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ESSENTIAL STRATEGIES FOR TEACHING STUDENTS TO READ

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Abstract

This paper examines ways to help elementary school students in the Osaka region of Japan learn to read in English. The need for this research has become important because of the mandate from the Ministry of Education to implement English in the elementary school curriculum as of April 2020. The methodology used was an exploration of a cause-and-effect relationship between the techniques used by the teacher and the student's ability to learn to read. The findings show that, by using phonics, analogy phonics, context clues, syntax, and sight words, children in the Kids' English Program at Osaka Shoin Women's University (OSWU) showed an improvement in their reading skills. One takeaway from this research was that, when students had long periods off between their lessons, there was a decrease in their reading abilities.

Keywords

Phonics, Word Families, Context Clues, Syntax, Sight Words

1. Introduction

Reading is an essential skill that is necessary for most subjects in school. The earlier a child learns to read, the more beneficial this ability is to their studies. According to McNamara (2007), reading is an extraordinary achievement when one considers the number of levels and components that must be mastered. A variety of research has also shown that an English as a

Foreign Language (EFL) pupil's lack of reading fluency in English directly correlates with poor reading comprehension skills (Adams, 1990; Kuhn et al., 2010; Guerin & Murphy, 2015). In the early 2010s, the Ministry of Education in Japan announced that English would become an official subject in the elementary school curriculum beginning in April 2020. The problem from the perspective of an English-language teacher in Japan is that Japanese students had not studied English as a school subject until they entered junior high school at 12 years old. It became important to find an effective way to teach students how to read in the most effective way possible. The research began in September 2013 with the creation of the Saturday Kids' English Program at Osaka Shoin Women's University (OSWU). Over the years, the program has tried different methods to see which were the most effective for its students. This paper examines and explains the benefits of using phonics, analogy phonics (word families), context clues (semantics), syntax (word order), and sight words and how these tools were implemented in the Kids' English Program at OSWU.

1.1 Phonics

Phonics helps learn to read because it teaches the most common sounds in the English language. This allows students to learn patterns that will help predict the relationships between letters to form words, which helps them progress in their English skills. The goal of teaching phonics is for children to be able to read with accuracy, comprehension, and fluency. Research suggests that the ability to sound out words successfully leads children to develop better decoding and comprehension skills for their future studies (Lesgold & Resnick, 1982). Stanovic (1986) illustrates the importance of learning phonics from an early age, arguing that children who get off to a slow start in reading rarely catch up to their peers and seldom become strong readers. Those who experience difficulties decoding early on tend to read less and grow less in terms of their word-recognition skills and vocabulary (Stanovich, 1986).

In 2013, OSWU created the Kids' English Program to assist children in the community with their English skills on Saturday mornings. Over the years, four textbooks, ranging from kindergarten English to elementary school grade 6 English, have been created. The first version of the textbooks was based on the idea of the visual word association.










Fruits			Draw and color		
Banana 	Pear 	Apple 	Yellow banana	Green pear	Red apple
Peach 	Orange 	Lemon 	Pink peach	Orange orange	Yellow lemon
Grapes 	Pineapple 	Strawberry 	Purple grapes	Brown pineapple	Red strawberry
It's a (color) (fruit).			It's a (color) (fruit).		

Figure 1: Word Association

(Source: "Passport to the future C," by T. Minotti, 2014, p. 3-4)

Unfortunately, students' reading ability did not improve as quickly as hoped. The 2016 version of the textbook tried a different approach. Educators like Bredekamp (2014) believe that adults' reading out loud to young children in an entertaining manner is one of the most effective ways to get children interested in reading, since reading aloud allows children to focus on and learn the words they hear. For this reason, stories were written that the teacher would read several times before having the children try to read the story together. Figure 2 offers an example of this.

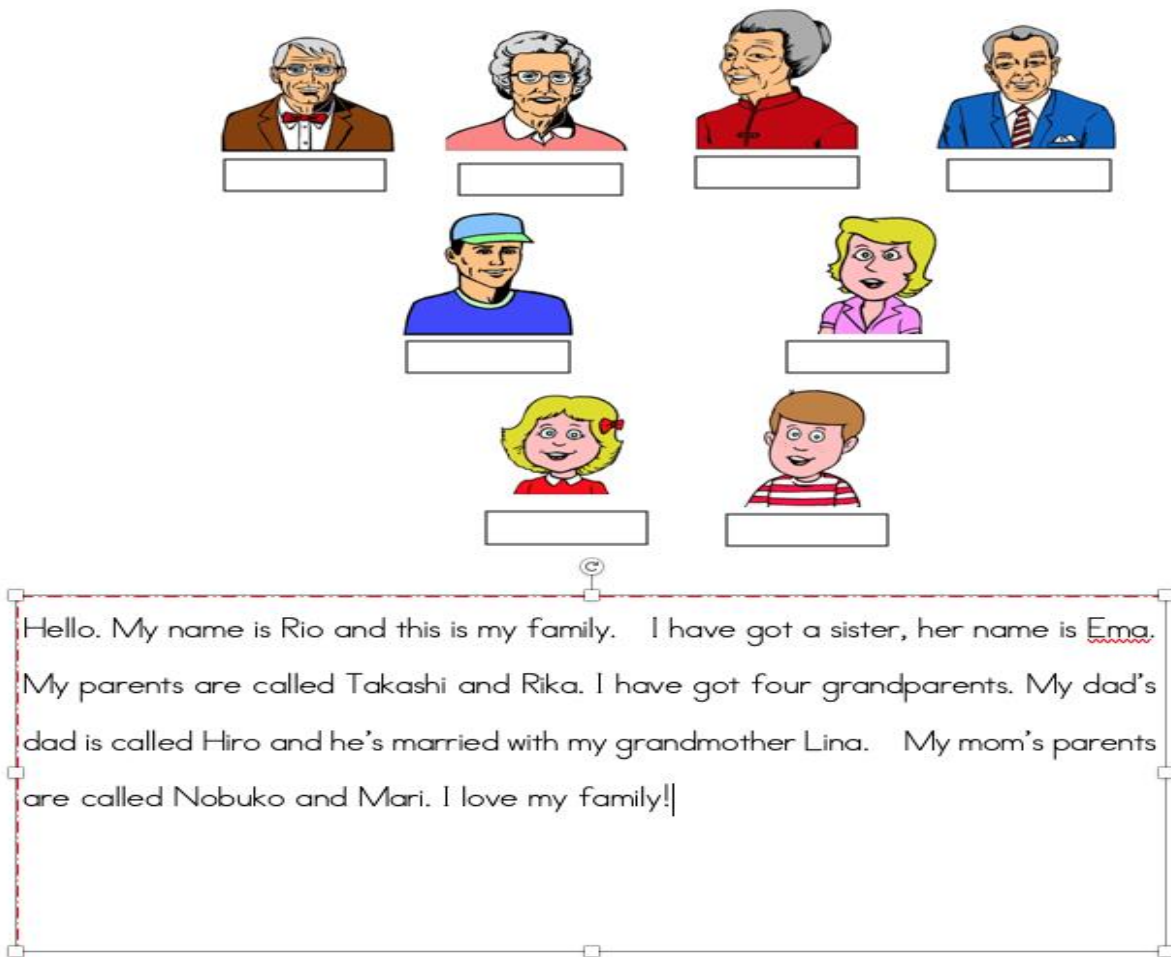


Figure 2: Reading Aloud

(Source: "Passport to the future D," by T. Minotti, 2016a, p 41)

The 2018 version of the textbooks were structured so that students learned phonics by scaffolding and by incorporating semantics and syntax into the curriculum. Book A, which was created for students who had never been exposed to English, started by teaching student's phoneme sounds. The children were taught in reception. This involved thinking about what sound starts a word, saying the sound out loud, and then recognizing how letters represent that sound. Students learned the correlation between letters and sounds by practicing the alphabet using picture cards while saying the letter, the sound, and the picture (decoding). For example, the students would see the image in Figure 3 and say, "A, ah, apple".

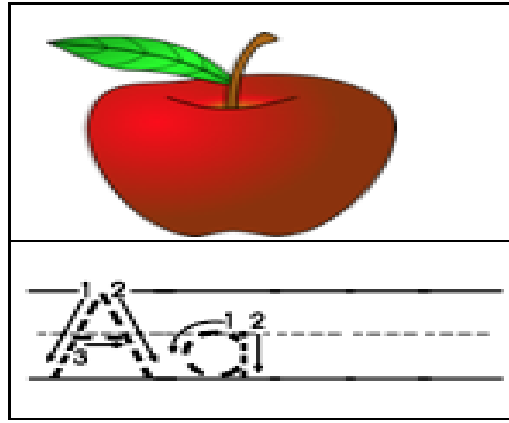


Figure 3: Alphabet Flash Card

(Source: "Passport to the future A," by T. Minotti, 2020, p 2)

The 2018 version of the "A" textbook contained worksheets in which the students had to find hidden letters in a picture, as well as words that begin with that letter, as shown in Figure 4.

2. Phonics

Tracing practice for uppercase 'B' and lowercase 'b' on ruled lines. The first row contains six dashed uppercase 'B's for tracing. The second row contains six dashed lowercase 'b's for tracing.

Find and circle as many Bb's and Bb words in the picture.



Figure 4: Alphabet Worksheet

(Source: "Passport to the future B," by T. Minotti, 2018a, p 6)

Before the students complete the exercise, an adult would practice the sounds and words and have the children repeat them. Using the page above, the students work like this: “Bb-bu-boat, Bb-bu-boots, Bb-bu-ball...” and so on.

Another term for this activity is “decoding,” which helps students think as they learn to read. The students then repeat the pattern. When they complete the oral section of the worksheet, the students colour or circle the letters and words in the picture. When the students finish the worksheets, they present their homework orally to the teacher. If students do not understand something, they are encouraged to ask for help from an adult. By doing this, children use their senses in the learning process, which ultimately makes it more enjoyable for them. The research of Ehri and Roberts (2006) showed that children who can manipulate phonemes and identify letters progress in their reading more quickly than children who cannot.

Children’s ability to manipulate phonemes and identify letters was also seen in the students from the OSWU program. Using the 2018 version of the textbook, children were able to identify letters quickly, and they began independent reading sooner than students from previous years.

1.2 Word Families

Another way to use phonics is to teach analogy phonics (word families) to help students improve their reading, comprehension, and fluency skills. In research done in the 1970s, 37 high-frequency phonograms were identified in over 500 words commonly found in lower-level texts: ack, -ail, -ain, -ake, -ale, -ame, -an, -ank, -ap, -ash, -at, -ate, -aw, -ay -eat, -ell, -est -ice, -ick, -ide, -ight, -ill, -in, -ine, -ing, -ink, -ip, -it, -ock, -oke, -op, -ore, -ot, -uck, -ug, -ump, and -unk (Teaching Analogy Phonics, 2006). Before 2018, word families were not used; in the 2016 version of the textbook, students were taught using word repetition. Questions were created so that many sentences would follow a specific pattern, as shown in the diagram in Figure 5, in which exercise the pattern was: “What day is the...?” The result was that the students memorized the pattern but did not learn how to read on their own.

Write the short form of each day.

Sunday _____
 Monday _____
 Tuesday _____
 Wednesday _____
 Thursday _____
 Friday _____
 Saturday _____

Write the complete name of each day.

Sat _____
 Mon _____
 Thur _____
 Sun _____
 Wed _____
 Tue _____
 Fri _____

December						
Sun	Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat
2	3	4	5	6	7	8
9	10	11	12	13	14	15
16	17	18	19	20	21	22
23	24	25	26	27	28	29
30	31					

1. What day is the 1st? _____
2. What day is the 5th? _____
3. What day is the 10th? _____
4. What day is the 14th? _____
5. What day is the 20th? _____
6. What day is the 25th? _____
7. What day is the 30th? _____

Questions?

1. What day comes before Tuesday? _____
2. What days comes after Friday? _____
3. What day starts with a "W"? _____
4. What two days start with "T"? _____
5. What two days are on the weekend? _____

What is your favorite day of the week? Why?

Figure 5: Days of the Week Worksheet

(Source: "Passport to the future C," by T. Minotti, 2016, p 56-57)

With this in mind, each section of the lower-level textbook from 2018 onward was based on one specific analogy, meaning that the base of the word is the same but the beginning differs. An example of this would look at a base or phonogram, such as -at, as shown in Figure 6.

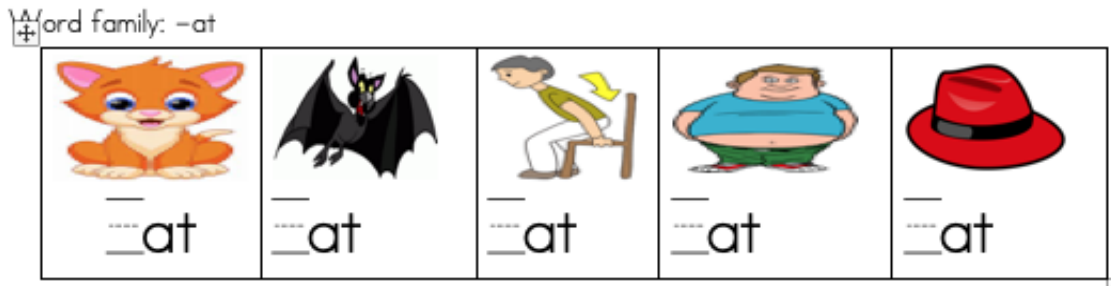


Figure 6: *Word Family -at Worksheet*

(Source: “Passport to the future C,” by T. Minotti, 2018b, p 38)

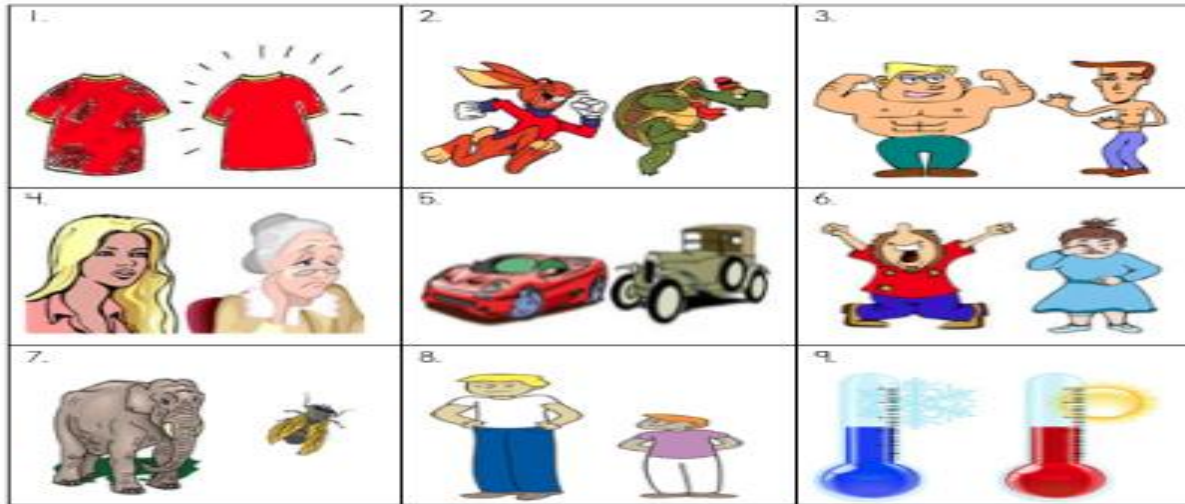
In this exercise, the teacher can demonstrate how to create words by adding a consonant to the beginning of the word phonogram, such as “b-at, bat,” “c-at, cat,” and elicit other words that could be created by adding a consonant to the beginning of the same phonogram. In this example, students would ideally create a list with the following words: bat, cat, fat, hat, mat, pat, rat, sat, and vat. For more advanced students, the word family can be expanded to include consonant blends (e.g., flat, slat, brat, scat, spat). Every lesson would include a new word family, such as -ed, -eg, or -en, (Teaching Analogy Phonics, 2006). After completing their study of word families, students are ready for something more challenging: context clues.

1.3 Context Clues (Semantics)

Students can use context clues to use to figure out the meaning of unknown words. When a student comes across an unknown word, he or she can look to other words in the text to provide clues about the meaning of the unfamiliar word. The clues can include synonyms, definitions, or examples. Jennings, Caldwell, and Lerner created a four-step process for students to use when they do not understand a word:

1. Look at the unfamiliar word - then read the sentence before and after the word.
2. Connect what you know with the text.
3. Predict meaning.
4. Confirm or revise your prediction. (Jennings et al., 2014)

Before 2018, the students enrolled in the Saturday Kids’ Program were given only visual clues to help them. The reasoning for using this method was that, if students could visualize a word, it would be easier to remember and would help them in the reading process. An example is shown in Figure 6.



Match the opposite pictures to the words:

- | | | |
|----------------|--------------|----------------|
| a. Young—Old | b. Happy—Sad | c. Dirty—Clean |
| d. Tall—Short | e. Fast—Slow | f. Hot—Cold |
| g. Strong—Weak | h. Big—Small | i. New—Old |

Questions

1. What is the opposite of tall? _____
2. What is the opposite of new? _____
3. What is the opposite of fast? _____
4. What is the opposite of clean? _____
5. What is the opposite of Weak? _____

Choose five words and tell me meaning of the word in English.







- | | | | | |
|------|-------|------|--------|------|
| Tall | Short | Weak | Strong | Fast |
| Slow | Hot | Cold | Happy | Sad |

Figure 6: Visual Clues Worksheet

(Source: “Passport to the future D,” by T. Minotti, 2016b, p 64-65)

By 2018, the students' reading ability was not what the organizers had envisioned, so a new approach was taken. From 2018 on, the program at OSWU used lower-level textbooks tailored for EFL students who were still in the early stages of English exposure. The process derived by Jennings et al. was adapted to fit the levels of EFL students. In this new process, students are first taught an analogy family of words; they then progress to more challenging sounds before moving on to learning vowel sounds. At this stage, the students are shown images of the words they are learning, at which point the textbook introduces context-clue exercises. Students are given simple short sentences with words that were used in the phoneme-sounds practice and/or word-family activities. First, students are asked to read the sentence and circle any words they do not understand. They are asked to look at the pictures above the sentence or from previous textbook assignments to find clues to the meaning of the word, and then draw a picture that depicts the meaning of the sentence. Students explain what they have drawn to the teacher and why. Finally, the teacher confirms that they are correct or asks them to revise their drawings. Figure 7 shows an example of this.

Phonics: Short e

 b _ _ d	 p _ _ n	 t _ _ n	 h _ _ n	 v _ _ st	 n _ _ st
--	--	--	--	---	---

Read the stories and draw pictures of what you think the meaning is.

There are ten pens on the bed.

The hen had ten eggs in the nest.

Figure 7: Short e Worksheet

(Source: "Passport to the future C," by T. Minotti, 2018, p 25)

By looking at the pictures, the students can use context clues to determine the meaning of words, which will help them understand the meanings of sentences (Tama & Haley, 2007).

1.4 Syntax (Word Order)

Syntax helps students learn the functions of words, phrases, and clauses and how to use them in the correct order to create complete sentences that people can understand. A simple sentence, such as “I can go,” has a very different meaning than “Can I go?” or “Go can I?” (This has no meaning) In the early years of the program, the idea of word order was not considered. According to Lugolobi-Nalunga (2017), the use of syntax in the classroom helps create meaning and provides “the function of grammatical aspects in use.” It was decided by this author that word order would be a beneficial way to help students learn to read. Beginning in 2018, the upper-level textbooks in use in the Kids’ English Program began using syntax to help students create and understand complete sentences. In this process, students are given open-ended sentences, such as “The boy ate,” and then must complete the sentences so that they make sense. For students who find this to challenging, the exercise can be done orally before advancing to a written assignment. Intermediate-level students are taught simple sentences with a subject-verb structure (e.g., “The boy sang.”), whereas students in more advanced levels learn compound sentences with a: subject–verb–object–conjunction–subject-verb structure (e.g., “The teacher taught the lesson, and the students listened.”). Finally, students are given a set of sentences and asked to identify each of their components by colour-coding them.

1.5 Sight Words

Sight words are common words that often appear in the English language. These words play an important role in learning to read. Students learn these words by sight rather than by sounding them out. There are several lists of sight words from which to choose, such as the Fry and Dolch Words list and the Oxford Wordlist. Sight words, also known as “high-frequency words” and “word-wall words,” are simply the words most regularly used by students when using English. In 2013, at the beginning of the Saturday Kids’ English program, the concept of sight words was not considered. In 2017, January et al. introduced a method for teaching sight words. The idea of this method was to introduce each new sight word in isolation rather than introducing two easily confused sight words at the same time and to only give a brief period during each lesson to teach sight words. Following these suggestions, starting in 2018 the OSWU program taught students to sight words while learning phoneme sounds. The instruction lasted a maximum of ten minutes per lesson, and similar sight words were taught at different times.

During class time, the sight words taught that day were used as frequently as possible so that the children could have maximal exposure to the words. The result was that, after the implementation of sight words into the curriculum, students began to read most words effortlessly. The acquisition of sight words is an important early step in the learning process for students. Students who can recognize, decode, and encode sight words can read most of the words that appear in children's books. An activity that OSWU uses to help teach sight words is having the students make flashcards for the sight words they learn. First, students make a flashcard with a picture above the written word. Students are then asked to create a sentence using their flashcards. For lower-level students, saying the sentence out loud is enough. More advanced students are required to write a sentence using the sight words and then draw a picture so that the teacher can confirm that they understand the meaning of the word.

2. Conclusion

The Japanese government has placed great importance on the value of English education by incorporating it into the elementary school curriculum as of April 2020. It is the responsibility of English educators to see that students use techniques that will help them succeed. At OSWU, the administration recognized this importance in 2012 and created an English Program to help students living near the university. Since 2013, the educators in the Saturday Kids' English Program have been refining their teaching methods to help find the best way for children to improve their reading, comprehension, and fluency in English. Since 2018, the program has begun taking a new approach that teaches phonics, analogy (word families), context clues (semantics), syntax (word order), and sight words to help students reach their English-comprehension goals. Throughout the years, all the students in the program have improved their English abilities. There has been a greater improvement in the reading-comprehension skills since 2018 due to the changes made to the program. It is been shown that, with an early and strong foundation in these techniques, students benefit in their studies (McNamara, 2007). Through its dynamic adaptation to current research, the program at OSWU continues to work toward finding the best and most efficient way for students to improve their English abilities.

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