative findings from the questionnaire

In view of the small sample size, the focus of this study is more on qualitative analysis than quantitative analysis. However, statistical analysis showed that there were correlations for the whole group of students ( $n = 16$ ) between reading speed and their answers to the questions: How difficult was it? ( $r = .78$ ); How many words were there that you did not understand? ( $r = .65$ ); How many times did you translate in your head? ( $r = .82$ ); How fast did you feel you were reading? ( $r = .72$ ); and Did you understand the story? ( $r = .55$ ). Also there was a correlation between reading speed and the number of books students had read ( $r = .63$ ). The correlations were significant for the whole group of 16 students ( $p < .05$ ); in other words, it is very unlikely that the correlations were a coincidence. There was a significant correlation for the readers of the German books ( $n = 8$ ) between reading speed and their impression of their reading speed. However, for the other questions, the correlation was not significant looking separately at the group of eight German readers or the group of eight English readers. This does not mean there was no correlation, but the sample was not large enough to claim a correlation. Indeed, the correlation for the whole group may come from the difference between the German readers and the English readers, as we can see in Figure 1. There is a clear trend for students who read more books to have a faster reading speed. However we can also see that all the English students are faster than all of the German students, and most of the English students have read more books.

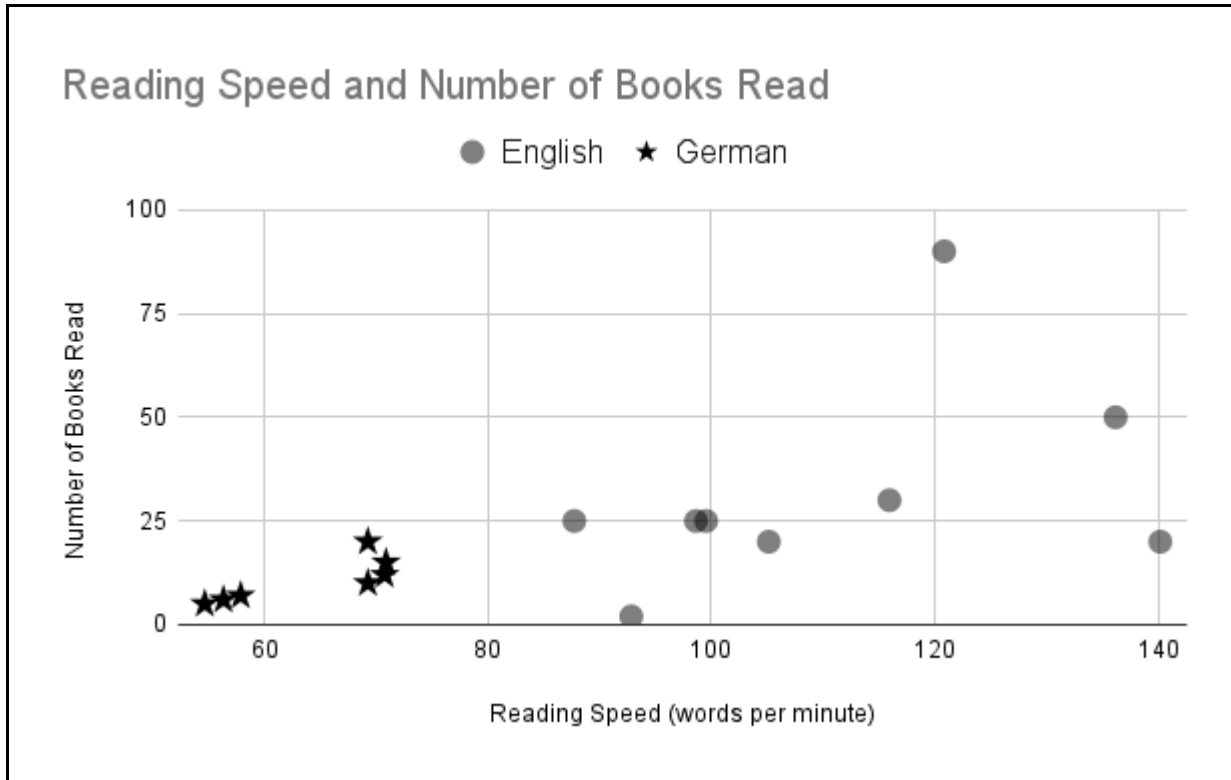


Figure 1. Reading speed and number of books read.

For the students reading in English, the mean reading speed was 113 words per minute (wpm) with a standard deviation of 18.7. For the students reading in German, the mean reading speed was 64 wpm with a standard deviation of 7.4. Figure 1 shows a scatter graph of books read against reading speed for each student.

All the students answered that they enjoyed the book, with two enjoying it very much. None of the students in our study had read *The Gruffalo* before, and only two had heard of it. This confirmed the suitability of the book for our study as a compelling and unknown text.

#### 4.2 *The Gruffalo: Didn't you know?*

On the linguistic level, *The Gruffalo*'s appeal has been credited to repetition, rich language use and “carefully crafted, playful rhyming lyrics, delivered in a tight metrical form” (Burke 2022). The English version is written mostly in iambic or dactylic verse, i.e. one stressed sound followed by one or two unstressed sounds. The rhyming sequence strategically changes to mark shifts in the story.

*Where are you going to, little brown mouse?*

*Come and have lunch in my underground house.*

According to Riedler, in the German version, the Gruffalo has slightly different traits, being described as a bit more frightening and less easily outwitted, hesitating a little longer before running away (2011, p.67). Nevertheless, the German version is very close to the original English version, keeping the core information but sometimes adding more e.g. “und schreckliche Zähne um Tiere zu kauen.” [and terrible teeth for chewing animals] (Riedler 2011), as well as using

deviant adjectives or nouns, most likely to preserve the verse and predominantly AABB balliol end rhyme structure, which is so prominent in this book.

»Hallo, kleine Maus, wohin geht die Reise?

Bei mir im Bau gibts Götterspeise.«

Lexically, the text includes useful question-answer schemes (“*Was ist das für ein...*”) and phrases for polite rejection, vocabulary of body parts, animals, food, feelings, along with collocations and synonyms (*erstaunlich* - *verblüffend*). Grammatical features include prepositional structures (*zu Mittag*, *im Bau*), position of the verb, verb bracket and verbs with prepositions, adjective endings, pronouns in different cases and simple past tense, making it suitable for exercises with A1-A2 level learners (Sauerborn, 2017).



Figure 2. Images from *The Gruffalo* and *Der Gruffelo*. (Donaldson & Scheffler, 1999a, 1999b)

According to Tajimi Library, *The Gruffalo* has a YL of 1.5. A book of YL 1.0 should be suitable for learners of English with more than 80 hours of studying. Furukawa (2007) recommends learners read 20,000 words at level 0-0.9 and 80,000 words at levels 1.0-1.9.

Both the English and German versions include low-frequency vocabulary. We analysed the text on the Online Graded Text Editor at Extensive Reading Central (n.d.), and found that in order to know 98% of the words in the text and allow fluent reading, a typical vocabulary of around 6,000 words is necessary. To reach a coverage of 95%, which is considered necessary for study reading (Waring & Nation, 2004), a vocabulary of at least 3,000 words is necessary. This

may seem a lot for a book aimed at young children. However, the book is often read aloud to children by adults and while young children may not be proficient readers, they have typically acquired vocabulary at a rate of thousands of words a year, so by the age of six will know more than 6,000 words. Of course, the illustrations and repetition of words and scenes in the story will help understanding.

Table 1. Lower frequency words in English

ERF level based on number of headwords	Words (CEFR Level)
1000-	Sped (B1), amazing (B1)
1250-	Knees (B1), slid (B2), path (A2)
1500-	Mouse (A2) , poisonous (B2), *bursting (B1), laughter (B2), till (A2)
1800-	Fox (B2), stream (B1), tongue (B1), creature (B1), slice (A2), nut (B2)
2100-	Terribly (B1), cream, snake (A2), feast (C1), fled (C1)
2400-	Toes (A2)
3000-	Underground (A2), claws, jaws (B2)
3600-	Roasted (A2), owl (B2), *hiss
4500-	****stroll (C1), scrambled (C2), **rumble, *crumble (C2)
6000-	*hoot
8000-	tusks, wart, *prickles, **astounding, *tummy
12000-	knobbly
>18,000	Logpile, treetop, *Oh crumbs

\* The asterisks show the number of students who indicated this word was difficult. For example four students indicated that “stroll” was making the text more difficult to understand.

Of these lower frequency words, 60% are repeated in the text, and of all headwords in the book, only 30% appear just once. In most authentic texts, around half of the headwords appear

only once (Nation 2006). In this paper, for example, 60% of the headwords appear only once and just 40% of all the words are repeated (ASV Online Toolbox, n.d.). Repetition not only helps readers to understand the words and the story but is also essential when learning new or less-familiar vocabulary.

CVLA (Uchida, 2021) analyses texts and estimates the CEFR level on the basis of various metrics: ARI is a readability index calculated from characters per word and words per sentence; VperSent measures the number of verbs per sentence; AvrDiff shows the average of word difficulties on the basis of the CEFR-J Wordlist while ignoring function words; BperA shows the ratio of CEFR B-level content words against CEFR A-level content words. For *The Gruffalo*, ARI suggests the level is pre-A1; VperSent suggests A1 and AvrDiff and BpreA both suggest level B1. This is consistent with the appearance of the text as grammatically simple but hiding many words of lower frequency.

The German learners identified 23 words as being “difficult”, far more than the English learners. This included two rather high frequency words which should have been familiar. All but these two words fall into the DWDS online dictionary’s frequency category of three or below, and thus less than 11,153,945 occurrences in the corpus of 35,271,873,584 words. Table 2 shows these difficult words, along with other low-frequency words from the book.

To determine the word frequency for the German list, the frequency given in the DWDS online dictionary, which includes the infinitive verb forms in the entry for the dictionary form and thus has higher frequencies for verbs, was cross-referenced against the DeReWo corpus-based wordlist (Leibniz-Institut für Deutsche Sprache 2014). Neither of these are based on learner-materials corpora, and in the latter the frequency ranking was influenced by the inclusion of various genres including newspapers. To add another variable, the word frequency provided in the COSMAS2 tool (Leibniz-Institut für Deutsche Sprache 2022: using “Deutsches Referenzkorpus” / W- Archiv der geschriebenen Gegenwartssprache, W öffentlich - alle öffentlichen Korpora des Archives W, mit Neuakquisitionen, 2022-I, Release vom 08.03.2022), was also considered, but not included in Table 2. Interestingly, neologisms which were coined in *Der Gruffalo* can be found in the COSMAS2 data since they are referred to in articles about *Der Gruffalo* that have been added to the corpus.

While the nouns “Hauer” [tusk], “Zunge” [tongue], “Klaue” [claw] and “Warze” [wart], which were not mentioned by the participants, can be identified clearly, the meaning of neither the phrasal verb “turned-out” nor of the adjectives “grässliche” [abominable, dire, ghastly, to cause shudders] or “schreckliche” [terrible, hideous, frightful, scary] in the German version are self-evident from the picture, as can be seen in Figure 2. Similarly, the abstract adjectives “erstaunlich” and “verblüffend” [both meaning astounding, surprising], which perhaps cannot be depicted, caused the most problems for the learners and make up 25% of the words identified as difficult.

In the German questionnaire, the students also mentioned five compound nouns (“Fuchsspieß” [fox-kebab], “Schlangenspüree” [mashed snake], “Lieblingsschmaus” [favourite feast], “Götterspeise” [ambrosia, jelly] and “Zuckerguss” [sugar icing]), two of which are neologism coined for this book and cannot be found in the dictionary. A subsequent study is needed to determine whether the German word structure, merging the compounds into one long word that is hard to disentangle into separate meanings, or unfamiliarity with the low-frequency



compounds, or both, are the reasons for the difficulty of these words. The coined adverbs “waldein” and “waldaus” mentioned by some students, are, on the other hand, not only extremely rare and not included in the Duden dictionary, but are analogous to the set of “landaus, landein”, and another very rare set of words “landauf, landab”, meaning “everywhere in the country”. Given the book’s setting in the wood (“wald-”), the meaning “everywhere throughout the wood” becomes evident to a native, but not to a learner.

Table 2. Lower frequency words in German

Word frequency according to DWDS	DeReWo based rank	Words
≤ 316 per million (4)	≤ 1900	*jemand (A2), *See (A1)
≤ 32 per million (3)	≤ 10.000	*Abschied (B1), *o, ***erstaunlich, *Wesen, *fürchtet (B1), Gras (B1)
≤ 32 per million (3)	≤ 16.000	<u>Zunge</u> , **schrecklichen (A2), floh (B1), Nest, <u>Pfad</u> , *schrein (B1)
≤ 32 per million (3)	≤ 26.000	<u>Ast</u> , vertragen, *****verblüffend, *gefürchtet (B1), *Nu
≤ 3 per million (2)	≤ 26.000	Rast, umher, flugs, <u>Hauer</u>
≤ 3 per million (2)	≤ 50.000	verzehrt, <u>Stacheln</u> , <u>Klauen</u> , *knackte
≤ 3 per million (2)	≤ 100.000	<u>kauen</u> , glitt, knurrt, bang, <u>feurig</u> , *zwischen, *grässliche, <u>Warze</u> , <u>Stacheln</u> , *Zuckerguss
≤ .3 per million (1)	n.a.	<u>Tatze</u> , *Götterspeise, <u>knotig</u> , *Reißaus
≤ .03 per million (0)	n.a.	**waldein, *waldaus, *Lieblingsschmaus, *Schlangenpüree, **Fuchsspieß,

\* The asterisks show the number of students who indicated this word was difficult. Words with an explanatory picture are underlined.

According to the Zipfel analysis, *Der Grüffelo* has 293 unique words and only 46% of all headwords appear only once (ASV Online Toolbox, n.d.). Thus, the German version has less repetition than the English original, but still more repetition than this paper.

#### 4.3 Qualitative findings from the questionnaire

The students were asked to specify not only specific words that they did not understand, but also to point to things that made the book difficult to understand. Eleven participants, four from the English class and seven from the German class, mentioned that unknown or unfamiliar words were a reason why this book was difficult to understand. Of these participants, four even mentioned “many unknown words”. Four students, three of whom were from the German class, mentioned Grammar, especially spoken word structures, as difficult. Other reasons given by the

German learners were the presence of long, coined words, the fact that they felt it was inappropriate to look back in the book to reconfirm some meaning, or that they could not decipher who was speaking. Sauerborn (2017) mentions the latter as one skill that could be practised using this book. One English learner further mentioned that the preface of the book was difficult.

On the other hand, eleven students, four English learners and seven German learners, pointed out that the illustrations or pictures had helped them to guess the meaning. Seven students, five of whom were from the German class, stated that repetition was helpful and five students, three of whom were from the English class, mentioned that the flow or the pattern of how the storyline developed was helpful. Encountering the same word numerous times is often connected to language as being essential for acquisition (Yamashita 2012) but in our context students managed to use it to unravel the meaning of the sentences or the story. Unlike the German students, three English students considered the text itself to be easy due to the “few unknown words”, “sentences with easy words” or “short sentences”. Another English student mentions that “keeping reading” helped to understand the book.

To our surprise, the section on further comments was not as divergent as expected. Five students, three from the German and two from the English groups, mentioned that they had heard a similar story or that it reminded them of a similar story or proverb with a tiger. It has to be mentioned here that *The Gruffalo* was inspired by a Chinese fairytale in which a tiger has a similar role to the Gruffalo. The remaining six comments ranged from commenting on the story itself to reaffirming the helpfulness of the illustrations and wondering which CEFR level this book might be.

## 5. Conclusion

In this small-sample qualitative research, we tried to analyse the difficulties of the non-graded reader *The Gruffalo* in English and German. We were able to identify the core difficulty of this book as being the vocabulary, especially the low-frequency words, while comprehension was made easier by repetition and pictures, which is in accordance with the ideas of the YL. We were able to find further evidence for this by matching the book's low-frequency words with the words specifically mentioned by the participants. Even very low-frequency words that were represented in a picture were not mentioned by the students.

Although the book is recommended in the English (Yamashita 2012) as well as the German version (Sauerborn 2017) as a learning tool, in view of the slow reading speeds and high numbers of problematic words, it seems too difficult to be used as a reader in autonomous, silent reading for German 2nd year students. The results of this small sample suggest it is well suited for English first-year students. We found that in spite of the difficult vocabulary all of the students were able to enjoy reading the book.

Even though we found some evidence that on the lexical level this book is most likely B1 or above, in order to confirm the level of *The Gruffalo* we should conduct another study with a larger group of students who have read other graded readers.

As a classroom activity, reading *The Gruffalo* may be useful in helping students think about the factors underlying reading difficulty and in helping them to choose books at an appropriate level and gain a better idea of what that level might be. The book, particularly in German, may

also be an excellent tool to test students' retention of vocabulary items since it contains neologisms that are very unlikely to have been encountered before, and will be unlikely to be encountered after reading.

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## Appendix: Questionnaire Text

1. 本を最後まで読むのにどのくらいの時間がかかりましたか。  
(何分何秒)
2. どのくらいの難しさでしたか？
  - 非常に難し
  - 難しい
  - -
  - +
  - 簡単
  - 非情に簡単
3. わからない単語はいくつありましたか？
  - たくさん
  - いくつか
  - -
  - +
  - 少し
  - なし
4. 頭の中で何回翻訳しましたか？
  - すべての単語
  - ほとんどの単語
  - 一文に一回
  - 段落ごとに一回
  - 各ページに一回
  - 翻訳しなかった
5. 読書のスピードはどれくらいでしたか？
  - とてもゆっくりだった
  - ゆっくりだった
  - -
  - +
  - 速かった
  - とても速かった
6. 話は理解できましたか？
  - 全くわからなかった
  - 分からない部分が少しあった
  - -
  - +
  - ほとんどわかった
  - 全部わかった
7. 楽しんで読むことができましたか？
  - 全く楽しめなかった
  - あまり楽しめなかった
  - -
  - +
  - 楽しかった
  - とても楽しかった
8. わかりにくかった言葉は？ (どの単語か書いてください)
9. 内容を理解するのが難しかった理由は何ですか？ (できるだけたくさん書いてください)
10. 本の内容を理解しやすかった理由は何ですか。 (できるだけ詳しく書いてください)
11. この本に関して、そのほかに何か思ったことはありますか？
12. この本のことは以前から知っていましたか？
  - いいえ
  - 聞いたことがあった
  - 日本語で読んだことがあった
  - 英語で読んだことがあった
  - その他:
13. ドイツ語を何年間学んでいますか？
14. ドイツ語で何冊くらい本を読んだことがありますか？
15. 同意書
  - これらの回答を研究に使用することを許可します。
  - これらの回答を研究に使用しないでください。
16. これらの回答について、(何か不明点があった場合) こちらから内容を確認してもいいですか？
  - はい
  - いいえ