

# Importance of Phonics and its prerequisites: What is necessary for Japanese students?

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## **I. Introduction**

In spite of the long lasting debate on phonics in reading instruction, it has strongly been gaining popularity in the U.S. since the enforcement of the No Child Left Behind campaign. Based on research findings, the federal government summarized the importance of phonemic awareness and phonics in its 'reading first initiatives'.

Now that the Japanese government has announced the introduction of 35 hours of foreign language activities in the fifth and sixth grades in all of the public elementary schools starting from 2011, it is probably time we discuss and consider the introduction of phonemic awareness and phonics for students to gain a better acquisition of the English.

Public elementary schools commenced English activities in the period for integrated studies in 2002. Without governmental guidelines and programs, elementary school teachers made grate efforts in setting the activities in the school curricula. In spite of the teachers' hard work, problems have arisen, such as the different proficiency levels of English among students and elementary schools, and gaps between the English taught in elementary schools and junior high schools.

In order to acquire a language, the four skills of listening, speaking, reading and writing, are necessary. In the EFL situation, a curriculum for balanced learning is indispensable. Therefore effectiveness on Japanese children of phonemic awareness and phonics, which are defined as necessary skills for learning to read by the U.S.

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government, should be taken into consideration.

## **II. Research findings about reading instruction**

There had been a debate regarding to phonics instruction in teaching reading for more than three centuries (Starret, 2007), however, recently it has firmly gained its position in public education in the U.S. due to the findings reported by two federal initiatives in the U.S.: research done by National Reading Panel (henceforth NRP) and No Children Left Behind (henceforth NCLB).

NRP started its research during Clinton's presidency in 1997. Asked by Congress, the director of the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (henceforth NICHD) established NRP and examined over one hundred thousand of research studies published since 1966 and fifteen thousand more before the time. President Bush implemented NCLB in 2000 based on the previous findings by the NRP.

Among five phonics instructional approaches; analogy phonics, analytic phonics, embedded phonics, phonics through spelling and synthetic phonics, the meta-analysis proved the positive and significant effect of systematic synthetic phonics instruction on children's level of reading (NRP findings 2000)<sup>1</sup>. According to NRP, synthetic phonics benefits all the students in kindergarten to sixth grades on their word recognition, spelling, and reading comprehension (NIFL, 2001). It is also beneficial for students with learning disabilities, low-achieving students, and students from low economic status families. The findings gave the decision in favor of explicit phonics to implicit phonics, which is also called whole-word method<sup>2</sup>. The long lasting debate

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<sup>1</sup> See Notes section at the end.

<sup>2</sup> Whole word (Whole language or sight-word method) emphasizes the importance of a natural setting and authenticity of the reading material (Akamatsu, 1999). It instructs students to memorize the pronunciation of the word as a whole and the shape of the word (Ando, 1991).

whether phonics or the whole word method should be taught in reading instruction seems to come to a terminus.

In addition to the findings about the importance of synthetic phonics instructions, NRP reported the importance of prerequisites of phonics instruction namely phonemic awareness and alphabet recognition. Without the success of the acquisition of the two, synthetic phonics instruction could not be effective in learning to read.

### **III. Prerequisites of phonics**

#### **III-1. Phonemic Awareness**

Phonemic awareness refers to the understanding that a word is made up of a series of phonemes (Blevins, 2001) and phoneme is “the smallest unit of speech that corresponds to letters of an alphabetic writing system” (Adams, 1998). Phonemic awareness is sometimes treated as same as phonological awareness. Although they are required to be learned before any phonics instructions, their definitions are slightly different. By Heilman (2006), “phonological awareness is the ability to think about all the possible sounds in a word; syllables, onset, rime, and phonemes”, and phonemic awareness is “the knowledge or understanding that speech consists of a series of sounds and that individual words can be divided into phonemes.” Phonological awareness is a broader definition which includes phonemic awareness.

Children entering schools already know many words in speech, however, do not think a word is made of smaller units. They must be taught to realize that the word can be broken down into phonemes before learning to read. Children’s level of phonemic awareness firmly defines their success and failure in learning to read in their future (Adams 1998, Heilman 2006, Heilman retrieved 2008). The relationships between the performance of phonemic awareness and the success in learning to read is not only reported for English, but also Swedish, Spanish, French, Italian, and Russian (Adams, 1998). It is also reported that adults with literacy problems usually

show underdeveloped phonemic awareness in America, Portugal, England, and Australia (ibid.). It is certainly predictable that the children who experienced rhyming, chants, jingles, and songs in their daily lives before entering school will likely to make progress in learning to read compared to children with no such experience since the former have already acquired the most part of phonemic awareness.

Phonemic awareness is necessary before phonics instructions. However, learning it is no easy task. Since the way people talk depends naturally on each individual, a phoneme can differ significantly. It is true when people listen or speak, they do not pay any attention to phonemes. Linguists also have difficulties to define the numbers of phonemes in English; the number varies from forty-four to fifty-two (ibid.).

Despite the difficulties of defining phonemes, phonemic awareness must be taught before phonics. According to the National Institute for Literacy (NIFL) (2001), phonemic awareness is something that can be taught by teachers and learned by students. To acquire phonemic awareness, many different activities can be taught: phonemic isolation, phonemic identity, phoneme categorization, phoneme blending, phoneme segmentation, phoneme deletion, phoneme addition, and phoneme substitution (ibid.)<sup>3</sup>. Rather than focusing on many types of instruction, one or two of phoneme manipulation are sufficient, namely, blending and segmenting phonemes (ibid.).

### **III-2. Alphabet recognition**

In addition to phonemic awareness, alphabet recognition is needed as a prerequisite of phonics instructions. As hiragana is taught in elementary schools in Japan as the first step into education, learning alphabet is also considered as the foundation for all the other subjects in schools in the countries which use the alphabet in their writing system (Starret, 2007). Teachers could define whether the students are ready

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<sup>3</sup> See Notes section at the end.

to learn any reading instructions by grasping the level of their alphabet recognition and phonemic awareness (Blevins, 2001). In other words, if children do not have a sufficient level of both alphabet recognition and phonemic awareness, it is impossible for them to develop their reading skills. Adams (1990) stated, “On one hand, we saw that teaching children to recognize letters produced little reading benefit unless the children were also taught the letters’ sounds. On the other, we saw that training phonemic awareness produced little reading benefit unless children were also taught the printed letters by which each phoneme was represented.”

Phonics teaches sound-spelling relationships. Acquiring the phonics skill will improve children’s reading since it helps to free their mental energy from decoding unknown words and concentrate on the meaning of the text (ibid.). As a result of recognizing the alphabets with accuracy and speed, children are encouraged to focus on learning sound-spelling relationships. If a child has a difficulty in identifying the alphabets, it is impossible for him/her to proceed to learn phonics, thus the improvement in learning to read will not occur.

#### **IV. Importance of prerequisites of phonics for Japanese children**

Phonemic awareness and alphabet recognition are important prerequisites of any reading instructions for students whose mother tongue is English. The question now is whether they are necessary for Japanese children who are in the situation of English as a foreign language (EFL).

Since the introduction of the English activities in the period for integrated studies in public elementary schools in 2002, much emphasis has been put on listening and speaking activities rather than reading and writing. Since the natural sequence of acquiring the language is, listening, speaking, reading, and writing, many scholars suggest putting emphasis on input in natural English. In addition, they argue that

when acquiring language, it is observed that the children have the silent period in both L1 and L2 situations. Children experience the time when they only listen to the target language before they could produce something in it. Therefore, listening is the most important input and reading and writing are not the priority for children at beginner level.

However, on the contrary, Shirahata argues that the silent period can vary for ESL children compared to about a year for L1 children, and it is questioned that the silent period for ESL children is same as that of L1 children (Shirahata, 2004)<sup>4</sup>. No one would argue about the importance of listening for acquiring a language, yet in the situation where the children learn the language only once or twice a week, it is not realistic to expect a natural output from them (Katagiri, 1985).

Reading and writing skills are as important as listening and speaking skills when acquiring the language, thus, language education must aim at acquiring four skills as its goal and should be taught in the long-term vision.

As we have discussed in section III, success in learning to read depends on the success in acquisition of prerequisites of phonics. Since phonics significantly improves not only children's word recognition and reading comprehension, but also spelling (NIFL, 2001), in other words, phonics can positively affect reading and writing, it could be beneficial to introduce the instruction into English education in Japan.

## **V. Possibility of introduction of phonemic awareness and phonics**

According to the findings from NRP, both phonemic awareness and phonics

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<sup>4</sup> According to Shirahata, the silent period for L1 children is about a year and the time is said to be used for learning the target language, however, for L2 children, the length of the silent period varies. For L2 children, what is being processed in the period is unknown yet, however, he assumed that the period might be caused by psychological factors (Shirahata, 2004).

should be instructed explicitly (2001). Explicit instructions require teachers to engage in some kind of writing activities when supplying explanations. It is clear that the students must recognize the alphabet in order to acquire both phonemic awareness and phonics.

The Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) announced the introduction of 35 hours foreign language activities (English activities) in 2008, and it has published “Eigo Noto” (side text book as “Kokoro no noto” in moral education) temporarily. In “Eigo Noto”, seven lessons of letter instruction are scheduled for sixth grade students. Should the phonemic awareness and phonics instruction be waited until sixth grade since they require the alphabet recognition? It seems that there is a time constraint when the alphabet is taught in six grades. Is it impossible for students to learn the alphabet earlier? The answer could be found in the romaji education in Japanese lessons. Currently, romaji is taught in the fourth grade for four to five hours, and both upper case and lower case letters are introduced simultaneously making it quite difficult for students to fully memorize all the letters in the limited time.

If upper case and lower case letters are introduced perfectly in romaji lessons, the phonemic awareness can be taught from fourth grade. According to MEXT, romaji lessons will begin at third grade starting in 2011. Phonemic awareness can even be taught in third grade. Supposing children have experienced foreign language activities (English activities) from their first year, as it is the case in most public elementary schools (MEXT, 2005)<sup>5</sup>, there would be enough time for them to gain the knowledge of phonemic awareness and that would lead to sufficient phonics instruction.

Research conducted by Tamai on the relationships between the alphabet knowledge and the phonemic awareness, concluded that the alphabet instruction helped

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<sup>5</sup> A survey done by MEXT in 2006 showed that the 75.1% of elementary schools introduced English in the first grade in the period for special activities (MEXT, 2006).

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develop Japanese students' phonemic awareness. 10 minutes of letter instruction was given twenty-one times in fifth grade and nineteen times in sixth grade. For the fifth grade, the writing of the upper case letters and the sound of the letters were taught, the writing of the upper case letters and lower case letters and their sounds were instructed in sixth grade. The conclusion was made that letter recognition was improved by letter instruction, learning the alphabet helps the recognition of English sound, phonemic awareness can be developed by writing the alphabet, and the acquisition of the alphabet has a strong relationship with the acquisitions of romaji (Tamai, 2006 ).

Since alphabet recognition is the foundation for successful acquisition of English, readjustment and reconsideration should be emphasized for connecting romaji education to foreign language activities.

## **VI. Conclusion**

Phonics is now considered as the most important skill for children when they learn to read in L1 situations. Cross-examination of ample research done by NRP concluded the importance of phonics, and the success in phonics instruction depends on the level of acquisition of the prerequisites: phonemic awareness and alphabet recognition.

Since the four skills; listening, speaking, reading and writing, are equally important in acquiring a language, a balanced program for EFL students is obviously needed. Therefore, the instruction to improve the alphabet recognition and phonemic awareness is inevitable for successful phonics lessons to have positive impact on reading and spelling.

English education in Japan has been experiencing some changes. The introduction of letters will be allowed in the sixth grade starting from 2011. However, since phonics instruction requires alphabet recognition and phonemic awareness, the time



is not sufficient for effective phonics lessons.

Alphabet recognition needs to be taught earlier so that phonemic awareness and then phonics can be instructed. Romaji education in Japanese lessons might help to improve alphabet recognition, thus the possibility of teaching Japanese students phonemic awareness and even phonics would be found. It is probably time to consider the close cooperation of different subjects, specifically English and Japanese.

## NOTES

1. Analogy phonics – Teaching students unfamiliar words by analogy to known words.  
Analytic Phonics – Teaching students to analyze letter sound relations in previously learned words to avoid pronouncing sounds in isolation.  
Embedded Phonics – Teaching students phonics skills by embedding phonics instruction in text reading, a more implicit approach that relies to some extent on incidental learning.  
Phonics through Spelling – Teaching students to segment words into phonemes and to select letters for those phonemes.  
Synthetic Phonics – Teaching students explicitly to convert letters into sounds (phonemes) and then blend the sounds to form recognizable words.  
(Findings and Determinations of the National Reading Panel by Topic Areas, 2000)
3. Phoneme isolation – Children recognize individual sounds in a word.  
Phoneme identity – Children recognize same sounds in different words.  
Phoneme categorization – Children recognize the word in a set of three or four words that has the “odd” sound.  
Phoneme blending – Children listen to a sequence of separately spoken phonemes, and then combine the phonemes to form a word. Then they write and read the word.

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Phoneme segmentation – Children break a word into its separate sounds, saying each sound as they tap out or count it. Then they write and read the word.

Phonemic deletion– Children recognize the word that remains when a phoneme is removed from another word.

Phoneme addition – Children make a new word by adding a phoneme to an existing word.

Phoneme substitution – Children substitute one phoneme for another to make a new word. (NIFL, 2001)

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