

Rhyming words activities in elementary school English

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1. Introduction

One of the biggest challenges for native speakers of Japanese is to acquire the English skills, even though they hope to master English during their school days. There are various reasons why mastering English seems very difficult for them (cf. Shirai, 2008): various linguistic differences between English and Japanese, negative transfer from Japanese, low motivation for studying English, the overwhelming shortage of English input in English as a foreign language context in Japan, and so on. Considering the insufficient English ability of Japanese people, not only the educational but also the economic circles in Japan insisted that English education should be implemented in Japanese elementary schools. According to Terasawa (2020), the English education in Japanese public elementary schools has been transformed through five periods: (1) the informal and sporadic elementary school English until 1980s, (2) the experimental elementary school English from 1992 to 2001, (3) the elementary school English in the comprehensive learning period, *Sougouteki na Gakushu*, from 2002 to 2010, (4) the compulsory elementary school English activities from 2011 to 2019, (5) the elementary school English as one of the subjects from 2020. In 2020, the elementary school English in Japan faced drastic changes: the elementary school English activities were pushed forward to the third and fourth grades, and the subject of English was implemented in the curriculum of fifth and six grades.

Another significant change for the subject of English for fifth and six grades is to teach not only English speaking and listening, but also basic English reading, writing, and sentence structures, which previously had been taught in the subject of English in the junior high school curriculum. There has been a controversy whether English reading and writing should be taught in elementary school English. According to a survey on junior high school students' attitude for English study conducted by Benesse Education Research & Development Institute (2009), 78.6% of junior high school students answered English grammar was difficult, and 72% of students thought writing sentences in English was also difficult. Another survey released by Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (2015) reported that more than 75% of the first and second graders of junior high schools answered they had wanted to study reading and writing English in their elementary school English activities, while 43.9% of the junior high school students answered that they thought they were bad at English.

In spite of the aforementioned situation, the subject of English in elementary schools started to include English reading and writing from 2020. According to the course guidelines for the subject of English in elementary schools, fifth and sixth graders in elementary school should be sufficiently familiar with English words and sounds of the English activities in the third and fourth grades, and then they should start to read and write the alphabet, English words, and plain English sentences. However, it would be difficult for elementary school students to be familiar with English sounds and words in the limited time of English activities, especially if their native language, Japanese, is not an alphabetic language like English. The present study introduces and examines elementary school

English activities in which instructors used various English rhyming word cards with English sounds and words. Through these activities, it is expected that the elementary school students would enhance phonological awareness.

2. English Activities in *Kikuyo, Kumamoto*

As mentioned in the previous chapter, English in the elementary schools started as compulsory English activities in 2011, and the English activities for the fifth and sixth grades kicked into gear in all the public elementary schools. Regarding the teaching materials, Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology provided elementary school students with a common textbook, “Hi, Friends” in 2012. However, there was a controversial issue about who should teach English in elementary schools. Needless to say, elementary school teachers should teach English to elementary school students, however, most elementary school teachers had not studied English pedagogy before and after they started to teach in elementary schools. In addition to it, most elementary school teachers did not have enough opportunities to take training on how to teach English. Taking the issue into consideration, most boards of education began to provide elementary school teachers with training sessions in and out of schools.

In Kumamoto, the prefectural, municipal, or city boards of education held various kinds of training sessions. However, in reality, there were not many teachers who took part in the training. Matsumoto (2014) conducted a questionnaire survey to elementary school teachers in *Kikuyo* Town in 2013, and it revealed that 69.0% of the teachers took the trainings on English education for less than 5 hours in a year, and 27.6% of them took no training session in a year. The survey also revealed that 69.0% of the teachers answered that they did not have confidence in teaching English. They also answered that they did not have confidence in English pronunciation (72.4%), followed by fluency in English (69.0%) and communication in English (55.2%). These facts implied that the elementary school teachers seemed to lack confidence in oral English skills. Regarding the question to ask appropriate instructors for elementary school English activities, 74.1% of the teachers answered that Assistant Language Teachers (ALT) was appropriate, followed by an elementary school teacher (44.4%), and a Japanese teacher of English with English teacher license. This result revealed that the teachers thought an English fluent person such as an ALT or a Japanese teacher of English would be a preferable instructor to teach elementary school English activities even though they understood elementary home room teachers were more appropriate instructors.

Realistically speaking, many boards of education, especially small towns, could not distribute enough Assistant Language Teachers to elementary schools. In *Kikuyo* town, one or two Assistant Language Teachers were assigned to two junior high schools and six elementary schools in the town, but they taught exclusively in junior high schools, and could not afford to come and teach at elementary schools. In order to help elementary school teachers in *Kikuyo* town to teach English activities, *Kikuyo* town and Kyushu Lutheran College concluded an agreement to send out college students who major in English to the six elementary schools in the town. The students have been volunteered T2 in elementary school English activities since 2010. They are expected to demonstrate English pronunciation with teachers. According to the questionnaire survey in Matsumoto (2013), the college students were expected to communicate in English the most (86.2%), followed by demonstrating English pronunciations (82.8%). The volunteer students are required to

participate in the English activities at least 6 times in a semester as a part of the course work and to take on a role of an assistant teacher. Basically, the volunteer students are expected to do what the elementary school teachers demand, such as reading aloud English words in textbooks, and playing a conversation partner in English with teachers. However, they sometime take initiatives in warming up exercises under the supervision by elementary school teachers. For the warming up exercises, the college students prepare the various kinds of teaching materials, English games, English songs and chants, and so on. In the classes in 2018 to 2019, the students and I created English cards which aim to enhance phonological awareness or phonemic awareness in English by using rhyming picture cards. In the following section, I will examine phonological awareness and rhyming picture cards.

3. Phonological Awareness

As was examined in Matsumoto (2017), the relationship between phonological awareness and children's English reading ability have been investigated in a lot of literatures. Cisero and Royer (1995) investigated much development of phonological awareness in alphabetic languages and divided it into three stages:

Table 1. the stages of phonological awareness

(1) syllable awareness	e.g. London consists of 2 syllables Lon (CVC) · don (CVC)
(2) onset-rhyme awareness	e.g. w (onset) -ig (rhyme) d (onset) -ig (rhyme) p (onset) -ig (rhyme)
(3) phonemic awareness	e.g. cat consists of the three phonemes, /k/, /æ/, and /t/,

As illustrated in Table. 1, syllable awareness is the knowledge that English words basically consist of syllables, and that English words can be broken into syllables. For example, native English speakers can divide the English word, *London*, into two syllables: “Lon” and “don,” while native Japanese speakers tend to divide the same English word, *London*, into four morae, because the basic sound segment unit of Japanese is a mora. Thus, *London* is divided into four morae: /ro/, /n/, /do/, /n/. Onset-rhyme awareness is the knowledge to recognize that syllables can be basically divided into two smaller units of onset and rhyme. Thus, native speakers of English can divide the English words such as *wig*, *dig*, and *pig* into the onset phonemes, /w/, /d/, /p/ and the rhyme /ig/, and the three words share the same rhyme. Phonemic awareness is the knowledge to understand that English sounds consist of the combination of the smallest unit of a phoneme. For example, the English word, *cat*, consists of the smallest units of the three phonemes, /k/, /æ/, and /t/. According to Cisero and Royer (1995), detecting rhyme is easier than detecting onset, i.e., alliteration, and word final phoneme detection. Cisero and Royer (1995) tested if Spanish and English speaking first grade students could answer more accurately and faster in the rhyme detection than in the onset detection and final phoneme detection. The results revealed that the students could answer more accurately

and faster in the rhyme detection task than in the onset detection and final phoneme detection tasks. Cisero and Royer (1995) discussed the conceivable reasons why Spanish and English speaking students could answer more accurately and faster in the rhyme detection. One possibility is that children growing up in English speaking communities would be exposed to a lot of opportunities that include rhyming words such as listening to and singing nursery rhymes, and reading picture books, which contains a lot of rhyming words. Through these activities, children's ability to detect rhyming words might develop faster in the early stage of English learning. Another possibility discussed in Cisero and Royer (1995) was that detecting rhyming words would be more holistic than detecting smaller onset and final phoneme. Thus, onset and final phoneme detection would require more analytical knowledge and be cognitively more difficult for children. The studies in Cisero and Royer (1995) revealed that developing phonological awareness, especially detecting rhyming words, would build the foundation of literacy knowledge in English. Cisero and Royer (1995) also hypothesized that English learning children break syllable sounds down into onset and rhyme parts before dividing into phonemes. Therefore, when English learning children listen to the English word, *cat*, they might divide it into the onset sound /k/ and the rhyme /æ/+ /t/, then they might learn to divide it into the three phonemes: /k/, /æ/, and /t/.

Allen-Tamai (2004, 2006) investigated the phonological awareness of Japanese children. Allen-Tamai (2004) conducted the series of tests to five and six-year-old Japanese children to investigate their knowledge of basic sound segment unit, mora would affect their knowledge of phonological awareness in English. The results indicated that those who had shown higher ability in the phonological awareness in Japanese morae could also perform better in phonological awareness in English. Allen-Tamai (2006) further investigated how Japanese children decoded the syllabic structures in English. The results revealed that Japanese children decoded English syllabic structures not by syllable but by mora. The result could be interpreted that Japanese children in the early stage of English learning would be influenced by the phonological knowledge of Japanese.

Taking the studies in Allen-Tamai (2004) and (2006), Allen-Tamai (2010) pointed out that it is important for Japanese children to develop the phonological awareness in English before introducing literacy because each English letter basically corresponds to a phoneme. Thus, in order to recognize the English word, *cat*, Japanese learners of English need to understand that the word consists of the three phonemes, /k/, /æ/, and /t/ as well as the onset and rhyme combination, /k/ and /æ/+ /t/. The following section introduces phonological awareness activities in the elementary school English by volunteer college students.

4. Rhyming picture cards

As discussed in the previous section, the development of phonological awareness is divided into three stages: syllable awareness, onset-rhyme awareness, and phonemic awareness. According to Cisero and Royer (1995), English learning children first learn to break syllable down into a set of onset-rhyme, then they learn to divide it into smaller phonemes. Furthermore, it was discussed in Cisero and Royer (1995) that detecting rhyme is easier than detecting onset, i.e., alliteration. Regarding Japanese children learning English, Allen-Tamai (2010) pointed out that Japanese children need to enhance phonemic awareness as well as onset-rhyme awareness before studying English literacy. As was mentioned in the first section, fifth and sixth graders in Japanese

elementary schools have started to learn English reading and writing since 2020. However, the importance of enhancing phonologic awareness in English cannot be emphasized too much before introducing English reading and writing. Taking this into consideration, various kinds of activities to enhance English phonological awareness were carried out in the English activities for fifth and sixth graders in *Kikuyo* town.

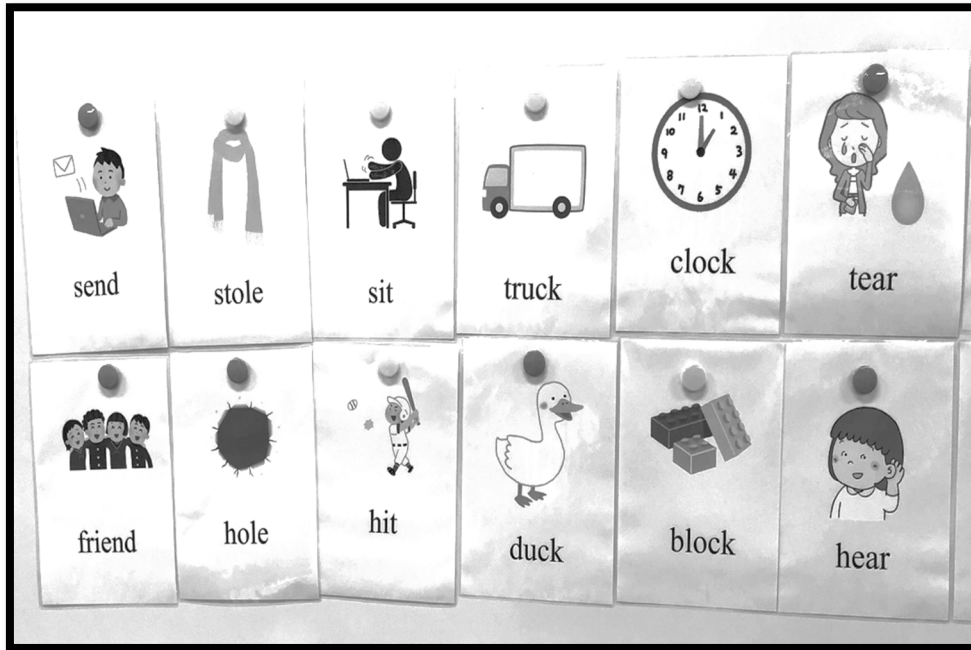
In preparing for the activities, 76 rhyming sounds were selected from Oxford Children's Rhyming Dictionary (2014) and Oxford First Rhyming Dictionary (2014). Table. 2 shows the lists of rhyming sounds.

Table 2. the 76 rhyming sounds

1	-ape	2	-arm	3	-ack	4	-ag	5	-all
6	-age	7	-ake	8	-amp	9	-ame	10	-ate
11	-ass	12	-air	13	-at	14	-ar	15	-ad
16	-ace	17	-atch	18	-ark	19	-and	20	-ash
21	-ail	22	-ain	23	-ay	24	-ard	25	-ed
26	-en	27	-eam	28	-ess	29	-ear	30	-end
31	-eat	31	-eck	33	-est	34	-et	35	-een
36	-eed	37	-eep	38	-eak	39	-ent	40	-ee
41	-ell	42	-ish	43	-ive	44	-ip	45	-it
46	-ice	47	-ine	48	-in	49	-ide	50	-ile
51	-ie	52	-ime	53	-ig	54	-oat	55	-ook
56	-ox	57	-old	58	-ock	59	-ole	60	-oon
61	-ose	62	-ool	63	-ot	64	-oom	65	-ope
66	-op	67	-ore	68	-ow	69	-ong	70	-own
71	-oy	72	-uck	73	-ug	74	-ump	75	-ull
76	-un								

Based on the rhyming sounds in Table 2, one hundred and seventy-one English pictures were prepared which contained those sounds. Since the two rhyming dictionaries were edited for children who learn English in English speaking countries, some words seemed unfamiliar to the Japanese elementary school students. Therefore, relatively easy English words were chosen to make the English rhyming picture cards. Most rhyming sounds were made into two pairs of English picture cards, such as *tape* and *shape*, however, some included three or four English cards, e.g., *ball*, *call*, *mall*, and *call*. Copyright free images were used to make the picture cards and all of them were printed and laminated in A4 size. Figure 1 illustrates some of the picture cards:

Figure 1. Rhyming picture cards



As explained in the section 2, the volunteer students from Kyushu Lutheran College participated in the English activities as T2 teachers in 2018 and 2019. These volunteer students sometimes had opportunities to lead various kinds of English activities under the elementary school teachers' supervision. As warming up activities, the rhyming games were used to enhance phonological awareness in English. The volunteer college students showed the elementary school students the picture cards, and read aloud each word a couple of times, then the elementary school students pronounced the same words after T2 teachers. After the elementary school students seemed to be familiar with the English words as well as the rhyming sounds, various kinds of rhyming games were performed in the activities. The rhyming games include "matching the same rhyming sounds game," "rhyming sounds concentration game," and "key rhyming word game." The matching the same rhyming sounds game is a game in which elementary school students try to rearrange the picture cards scattered around in accordance with rhyming sounds. For example, as shown in Figure 1, the twelve picture cards were sorted to make a pair of six rhyming sounds, such as *send* and *friend*. The rhyming sounds concentration game is a game in which all of the picture cards were laid face down on the surface, and elementary school students flipped to face up over each turn to match the rhyming sounds. The key rhyming word game is an easy game in which each elementary school student made a pair with a classmate sitting nearby, with an eraser put between them. The T2 teachers read aloud a picture card posted on a blackboard. The elementary school students were instructed to put their hands on their heads and take the eraser as soon as they heard the same rhyming sound. Those who could take the eraser were the winners. Figure 2 is a photo of the key rhyming word game in the classroom.

Figure 2. The key rhyming word game



The rhyming games mentioned above were easy activities. Most elementary school students concentrated very well on the games and could find rhyming words and sounds. After the activities, they were asked to fill out the self-evaluation sheets, and most of them answered that they found the games very interesting and enjoyed very much. Since the rhyming games used in the activities were a part of the English activities at elementary schools, we were not allowed to measure the effectiveness of the games, however, the reaction of the elementary school students implied that using the rhyming games might be beneficial for Japanese elementary school students to enhance their phonological awareness in English.

5. Conclusion

The present study discussed the current situation of English education in Japanese public elementary schools and the importance of enhancing phonological awareness before teaching English reading and writing. As discussed in the introduction, in 2020 elementary school English in Japan faced a significant change that elementary school English activities started from the third grade, and the current English activities were transformed as the subject of English for fifth and six grades. Moreover, elementary school English for fifth and six grades must involve reading and writing in English. This change may provide elementary school students with good motivation for studying English, because the survey by MEXT (2014) revealed that more than 75% of the first- and second-year students of junior high schools answered they wanted to study reading and writing English in their elementary school English. On the other hand, teaching reading and writing to beginners of English learning may increase the number of Japanese students who do not like English. A survey of Benesse Education Research & Development Institute (2009) revealed that 72% of junior high school students answered writing sentences in English was difficult. Considering these situations,

this paper first examined the previous study by Cisero and Royer (1995) which argued phonological awareness in English would be categorized into the three developmental stages, and native speakers of English acquire the knowledge to divide an English syllable into an onset and a rhyme in the process of English learning. Cisero and Royer (1995) also discussed that detecting a rhyme is easier than detecting onset detection for English learning children. Furthermore, Allen-Tamai (2010) pointed out that it is important for Japanese children to develop phonological awareness in English before introducing literacy education. Taking these studies into consideration, three kinds of rhyming games were conducted in the elementary school English activities for the fifth and six grades to examine development of phonological awareness. The game activities were carried out as warming up exercises in formal English activities at public elementary school. Therefore, students completed self-evaluation sheets after classes. Most of them answered that the games were very interesting, and they enjoyed them very much. These rhyming games would be appropriate for short time activities in class, and continuing rhyming activities would contribute to development of the phonological awareness of Japanese elementary school students before they study English reading and writing. However, further studies will be necessary to evaluate the effectiveness of the rhyming activities.

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