

17th ICLEHI 2020 Singapore 009-005 Hiroko Kashimoto

EFFECTS OF PHONICS INSTRUCTION FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENTS' TEACHER TRAINING COURSES IN JAPAN

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ABSTRACT

Very few elementary school teachers have learned TEFL methodology in their teacher-training courses despite the recent curriculum reform by the Ministry of Education in Japan. They feel a lack of confidence in teaching English mainly because of their difficulty in pronunciation practice. It is considered important to gain experiential knowledge of English pronunciation together with that of how to teach the combinations of letters and sounds, i.e., phonics, to pupils. Osaka Kyoiku University (OKU), a national university for teacher-training, has been providing English education courses for future elementary school teachers since 2016. In one course, phonics theory and practices are introduced to improve student pronunciation. Students take a pre-test and a post-test, both composed of the dictation of 25 phonetic alphabets and some questionnaires. Also, some students record their pronunciation of minimal pairs in ten English sentences. From the results of the tests, it has been found that university students' ability to hear short vowels such as / e /, / i /, and / u / is particularly poor, although phonics instruction has promoted pronunciation. (Kashimoto & Yoshida, 2019). This paper will introduce an appropriate method for pronunciation improvement practice through modified phonics instruction in the students' teacher-training courses and show an analysis of pre-test and post-test results quantitatively and qualitatively. This paper also attempts to explain the difficulty of adults' phonological listening and production based on neurolinguistic studies, which might be due to the relative weakness in phoneme construction in the mind in terms of the function of the mental lexicon and working memory.

Keywords: phonics, teacher-training, teaching English to young learners, neurolinguistics

Introduction

English has been taught in elementary schools as a part of foreign language activities in the 5th and 6th grades since 2011 in Japan. Pupils learn English mainly through listening and speaking. In 2017, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) revised the Course of Study, declaring “We aim to train pupils' qualities and abilities on the basis of communication through the language practices of listening, reading, speaking, and writing.” Now, elementary pupils will learn English as a subject, and not only speaking and listening but also reading and writing through linguistic activities from 2020. However, in-service teachers are suffering from stress or anxiety because they don't have sufficient knowledge or skills in teaching English to young learners. Along with the questionnaire survey (2019) conducted by AEON Co., Ltd. on 270 in-service teachers, about half (48%) responded that they were not very confident/anxious about teaching foreign languages as a subject. Teachers themselves have not learned English when they were pupils. Under such circumstances, it can be said that it is becoming more and more important to know and fully master the teaching

methods related to “reading and writing” for children, both in the teacher-training courses as well as during in-service teacher training. In previous research (Kashimoto & Yoshida, 2019), it was found out that many university students in the teacher training course are not confident of their pronunciation and are worried about teaching English to elementary pupils. These future teachers stated that they were uncomfortable or felt insecure about teaching English to their future students. Their results of the test of listening to phonetic alphabets showed almost the same as the stumbling blocks as elementary school pupils. Hence, what, how much, and how to teach was a big problem with the limited class time in the training course.

Therefore, enabling students in elementary school teacher-training courses to confidently pronounce the 26 letters (25 sounds) of the alphabet has been set as the goal in OKU specialized subjects related to foreign languages, a course conducted 15 times over one semester. In this course, university students experience the method of letter teaching that this researcher has conducted for elementary school students.

Purpose of Study

This paper introduces the results of a practice conducted in the first half of 2019 at OKU; it analyzes the results of a phoneme listening-check test with 130 student participants and a questionnaire survey, conducted at the beginning and end of the semester. Furthermore, a possible explanation of adults' difficulty in listening and producing of the sounds revealed by the test results is made based on neurolinguistic studies.

Research Questions

These are the research questions of this study;

1. Is learning English vowels more difficult than consonants for Japanese learners?
2. Is repetition of the target sounds through phonics activities beneficial for Japanese learners?
3. Is there any relationship between students' self-efficacy and sound-recognition improvement?

Methodology

Participants, the Implementation Period

Participants in this study were 130 third-year undergraduate students, none of whom were English education majors. In the first half of 2019 (April to July), phonics instruction was conducted 13 times in the required subject "English for Elementary Schools" (90 minutes, 15 times). The student's level of English (by self-report checking CEFR Can-Do descriptors) is generally between CEFR A2.2 and B1.

Research Methods

The students were taught the pronunciation of each letter according to the area of production for vowels and consonants through warm-up activities in accordance with the plan shown in Table 1. In the Table, items from the educational material for children “*Enjoy Phonics 2*” (2016, Zyken Kenkyusha) were used. These activities were conducted for 10 to 15 minutes each class from April to July 2019.

Table1*Lesson Plans*

Contents		Contents	
1	Orientation	8	Magic E
2	Pre-Check Test	9	Digraph & Blend
3	Alphabet Letter Names & Sounds	10	Vowel Sounds
4	Alphabet Jingle	11	Vowel Teams (1)
5	Initial Sounds (1)	12	Vowel Teams (2)
6	Initial Sounds (2)	13	Review
7	Rhyming Words	14	Post-Check Test

Actual instruction was divided into the following three steps:

1st step: Alphabet Letter Sounds

2nd step: Alphabet Phonetic Sounds

3rd step: Blending & Decoding Activities

In the second lesson when phonics was not being taught, a preliminary check test was conducted for 25 phonetic alphabets (the overall accuracy rate at this time was 62.7%). Before the instruction, students were unable to pronounce these perfectly. They had problems such as differentiation of / l / and / r /, / m / and / n /, and / g / and / z /. Because of their ambiguous pronunciation, introducing correct letter name sounds started the lessons. In the second step, letter sounds were introduced with visual aids as well as explaining how to make the sounds to the pupils, and then Alphabet Jingles*¹ were repeated several times at the beginning of the lessons. Students learned to blend three sounds, with additional explanations that the instructor gave children to make the sounds easily. As the third step, after giving lectures about initial sounds, students learned the end-of-word sounds, onset-lime, Silent E / Magic E, so on. Also, the students were preformed micro-teaching in pairs. Through the micro-teaching, they were able to gain experience and receive feedback from colleagues and the instructor. The post-test was performed during the 14th lesson. The content of the test was the same as the pre-test. The accuracy rate of the phonetic alphabets improved (81.2%).

Pre- / Post-Test

In April and July 2019, the evaluation test was conducted. The test was composed of four items which was referenced to Murakami (2018).

- A. Listen and write: Phonetic alphabets
- B. Listen and write: Words (including meaningless words)
- C. Syllable decomposition
- D. Phoneme decomposition

Students also responded to Part E., a Questionnaire and Part F., Free description.

In Part A, students listened to the 25 phonetic alphabets that a native speaker pronounced in random order and spelled out the letters. In Part B, they also listened to the words pronounced by a native speaker (for example, listen to / ɔg / and write "og"). In Part C, they listened to English words spoken by a native speaker and circled the number of syllables in the word (for example, listen to the word "Monday" then circle 2). In Part D, they listened and circled the number of English sounds produced by a native speaker (for example, listen to the word "cat" then circle 3). Part E was a 5-point Likert scale questionnaire about: (1) their confidence in speaking English (pronunciation); (2) their confidence in reading words that they don't know; and (3) their confidence in teaching

children the rules of English sounds and letters. Part F asked open-answer questions about teaching English in foreign languages classes --- for the pre-test: "How do you feel about the phonics instruction and what do you want to do in the future?", and for post-test: "What did you want to learn more and what do you want to learn in the future?", and students answered these questions freely. In this paper, the results of the analyses of Parts A, E, and F are described. The results of test A were statistically analyzed using SPSS.

Micro-Teaching

Each student did 10 minutes of micro-teaching in pairs. Each pair was given a theme, such as "vowel sounds", "digraph," "magic-e," so on. The rest of the class had to pretend to be pupils and also had to give peer-assessment. The instructor also gave feedback after their teaching. The assessment sheet was shared with the students before the practice. (see Appendix 1)

Literature Review

In accordance with Snow, C.E. et al. (1998), adequate initial reading instruction requires that children:

- use reading to obtain meaning from print,
- have frequent and intensive opportunities to read,
- are exposed to frequent, regular spelling-sound relationships,
- learn about the nature of the alphabetic writing system, and
- understand the structure of spoken words.

Moreover, they mentioned three potential stumbling blocks that are known to throw children off-course on the journey to skilled reading; "The first obstacle, which arises at the outset of reading acquisition, is difficulty understanding and using the alphabetic principle—the idea that written spellings systematically represent spoken words. (p.4)"

Tamai (2019) also espoused the above and stated "about the ability pointed out, it is probably the knowledge and skills that Japanese students learning English should also acquire, (p.21)" Tamai (2010) also proposed "knowledge of alphabet letters" and "phonological awareness" as two important abilities for the early reading stage. As the basics of reading and writing, it is important to improve speech recognition ability as well as the ability to know the alphabet's "letters", "sounds", and "relations between letters and sounds". Furthermore, because the Japanese language is based on morphographic writing systems and English uses phonographic ones, great care and effort are required when teach literacy to Japanese young learners.

Since the pilot study (Kashimoto, 2018), undergraduate students with weaknesses related to vowels were shown to benefit from phonics instruction, which was effective in improving their pronunciation and teaching confidence. However, students still had insecurities and needed more practice to become proficient, so the instructor had students do micro-teaching sessions in 2019 and supported learning phonics as an effective way for undergraduate students to learn pronunciation and to have confidence in teaching.

Working Memory

Working memory is a brain system that temporarily stores and manages information needed to perform complex cognitive tasks such as learning, reasoning, and understanding. Working memory is responsible for information processing functions such as encoding, storing, and retrieving data.*² Baddeley's working memory model (2000) is still well-known. Before that Atkinson & Shiffrin (1968) proposed a memory model composed of two components, i.e., short-term memory and long-term memory. In that model,

information was considered to be rapidly and effectively transferred from short-term memory (STM) to long-term memory (LTM).

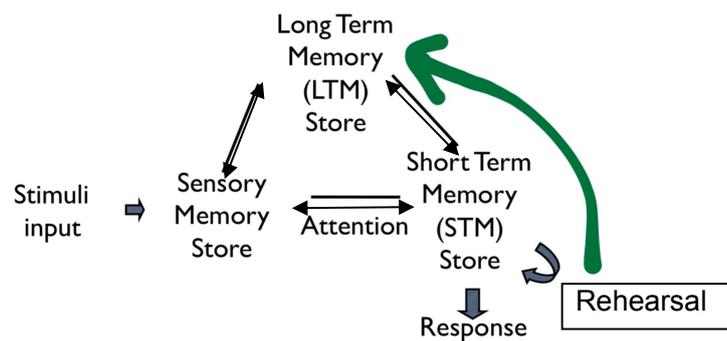
Information Processing in Working Memory

It is significant to know what is happening in the brain in the processing of information concerned. There have been various sorts of working memory models to explain the phenomena. In the basic model of Figure 4, every component of memory has an interactive function. It explains every type of relevant information processing, including that of the phonological loop in the working memory model of Figure 5.

The interaction between sensory memory and short-term memory plays an important role since sound perception is supposed to have much to do with 'active' sound mapping as well as 'passive' sound processing. In order to have the mapping go smoothly pronunciation practice in daily activities works well when attention is activated. The same thing can be said with the function of 'rehearsal' as it strengthens the relation of STM and LTM, making it possible to make the quick shift of information from STM to LTM.

Figure 4

Working Memory Model Modified by Author (retrieved from: <https://sites.google.com/site/wasitfreud/archive/cognition-and-perception/intro-to-memory-multistore-model-of-memory>)

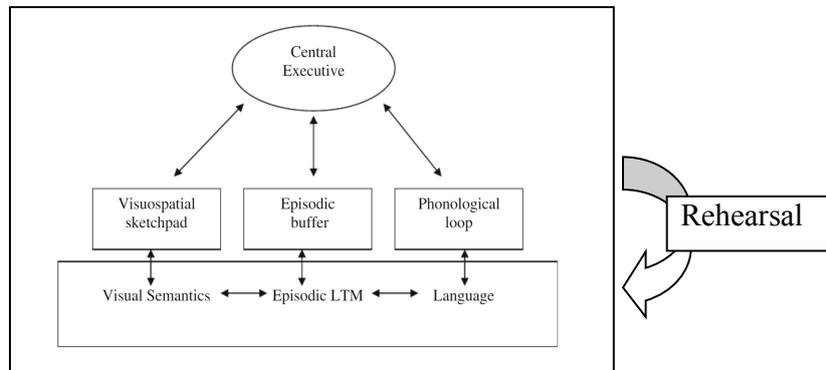


Phonological Loop

According to Baddeley (2002), the phonological, or articulatory loop is assumed to comprise a store holding memory traces for a couple of seconds, combined with a subvocal rehearsal process. Subvocal speech is mainly used for keeping the information in memory. It is also used to convert visually presented stimuli such as letters into phonological codes. In Baddeley's working memory model (2000), it is expected that the stored information can be activated through elaborative rehearsal by repeated pronunciation practice.

Figure 5

Baddeley's Working Memory Model (2000) Modified by the Author



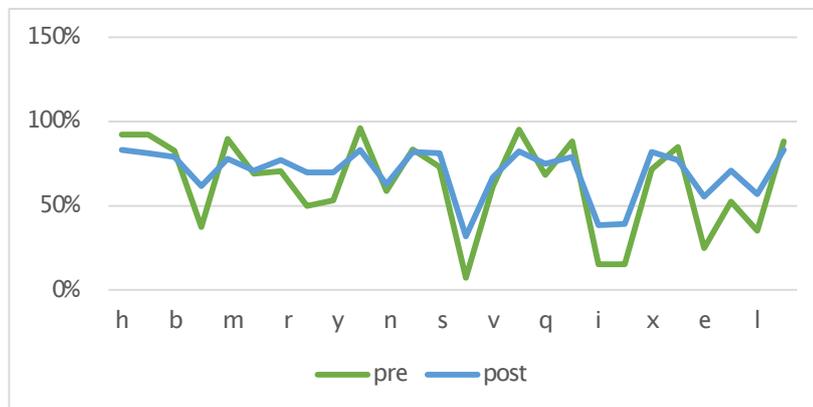
Pre-/Post-Test result

Phoneme Checking Test Results

Figure 6 shows the average value of each phoneme. In the phonetic sound listening test for students, the overall accuracy rate was 62.7% in the pre-test and 81.2% in the post-test. In the post test, however, the results for the phonemes / m /, / g /, / d /, / p /, / j /, / w /, and / z / decreased. Some students might confuse similar sounds such as / m / and / n /, / d / and / j /, and / g / and / z / even after learning phonics. It can be said the intake practice was insufficient for them.

Figure 6

Phoneme Checking Test result (2019, 1st semester)



In the pre-test, listening to phonemes of [u, i, o, l, e, f] was particularly weak (under 40 %). It can be assumed that that it is more difficult for Japanese learners to identify and create vowels than consonants, which means that RQ1 has been proved.

Table 2 shows the results of Descriptive statistics (using SPSS).

Table 2*Descriptive Statistics of Phoneme Checking Test (Pre / Post)*

	phoneme	frequency	Min	max	Pre		Post	
					Mean	SD	mean	SD
1	h	120	0	1	0.92	0.276	0.98	0.128
2	c/k	120	0	1	0.92	0.276	0.97	0.180
3	B	120	0	1	0.82	0.387	0.94	0.234
4	f	120	0	1	0.38	0.487	0.73	0.447
5	m	120	0	1	0.91	0.289	0.92	0.276
6	a	120	0	1	0.69	0.463	0.83	0.373
7	r	120	0	1	0.70	0.459	0.92	0.276
8	t	120	0	1	0.50	0.502	0.83	0.380
9	y	120	0	1	0.54	0.501	0.83	0.380
10	g	120	0	1	0.98	0.156	0.98	0.128
11	n	120	0	1	0.58	0.496	0.74	0.438
12	d	120	0	1	0.83	0.373	0.98	0.156
13	s	120	0	1	0.74	0.438	0.97	0.180
14	u	120	0	1	0.07	0.250	0.38	0.487
15	v	120	0	1	0.61	0.489	0.78	0.418
16	p	120	0	1	0.96	0.200	0.98	0.156
17	q	120	0	1	0.69	0.466	0.88	0.321
18	j	120	0	1	0.89	0.311	0.93	0.250
19	i	120	0	1	0.13	0.340	0.46	0.501
20	o	120	0	1	0.14	0.349	0.46	0.501
21	x	120	0	1	0.72	0.451	0.97	0.180
22	w	120	0	1	0.86	0.349	0.91	0.289
23	e	120	0	1	0.24	0.429	0.67	0.472
24	c/k	120	0	1	0.53	0.501	0.85	0.357
25	l	120	0	1	0.34	0.475	0.66	0.475
26	z	120	0	1	0.88	0.321	0.98	0.128

Next, looking at the Descriptive statistics of the t-test (df=120), almost all vowels were significantly different.

$p < 0.01$

[f] $t = -6.837, p = .000$, [r] $t = -4.695, p = .000$, [t] $t = -6.108, p = .000$,
 [y] $t = -6.723, p = .000$, [d] $t = -4.154, p = .000$, [s] $t = -5.177, p = .000$,
 [u] $t = -6.901, p = .000$, [q] $t = -4.276, p = .000$, [i] $t = -6.397, p = .000$,
 [o] $t = -5.962, p = .000$, [x] $t = -6.290, p = .000$, [e] $t = -7.502, p = .000$,
 [c/k] $t = -6.108, p = .000$, [l] $t = -6.265, p = .000$,
 [b] $t = -3.414, p = .001$, [n] $t = -3.381, p = .001$, [z] $t = -3.339, p = .001$
 ([a] was $t = -2.798, p = .006$.)

From the above test results, it can be said that undergraduate students improved recognition of alphabet sounds, especially concerning the vowels, through repetition of the alphabet sounds. So RQ 2) has been proved. This would be even clearer when compared to the test results of 2018. (n=130)

$p < 0.01$

[h] $t = -3.663, p = .000$, [c/k] $t = -4.255, p = .000$, [n] $t = -3.596, p = .000$,
 [i] $t = -3.981, p = .000$, [f] $t = -3.596, p = .001$, [x] $t = -3.453, p = .001$

$p < 0.05$

[s] $t = -2.973, p = .004$, [t] $t = -2.215, p = .028$, [o] $t = -2.139, p = .034$

In 2018, students had just only input, although, from the 2019 academic year, they were given micro-teaching sessions, so they practiced even outside of class. That advanced students further in their learning.

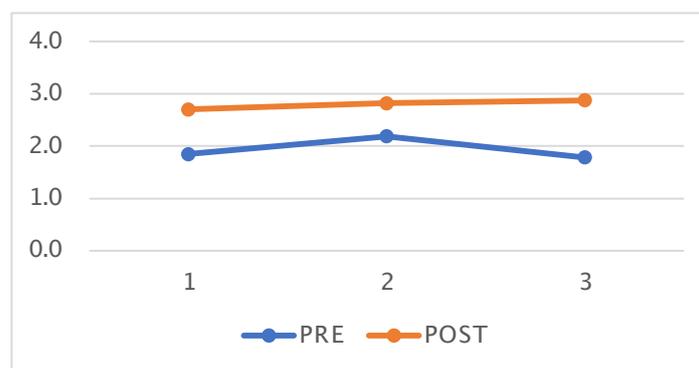
Questionnaire For part E, the students responded to the following three questions using a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 = nothing, and 5 = enough.

- 1) Do you have enough confidence in speaking English?
- 2) Do you have enough confidence in reading words you do not know?
- 3) Do you have enough confidence in teaching children the rules of English sound and letters?

Figure 7 shows the average value of answers to each question pre- and post-tests. It shows students' confidence generally improved after taking phonics instruction. So RQ3 has been proved.

Figure 7

The Results of Questionnaire



Free Descriptions. The students wrote freely about what they learned/felt in the course (during the pre-test), and also what they want to learn more (during the post-test) in the free description section. Their writing was analyzed by KH coder, free software for quantitative content analysis of text-type data (metric text analysis) or text mining. Many students wrote answers such as:

“When I was an elementary school student, I mainly spoke and listened to English, and when I entered junior high, I suddenly started learning letters (mainly writing).”

“Can I teach children the correct pronunciation of the alphabet, even if I haven't done it myself?”

“I am not confident in teaching the rules of sounds and letters. I would teach children the wrong pronunciation.”

Tables 3 and 4 show the top 20 extracted words from all descriptions. Negative words, such as “disadvantage” (7th) and “anxiety” (15th) were ranked high in the pre-test but disappeared in the post-test.

Table 3
Extracted Words (Pre-test)

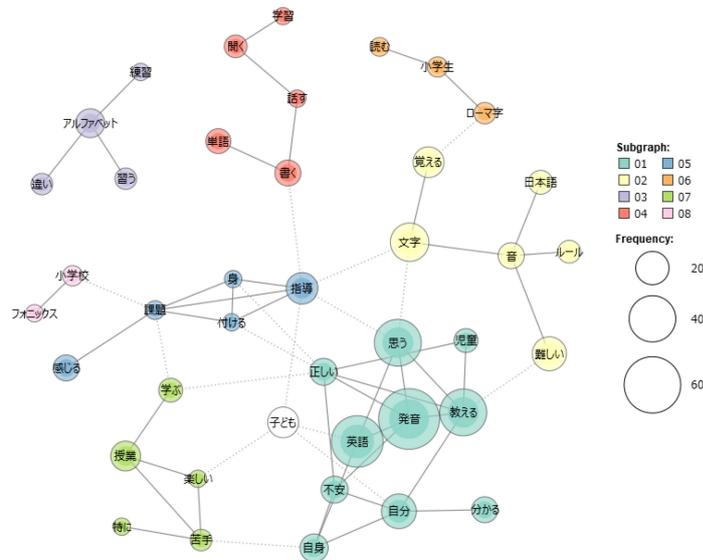
	extracted words	frequency
1	pronunciation	70
2	English	50
3	teach	41
4	think	41
5	letter	27
6	myself	22
7	difficult	21
8	lesson	18
9	remember	17
10	children	17
11	teaching	16
12	Alphabet	15
13	personally	14
14	right	13
15	anxiety	13
16	sounds	12
17	feel	12
18	write	12
19	understand	12
20	confidence	11

Table 4
Extracted Words (Post-test)

	extracted words	frequency
1	pronunciation	69
2	English	47
3	think	43
4	letter	32
5	learn	28
6	teaching	28
7	sound	25
8	ability	25
9	myself	23
10	teach	21
11	teaching	21
12	children	20
13	pupils	17
14	confidence	17
15	listen	15
16	phonics	13
17	rule	13
18	right	13
19	find	12
20	understand	12

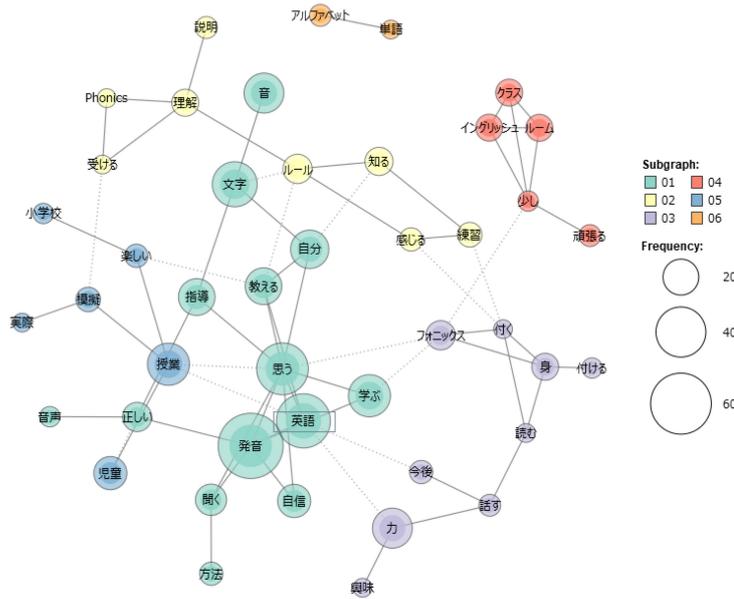
Along with the Figure 8, which is the Co-occurrence network diagram of the pre- and post-test, “pronunciation” and “English” are centered in the largest networks in both cases. Therefore, their co-occurrence during the pre-test shows that many students thought "it is right to teach children English pronunciation correctly" and they were worried about it. On the other hand, after the instruction, it can be read that they learned how to connect sounds and letters, and they gained confidence in teaching even though their anxiety remained.

Pre-test



Post-test

Figure 8
Co-occurrence Network Diagram (pre- and post-test)



However, there are many constructive comments on the post-test. For example, they wrote they could get some confidence in their pronunciation, thus:

“In this course, I was able to learn about sounds and letters gradually in various ways.”

“I have got English pronunciation that comes with me, so I want to listen to and pronounce more English so that I can be confident in myself and have other people listen to it.”

elaborative rehearsal. In the classes, the output opportunities were micro-teaching and also as elaborative rehearsal. Through the micro-teaching, students will be able to make their mental lexicon richer and the obtained information can be transmitted from short-term memory to long-term memory. Even if students recognize the sounds correctly, more rehearsals are needed to pronounce the sounds correctly. Exact output practice rehearses English phonemes many times in the brain; it both strengthens neural networks and improves phonetic sound recognition ability.

Conclusion

Between English and Japanese, there are huge linguistic differences. Japanese learners need both inputs and outputs to strengthen their phonological knowledge. In accordance with Baddeley and Hitch (2000): "It does, however, focus attention on the need for our working memory model to be able to account for the integration of information from multiple sources, and for the use of such integrated representations for building mental models and using them to plan for future action. (p.135)" Even though most of the information is encoded in long-term memory, learners need to retrieve previously learned information to use it; this is the elaborative rehearsal.

According to Tamai (2019), the most important point for gaining literacy in Japanese young learners is to foster in them phonological awareness and to integrate literacy instruction cultivating speech-language (phonological/phonemic proficiency). This means it is necessary to teach phonics instruction to in-service teachers, those who haven't experienced learning phonics when they were elementary school pupils, even in junior high schools. It follows that it is very important to gain experiential knowledge of English sounds as well as how to teach letters and sounds to pupils. For students to obtain information from long-term memory, they must be given regular access to the content they have learned or an opportunity to access the encoded information through not only input but also through opportunities of output. However, the problem is that there is not enough time in their training course, so it is very important to have students conduct micro-teaching about phonics instruction. They use multiple stimuli in their micro-teaching, and they can thus strengthen their knowledge through the experience. This was accompanied by preparatory practice outside of the classes, the kind of practice that will reinforce students' knowledge through elaborative rehearsal.

If careful initial literacy instruction from the elementary school will succeed, it will be a great help for Japanese elementary school teachers. The undergraduate students in the training course have to understand the phonics instruction and improve their English skills, so that this study will be a great suggestion or strategy for their teaching techniques.

*1 Alphabet Jingle: A phonics alphabet jingle is a character that is cast from A to Z, with a set of letters, their

pronunciation, and the words that begin with that pronunciation, such as "A / ae / , / ae / , apple."

*2 online: Med terms Medical Dictionary A-Z list / working memory

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Appendix

Peer Assessment Sheet for Micro-teaching

Date :	
Peer Assessment Sheet	
practitioner(s) :	
○Based on the following evaluation criteria, please enter your score in 5 levels.	
5-Excellent 4-Well done 3-good 2-Not enough 1-No good	
プレゼンテーション	1. The description of the activities is clear and concise.
Interaction	2. The contents are organized and carefully designed to be posted clearly.
Feedback	3. Encourage pupils using expressive/praise words.
Teaching method	4. Not only teacher's unilateral approach but also encouraged pupils to speak out.
Feedback	5. Error correction has been made properly.
Teaching method	6. There are occasions where comments and evaluations are given to pupil's activities.
Teaching method	7. Appropriate responses have been made to pupil's comments and reactions.
Teaching method	8. Teaching materials and tools were devised according to the instructions. [Songs / Chants / Picture Books / Others]
Teaching method	9. Using well-balanced multi sensors [Visual, auditory, body sensation, etc.]
Teaching method	10. Based on phonics rules, pronouncing him/her-self and gives appropriate guidance
Total _____	
A+= 46~48, A= 40~45, A-= 36~39, B+= 30~35, B= 25~29, B-= ~25	
Comment: What was good/ what needed in improvement/ what you noticed etc..	