

# Exploring Phonemic Awareness and Phonics Activities in the EFL Context to Japanese Children (K1- Gr3)

Corazon T. KATO

**Abstract :** Since English as a Foreign Language (EFL) was introduced to elementary schools in Japan; speaking and listening skills have been the emphasis of teaching and learning in the classroom. However, with the recent inclusion of English language in the elementary school curricula, it has become highly relevant that EFL reading and writing skills should be introduced for the children to acquire the proper basic language skills necessary for successful language learning. This report discusses how reading and writing skills were introduced to K1 to Gr3 classes in two schools, in Gifu prefecture, using phonemic awareness and phonics activities. Consistent instructions of phonemic awareness activities to kindergarten children provided evidence of development in basic alphabetic knowledge and principles and, as children progressed and were exposed to explicit phonics instruction, they also acquired significant decoding skills leading to early reading and writing preparedness. Highly motivated children introduced to phonemic awareness activities and explicit phonics instructions were beginner readers by 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade.

**Keywords :** Phonemic Awareness; Phonics; Reading; Writing; Spelling; Kindergarten; Elementary Grade

## I . Introduction

Although speaking and listening skills have been the focus of EFL classes in Japanese elementary schools, reading and writing skills have been generally left out. Issues such as children having difficulty in writing the first language and the fact that teaching reading and writing English skills requires considerable expertise for educators were common reasons cited as to why reading and writing were being ignored. However, as EFL listening and speaking skills progressed and gained success, the gap with reading and writing also widened. This increasing gap has resulted to an imbalanced acquisition of basic language skills and learning strategies for many graduates of elementary schools, as they are required to read and write EFL when they reach junior high school. Research has revealed that “learning to read and write is a part of and not separate from learning to speak and comprehend a language” (Wallach and Butler, 1994, p. 41, as cited in Soifer, in Birsh, 2005, p. 45). Therefore, it is significant to introduce reading and writing skills even to young learners, as failure to cope with the difficulties in higher language learning can be attributed to the lack of skills acquired during the earlier stage of learning.

The application of phonemic awareness and phonics activities in the classroom for several years has

shown significant contribution in assisting the development of EFL reading and writing skills as well as speaking and listening skills of Japanese young learners. Comprehensive studies on phonics (Adams, et al, 1990, cited in Moats and Farrell in Birsh, 2005, p. 30) concluded that, if all EFL students were to be successful, phonics needed to be a necessary component [in the curriculum]. Children who have received explicit instruction of phonemic awareness and phonics acquired and developed literacy skills on reading, writing and spelling.

This report could benefit EFL teachers who are interested in teaching reading and writing skills using phonemic awareness and explicit phonics instruction in young learners in the EFL curriculum. Specifically, this report aims to discuss how phonemic awareness activities and phonics instruction were explored in K1 to Gr3 EFL classrooms.

## Literature Review

EFL proponents of phonemic awareness have reported that poor EFL readers have a weakness in phonemic awareness as shown by “slow and inefficient decoding skills, inaccurate spelling and related language-processing difficulties” (Moats and Farrell, as cited in Birsh, 2005 p.30). Poor readers also over rely on one reading strategy by using

context and picture clues, a characteristic commonly exhibited by many EFL Japanese learners. According to Sulzby (1985, as cited in Blevins 1998) this is due to an inadequacy in phonic skills and a strategy imbalance. A wide range of studies has indicated that EFL learners must be taught phonemic awareness and phonics skills to overcome this reading weakness. However, phonemic awareness and phonics skills are not explicitly taught in Japanese public schools, and it is apparent that EFL learners who have attended cram schools (Juku) are at an advantage over those who do not, as basic phonics skills are usually integrated in the curriculum. Substantial EFL research has confirmed that all young children benefit from phonemic awareness activities, as it is a prerequisite for reading and a consequence of learning to read (Yopp, 1992), and it provides the basic building blocks of a good EFL linguistics phonics program (McGuinness, 2004).

Similarly, staunch advocates of phonics have credited phonics knowledge in enhancing decoding skills ability among children in their figuring out and analyzing unfamiliar words (Stanovich and West, 1989, as cited in Blevins 1998; Cunningham and Cunningham, Moore and Moore, 2004). Other EFL protagonists have added that early success in decoding skills predicts later skills in reading comprehension (Beck and Juel, 1995) as phonics and reading comprehension work together. “When a child uses phonics to decode a word during reading, the child receives instant feedback as to whether the word sounds familiar, fits into the syntax of the sentence and makes sense given what has been read previously” (Cunningham et al, 2004, p. 188). Furthermore, phonics can help improve spelling ability because reading and spelling share the same basic principles. Phonics emphasizes spelling patterns, which become familiar from reading (Blevins, 1998).

Therefore, if basic phonics skills are not explicitly taught, EFL learners lack knowledge about the relationships between letter print and sound. Thus, they face more difficulties to acquire and develop reading and writing skills. These difficulties can lead to learning anxieties, lack of motivation and interest in learning EFL. In order to overcome these difficulties, teaching phonemic awareness

and phonics skills is beneficial to EFL learners.

#### Definition of terms

Alphabetic Principles - the understanding that letters represent sounds and are ordered in a visual sequence in written words. And phonemes are ordered in a specific temporal sequence in speech and that speech maps onto print (Uhryas cited in Birsh, 2005).

Phonemic awareness - the understanding that a word is made up of sounds and the ability to manipulate sounds in spoken words (Adams, 1990; Stanovich, 1992; Chall, 1996; Beck and Juel, 1995; as cited in Blevins, 1998). Children who are able to acquire phonemic awareness are able to reflect on and manipulate sounds to create a new word (Hodson, 1994; Stahl, 1992, as cited in Ericson and Juliebo, 2006). For example, the letters in *top* can be rearranged to form a new word *pot*.

Phonics - the knowledge of the combination of graphemes (letter print) and phonemes (letter sound) (Uhryas cited in Birsh, 2005), or the direct teaching of sound-symbol correspondences (Moats, 2000). In phonics instruction children learn that letter *c* is sounded as the phoneme /k/ and *ph* is sounded as the phoneme /f/.

## II. Setting and Participants

The classes were conducted regularly in two kindergarten schools from April 2006 - March 2010 to the following groups:

General Classes: Kindergarten-1(Nenchu), Kindergarten-2 (Nenchou). General classes received 30 to 40 minute EFL lessons twice a month. Classes were composed of 24-34 children. There were 32 classes that received phonemic awareness instructions from 2006 to 2010.

Private Classes: Kindergarten-1(Nenchu); Kindergarten-2 (Nenchou); 1<sup>st</sup> Grade, 2<sup>nd</sup> Grade and 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade. Private classes received 40 to 50 minute EFL lessons once a week. Classes were composed of 7-10 children. There were 24 classes that received phonemic awareness and phonics instructions from 2006 to 2010.

## III. Application and Discussion

Exploring Alphabetic Knowledge, Alphabetic

Principles and Phonemic Awareness Activities to Kindergarten in General Classes:

A. The Introduction of Alphabetic Knowledge and principle using letter recognition and letter names.

1. Letter Recognition: The English alphabet song was sung to the tune of Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star without visual cue to avoid distraction at the beginning of the school year. When children were familiar with the song, the 26 visual letter prints were presented. Letter prints were introduced in a lesson using Sans Serif as children often encountered this print in EFL reading materials and was used in actual writing.

2. Letter naming: There are 21 letters of the alphabet that contain the most common sound assigned to them in their names. However, critics of letter naming have discouraged teaching it due to some letter names have no relationship to their sounds that would lead to confusion among learners. Advocates of letter naming like Moats (2000, p.150) explained that, "letter names are so much a part of daily classroom life, that to avoid confusion among learners, clarity and practice are the most important factors in helping children learn them". In agreement, prominent supporters of letter naming also justified its importance and advantages. Cox (1992, as cited in Birsh, 2005, p. 114) mentioned that, "the name of a letter is its most stable property." Other properties of the letter vary and can confuse children, as in shapes (upper and lower case as well as the differing fonts: e.g. A, **A**, A, a, **a**, a) and speech sounds (short and long vowels). According to Gibson, et al (1962, as cited in Gunning, 1966, p. 55 in Birsh, 2005, p. 116), children can uniquely label different letter shapes with letter names as they can distinguish the special feature of the letter such as identifying curves, straight lines, slanted, open or closed. In addition, Allen et al (cited in Birsh, 2005, p. 115) also reported that, "children who know letter names have an advantage for learning the alphabetic principle", as knowing letter names helps children recall letter-sound association. And comprehensive research findings have shown that "the value of accurate letter-naming predicts later reading achievement" (Badian, 1994; Chall, 1996; Share, et al, 1984; cited in Birsh 2005, p. 117). Letter naming was used in class, as it was much easier for children to recall letter names than letter sound.

Some kinesthetic activities used in the classes in building letter recognition and letter naming were: "Touching of body parts" while singing the ABCs; "Children being an alphabet" lining up in order; "Puzzling the train alphabet" ; "Knowing the missing alphabet" ; "Finding my pair," children looking for letter pairs.

B. Exploring Phonemic Awareness in General Kindergarten Classes: Letter sequencing; Anchoring letter print and letter sound; Oddity tasks; Rhythmic, chants and kinesthetic phonemic activities; Playing with names; Fun writing and Stories and plays:

1. Letter Sequencing: As there is no consensus in the correct order of teaching the alphabets, vowels were introduced at the start and followed by consonants. A grapheme and its phoneme were taught in a lesson or topic. Example: Topic- Animals: letter print and sound: /e/-e for *elephant*. Beginning letters in a word were introduced first, as significant studies revealed that phonemes at the beginning of words are easier to recognize and produce than phonemes in the ends of the words (Zhurova, 1964; Lewkowics, 1980; Cavoures, 1964; as cited in March and Mineo, 1977; in Ericson and Juliebo, 2006). Children easily produced the letter sound /m/ in *monkey* but had difficulty of producing /m/ in *am, farm, time, etc.* "I a..fine." "Old McDonald had a fa.." (Sounded/ng/as children had difficulty closing their lips).

2. Anchoring Letter prints (grapheme) and Letter sounds (phoneme):

For a strong foundation of alphabetic knowledge and principles, it is highly important that the letter print and letter sound should anchor in children's memory. How? For the image of a letter to anchor, a letter-print is shown, for the sound of a letter to anchor an image familiar to children's vocabulary is presented and spoken. For example, when presenting a letter the teacher says, "This is letter *Ee*." by illustrating on the board or showing *Ee*, "Ee stands for /e/ as in elephant" (showing a picture key, *eLephant*). Activities used in the classes were: Repeating a sound called reiteration by Zhurova (1973; Lie, 1991, as cited in Ericson and Juliebo, 2006). (e. g., /b/-/b/-/b/- *b*). Children have found varying the sounds (soft or loud) and emotion (happy, sad or angry) interesting. Doing

letter search on clothing has been engaging to curious children. Associating letters with children's names has deepened letter recognition. A child whose name begins with the target letter would often say, "Watashino k" (*My K*). Identifying and counting the target letter print on familiar word. For example: Write the word rabbit on the board, and then ask, "How many b's are there in the word rabbit?" These activities have been fun and effective in making connections with letter print and letter sound relations.

3. Oddity Tasks: The ability to do oddity tasks using pictures or objects has been helpful in assisting learners to anchor in alphabetic knowledge and principles due to most children are visual learners. When working on a letter, a set of 4 pictures or objects is presented. (e.g., *pumpkin, pie, ball, penguin*). Then the teacher exaggerates the pronunciation of picture/object names to emphasize the target lettersound. Next, the children try to identify the picture/object that doesn't carry the target letter sound. Following that, the class chants the words that carry the target sound in a familiar rhythm. Finally, children clap hands twice when sounding the lettersound and point to the letterprint/picture or object when sounding the name. (e.g., /p/-/p/ -*P* (2x), /p/-/p/- *pumpkin*(2x), /p/-/p/- *pie*(2x), /p/-/p/-*penguin* (2x). When working in smaller groups children touch/tap the pictures/objects instead of pointing. Children were able to identify the right pictures by listening, watching and repeating the words. The combination of tactile approach strengthened the process of anchoring letter print and letter sound in children's memory as different senses were involved.

4. Rhythm, Chants and Kinesthetic Phonemic Activities: Rhythmic and kinesthetic phonemic activities have energized the EFL classroom and promoted creativity in language learning. Active body movements suit properly to the physical and mental growth of very young learners that children enjoyed clapping hands, stomping feet and tapping fingers while learning. For example: Chanting /p/-/p/ - *P* . Children clap twice front when sounding the lettersound /p/-/p/ and clap once above head when sounding the letter-name *P* .

5. Playing with names: Playing with names has

helped children recognize grapheme and phoneme because they were often seen, heard and spoken. The following activities were used in the classes: (a) associating a letter to children's name: For example, write the letter *K* on the board. Ask children whose names start with /k/ to stand up. The class chants the phoneme as they point to the grapheme *K*, and point to the child when sounding his/her name: (e. g., /k/-/k/- Kenta, /k/-/k/- Kimiha); (b) changing beginning letter sounds of a name; (e.g., Kentarou, /g/- /g/-Gentarou) (c) omitting the beginning letter sound of a name; (e.g., Miyu- iyu).

Using names for simple word manipulation activities were amusing to children and boost the connection of letter print and sound relationship.

6. Fun Writing. Kindergarten classes generally practiced writing by: (a) Imaginary writing: sky-writing, writing on someone's back, on palms, on rough walls and carpeted floors. Imaginary writing allowed children to prepare mentally before the actual writing experience. (b) Using Worksheets: K1 children were given simple worksheet activities (i. e., finding letters, coloring, ringing, matching and simple tracing). K2 children practiced writing by tracing before the actual writing.

7. Stories and Plays: Stories could entertain, enchant, inform and above all stimulate imagination and transport children to new worlds. (a) Rhyming Stories were very attractive to children and proven effective in developing memorization, vocabulary building and grammar input. (b) Echo reading using very easy books that children could predict and repeat lines was appropriate for young learners and even older ones. Materials: 5 Little Monkeys Series, Baa Baa Black Sheep, Ginger Bread Man, The Little Red Hen, Each Peach Pear Plum, Shared Reading series.

Discussion:

Singing the English alphabets enhanced letter recognition and naming as children learned the alphabets by rote at this stage. It also helped develop the understanding that the letters are sequenced. When both upper and lower cases were presented, upper case letters were distinguished visually than lower case letters. This can be explained by how often the learners are exposed to the alphabets.

Some studies revealed that unlike in ESL classes where pre-school children are exposed to the English alphabet in daily life, in EFL classes, children have limited exposure to alphabets before entering kindergarten. Contradicting previous assertions against teaching letter names, naming letters was found advantageous in many activities especially when spelling out children's names and familiar words in advanced activities.

Teaching phonemic awareness activities to young learners was highly beneficial in providing the basic understanding of alphabetic knowledge and principles and preparing the children for complex language learning activities ahead. As the activities were mostly oral, phonemic awareness suited perfectly to young learner's age.

### C. Exploring Alphabetic Knowledge, Alphabetic Principles and Phonemic Awareness Activities to Kindergarten in Private Classes

#### 1. Exploring Alphabetic Knowledge, Alphabetic Principles to Kindergarten in Private Classes:

EFL textbooks were adopted in these classes. For effective understanding of alphabetic knowledge and alphabetic principles, the following activities were integrated in the lessons.

a) The alphabet song: The alphabet song was regularly sung through multi-sensory technique-visual, auditory, kinesthetic and tactile. Children looked, pointed to picture in text and sang in parts or unison. Then they sang again while touching and feeling the alphabet manipulatives (blocks/foams or hard/soft cards). b) Pair-work search: Children worked in pairs and searched for upper and lower case letters in piles of 3D alphabets. c) Letter-Art activities: Extra time was spent on activity sheets for coloring, cutting, pasting, writing the alphabet and making mini alphabet books. Associating a letter to child's name and forming this letter using clay or pipe cleaners. d) Audio lessons: At this stage children were exposed to more audio materials. Classes listened to more audio stories, sang more songs and performed more role-plays. e) Writing: Children were encouraged to practice guided writing on their activity books at home and in class and worksheets were corrected.

#### 2. Exploring Phonemic Awareness in Kindergarten Private Classes.

The two basic tasks of phonemic awareness regularly introduced to the classes were: rhymes and alliteration and oddity tasks. Phonemic awareness activities were learned more thoroughly in rhythmic patterns using musical instruments to enhance active participation.

Task 1-The ability to hear rhymes and alliteration: Rhyme: For example, A cat A hat. A cat on a hat A pig A wig A pig with a wig Alliteration: For example, Jeremy Jaguar can jump Yopp and Yopp, (2000, in Cunningham et al, 2004, p. 117), mentioned that exposure to "lots of nursery rhymes and word play lead to phonemic awareness."

Using rhyming books were found ideal for young children in big and small classes. By rhyming, children discovered sound similarities in spoken language (Lieberman, et al, 1974, as cited in Ericson and Juliebo, 2006). In addition, Van Kleeck and Bryant (1984; as cited in Ericson and Juliebo, 2006) found the importance of sharing the joy of reading selections that have language play as a major component in language learning. The classes received at least one story rhyme to sing, act and play per month. Children who were attentive and engaged in enjoyable activities involving rhyme and sound play were able to analyze individual sounds in word. They acquired sentence-patterns quickly when doing a rhyme because words and language patterns were predictable, easy to remember and imitate. This was supported by Yopp (1995, as cited in Ericson and Juliebo, 2006, p. 25), that rhymes also "provide opportunities [for children] to focus on structure without having to attend to its meaning". Therefore, rhyming stories are also valuable tool for developing language fluency in EFL classes. Materials: Brown Bear; 5 Little Monkeys Series; Baa Baa Black Sheep; Ginger Bread Man; Little Red Hen; Twinkle - Twinkle Little Star; Row - Row Your Boat; Pete the Cat; and Alpha Tales.

Task 2-The ability to do oddity tasks: Commonly called as "odd man out" by Bradley and Bryant (1983). Doing oddity tasks using rhythm and short chant with body movements were effective in anchoring letter sound and

introducing vocabulary. For example, frog, fox, fire, pig. (Discussed earlier). Materials: Stuffed objects/toys, picture cards, and musical instruments.

Discussion:

Phonemic awareness activities have helped broadened children’s understanding that a letter carries a sound, and that the word is made up of different letters and sounds. That taking one letter out from a word a new word is created or changing one letter can change it to another word and so to another sound. Exposure to phonemic awareness activities, have deepened children’s awareness of alphabetic knowledge and discover alphabetic principles. As children were repeatedly exposed to the process, their understanding increased that they began to decode. It was clearly evident that the acquisition of proper knowledge of letter sounds resulted to clearer utterances and improved pronunciations.

D. Exploring Phonemic Awareness Activities to 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade Classes

At these levels, higher EFL textbooks were adopted for each grade. In addition, in depth instruction of phonemic awareness were provided in the curriculum.

The classes were exposed to five basic types of phonemic awareness tasks based on Adams (1990), with more emphasis on: Tasks 3- Oral blending, Task 4- Oral Segmentation and Task 5- Phonemic Manipulation. Each task followed a progressive to more complex activities. A maximum of 15 minutes of the 40-50 minute-lesson was utilized in order to cater to other class works. Armbruster, Lehr, and Osborne, (2001, as cited in Cunningham et al, 2004 p. 117) suggested that the desirable “phonemic awareness program should be limited to 20 hours over the whole school year to

avoid neglecting other language development such as vocabulary, oral language and comprehension”.

Task types and activities in 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade:

Task 3-The ability to orally blend words:

After children were taught the letter sound relationship, they were taught to blend to produce words. Blending is “a critical component of learning sound-symbol correspondences”, according to Carreker (as cited in Birsh, 2005, p. 225). Haddocks (1978, as cited in Blevins, 1998, p. 86-97) also reported that, “to blend separate phonemes (letter - sounds) and to associate a limited number of letter sound correspondences result in transfer to word reading”.

There were 3 blending activities explored: Blending by onset-rime division, final blending and successive blending (Blevins, 1998, p. 94).

(a) Blending by onset-rime division: An onset is the part of the syllable that precedes the vowel of the syllable. (e.g., *man-* /m/- /an/: *m* is the onset). A rime is the part of a syllable that precedes its vowel and any consonant sounds that comes after it. (e.g., *man-*/m/-/an/: *an* is the rime). (b) Final blending: For example: teaching the word *sad*. First, point to the letter *s* and say /s/. Second, point to the letter *a* and say /a/. Third, slide your index finger to letters *sa* and say /sa/. After that, point to the letter *d* and say /d/. Finally, slowly slide your index finger under the letters *sad* and say /sad/. In (c) Successive blending, first point to the beginning of the word. Then slowly run your index finger under the word and say the word prolonging the sound that each letter stands for. For example: *ssssaaad*, then slowly compress *ssaad* and finally *sad*. Blending by onset-rime division was easier to most children as it assisted them to discover counting syllables and provide reading preparedness.

Table 1. Sequence of Phonemic Instruction

Phonemic skills	K1	K2	1 <sup>st</sup> 2 <sup>nd</sup> & 3 <sup>rd</sup> Grade
1.Rhyme and Alliteration	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
2.Oddity Tasks	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
3.Oral Blending			<input type="checkbox"/>
4.Oral segmentation			<input type="checkbox"/>
5.Phonemic Manipulation			<input type="checkbox"/>
			• • • •

Exposure to lots of practice in oral blending activities has assisted children to hear clearly how sounds were combined together to make up words. Blending has also enhanced spelling development. The mistakes children made in invented spelling gave them new experience on how blending letter print and sound work. Blending orally with the use of manipulatives such as colored

blocks and color-coded cards were highly engaging to children. Children have shown increased motivation to keep doing as they experienced success in the process. Activities in classes: (a) *Saying it slowly* (Beck and Juel, 1995), demonstrating how to say the word slowly by blending the sounds together. (e.g., /b/ -/a/ - /t/ *bat*). (b) *Tapping and Sweeping* (Greene and Enfield, 1985, as cited in Carreker in Birsh, 2005). With tiles or cards make a word. For example, *bat*: With a finger, tap under /b/, then tap under /a/, then tap under /t/ and sweep a hand under the word. Frequently, children do kinesthetic blending by making a fist and tap the arm for each letter and sweep for the final word. If a child missed a letter, it was found important to name each letter in a word because naming the letters could strengthen the recognition of letter-print of the word.

#### Task 4-The ability to do segmentation:

Before children could do segmentation, it is consequential that children learn to isolate the initial letter sound because it is the first step in letter-sound segmentation (Lewkowicz, 1980, as cited in Ericson and Juliebo, 2006). Isolation was introduced to kindergarten classes by isolating initial letter sounds from children's names and very familiar words. (e.g., Ken; red; pig, bag). During this latter stage, isolation was practiced on text related words. When isolating syllables, clapping on each syllable was found highly effective. (e.g., *strawberry*). Segmenting is a higher form of phonemic awareness. Children exposed to the letter sound relationships develop the ability to segment letter-sound once they start to pick up the alphabetic principle involved. This was highly noticeable among quick learners in kindergarten and demonstrated by first graders who have been exposed to explicit phonics approach. Although children are good at guessing, "not until the children reach the age of 6 or the beginning of formal reading instruction that they are able to segment phonemes and show signs to begin reading unfamiliar word on his or her own" . (e.g., *map* sounds /m/-/a/-/p/). (Adams, 1990, in Uhry, as cited in Birsh, 2005, p. 83-107).

Second graders who were exposed longer to explicit phonics instruction displayed higher abilities to grasp the concept of segmenting and thus began to show pre-reading and early reading skills as well as predict spellings when writing. This

validated the findings of Griffith and Olson (1992), Yopp (1988), that blending and segmenting speech sounds are closely related to early reading and writing. However, blending and segmenting didn't come easy to most children. It was easier for children to segment and blend the onset and rime but some have shown difficulty to blend and segment separate letters. For example, the word *b-at* was easier to segment and blend than *b-a-t*. Resources used: Hooked on Phonics, Phonics Chart Pocket, Toss and learn blocks, The Little Red Tool Box Literacy Manipulatives.

#### Task 5-The ability to do phonemic manipulation:

In making words children were engaged in manipulative activities where they learned how to look for patterns in words or changing only one letter or where to put a letter to make a word. Activities used in the classes were: substitutions and deletions.

Initial sound substitution: Replace the first sound in *mat* with *s*; Final sound substitution: Replace the last sound in *mat* with *p*; Middle sound substitution: Replace the middle sound in *map* with *o*; Deletions: Syllable deletion: Say sister without *sis*; Initial sound deletion: Say *fat* without *f*; Final sound deletion: Say *fox* without *x*; Initial phoneme in a blend deletion: Say *fruit* without *f*; final phoneme in a blend deletion: Say *jump* without *p*. Other than writing on the board, using learning blocks, traditional flat cards and 3D tiles were very useful in presenting these exercises. Discussions were highly enhanced during pair work activities as children tried to learn and discover how words were formed using manipulatives. Learning blocks and 3D tiles received more positive response than traditional cards as children enjoyed the tactile materials. Resources: Hooked on Phonics. Toss and learn Blocks, Learning Tiles and Phonics Chart Pocket.

#### E. Exploring Phonics in 1<sup>st</sup>, 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade

Phonics activities adopted in classes: Phonemic awareness exercises; Explicit teaching of sound - spelling relationships; Blending exercises; Word building exercises; Controlled text reading and shared reading and Free writing

Initially, phonics was introduced in classes using

the implicit approach, as phonics activities were included in the textbooks. In implicit approach, list of words presented in textbook were learned with common phonemic element; the words were examined focusing on what was common and finding similar sound; when the common sound was discovered, the spelling that stands for the sound was discussed and children were asked to verbalize the sound and spelling (Blevins, 1998). However, it was highly visible that children did not thoroughly grasp the sound-print relationship using the implicit phonics approach.

With the weaknesses of implicit phonics approach, explicit phonics instruction was introduced and integrated with tactile-kinesthetic approach. Inexplicit approach, letter names and letter sounds were taught and reviewed; the principles of blending sounds to form words were taught and explained and blending unknown words were given (Blevins, 1998). In Tactile-kinesthetic approach, phonics was learned through visual, auditory, kinesthetic and touch. Tactile-kinesthetic approach was beneficial as children's ages suit well to physical activity. In order to gain benefit from each technique, the combined approach- implicit, explicit and tactile-kinesthetic- was adopted with more emphasis on explicit instruction.

1. Phonemic awareness exercises (discussed earlier)

2. Explicit sound-spelling relationship:

For example: *h/h/- hit*. Explain that /h/ stands for the letter *h*. Then present a memory device such as key picture/word. Then write on the board and make example in a sentence in order for the children to remember the relationships. In this exercise, text words to be used in the succeeding phonics activities such as blending, word building, reading and writing were used.

3. Blending exercises: At this time blending was taught progressively and consistently using graded books and worksheets.

Example: /a/ /d/ /t/

*a-d ad sad mad bad*

*a-t at rat fat mat*

/i/ /g/ /t/

*i-g ig big pig wig*

*i-t it hit sit mit*

*A cat. A cat sat on a mat.*

*A pig. A big pig has a wig.*

Materials: Hooked on Phonics.

4. Word Building and spelling exercise: Children made words using manipulatives such as: colored -cube-blocks with color-coded picture cards, magnetic alphabet foams and alphabet cards.

a). Using colored-cube-blocks with color-coded picture cards: For example: Take the word feet. First, children look at the picture card with a word print on colored squares and study their relationship.

(e.g., *f* on yellow square; *ee*- on blue square; *t*- on red square). Then, children try to study the spelling. Next, they flip the card. After that, they look at the picture without the word print and try to recall the letters on each colored square. Then using the colored blocks they form the word by following the color cues. Finally, they read the word and write on lined paper.

b). Making CVC (consonant-vowel-consonant) words: First, give two consonants cards and one vowel card to 3 children. Then, each child represents the letter and tries to form a word. For example: /t/- /b/-/a/. Possible words: *bat, tab*. These tactile activities were found engaging to the children.

5. Controlled Reading and Shared Reading

Controlled reading was provided so children had opportunities for repeated practice to recycle words previously learned. During controlled and shared reading, the teacher read a story. Then the children were given similar mini-story-books to read after the teacher (echo reading). Next, they worked in pairs and tried to read and re-read the story to build confidence to be able to read to other pairs. Finally, when children were familiar of several stories told and retold, each child chose a story to read to the class.

Materials: Hooked on Phonics, Fun with Phonics.

F. Free writing: As children already knew more letter prints, they learned to write words practicing the target letter sounds discussed; they were encouraged to recall and write events of stories through pictures and described them.

Discussion:

For phonics to be effective, phonemic awareness must be taught and learned first. Learners who joined the classes from 1st grade had difficulties with phonics because they missed the phonemic awareness skills that were taught earlier to other



students through songs, rhymes and stories. Thus, supplementary hours to work on phonemic awareness exercises were necessary. Implicit phonics instruction had little influence on children's pre-reading and writing skills development. High evidence on children's progress in decoding abilities was evident when explicit phonics instruction was applied. Explicit phonics instruction integrated with tactile-kinesthetic approach was a powerful tool in teaching literacy skills.

Phonemic awareness and phonics activities taught in the context of a print-rich environment using lots of storybooks further facilitated learning for successful early literacy skills. The impact of stories of different genre, that were read and re-read during the years, have highly benefited fluency and acquisition of language chunks of correct grammar structure and language patterns. Children who loved to be read stories also built more vocabulary as they were exposed to both familiar and unfamiliar words.

As writing, "is not part of phenomenal development and should be taught as a basic skill", (Slingerland, 1981, as cited in Wolf in Birsh, 2005, p. 413-438) many children had difficulty learning it. However, when children became more familiar of the letter print and sound, they began to decode and write. It took more than 2 or 3 years for children in the classes to write each letter legibly. Some children found writing challenging while others enjoyed the process. Developing writing skills also needed patience for both teacher and students. Therefore, it is very crucial that children should have fun and sense of achievement during writing activities at the very beginning stage to keep their motivation and interest to do writing exercises. Although, writing and spelling were well distributed in a lesson when using phonics, children needed to devote extra time writing outside the class to practice on letter shapes and sizes using the activity books. Lower case letters were given more importance from the 1st grade as they were commonly met in EFL reading materials.

Predictable performance among children was noticeable during the years of learning. Children who struggled in recognizing letter sound and letter print relationships in kindergarten had difficulties

with phonics in the 1st grade, thus, acquired poor decoding skills and as a consequence read less in the 2nd grade. Those children tend to rely more on picture clues not only in reading and writing but also in speaking and listening activities. Whereas, children who had good grasps of the letter sound principles exhibited the following:

1. Independent learning abilities when faced with new vocabulary and structures in advanced activities.
2. Ability to follow instructions from audio CDs with minimal guidance. That is, they listened and followed written instructions by learning to decode words.
3. Demonstrate early reading and writing preparedness skills.
4. Produced clearer pronunciation when speaking.
5. Began to read at 2nd Grade.

#### IV. Limitations and Conclusion

1. Phonics becomes complicated when mixed rules are taught.
2. Lack of knowledge of phonics instruction hampers teaching ability to teach phonics even good resources are available.
3. It's possible to overdo phonics instruction to children that have poor understanding of letter sound and print relations and could impede the learning process.

The introduction of phonemic and phonic awareness during early EFL instruction has major beneficial effects on reading, writing and spelling. In addition there is also a flow-on improvement in listening and speaking skills. This implies that children have acquired and developed some balanced language skills and learning strategies beneficial in EFL learning. Exposure to advance phonemic activities can further enhance EFL language skills and learning strategies. This is highly applicable to higher elementary school grades (5th and 6th), as extensive phonics activities require critical thinking abilities appropriate to the cognitive level of higher elementary school children. In addition, as phonics skills are not explicitly taught in most public JHS and SHS in Japan, it is highly relevant to integrate phonemic awareness and phonics activities into the EFL curriculum in higher elementary school grades to further enhance the language skills and

language learning strategies necessary for successful EFL learning in higher education. To conclude, the application of phonemic awareness and explicit phonics instruction in EFL classroom is highly significant in learning EFL. For children learning EFL to be successful in developing reading and writing skills, there is no better way but to integrate phonemic awareness and explicit phonics instruction in the EFL curriculum.

Teaching phonemic awareness and phonics activities indeed require some teaching expertise. Lack of confidence among Japanese teachers can be overcome by collaboration with other teachers working on the same interests and acquiring training from experts. Also, for children learning EFL to receive explicit phonics instruction, variety of experiences is necessary to enhance explicit phonics instruction. Although teachers are always in an ideal position to develop EFL materials that are functional and fun according to the context of classroom themes, collecting variety of relevant resources that have been tested successfully in EFL classrooms is helpful to meet the children's needs. Therefore, EFL materials that work best to the level of the children in the class and friendly for the teacher to use should be properly planned and examined for smooth application of phonics literacy program in the EFL classroom.

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