

# Understanding Pre-Service Teachers' Familiarity and Interest in Phonics and Potential Implications

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The aim of this study was to better understand pre-service teachers' familiarity with and interest in phonics and how these factors might influence the development of future phonics courses. For this study, 86 first year undergraduate students attending a national university for teacher education completed a survey in 2017. Participants from one class submitted a journal after attending three lessons introducing phonics. The survey results showed that most participants did not learn phonics before entering university, and admitted they had trouble reading new English words. Furthermore, according to the journal comments, participants gained an awareness of their own pronunciation skills, and an understanding of the key points of phonics and how it can be taught using songs.

本研究では、フォニックスに関する教育実習生の学習経験と関心、及びこれらの要素が将来のフォニックスコース開発にどのような影響を与えるかをより把握することを目的とした。本研究に関して、2017年にある国立教育大学で86名の1年生の学部生が調査を行いました。また、あるクラスからの参加者が、フォニックスを紹介するレッスンに3回参加した後、日誌を提出しました。その調査結果によると、ほとんどの参加者は大学入学前にフォニックスを習得しておらず、ほとんどの参加者は英語の新しい単語を読むのに問題があると認めました。さらに、その日誌のコメントによると、自分の発音スキル、フォニックスの要点、及び歌をどのように使っているかという認識が得られたと結論づけることができました。

**P**re-service EFL teachers require both pedagogical content knowledge and practical skills. As Japan makes reforms to English education, university educators must also consider the changes in the interests and experiences of incoming students to provide more effective teacher education. Currently, teachers of English are not specifically required to learn about phonics according to the Educational Personnel Certification Act (MEXT, 2009), because the regulations do not state the specific content of English-related courses. However, some aspects of the Educational Personnel Certification Act are expected to change in 2017, which might improve the content of training courses. It should also be noted that features of phonics are already included in junior high school textbooks, such as the phonemic awareness tasks in *New Horizon English Course 1* (Kasajima et al., 2015, pp. 14-15). Thus, there is a need

for pre-service junior high school teachers to have both an understanding of phonics and the ability to teach it. The extent to which elementary and junior high school teachers of English should be required to have a solid understanding of phonics and be able to systematically teach phonics are topics that require more attention. However, teacher trainers need to follow the national guidelines on language education and anticipate future reforms as well as understand changes to pre-service teachers' familiarity with and interest in phonics to provide adequate training.

## The Position of Phonics in Japanese National Educational Guidelines

One of the causes of students and teachers not learning phonics is its lack of inclusion in the MEXT-established Japanese national curriculum guidelines. According to the previous Course of Study for Foreign Language Activities document (2010), 5th and 6th grade elementary school students should gain familiarity "with the sounds and rhythms of the foreign language, to learn its differences from the Japanese language" (MEXT, p. 1). Junior high school students should gain familiarity "with the basic characteristics of English sounds such as stress, intonation and pauses and pronounce English sounds correctly" (MEXT, 2011, p.1), and "distinguish letters or symbols and read English correctly" (MEXT, 2011, p. 2). Thus, the term *phonics* was not specifically included in the English Course of Study for elementary school or for junior high school. Features of phonics instruction have been encouraged, but not necessarily in a systematic way. This continues to be the case with the new Elementary School Course of Study (MEXT, 2017a) because it simply encourages "activities to look at letters written in print and pronounce them properly" (p. 141). The new Junior High School Course of Study (MEXT, 2017b) also neglects to highlight the importance of systematic phonics instruction, although "the relationship between pronunciation and spelling" (MEXT, 2017c, p.13) is recommended to be taught. Thus, even though the inclusion of systematic phonics instruction is still

unlikely, there is a growing need to create comprehensive phonics courses for pre-service teachers to ensure the smooth flow of language education between school levels.

### Reasons for Including Phonics

The reasons for including phonics in English education are clear. For native English-speaking children, phonics is considered an essential part of early literacy education in Australia, the United States, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand (Lewis & Ellis, 2006). Major studies (National Reading Panel, 2000; Torgersen, Brooks, & Hall, 2006) have shown that literacy development is linked to phonological awareness and particularly phonemic awareness, which are aspects of phonics instruction. Regarding EFL learners, Takeda (2002) has suggested that phonics can be beneficial for L2 English learners, too. Thus, if all students are required to study English in Japan, some students might learn English better with early phonics instruction. By learning phonics students become able to decode text by learning the 44 phonemes of the English language which are represented by 26 letters and letter combinations. The key benefit of learning phonics early on is that “approximately 84% of English words are phonetically regular” (Blevins, 2006, p.8). This means students who learn phonics can learn to quickly read new words that they encounter. Furthermore, English teachers who learn phonics might notice improvements in how accurately and fluently they read texts aloud in their junior high school classes or notice improvements in their ability to do shared picture book reading in elementary school English classes. Thus, both teachers and students can benefit from learning phonics.

In the past, research has focused on the difficulties of including phonics in Japanese EFL lessons (Katanoda & Wada, 2012; Nahatame, 2014), and overlooked the importance of understanding the current levels of pre-service teachers’ familiarity with and interest in phonics. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to investigate pre-service teachers’ basic familiarity with phonics and their level of interest, as well as highlight any expected problems in phonics course implementation.

### Methodology

#### Research Questions

This study was guided by three research questions:

1. To what extent have first year undergraduate students who are studying to be teachers

received phonics instruction before entering university?

2. To what extent are pre-service teachers interested in learning and teaching phonics?
3. What did first year undergraduate students feel they gained from three intensive lessons on phonics? How might those comments help develop phonics courses for pre-service teachers?

### Participants

The survey involved a sample of 86 first year undergraduate students enrolled in a national university for teacher education in Japan in the first semester of 2017. Two-thirds of the participants were female students, and just under 6% of participants were majoring in English. Furthermore, most of the participants were interested in teaching English in elementary schools in the future, and at least half of the them indicated that they were interested in teaching English in junior high schools. Because participants were first year students, many of them were uncertain about which level they were interested in teaching in the future. Thirty-one students from one class also completed journal entries in English about the three phonics lessons taught within the course of this study.

### Survey and Reflection Journal

The survey questions focused on participants’ previous phonics experience, future interest in teaching phonics, pronunciation and reading ability, and knowledge of key terms. It used a four-point Likert Scale, including responses labeled “agree,” “mildly agree,” “mildly disagree,” and “disagree.” Some of the questions were based on those used in a similar study by Yoshida and Chon (2012). Apart from the survey, participants in one class of 31 students submitted a reflection journal in English that was composed outside of lesson time. That class was chosen because the course content included three phonics lessons and included the most students majoring in English, who were expected to be able to write comments in English competently.

### Analysis

The results of the survey were calculated into percentages. The comments from the reflection journals were organized into categories to understand the distribution and popularity of journal comment topics regarding the phonics lessons. Revealing and informative comments were selected for inclusion in this paper.

## Results and Discussion

The first research question asked to what extent participants had studied phonics before entering university. Only four replied that they had studied phonics in elementary school and only four participants indicated that they had studied phonics in junior high school (see Appendix). Furthermore, only five of the 86 participants indicated that they had studied phonics at a cram school or English conversation school. Many participants had not heard of the word *phonics* before. Therefore, it is not surprising that most participants were unaware of the meaning of *phoneme* in Japanese. However, just under half of all the participants agreed or mildly agreed that they were familiar with the meaning of *syllable* in Japanese. Since learning about syllables is one aspect of phonics, their familiarity with the word *syllable* suggests this aspect of phonics might have been taught to them. This also means that for these pre-service teachers to sufficiently understand phonics enough to confidently teach it, they would need a comprehensive program to develop their core knowledge of phonics along with teaching methods and practical teaching opportunities.

The second research question investigated participants' interest in learning phonics. The survey results show that most participants were interested or mildly interested in learning more about effective writing instruction, and that they clearly showed a desire to develop their pronunciation skills and ability to speak naturally. Additionally, most participants also wanted to improve their ability to read aloud. For pre-service teachers, learning phonics is likely to assist with the development of certain teaching skills. In particular, developed decoding skills are likely to be useful for teaching activities, such as shared reading and *ondoku* (reading aloud) activities.

Furthermore, considering that this survey was carried out before the participants had taken phonics lessons, their comments in their journals are of significance. In the journals, many participants indicated that they were interested in using phonics to either improve their own pronunciation skills or to teach English in the future. Also, roughly one third of the journals had comments that indicated participants felt more interested in learning about phonics. Several participants also indicated that watching a video of a child reading a book and sounding out the phonemes helped them to understand the importance of phonics. Conversely, some participants wrote that their previous English classes did not include the National Reading Panel's (2000) key points related to reading instruction in

the U.S. (phonemic awareness, phonics, fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary development), and that they felt concerned or confused as a result. These results suggest that the participants were interested in either learning or teaching phonics in the future to some extent for a range of reasons.

The final research question asked what participants felt they had gained from three lessons on phonics taught by the researcher. These lessons included an introduction to the meaning of phonics and the benefits of learning phonics, easy ways to include phonics in short modules in elementary school or junior high school EFL lessons, and various teaching materials. Most students covered several topics in their submitted journals, which have been summarized in Table 1. The most popular topics included in the journal entries were phonics songs, personal pronunciation skills, key points of phonics, and enjoyable ways to teach phonics.

Table 1. Distribution of Topics of Journal Comments on Phonics Lessons

Topics of Journal Comments	Total Number Observed
Key Points of Phonics	14
Benefits of Phonics	5
Importance of Phonics	7
Interest in Phonics	11
Phonics Songs	19
Materials for Teaching Phonics	10
Pronunciation Ability	16
Previous Learning Experiences/Methods	9
Enjoyable Ways of Teaching Phonics	14
Difficulties Between Japanese and English	4
Phonics Videos (YouTube)	10
Phonics Teaching Methods/Activities	10

Note.  $n = 31$

Some students clearly grasped some of the key points of phonics according to their journal entries:

I was surprised that the English alphabet is 26 letters, but they represent about 44 phonemes. (Female Student A)

“Hen” . . . in English has three sounds. But “hen” . . . in Japanese has two sounds. (Female Student B)

I learned that phonics is a method for teaching reading and writing by developing phonemic awareness. (Female Student C)

Overall, many participants felt that they had gained an interest in phonics from the lessons on teaching materials. These included useful websites, workbooks, resource books, songs available on YouTube, and handouts provided by the researcher. Many comments focused on the phonics songs which students were required to compare and analyze which were used to introduce a quick method for teaching phonics.

I listened to the songs . . . I thought that this would be easy for children to learn about English pronunciation while having fun. (Female Student D)

I think that it is useful for the children to listen to these songs, but each songs have [sic] both good and bad points, so we should choose appropriate songs. (Male Student A)

One concern that was raised from the journal responses was that lessons about phonics could actually lead students to misunderstand the true purpose of teaching phonics. Some students linked phonics to improving pronunciation skills instead of assisting reading and writing skills, which is the main purpose of learning phonics for native English speakers.

It was easy to understand. And I noticed that my English pronunciation was wrong. I was glad to understand the right English pronunciation. (Male Student B)

It is often said that Japanese are speaking English by katakana English, so I practiced my pronunciation this time and realized that my English pronunciation is inadequate. (Female Student E)

Unlike young learners, the participants attended the phonics lessons after they had already mastered their English reading skills. That might be the reason why they considered the phonics lessons to be pronunciation practice. Because the survey also showed that most participants were interested in developing their pronunciation skills at the start of the course, their personal interest in pronunciation skill development might have contributed to their confusion. Overall, the reflection journal responses showed that participants became more aware of their own English-learning experiences and their own pronunciation. Furthermore, almost half of the journal writers were particularly interested in fun ways of teaching phonics using songs.

## Limitations of the Study

This study has several limitations. Regarding the survey questions, more specific information on the learners' experiences of learning phonics with examples of different tasks could have been included. For a more comprehensive study on pre-service teachers' familiarity with phonics, a test might be advisable because, according to the results, students might study aspects of phonics without realizing it. A follow-up survey after the phonics lessons also would have been useful to measure any changes in participants' knowledge and interests. However, with those limitations in mind, some conclusions and potential implications can be drawn.

## Conclusion

In Japan there have been problems linking oral language skills and literacy skills between school levels, which MEXT (2017c) has recently acknowledged. In the new Course of Study guidelines (2017a, 2017b) MEXT aims to rectify this problem without requiring teachers to systematically teach phonics. However, future teachers of all levels could benefit from learning about phonics in a systematic way. The results of this study suggest most first year undergraduate students studying to be teachers are not familiar with phonics before entering university. Furthermore, most students in this study either mildly agreed or agreed that they had trouble reading new English words. For the participants in this study, a limited number of phonics lessons promoted an awareness of their own pronunciation skills, and some understanding and awareness of phonics teaching methods. If these students lack prior knowledge of phonics before entering university, they will need to gain a solid understanding of effective pedagogy and confidence through extensive phonics training during their university studies. By developing phonics courses, pre-service teachers can more effectively link oral language skills and literacy skills when they start teaching. Considering that English education in Japan is undergoing critical changes, it is essential that more research on phonics training for pre-service teachers is carried out, as well as research on ways to adapt phonics programs for teaching phonics to EFL learners.

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## Appendix

## Survey Results

	I Agree	I Somewhat Agree	I Somewhat Disagree	I Disagree
(1) 将来、小学校で英語を教えたい。 I want to teach English at elementary school.	55% (47)	33% (28)	10% (9)	2% (2)
(2) 将来、中学校で英語を教えたい。 I want to teach English at junior high school.	15% (13)	36% (31)	30% (26)	19% (16)
(3) フォニックスを教えられるようになりたい。 I want to be able to teach phonics.	17% (15)	35% (30)	34% (29)	14% (12)
(4) 効果的な文字指導をもっと知りたい。 I want to learn more about effective writing instruction.	57% (49)	36% (31)	5% (4)	2% (2)
(5) もっと自然に英語で喋るようになりたい。 I want to speak English more naturally.	91% (78)	9% (8)	0% (0)	0% (0)
(6) 自分の英語の発音を向上させたい。 I want to improve my English pronunciation	91% (78)	9% (8)	0% (0)	0% (0)
(7) 英語の音読能力を向上させたい。 I want to improve my reading aloud ability.	77% (66)	21% (18)	1% (1)	1% (1)
(8) フォニックスを聞いたことがある。 I have heard of phonics before.	10.5% (9)	16% (14)	3.5% (3)	70% (60)
(9) フォニックスの名前だけ知っている。 I only know the name of phonics.	4.7% (4)	11.6% (10)	8.1% (7)	75.6% (65)
(10) 塾か英会話学校で、フォニックスを習ったことがある。 I have studied phonics at an English conversation school or cram school.	6% (5)	7% (6)	3% (3)	84% (72)
(11) 小学生の時、フォニックスを習ったことがある。 I have studied phonics at elementary school.	5% (4)	6% (5)	1% (1)	88% (76)
(12) 中学生の時、フォニックスを習ったことがある。 I have studied phonics at junior high school.	5% (4)	7% (6)	7% (6)	81% (70)
(13) 「音素」の意味を知っている。 I know the meaning of <i>phoneme</i> .	0% (0)	6% (5)	16% (14)	78% (67)
(14) 「音節」の意味を知っている。 I know the meaning of <i>syllable</i> .	14% (12)	33% (28)	24% (21)	29% (25)
(15) 新しい単語を覚えるたびに、カタカナで書く。 I write katakana, every time I remember new words.	3% (3)	5% (4)	20% (17)	72% (62)
(16) 綴りを覚えるのは得意だと思う。 I think I am good at remembering spelling.	10.5% (9)	26.7% (23)	38.4% (33)	24.4% (21)
(17) 分からない単語は読みにくい。 Words I don't know are difficult to read.	44% (38)	42% (36)	8% (7)	6% (5)