

# フォニックスの重要性と日本の英語教育におけるその役割

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## The Significance of Phonics and Its Possible Role in English Acquisition in Japan

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要 旨 日本の英語教育に対する批判が高まる中、英単語の発音ルールであるフォニックス (phonics) の役割に注目する。フォニックスとは英単語の綴り字と発音の関係を教えることによって正しい発音や語彙力を身に付けるための教授法であり、英語圏の子どもたちが英語を学習するために重要な役割を果たしてきた。本稿は、1)フォニックスの重要性、2)日本における英語教育の現状、3)フォニックスの持つ力を最大限に活用するために日本人の英語の弱点をいかに克服するかという点について考察した。英語の綴りである26文字のアルファベットは、英語の持つ音声の数より少ない。よって足りない音声を英語は文字と文字のコンビネーションで補っている。英語教育の基礎である語彙力を伸ばすためにはフォニックスの学習は不可欠である。

Japanese English education has been criticized for emphasizing word-for-word translation skills over communication skills such as speaking and listening. The main reason Japanese students have not been taught English communication skills is because English is learned primarily to pass written entrance examinations for high school and universities. Also, historically, to understand Western culture, through English publications, Japanese have emphasized translation skills.

One consequence of the emphasis on translation is that Japanese students do not learn correct English pronunciation. Yet in order to develop comprehensive English language skills it is extremely crucial to know how to pronounce English words. Many Japanese language teachers start by teaching the sounds of the 26 letters of the English alphabet. But even if the teachers know how to pronounce these sounds correctly, and many do not, this method falls short in teaching the sounds of the English language because there are more than 26 sounds in the English language. Moreover, some of these sounds follow rules, while some do not. There is a systematic method that helps in learning the sounds that follow the rules. This method is called phonics. But words containing sounds that do not follow the rules need to be memorized.

This paper will discuss the significance of phonics versus whole language. Whole language is an alternative language acquisition system to phonics, which stresses interrelationships among the various language skills. This paper will also address the present condition of English language acquisition in Japan and overcoming the Japanese weaknesses in English language acquisition in or-

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der to maximize the power of phonics.

### ***Significance of Phonics Versus Whole Language***

Phonics is a systematic, reliable way for English learners to figure out the pronunciation of words which they do not know using letter sound-patterns. Learning phonics will help the learners build logical and sequential skills that will enable them to pronounce correctly unfamiliar words. Phonics teaches English learners background knowledge about phoneme awareness.<sup>1)</sup>

Originally, words were spelled as they sounded, making it easier to read. As time passed many languages went through changes and silent letters appeared. Such changes, in English, have complicated the pronunciations of words. Barnard Shaw, one of the most important literary figures of the 1900's, exemplified complexities of the English language when he spelled fish 'ghoti.' In English, the 'gh' in laugh is pronounced as 'f'; the 'o' in 'women' is pronounced as 'i'; and the 'ti' of 'nation' is pronounced as 'sh [ʃ].' So 'ghoti' is fish. This is Shaw's joke about how complicated the English language is.<sup>2)</sup>

Phonics, however, helps to minimize efforts to learn pronunciations of English words. Phonics is a teaching method that helps learners to understand relations between spellings and pronunciations. There is clear evidence that most Japanese students do not know phonics and tend to depend on their knowledge of alphabetical pronunciation. Most students can pronounce the 26 letters of the English alphabet; however, the English language has more sounds than its symbols. Each vowel, 'a', 'e', 'i', 'o', 'u' and 'y', has two ways of pronunciation, either long or short. Also, combinations of consonants such as 'sh', 'ch' and 'ph' have their own pronunciations. If English had more characters, a non-native English speaker would be able to learn English with fewer struggles and less confusion.

The problem of poor reading ability is not limited to Japanese students learning English. ABC news in the United States reported on March 8, 1999 the decline in reading skills in American elementary schools. According to the news research, about 70 percent of American fourth grade elementary school students have trouble reading accurately due to the whole language approach. Among minority fourth graders, the problem is even worse; 90 percent have problems.<sup>3)</sup>

Educational critics blame this poor showing on the fact that elementary school teachers have stopped teaching phonics, and instead began using the whole language approach to teach reading. "Whole language" was one of the most popular terms into 1990's that swept through the teaching profession. Initially the whole language approach believed in "not breaking up the language into too many bits and pieces, otherwise students would not see the relationship of the whole." Whole language stresses the interrelationships among the various skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing) so that learners are able to see the important connections.<sup>4)</sup>

Using the phonics method requires that unfamiliar words be broken down into their component sounds and then can be read. Phonics can be used to figure out the pronunciation of unfamiliar words. As a result of the whole language approach, a number of American elementary students can-

not read English sentences. The current practice is to restore phonics to the elementary school curriculum in the United States.<sup>5)</sup> Most Japanese junior high school students do not learn phonics; therefore, the students do not know how to pronounce English words. Some students check phonetic symbols called 'hatsuonkigou' in their English-Japanese dictionaries to learn correct pronunciation. It is difficult, however, for the students to acquire reading skills without knowledge of phonics.

### ***The Present Condition of English Language Acquisition in Japan***

Japanese education has placed emphasis on the English language for many years; nevertheless, the outcome has been disappointing. College students are exposed to at least eight years of English language courses. These students' English communication skills are poor in that the students are unable to talk about their daily events in basic English. There is an ongoing debate to revise the English program in the Japanese school systems: elementary, junior high school, high school and college levels. English educators have voiced their opinions in favor of going in the direction of communicative approaches beginning from elementary school. Without analyzing the reasons why Japanese students have difficulties in acquiring the English language, the efforts will fail. This section discusses the present condition of English language acquisition in Japan.

In order to evaluate English proficiency for non-native English speakers who wish to attend universities in the United States and Canada, there is a required examination called Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL). Students submit the scores to the institutions and each institution evaluates the scores according to its standards.

The TOEFL consists of three sections: listening comprehension, structure and written comprehension, and reading comprehension. The maximum score of TOEFL is 677 points. Most American universities require at least 550 points for their undergraduate programs. As the following data indicate, scoring 550 is difficult, especially for Japanese students.

Worldwide TOEFL Results: July 1996–June 1997 (total: 794, 989 examinees)

Average Score:	Listening	Structure and Written	Reading	Mean Score
Japanese Examinees	49	50	50	496
Total Male Examinees	51.6	53.3	54.1	530
Total Female Examinees	51.9	52.4	52.8	523
Total Male and Female (World Average)	—	—	—	526.5

Among the scores shown it is important to note that the average score of the Japanese examinees is 30.5 points lower than the world average. The Japanese total mean score of 496 ranked the Japanese examinees in 111<sup>th</sup> place out of 118 language groups.<sup>6)</sup>

These results indicate that the Japanese language group falls far behind the world average.

Although the points of the listening, structure and written, and reading comprehension sections are evenly scored, Japanese learners' lack of English proficiency is clearly proven in the above chart. Japanese incompetence in grammatical skills raises serious questions about Japan's English education. From the TOEFL results (July 1996-June 1997) it is also apparent that the examinees of the Japanese language showed the worst score among the examinees of the world major language groups.<sup>7)</sup> As the TOEFL scores from July 1989 through June 1991 for the examinees who speak the Japanese language were similar to the Japanese examinees' scores for the July 1996/June 1997 period, it would seem that over the last decade the Japanese language group has not made much progress overall.<sup>8)</sup>

It is possible to say that a student who has difficulty in one area of language comprehension has difficulty in all the areas (of second language skills). Generally, this is due to the students being taught by repetition, translation and memorization. Japanese students are accustomed to translating word for word with dictionaries and do not read English sentences from left to right like English native speakers. In short, they cannot understand the meaning of sentences if they do not translate into Japanese. This also points out that they cannot listen to and understand spoken English sentences unless they can grasp meanings of English written expressions, not translating. More often the skills that have been developed have been lost through lack of use. Therefore, the students do not obtain the language skills necessary to succeed in English. This is evident through the TOEFL test scores of the Japanese students. The scores reflect the need to improve all comprehension skills involved: listening, writing and reading.

Today, students cram in order to prepare for high school entrance exams. Most students begin to learn the English language in junior high school. During their three years of junior high school Japanese students have to memorize a great number of words and grammatical rules in order to pass their high school entrance exams. Since most Japanese high schools demand that the candidates be able to answer general knowledge questions on their exams, junior high school English teachers do not have enough time to cover the phonics rules. The content of English education in Japanese junior high school is rather unnatural with textbooks in particular not being communicatively-based. The relationship between teachers and students is extremely passive and does not provide the students with chances to practice and communicate in English. For example, a student has to ask "What's this?" even though the person who gets asked already knows it is a pen. It is quite unnatural to ask something students already know, and doing so may bore students. Such a problem was even more common in the English classrooms several decades ago. Although students knew someone was a boy or a girl, they had to ask the person his or her gender. "Are you a boy? Yes, I am." "Are you a girl? No, I am not." In short, students in Japanese English classes do not have meaningful communication in English. Students are easily bored with these unnatural materials, which are far from everyday conversation in Japanese. As a consequence of spending too much time on these other areas, English pronunciation is not learned. Consequently, the students do not learn phonics as a tool to help them memorize words and grammar.<sup>9)</sup>

This also applies to Japan's university entrance examinations. Most of the universities put significance on reading, grammatical and vocabulary skills; thus, high school English teachers spend most of their time teaching these skills, rather than concentrating on speaking and listening. Therefore, it is quite natural for most Japanese high schools not to cover phonics. For a number of years the English language has been a required subject that Japanese students need to pass school entrance examinations. Accordingly, the English language as a communication tool has been completely ignored. If entrance examinations of both high schools and universities required oral competence, teachers would place more significance on communicative skills such as listening and speaking. Thus, phonics would be utilized from the early stages of English language acquisition.

Presently, phonics is not taught because most Japanese schoolteachers are unable to pronounce English words correctly. In order to teach phonics it is extremely important that the teachers know how to pronounce basic sounds of English words. Even though students learn the correlation between spelling and pronunciations, if teachers do not know correct pronunciations, phonics is of no use. Numerous high school students realize that their teachers are not able to correctly pronounce English. Some teachers have admitted this fact in their classrooms. Phonics takes a certain degree of capability of English pronunciation; however, today a great volume of audiotapes and videos are available to English teachers who are not confident in their pronunciation.

Unfortunately, Japanese teachers have not recognized the power of phonics; otherwise, phonics would play a very important role in English language acquisition. Several Japanese authors of phonics books commonly mention that they did not have any notion of phonics before they attended schools in English speaking countries. In the United States, the authors discovered phonics and its usefulness. This fact may indicate that most Japanese English teachers do not have knowledge of phonics, or it has been quite new to teachers in Japan. This factor needs to be studied.

### ***Overcoming the Japanese Weaknesses in English Language Acquisition in Order to Maximize the Power of Phonics***

If Japanese learners know the co-relations between spelling and pronunciation it would be so much easier for them to memorize English words. It is not too much to say that a number of Japanese memorize English words without using any logical or systematical rules. For instance, a word such as handkerchief is one of the common words in junior high school English textbooks in Japan. Japanese learners, however, encounter difficulties in memorizing the word since they do not know the letter-sound patterns. If an English learner knows that the letter combinations of 'er', 'ir' and 'ur' are pronounced the same way, or the letter-pattern 'ie' is pronounced as the long vowel 'e' sound, learning to pronounce the word "handkerchief" would not be as complicated as it might seem. Phonics helps Japanese learners acquire the English language. In order to utilize phonics in their English acquisition, letter-keywords must first be mastered.

Native English speakers already know English sounds before they start learning to read. When learning the alphabet native speakers use letter-keywords. American teachers and parents use let-

ter-keywords to introduce children to basic letter sounds. They often use letter-keyword charts to enable students to establish accurate sounds for each letter. For example, teachers and parents first point to the word 'mitten' and pronounce the word. Next they point to the letter 'm' and pronounce 'm.' Then they have the children repeat the sound. Long and short vowel sounds, which do not appear in this alphabetical order, need to be taught with separate letter-keywords. And children must know vowels are special letters and are pronounced two ways.<sup>10)</sup>

Unlike native speakers, Japanese English learners do not know English letter-keywords with correct pronunciations. Consequently, their development of English pronunciation skills is highly dependent upon their first teacher's pronunciation. Therefore, in junior high school, where most Japanese first learn the English language, those who happen to be taught by an English teacher with good pronunciation are fortunate. In contrast, those who do not have such teachers will be disadvantaged in their English study. Phonics would alleviate this problem because the students would learn to master the basic sounds of English, including letter combinations with more than one pronunciation. Even though average Japanese English teachers do not have proper English pronunciation, they can still use audiocassettes, videos and various other audio materials.

American children are able to learn and recognize the letter-sound pattern of the English language. Americans can figure out pronunciations of unfamiliar words in their everyday lives because they are taught these rules in an early stage of their education. Accordingly, Americans often apply these rules to foreign words. For instance, the Japanese camera company Nikon's 'i' is pronounced differently in Japan and in the United States. It is pronounced with a short 'i' vowel sound like "Nikon" in Japan, but in the United States it is pronounced with a long vowel 'i' sound.

Phonics rules cannot apply to all the words elementary school students must learn; however, basic phonics rules enable the students to learn and read a great number of English words without asking their teachers and parents for the pronunciations of those words. The use of phonics in teaching English would also benefit Japanese students. It would give them a logical system to learn how to pronounce the majority of English words. The pronunciation of words that do not follow the rules would still have to be memorized. Knowing correct English pronunciation makes reading and learning English easier. Also students would be able to converse with other English speakers and feel confident that they will be understood. Hence, Japanese students would no longer be near the bottom in TOEFL scores.

Gregory Stricherz, a former English educator in Japan and author, tells why Japanese schools do not deal very well with the relation between spelling and English pronunciation in his book *Naze Eigo Ga Kikitorenai, Hanasenai* (Why Japanese cannot speak and listen to English). From his experience of living in Japan for 12 years, he realized that the biggest problem in English education in Japan lies in the use of katakana English. The Japanese language has three forms of characters: kanji, hiragana and katakana. When the Japanese adopt foreign words, the katakana characters are used to write those words. Once those foreign words are written out into katakana, pronunciation is changed because Japanese sounds are used to pronounce the words. Those japanized sounds are

almost impossible for the English native speakers to recognize while Japanese are under the illusion that katakana pronunciations are equal to the native English pronunciations. One reason for the difference is that the Japanese language has fewer sounds than English. Stricherz gives examples of japanized English words which English native speakers have trouble understanding: the [z] sound of ‘business’ is sounded [dʒ] in Japanese; ‘Do’ of the word Dodgers is pronounced [da] by English native speakers in the U.S., while most Japanese will say [do].

Some other reasons why Japanese pronunciation and English pronunciation differ are:

- 1) Unlike the English language, the Japanese language does not have various vowel sounds. And when most Japanese see English vowel letters ‘a’, ‘e’, ‘i’, ‘o’ and ‘u’ in a word they use Japanese vowel sounds あ [a], え [e], い [i], お [o], and う [u].
- 2) The Japanese consonant sounds are much weaker than their English counterparts. Even though Japanese consonants are weaker, every consonant is followed by a vowel, which makes the sound recognizable.
- 3) Most Japanese are unable to distinguish [l] and [r] sounds of the English language.
- 4) When most Japanese pronounce the letter ‘w’ they use the Japanese vowel う [u] that is similar but not exact. Most Japanese do not taper off their lips when they pronounce the sound.
- 5) The Japanese [f] sound does not put as much pressure on the lower lip by the upper teeth as the English [f] requires. Some of the [f] sounds by Japanese speakers are more like ‘h’ sounds. For example, when Japanese speakers say “alphabet,” the [f] sound is sounded like [h]. This is clear evidence that most Japanese do not know phonics. Also, most Japanese do not put pressure on the lower lip with the upper teeth when they pronounce the English [v] sound.
- 6) In the Japanese language [s] and [ʃ] sounds are vaguely pronounced. For instance, the word ‘stew’ is pronounced like ‘shi-chew.’
- 7) The Japanese language does not have the ‘th’ letter-sound. Instead of the ‘th’ letter-sound [z], [d] and [s] sounds are used.

The following words are everyday words in Japanese that are adopted from the English language. But their Japanese pronunciations are almost impossible for English native speakers to understand.<sup>11)</sup>

air	channel	dessert	god	lady	pop	runner	television
alcohol	chocolate	dry	hall	lamp	pot	shirt	thriller
biscuit	coffee	film	handle	lighter	popular	stamp	tire
button	cup	fork	hoses	locker	radio	stew	van
card	cut	fruit	hot	office	rock	sweater	wet

A number of English educators throughout the nation have criticized today’s English education in Japan. Katsuhiko Togo, an English educator, points out that the essence of language study is

sound. There are many languages without writing systems, but there are not any languages without sounds. In order to learn, language students must be familiar with the sounds of the language and know its grammar and characters. Most Japanese learn in the opposite way. First, they learn the letters of the English alphabet without knowing the correct pronunciation, then they learn English words and grammar, and finally they learn pronunciation and phonetic rules.<sup>12)</sup> This method is certainly different from the way Japanese people develop their native language.

It is crucial for English learners to become aware of the differences in the number of sounds between the English language and the Japanese language. There are only 5 vowel sounds in the Japanese language, while English has 12 vowel sounds. The 5 Japanese vowels are not the same as any of the 12 English vowels. Also, there are 21 consonant sounds in the Japanese language, while English has 24 consonant sounds.<sup>13)</sup>

Some of the Japanese consonant sounds differ greatly from the English ones. Since the Japanese language has fewer consonant sounds, Japanese English speakers tend to substitute the closest consonant of the Japanese language for some of the English consonant sounds. Although the Japanese think they are close enough, to the English native speaker it is very different from the correct sound.

In spite of the fact that phonics is an unknown word to most Japanese people, there are some phonics books available written by Japanese authors. *Eigo Sukidesuka* (Do you like English) written by Yoko Matsuka introduces how American children learn their ABC's by using phonics. According to her book, English-speaking children begin to read later than their Japanese counterparts; however, once they begin to read they improve reading skills more quickly than the Japanese. At the age of 11 they are able to read adult books. It is almost impossible for the Japanese 11-year-old child to read adult Japanese books because the Japanese language uses kanji, which are an adapted form of Chinese characters. Without knowing pronunciation the child cannot read kanji. The English language has only 26 characters and no matter how difficult or complicated words are, they are all combinations of some of these 26 characters.<sup>14)</sup>

Japanese children need to know a large number of kanji in order to read Japanese adult books, which means the more kanji they know, the more sophisticated the books they can read. Part of the reason that Japanese children can read earlier than American children is because hiragana and katakana (the Japanese elemental alphabets) are composed of 50 characters each. Each character has only one pronunciation. Although the English alphabet has only 26 letters, all English words are composed of combinations of some of these 26 letters. American children learn to pronounce all the letters of the alphabet but that does not mean that they can read books.<sup>15)</sup>

American children need to learn the correlation between spelling and pronunciation in order to read books. About 75 percent of English spelling is pronounced according to the rules. By acquiring the basic rules from phonics, children are able to establish skills to read and write in English.<sup>16)</sup> Phonics teaches the correlation between the 24 consonant and the 12 vowel sounds and the spelling of English.<sup>17)</sup>



In order to maximize the power of phonics, it is indispensable for Japanese to master basic English sounds. Most importantly, Japanese need to become aware of their weaknesses, especially sounds not prevalent in their own native tongue.

### ***Conclusion***

This paper has discussed the significance of phonics versus whole language, the present condition of English language acquisition in Japan, and overcoming the Japanese weakness in English language acquisition in order to maximize the power of phonics. In order to progress in English acquisition, Japanese English learners need to learn the basic English sounds on a frequent basis. For instance, phonics toys, radio and television are all useful tools in obtaining listening skills on a routine basis. The more listening skills that a student acquires, the greater the ability will be to decipher and learn the numerous sounds of the English language.

Without basic sounds of English, phonics does not work. It is extremely beneficial for Japanese educators to start introducing their students to the sounds of English in the early stages of their learning process. Some of the crucial letter sounds of English for the Japanese, such as [l], [r], and [θ], [ð] are only naturally mastered prior to puberty. Therefore, parents must partake in their children's English language learning before native language interference takes place. It is desirable that children learn both language sounds simultaneously from infancy.

### **Notes**

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