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Who are Beginning to Study English
in a Classroom Setting

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1. Introduction

From the year 2020, Japan will expand English language lessons in primary schools from the current 5th and 6th grade levels to also include the 3rd and 4th. As the age of English learners in Japan steadily becomes younger and younger what initial steps should be taken to ensure their continued progress ? Although English lessons will soon begin for Japanese children from around age 8 or 9, what is a good age to commence ? With regards to the age of initial instruction, there is no conclusive decision among SLA (Second Language Acquisition) researchers and ELT (English Language Teaching) professionals as to the exact critical time frame that dictates true language acquisition. The instruction, its quantity and quality, are of more importance (Igawa, 2007). In Japanese elementary English lessons, the primary emphasis is on listening, reading and writing skills. Speaking, surprisingly, seems to be the area of least concentration. Oral competence has many advantages when it comes to language learning, especially when it comes to learning English.

Although it is not obvious to the casual observer there are fundamental reasons for this approach. Oral language proficiency is directly related to the ability to learn to read because the solid language knowledge helps children to make intelligent guesses when attempting to read, by simply drawing on what would make intelligent guesses (Pinter, 2006).

What is decisive is that how students initially learn English in their early years can drastically affect their English language abilities as they progress from primary school to junior and senior high school and beyond. Some bodies of education have taken notice of this ...the UK Government embraced the explicit method of instruction known as phonics at a national level amid concerning national statistics (Robinson & Armitage, 2017). Closer to home in Japan, test results from the Eiken, Center test, or TOEIC test along with general university entrance examinations also play a significant part in why Japanese students learn English the way they do. Learning the ABC's is most often the initial experience English language learners receive. Commonly, this is at a very young age and involves simple activities such as playing with blocks or singing the ABC song. Sight recognition and the basic sounds, a – apple, b – banana, are the key objectives for instructors familiarizing students with the ABC's. This introductory familiarity with letters and words only works up to a certain point though. If children are taught by a wholly look-and-say approach, they may appear to achieve success, but eventually there will be too many words which are too alike to be distinguishable (Croll and Hastings, 1988). Phonics on the other hand is not only concerned with the basic sounds of a single letter but also the sounds that two or more letters together may produce along with additional sounds that each letter can make depending on the preceding or following letters. In phonics, the vowels and consonants play an essential role in what sound is produced. The learning of the

ABC's which assists in reading, along with phonics ; supports the understanding of the difference that a single letter or groups of letters may have and the varying sounds that can be constructed. In early English language learning being able to make these distinctions is critical for advanced vernacular development later on. Thusly, a mix of both instructions in ABC recognition and the varying sounds that they may produce in multifarious patterns is important in English language learning, especially when young non-native learners are involved. This of course is the context in which Japanese students attempt to learn English in Japanese public elementary schools.

In Japanese public schools the implementation of English language lessons has been inconsequential at best. Up until 10 or so years ago there were no formal English lessons in Japanese schools at the elementary school level. Materials and ideas for using the materials was left up to each instructor. The days before the Internet meant cutting and pasting from magazines or printing pages of games and tasks from the mimeograph machine. Once that area of lesson planning was secured there was still the difficulty of conferring between native part-time English speaking instructors and the full-time Japanese homeroom teachers who are tasked with many duties in addition to teaching English.

Difficulties with organizing meaningful lessons between a native English instructor, often referred to as ALT's (Assistant Language Teachers) and the young learners Japanese homeroom teachers also known as JLT's (Japanese Language Teachers) has been a continuous area of contention. A significant number of ALT's have been introduced into Japan through the JET (Japan Exchange and Teaching) Program. Most often JET participants are young, with little or no teaching experience, while at the same time being right out of university and often being overseas for the first time. JLT's on the other hand are licensed Japanese elementary school teachers that may have a varying number of years of instructional

experience in Japanese schools. Neither is most likely to have any experience or academic degree(s) in ESL (English as a Second Language) or EFL (English as a Foreign Language). The decision to teach English lessons via the alphabet or phonics therefore can be a hit or miss decision most often based on which ever seems to be the easiest to instruct and gets the best positive results from learners for that particular time or day.

2. The Alphabet

Described as the building blocks of the English language, recognizing and understanding each letter is fundamental to any understanding and continued study. The assumption that children learn to read by being taught letters is deeply rooted in our culture. It is probably as old as alphabetic writing itself (Moustafa, 1997). Despite advances in technology, learning tools such as dot to dot pictures, where children have to connect all the letters of the alphabet in order to construct a picture are still used for young learners with very positive results. Before that though ABC blocks are most often the first experience children have with the alphabet. It is frequently their initial academic experience and achievement; albeit a small one. Knowing the names of the letters will not help the children to read but it will enable them to spell words in English (Pinter, 2011). At this age English exposure consists of young children having simple stories read to them by a parent or guardian. This in turn helps to further emphasis the importance of letter recognition. Being able to recognize and print the letters of their own name is also a huge advancement for youngsters. From these early beginnings comprehension of the ABC's leads to an ever expanding base of familiarity and comfort with using letters. An expanded understanding of the ABC's leads to the construction of words, phrases, and sentences. Importantly, learners begin to not only recognize

words but are also able to read them individually or when they are grouped together in sentences. This of course leads to further development of reading skills and higher cognitive understanding of the English language as a whole. It is therefore critical that a learner of English be able to comprehend each individual letter and their placement and importance in the language itself; the difference between constants and vowels is but one example. With letter recognition also comes sound detection and the differences that single or groups of letters may constitute.

3. Phonics

Phonics, similar to the ABC's, is an intricate part of language learning. Phonics is basically the sounds that each letter makes in the English language. These sounds are commonly referred to as phonemes. Added to phonemes is the relationship of the letters or graphemes as they are called. This combination of phonemes and graphemes is the basis of phonics. After early learners are taught to recognize each alphabetic letter they can then quickly progress to understanding the different sounds that may be made by individuals or groups of letters. This important step of sight and sound recognition of the letters plays a key part in English language attainment. Acquiring an expanding knowledge of phonics allows learners to read at a faster pace and enables them to cite out loud what they have just perused. The activities that build phoneme awareness, such as rhymes, songs, and games that manipulate sounds in words, usually happens in kindergarten and continues into 1st grade for students who have difficulty identifying sounds (Herron, 2008). To further their language knowledge students are then able to sound out unknown letters or words. They might not always be 100% correct in their pronunciation but any errors are most likely be from spelling rules not yet learned. As students progress with phonics their vocabulary of sighting words and sounding

them out can expand exponentially. They may occasionally run into words that do not follow the patterns that they have already learned but this is where the teacher plays a vital role.

4. Phonics Types

Although most individuals accept the word ‘phonics’ as a generalization of the sounds that letters and their groupings may produce; there are actually many different approaches toward phonics pedagogy. It is arguable how many there actually are, but most scholars would agree that there are between 4-6 distinct styles. The division between one style of instruction and another can again be up for debate. For clarity, only a few of these styles will be briefly explained here. While examining the differences in the types of phonics it is also worth considering how these methods may be properly applied to English education as taught in Japanese elementary schools.

4a. Synthetic Phonics

Commonly referred to as synthetic phonics in the United Kingdom, in the United States this is often called blended phonics. Additionally, called inductive phonics, it is a type of phonics that first teaches the individual letter sounds and later expands to blending these sounds together. It is therefore a gradually growing and expandable method of acquiring knowledge to pronounce whole words. Some common features of synthetic phonics are that it essentially teaches the relationship between graphemes and phonemes, teaches reading by blending or identifying the graphemes in a word, and then recalling phonemes and saying the phonemes together to comprise that word. Another term often used with synthetic phonics is that of segmenting; where longer words are divided up into smaller parts.

A common phrase that instructors may mention to their pupils is that they “sound it out”. Summed up, synthetic phonics is this basic principle of sounding out the letters when it comes to unfamiliar words either as a whole word or small chunks to finally get the entire word.

Synthetic phonics instructions blends with the alphabet by most often teaching the grapheme phoneme connection through the corresponding alphabet. For example, the letter ‘a’ and it’s corresponding sounds, the letter ‘b’, ‘c’, ‘d’, and so on. Additionally, synthetic phonics tends to also encompass easy sounds before advancing to those that are more difficult to learn and remember. Therefore, the typical patterns of phonics early on are learnt to form a strong basis before moving on to more complex patterns. Synthetic phonics seems to be a very viable means of instruction for use in Japanese elementary schools. The infrequency of Japanese English language lessons whether they occur weekly or less could strongly support the need for a simple phonics approach such as synthetic phonics which is easy to understand and progress at a slow pace if need be.

4b. Analytic Phonics

Another approach often used is that of analytic phonics. In this technique, students learn to analyze letter-sound relationships from previously learned words. Learners are looking at the whole word to detect patterns in spelling. From this approach it is thought that young students can advance more rapidly through some of the clearer and easier forms of spelling and pronunciation. Words with ‘a-t’ at the ending as in ‘cat’, ‘bat’ or ‘hat’ which all follow the same pattern but with only the substitution of a single letter making an entirely different word. This method of course would be best for those extremely young learners or those with learning difficulties. A suggested method analytic phonics instruction might be ;

1. First, the students must know all the letters of the alphabet and their sounds. The child will need to be able to identify the sounds in the beginning, middle and end of a word. Once the students are able to do that, the teacher then selects a text that has a lot of letter sounds.
2. Next, the teacher presents the words to the students (usually sight words are selected to start). For example, the teacher places these words on the board : light, bright, night or green, grass, grow.
3. The teacher then asks the students how these words are alike. The student would respond, “They all have “ight” at the end of the word.” or “They all have “gr” at the beginning of the word.”
4. Next, the teacher focuses on the sound the words make by saying, “How does the “ight” sound in these words ?” or “How does the “gr” sound in these words ?”
5. The teacher picks a text for the students to read that has the sound they are focusing on. For example, choose a text that has the word family, “ight” (light, might, fight, right) or choose a text that has the word family, “gr” (green, grass, grow, gray, great, grape).
6. Finally, the teacher reinforces to the students that they just used a decoding strategy to help them read and understand words based upon the relationships letters have with one another. (Cox, 2017).

As explained previously, “the students must know all the letters of the alphabet and their sounds”. This is indeed very important but more essential in that it shows the vital connection between learning the basic ABC’s and phonics. While many may suggest that there is no relationship between the two, it is quite obvious that there is with analytic phonics strongly supporting this argument.

4c. Analogy Based Phonics

In analogy based phonics learners are utilizing their past knowledge of phonics to decode and then read the words they don't know.

For example, by comparing the phonological characteristics of sound symbolic words to their referents, children may notice the similarity between them, which helps them to establish correspondences, leading to the understanding that people use words to represent meanings and ultimately facilitating early vocabulary development (White, 2005).

Coding and decoding of words are much better suited to those students who are older, native English speakers or for those nonnative's studying English on a prolonged continuous basis. This method therefore, would most likely not work well with Japanese students especially those of a young age. At the junior or senior high levels of English this could possibly be a suitable mode of instruction.

5. Decoding versus Encoding

The basics of phonics come down to two fundamental methods. Learners either decode a word or they encode. In decoding, the unknown word is seen in its entirety and the learner attempts to pronounce and relate meaning. Whereas in encoding the student analyses each letter by dividing up the word and its corresponding sound(s). The letters are then assembled and the word pronounced. Each method has its value depending on the learner's abilities. Although the author Herron (2008) notes some discrepancies when the two methods are compared.

- Visual processing is activated first. A reader relies on analyzing and recognizing patterns, contours, shapes, and configurations (typically right-hemisphere processes). The reader achieves pronunciation and meaning only after successful visual analysis.
- Retrieval of knowledge about the alphabet code involves letter-to-sound associations. This process involves visually deconstructing a word that has already been written by someone else ; often these words use more advanced rules of spelling or break the rules. When a student is trying to learn the alphabetic principle, it's confusing to encounter exceptions.
- Instructional activities tend to be divorced from meaningful experiences with text. Exercises often involve visually analyzing lists of unrelated words or sentences, such as counting phonemes, underlining blends and digraphs, or copying sentences from the board. Such activities do not elicit the joy of personal construction. They reinforce dependency on the teacher rather than independent learning.

For the following reasons, encoding instruction is a more powerful place to start :

- Pronunciation and meaning are immediately activated because the reader must pronounce the word he or she wants to build, either silently or aloud (which typically involves left-hemisphere processing).
- The reader segments phonemes primarily by using the motor system of speech, with its superior capability for sequencing and memory.

- Retrieval of knowledge about the alphabetic code involves articulated sound-to-letter associations.
- Activities involve meaningful interactions with text—primarily assembling letter tiles or using a keyboard, magic slate, or pencil to write dictated words or sentences. The teacher guides instruction of encodable consonant – vowel – consonant words in a systematic way so students gradually build up a repertoire of the 40 letters and digraphs that represent the basic phonemes in English. Neural networks for these 40 paired associations will thus be laid down consistently without the confusion of dealing with more complex spelling patterns. Writing becomes an efficient route to early reading rather than a separate subject.
- These activities are empowering. Mastering the code enables a student to write any word. Even if the student does not spell a word perfectly, someone can usually read it. Successful communication makes clear to the student how words get on paper and what reading and writing are all about (Herron, 2008).

Decoding and encoding are actually intertwined though and a certain amount of each is necessary. Admittedly, the two terms are often used interchangeably without proper understanding of the role each plays. Many studies have been undertaken (Clay, 1979, Lesgold & Resnick, 1982, Stanovich, 1986, & Juel, 1988) which show a direct relationship between those young scholars who learn to efficiently learn to decode and future reading progress and language attainment. Wide reading provides opportunities to grow in vocabulary, concepts, and knowledge of how text is written. Children who do not learn to decode do not have this avenue for growth

(Beck & Juel, 1992).

This phenomenon, in which the “rich get richer” (i. e., the children who learn early to decode continue to improve in reading) and the “poor get poorer” (i. e., children who do not learn to decode early become increasingly distanced from the “rich” in reading ability), has been termed the Matthew effect (Stanovich, 1986).

Therefore many reading level disparities may be avoided with the addition of even the most simplest of phonics instruction.

6. Best Approach

An ideal approach to English language learning seems therefore to be not any one style of phonics or separation between the ABC's and phonics, but a mixed or blended approach with the opportunity to implement numerous methods depending on the needs and ages of the students.

Phonics is simply one part of the total program. Although it is a very important part of beginning reading programs, it cannot, by itself, guarantee reading success for all students. The benefits of phonics instruction will depend on the comprehensiveness and effectiveness of the entire literacy curriculum. Nor is phonics the only way to teach reading. Millions of students have learned to read with little or no exposure to any phonics (Starrett, 2006).

An even steady and constant approach is important while learning any subject.

In the case of younger children it is important to progress slowly with reading in a foreign language (Pinter, 2011).

There are general instructional principles that apply to everything we teach. All instruction, including phonics instruction, must help learners develop cognitive clarity and become engaged with what they are learning. All instruction, including phonics instruction, must also be as multifaceted and multilevel as possible. Guided reading, self-selected reading, and writing instruction are the methods and components of a complete reading program that best follow these general principles of teaching (Cunningham & Cunningham, 2002).

7. Japanese Elementary Schools

With the introduction of an English language text as part of the education curriculum in Japanese elementary schools in 2008, the Japanese government carried on with the traditional method of introducing the alphabet to new learners. This initial text known as the ‘Eigo Note’ took many years to develop. Unfortunately, not only because it relied on the ABC approach but also due to other factors it was discontinued after only one year in use. The following year ‘Hi Friends’ was introduced for 5th and 6th graders which is also being phased out. Currently primary schools are in a transitional phase while the English educational program is being expanded. The official start is from April 2020 but recently many schools have begun to gradually introduce the contemporary plan established by MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology). At the 3rd and 4th grade level the emphasis will be on English activities in a non-graded, relaxed format. Alternatively, the 5th and 6th grade students will have formally graded

classes. Unfortunately, these texts do not introduce any form of phonics which could greatly benefit their early learning years.

8. Other Countries

In many countries the decision to teach phonics or the alphabet to early learners has become part of a very political and passionate debate. In Great Britain for example, it is a continuous source of contention amongst educators, academic scholars and legislators.

The so called reading wars have raged in the U.K. for more than half a century, and the phonics debate is highly political. There is also debate in Australia over the best way to teach reading to children, and while phonics is part of the teaching methods employed, critics say it is mechanical and does not help with comprehension (Robinson & Armitage, 2017).

Other countries such as Malaysia for example, have strong backing from their own government bodies. The Malaysian Ministry of Education (2011) English Standardized Curriculum for Primary Schools (KSSR) strongly recommends the use of phonics when teaching students at a younger age. The phonics instruction places emphasis on the synthetic approach (Curriculum Development Division, 2014).

In demographic regions such as France, Germany, Spain, and Portugal to name a few, they have also considered phonics for study in their own native languages. Many resources are available via download from the Net to infuse into various language courses and not only English. A vast majority of instructors are convinced of the importance for students to not only see the language but to also be

able to understand it through aural comprehension. This aural proficiency may be fine tuned by way of early phonics instruction at a young age.

Closer to Japan, but with a much larger student population and ethnic diversity, China has also been struggling with teaching it's young populace the essentials of understanding English.

As more Chinese pupils start to learn English with the implementation of new national curriculum, it is urgent for researchers to explore more effective English language teaching methods. Against this background, phonics, which has a long history of being used to teach English beginners in North America, emerged in China as a new method to learn phonetics (Kang & Liang, 2018)

Through learning phonograms directly, students can develop the skills of “reading the word when seeing it, and writing the word when hearing it” (Gao, 2005). Educators the world over seem to agree with this assessment. In New Zealand, there has been some agreement with the implementation of phonics. Phonics instruction, carefully and systematically integrated into literacy teaching that is focused on the development of effective word-level decoding skills, has the potential to improve the literacy learning outcomes of New Zealand children (Chapman, Greaney, Arrow, & Tunmer, 2018).

9. Teacher Training

Regardless of method of instruction, appropriate training and continued teacher development is a necessary key in any educational program. Unfortunately, this has not been the case for English language education in Japan. Teaching systematic

phonics effectively to beginning readers requires specialized knowledge and training which many primary grade teachers lack (Ehri & Flugman, 2017).

The current and ongoing team teaching approach of untrained English speaking foreigner linked with a Japanese homeroom teacher with questionable English speaking abilities has shown it's futility time and time again. Japanese teacher's who have been properly educated in appropriate English language techniques that include phonics instruction among others ; could drastically raise Japanese students English language abilities without the need for foreigners. As the area of study broadens and expands to include the lower grades of the 3rd and 4th grades it is most likely that teacher training will be in a somewhat traditional mode of catch-up while administrators and educators attempt to figure out what to do. This does not necessarily need to be so, a fast track to teacher training and expeditious opportunity for tasks and exercises can now be incorporated with access to the Internet. Simply with a device such as a Smartphone there are ways to project images and videos on to a larger screen such as a white board which a majority of schools possess. Phonics learning need not only be through textbooks and tapes but also videos encompassing instantaneous student response.

10. Conclusion

The importance of learning an additional language has constantly been proven to boost individual cognitive skills that benefit the learner by allowing them to converse on a more global scale. Research shows that foreign language study improves cognitive abilities, positively influences achievement in other disciplines, and results in higher achievement test scores, especially when study of a second language begins in the elementary school years (Cumming-Potvin, Renshaw, & van Kraayenoord, 2003 ; Garcia, 2001 ; Hakuta, 1987 ; Landry, 1974 ; Marcos, 2001 ;

Turnbull, Lapkin, & Hart, 2001 ; Weatherford, 1986). For the past 100 years or so English has been the lingua franca of global business. English has become the de facto global language and it is in English that a majority of political, cultural, social and business transactions are carried out in the whole world day in, day out (e. g. Crystal, 1997 ; Graddol, 1997 ; Wallraff, 2000).

While this paper has been admittedly partial toward the positive merits of phonics instruction at an early age ; regardless of the author's personal view, it is quite apparent that this is something that is sorely lacking in Japanese English elementary education. Since the original introduction of an English language text for the 5th and 6th grades there has been an obvious paucity of the fundamentals that ensure a strong English language learner. Reciting the ABC's or singing a song and recognizing the individual letters is only a prelude to actually learning the English language. As the argument continues in many countries from the highest government level down to local school boards and PTA (Parent Teaching Associations) committees, the blending of both approaches seems to be a more suitable concept. Research has shown that young learners respond quite positively to phonics instruction.

When phonics is introduced in a more child-centered way, it can be a wonderful tool for encouraging creativity and active learning, and can give Asian EFL learners the confidence to approach the reading and writing of English with positivity and enthusiasm. One great advantage of phonics is that it gives children an effective strategy for reading words they have not seen before. This is particularly relevant when we are teaching children who have little exposure to English words and are constantly coming across words that they have never seen before (Paul, 2005).

A format of study that generates lists of new words to recognize and remember should be nothing new to Japanese students. This of course is how almost all junior and senior English textbooks are laid out. There are long reading passages with unfamiliar words intermingled in with prior vocabulary. It is up to the student to figure out the meaning and sound (if reading out loud) by the contextual clues given. This basic understanding in phonics early on can significantly aid in further language development at junior and senior high as well as all through life if they so desire to continue studying English.

Additionally, for non-native learners, again speaking mostly about Japanese students, the acquired knowledge of already knowing how to read, and write in Japanese can offer tremendous psychological and moral support. Although the actual first language influences the process of learning to read in English, the point of similarity is that the children have some understanding about what reading is (Pinter, 2011). Japanese students have accomplished learning their own native language and with proper instruction (phonics) at an early age the same could be realized with English. From 2020, young learners will have instruction for English classes from the 3rd to 6th grade in primary school, 3 years of junior high student and an additional 3 years at the senior high level. This new curriculum will encompass ten years of English language instruction. Hopefully, after ten years of schooling the average Japanese senior high school graduate will be proficient enough in English to legitimize the years and years of effort and to strongly justify the educational financial costs.

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