

# Teaching of Phonics to Japanese Learners of English: A Theoretical Analysis

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The instruction of literacy is not organized systematically in second language classrooms (Cook, 2008). English teachers in Japan tend to rely largely on the “look-say” method when teaching learners to read English words (Lewis, 2007). The acquisition of vocabulary depends largely on repetition, but regrettably, no systematic teaching of literacy is being carried out. This MA thesis focuses on phonics, the rules of the relationship between spelling and pronunciation in English, and discusses possible applications of phonics in English language teaching in Japan.

This thesis consists of seven chapters. Chapter 1 describes the current situation of teaching literacy in English in Japan and introduces phonics. This chapter also presents three sets of major phonics rules formulated in Japan: Takebayashi (1988), Matsuka Phonics Institution (2003) and Tajiri (2006).

Chapter 2 presents an outline of twenty phonics rules proposed by Takebayashi (1988). The basic rules of phonics are defined between Rule 1 and Rule 12. From Rule 1 to Rule 3, the rules for consonant letters are defined. The rules concerning vowels are dealt between in Rule 4 and Rule 6. Rule 7 describes the rules pertaining to diphthong letters. Sound changes under particular combinations of vowels and consonants are

mentioned in Rule 8 to Rule 9. Between Rule 10 and Rule 12, the rules for combinations of vowel letters and <ɹ> are demonstrated. Rule 12 to Rule 20 are regarded as advanced rules. Rule 13 to Rule 15 deal with additional rules of the basic rules. The pronunciation rules for grammatical morphemes are defined in Rule 16 and Rule 17. Finally, the rules concerning with weak vowels are defined from Rule 18 to Rule 20.

Chapter 3 analyzes the system of phonics rules stated by Takebayashi (1988) and describes the deficiencies of phonics rules. Furthermore, it describes the relationships between phonics rules presented by the Matsuka Phonics Institution (2003) and those by Tajiri (2006), and the basic assumption behind organizing each set of rules. Firstly, the system of phonics rules has been proved to be fairly complicated: multiple rules are contained in one category of rules, some rules are concerned with conditions for rule application and the system of phonics rules is hierarchical. Letters to be given attention which refer to the pronunciations which are out of the twenty rules are also pointed out. Secondly, it is stated that the phonics rules presented by Tajiri (2006) and those by the Matsuka Phonics Institution (2003) have been found out to be almost the same as those of Takebayashi (1988). Thirdly, it has been

confirmed that phonics cannot define the rules concerning with long vowels perfectly. Finally, it has been found out that these rules are organized based on the pronunciation frequency of each letter and combination.

Chapter 4 examines the applicability of phonics rules by Takebayashi (1988) in English language teaching in Japan. Four hundred and sixty-four vocabulary items in the list from *Eigo Note 1 and 2* (Nakajo et al., 2006) were selected and were classified into two categories: the words following phonics rules and the words out of the ambit of phonics rules. The result shows that over 80 percent of words follow the phonics rules. The rest tend to be monosyllabic words and are likely to be included in the core vocabulary for English. This indicates that the phonics rules are fairly reliable and worth teaching to students when needed.

Chapter 5 discusses the teaching method for phonics in L1, focusing on Heilman (1981) and Whole Language. Heilman (1981) claims that reading is a complex process for children because both cracking the code and decoding the meaning are necessary for reading words and texts. The purpose of teaching phonics rules is to assist in the process of cracking the code. On the other hand, Whole Language suggests an important idea that context and meaning are also necessary to read a text. In other words, phonics rules should not be taught independently. Hence, teachers are supposed to avoid too much reliance on phonics and excessive teaching of phonics rules. They should acknowledge that the purpose of teaching phonics is to help children read a text independently.

Chapter 6 discusses possible applications of teaching phonics rules in the L2 environment while describing the difference between L1 learners and L2

English learners. L2 English learners differ from L1 learners in the amount of knowledge about sounds of English words and in learning style. As L2 English learners have a smaller body of knowledge about English sounds, these learners have to learn pronunciation, spelling and meaning of words in English at the same time. Furthermore, L2 learners are supposed to learn English through formal instruction. As is mentioned previously, the system of phonics rules is so complex that excessive teaching of phonics rules could feel like a burden to a novice learner without knowledge of English pronunciation. Hence, the teaching of phonics rules should be conducted not in FonFS, which deliberately discusses the features of form of the language, but in FonF, which treats both meaning and form.

Students tend to just focus on the meanings of the words and to perceive the forms of words. Teachers are supposed to teach phonics rules in FonF and they are supposed to draw students' attention to the forms of words since learners are supposed to consciously notice the features of forms in order to acquire language.

Chapter 7 concludes that phonics should be taught as Consciousness Raising to the relationship between letters and sounds in FonF. In order to draw the students' attention to the features of English words, teachers should teach phonics rules relevant to the unknown words the students encounter.

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