



Phonemic Awareness as a Fundamental Listening Skill: A Cross-sectional Cohort Study of Elementary School Foreign Language Learners

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Introduction

Developing the fundamentals of a foreign language is a major focus of most elementary school language programs (Butler, 2015). One of the established key fundamentals for all later language studies comes in the form of awareness and understanding of the sounds commonly used in the new language, commonly known as phonological awareness (PA). Findings regarding the impact of PA across alphabetic languages are long-standing and robust (Sawyer & Fox, 1991; Treiman et al., 2019). Students who understand that words are composed of individual sounds and that those sounds follow patterns develop better ultimate language skills (Melby-Lervåg et al., 2012). In studies comparing second/foreign language learners and L1 learners, the primary differences in learners' abilities can be traced back to general language aptitude, one portion of which includes an awareness of phonemes (Melby-Lervåg & Lervåg, 2014). Other cross-national studies of language acquisition show an important role for PA across languages (Moll et al., 2014; Treiman et al., 2019).

Importantly, elementary school foreign language programs are often designed as a method for developing fundamentals that later lead to literacy (Butler, 2005). Many public education programs across East Asia (Butler, 2015) explicitly treat English in elementary school as the initial step in preparing students for successful language learning in secondary schools. Programs focused on phonemic awareness and connections between written and oral language have been demonstrated as effective for promoting literacy among both L1 (Bowyer-Crane et al., 2008) and L2 (Szabo, 2010) learners. In order to prepare students for the reading-based, test-focused environment set by many secondary education curricula (Butler, 2015), elementary language education programs must necessarily support students in developing an awareness of the phonemic representations of the new language.



Literature Review

Phonemic Awareness in Language Learning

Phonemic awareness is an important component of literacy acquisition (Sawyer & Fox, 1991), general language skills (Hulme et al., 2020), and to a small extent, arithmetic ability (Amland et al., 2021). Reading, both silent and oral, involves some form of phonological decoding (Leininger, 2014). While languages differ with regard to the strength of the effects brought by PA, knowledge of phonemes contributes to literacy across many alphabetic languages (Moll et al., 2014). Phonemic awareness contributes equally to spelling and reading skills across numerous languages using alphabetic orthography, including English (Caravolas et al., 2019). An awareness of phonemes appears an indispensable, necessary, but not sufficient factor in learning to read a new language (Schiff & Calif, 2007).

In learning a new language, skills related to individual phonemes appear to have a similar relationship. In their meta-analysis of L2 reading comprehension, Jeon and Yamashita (2014) demonstrated that L2 decoding and L2 phonological skills are consistent and similarly strong predictors of reading ability ($r = .56$ and $r = .48$, respectively). This same meta-analysis found a relationship between reading and listening comprehension ($r = .77$), indicating strong connections between language's auditory and orthographic aspects. Follow up analyses in the same meta-analysis indicated that this effect is not significantly moderated when learners come from a logographic L1; phonological decoding remains a meaningful source of predictable variance for Chinese and other logographic languages. Thus, phonemic awareness is a component of L2 decoding and L2 phonological skills. However, acquiring phonological awareness in input-poor environments is an as-of-yet unanswered question for the quality of teaching and curriculum (Butler, 2020). Effectively testing phonological awareness within this environment can help to create empirically sound developmental models.

Testing Phonemic Awareness

Tests of phonemic awareness are a common aspect of studies of pre-literate and early-literate readers (Melby-Lervåg & Lervåg, 2014). Often, tests ask learners to identify sounds related to known words, isolating pieces of words and asking students to identify the letter or sound (Sodoro et al., 2002). Numerous PA tests are available; all isolate phonemes and ask students to determine the correct letter, sound, or combination of sounds. Once children know the alphabet and its connections to writing systems, the connections between oral and written language can be drawn in both their own language and new language settings (Caravolas et al., 2019; Schiff & Calif, 2007), although this process might potentially take greater time when teaching learners of logographic L1s due to reliance on rapid automatic naming and other whole-word memorization strategies more useful to memorizing characters (Jeon & Yamashita, 2014; McBride-Chang, 2016).

Japanese National Curriculum and Aims

In 2017, the Japanese Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (henceforth MEXT) expanded English teaching in elementary schools. What had been once-a-week foreign language activities became a formal subject (MEXT, 2017), with third and fourth grades receiving 35 hours a year and fifth and sixth grades receiving 70. Teaching in upper elementary now focuses on four skills (i.e., listening, reading, speaking, and writing). Despite these curricular changes, most elementary teachers continue to receive scant training as foreign language speakers or teachers (Nakao et al., 2019). Under the current Course of Study (MEXT, 2017), students are expected to identify letters written in typeface and pronounce their readings (i.e., A or J, but not /æ/ or /dʒ/). The writing aims are for students to write uppercase and lowercase letters in typeface, copy familiar oral expressions and demonstrate initial word

sound recognition by the end of sixth grade, as in PA assessments (Sodoro et al., 2002). As yet, no standard tools or methods have been put forth to assess students' PA development in the Japanese environment.

The Current Study

Given that PA is fundamental to literacy development in many languages (Melby-Lervåg et al., 2012), by assessing PA we can better understand foreign language acquisition from its inception in elementary school. Many decoding difficulties stemming from issues with phonological awareness (Szabo, 2010) also differ across settings (Melby-Lervåg & Lervåg, 2014). To address these issues, the current pilot study was designed to assess Japanese L1 elementary school students' basic English phonemic awareness of initial letter sounds.

Aims

The current study developed and employed a practical pen and paper PA test based on the Japanese elementary school national curriculum for English studies. Utilizing this test, a cross-sectional, cohort examination of PA differences between Japanese elementary school students across four years (three-six) was conducted. This study aimed to address one research question and posited a single hypothesis.

Research question: Is a student's year at a Japanese elementary school a meaningful factor in determining general phonemic awareness? With increasing exposure to English across successive years of elementary school, students of later grades were expected to have higher average accuracy in phonemic awareness (Hypothesis 1).

Methods

Participants

Public elementary students in Western Japan (total $n = 268$, female $n = 144$) participated in this study. All participating students were between eight and twelve years old. Students in each grade were taught under the same curriculum progression. In line with curricular guidelines (MEXT, 2017), only minimal guidance was given to students regarding English sound-letter connections, with most input focusing on whole-word aural/oral learning.

This current study employed a convenience sample obtained through meetings with the school principal and teachers. Student participation in the study was voluntary. The assessment was administered in the third semester of the 2019 school year during regular foreign language education classes. Ethical oversight was included in the review process for the JSPS Grant-in-aid for Scientific Research. All procedures were in accordance with the ethical standards of the national research committee.

Materials

For the current study, a curriculum-based phoneme-identity test (Bradley & Bryant, 1983; Sodoro et al., 2002) was used. The phoneme-identity test used fifteen words, selected from the third grade Ministry textbook (MEXT, 2017), *Let's Try!*1. Words were then randomized for the test. An optical mark reader (OMR) sheet was used for students' to report their answers, with letters A to Z, and ? for 'I don't know' presented as choices (See Appendix). Capital letters were used as this would have the greatest comprehensibility for all participants. Previous studies using this testing format have indicated students with a stronger recognition of initial sounds have better PA (Bradley & Bryant, 1983). While numerous

other studies of phonemic awareness employ pseudoword tests of phoneme recognition, negotiations with schools and teachers made testing this aspect unfeasible; all words tested were recognizable as real words from the curriculum.

Procedure

The PA test was administered by one Japanese native English teacher who taught at the elementary school where the study took place. The participating teacher pronounced each of the 15 words three times with no specific emphasis on any syllable. The participating teacher received a brief training on how to read each word by the first author. The students were instructed to select the letter that corresponded with the first phoneme of each word. Students marked the initial word letter on the test sheet after hearing each of the 15 target words. The teacher distributed and collected test papers for all classes (test materials are presented in Appendix).

Third graders completed the test sitting on the floor while lined up in front of their English classroom before the beginning of class. The fourth- through sixth-grade students completed the test while seated at their desks in their homeroom. The test took seven to eleven minutes.

Completed tests were scanned and converted to data using OMR software. The first author reviewed each scan to address marking errors and input mistakes. The finalized OMR data was imported to JMP14.1 (SAS Inc., 2019) for univariate analysis.

Analysis Plan

The analysis for the study proceeded in three stages. First, test scores for each student were created by summing correct answers across the fifteen-question test. Second, an ANOVA was conducted using the four participating grades as the independent and test scores as the dependent variable (H1). This analysis was followed by pairwise difference testing (Tukey's Honest Difference) to examine differences between the students' year of study (H1). For all tests, statistical significance was set at $p < .05$. Where feasible, effect sizes (Cohen's d or R^2) are reported.

Results

The test presented sufficiently normal distribution of scores: skew was approximately symmetric (-1 to 1) and kurtosis within reasonable limits (-2 to 2; George & Mallery, 2010). Table 1 presents the descriptive statistics with skew and kurtosis for each grade. A one-way between subjects ANOVA (H1) compared the effect of (IV) year of study on (DV) test score. There was a significant effect of IV year of study on DV test score at the $p < .05$ level for the three conditions [$F(3, 265) = 17.79, p < .001$]. Given the simple nature of the test, year of study accounted for a considerable amount of the difference in students' test scores ($R^2 = .17$).

TABLE 1
Descriptive Statistics

Grade	Test Score		N
	Mean	Std Dev	
3	6.26	3.62	65
4	7.27	4.29	65
5	9.29	4.03	62
6	10.45	3.09	77
Skew	-.39		
Kurtosis	-1.00		

A Tukey-Kramer HSD post hoc test (H1) was significant ($q^* = 2.59$, $\alpha = .05$). Results suggested that: a) year six students had a larger amount more PA than years four ($d = .86$, $p < .0001$) and three ($d = 1.25$, $p < .0001$), but not year five ($p = .27$); b) year five students had a moderately greater PA than year four students ($d = .49$, $p = .015$) and year three students ($d = .79$, $p < .0001$); c) there was no statistically significant difference between year three and four students' phonemic awareness.

Discussion

The phonemic awareness of Japanese elementary school students was tested with a short pen and paper test. Descriptive statistics suggested appropriate distribution, demonstrating no ceiling or flooring effects that would interfere with its interpretability. The test offers a practical classroom tool that teachers can conduct without assistance from specialist researchers. Students across four participating grades had no difficulty understanding the procedures. The current study focused on one research question and posited one hypothesis: *Does students' phonemic awareness meaningfully increase with each advancing year of formal curriculum exposure?* (RQ1) More exposure to English across cumulative years was expected to correspond with increased phonemic awareness (H1). Analyses across grades indicated increasing test scores with advancing grades, addressing the broader research questions. The pairwise results partially supported the hypothesis. The Tukey-Kramer HSD pairwise test refined the broader findings, confirming statistically significant increases between consecutive years four and five, but not three-four or five-six. Comparison between grades with two- or three-year gaps were all statistically significant, medium (year three to year five) and large (years three & four to year six) effect sizes. The lack of significant differences between consecutive years (three-four, five-six) disconfirmed the hypothesized clear, stepwise increase in PA for Japanese elementary school students. Results were instead indicative of a longer timeline for growth.

Theoretical Implications

The first meaningful finding shows that the test used here suggests differentiation across students' grade levels, indicating its suitability as a curriculum-based or criterion-referenced achievement test (Sandoro et al., 2002). The test showed no ceiling or floor effects, indicating that it appropriately captured the spread of student abilities, while the ANOVA test showed that students' abilities on the same metric meaningfully improved given sufficient time and input.

Second, students' PA increased over the course of the four years of English instruction they received. While on the surface, this may seem obvious, given the amount and frequency of English input students receive, results confirm that even small amounts of time spent learning the foreign language (without explicit letter-sound instruction) can increase students' awareness of the phonemes of the new language (Hulme et al., 2020). Results also indicate a potential minimum necessary quantity of time and input; the lack of significant changes across single-years (i.e., third-fourth year), but significant change across two-year blocks (i.e., fourth-sixth year), implies that input received from one year is insufficient to promote a noticeable change in PA. Thus, the results show that phonemic awareness increases initially after a minimum of 70+ hours of instruction (third to fifth grade), and then an incrementally increasing quantity of instruction for noticeable change (100+ hours; fourth to sixth grade).

Practical Implications

The lack of measurable incremental year-on-year growth indicates minimum theoretical limits for implicit input; it also points to the value of increased explicit focus. Explicit instruction in initial letters is a recognized part of the Japanese national elementary foreign language curriculum (MEXT, 2017), offering insight into where to emphasize for maximum impact. Findings indicate the value of explicit

teaching of sound-letter connections beyond Japan, especially in other ideographic languages where sound-letter connections may be opaque (McBride, 2016).

For teacher trainers, this creates opportunities for improving pre-service and in-service training. Currently, teachers are implementing the elementary curriculum as directed, but many lack the skills and confidence to provide effective explicit PA instruction and interventions (Nakao et al., 2019). Findings indicate that teacher educators and local administrators can produce measurable impacts through explicit teacher training on the letter-sound connections.

Crucial to this discussion is the larger picture of Japanese language education. According to Melby-Lervåg and Lervåg (2014), there is a need for decoding interventions when general language comprehension fails to provide sufficient remedy to reading comprehension problems. While these children do not demonstrate specific reading/decoding issues, many Japanese learners in the wider population show poor English phonological decoding skills alongside poor reading (Coulson et al., 2013). Given that Japanese learners have shown lower reading than listening proficiency in English (cf. ETS, 2019), it is worth speculating that decoding problems might be present throughout Japan. Recognizing that much of the focus in the elementary foreign language curriculum has focused on language comprehension skills, greater explicit focus on the sound-letter connections might improve ultimate language acquisition.

Future Directions and Limitations

One limitation of this study is the use of cross-sectional rather than longitudinal measurement. Results capture a snapshot of four different groups of learners at four different ages within a similar population and might infer a specific trajectory for phonemic awareness; developmental benchmarks for PA cannot yet be determined from this study. Future work will need to address this issue through longitudinal analyses.

Longitudinal analyses can indicate cognitive, developmental, motivational, and environmental variables that may contribute to the ultimate attainment of PA and literacy in a foreign language. By regularly assessing decoding skills through the course of elementary school, research can indicate how students acquire mastery of both simple and complex sounds (e.g., diphthongs, vowels not represented in students' own language, etc.).

Conclusions

This study illustrates the potential applications of a short test of phonemic awareness for assessing pre-literate young learners in elementary foreign language settings. This test can be easily and quickly implemented by non-English language specialist teachers using only minimal training. Findings offer both theoretical and curricular implications. The results of the cross-sectional investigation of students across four grade levels indicates a potential developmental trend regarding the amount of input required to build students' PA. For teachers looking to improve eventual literacy acquisition in non-alphabetic own-language settings, increased explicit teaching may potentially show greater increases in phonemic awareness and eventual decoding skills.

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Appendix

Name: _____

学年: ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥

組: ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥

出席番号: ① ② ③ ④ ⑤ ⑥ ⑦ ⑧ ⑨

先生が言う単語の最初の音をえらんで、その○をぬりつぶしてください。例) APPLE → ④

1	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
2	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
3	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
4	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
5	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
6	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
7	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
8	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
9	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
10	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
11	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
12	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
13	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
14	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z
15	A	B	C	D	E	F	G	H	I	J	K	L	M	N	O	P	Q	R	S	T	U	V	W	X	Y	Z