

Introducing Phonological Instruction into Early English Education: Effects on Students' Phonological Awareness and Learning Motivation

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This study proposes to integrate a set of activities to enhance phonological awareness into the current English language education in Japan at the upper elementary level.¹ It investigates whether such activities can indeed help improve students' phonological awareness and students' motivation to learn and interest in the language. Using a classroom experiment over a 3-month period, this study explores different instruction methods with varying combinations of activities and lengths of instruction.

The existing teaching materials avoid or delay the use of letters in English language education at the upper elementary level. The Course of Study or curriculum guidelines for elementary education in Japan was revised by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Science, and Sports in 2008, and Foreign Language Activities (FLA) was introduced to the upper elementary levels (Grades 5 and 6) in 2011. Although it is called "Foreign Language," the target language is English. According to the new guidelines, building a foundation for oral rather than written communication skills in English is the main objective of FLA, and the guidelines recommend teaching methods and materials that focus on those skills. Thus, the *English Notebook*² and other teaching materials used in the classroom avoid or delay

introducing letters, at least until students acquire a certain level of aural-oral skills.

Although the main objective of FLA is to improve students' aural-oral skills, not having letters as part of teaching materials can make it difficult to enhance students' phonological awareness, which is reported to play a crucial role in aural-oral skills in studies of students who are learning English as a first language (L1). There are sounds that are unique to the English language and that Japanese elementary school students have never been exposed to. The current teaching method focuses on activities that familiarize the students with these sounds through games and songs, which is an important step toward learning a new language; however, the avoidance of letters in the existing materials makes it difficult for instructors to introduce phonological awareness. This study therefore proposes to integrate a set of activities to raise phonological awareness into the current classroom activities.

Evidence from the L1 studies shows that phonological awareness plays an important role not only in the earlier stage but also in the later stage of English language education, though such evidence is lacking in Japan. Evidence from L1 studies shows that raising phonological awareness not only helps students match letters with sounds, but also helps their literacy later on (Chapter 1). Our interest is in how these findings in L1 studies apply to Japanese students, who are learning

¹ Phonological awareness refers "not only to phonemic awareness but also to awareness of larger spoken units such as syllables and rhyming words" (Ehri, Nunes, Willows, Schuster, Zadeh, & Shanahan, 2001).

² *English Notebook* is a textbook used at the upper elementary level.

English as a foreign language (EFL). Unfortunately, data on English phonological awareness of elementary school students in Japan are lacking. Moreover, little research has been done on different teaching methods that help raise Japanese students' phonological awareness and motivation. The main objective of this study is to fill this gap.

This study shows that the choice of activities plays a crucial role in improving students' phonological awareness. A set of classroom experiments was conducted over a 3-month period. Students' phonological awareness and motivation was assessed three times: at the beginning, after 6 weeks, and at the end. In total, four activities were introduced in varying combinations: (a) matching a phoneme with a corresponding letter, (b) a pronunciation exercise, (c) identifying a phoneme in a word, and (d) identifying the same (or different) phoneme in different words they hear. The experiments showed that there was no improvement in the phonological awareness of students who were exposed to only the first two activities (Chapter 2), but when all four activities were introduced, there was an improvement (Chapter 3). These results point to the fact that introducing a specific phoneme with a corresponding letter alone may be too abstract for elementary school students to grasp. Integrating these activities into something they are already familiar with, such as an English word they have already learned in the classroom, is more effective.

The study also shows that the length of the instruction can be shortened without compromising the effect on phonological awareness, but shortening the instruction period adversely affects the students' motivation and interest. One class was exposed to four activities over a 3-month period, while the other class

was exposed to the activities over a 6-week period (Chapter 3). An improvement in the students' phonological awareness was observed in both classes, but the students' interest in letters and pronunciation of those letters were higher for those who were exposed to those activities over the entire 3-month period (Chapter 3). This result was observed in both quantitative and qualitative assessments. These findings imply that easing students into phonological awareness and nurturing students' interest over time are important.

Integrating activities to raise phonological awareness into the current English language education at the upper elementary level is worth considering, given the benefit of students' phonological awareness found in the literature and the positive outcome of the classroom experiments observed in this study. Delaying the introduction of letters and orthography limits an instructor's ability to teach phonological awareness in English at the upper elementary level. The consequences of this limitation should not be underestimated. This study finds that activities to improve phonological awareness can be introduced at the upper elementary level with positive results, but the instruction method and length should be carefully designed, because these design decisions make a difference in the students' absorption level as well as their interest in letters and pronunciation of the letters. These activities are better received by the students if made less abstract and integrated into classroom activities they are already familiar with. Easing students into these activities is also important, and therefore introducing these activities is well-suited for instruction at the upper elementary level, where instruction time is less constrained than later on.

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