

A Proposal for Teaching Writing in Foreign Language Classes in Elementary School through Communicative Activities which Raise Phonemic Awareness

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1. Introduction

Reading and writing have been introduced into the foreign language subject at Japanese elementary schools. Research on early reading instruction has supported the importance of raising awareness of the sounds of letters (phonemic awareness). In this action research, the first author designed a 2-period lesson which would encourage fifth grade students to mentally process letter sounds in a communicative task. It was hoped that this would enhance students' phonemic awareness. The lesson was effective in helping students understand the fundamental concept that English letters express sounds. Based on this result, some practical suggestions are given.

1.1 Reading and Writing in Elementary School Foreign Language Activities

In this section, we will provide an overview of how the teaching of English letters has been incorporated into the elementary school foreign language curriculum from 2011, when foreign language activities in primary school became compulsory, to now. We will also discuss issues that Japanese junior high school students experience with reading and writing English.

In its commentary on the curricular guidelines to be enacted in 2011, the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports, Culture, and Technology (MEXT) described the instructional objectives of foreign language activities as below:

Through foreign language activities, deepen children's understanding of language and culture, and develop in them a basic ability to communicate actively. (MEXT, 2008, p. 7)

It was explicitly written that foreign language activities should concentrate on speaking and listening and "the alphabet should be used only to supplement communicative activities" (MEXT, 2008, p. 18). An

examination of the textbooks used for foreign language activities at that time, *Hi, friends 1 & 2*, (MEXT, 2012 -a, 2012 -b), shows that the textbooks were mostly composed of pictures with few printed words. Therefore, it can be concluded that there were few activities to enhance students' understanding about English letters.

In its commentary on the foreign language subject and foreign language activities in the new Course of Study to be enacted in 2020, MEXT (2017) wrote that "the basic ability of communication should be developed through reading, writing, speaking, and listening activities" (p.67, authors' translation). It also explicitly mentioned developing writing and reading skills for the first time in stating that a goal for foreign language activities is to "become accustomed to reading and writing and develop the basic skills for being able to listen, read, speak, and write in foreign language activities" (MEXT, 2017, p.69, authors' translation). One can infer that understanding English letters and their sounds is a skill associated with being able to read and write.

In its objectives for writing, the new Course of Study (MEXT, 2017) states that students should be able to write capital and lower-case letters as well as copy English sentences while being aware of the word order. It also states that students should be able to write about familiar topics. *We Can! 1 & 2* (MEXT, 2018a, 2018b) is the first textbook produced to correspond with the new Course of Study. An examination of *We Can!* shows that there is significantly more written language in it than *Hi, friends!* Notably, *We Can! 2* has a *Let's Read & Write!* section in which students copy words that appeared in the unit or complete sentences with these words. An examination of the textbook confirms that while English letters were barely included in the current foreign language activity curriculum, there will be significantly more time devoted to their study in the new curriculum. Because this is a new development, there is little practical research on effective instruction or activities for learning about English letters in elementary school.

In a survey of first year junior high school students (Benese Education Center, 2009), seventy percent of the respondents selected 'It is difficult to write English sentences' as a reason why they were struggling to follow their English class. It was also revealed that students start to feel their English abilities are inadequate from the summer of their first year. Furthermore,

80% of junior high school students responded in a survey that they wanted to study reading and writing more for foreign language activities (MEXT, 2013). One factor of this result could be that students lack confidence in their ability to read and write. The first author wanted to research a way to teach about the English letters in elementary school that would address the aforementioned issues.

2. Literature Review

In this section, we discuss what the research says about the role of letter instruction in elementary school English in Japan. Next, we define phonemic and phonological awareness and describe their role in English literacy development.

2.1 The Role of Letter Instruction in Elementary School English

According to Nakamura (2012), learning vocabulary for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) involves understanding its sound, meaning, and spelling. In the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), which are internationally recognized guidelines used to describe different levels of English ability, orthographic control (spelling), phonological control (pronunciation) and vocabulary (recognizing and using words) is considered part of one's linguistic knowledge (Council of Europe, 2018). While the role of spelling in learning English vocabulary is undisputed, there is an issue about the extent to which spelling should be taught. The Japanese version of CEFR, CEFR-J, establishes the following descriptors for reading and writing ability (Tono, 2013) at the pre-A1 level (Table 1). These abilities can be considered appropriate for elementary school children in Japan.

Table 1. Pre-A1 reading and writing descriptors in CEFR-J (Tono, 2013)

Reading (p.294)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I can recognize words in a picture book that are already familiar through oral activities. 2. I can recognize upper- and lowercase letters printed in block type.
Writing (p.300)	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. I can write upper and lower-case letters and words in block letters. 2. I can write down words provided they are pronounced letter by letter. I can copy what is written.

Therefore, one can conclude that understanding how familiar words are spelled plays a role in English vocabulary learning in elementary schools in Japan. Children can be expected to recognize familiar words and letters. They can also be expected to write letters, copy words, and write down words that are pronounced very slowly with letter sounds that they can recognize.

Nakamura (2015) introduces a model to describe a process for teaching about English letters. This process covers elementary school to junior high school (See Figure 1 on the next page). Although this is called *moji shidou* or 'instruction of letters' in Japanese, the process covers reading at the sentence-level. It is the authors' viewpoint that the last activity in each stage can be interpreted as its ultimate objective. Therefore, the first stage, *Alphabet*, is concerned with understanding the names and sounds of letters and being able to write them. The second stage, *Word*, is concerned with being able to write words after listening to them spoken. The third stage, *Sentence*, is concerned with being able to read and process various kinds of English sentences. It is the authors' view that the activities in the *Alphabet* and *Word* stage can also be seen as enabling activities for accomplishing the CEFR-J pre-A1 reading and writing standards noted in Table 1. It is not the authors' belief that the micro-abilities described in these activities will develop in sequence. However, Nakamura's (2015) framework provides important insights into designing enabling activities for children to read and write words. These activities served as a basis for the first author to design her own letter recognition and writing activities.

↓ ↓ ↓ ↓	Alphabet	① Teaching (Activities) to realize that there are sounds in the alphabet.
		② Teaching (Activities) to get used to the alphabet.
		③ Teaching (Activities) to recognize capital letters and lower-case letters of the alphabet.
		④ Teaching (Activities) to read and write the alphabet.
↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓	Word	⑤ Teaching (Activities) to recognize the word as a unit.
		⑥ Teaching (Activities) to notice that the sound of an individual letter and word are different.
		⑦ Teaching (Activities) to understand a word's meaning by listening to the sound
		⑧ Teaching (Activities) to verbalize one's perception of the sound.
		⑨ Teaching (Activities) to understand the meaning of a word through its spelling and verbalize it
		⑩ Teaching (Activities) to help students write the sounds they hear.
↓ ↓ ↓ ↓ ↓	Sentence	⑪ Teaching (Activities) to realize where one word stops and another word starts.
		⑫ Teaching (Activities) to realize the sentence structure is different between Japanese and English.
		⑬ Teaching (Activities) to understand the subject in an English sentence.
		⑭ Teaching (Activities) to realize that verbs change their form.
		⑮ Teaching (Activities) to realize English has various sentence patterns and sentence structures.

Figure 1. Stages of letter instruction (Adapted from Nakamura, 2015, p. 27)

2.2 Phonemic and Phonological Awareness in Developing English Literacy

Nakamura's (2015) hierarchy of activities indicates that recognizing that English letters have sounds is the foundation for all ensuing letter instruction activities, as it is the first activity listed in Figure 1. This section will give an overview on what recognizing English sounds entails by explaining phonemic and phonological awareness.

Phonemic awareness is "the ability to hear and remember the order of phonemes" (McGuinness, 2004, p. 364). A phoneme can be considered the smallest unit of sound that people hear and corresponds to either a vowel or consonant sound. Japanese is composed of mora, that is, the speaking units are either consonants and vowels together such as か (/*ka*/) or vowels alone such as う /*u*/. The sound か has two phonemes /*k*/ and /*a*/. Words in English

are composed of phonemes, for example, the phonemes of the word 'cat' are /k/ /æ/ /t/. Phonemic awareness involves recognizing the phonemes in a word and their order.

One challenge English learners in Japan face is putting English sounds into letters. Japanese hiragana and katakana have a perfect sound-to-character correspondence. That is, each of their characters corresponds to only one sound. English, on the other hand, has 26 letters but 44 sounds. Therefore, there is not a perfect sound to letter correspondence for English and it has what McGuinness (2005) calls an opaque writing system. This means that a learner might recognize a sound in a word but not be sure which way to write it.

Phonological awareness is "the ability to hear and remember a variety of units of sound within words: syllable, syllable fragments (onsets/rimes), phonemes" (McGuinness, 2004; p. 368). A syllable is the vowel sound of a word with its associated consonants, for example, 'banana' has three syllables: 'ba/na/na'. An onset is the consonant that comes at the beginning of a syllable, for example, 'b' in the first syllable of 'ba/na/na', is the onset. Rime is defined as the nucleus of the syllable, for example, the /en/ in /pen/ is the rime. Therefore, a person with phonological awareness would understand that the word /nest/ rhymes with the word /pest/ and the only difference lies in the first letter. In summary, while phonemic awareness refers to manipulating individual sounds, phonological awareness refers to manipulating units of oral language such as words, syllables, onsets, and rimes. Some research that investigates instruction for developing students' phonemic awareness, however, seems to conflate these two terms. The reason is that sometimes they can be difficult to distinguish. Therefore, the authors will only use the term "phonemic awareness" for instruction that encourages students to recognize and manipulate sounds.

The National Reading Panel (2000) in the United States released a report on a 2-year review of the research on effective reading instruction. It found that phonemic awareness was essential for developing high level literacy skills, and it also found that phonemic awareness instruction was effective. An example of such instruction is given below in Excerpt 1.

Excerpt 1. Phonemic awareness instruction (National Reading Panel, 2000, p. 2_2)

- 1) Q: "Tell me the first sound in paste." A: "/p/"
- 2) Q: "Tell me the sound that is the same in bike, boy and bell." A: "/b/."
- 3) Q: "What is 'smile' without the /s/?" A: "Mile."

Phonemic awareness has also been found to help promote literacy in learners of English as a second language (Linse, 2005). In her summary of previous research, McGuinness (2005) states that it is important for second language learners to recognize that English letters express sounds. This is the first activity in Nakamura's (2015) *Alphabet* stage (See Figure 1.) and is connected with learning to write the letters in the latter part of the stage. Tanaka (2017) also found that when students had the ability to pronounce words they did not know by recognizing the sounds of the letters, it was easier for them to learn new words and their vocabulary improved.

In this section, we have sought to show the importance of phonemic awareness in developing English literacy in first and second language learners. We have also shown that instruction in phonemic awareness is appropriate for the Japanese elementary school context. The teaching method in this study will seek to enhance learners' phonemic awareness, and will be explained in the next section.

3. Methodology

3.1 Participants and Procedures

Research was conducted at School A in Morioka City in a fifth-grade class. There were 26 students in the class and one lesson which spanned two periods was conducted on November 6 and November 8, 2018. Of the 26 students, 9 had studied English outside of school. These students had never experienced a class at their school where they had studied the sounds of letters. It was thought that this would enable us to see the effect of such instruction. Students in this class had previously received writing instruction, so it was employed into the main activity of this research. In the main activity, students traced the first letter of the word they heard their partner say.

3.2 Data Collection and Analysis

The effects of the class were investigated through a questionnaire which surveyed students' attitudes towards English reading and writing, a listening test, and reflection cards. The questionnaire and listening test were done before and after the lesson. However, because the lesson spanned only two periods, they could not be used to measure whether or not students' skills changed. On the other hand, the questionnaire and reflection cards could be used to understand what students felt they learned from the lessons. Furthermore, the phonemic awareness test could be used to understand which English sounds students found difficult.

4. Explanation of the Lesson

In planning the lesson, the following points were paid attention to.

1. Instruction of letters (Basic skills for reading and writing) should be integrated with the normal content and objectives of foreign language activities in elementary school.
2. Based on the research of Nakamura (2015), reading and writing instruction is considered to be linked with developing students' communicative competence.

4.1 Outline of the Lesson

Unit: *We can!* / Unit 1 *Hello, everyone.*

Lesson Goal (2 Periods): Realize that letters have sounds. Identify the letter for the alphabet sound.

Unit Goals:

- Ask and answer about things one likes using expressions studied in Grade 5.
- Listen to and understand a self-introduction, and engage in a conversation about what one likes and what one wants.

The framework of "Practice, Activity, and Task" developed by the Iwate University Faculty of Education Affiliated Elementary School (2018) was employed to design and sequence activities. It is explained below.

Practice : Practice of words or expressions to be learned for the unit or lesson.

Activity : Communicative activities making use of the *practice* language.

Task : Students engage in free communication trying to resolve some kind of problem with some kind of ‘information gap’ between the speakers.

Figure 2 shows an outline of the two periods which were each divided into *Practice*, *Activity*, and *Task & Writing* stages.

	Period 1	Period 2
Learning contents	Students review what they have learned so far, and write a sentence “I like ~.” They realize and write word initials of what they like.	They introduce themselves using “I like ~.” They realize and write word initials of what their conversation partner likes.
.0	Set today's goal	
10	Practice (food)	Practice (animals, colors, sports)
20	Activity (What food do you like?)	Activity (What O do you like?)
30	Task&Writing (I like ~)	Task&Writing (I like ~)
40		
45	Reflection	

Figure 2. Outline of the lessons.

In the *Practice* stage, students reviewed the food names for each letter of the alphabet. They chanted the names of the letter, the letter sound, and the name of the food. For example, for the picture of *Apple* in Figure 3 below, students chanted, “A; / æ/, /æ/, apple.”

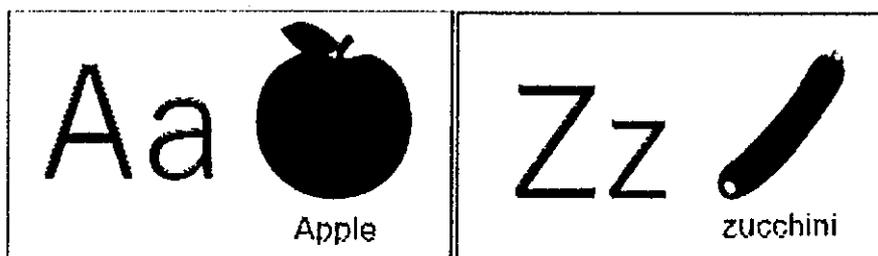


Figure 3. Practice example.

Students said all the names of foods from A to Z to become aware of the first letter of each word and its sound. In addition to this, when reviewing others words, the first author tried various methods to focus students concentration on the sounds of letters such as blending the individual word sounds (/p/ /i/ /ŋ/ /k/ pink) or repeating the first letter sound of a work (/s/ /s/ /s/ /s/ skiing).

In the *Task* stage, students used the expression *What... do you like?* to ask and answer questions. After asking the questions, they had to trace the first letter of the word that their partner answered. In Figure 4, the worksheet that the students used as well as example dialogue is shown.

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Figure 4. Worksheet for the *Task* and sample dialogue

5 Results

This section examines the results based on the pre and post-practice questionnaire on students' attitude towards reading and writing, the pre- and post-practice listening tests, and students' reflection cards.

5.1 Questionnaire on Students' Attitudes towards Reading and Writing

All questions and responses in this section were translated by the authors. In the pre and post-questionnaire students were asked the following

Q: Can you look at and read an English word?

Q: Do you understand the meaning of a word when looking at it?

There were no significant changes in responses between before and after the classes. In the *Practice stage* of the lesson, students were focusing their attention on the first letter of each food word, but not the spelling of the whole word. The first author surmises that if she had focused students' attention on the spelling of the word, the result might have been different.

Students were given the following open-ended question in the post-practice questionnaire:

Q: If you learned anything about the connection between English letters and sounds, please share it.

Below are some of the students' answers:

1. Some sounds are similar to Japanese sounds.
2. Capital and lower-case letters are written differently but have the same pronunciation.
3. 'S' is sometimes pronounced as 'Z', but it is still the same letter.

In the lesson, students were exposed to such words as "colors" in which the plural -s takes the /z/ sound. In Response 3, the student was able to connect the sound she heard to a letter. This shows that some students were aware of connection between sounds and letters.

Lastly, there were the following responses to the question, "Please reflect on what you learned to do in this lesson."

1. I learned to write 'dog'. I was able to write 2 to 3 words for the first

time.

2. I enjoyed the activities with everyone. I could write the words correctly and paid attention to my pronunciation.
3. I was able to improve my understanding of what the teacher said little by little.

There were many responses in which students said that they improved their listening or were able to better monitor their own pronunciation. Also, many students said that they were able to write words even though they had little experience with English writing activities.

5.2 Listening Test

The results for the post-practice listening test are shown in Table 2. In Part A, the results show that it was challenging for students to distinguish /b/ and /v/, item 1_1 shows that 13 students write 'B' as the sound for /v/. Furthermore, in Part C item 3_1 shows that the /w/ pronunciation might have been difficult because it does not exist in Japanese. The pre-practice questionnaire had similar items that asked students to distinguish the same sounds. Overall, it can be concluded that students did not improve on problematic areas of the English phonological system before and after the lesson.

Table 2. Results of the post-practice listening test

Part A: Write which letter you heard.						Part B: Write the letter into the blank.				Part C: Write the first letter of the word.				
1_1 "v"		1_2 "M"		1_3 "G"		2_1 "(C)orn"		2_2 "(S)trawberry"		3_1 "(W)hite"			3_2 "(P)umpkin"	
B	V	M	N	G	Z	C	S	C	S	W	H	other	P	B
13	11	21	3	24	0	24	0	0	24	14	7	3	23	1
54%	46%	88%	12%	100%	0%	100%	0%	0%	100%	58%	29%	13%	96%	4%

5.3 Reflection Cards

The following are some sample responses from students. These responses

were translated by the authors. The major themes of the responses were that students could communicate with friends, they found pleasure in the learning activities, and they were able to say the first letters of words and pronounce them correctly. Overall, the comments show that students were able to enjoy a new kind of communication breaking down the barriers between male and female as well as practice the language and letters in the activity.

Reflection card responses after Period 1

- I was happy to be able to ask about the foods that other people like. I enjoyed being able to communicate with people that up to now I had not been able to talk to.
- I was only able to talk to my friends a little bit, but I enjoyed it. From now on, I want to try writing when I study by myself or practice it with my teacher or friends.

Reflection card responses after Period 2

- I enjoyed hearing about things that my friends like other than food. I was able to communicate with many friends and learn from their pronunciation. I want to improve my pronunciation.
- I was able to ask and answer faster today than last time. I thought today's game was a little difficult but I am glad that I could speak.

6. Discussion

This study has the following implications for raising students' phonemic awareness in elementary school.

1. It is possible to enhance students' phonemic awareness by focusing their attention on the sounds of letters in words from *We Can!*
2. It is possible to attempt to enhance students' phonemic awareness in communicative activities.
3. It is possible to add a writing component to communicative activities which focuses students' attention on listening to English and writing the sounds that they hear.

This study indicates that students learned the fundamental principle that letters have sounds. However, they did not make any discernible improvements in their abilities to read English words or distinguish difficult English sounds. It is the first author's belief that a more robust approach is necessary to improve students' reading and writing ability. The National Reading Panel (2000) recommends that to develop English literacy, in addition to phonemic awareness, phonics instruction, reading fluency development, vocabulary development, and reading comprehension are necessary. As Nakamura's (2015) *Stages of Letter Instruction* shows, understanding the principles of English letters and sounds is a gradual process that cannot be mastered in a few lessons.

The first author suggests the following process for helping children to learn how to develop basic reading and writing skills: after children are familiar with reading some English words, take a gradual phonics approach helping students understand some of the letter and sound correspondences in the words they have learned. After this, students should engage in activities where they can write the words and sounds that they have learned. This will ensure a smooth transition from reading to writing.

7. Conclusion

Overall, this paper has shown that in the new Course of Study, students will be expected to acquire basic reading and writing skills. It has also shown that phonemic awareness is a foundation for these skills and introduced a 2-period lesson designed to help enhance students' phonemic awareness through practice and communication using all four skills. The lesson was successful in helping students understand the basic principle of English reading and writing. However, given that English letter and sound correspondence is opaque a gradual phonics approach should be taken to help familiarize students with English letter and sound combinations.

Through this action research, the first author has realized the importance of linking letter instruction with writing instruction and hopes to continue to develop further methods to enhance students' basic literacy skills.

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