Sequencing Literacy Instruction
in Japanese Elementary School English Classes :
Using the MEXT-Designated Hi Friends+ Materials Effectively

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As is well known, the government has finally approved English as an elementary school subject, with a transition period beginning in 2018 and full implementation in 2020 in time for the Tokyo Olympics.　The present speaking and listening focused Hi Friends materials will be adapted and used for the first time with grade threes and fours in English Activity classes, and new four-skills materials will be developed for grades five and six.　The upper grades will receive two regular English lessons a week with one more lesson hour provided via three, shorter module lessons.　Reading and writing materials are already being piloted in MEXT-designated research schools under the title Hi Friends +.　These consist of CDROM exercises for use in whole class instruction and printable handouts for student use.

At present, guidelines on methodology, sequencing of instruction and lesson plans are not provided, leaving teachers and schools to create their own lessons and syllabuses willy-nilly. This paper aims to address some of these gaps so teachers can design their own instruction in a more consistent and logical fashion using the designated materials.

Resources and Challenges

Most research regarding initial literacy considers native-speaking children in pre-school and in the early grades of elementary school.　Adapting and extending these findings to ten- to twelve-year-old Japanese students, demands that we consider both their resources, and special challenges.　Among the advantages of older children is that some instruction can proceed through higher-level explanations and student-centered reflection.　The knowledge of a first language is also an invaluable resource providing : a ready-made language of instruction, a set of linguistic rules for contrast and comparison and a large set of English loanwords as a starter vocabulary.　However, challenges such as lack of English experience and reinforcement outside of class and negative transfer of certain rules and habits from their native language must also be taken into account.

The most daunting challenge to reading and writing progress is, however, developing a sense of Phonemic Awareness (PA), the ability to distinguish and to manipulate individual speech sounds.　Explicit PA teaching has been shown to have a large effect on reading success (National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, 2000) even though native speakers will generally grasp the fundamentals of PA naturally with little or no instruction as they have done traditionally.　Our Japanese learners, however, have much more difficulty picking up PA on their own.　Japanese does not require individual phoneme manipulation so it is not something that can be transferred from their native language as it can be from alphabetic languages.　In Japanese, each "sound" (in most cases a combination of two phonemes, representing a syllable in effect) corresponds precisely to one *kana* character. Reading a word using the *kana* system, is simply to say the letters as they are.　*Sushi* (two syllables) is rendered by two letters, すし.　In English, by contrast, each of the 40 phonemes is represented singly and mapped onto one letter or a combination of letters to represent one sound, /s//u//sh//i/. Phonemes must be manipulated independently, and blended together to read and write words.　This counterintuitive process makes explicit teaching and careful sequencing of instruction all the more important for our Japanese learners.

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The Elements of Instruction

According to research, the elements most needed as a foundation for literacy are first, a general familiarity with English and more particularly with English sounds. In the case of our students, this must be provided largely via in-class activities. Second, the ability to name letters (Badlan, 1995), and to name them rapidly (Norton & Wolf, 2012) is required. And third, the ability to distinguish and manipulate phonemes (Ehri, Nunes, Willows, Schuster & Yahgoub- Zadeh, 2001), that is PA has long been understood as crucial to success. Viewed from the deficit side : "many studies suggest that the common trait running through the reading ability of children and adults with reading disorders appears to be impairment in phonological, and primarily phonemic, awareness" (Henry, 2003, p. 13).

Familiarity with English sounds and expressions is treated in English Activity classes and in ongoing instruction so it will not be addressed in detail here. Writing activities support both letter naming and phonological awareness (Ehri, 2006) and are well supported through an extensive collection of handouts in HF+. Since these writing activities reinforce all stages of instruction, however, they will not be treated here as they make no difference in sequencing. The framework of instruction will depend on the order of letter naming and PA teaching so they will be dealt with in detail.

Letter naming

In addition to being able to read the sound-based Japanese syllabary, our learners are also adept at visually memorizing and reading Chinese characters (*kanji*), having learned over 800 characters by the end of fifth grade. Unfortunately, they are likely to rely on this highly developed ability when first encountering an English word, rather than reading it one letter at a time, phonetically. The word-image approach seems convenient at first, but it will become a handicap in future when they have to read and to spell words they have never seen before (Allen, Neuhaus & Beckwith, 2011). It is, therefore important that letter-naming skills be well practiced as a foundation for phonetic reading so it can compete with the word-image strategy.

Letter naming begins with letter recognition. HF+ activities featuring letter recognition are presented below in order of difficulty.

> HF+ Quiz 4, Cloud Quiz : The teacher selects the speed at which each letter resolves itself out of a cloud. Students say the name of the letter as soon as they recognize it.
> HF+ Quiz 3, Flashlight Search : Students identify a letter as a flashlight beam is scanned across the screen revealing parts of the letter.
> HF+ Quiz 2, Puzzle Game : Pupils identify a secret letter hidden behind a grid of 9 panels, which are removed one by one.
> HF+ Quiz 1, Letter Search : Students search for letters hidden in a large picture. Because this activity contains all the letters, it is best used for review.

Caution must be used in HF+ not to work with more letters than pupils can handle in one lesson (5-7 new items is standard), meaning most of the quizzes and jingles (letter-sound correspondence exercises set to rhythm or music) are best split into parts and used in separate lessons. The teacher may supplement freely with other activities such as :

> Repeat and point : The teacher says 2-4 letters of a five-letter sequence in random order. The students repeat while pointing at the letter cards. This is best done in pairs so students can support each other, or compete.
> HF+ writing activities on printable handouts can be used for reinforcement with the instruction that they say each letter aloud as they write.

As accuracy in recognizing letters is achieved, moving into production and increasing speed is the next goal to pursue. Some possible activities are :

> Spell It Out : The teacher reads the word connected to a picture in HF+ eg. Cat, c-a-t

cat. The teacher encourages speed by doing this with the class at a challenging pace. Care must be taken, however, not to practice one word so much that the spellings are memorized instead of read letter-by-letter. Rock Paper Scissors Race. Letter cards are arranged in a line. Two students race towards each other, touching and naming each letter as they go. They do rock, paper, scissors when they meet, with the loser returning to the start.

Letter naming is a good indicator of future reading success, at least in part, because it acts as a springboard to PA since the sound each letter makes is contained in its name (excepting H, W and Y).

Phonemic Awareness

Phonemic awareness (PA) concerns speech sounds only. It is the ability to distinguish individual sounds (phonemes) from each other, and to arrange and rearrange them in different combinations. Phonics, on the other hand, is an instructional method (with many variations) aimed at teaching the connection between sounds and the letters used to represent them. Phonics can have only limited success without the PA foundation, which may explain why even well designed phonics programs can sometimes fail.

Ehri et al (2001) states that PA is commonly divided into the following six components as a basis for instruction and assessment.

1. Phoneme isolation, for example identifying the first sound in a word.
2. Phoneme identity : identifying the common sound in different words.
3. Phoneme categorization : choosing the word in a list of three or four that contains a different sound.
4. Phoneme blending : combining phonemes to say words.
5. Phoneme segmentation : breaking words into component phonemes by counting them out or saying them.
6. Phoneme deletion : saying the word that remains after removing a specified phoneme. (p. 253)

I will display the models and recommended teaching sequence of Adams (1990, described in Uhry, 2011) along with the more recent Schatschneider, Francis, Foorman, Fletcher, & Mehta (1999) together with the labels from Ehri et al (2001)

Table 1 *Levels of Difficulty in Phonemic Awareness Instruction*

	Adams (1990)	Ehri et al (1990)	Schatschneider et al (1999)
1.	Sensitivity to rhyme	—	—
2.	Matching initial phoneme	Phoneme isolation Phoneme identity Phoneme categorization	1. First sound comparison
3.	a. Separating first phoneme b. Blending phonemes	Phoneme blending	2. Blending onset-rime units 3. Blending phonemes into word
4.	Dividing whole words into phonemes	Phoneme segmentation	5. Segmenting words into phonemes
5.	Manipulating phonemes	Phoneme deletion	4. Deleting a phoneme
	—	—	6. Blending into non-words

in Table 1.

The first level, *sensitivity to rhyme*, is not included in the categories of PA outlined by Ehri et al (2001). It refers to general awareness and perception much like the goal of developing familiarity with English as in English Activity classes.

After this there is general agreement on the skill of matching the initial sound in a word. *Identifying the initial phoneme* is divided into three separate categories by Ehri at al (2001) : *phonemic isolation, phonemic identity and phonemic categorization*, but these might best be thought of, not as different skills, but as three different activities based on the same underlying skill. Likewise, Adam's *separating first phoneme* falls into the same category.

Blending follows, with Schatschneider et al (1999) offering the greatest detail, dividing it into : *onset-rime blending, blending phonemes into words* and finally, at a higher level of difficulty, *blending phonemes into non-words*. Here is where I would point out an important difference between native speakers and Japanese learners of English. While phonemic isolation, separating consonants from

vowels and treating them as discrete entities, poses a particular challenge in the first stage, blending them back together again is also a counter-intuitive challenge for Japanese students and takes special care. The difficulty is increased by the lack of familiarity with English vocabulary. A native speaker might blend the first two or three phonemes together and recognize the word almost immediately. In contrast, the Japanese learner, due largely to a limited vocabulary, experiences something more like *blending into non-words*, which requires reading to the end of the word and perhaps not understanding the result. This is made even more difficult considering how vowels change in different contexts. Full blending should, therefore, be moved to a later stage for Japanese learners. I would suggest blending be separated into *onset and rime* at elementary school, which does not require the reading of vowels, with *blending whole words* left to specialists at JHS.

The next stage in Adams (1990) is *dividing whole words into phonemes*. And finally, *manipulating phonemes* (deleting, adding or reversing) is considered the most difficult stage for English environment learners. Here I would reverse the order for Japanese learners due to their higher developmental level. Eleven- and twelve-year olds, as formal operational thinkers, have the ability to manipulate things in their minds much more readily than a six-year old native speaker and should be able to delete, add or reverse phonemes easily once they have an awareness of separate phonemes.

HF+ activities aimed at teaching phonemic awareness are listed by difficulty.

> Quiz 6 : Let's Gather Similar Words. A common initial sound is identified.
> Quiz 7 : Which Word Has a Different Initial Sound. The word with the odd initial sound is identified.
> Quiz 5 : What Color Quiz. The student names a color, identifies the initial sound and matches it to the first letter.
> Alphabet Jingles : These teach keywords, connecting the initial sound of a word to a letter.
> Storybooks : Using their knowledge of let-

ter/sound matches, students are asked to listen while following the words with their finger.

As in letter naming activities, the teacher may supplement these activities in any number of ways using flashcards or supplementary storybooks.

Grade Level Targets

In line with the discussion above, a sequence of instruction for grades three to six, and extending

Table 2　*Literacy Teaching Targets Arranged for Grades 3 to JHS*

ES 3-4	Develop awareness of English sounds and expressions
	Become familiar with letter names and letter order via alphabet song etc.
ES 5-6	Say the names of the letters accurately, then at speed
	Identify the initial sound in a word
	Connect letters to sounds using keywords, then freely with new words
	Blend onset and rime (orally) to make known words
JHS	Divide whole words into phonemes
	Blend whole words matched to increasing knowledge of letter combinations and vowels

into JHS is offered in **Table 2**.

As mentioned earlier, writing activities should be carried out at each stage for reinforcement of letter naming and of PA as "combining phonological awareness training with instruction in letter names, formations, and sounds works the best" (McKenna & Dougherty Stahl, 2015).

It is hoped that the guidelines listed above will be of some assistance to classroom teachers planning instruction with HF+ materials while waiting for the release of a teachers' manual.

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