Teaching Phonics in Japanese Schools

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What is Phonics?

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- a system of teaching reading and spelling that stresses basic symbol-sound relationships and their application in decoding words; a system used especially in beginning instruction.
  csmp.ucop.edu/crlp/resources/glossary.html

- the phonological structure of oral language and its representation in written language.
  www.crede.org/tools/glossary.html

- sometimes referred to as sound/symbol connections, or graphophonics, phonics is the understanding of how letters or spelling patterns (graphemes) represent sounds of speech (phonemes). It involves awareness of the sounds of individual letters or letter combinations. Phonics requires the understanding that sounds can be blended to make a word, and a mastery of some rules about certain sound patterns. Phonics can be taught in many ways. All learners do not require the same amount or sequence of phonics instruction. Phonics should be balanced with instruction on language and meaning. A student may be able to sound out a word
  www.learner.org/channel/workshops/readingk2/front/keyterms2.html

- a method of teaching beginning readers to read and pronounce words by learning the sound of letters, letter groups and syllables
  ww2.aps.edu/users/apsedumain/CurriculumInstruction/glossary.htm

In this workshop, I will be working off the assumption that phonics describes the way that letters are used to represent sounds.

Sounds are represented by letters, letters do not 'have' sounds.

The same sound can be represented by different letters (kite, cat, chiropodist) and most letters have more than one sound.

Question: How do you pronounce "ghoti"?

Basic vs. Comprehensive Phonics

Talking about phonics is complicated by the fact that there are almost as many different definitions of what phonics is as there are teachers. There are also wildly differing views on how much phonics should be taught.

I believe that only the most simple and basic phonic relationships should be taught to Japanese students in junior and senior high school. This should be enough to give them the skills and the confidence to start reading simple texts on their own without overwhelming them with complicated explanations.

In this handout I do not refer to elementary schools, as the Monbukagakusho guidelines for the period of integrated study discourage teaching reading and writing. However, if you want to introduce phonics practice in elementary school, most of this material is easily adapted.

English Phonemes

A phoneme can be defined as the smallest unit of sound in a language. English has approximately 43 (the exact number is hard to determine as people disagree over whether or not /w/ in witch and /wh/ in which are different sounds or not).

The table below lists 42 basic phonemes in English, along with key words to show the pronunciation of each.

The Basic Code

The Basic Code				
VOWELS			CONSONANTS	
Sound	Key Word	Letter(s)	Sound/ Letter	Key Word
a	sat	a	b	bed
e	set	e	d	date
i	sit	i	f	fun
o	dog	o	g	get
u	but	u	h	hot
ae	ate	a-e	j	jump
ee	seem	ee	k	kin
ie	time	i-e	c	(as option for k)
oe	tone	o-e	l	log
ue	cute	u-e	m	mat
oo	book	oo	n	not
oo	soon	oo	p	pan
oi	oil	oi/oy	r	red
ou	out	ou	s	sit
er	her	er	t	top
ah/er/	far	ar	v	vet
oe/er/	for	or	w	wet
			x/ks	fox
			z	zip
			ch	chip
			ng	song
			qu	quit
			sh	ship
			th	them
			th	thin

*This table is for teachers. Students should use the anchor words on page 7.

Why teach phonics in Japanese schools?

Why Teach Phonics?

Most teachers do not explicitly teach phonics in either JHS or SHS in Miyagi. Students are introduced to the alphabet (names of letters) at the beginning of junior high school, and that is the extent of their phonics training. They then proceed to try to memorize the spelling of all the new words they encounter. The brightest students will discover the connection between sounds and letters on their own, but most will not.

Give students tools to work with English

Students who understand the connection between sounds and letters, who have practiced reading and writing phonetically regular words (real and nonsense), and who have grasped basic phonics rules, will be able to learn how to read and write new vocabulary much more quickly and easily, and perhaps more importantly, will be able to have a go at reading and writing unfamiliar words.

Increase student confidence/reduce student anxiety

Mastering basic phonics and succeeding at reading and writing unfamiliar words will boost student confidence, and more importantly, will make it easier for students to learn new words, read texts, and write in English. This will reduce the anxiety and discomfort that students face when they run into the limits of their potential for memorizing the spelling of new words.

By giving them the tools to understand and categorize spelling (reading phonetically regular words according to the rules they have learned, and memorizing irregular ones) we can reduce the amount of time and effort students have to put into memorizing new words.

Help less able students to keep up

If basic phonics is not explicitly taught, the most able students (the brighter students or the ones who have extra tuition outside of school) will figure out phonics rules for themselves, while less able students will not. This will lead to even wider ranges of achievement in classes and result in many students becoming disheartened. If we teach the rules explicitly, all students will have the same opportunities.

Allow students to read independently

I believe the key to developing advanced English skills in Japan lies in extensive independent reading. An understanding of basic phonics rules allows students to try to read simple texts on their own, which will lead to increased vocabulary, a better understanding of grammar, and greater confidence in their English ability.

How can we teach phonics?

Phonics instruction is most effective as regular, short sessions, integrated into normal classes. Long, one-off sessions are much less effective than a number of much shorter sessions.

Phonics practice activities can be good for warm-ups or for breaking up a class by giving students something different to do for a few minutes.

Don't teach, demonstrate
Don't demonstrate, guide

From the beginning, if you can encourage students to try to figure out rules for themselves and to take an active interest in this new 'game' (and learning phonics rules can be fun like a game) then not only will they internalize the rules much more thoroughly but they will also be building good study habits and an interest in English that should transfer to other aspects of English classes.

Rather than telling students the answer, show them examples and encourage them to guess it. Students will remember an answer they struggled to find and will forget one they weren't really listening to.

Practice Actively

After introducing concepts, practice them extensively through a variety of different activities. Be sure to practice writing from the very beginning too, as writing is more difficult and takes longer to assimilate. Also, being able to write shows that students have really absorbed the knowledge.

Extensive practice is important because students need to be able to read and write automatically, without thinking about it too much.

Set Up Success

When demonstrating, practicing, and testing phonics, plan activities so your students will succeed. Rather than testing their knowledge, allow them to show off what they have learned. Make sure students have practiced enough before testing them. Students who succeed are encouraged and are more likely to keep succeeding. Students who fail become discouraged and are more likely to keep failing. Try to set up activities and tests so that all your students can succeed.

By keeping the amount of new material limited and the amount of practice high, we can maximize the chances of students internalizing the material and succeeding in mastering it.

The next section will deal with specific activities to introduce and practice phonics.

Politics

In order to introduce phonics effectively in Japanese junior or senior high schools it is essential to get the understanding and support of JTEs. If JTEs are on-board and enthusiastic about teaching phonics, students will be able to do short practice activities in all their English classes, not just the team-taught ones.

If JTEs do not understand why you want to introduce phonics instruction, they will not support you and it will be extremely difficult to get results.

Therefore the first step towards building an effective phonics program is to broach the subject with your JTEs and see what they know and how they feel about teaching the students basic phonics.

Persuasion

In an ideal world, your JTE will know all about phonics and why it's a great idea to introduce it in JHS/SHS, and has just been waiting for an opportunity to try it out.

Unfortunately, it is more likely that your JTE will be unfamiliar with or opposed to introducing phonics into their classes. In this case, take things slowly, refer to the "why teach phonics in Japanese schools?" page for ideas, and emphasize that taking the time to teach phonics explicitly now will save time later because students will be more confident and better able to deal with reading and writing.

Start small, spending only 5 minutes each class on phonics activities. Use them as warm-ups, or as a change of pace from other activities in the class. Hopefully they will go well, the students will be interested, and your JTE will come around.

Planning

Once things have started moving, you will need a rough plan of what you will do over the year/during the time you have available.

Don't be too ambitious: the most important thing is that students feel comfortable and confident, and that they get enough practice to actually internalize the material. If they have had enough practice, students should be able to read and write phonically regular words automatically, without thinking about them too much.

A fairly standard plan would include, in the following order:

- single letters: a, e, t, c, h, l, etc.
- CV combinations: da, bi, ga, na, nu, ze, etc.
- CVC combinations: dab, tef, giy, pok, etc.
- regular C blends: bl, gr, cr, etc.
- dipthongs, double Vs: ae, ai, oa, oo, ee, etc.
- irregular C blends: ph, ch, sh, etc.
- magic 'e': cut<u>e</u>, tid<u>e</u>, tap<u>e</u>, etc.

***C = consonant**
V = vowel

Introducing Phonics

When introducing phonics to students, it is important not to go too quickly. All students should be comfortable with what you have done so far before you move on. After introducing some new concepts, be sure to practice them thoroughly through both reading and writing activities. It is very important that students be able to write what they have learned as well as read it (this helps internalize the language much better). As always, be sure to vary the activities you use so that even if you are practicing writing the same sounds for the third time, you are doing it in the context of a different activity.

Anchor Words

Letter	Anchor Word
a	apple
b	book
c	cat
d	dog
e	elephant
f	fish
g	gorilla
h	hat
i	igloo
j	jacket
k	key
l	lion
m	mouse
n	nose
o	orange
p	pig
qu*	queen
r	ring
s	snake
t	tiger
u	umbrella
v	violin
w	watch
x	box
y	yacht
z	zebra

*can be taught as "q" instead

Anchor words are used to remind students of what sounds are represented by certain letters. When first introducing a sound-letter relationship, it is very helpful to introduce a visual anchor word that contains this sound. This can be done by making flashcards with letters on one side and visual depictions of the anchor words on the other.

The list of anchor words on the left are not set in stone. They were chosen because they are easy to illustrate, and because they are accessible for elementary/junior high school students.

In fact, any words can be used as anchors. The words do not even have to be phonically regular because you will be using pictures as anchors rather than writing. Thus elephant is used in the anchor words list because it is a word that students find easy to remember. The complex spelling (ele<u>ph</u>ant) is not a problem because students will just see a picture of an elephant along with an "e". Feel free to choose other anchor words that better reflect your students' interests and backgrounds.

After students have learned a sound-letter relationship and corresponding anchor word, it can be used to refer to the letters or remind them of sounds in subsequent sessions ("cat is c-cat, a-apple, t-tiger"). It can also be used to differentiate between different letters ("is it c-cat or k-key?").

Letter <u>names</u> ("ey" for "a", "bee" for "b") are best not taught if possible. If students already know them encourage them to use the sounds and anchor words instead, at least during the phonics portions of lessons.

Introducing Phonics

Phonics should be introduced in such a way as to make it seem easy, fun, and relevant. This is not as hard as it sounds.

Basic phonics are consistent and simple, and students pick up the relationships between sounds and letters pretty quickly. If the pace is kept slow and the amount of practice high, students will become fairly confident in their abilities.

If activities are kept light-hearted, active, fun, and short, students will look forward to phonics practice.

By explaining the reason why they are doing phonics practice, teachers can make students see how it will help them, now and in the future.

Introducing New Material

Set the tone from your very first session. Instead of telling students the answers, elicit them. Compare the two examples below:

Example 1:

Teacher holds up a flashcard with a lower and upper case A written on it, and says: "This is A <ey>. It is pronounced 'a' <ah>. Repeat after me. A. 'a'.
The students, eyes glazing over, say: "A. 'a'."

Example 2:

Teacher holds up a flashcard with a picture of an apple on it, and in a smiling and friendly manner asks students: "What's this?"
Students call out answers: "Ringo!" "Apple!" "It's an apple!"
Teacher says: "Good!" indicating one of the students who answered. Teacher then turns over the flashcard, showing a lower case A. "What's this?"
Students (more of them this time) call out: "A <ey>!" "'a' <ah>!" "Apple!"
Teacher, indicating one of the students that said 'a' <ah>, says "Good! 'a' <ah>."
Teacher then asks another student "What's this?"
The student answers hesitantly "'a' <ah>?"
"Yes! Great!" says the teacher with another smile.

This may seem like an extreme example, but it shows the contrast between a classroom where the teacher tells students the answers, thereby removing any need for them to think, and one where the teacher guides the students towards the answer. The example above is based on new JHS students, and would obviously have to be done a little differently when dealing with say, second year SHS boys. Still, the principle is the same.

Some teachers prefer to introduce upper and lower case letters at the same time, as this allows students to learn them together. I believe it is more effective to introduce ONLY lower case letters initially, as they are both more difficult and more common, and wait until students are confident in their use before moving on to upper case letters. Once students have learned the lower case, it is a simple matter to introduce upper case as the students have something to relate it to.

Of course, if *you* find it easier to introduce both together, then by all means do so!

Reading

Reading is half of phonics practice. It is arguably the more important of the two, at least in terms of students' academic careers in Japan.

Reading activities can be divided into two types, reading aloud and reading silently. Both are useful and necessary, but require different implementation.

Reading Aloud

Reading aloud reinforces the target material by combining visual and audio input. It also allows teachers to effectively check whether students have understood the target or not.

However, reading aloud puts students on the spot, potentially increasing stress and anxiety levels. Also, in a large class of 30-40 students it takes a long time for teachers to monitor all students as they read.

Despite these drawbacks, it is well worth attempting to integrate activities where students read aloud into classes. Pair work, group work, and whole class games give students opportunities to practice their skills through reading aloud.

It can be helpful sometimes to remind students of just how long they spent practicing reading aloud in Japanese at elementary school.

Reading Silently

Reading silently is the other side of the reading coin. It is perhaps less effective than reading aloud in reinforcing target language, but makes up for this in its ease of implementation, potentially lesser stress and anxiety levels, and in the long term will lead to more advanced reading skills (reading aloud forces readers to really pay attention to what they are reading and focus on each letter or word, while reading silently allows them to skim and search for patterns and meaning without worrying about every letter).

The problem for the teacher is that it is more difficult to evaluate where students are in terms of their mastery of the target language. To monitor students, it is necessary to devise activities where they are to show that they can recognize and decipher letters and words by achieving tasks, whether individual worksheets or pair, group, or whole class games.

The important thing to remember about any phonics activity is that it should be short, simple, and provide near immediate feedback to students and teachers. If students do not know the answer or are confused, the activity should provide them with the right answer in a non-threatening way. Ideally, activities will also show teachers where students are in terms of understanding and internalizing the target language.

Writing

Writing is more difficult than reading, but doing it allows students to internalize phonics rules much more deeply.

If students are able to write fluently and without errors (and of course, without referring to their notes or books) this is a clear indication that they have understood and assimilated the current target, and are ready to move on to the next.

Writing Activities

Writing activities are the key to successful teaching of basic phonics. Without writing, students are only getting half of the equation. Also, because of the way writing reinforces and focuses attention on the target language, if students do not practice writing alongside reading they will only get a fraction of the benefits.

Writing IS difficult. It is something that students have problems with throughout the educational system in Japan, from junior high school all the way through to university. However, the fact that it is difficult should not prevent us from teaching it. On the contrary, we should teach it because it is difficult.

By including writing activities right from the beginning, we allow our students to progress their written skills alongside their reading skills, rather than as an afterthought tacked on towards the end of the third year of junior high school.

This will give our students a huge advantage when they have to answer written questions in exams (writing questions are becoming more common, both in SHS entrance exams and in the 'niji shiken' of many universities).

A very welcome side effect is that developing specific language skills has a knock-on effect on other language skills. Practicing reading skills can make you a more fluent speaker, practicing writing can improve your ability to break down 'chunks' of meaning while listening. All four skills build upon each other.

In particular, writing forces students to pay attention to spelling and grammar and really focus on language in a way that they don't have to while reading. This leads to a deeper and more long-lasting internalizing of the target language.

Of course, students will not start off writing essays, sentences, or even words. They will start off trying to write 'd' and 'b' and distinguish the two when the teacher says them. Once they have single letters down they can move on to more complex combinations, ultimately leading to words, sentences, essays, and maybe even books.

By writing I do not mean copying letters from the board or a book. Nor do I mean reproducing a previously learned text from memory. Writing should involve students using letters to transcribe something they want to say or something that they hear in real time and without help.

What comes next?

Phonics instruction is of course, a means to an end. Students do not learn phonics in order to know phonics, they learn phonics in order to be able to read and write.

After students have mastered basic phonics and are comfortable reading and writing unfamiliar phonically regular words, it is time to move on to more extended reading and writing.

Either as homework, or using the time that was previously used for phonics during class, have the students do free reading or writing. As with phonics, students should be introduced to these activities gradually, thoroughly, and in a way that makes it easy for them to succeed. Length and difficulty of activities can be gradually increased in line with student ability and confidence.

In fact, due to the individual nature or free reading and writing, length and difficulty of activities can be tailored to each individual student.

Free Reading

Also known as extended reading, free reading is essential for expanding vocabulary, increasing reading speed, giving students a 'sense' of grammar, and boosting student confidence.

Either as homework or during class, students should read texts they find easy and interesting for pleasure. Any text is fine, as long as the students can understand around 70-90% of the words and constructions in them.

There is a wide range of materials available for this, from children's books to graded readers, things written by teachers or students, comics or internet content.

Free Writing

Writing is more difficult than reading, so arguably it needs more time to be spent practicing it. Students will initially find writing extremely difficult and intimidating, and it is important not to overwhelm them at this point. Correction should be sparing and focused on the most important and easily understood errors.

Start out small, with short (3-5 sentences) self-introductions or diaries, and gradually expand the length and increase the difficulty of the contents. Short writing assignments are a good way to review and reinforce students' current language targets by giving them topics that require them to use vocabulary or grammar they learned recently.

With practice, your students will become more confident and ambitious writers. Also, writing their own sentences and choosing words and constructions will really help them process and internalize the language they are working with.

Bibliography and Resources

Books

McGuiness, D. (1999). *Why Our Children Can't Read*. New York: Touchstone

This book, aimed at parents and teachers in the US, is a wonderful, scientific explanation of how the English writing system works and how it developed, as well as how to teach phonics to native speakers. With some adaptation it is also very relevant for an EFL classroom.

Paul, D. (2003). *Teaching English to Children in Asia*. Hong Kong: Longman Asia ELT

TECA, written by a long-term English teacher and school owner in Japan, is a great guide to teaching children, touching on teaching goals and philosophy, classroom activities and discipline, and how to encourage students to learn and be interested. It includes a good section on phonics activities and teaching.

Online Resources

English Teachers in Japan
A group to support teachers teaching English in Japan. Membership is free. Local meetings (in Sendai) and excellent mailing lists make this a great resource for ALTs.
http://www.eltnews.com/ETJ/

Reading A-Z
Website with downloadable readers. A few are free, membership is required to get all of them. By far the cheapest way to get hold of large amounts of graded readers.
http://www.readinga-z.com/

Reading 'n Phonics
Good resources page with lots of great links.
http://www.geocities.com/EnchantedForest/Dell/4678

Starfall
Learn to read online through games and simple stories. Meant for younger native speakers, but if you can get some time in the computer lab this would be excellent for JHS or even SHS students.
http://www.starfall.com/

Contact Me

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