The Application of Phonics Teaching in Junior High School English Classes in Japan

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1. Introduction

This author’s previous research entitled, A Feasibility Study for the Application of Phonics Teaching in Junior High School English Classes in Japan (see Takeda, 2002a, April issue of The Language Teacher), concludes that phonics instruction is justified and necessary at the junior high school level in Japan. The result of a vocabulary analysis in this study shows that 75.0% of all textbook vocabulary items and 71.8% of the Ministry of Education’s “compulsory” words¹ can be read entirely by applying phonics rules, and in addition, the percentage of spelling-sound regularity is 87.9%. Since the minimum essential phonics rules that should be taught to students have also been determined in this study, the next step can be developing teaching materials and plans to introduce phonics instruction into regular English classes in Japanese junior high schools. Therefore, when and how phonics instruction should be carried out in junior high school English classes in Japan will be discussed in this paper.

All Japanese primary and middle schools must observe the Ministry of Education’s teaching guidelines, and junior high school English education is no exception. Thus, English
textbooks used in Japan follow these teaching guidelines, and teachers are expected to finish the textbooks systematically within three years. Each grade’s yearly teaching schedule for English is based upon the contents of these textbooks. The ultimate duty of junior high school English teachers is to supply students with knowledge and skills for passing the entrance examinations to high school which are held at the end of their three-year study in junior high school. Therefore, the entire contents of these textbooks must have been taught by that time. However, in spite of this pressure and the fact that the textbooks have a good deal of information to teach, there are only three 50-minute English classes a week, many of which are cut due to other school events. Thus, the teaching schedule is always tight and there is not much freedom to teach extra material in classes. Students are also busy studying many other subjects, so that the phonics instruction outlined here should neither be a burden to them, nor interfere with the regular teaching program for the year. Therefore, it is necessary to provide effective phonics teaching which will fit into this busy and restricted school environment. Based upon this author’s experience of phonics teaching, this study will outline the plans and preparations undertaken in achieving this goal from the following points of view: (1) when phonics instruction should be started in the three years of junior high school, (2) how phonics instruction should be implemented, and (3) the scheduling of phonics instruction within one 50-minute class.

2. When Phonics Instruction Should Begin
Those Japanese students who fail in learning English tend to do so very early in their schooling, and there are many cases in which these students graduate from junior high school without recovering from this failure. They cannot read or write because they cannot connect the letters of the alphabet with their sounds. This is the first big hurdle to be overcome, and it is actually the source of most of the failure which students experience during their first three years of English learning (Nakajima, 1995, p. 69; Teshima, 1995, pp. 12-13). This deficiency leads to katakana^{2) pronunciation and rote memorization of large vocabulary lists which discourage students’ interest in learning English; therefore, this could be the most critical problem to be solved in providing students with an effective foundation for their future in English learning. Matsuka concurs, stating that since English and Japanese are
completely different in terms of pronunciation, letter systems, and the relationships between them, English instruction can be very stressful at the early stages for Japanese children. By teaching phonics, however, students can begin their English instruction free of anxiety (1981, pp. 9-10; 1993, p. 28). Applying phonics instruction at an early stage in English classes can prevent students from falling behind because it clarifies the relationships between letters and sounds. It is never too late to start phonics teaching, but the introductory period of English instruction is the most appropriate time to begin. Therefore, the teaching of phonics should be introduced in entry-level classes; i.e., in April of students' first year in junior high school.

3. How Phonics Instruction Should Be Implemented

A basic premise here is that it is imperative to teach students all of the most important phonics rules determined by vocabulary analysis, in order for them to rapidly acquire “word attack skills.” This author believes that essential phonics rules have to be learned intensively, so phonics instruction should be given separately from their regular lessons. In order to help students learn these rules, a phonics textbook with a brief explanation of each rule and many example words to which the rule is applied should be provided to students. This can help give them practice in pronouncing vocabulary items through their developing word attack skills. These example words should not be limited to the vocabulary used in the English textbooks, but should include any appropriate words suitable for reading practice. The more reading practice students have, the better their word attack skills become. Taking this into consideration, a textbook for this purpose was developed by this author to provide fundamental instruction in phonics, and a sample is included in the Appendix.

3.1 How to Use the Phonics Textbook

This author used the phonics textbook as follows: Firstly, the “sound alphabet” was taught carefully and thoroughly because this is the basis of all phonics instruction. It took about one month for students to master this alphabet. Then, the students pronounced short words which could be read entirely by applying only the sound alphabet. This exercise demonstrates the principle that any English words can basically be read by connecting the sounds of their constituent letters. Secondly, letter combinations involving “magic E” and
"polite vowels" were taught through the following steps:

1. The phonics rule was arrived at inductively by students; i.e., the teacher did not provide explicit instruction on the rule at the beginning, but let students discover it for themselves. For example, the rule ch = /ʃ/ was presented by showing students the word lunch, which was familiar to most of them. The teacher asked them, "How do you pronounce this word?" Students replied, "/ʃ/". The teacher said, "Very good! Then, how about the ch part only?" Students responded, "/ʃ/".

2. The teacher provided careful instruction on how to make the sound of the letter combination by demonstrating the mouth shape and movement. Students then practiced by sounding it out many times.

3. Following the directions written in the textbook (i.e., "Try reading the words below according to the following instructions in ①—③: ① Underline the letter combination of each word. ② Read the underlined parts. ③ Read the whole word."), students attempted to read many example words which had the same letter combinations, using their developing word attack skills.

4. Then the teacher checked the students’ pronunciation and corrected them.

4. The Schedule of Phonics Instruction within One Class

The timing and duration of phonics instruction within a 50-minute class must also be considered. Phonics rules can be learned a few at a time on an ongoing basis; i.e., one period of phonics instruction should deal with only one phonics rule, as well as reviewing and recycling rules that have already been learned. The best occasion this author found for this kind of instruction was the first 10 minutes or so in every class. After a small amount of phonics instruction, the regular teaching of the class began. As a result, this 10 minutes of phonics intervention did not create any major problems for teachers in keeping to their schedules, but rather played a supportive role as an enjoyable warm-up for the class. In this introductory period, students could focus their attention on learning a new phonics rule with plenty of reading practice to develop their word attack skills and could maintain their interest and enthusiasm without becoming overly tired. In addition, they soon became accustomed to this daily routine so that it could continue as an enjoyable, yet useful, introduction to
classes for the duration of the course. This seems to be an effective way for students to acquire word attack skills on a gradual basis. The teaching based on the phonics textbook took half a year, and after finishing this fundamental instruction, students increasingly had the desire to apply these rules in their reading of new words and new passages in their English textbooks.

5. The Phonics Instruction

Phonics instruction was carried out according to these guidelines by this author and the results show that by building on the sound alphabet, the students gradually learned all of the essential phonics rules in a step-by-step process in their first six months of English instruction. After finishing the phonics textbook, they were assigned to read new words and new passages in their English textbooks by themselves, with their teacher’s occasional assistance. Therefore, the period of “phonics application” which followed their fundamental phonics instruction was considered to be a period of “reinforcement” as their word attack skills developed. In general, students showed a strong interest in this instruction, and enjoyed reading unknown words by themselves in the sense of “playing a game.” They were actually able to read most of their new words correctly. Therefore, the first 10 minutes in every English class were not at all an obstacle to the advancement of the curriculum, but an enjoyable warm-up period which students seemed to find stimulating. (For an empirical study of the results of this phonics instruction, see Takeda, 2002b, and Takeda, 2005).

6. Summary of Key Elements for Effective Phonics Teaching

(1) Implementation Period
Phonics instruction should start at the beginning of English teaching at school; i.e., in the first English class of junior high school. In terms of fundamental phonics instruction, the first six months or so should be spent teaching essential phonics rules intensively. After this period, throughout the rest of their junior high school education, these rules should be applied by students in the independent reading of their English textbooks.

(2) Teaching Method
Through the use of the phonics textbook, the most important phonics rules can be taught and
word attack skills can be mastered through plenty of reading practice focusing on example words illustrating each rule.

(3) Efficient Use of Class Time
During the period of fundamental instruction, phonics teaching through the phonics textbook should be provided in the first 10 minutes of every class, separate from regular lessons. This can play a supportive role as an enjoyable warm-up for the class.

7. Conclusion

In English L2 education in Japan, which is still dominated by the yakudoku\(^7\) (translation reading) method, instruction on proper pronunciation and the direct reading of English words and passages has long been neglected. As a result, students are forced to memorize large vocabulary lists by rote which discourages them from learning English, and they have to rely on katakana pronunciation which creates counter-productive speaking habits which are extremely difficult to break. Phonics instruction is effective in solving these problems because through this kind of teaching, students become able to read and pronounce English properly by connecting the letters of the alphabet with their sounds. Phonics instruction should be applied as soon as possible to English classes in Japan in order to stop the mass production of so-called "dropout" students of English, as those who receive phonics instruction will develop a strong foundation to build on as they face the many challenges of their on-going English studies. By understanding phonics rules and applying them to their assigned textbook passages, the students' enthusiasm and confidence will increase, both of which will help to keep them motivated in English for years to come.

At present, phonics is becoming increasingly popular in English L2 teaching in Japan. Some teaching materials based upon phonics have been developed for the early English education of Japanese children and a small number of juku\(^8\) teachers have started to use them. But overall, teaching methods for the L2 use of phonics are still unclear and most public school teachers have little knowledge of the approach, so it is not widely in practice yet. It is hoped that this study will contribute to the establishment of effective teaching methods of phonics in English classes in Japan, and encourage teachers to apply phonics in their classrooms, leading to an increase in the number of successful English-speaking students.

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Notes

1. The Ministry of Education stipulated 507 minimum essential words needed for basic conversation as compulsory words for Japanese junior high school students (Mombusho, 1988, pp. 116-122).

2. Katakana is a Japanese syllabary used to transcribe words of foreign origin; however, it cannot represent the exact English sound and is actually often far from the original. Through katakana reading, incorrect pronunciation is acquired. Once this katakana pronunciation is acquired, it becomes a lifelong bad habit. As one of big features of katakana pronunciation, extra or unnecessary vowels are inserted to the original pronunciation. For example, Japanese people tend to pronounce the word “drink” as /dorinku/, thus they also tend to spell dorinku when writing it. Katakana English, flourishing and seen everywhere in Japan, is a serious problem in English L2 teaching.

3. Phonics provides students with the techniques and motivation for “attacking” and deciphering words they are not familiar with, which is called the skill of “word attack.”

4. For a copy of this textbook, please contact the author at the following e-mail address: fsdmg582@ybb.ne.jp

5. The sound alphabet, which is also called the “phonics alphabet,” can be defined as the most representative sound of each letter of the alphabet, or the sound which is used most commonly among the sounds each letter has. They are /æ/ /b/ /k/ /d/ /e/ /f/ /g/ /h/ /i/ /dz/ /k/ /l/ /m/ /n/ /q/ /p/ /k/ /s/ /t/ /v/ /w/ /ks/ /j/ /z/.

6. As for the definitions of magic E and polite vowels, see the Appendix.

7. This is a reading method in which English sentences are first translated into Japanese word-by-word, and then the resulting translation is reordered to suit Japanese word order. In the yakudoku-style class, which is typical of English study in Japan, a teacher reads the text aloud for his or her students and has them repeat it. Then the students give its word-for-word translation, usually assigned as the previous night's homework and written in their notebook, after which the teacher corrects their translation by offering grammatical explanations. The goal of the class is to have students understand the exact Japanese translation.

8. A juku is not a regular school, but a place which gives private lessons depending upon
children’s interests. In this case, these are juku for teaching English to small children like pre-schoolers or elementary school students, mainly through playing games or singing songs.

References


Appendix: Sample Pages from the Phonics Textbook

Phonics
自分で英語が読める！
You Can Read English by Yourself

1
1

音のアルファベット
The Sound Alphabet

まず、アルファベット26文字の『母音』（普通のアルファベット）と『音』（音のアルファベット）を覚えておきましょう。
First of all, let's memorize the "vowels" of the 26 letters of English (the regular alphabet) and their "sounds" (the vowel alphabet).

a b c d e f g h i j k l m n o p q r s t u v w x y z

★ 母音の文字（5つ）は、どれでしょう。

Which are the five vowel letters?

( ) ( ) ( ) ( ) ( )

なお、( )と( )もよく母音の役目をします。
Besides, ( ) and ( ) often give a note as vowel, too.

ant bat bus cat cut
(アン) (バット) (バス) (キャット) (カット)
dad dog don end fan
(だだ) (ドッグ) (ドン) (エン) (ファーン)
fat fox gas god gun
(ファット) (フォックス) (ガス) (ゴッド) (ガン)
ham hip hit ink jet
(ハム) (ヒップ) (ヒット) (インク) (ジェット)
kid lip man nut pal
(キッド) (リップ) (マン) (ナット) (パル)
pet pig rat sun tax
(ペット) (ピグ) (ラット) (サン) (タックス)
tip top yen wax zen
(ティップ) (トップ) (イエナ) (ワックス) (ゼン)
film golf hand milk
(フィルム) (ゴルフ) (ハンド) (ミルク)
pond pulp slip vest
(ポンド) (パルプ) (スリップ) (ベスト)
stamp trunk zigzag
(スタンプ) (トランク) (ジグザグ)

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ルール 1 「マジック E」

2 Rules and 21 Letter Combinations

音のアルファベット通りに読めないときには、次の2つのルールと21個の組合せ文字を使ってみよう！

When a word cannot be read correctly by just applying the sound alphabet, let's apply the following 2 rules and 21 letter combinations!

ルール1 「マジック E」
（1）マジックEから、組合せ文字のairまで順に一つ一つ学んでいきましょう！
Let's learn them one by one, from "madness" to the letter combination "air"!

ルール2「礼儀正しい母音」

Rule 2 Poite Vowels

それぞれの文字の組合せとその音を覚えていきましょう！
Let's memorize each combination of letters and its sound, one by one!
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>who</th>
<th>whom</th>
<th>whose</th>
<th>what</th>
<th>when</th>
<th>where</th>
<th>which</th>
<th>why</th>
<th>whack</th>
<th>whale</th>
<th>wheel</th>
<th>wheat</th>
<th>whim</th>
<th>while</th>
<th>whine</th>
<th>whole</th>
<th>whisky</th>
<th>whether</th>
<th>whistle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

- Phonics alphabet dolphin elephant graph Joseph pamphlet telephone phrase photo photographer phenotype menon philosophy Philip Philadelphia
- ball call fall hall mall tall wall baseball basketball softball small salt salt malt also alter almost already Almighty altogether
- book cook hook hook look moor nook nook rook took foot good hood wood woof wool oops brook crook shook stood
- doo loo moo woo zoo cool fool food hoop loop moon noon pool room root loot soon tool toot loom broom spoon tooth cocoon platoon shampoo
- house louse mouse mouth south blouse ooch out about doubt trout count foul pouch loud cloud bound found hound pound sound round ground noun announcer denoun ce pronoun ce mountain thousand
- cow bow vow how now wow down gown town owl brown crown clown drown tower power power er flower bewow wo kow tow chow chow
- new mew few Jew Kew New York New Zealand news knew blew flew crew screw drew Andrew grew pew phew threw chew chewing gum

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Australia</th>
<th>Paula</th>
<th>Laura</th>
<th>Austin</th>
<th>audio</th>
<th>August</th>
<th>auto</th>
<th>automatic</th>
<th>autumn</th>
<th>because</th>
<th>daub</th>
<th>daughter</th>
<th>pause</th>
<th>sauce</th>
<th>sausage</th>
<th>astron</th>
<th>aut</th>
<th>Santa</th>
<th>Claus</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>

※ 以下は、すべて【r のついた母音】です！

The following are all `vowels with the letter r'.

- card cart part apart depart chart smart start star guitar Tarzan bar jar far far arm army art ark bark dark dark park mark mark et March hard yard garden
- orca organ orthodox cord corn horn hoo moon morning for form fork cork pork port sport passport sort short stork storm horse north forth force forty porch torch worl worker word worn worry worse worst worth motor mirror sensor actor doctor sailor emperor visitor junior senior elevator escalator
- herd per perm perch person Harper nerve serve server germ Germany Berlin berg Bert Emie fem jerk term river tiger butter better letter summer soccer teacher sister brother father mother yesterday
- girl bird first third thirteen thirty dirt dirty sir sir firm stir skirt shirt birch birthday chip circus circle

Thursday fur further burst bum tum church curve curtain curl hur hurl hurt hurt le nurse purse purp le turtle Saturn surfing murk murder murmur

- chair | air | airport | fair | hair | pair | laird | Blair | Clair | flaire | stair | upstairs | affair | repair | airy | dairy | fairy | prairie

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