

# Teaching Children How to Read and Write: Findings and Suggestions Based on the Research on Japanese Elementary School English Education

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# **Teaching Children How to Read and Write: Findings and Suggestions Based on the Research on Japanese Elementary School English Education**

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## **Introduction**

With the advent of the Tokyo Olympics and Paralympics in 2020, English education in Japan is going through a revolutionary change: Foreign Language (English) is going to be incorporated into the new elementary school curriculum as an official subject to be taught for the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6 graders. The new policy of making English an official subject had gone through enormous controversies until the decision was finally announced by MEXT in 2017. Impetus for starting English education in elementary school came from the need for Japanese people to communicate with people from around the world and to cultivate internationally spirited individuals. Japanese people need to be able to participate actively in political and economic scenes and voice their opinions to cooperate as well as compete with the world in this highly globalized society.

Observing elementary schools entering into the transition period (2018-2019) to prepare for and familiarize themselves with upcoming changes, we have investigated over some years elementary school teachers' perceptions about teaching English. We also conducted tests to examine elementary school students' English abilities and administered questionnaires to investigate their perceptions about English studies.

In this paper, we will focus on our research we have conducted in the past few years on

reading and writing in elementary schools and will report some notable findings from our studies. This paper first reviews the importance of teaching reading and writing to children. Then it describes the current English education and issues related to elementary school teachers and students. We conclude the paper with a claim that we need first-hand teacher trainings both at elementary and junior high school levels to meet the goals MEXT stipulates.

### **Importance of teaching reading and writing --Some findings--**

Reading is important for children to become successful in school and in life. The better they can read, the more efficiently they can learn in school. According to Goswami, “the richness of language input in the early years has effects not just on later intellectual skills, but also on emotional skills such as resolving conflicts with peers (2014, p. 3).”

It is worth noting here that in the elementary school years in the US, students must learn 3,000 words per year by the time they reach third grade (Nagy & Herman, 1987). However, approximately 400 words are directly taught by the teacher during the same year (Blachowicz & Fisher, 2002). Besides, everyday speech consists of only 5,000 to 7,000 words (Klein, 1988). This shows that “it is unlikely that conversation and discussion alone can compensate for a limited command of the academic vocabulary” (Frey & Fisher, pp. 71-72). The gap in word knowledge is problematic because of its impact on content learning (Flood, Lapp, & Fisher, 2003; Stahl & Fairbanks, 1986). Students, therefore, have to learn to read and acquire necessary vocabulary for academic success.

The ultimate goal of teaching letters to children is for them to become independent readers, and it is the teacher’s responsibility to help them to be successful academically. According to Moats (2010), surrounding children with books, or children having strong desires to read books will not help children learn to read. In order for children to be able to read, teachers have to teach them how to read. It is also important to instill reading skills

in children by teaching them how to read at early stages of development (Blachman, Schatschneider, Fletcher, & Clonan, 2003; Mathes, Denton, Fletcher, Anthony, Francis, & Schatschneider, 2005; Torgesen, & Mathes, 2002).

### **What do children need to know in order to be able to read and write**

In order for children to be able to read and write, first they must have alphabet knowledge; that is, the ability to name the letters of the alphabet. It is a well-established predictor of children's later literacy development (Piasta, Petscher, & Justice, 2012; Share, Jorm, Maclean, & Matthews, 1984; Treiman, Tincoff, & Richmond-Welty, 1997).

Children also must have knowledge about sounds of alphabet and "an understanding that speech is composed of a series of individual sounds" (Ehri & Nune, 2002). This knowledge is known as phonemic awareness, and as is phonics, which is a letter-sound relationship (Ehri & Nunes, 2002), it is an indicator of later success in English learning. Studies suggest that instructions of alphabetic knowledge enhance children's ability to recognize letters corresponding to spoken sounds, and therefore, phonemic awareness has great effects on their later academic performance (Ehri, Nunes, Willows, Schuster, Yaghoub-Zadeh, & Shanahan, 2001). The National Reading Panel (2000) conducted a meta-analysis of phonemic awareness instruction and concluded that teachers need to raise children's phonemic awareness before teaching phonics to enhance their reading and spelling ability. Allen-Tamai (2010) and Zygouris-Coe (2001) also claim that it is important to foster L2 children's awareness of sounds before teaching phonics.

### **Current English education in elementary school (2011~)**

English was introduced as Foreign Language Activities in 2011 as a required subject for the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders. The current English education follows the curriculum mandated by

MEXT for Foreign Language Activities, but this is not conducted as an official ‘subject’ but as one of the area studies like moral studies. Currently, there is no assessment as there is no method for it, and there is no so to speak ‘textbook’ as it is not a regular subject. Elementary schools, however, are recommended to use *High Friends ! 1 & 2* (2012) as supplementary materials.

Overall objectives of Foreign Language Activities are as follows.

To form the foundation of pupils’ communication abilities through foreign languages fostering a positive attitude toward communication, and familiarizing pupils with the sounds and basic expressions of foreign languages (MEXT, 2008).

As for reading and writing, III. Lesson Plan Design and Handling the Content in the Course of Study writes as follows.

When giving pupils opportunities to experience communication in the foreign language, teachers should focus on the foreign language sounds and use letters of the alphabet and words as supplementary tools for oral communication, in effort not to give too much burden to pupils. (MEXT, 2008) (Emphasis by the authors)

The statement implies that letters of the alphabet and words can be a “burden” for pupils and that it is something to be avoided. When this course of study was first announced in 2008, some ‘earnest’ believers feared that using letters would produce children who will come to dislike English, and it would be an obstacle for English language education. Because of the statement such as this, and a lack of knowledge about how to teach reading and writing, elementary school teachers became anxious that they may create children who may come to

dislike English if not taught appropriately. ‘Paranoia’ of producing children who may detest English lead some supervisors in municipal boards of education to prohibit all together the use of letters in teaching Foreign Language Activities in elementary schools.

According to *the Interpretation of the Elementary School Course of Study: Foreign Language Activities* (2008), suggested instructions with regard to teaching letters were, “to touch on capital and small block letters of alphabet.” The ambiguous wording of “supplementary tools” in the course of study and “to touch on” in its interpretation certainly left the elementary school teachers in turmoil.

The MEXT’s attempt to introduce English education under the name of Foreign Language Activities, however, has brought about unforeseen results in the field of teaching. One such result was revealed by the MEXT’s study (2015) on the elementary school and junior high school students’ perceptions about Foreign Language Activities. With regard to Foreign Language Activities, 88.8% of junior high school students responded that reading alphabet was useful, and 83.9% responded writing alphabet was useful. Moreover, 80.1% claimed that they had wished they had learned how to read English words, 83.7% how to write English words, 79.8% how to read English sentences, and 80.9% how to write English sentences while in elementary school.

The research implies that alphabet letters were not utilized enough as “supplementary tools” and that they weren’t “touched on” enough to make elementary school students satisfied with Foreign Language Activities. Simply put, students did not learn how to read and write simple English words and sentences, and they wished they did.

Benesse (2011) reported the similar findings when they conducted research asking a total of 2,688 pairs of junior high school students and their mothers. Among the top 5 items junior high school students responded that they wanted to learn before they graduated from elementary schools, writing English words came in first (33.1%), reading English words came

in third (26.9%), and writing English sentences came in fourth (26.7%).

### **English as an official subject in elementary school (2020~)**

As mentioned earlier, English is going to be an official subject in public elementary schools in 2020. The decision along with the new course of study was publicly announced in March 2017 (MEXT, 2017a). The subject name was changed from Foreign Language Activities to Foreign Languages (Gaikokugo), but in principle the language expected to teach is English. The classes are going to be held twice a week, and the number of classes will be increased from 35 class hours (1 class hour = 45 minutes) to 70 class hours. *High, friends! 1 & 2* (2012), materials which have been used since English was incorporated into the Japanese elementary school curriculum as Foreign Language Activities, and *We Can 1 & 2* (2018), ones distributed for the transition periods of 2018 and 2019 for the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders are now being used in elementary schools. However, they will be replaced with textbooks that are developed by professionals and screened by MEXT. The objectives under new course of study have significantly changed from the old ones. Basic literacy skills are now introduced and reading and writing are incorporated into the new curriculum. The following is the description of the new course of study to be implemented in 2020.

With regard to the sounds and letters, words, expressions, sentence structures, and functions of language, pupils should be able to recognize and understand the differences between Japanese and English, at the same time familiarizing themselves with reading and writing, and acquiring the basic skills used in communication in listening, reading, speaking and writing. (MEXT, 2017b) (Translation and emphasis by the authors)

The new course of study transformed itself from oral-skill-only curriculum to the one

that includes literacy skills to develop basic communication skills in all four areas. The following describes the objectives of reading and writing.

### Reading

- a. Recognize the block letters, and pronounce them.
- b. Understand the meaning of simple words and basic expressions that pupils are familiar with.

### Writing

- a. Able to write block capital and small letters. Also able to copy simple words and basic expressions that pupils are familiar with.
- b. Able to write things about themselves and their simple surrounding events referring to sample sentences that pupils are familiar with.

(Translation by the authors)

## **Studies on elementary school teachers**

### 1) Elementary school teachers' perceptions about teaching letters

Tanaka and Kawai (2016) conducted a survey about elementary school teachers' perceptions about teaching alphabet letters. Participants were 92 elementary school lead teachers who attended the Chiba prefecture teacher-training workshop that was held at Kanda University of International Studies. The questionnaire and interviews revealed that teachers lacked confidence in "teaching letters." They also regarded teaching letters as "teaching writing" and claimed that it was too early in elementary school to introduce. If teaching alphabet letters, teachers responded that the appropriate grade to teach the names of the capital and small letters would be the 3<sup>rd</sup> grade, and the sounds, the 5<sup>th</sup> grades. However, among the 80 teachers who responded that teachers should teach names of alphabet, 10

responded that teaching the sounds of the alphabet is not necessary in elementary school. Some have also responded in the interview that if teachers teach names and sounds at the same time, children will be confused (and therefore it is not good). As noted above, these are teachers who are actively involved in English education as lead teachers and are responsible for passing information they received from the lead teachers' seminars and workshops to each individual school. Their beliefs will have a strong impact on elementary school English education.

The noteworthy findings of this research were that 1) the definition of teaching letters varied and most teachers regarded it as teaching writing, and 2) the teachers lacked confidence in teaching alphabet letters. We therefore defined clearly in the paper (Tanaka & Kawai, 2016) what teaching letters is: Teaching letters is to teach names and sounds of alphabet letters and to teach how to read and write basic simple words. The study also found that teachers are not confident in teaching letters because they do not have knowledge about sound-letter relationship and do not know how to teach children how to read and write. We therefore claimed for the importance of holding seminars and workshops and instructing elementary school teachers how to "teach letters."

2) Elementary school teachers' perceptions about teaching letters: knowledge about and their desire for teaching letters

Tanaka and Kawai (2017) investigated elementary school teachers from Chiba prefecture, Fukui prefecture, and Edogawa-Ward, Tokyo about their perceptions about teaching letters. We conducted a questionnaire to a total of 267 teachers and interviewed 15 of them. The study showed that 66.1% and 55.1% of elementary school teachers believed that 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders wanted to read (Item 2) and write (Item 3) English respectively. Although these elementary school teachers seemed to realize their pupils' desire to read and write English, it

was also revealed that they did not know the basic method of how to teach children how to read and write alphabet letters and simple words. The data revealed that 51.1% and 54% of them did not know how to teach children to read (Item 10) and write (Item11) respectively. About half (49.3%) responded that they do not know how to incorporate letters into their lessons (Item 5). About 60% of teachers showed desires to know how to read picture books for children (Item 8) (Table 1).

Table 1

*Cross-tabulation of the Questionnaire Items*

Items	1	2	3	4	5	Total
2. Children want to read English.	2 0.8%	13 4.9%	75 28.3%	108 40.8%	67 25.3%	265
3. Children want to write English.	5 1.9%	21 7.9%	93 35.1%	98 37.0%	48 18.1%	265
5. I do not know how to incorporate teaching reading and writing in class.	7 2.7%	44 16.7%	83 31.4%	95 36.0%	35 13.3%	264
7. I want to help children be able to read picture books.	4 1.5%	26 9.8%	83 31.3%	79 29.8%	73 27.5%	265
8. I want to know skills to read picture books.	8 3.0%	23 8.7%	76 28.8%	86 32.6%	71 26.9%	264
9. I want to teach children how to write simple sentences.	7 2.7%	36 13.6%	115 43.6%	70 26.5%	36 13.6%	264
10. I don't know how to teach children how to read English.	5 1.9%	33 12.5%	91 34.5%	97 36.7%	38 14.4%	264
11. I don't know how to teach children how to write English.	4 1.5%	27 10.3%	90 34.2%	95 36.1%	47 17.9%	263

This study showed clearly elementary school teachers do not know methods of teaching letters and had desires to learn about them in teacher training seminars.

### **Studies on elementary school children: Children's sound-letter recognition knowledge and self-evaluation of English abilities**

Tanaka and Kawai (2018a) investigated English vocabulary and sound-letter recognition knowledge of Japanese elementary school children and their perceptions of their English abilities by giving the Vocabulary Test and the Sound-Letter Recognition Test through listening. These were conducted along with the questionnaires to the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> graders, to a total of 3,240 (about 30% of 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> grade children), in Funabashi city's 54 public elementary schools in Chiba, Japan. The purpose of the research was to examine effects of the English education policies for elementary schools supervised by Funabashi board of education and help them prepare for English education for the coming year 2020 when English will be incorporated into elementary school curriculum as an official subject.

We investigated children's size of vocabulary for several reasons. First, the size of vocabulary is often tested in assessing children's L2 development as learning a useful vocabulary is central for young learners in foreign language learning at primary level (Cameron, 2001). Since elementary school English education in Japan also focuses on learning words at an early stage, testing their vocabulary knowledge from the textbook is valid to evaluate if they have acquired English successfully. Second, the size of vocabulary is one of the determinants of L2 development (Langeland, 2012). Indeed, vocabulary acquisition is so critical that middle school children with poor L2 vocabulary knowledge are at risk in terms of L2 development (Roessingh & Elgie, 2009). Third, the vocabulary size provides teachers with knowledge about how they can help children enhance their English skills. As for the method of assessing children's vocabulary knowledge, Sylvén and Sundqvist (2016) recommend using a multiple-choice format as it is easily administered and scored. We used a multiple-choice format in two patterns: one is a multiple-picture choice to define the meaning of a word (choosing one correct picture from 3 different pictures that matches the

word students hear), and multiple-word choice to define the picture of a word (choosing one correct word (number) from 1, 2 and 3 that matches the picture after listening to three different words).

According to Cameron (2001), not only vocabulary knowledge but also phonological awareness is extremely important for L2 children in the early stage of learning. As mentioned earlier, children must be able to read ('sound out') alphabet letters as reading and writing simple words will be introduced into the elementary school English curriculum in 2020.

Funabashi city provides a very good ground for research studies as English has been taught as an official subject from the 1<sup>st</sup> grade in all the city's 54 elementary schools since they were designated as curriculum special schools (Kyoikukatei-tokureikou) in 2006. The city uses a textbook developed by the city board of education, and it includes basic phonics instruction. It was therefore our interest to examine how well children understand sound-letter relationship. The Sound-Letter Recognition Test investigates their knowledge about sounds and letters of alphabet and if they are able to match them together.

Table 2 shows the descriptive analysis of the questionnaire regarding reading and writing of alphabet letters. The 6<sup>th</sup> graders' response showed that they could read simple English words better (55.6% when 4 and 5 are combined in Item 6) than the 5<sup>th</sup> graders (44.7%). The 6<sup>th</sup> graders' response showed that they could write simple English words better (67.8% when 4 and 5 are combined in Item 7) than the 5<sup>th</sup> graders (54.8%). As for item 8, 89.6% of the 5<sup>th</sup> graders and 90.1% of the 6<sup>th</sup> graders answered they wanted to be able to read simple English words. As for Item 9, 89.2% of the 5<sup>th</sup> graders and 89.9% of the 6<sup>th</sup> graders responded that they wanted to be able to write simple English words. The research clearly showed that students were eager to learn letters. In the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, 90 % of students claimed that they wanted to be able to read and write simple English words. This result coincides with the MEXT's investigation (2015) on the first and second grade junior high school students

and Benesse’s (2011) research on the first grade junior high school students (see p. 4).

We conducted explanatory Factor Analysis using Promax rotation method to determine the factor structure. Three factors were extracted: Factor 1 *Motivation to learn English*, Factor 2 *Interest in English classes*, and Factor 3 *Self-evaluation of English abilities*. We then conducted Pearson’s Correlation Coefficient for 5 variables that included the Vocabulary Test and the Sound-Letter Recognition Test. Table 3 shows the relationship between variables.

Table 2

*Cross-tabulation of the Questionnaire Items*

Item	Questions	Grades	5-point Likert scale				
			1	2	3	4	5
6	Can you read simple English words?	5	14.2	21.0	20.2	27.6	17.1
		6	10.2	16.4	17.9	36.7	18.9
7	Can you write simple English words?	5	21.6	20.9	2.6%	26.5	28.3
		6	13.0	17.6	1.6%	32.6	35.2
8	Do you want to be able to read simple English words?	5	2.5%	2.0%	5.9%	24.1	65.5
		6	1.9%	1.6%	6.4%	27.0	63.1
9	Do you want to be able to write simple English words?	5	2.9%	1.6%	6.4%	23.0	66.2
		6	2.1%	1.2%	6.7%	26.6	63.3
10	Do you want your teachers to teach you how to read and write simple English words?	5	3.6%	3.4%	21.9	35.9	35.2
		6	3.6%	2.6%	25.9	36.4	31.5

As Table 3 shows, *Self-evaluation of English abilities* was highly correlated with *vocabulary* (the scores of the Vocabulary Test) ( $r=.448$ ) and *Sound-Letter Recognition* (the

scores of the Sound-Letter Recognition Test) ( $r=.518$ ). We therefore conducted a Multiple Regression Analysis to examine the relationship between *Self-evaluation of English abilities* and four other variables. As Table 4 shows, *Sound-letter Recognition* had the most positive regression weight ( $\beta=.344$ ), indicating that the scores of the Sound-Letter Recognition Test were predictors of self-evaluation of English abilities. That is, the result of the Sound-Letter Recognition Test was most positively correlated with the students' self-evaluations of English abilities. In other words, higher sound-letter knowledge contributed to children's positive perceptions about their English abilities.

Kawai & Tanaka (2019, in print) further conducted a study with the participants who were the 5<sup>th</sup> grades and became the 6<sup>th</sup> grades a year later to investigate their English progress. Interested readers are recommended to read the coming paper.

Table 3

*Correlation among the Five Variables*

Variables	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.
1. <i>Motivation to learn English</i>	1				
2. <i>Interest in English classes</i>	.544**	1			
3. <i>Self-evaluation of English abilities</i>	.350**	.473**	1		
4. <i>Vocabulary</i>	.255**	.338**	.448**	1	
5. <i>Sound-Letter Recognition</i>	.227**	.320**	.518**	.671**	1

Note. \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Table 4

*Result of the Multiple Regression Analysis*

Variables		<i>Multiple regression weights</i>			
		<i>B</i>	<i>SEB</i>	$\beta$	<i>p</i>
Dependent	3. <i>Self-evaluation of English abilities</i>	2.581			
	4. <i>Vocabulary</i>	.059	.013	.092	.000
Independent	5. <i>Sound-letter Recognition</i>	.168	.010	.344	.000
	1. <i>Motivation to learn English</i>	.084	.015	.096	.000
	2. <i>Interest in English classes</i>	.198	.012	.283	.000

**Studies on junior high school students and their teachers**

The study was conducted to investigate junior high school students' and their teachers' perceptions about reading and writing. Participants were 840 junior high school students and their 27 English teachers in Funabashi city's 27 junior high schools. Tanaka and Kawai (2018b) presented a paper at JASELE conference in 2018 and reported our findings on the students' self-evaluations of their ability to read and write and their teacher's evaluation of their students' ability to read and write.

According to the study, only 58.1% of students responded that they could read sentences, and 49.7 % said that they could write sentences. When asked if they had learned how to read in elementary school, 75.0% responded that they learned how to read (Figure 1), and 57.9% responded that they learned how to write (Figure 3). Their teachers' responses, however, showed low evaluation of their reading and writing abilities. Only 44.4% of teachers responded that students could read simple words (Figure 2), and only 7.4% claimed that they could write simple words (Figure 4).

One thing to note here is that when students were asked if they had learned “how to read and write,” they must have taken it to mean “reading and writing names of alphabet letters” such as Aa as /eɪ/ and Bb as /bi/ as that is fundamentally as far as teachers teach in elementary schools in Funabashi city. Teachers may teach English alphabet by introducing alphabet “jingles” (e.g. /eɪ//æ/ apples, /bi//b/ bear, etc.), but from what we observed in classes, teachers do not go beyond choral reading to combining the sounds of letters to read simple words. This implies that chanting alphabet jingles alone does not help students acquire skills of reading and writing simple words. It may raise children’s phonemic awareness, and it is a very important step for literacy development as we mentioned earlier, but phonemic awareness alone is not enough for children to develop reading skills.

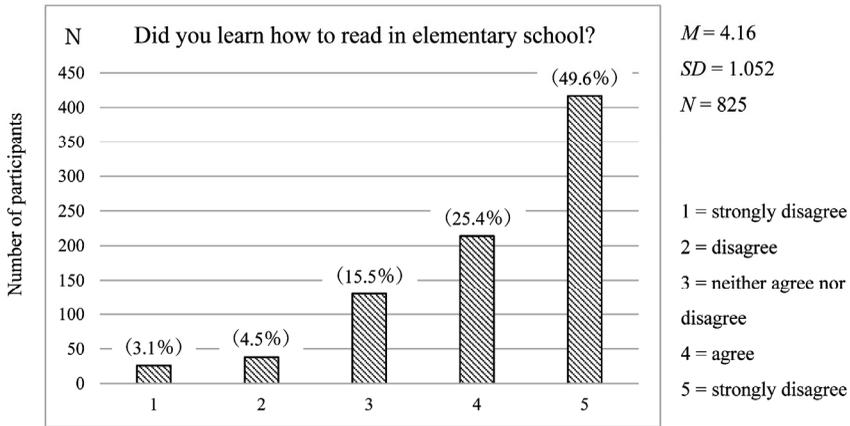


Figure 1. About reading English

To students: Did you learn how to read in elementary school?

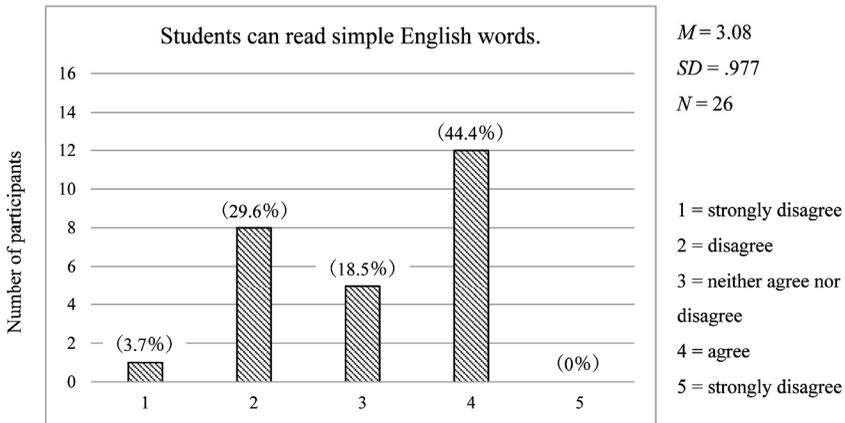


Figure 2. About reading English

To teachers: Students can read simple English words.

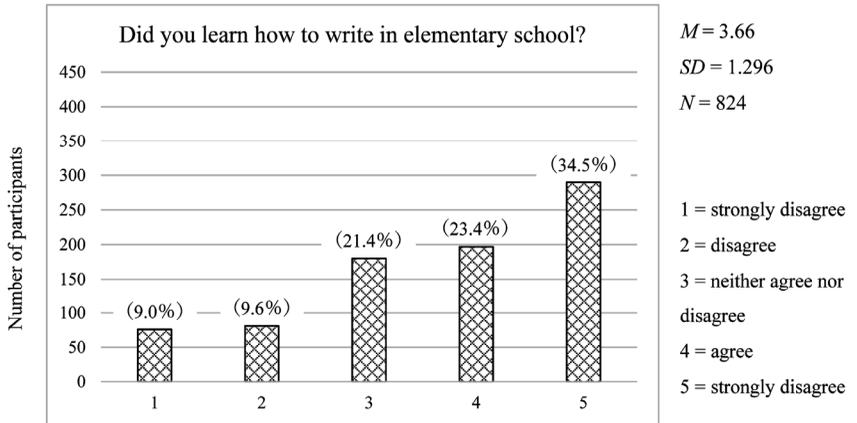


Figure 3. About writing English

To students: Did you learn how to write in elementary school?

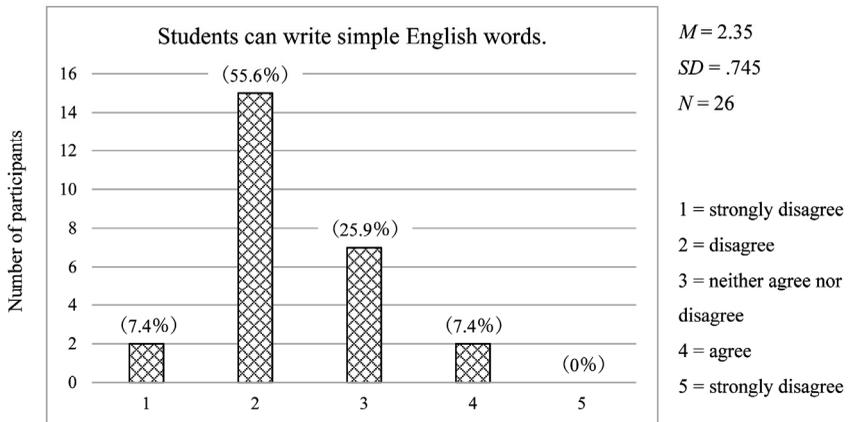


Figure 4. About writing English

To teachers: Students can write simple English words.

Students commented in the questionnaire had a number of negative responses about reading and writing in elementary schools. They said, “It was boring because we only learned alphabet.” “All we did focused on speaking and listening, and we only wrote alphabet, so I’m glad we can learn how to write (words and sentences) in English (now) in junior high school.” “I wanted to learn not just words but also sentences.” “We only learned how to write alphabet, so it was boring.” “I wanted to learn sentences.” “Not just pronouncing words by looking at pictures, but I wanted to learn how to write and its rules.” One went further to say “The games are fun, but it will be useful if we seriously study how to write English.” At the opposite end were positive comments. Students said, “We practiced how to read alphabet by singing songs many times, so it became easy when we read sentences.” “We learned words intensively, and we learned phonics, so it is now useful.”

From the questionnaire, it once again became clear that students did want to learn how to read and write simple words and sentences when in elementary school, and that the fact that they did not rather disappointed or frustrated them.

### **Summary of our findings**

The following are the findings of our research on students’ and teachers’ perceptions about reading and writing in both elementary schools and junior high schools. 1) Contrary to the concerns of elementary school teachers as well as of MEXT, elementary school children are eager to learn to read and write. From our data, almost 90% of both the 5th and 6th graders responded that they wished to learn how to read and write words when in elementary school (Tanaka & Kawai, 2018a). 2) Students who can read and write have higher self-evaluation. The scores of the Sound-Letter Recognition Test was also the predictor of their self-evaluation (Tanaka & Kawai, 2018a). 3) Alphabet jingles are introduced in elementary school classrooms, but just chanting alphabet jingles in chorus does not help prepare children to start learning

reading and writing in junior high school (Tanaka & Kawai, 2018b). Teachers have to teach children the sounds of letters and raise their phonemic awareness first and then connect the sounds with corresponding letters. 4) However, half of elementary school teachers do not know how to teach children how to read and write (Tanaka & Kawai, 2017). 5) Because students do not learn how to ‘sound out’ letters, they have trouble reading and writing words when they become junior high school students (Tanaka and Kawai, 2018b).

English education in Japan is going through a period of enormous changes. In a new curriculum that is going to be implemented officially from April 2020, students will be exposed to some 700 English words (MEXT, 2017b) before entering junior high school. If students have to learn all those words by looking at them, it will take enormous amount of time, and not to mention, it is not an effective way to learn words. A ‘Look and remember’ method also means students cannot read words they have never seen. As mentioned earlier, the size of vocabulary is one of the determinants of L2 development (Langeland, 2012), and in order to increase vocabulary, students need to read. Teachers’ responsibility is to teach them how to read and help them become independent readers so that students will be successful academically and through life as well. The importance of teaching reading and writing should be more stressed at all levels from MEXT to prefectural and municipal boards of education, and to both junior high school and elementary school classes. In order to meet the goals MEXT stipulates and to develop children’s literacy skills, professionals in literacy development need to do significant amount of first-hand teacher trainings both at elementary school and junior high school levels.

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