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# JOURNAL

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## Introducing Literacy to Young English Learners

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**Abstract:** The study of ENL children's (children whose native language is English) literacy development enables the exploration of how to introduce reading to EFL students (children who learn English as a foreign language) in Japanese elementary school. The final goal of this study is to discern effective ways to introduce literacy. As reading is the first part of literacy education, this paper mainly focuses on reading. The first part of this study discusses literacy development and the difficulty of written language for ENL children. Then, the study shifts to literacy development and the difficulty of written language for EFL children, compared to their counterparts in ENL environments. The implications of this study help explore and improve efficient literacy education in English in Japanese elementary schools.

### Introduction

In 2020, English will be taught as an official subject in Japanese elementary schools. Since 2011, as part of a curriculum called "foreign language activities," English has been taught. But in 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade classes, students (ages 10–12) have only been expected to become familiar with English sounds and some expressions by speaking and listening, without ever being encouraged or required to learn the written language. A new curriculum provided by the MEXT (Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology) in Japan, which will be enforced in 2020, shows that 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders will learn English, including the written language. That means that literacy in English will be newly introduced to the curriculum.

For the past decade in Japanese elementary schools, teaching English has been a big challenge for most teachers who are neither well trained nor ready to teach English due to their lack of teaching skills and English proficiency. A new challenge they face is to teach reading and writing in English in a way that instructs students to effectively employ the English sounds they have previously learned. Currently, 2019 marks the middle of the curriculum shift for a new start in 2020. Elementary school teachers in Japan are experiencing a process of trial and error from scratch. Therefore, it is highly necessary for Japanese English as a foreign language (EFL) researchers to discern and explore paths to

literacy introduction in English that are cognitively and physically appropriate for EFL children and feasible for elementary school teachers.

### Difficulty of written language

Learning a written rather than an oral language is a more demanding and complex task for children. Nevertheless, this is a must as a global citizen in the current advancing global society. Literacy skills are critical to every aspect of our lives. They are fundamental skills for education, employment, navigating the Internet, and performing various daily activities in society. Becoming capable readers and writers in English enables children to be socially and culturally literate and empowers them to be economically independent, providing career stability and success in the future. Therefore, literacy development has been getting much attention in early childhood education regardless of nation.

In complexity, however, no development process compares to that of learning to read and write a language. Written language plays a symbolic role, representing meanings just like a spoken language. In spoken language, meaning is made by sounds or phonemes. By undergoing many experiences with the language used in the environment, children gradually discover which symbols stand for which meanings and they connect these meanings to word sounds. This is a completely natural part of child development.

There must be multiple reasons for the difficulty of the English written language. However, here, we will see two of the cognitive aspects to consider for the goal of this study.

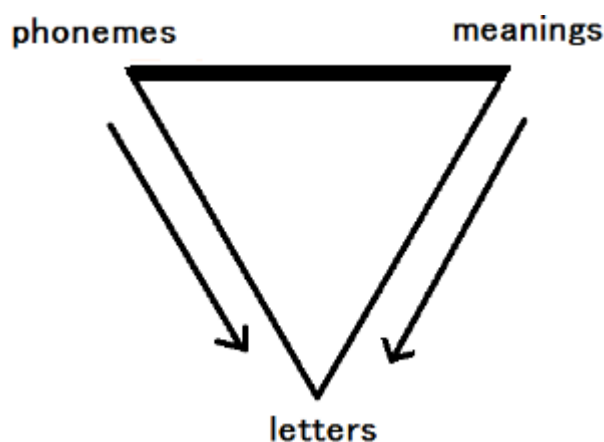


Figure 1. Attention to letters

First, what happens during reading? As seen in Figure 1, in written language, it is necessary to simultaneously pay attention to a word's phonemes as well as the meanings and sequences of letters. This is a huge burden on human cognition. In the case of English as a native language (ENL) children, they build a connection to the words' phonemes and meanings first, then learn to pay attention to the letters. By undergoing many experiences with English words and sentences used in the environment, children gradually discover which symbols stand for which concepts, connecting with the sounds in English. This is quite a natural part of child development. Reading and writing in English requires them to raise their awareness of words' phonemes and the letters of the alphabet. When children are engaged in speaking and listening, they sequence the phonemes in spoken words on an unconscious level;

however, in written language, paying simultaneous attention to the phonemes and sequences of letters that represent the meanings are requisite to be an independent reader and writer.

Second, written language is decontextualized since a written communication, in most situations, goes beyond time between the writer and the reader. That requires readers to have a lot of imagination and knowledge to comprehend the meaning. That makes readers feel that written language is difficult because the smooth connections in Figure 1 are not guaranteed without context: readers sometimes cannot identify the meanings.

### **Literacy development**

Regardless of the complexity of written language, emergent literacy is considered a natural part of child development. Early literacy development occurs as children become increasingly proficient in the cognitive processes that support skilled reading (Blair, Protzko, & Ursache, 2011). In the case of English as a native language (ENL), children cannot avoid all the natural input of their living environments' alphabets. Many things such as food packaging, magazines, and billboards written in English are everywhere in their surrounding environments. Children naturally start paying attention to the letters they see with interest and curiosity when they are cognitively mature enough to understand the function of written language.

Henderson (1981) suggests a model of literacy development. The rest of this section describes the five stages suggested in his model. The first stage is "Emergent," in which children pretend to read and write. It is a common sight for a child to hold a book and mumble something while flipping pages, as if they are reading aloud. They mimic the behavior of their caretakers, who read picture books aloud to them.

In the second stage, "Beginning," children try to read aloud to themselves and engage in word-by-word and finger-point reading. In this stage, they actually read rather than just pretend. Their word identification speed is still very slow, and reading takes much attention and concentration.

The third stage is "Transitional." In this stage, children are quite independent as readers and approach fluency in phrases or expressions in oral reading. Children can read most single-syllable words and many two-syllable words. Based on their word knowledge, they can read unfamiliar words with modest fluency. Their reading partly shifts from oral to silent and at the end of this stage, they mostly read silently. In the Transitional stage, a reader's word knowledge is sufficient for fluency in reading (Bear & Smith, 2016). In this stage, writing skill also approaches fluency with more organization and several paragraphs.

From the fourth stage, "Intermediate," to the fifth stage, "Advance," readers become fully fluent with expressions as they learn to develop a variety of reading styles. Finally, it can be said that children are full-fledged readers.

This developmental model elaborates on a normal and smooth literacy development that holds true only for ENL children without reading disorders. Promoting these stages takes about 5–6 years after children develop interest in letters at the ages of 4–5.

## English literacy for Japanese EFL students in elementary schools

With normal literacy development for ENL children in mind, the case of EFL children, like that of elementary school children in Japan, should now be considered. In Japan, English is taught only once a week for 45 minutes. By the new guidelines to be enforced in 2020, this will be increased to twice a week but still amounts to only 90 minutes. Therefore, children have very limited input in English. They are usually only exposed to English sounds, meanings, and letters in English classes, except in the case where they personally take English lessons outside school. Reading and writing will be taught until the 5th grade, which is 10–11 years old.

In most English classes, instructors teach English words by displaying picture cards to show the words' meanings and letters. Seeing the picture cards, students learn how to say things in English. This is a typical way of teaching in Japan. According to the present curriculum, which started in 2011, alphabetical letters should play a supporting role in the phonological approach. This means that how to read and write are not taught, but the letters of words are shown to assist students' listening and speaking in terms of recall and memory.

As previously discussed, in 2020, reading and writing will be included in the new curriculum, so it is time to think about literacy development for EFL children. When Japanese children expand their interests and attention to English written words, what happens? They fully know what reading and writing are in Japanese, so they jump to the beginning level of literacy development, skipping the first emergent learners' level: they attempt to do word-by-word reading and identify words by connecting meanings, sounds, and letters. Thus, the typical way of teaching in English classes suits their learning style, considering Japanese children's cognitive development: they see English words on picture cards that show the meanings.

Are there any problems? EFL learners acquire word sounds and meanings first. Unlike ENL children, for EFL students, the connection of word sounds and meanings are not solid and are unstable. Sometimes, they learn the sounds and meanings of a word and, soon after, they must learn the letter sequence. So for EFL students, it is triple the work to learn to read words. They must remember the word sounds that represent the meanings of things and see the whole word, which consists of several letters.

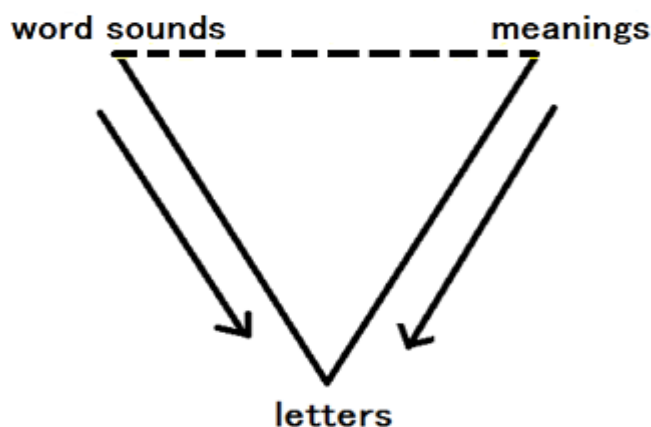


Figure 2. Triple work in a weak connection for EFL learners

Therefore, we must consider whether there are any advantages for 5<sup>th</sup> graders, aged 10–11, to learn to read in a new language. The first and foremost advantage is that they can already read and write in Japanese. Having literacy in a native language has a facilitating effect on the acquisition of literacy skills in another language since learners know what writing is and how written words function to make sense (Cummins, 2000). Japanese elementary school students are expected to raise learners' awareness to the written words in alphabets. Children of these ages are so cognitively developed that they easily recognize alphabetical letters and remember their sequences. (Blair, Protzko, and Ursache, 2011).

In Japan, children learn Roman letter reading and writing in the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, so they are familiar with the shape of alphabets. When it comes to reading in English as the 5<sup>th</sup> grader who learn English as a subject, first they must know that reading English is different from Roman letter reading. That could be confusing for some children, while others take advantage of their knowledge of Roman letter reading and utilize it to identify the common sounds and pay attention to the differences.

### **The differences between ENL and EFL with regard to literacy introduction**

The difference between ENL and EFL should be thoroughly considered to adopt the introduction of literacy education in ENL for undeveloped literacy lessons in EFL. This section summarizes the differences in six factors influencing their learning, shown in Table 1.

As previously mentioned, Japanese EFL students start learning reading and writing in English at the ages of 10–11. They are much older than their ENL counterparts and are cognitively mature enough to understand what reading is and to know reading tips. Of course, they must learn how to follow the letters in a different way. For example, they must learn to move their eyes from left to right to read English instead of top to bottom in Japanese. But the age factor for EFL learners is still a strong advantage in starting reading and writing, which are cognitively hard work.

However, Japanese EFL students' level of familiarity in English sounds is much lower than that of ENL children, although they are familiar with a limited number of word sounds they learned in previous foreign language activities classes when they were in 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> grade.

As for phonemes, they are not fully understood by many teachers. As a result, systematic phonemes instruction is not introduced in many schools. On the other hand, ENL children usually start with well-developed and systematic phonics instruction in their English classes.

As for meanings, EFL children know the meanings of some words because they have learned them in foreign language activities since 3<sup>rd</sup> grade. However, that does not mean they always remember them because memorization is not a requirement in English class for 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year students. Conversely, ENL children naturally know the meanings of words through their everyday lives.

Regarding letters, EFL children are barely exposed to English letters, while ENL children are surrounded by English sounds and letters in their living environments. Therefore, EFL children have only limited knowledge of letters, which makes it hard for them to connect letters with sounds.



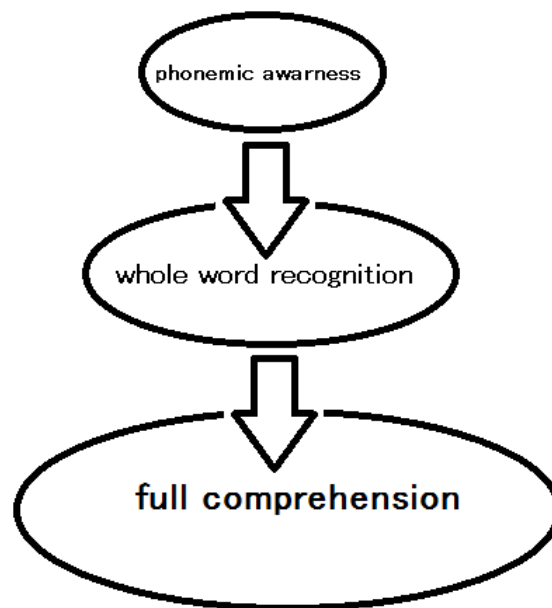
Table 1. Differences between ENL and EFL in introductory literacy

	ENL	EFL
Age	4-5	10-11
Sounds	⊙	△
Phonemes	△	×
Meanings	⊙	△
Letters	○	×
Reading Behavior	△	⊙

Note: ⊙ advantageous   ○ relatively advantageous  
 △ less advantageous   × disadvantageous

### The process of learning to read

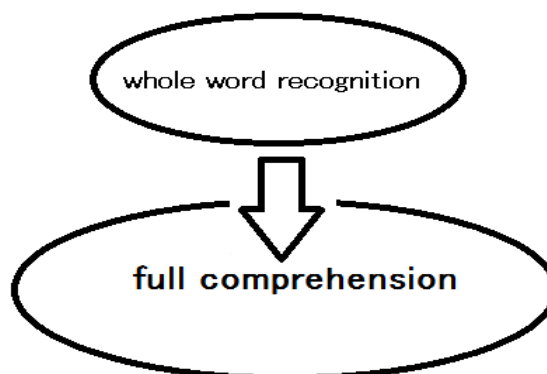
Unless children have dyslexia problems, they follow the typical process of learning to read by being given phonics lessons. Next is the normal way ENL children learn to read, suggested by LoGiudice (2015). In the phonemic awareness process, shown in Figure 3, ENL children acquire the recognition of letters as symbols that represent sounds. Then, they raise their awareness of the sounds each letter makes as well as how those sounds are blended and used within each word. Finally, they acquire the ability to hear, speak, and process the sounds of the language and also develop the ability to accurately perceive letters and letter sequences. In the second process, whole word recognition, children learn to have an automatic and instant recognition based on a word's shape. This recognition enables fluency, but phonics is not used in deciphering words. In the third process, full comprehension, children achieve the end result and ultimate goal of reading and understanding, remembering, and applying the information contained in written text.



*Figure 3.* Process of learning to read in ENL children given phonics lessons  
(modified model of LoGiudice 2015)

Many children with dyslexia are likely to fail to become aware of the sounds of letters and words in their phonics lessons. Therefore, they are encouraged to have a different approach, starting with whole word recognition because phonics lessons are ineffective and can even be counterproductive for them. Can this approach also be applied to EFL children?

The reasoning behind this question comes from the fact that EFL children, as mentioned in the previous section, do not take effective phonics lessons: they do not hear many English sounds in everyday life and find it difficult to connect letters and sounds to meanings. Furthermore, phonics lessons are not as systematic as in ENL schools. The present phonics lessons cannot benefit EFL children in Japan as much as is generally expected. As a result, EFL children may not be able to start the process, depending on their phonemic awareness for learning to read. Instead, they cannot help but start with whole word recognition. This idea is shown in Figure 4.



*Figure 4.* Process of learning to read in EFL children

## Survey



To grasp the reality of actual teaching in English classes, a small-scale survey was conducted on 43 elementary school teachers in Japan to discover how they introduce reading and writing to students in class. Multiple answers were possible. As in Table 2, the research result shows that all the teachers surveyed use picture cards with letters. Twenty-two teachers use alphabet songs to teach alphabetical names. Four teachers use an alphabet chart posted in the classroom. Only 18 teachers use phonics, and only 3 use an English bulletin board.

*Table 2.* How to introduce literacy in elementary English classes in Japan

Ways of introducing reading and writing	Number of respondents
Nothing special	0
Picture cards with letters	43
Alphabet song	22
Alphabet chart in classroom	4
Phonics	18
Bulletin board in English	3
Others	5

In fact, phonics is getting a lot of attention in Japan, and many boards of education nationwide are encouraging elementary school teachers to use phonics in class. However, phonics has yet to be properly understood among elementary school teachers in Japan. Although there are many phonics materials available and adopted by many teachers, most, if not all, materials are based on analytic phonics, starting with, a, b, c, and so forth, in alphabetical order. In this manner, learners see a word and then understand the sound of a letter. A typical example is showing the word “apple” and teaching the sound “a.” Among the 18 teachers who answered that s/he uses phonics, 17 use analytic phonics, in particular to introduce only the very beginning level, from a–z. Only 1 teacher adopts synthetic phonics after taking a course on phonics teaching. It is necessary to notice that analytic phonics are only fully effective for those who live in English environments or when learners know many words, as native English speakers do. Thus, learners in EFL contexts cannot benefit from analytic phonics lessons as much as those in ENL or ESL (English as a second language) contexts.

In addition to enhancing phonemic awareness, Japanese EFL children also need to try a whole language approach to become familiarized with English words. An English environmentally rich approach, such as using English bulletin boards, should be adopted in their classroom environments. In this research, only 3 teachers reported using them. English words can be displayed in bulletin boards in

various devised ways, for example, class goals, mottos, newsletters, or artwork. In particular, sight words that are used daily should be visually provided in students' living environments.

The present research shows that many elementary school teachers do not take much care in the phonemic awareness process. Instead, they make use of "whole word recognition" from the very beginning, even if they do not know the approach. As the research showed, all the teachers we asked use picture cards with letters to teach students to recognize word sounds and letters. This way is not wholly ineffective in learning to read the words they have learned. Whether it is effective enough, it can be said that Japanese EFL learners are likely to start with whole word learning, as was suggested in Figure 4, but the question is: Are students really reading "whole" words?

### Development of word recognition

Figure 5 is based on Frith's (1985) model, which shows the development of word recognition and is widely accepted. It explicates three stages of development. The first stage is called "logographic," which relies on rote memory of words connected to graphic symbols that are visually oriented and cued for reading. The second stage is termed "alphabetic," which takes a more analytical approach than the logographic stage, with a main focus on word components and the sounds of letters. The third stage is called "orthographic," which requires analyzing groups of words and promoting "sight reading" for efficient readers.

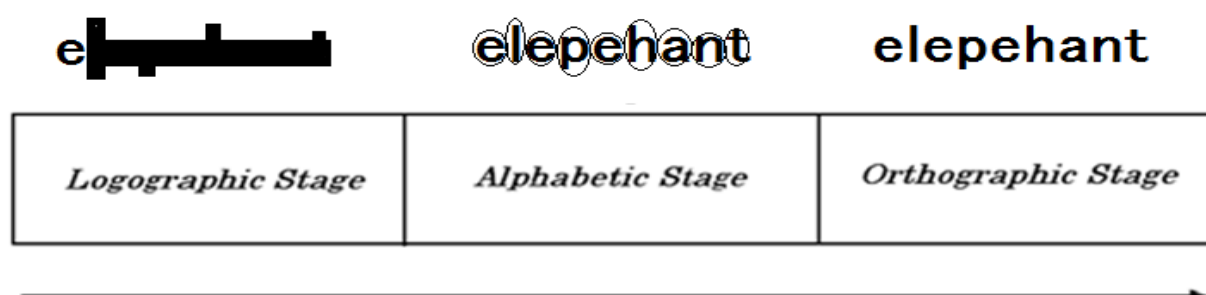


Figure 5. Word reading for EFL students (the figure is based on Frith's model in 1985)

Some studies examine the mutual influence of the major constituents of word-reading skills: phonology, meaning, and orthography (Nation & Castles, 2007; Shaha-Yames & Share, 2008). In the orthographic depth principle, orthographies vary from shallow orthographies with transparent grapheme-phoneme relations to deep orthographies, in which these relations are opaque (Irit & Zvia, 2014). It is found that the development of word-reading skills in a deep orthography language such as English is slower than in a shallow orthography language (Florit & Cain, 2011).

According to the principle, unlike the deep orthographic system in languages such as English, French, and Arabic, the Japanese language belongs to a shallow orthographic system language in which *hiragana* has a one-on-one correspondence between phoneme and letter. Therefore, the cross-language transfer of orthographies never occurs to Japanese EFL learners. It is often the case that Japanese English learners have much difficulty reading English regardless of whether they have any genetic problems, such as dyslexia. This is another reason why EFL learners, especially Japanese learners with a different orthographic system from English, should be carefully introduced into English literacy skills. This is

also one of the reasons why the use of alphabetical letters in Japanese elementary school English was limited in its function as a subsidiary to communication, according to the old guideline enforced by the MEXT in 2011. The difference in orthographic systems explains this cautious stance to literacy introduction in English. Japanese elementary school students were expected to at least be in the “logographic stage” of word recognition since the previous guideline enforced in 2011 required them not to read words but just to be exposed to them and to be familiar with alphabetical letters, which give hints to the sounds in recalling words and speaking.

Facing written words, some students may try to match the sounds and letters using speculation based on their previously learned words and knowledge of Roman letters. The acquisition of reading and writing skills with Roman letters is said to have positive and negative influences on letter-sound correspondence. Paying attention to the beginning letters of words raises students’ awareness of alliteration, which is often used for beginning literacy education for native English speakers (Leeper, 2008). Variety in the letter-sound combination in English words can be a source of confusion to learners who just acquired Roman letter familiarity.

The crux of the problem in this stage is that learners’ attempts to read words, however, remain guesswork. It is assumed that Japanese elementary school students are likely to be somewhere between the logographic and alphabetic stage, going back and forth in the continuum but hardly reaching the orthographic stage because of the lack of integrative knowledge of words and systematic spelling rules.

Without phonemic awareness, what ultimately happens to EFL children in Japan? A lack of experience in systematic phonics instruction makes it difficult for Japanese elementary school students to have a rigid linkage between phonemes and the sequences of letters and to be able to correctly read the word. In contrast to the unavailability of this systematic association, their attempts to read a word are made by paying attention to only a part of the word, such as initials that are visually well-recognized. It is a so-called “logographic reading,” which takes an analytic rather than a holistic approach, based on the presence of a few of the word’s letters (Genisio & Bastien-Toniazzo, 2003). In this sense, Japanese EFL students might be said to be at the “logographic stage” in word recognition development.

What is necessary for Japanese EFL children? In the present commonly used way of teaching, they have no choice but to remain at the logographic stage in which they focus on the words’ initials. It should be noted that this way of reading is actually even emphasized by phonics instruction, showing only the initial letter and the sound in alphabetical order, as was previously mentioned.

Although the “word reading” approach is used by Japanese EFL children without strong phonemic awareness, they see the word and instantly focus on just the initials. They can barely develop to the alphabetic or orthographic stage. In the new guideline to be enforced in 2020, the expectation is that students acquire a strongly-built basis of reading and writing that leads to an advanced level in junior and senior high school. This means that they should be able to read the words they come across for the first time. Word reading, stagnated in the logographic stage, will be a problem in the advanced reading levels in junior and senior high school, since students are expected to be able to read many newly encountered words.

### Suggestion for feasible and effective literacy introduction

Phonemic awareness is one of the concepts that emphasize raising the awareness of words' sound components using an auditory approach (Leeper, 2008). To create a foundation of literacy, instructions based on the importance of phonemic awareness go through seven steps to train auditory perception through listening, as shown in Table 3.

Table 3. Summary of phonemic awareness by Leeper (2008)

Step1.	Rhyming: Pay attention to the ending sound of a word Words ending with the same sound, c.g. king/ring/sing
Step2.	Alliteration: Pay attention to the beginning sound of word Words beginning with the same sound, e.g. Sumiko sits in the seat
Step3.	Syllable & Onset Rhyme: Group the sounds of word Syllable: Divide word by vowel groups Onset Rhyme: Divide word by the first vowel. A group of consonant before the vowel is onset. A group of the vowel and the consonant is rhyme. e.g. post: p(onset), ost (rhyme). green: gr(onset), een (rhyme).
Step4.	Blending: Connecting sounds to make a word e.g. c+a+t=cat
Step5.	Pay attention to the beginning sound, middle sound and ending sound e.g. boat: consider "b", "oa", "t".
Step6.	Segmentation/counting sounds: segment the sounds of the word and count them e.g. pig: /p/i/g/, 3sounds
Step 7.	Manipulate sounds: Convert the beginning and ending sounds

Through these steps, children perceive sounds from different angles and realize that spoken words consist of sounds and groups of sounds. The instruction enhances their perception of the phoneme. This process makes it easier for children to advance to the next stage of education in phonics, in which they are required to connect sound and letter. It also leads to solid reading and writing abilities.

On top of phonemic awareness, visual stimuli should also be considered. Many children are likely to learn most easily when material is presented in a way that is related to visual things. The problem is, as in the previous discussion, EFL students are also less likely to have experience with visual inputs of English words. The visual presentation of words is studied and practiced by many English teachers, using their ingenuity, showing words and meanings in pictures, such as "SnapWords<sup>®</sup>," which are stylized to look like what they mean (Major, 2012). These materials visually appeal to children's

recognition and effectively help their memory. The scientific evidence on the efficacy of this kind of visual materials in EFL research has been thin. This kind of devised materials in literacy instruction is often discussed and researched among the scholars and practitioners who are engaged in research and education for children with disabilities, such as dyslexia. However, visual learning can be useful and effective even for children without disabilities because it goes without saying that all children have different cognitive styles, and reading is no exception. Some children are more visually skilled than others and benefit from visual stimulation. They acquire the word shape and meaning kinetically and proceed to connect them with the sounds. Although the effects on EFL children have not yet been widely found, it is worth adopting visual materials such as “SnapWords<sup>®</sup>” to draw students’ attention to whole words.



Figure 6. An example of “SnapWords<sup>®</sup>” by Major (2012)

The idea stems from using not only the left brain but also the right brain for the benefit of right-brain users. With exposure to visually stimulating materials, the meanings are simultaneously taught with teachers’ motions, which give learners kinesthetic stimulations and a story connecting to the meanings to strengthen the memory. It is important to consider how learners learn a language depending on their brain dominance. The left brain is in charge of analyzing texts, logic, and objective information, while the right deals with processing visions, affects, and imaginations. People use both sides of the brain, although they all are likely to use one side more dominantly (Ofiaz, 2011).

It is not necessarily important to comprehend each learner’s learning style with regard to brain use; however, it is worth trying a variety of ways of presenting and teaching letters, because different ways of teaching can possibly match different learners’ styles.

## Conclusion

This study argues the difficulty and development of literacy with a special focus on the difference between ENL and EFL learning environments. Children in EFL environments, like in Japan, completely lack in words they know and have a weak bond between word meaning and sounds. This make it difficult for them to connect to letters and develop phonemic awareness. Regardless, they still do not have a systematic learning process that leads to English literacy in their English classes. The survey on Japanese elementary school teachers reveals that, even in the case where phonics lessons are partly given, these practices often fail to meet the needs of Japanese children and prevent their advance to the next level in word reading. At present, it is not inaccurate to say that English lessons in Japanese elementary school do not exhibit educational effects in terms of literacy introduction.



Phonics lessons must be thoroughly and properly understood by teachers: many teachers, if not all, teach only the beginnings of phonics by teaching the letters and sounds in words' initials. The research also clarifies that the majority of teachers use picture cards to show the meaning and the whole word. This is an instant way of learning to read; however, it also limits reading in a way: students can only read the words they know. Thus, it is necessary to find other ways to deal with reading unknown words. The survey shows that only a few teachers are aware of the effects of visual learning in literacy. In addition to phonics lessons, it is necessary to expand their perspective to the use of images. This enables EFL children in disadvantaged learning environments without much written English to visually learn the alphabetical letters. Visual learning in English has much more potential than is realized.

It must be admitted that this study is still in progress; hence, it is necessary to do further research on a larger number of subjects to grasp the reality of English teaching in Japanese elementary schools. It is also necessary to explore ways to enhance phonemic awareness using both an auditory approach and visual learning based on a whole language approach. The suggestion here is still not specific enough to be fully practiced in an actual classroom setting. Therefore, future research is urged to make specific and feasible suggestions to EFL teachers for better literacy teaching in English.

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