

## A Study of Phonics Teaching in the Case of Japan's Elementary School

日本の小学校におけるフォニックス指導についての一考察

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**Abstract:** In this research, what is reviewed is different approaches of phonics teaching, followed by controversial issues of comparison between phonics and whole language. At the same time the research results among Japanese high school students are shown, in which phonics teaching in Japan is considered. And then, it is suggested that the phonics instruction does not need to emphasize rules in class, but should be introduced step by step while conducting input of English words through reading books, singing songs or watching DVDs.

**keywords:** phonics, whole language, Japan's elementary school

### 1. Introduction

As one of the methods of how to teach children to read and write, phonics is practiced throughout English speaking countries including England, America, Australia, New Zealand and Canada based on the idea that reading and writing is a determinant factor of children's progress in school days and thereafter.

In this paper, different approaches of phonics teaching will be reviewed, followed by controversial issues of comparison between phonics and whole language. At the end the research results among Japanese high school students are shown, in which phonics teaching in Japan will be considered.

### 2. Phonics Teaching

#### 2.1 Different Approaches

There are mainly two different approaches to teaching phonics: synthetic and analytic.

Synthetic phonics programs teach children the phonemes (sounds) associated with particular graphemes (letters), in that children begin hearing the phonemes in a spoken word and blending phonemes orally, while in reading, individual phonemes are recognized from the grapheme, pronounced and blended together

(synthesized) to create the word (Lewis & Ellis, 2006).

On the other hand, analytic phonics programs teach children to identify phonemes in whole words and are encouraged to segment the words into phonemes, in addition to which they also analyze similar characteristics, which leads to the abilities to develop their inferential self-teaching strategies (Lewis & Ellis, 2006)

#### 2.2 Mixed Approach and Typical Phonic Teaching

There are arguments from the viewpoints of the above-mentioned approaches, however, both of which have not been proven with clear evidence (Lewis & Ellis, 2006).

Under real class situations, therefore, a mixed approach is commonly administrated. Evans (2006), for example, introduces her phonics lessons as a typical class with some songs, nursery rhyme or a language game used at the beginning, which for some children reinforces their phonemic awareness, and for others becomes an essential session in continuing to give them vital early language experiences. This is followed by a literacy session, where new sounds are presented orally while being shown on whiteboards, in addition to which

other words containing those new sounds are taught. After those phonic sessions, shared reading or writing, for example, was followed, where children had further opportunities to apply their phonic knowledge.

### **3. Comparison between Phonics and Whole Language**

#### **3.1 Advocators of Phonics**

Phonics is considered a “bottom up” approach where students decode the meaning of a text, so that once students get the basics down, they can go to the library and read a wide variety of children's literature (Reyher, 2008).

Stuart (2006) quotes the statements of David Share (1995) that children who have a principal alphabetical knowledge and letter-sound rules as early phonics in their first introduction to reading have a powerful self-teaching device available, in that if the words in the texts that they sound out are among their spoken vocabulary it will allow them to understand them. Even if the words are not included in their spoken vocabulary, the contexts in which they appear will give them some idea of what they mean, which leads to the power to develop both written and spoken vocabulary.

Furthermore, he continues, awareness of phonemes in spoken words, and letter-sound knowledge are crucial to the swift acquisition of sight vocabulary, which involves forming links between the visual form of the word and its meaning and pronunciation. (Stuart, 2006)

Moreover, he argues that sight vocabulary and phonics work together to reinforce and strengthen each other in that phonic knowledge allows rudimentary decoding of unfamiliar words and underpins early sight vocabulary; expansion of the phonic rule system allows more complex unfamiliar words to be decoded and stored as sight vocabulary; as sight vocabulary expands, so does the possibility for further inferences to be made; this further expands the phonic rule system and so on (Stuart, 2006).

A problem associated with phonics is that it is estimated about half the words in the English language cannot be pronounced correctly using commonly taught phonics rules (Reyhner, 2008).

#### **3.2 Advocators of Whole Language**

Whole language is an instructional innovation, the rudiments of which were created in 1971 by Frank Smith and Kenneth Goodman (Groff, 1997).

In contrast with phonics (See Figure 1), whole language is considered a “top down” approach where the reader constructs a personal meaning for a text based on using their prior knowledge to interpret the meaning of what they are reading (Reyhner, 2008). With whole language, teachers are expected to provide a literacy rich environment for their students and to combine speaking, listening, reading and writing (Reyhner, 2008).

According to Akamatsu (1999), while citing Goodman's 1986 statements, although there is no clear definition for whole language, this approach is stemmed from Chomsky's notion that human beings have the innate ability of language acquisition, so that without explicit skills instruction young children become aware of print and its functions, and show developmental progress towards reading and writing. He continues, therefore, that advocators of whole language emphasize the importance of a natural setting for reading instruction, in which children feel comfortable and do not hesitate to take risks in learning.

Problems associated with whole language include a lack of structure that has been traditionally supplied by the scope and sequence, lessons and activities, and extensive graded literature found in basal readers. Additionally, whole language puts a heavy burden on teachers to develop their own curriculum (Reyhner, 2008).

Whole language	Phonics
Constructivist Learning Theory Associated with Vygotsky	Behaviorist Learning Theory Associated with B.F. Skinner
Top-Down Approach	Bottom-Up Approach
Student-Centered	Teacher-Centered
Children learn to read naturally through authentic reading.	Children learn through workbooks, basal readers and so on.
Meaning Emphasis	Sound & Skills Emphasis

Figure1. Comparison between phonics and whole language in reference to Reyhner, 2008

### 3.3. Integrating Phonics and Whole Language

For more than two decades, most intensely from the early 1980s through the 1990s, a war was waged in this country over how best to teach students to read; that is a war between phonics and whole language (Moats, 2007). Especially in the battle going on in newspaper editorial pages, in state legislatures, and congress, proponents of phonics pointed to a purported decline in reading test scores in the 1990s when they saw a result that whole language instruction and scientific studies indicated phonics instruction produced better reading scores than other methods. On the other hand, whole language advocates pointed to other reasons to explain those instances of declining reading score such as students living in poverty and to ethnographic studies of students in classrooms to support their position (Reyhner, 2008).

Similarly, Reyhner (2008) argues that there is a difference in children's readiness rooted in the environmental conditions of their families. Children from highly educated families tend to enter school with larger vocabularies and reading readiness skills because they learn to read well regardless of the teaching approach used, while those from less educated families are not exposed much to reading in their homes and tend to have smaller vocabularies. Standard phonics approaches can be unsuccessful for these students and whole language

approaches are useful in that teachers can find reading materials that reflects their students' language and culture. Therefore, under real classroom situations, selective approach of either phonics or whole language is commonly accepted.

Furthermore, Akamatsu (1999) points out that children with weak word-recognition abilities, for example, will benefit from phonics instruction, which emphasizes the automaticity of word recognition as a necessary skill for actual reading. Children who have acquired basic reading skills, on the other hand, will appreciate the whole language approach in which the language arts are taught in an inter-related manner.

Also, Krashen (1999) states through a comparison study between whole language and phonics, that there are no clear differences in comprehension of a text based on the two separate instructions.

## 4. Questionnaire

### 4.1 ProcEDURE

The questionnaire was conducted among the first graders at three junior high schools located in a certain city of the Tokai area in March of 2010. The number of participants is 161, most of whom graduated from one of the eight public elementary schools in the same city. Half of those eight elementary schools were offering phonics instruction (P class, afterwards), while the rests were not (NP class, afterwards).

The examinees were supposed to answer the questionnaire including the two items as follows:

- 1 "How did you understand English lesson in your elementary school days?"
- 2 "Did you enjoy your English lesson at that time?"

The answer was based on the Likert Scale with four degrees from "strongly agree" to "never agree."

### 4.2 Observation of Phonics Classes

I observed the phonics classes of fourth and fifth graders, three to four times among four elementary schools. In this city there were two assistant language teachers (ALT, afterwards), both of whom were experienced male native speakers of English from Canada. The difference was that one introduced phonics and the other didn't.

In the P class the ALT began lessons with the DVDs explaining phonics rules including some songs. After that, complementary explanations were given, followed by games in which groups of four to five children tried to arrange alphabet cards to show the spelling of the words given by the teacher orally with the meanings. He was a diligent teacher who patiently gave explanations about the phonics rules repeatedly in every class.

On the other hand, in the NP class the ALT taught English words while entertaining the children by simple games with picture cards. Obviously the NP class was much easier than the P class, so that everyone could enjoy the activities. In the P class, however, only children who could understand the rules in groups arranged the cards to spell the words, while those who couldn't follow were just looking at the procedures. In a nutshell, in the P class children were divided in two: those who understood the phonics rules and the others who didn't.

### 4.3 Results and Consideration

Following are the results of the questionnaire.

For the statistical analysis, *SPSS 15.0J* for Windows was used.

Among 161 students there were 88 students from the P class, while 73 from the NP class. The results showed that the average score of the first question of "How did you understand English lessons in your elementary school days?" is significantly the lowest in the P class from the statistical view (See Figure2). Also in terms of the second question of "Did you enjoy English lessons at that time?", the average score is lower in the P class than in the NP class although the difference is not significant from the statistical view (See Figure2). Those results were consistent with what was learned through observation.

	items	<i>M (SD)</i>		<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
		NP (N=88)	P (N=73)		
1	enjoy	2.65 (0.84)	2.50 (0.91)	1.31	0.19
2	under-stand	2.57 (0.89)*	2.23 (0.95)*	2.30	0.02*

Figure 2 The results of questionnaire \* $p < .05$

Advocators for phonics insist that any failures in phonics instruction have come either because students did not have the prerequisite knowledge to learn phonics rules or because the phonics instruction was not explicit and systematic (Freeman & Freeman, 2004).

Under EFL situations, however explicit and systematic the phonics instruction is, the problem is that the prerequisite knowledge among children is totally scarce. Furthermore, Hall (2006) states learning is not only a cognitive process, it is also a social and cultural one. In the case of Japan, English is something cultural since American cultures are prevalent in Japan, but is not necessarily a social one to the extent that Japanese people could live a life without English knowledge.

In phonics teaching under those situations, first of all a certain amount of input of English words for the children has to be conducted in class. This practice can be administrated in a whole language approach through reading books, singing songs or watching DVDs. Without such input, it would be difficult to induce interests among children in listening to the explanation of phonics rules.

Given the difficulties of class management of the phonics teaching mentioned above, it might be a better idea for early learning English to emphasize only simple games so as to impress on them that English language learning is enjoyable and understandable as the present study shows. However, in consideration of the later English language learning of children for entrance examinations into higher education or realizing global communication skills, early English language learning should be more meaningful at the stage of fifth and sixth grades. If so, in order to make the present phonics practice more enjoyable as well as understandable, mixed approaches including phonics and whole language, which is mentioned above, should be administrated without focusing only on phonics rules.

English language learning at elementary schools for fifth and sixth graders at public schools in Japan has just started in 2011. It takes some time to gain effective approaches for Japanese children including phonics teaching. I would like to continue researching English classes at elementary schools in order to reveal implications for early English language learning.

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