Abstract

This study examines integrating foundational literacy skills, aligned with Common Core Standards, into English Language Education (ELE) for Japanese elementary students. Despite decades of investment, Japan is low in global English proficiency, which is attributed to a system heavily focused on rote memorization and exam preparation rather than communicative competence. This research assesses the impact of *Print Concepts* and *Phonological Awareness* training on early English acquisition. Data collected from two student groups at a private English school demonstrate significant improvements in reading fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary retention. Their progress was determined by conducting structured assessments systematically and analyzing them based on various factors surrounding the results. The implication suggests that incorporating Common Core Standards objectives into Japan's ELE framework can help prepare students for academic success and conversational fluency. This study discusses the potential for a literacy-focused curriculum and developmentally appropriate materials readily available to enhance Japan's English education outcomes in a globalized context.

Keywords: English Language Education, the MEXT, phonology, letter recognition, pre-literacy skills, literacy assessment.

Table of Contents

List of Figures and Tables

Chapter 1 Introduction

The acquisition of English has been a central goal of the Japanese education system for over 50 years. Despite significant investment and consistent curricular efforts, Japanese students often graduate with high scores on primarily written exams such as Eiken, entrance tests, and periodic term tests in schools but need more practical skills to hold basic conversations in English. This persistent issue has raised concerns about the effectiveness of English Language Education (ELE) in Japan, especially as globalization and Japan's international presence demand higher language competence.

Japan's junior high and high school ELE programs have prioritized entrance exam preparation over developing communication skills since MEXT added English to those entrance exam subjects. As a result, both teachers and students have undervalued conversational English in formal education, leading many to seek supplementary education through private conversation schools. While many individuals have genuinely tried to acquire the language skills needed for success in the global market by attending such English conversation schools, no notable changes have been seen in Japan's general society. Despite significant investments in time and money, many learners have struggled to achieve the proficiency necessary to succeed in real-world communication. On the other hand, other "Expanding Circle countries" where English is widely used as a second language have made considerable progress. Since the end of the Cold War, as English solidified its status as a global lingua franca, many countries have seen significant improvements in their citizens' English proficiency.

In contrast, Japan continues to rank poorly in global English proficiency surveys. According to the 2022 English Proficiency Index (EF EPI) conducted by EF Education First, Japan ranked 80th out of 112 non-English-speaking countries, marking a decline from the previous year. Since the first survey in 2011, Japan has consistently fallen, intensifying

criticism of the current English education system. The primary goal of this research is to explore this question:

1. How can adopting Print Concepts and Phonological Awareness Standard Objectives (K-1) improve English proficiency outcomes for Japanese elementary school students?

This study investigates integrating foundational literacy skills into the Japanese language Education (ELE) system. It examines objectives emphasizing essential early literacy skills, such as understanding the print organization, recognizing letter-sound relationships, and developing phonological awareness through rhyming, syllable segmentation, and phoneme blending. Incorporating these skills strengthens the literacy foundation necessary for students further to study English for junior high school and high school, achieving both academically focused English and conversational fluency.

This paper is organized into six chapters. Chapter 2 provides the historical development of Japanese English education. It contrasts with the United States ELE frameworks in which English is taught as a tool of communication and expression, demonstrating how the Common Core standards could provide a robust starting point for Japan's ELE. Chapter 3 reviews previous studies supporting the research question. Chapter 4 explains the method used to collect data. Chapter 5 presents data collected from a private English school which demonstrates an effectiveness of pre-literacy focused instruction. Chapter 6 summarizes key findings and offers actionable recommendations for overcoming challenges in Japan's English education system.

Chapter 2 Historical Background

2.1 Overview of Japanese English Education History

The role of English has shifted considerably over the past 150 years and this chapter explains how English as an academic subject has impacted Japanese education history. At specific points before World War II, people valued English as an essential tool for accessing Western knowledge. At the same time, people rejected English as a symbol of Western dominance (Hosoki, 2002). After World War II and with the establishment of the General Headquarters (GHQ) of the Allied Powers, the Japanese education system underwent significant changes. This transformation continued over the seven years until April 1952, when Japan regained its sovereignty, and the GHQ was dissolved. In 1951, the Ministry of Education (currently known as the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Japan) published a curriculum guideline and established English as an elective foreign language study for junior high school. English was taught in almost every junior high school in Japan. In the 1960s, English was added to entrance examinations for high schools and universities; this shift from learning English as a communicative language to memorizing to pass the entrance exams pushed Japanese learners further away from speaking and using English for communication. As the Japanese economy grew, people began purchasing English education outside compulsory school education. One of the popular reasons for seeking a privately operated 'business' to learn English is to gain the ability to speak English because that ability was viewed as one of the elite statuses for Japanese high-class society. The globalization of Japanese companies in 1970s and 1980s made English proficiency a skill for a successful business career. As a result, a business based on teaching how to speak English called 'Eikaiwa' became one of fastest growing businesses. Eikaiwa schools became essential to the Japanese economy today by offering lessons for preschool children to retired senior citizens. One of the selling points of Eikaiwa businesses was offering classes with foreign

instructors from Inner Circle countries, exposure to 'native pronunciation,' and direct interaction with foreign instructors. This concept worked well because there was no Assistant Language Teachers before 2002.

English became a mandatory subject for junior high school in 2002 under compulsory education, and the number of private English schools like Eikaiwa and cram schools has increased; the majority of Japanese people continue to struggle to use English to carry out basic conversations. People from all fields began to criticize the mainstream English curriculum as insufficient for speaking because it is generally focused on English grammar and vocabulary memorization. Some public and academic opinions have suggested starting language learning early, however Japanese elementary schools began teaching English as a foreign cultural activities focused on familiarizing foreign languages and cultural differences. However, the elementary schools initially did not have streamlined standards or curricula provided by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology Japan (MEXT), and it was up to each school or a department of education to decide how to incorporate foreign cultural activities into elementary school. It was then, in 2011, when MEXT formally added English as a foreign language activity by revising the National Curriculum Standards for Elementary Schools, which mandated class hours of 35 hours per school year for 5th graders and 6th graders. Soon after, the MEXT revised the National Curriculum Standards for Elementary Schools in 2019, which mandates foreign language study for 5th and 6th graders and a foreign language activity for 3rd and 4th graders from the same year. MEXT uses 'foreign language' instead of 'English language,' but it implies English.

Despite the efforts made by the MEXT for over five decades, the notion that the Japanese are terrible at English has become a widely-heard stereotype in recent years among foreign communities. Teaching English to Japanese people is challenging because there are

more differences than similarities, such as phonology, characters, and grammar. However, when 3rd graders begin learning English by starting with phonology and letter recognition like how Japanese children begin learning Japanese language, students could overcome such differences before entering to junior high school where English becomes a core subject. In other words, acquisition of these skills will likely impact learning English for the rest of their academic years.

2.2   The Role of Pre-literacy Skills in English Language Learning

Pre-literacy skills are the early knowledge and abilities contributing to successful reading development. This broad phrase refers to much more than a child's comprehension of letters, numbers, and shapes. It comprises crucial abilities, including oral language, phonological and phonemic awareness (the awareness of sounds), alphabet knowledge, and an understanding of typical print concepts. There are many skills listed under pre-literacy skills in many languages. Nevertheless, they are highly valued and regarded skills for a child's social-emotional, cognitive, and physical development. Therefore, studies of early child development and primary school education generally focus on helping children build a foundation for literacy. Spivey (n.d.) explains early literacy encompasses the knowledge and skills children need to develop about reading and writing before they are able to do so independently. She identifies six early literacy skills include *Print Motivation*, *Print Awareness*, *Narrative Skills*, *Letter Knowledge*, *Vocabulary*, and *Phonological Awareness*, and children who are exposed to those skills or have some or all of those skills will benefit more than those who do not when entering kindergarten and elementary school. These early literacy skills are the building blocks for learning languages. Therefore, all skills are essential when learning the language.

Children learn *Print Motivation*, *Letter Knowledge*, and *Print Awareness* through their parents, caretakers, and their surroundings at an early age. They start learning *Vocabulary*, like names of things and ideas, and soon, they learn to put those words together to tell a story or describe things. In other words, these five literacy skills can be taught by communicating with children, reading books, showing books to children, and exposing to the world. However, an understanding of Phonological Awareness needs not only a child's exposure to these five literacy skills but also a child's practice with these five literacy skills. It is one of the final steps in preparing children for reading instruction that begins in kindergarten, and children having difficulty with phonological awareness tend to have trouble learning to read in later years. Pre-literacy skills prepare children for further learning and help develop literacy and reading comprehension. It is a learning step designed for developmental progress for children.

When educators refer to literacy skills in teaching children, they generally state four areas of skill: reading, listening, writing, and speaking. They are tools to communicate with people effectively and understand the world, thus considered vital skills for success at school. Therefore, children spend almost their entire primary school years building literacy skills, especially reading. According to Reading Rockets (2024), a national public media literacy initiative in Washington D.C., USA, children need to be taught how to read because 'their brains are naturally wired to speak, but they are not naturally wired to read and write' and they will need 'developing more sophisticated language and comprehension skills throughout their schooling.' Such skills are referred to Reading Comprehension. Zimmerman and Hutchins (2003) describe Reading Comprehension as the ability to read, process, and understand text meaning. They say it relies on two interconnected abilities: word reading (decoding the symbols on the page) and language comprehension (understanding the meaning of the words and sentences)'. To become proficient readers, children must perform three tasks

simultaneously: identify the words in print, construct an understanding from words in print, and automatically coordinate identifying words and understanding definitions accurately. In other words, children first will need to develop word recognition. Moreover, three of the five essential skills required for word recognition are knowledge of sounds, phonological (phonemic) awareness, alphabetic principle, and decoding words. Pre-literacy skills lay the groundwork for language comprehension, and building these skills impacts a child's academic success in a sequential and structured manner throughout their schooling years.

2.3 Revised National Curriculum Standards for English Education in Japan

MEXT manages three key bureaus within the education sector: the Education Policy Bureau, the Elementary and Secondary Education Bureau, and the Higher Education Bureau. According to MEXT's Elementary and Secondary Education Bureau, one of its main priorities is to equip students with the skills needed to thrive in an increasingly information-driven and globalized society (MEXT, 2021). MEXT emphasizes that understanding diverse cultures and strong communication skills are essential for Japanese people to be globally competitive. There was considerable social pressure and criticism of the Japanese government's handling of the English education curriculum for its compulsory education (Yamamoto, 2009). As a result, MEXT faced the urgent need and pressure to reform the system to address these concerns. There was also a growing consensus among parents that language learning should begin at an earlier age, emphasizing the importance of starting English education in the early elementary school years (Kihara, 2019). As a result, many families have been enrolling their children in private Eikaiwa schools outside the compulsory education system, often at significant additional cost (Yano Research Institute, Ltd., 2024). These parents believe the national curriculum should provide sufficient support to help children develop English proficiency without needing supplementary private education.

Finally, in 2017, MEXT revised the National Curriculum Standards (MEXT Standards) for elementary education, with full implementation planned for the 2020 school year. The most significant change was making English Language Learning (ELE) a mandatory activity starting in the third grade and a mandatory subject for the fifth and sixth grades. ELE was already introduced in elementary schools in 2011. However, its purposes and goals lacked clear guidelines or regulations. In other words, MEXT allowed individual schools and local education boards to determine their approaches and curriculum content. The updated MEXT Standards introduced a more organized structure for ELE, specifying the learning objectives and curriculum content for each grade level. Under the new guidelines, foreign language activities begin in the third grade, while formal foreign language learning starts in the fifth grade. The standards also combined the third and fourth grades into a two-year cycle foreign language activity goals. Similarly, they paired the fifth and sixth grades to achieve foreign language learning objectives.

According to the MEXT Standards, the first two years of ELE should be foreign language activities. The overall objective of the MEXT Standards is 'to develop pupils' competencies that form the foundation of communication as follows through language activities such as listening and speaking in foreign languages while activating the Approaches in communication in foreign languages' (MEXT, 2021). The overall objective is outlined in three key focuses at the beginning of the MEXT Standards, followed by a detailed discussion of curriculum content, syllabus design, and lesson delivery (Table 1). While the standards use the term "foreign language," they specifically require the use of English due to its global prevalence and established use in fifth and sixth grades before the revision. English is also compulsory in junior high school, reinforcing its selection.

Table 1

A brief summary of MEXT objectives for ELE based on 'The National Curriculum Standards for Grade 3 and Grade 4 in Elementary School Chapter 4 Foreign Language Activities'

Objectives and Content	Details
I. General Objectives	
(1) Understanding Languages & Cultures	- Use foreign languages to understand languages and cultures. - Notice differences between Japanese and foreign languages (sounds, expressions). - Familiarize with basic foreign language sounds and expressions.
(2) Communication Skills	- Develop ability to express thoughts and feelings. - Use foreign languages for familiar and simple topics.
(3) Attitude Toward Communication	- Deepen understanding of languages and their cultures. - Foster willingness to communicate thoughtfully in foreign languages.
II. Objectives & Content for English	
1. Develop Competencies	- Aim to achieve skills in listening, speaking (interaction), and speaking (presentation). - Integrate objectives (I.1, I.2) while considering English language learning characteristics.
(1) Listening	
a. Understanding Simple Phrases	- Listen to simple words and phrases about familiar topics spoken slowly and clearly.
b. Basic Expression Comprehension	- Understand familiar, simple matters spoken slowly and clearly.
c. Alphabet Recognition	- Recognize alphabet letters by hearing their names pronounced.
(2) Speaking (Interaction)	
a. Basic Greetings and Instructions	- Use basic expressions to greet, thank, and give/respond to simple instructions.
b. Exchange of Thoughts and Feelings	- Communicate simple thoughts and feelings using words, phrases, and gestures.
c. Question & Answer	- Ask and answer questions about familiar topics using simple words and phrases with support.
(3) Speaking (Presentation)	
a. Describing Surroundings	- Talk about surroundings while showing objects, using simple language.
b. Talking About Oneself	- Present information about oneself using simple language while showing relevant objects.
c. Sharing Thoughts & Feelings	- Express thoughts and feelings about daily life with simple language while displaying relevant items.

(MEXT, 2021)

As seen in Table 1, the primary goal for the third and fourth grades is to maintain interest in learning and communicating in English by incorporating listening and speaking activities. Moreover, the goal for speaking is further divided into "interaction" and "presentation" skills by encouraging students to practice dialogue and expressive communication. The MEXT Standards strongly recommend the use of technology and Assistant Language Teachers (ALTs) to create engaging and interactive learning environments, but because the third and fourth grade students are not accustomed to hearing English on a regular basis, some students may experience foreign language anxiety even though the most of vocabulary used in MEXT approved textbooks are relatively simple and easy. Those textbooks are designed for hands-on use, often featuring detachable flashcards for students to practice remembering letters and basic words.

2.4 Common Core English Language Arts/Literacy

Common Core State Standards (CCSS) are a set of academic standards in the USA for what every student from kindergarten through high school (K-12) is expected to learn in mathematics and English language arts/literacy (ELA) at the end of each grade level. CCSS aim to provide clear, consistent student learning expectations that are aligned with college and career readiness. This educational Initiative started in 2010 in the United States; 41 states and the District of Columbia have adopted the Common Core Standards. In the US (and Canada), English language learning is called English Language Arts (ELA), and the reason for calling it Language Arts is that it involves the artful use of language. Compared to some subjects focusing on facts and technicality, Language Arts focuses attention on creativity, interpretation, expression, and the ability to communicate effectively with skills.

Common Core State Standard Initiative (the Initiative) began developing standards with a team of scholars selected by the National Governors Association (NGA). At the start of

this groundbreaking project in 2009, the Initiative released its statement of purpose through its website: 'provide a consistent, clear understanding of what students are expected to learn, so teachers and parents know what they need to do to help them.' The Common Core Standards' website (www.thecorestandards.org) clearly states its key features as follows:

1. Research and evidence-based

2. Clear, understandable, and consistent

3. Aligned with college and career expectations

4. Based on rigorous content and the application of knowledge through higher-order thinking skills

5. Built upon the strengths and lessons of current state standard

6. Informed by other top-performing countries to prepare all students for success in our global economy and society

When starting in the early grades, the standards concentrate on fundamental ideas and practices, giving teachers the time to teach them and students the opportunity to become proficient in them. There are grade-by-grade standards for ELA and mathematics for kindergarten to eighth grade, ensuring students are prepared to enter college and workforce training programs ready to succeed.

First, the Common Core Standards for English Language Arts (the Common Core English) define what students should understand and be able to do by the end of each grade from kindergarten to fifth grade. They also correlate to the College and Career Readiness (CCR) anchor standards, which outline the general information and abilities that educators believe children should possess throughout their schooling to prepare them for college and the workforce. CCR delineates the fundamental knowledge and abilities that educators anticipate students to demonstrate throughout their education in the arts. The Common Core English is written grade-specific and articulates three areas: foundation skills, informational text, and

literature for reading. The CCR anchor standards are organized in four areas by numbers, as

shown in Table 2.

Table 2

The 10 College and Career Readiness (CCR) anchor standards for READING

Key Ideas and Details	1. Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text. 2. Determine central ideas or themes of a text and analyze their development; summarize the key supporting details and ideas. 3. Analyze how and why individuals, events, and ideas develop and interact over the course of a text.
Craft and Structure	4. Interpret words and phrases as they are used in a text, including determining technical, connotative, and figurative meanings, and analyze how specific word choices shape meaning or tone. 5. Analyze the structure of texts, including how specific sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text (e.g., a section, chapter, scene, or stanza) relate to each other and the whole. 6. Assess how point of view or purpose shapes the content and style of a text.
Integration of Knowledge and Ideas	7. Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words. 8. Delineate and evaluate the argument and specific claims in a text, including the validity of the reasoning as well as the relevance and sufficiency of the evidence. 9. Analyze how two or more texts address similar themes or topics in order to build knowledge or to compare the approaches the authors take.
Range of Reading and Level of Text Complexity	10. Read and comprehend complex literary and informational texts independently and proficiently.

(Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010, p.10)

The Common Core English defines necessary foundational skills for reading.

> These standards are directed toward fostering students' understanding and working knowledge of concepts of print, the alphabetic principle, and other basic conventions of the English writing system. These foundational skills are not an end in and of themselves; rather, they are necessary and important components of an effective, comprehensive reading program designed to develop proficient readers with the capacity to comprehend texts across a range of types and disciplines. (p.15)

The Common Core English provides these ideas and a framework for teaching children to read proficiently in four areas: print principles, phonological awareness, phonics and word recognition, and fluency. Print Concepts and Phonological Awareness are taught only in kindergarten and first grade within these four topics because these two topics are essential at the earliest stages of reading development. Learning objectives are detailed in the Common Core English for these two grades, as shown in Table 3; it is straightforward for educators and parents to determine what steps students should take to build strong literacy skills, as well as series of goals they should look for in students.

Table 3

Foundational Skills: Print Concepts, Phonological Awareness, and Phonics and Word Recognition Standard Objectives (K-1)

Kindergartener	First Grade Student
Print Concept	
1. Demonstrate understanding of the organization and basic features of print. a. Follow words from left to right, top to bottom, and page by page. b. Recognize that spoken words are represented in written language by specific sequences of letters. c. Understand that words are separated by spaces in print. d. Recognize and name all upper- and lowercase letters of the alphabet.	1. Demonstrate understanding of the organization and basic features of print. a. Recognize the distinguishing features of a sentence (e.g., first word, capitalization, ending punctuation).
Phonological Awareness	
2. Demonstrate understanding of spoken words, syllables, and sounds (phonemes). a. Recognize and produce rhyming words. b. Count, pronounce, blend, and segment syllables in spoken words. c. Blend and segment onsets and rimes of single-syllable spoken words. d. Isolate and pronounce the initial, medial vowel, and final sounds (phonemes) in three-phoneme (consonant-vowel-consonant, or CVC) words.* (This does not include CVCs ending with /l/, /r/, or /x/.) e. Add or substitute individual sounds (phonemes) in simple, one-syllable words to make new words.	2. Demonstrate understanding of spoken words, syllables, and sounds (phonemes). a. Distinguish long from short vowel sounds in spoken single-syllable words. b. Orally produce single-syllable words by blending sounds (phonemes), including consonant blends. c. Isolate and pronounce initial, medial vowel, and final sounds (phonemes) in spoken single-syllable words. d. Segment spoken single-syllable words into their complete sequence of individual sounds (phonemes).

* Words, syllables, or phonemes written in /slashes/refer to their pronunciation or phonology. Thus, /CVC/ is a word with three phonemes regardless of the number of letters in the spelling of the word.

Kindergartener	First Grade Student
Phonics and Word Recognition	
3. Know and apply grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words.	3. Know and apply grade-level phonics and word analysis skills in decoding words.

a. Demonstrate basic knowledge of one-to-one letter-sound correspondences by producing the primary sound or many of the most frequent sounds for each consonant.
b. Associate the long and short sounds with common spellings (graphemes) for the five major vowels.
c. Read common high-frequency words by sight (e.g., the, of, to, you, she, my, is, are, do, does).
d. Distinguish between similarly spelled words by identifying the sounds of the letters that differ.

a. Know the spelling-sound correspondences for common consonant digraphs.
b. Decode regularly spelled one-syllable words.
c. Know final -e and common vowel team conventions for representing long vowel sounds.
d. Use knowledge that every syllable must have a vowel sound to determine the number of syllables in a printed word.
e. Decode two-syllable words following basic patterns by breaking the words into syllables.
f. Read words with inflectional endings.
g. Recognize and read grade-appropriate irregularly spelled words.

(Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2010, p.15-16)

When children begin kindergarten and first grade, depending on their upbringing and growing environment, they often start at different levels of literacy skills. The Common Core English is designed for kindergarten and first-grade students to be leveled at the critical skills for further advancing in the other two areas: Phonics and Word Recognition, and Fluency. By addressing these foundational skills, the Common Core ensures that all students build a strong literacy base, setting them up for continued success in reading and writing.

Chapter 3   Review of Studies

3.1   Language Learning and Different Approaches for Japanese and English

In 2006, the Central Education Council announced plans to incorporate ELE into elementary schools. In March 2008, MEXT updated its standards, making ELE mandatory for fifth and sixth grades starting in the 2011 school year. That same year, Yukio Otsu, a distinguished professor and scholar, organized two symposiums at Keio University to explore the challenges faced by English education in Japan from multiple perspectives. In 2009, Otsu published *Kiki-ni-Tatsu Nihon-no Eigo-Kyouiku*, a book containing eight symposium research papers alongside five essays on related topics and supplementary materials. The contributors were experts in English studies, linguistics, education, and applied linguistics, with participants including academics and teachers from junior high and high schools. A key point raised during the symposiums was the need for consistency between English and Japanese language education. It was argued that the ability to process language accurately should be similar, whether in Japanese or English (Otsu, 2009). As a result, the Grammar-translation method was deemed unsuitable for elementary students still in the early stages of English learning, as they still need to be developmentally prepared to grasp the complexities of linguistic structures in Japanese needed for translation.

Since 2011, MEXT has required ELE for fifth and sixth graders. Further reforms in 2020 lowered the starting grade for ELE and increased the hours dedicated to it. MEXT also shifted the teaching approach from the traditional Grammar-translation method to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and the Audio-lingual Method. This change was likely driven by public criticism that Japanese ELE needed to consistently improve students' speaking abilities. However, despite these changes, the curriculum guided by MEXT-approved textbooks does not include pre-literacy skills critical for learning English. An analysis of two third-grade textbooks, *We Can!* 1 (Tokyoshoseki, 2019) and *Let's Try*! 1

(Tokyoshoseki, 2019), shows a lack of phonics instruction. This omission actually aligns with MEXT's objectives, which do not emphasize understanding basic English sounds (MEXT, 2020). In contrast, MEXT's guidelines for Japanese study include not only speaking and listening but also reading and writing skills, with specific attention to Japanese phonology and letter recognition.

3.2   Positive Results from Phonology-Based Instruction: A Case Study

First, a case study by Watanabe (2020) investigated the effectiveness of phonology-based instruction in Japanese elementary school students who were fourth graders at a public elementary school. However, she noted in her case study that:

> Although teaching phonological awareness is effective in English speaking countries, there is still scope to investigate the effectiveness of teaching phonological awareness in an English as a Foreign Language (EFL) context (p. 99).

In her studies, she emphasized the effectiveness of phonological awareness instruction, including teaching letter knowledge to young Japanese learners' literacy. Her study focused on three key areas:

1. **Effect on Phonological Awareness**: The study examined whether phonology-based activities improved students' ability to recognize and pronounce the sounds of English.

2. **Enhancement of Letter Knowledge**: It evaluated how such instruction influenced students' understanding and recognition of English letters.

3. **Motivation to Learn English**: The research also examined whether these instructional methods motivated students to learn English.

The study involved 29 fourth-grade students from a public elementary school who participated in phonology-based activities. These included reciting and singing nursery rhymes, identifying rhymes or initial sounds, and counting syllables during 15-minute weekly

English lessons. Additional letter recognition exercises were integrated into English and other subjects to boost phonological awareness. Her findings indicated that phonology-based instruction effectively enhanced students' phonological awareness and positively influenced their attitudes toward learning English (2020).

3.3 Correlation between Phonological Awareness and Word Knowledge

Allen-Tamai has researched English literacy and language acquisition among Japanese elementary school students for over 20 years. Her research concentrates on critical aspects of literacy development, including phonological awareness, the acquisition of literacy skills, and the design of effective curriculum frameworks. One of her primary theories emphasizes the effectiveness of phonology-based instruction for Japanese primary ELE in developing English literacy. In her studies, she highlights two essential components for designing effective English lesson plans, which she calls "learning-centered class activities" (Allen-Tamai, 2011). The first component is aligning instructional strategies with students' developmental stages. Those strategies include focusing on phonological and alphabetic skills specifically adapted to Japanese learners of English. She emphasizes that a solid foundation in letter and sound recognition is crucial for becoming able readers. The second component involves contextual learning. She suggests teaching English in meaningful, context-rich scenarios rather than giving students single words or phrases. Young learners, who still need to develop metalinguistic skills fully, can benefit from understanding language in larger contexts. Therefore, limiting dialogue to predictable, one-way responses can restrict students' ability to expand their language skills through associative learning. Her research provides vital points on how Japanese elementary students can effectively develop English literacy through tailored phonology-based instruction and contextually rich educational strategies.

3.4 Summary of Key Findings

The evolution of English Language Education (ELE) in Japanese elementary schools highlights the effectiveness of phonology-based instruction and the relationship between phonological awareness and word knowledge. Japan has gradually transitioned from the traditional Grammar-translation method to Communicative Language Teaching (CLT) and Audio-lingual methods. However, despite these pedagogical shifts, MEXT's curriculum still lacks foundational pre-literacy skills crucial for English learning, such as phonics instruction. This omission contrasts with Japanese language education, which integrates phonological awareness and letter recognition from an early stage (Otsu, 2009; MEXT, 2020).

Studies by Watanabe (2020) and Allen-Tamai (2011) emphasize the importance of phonology-based instruction in enhancing phonological awareness, letter knowledge, and motivation among Japanese elementary students learning English. Watanabe's case study exhibited positive reinforcement through phonological awareness activities, such as nursery rhymes and syllable counting, significantly improving students' ability to recognize sounds and letters. It also positively influenced their motivation to learn English. Allen-Tamai's research further supports the role of phonology-based instruction in developing English literacy. She believes instructional strategies should align with students' developmental stages, focusing on phonological and alphabetic skills tailored to Japanese learners. Moreover, her research suggests that contextual learning rather than isolated word drills enhances students' grasp of language structures and fosters better language acquisition.

These findings suggest that integrating phonology-based instruction into Japan's ELE curriculum could help build a literacy foundation and support more effective English language acquisition among elementary students.

Chapter 4: Data and Method

4.1 Participants and Assessment Tools

The data for this study were collected from student performance reports provided by CIS English, a private English language school located in Handa City, Aichi Prefecture (hereafter referred to as "CIS"). All participants' starting age with CIS varied, ranging from four years old to sixth grade. However, the participants who joined CIS before reaching the third grade (when English is introduced in elementary schools) had no experience attending other private English institutions. In contrast, the participants who enrolled at CIS after the third grade were only exposed to English learning through formal elementary school settings. The participants' limited English exposure provided a critical context for understanding their foundational knowledge and analyzing their subsequent progress within the CIS program.

The same age-four participants were chosen for Group I to ensure that developmental factors did not confound the data when analyzing educational or linguistic outcomes. By selecting participants of the same age, the study minimized the potential disparities in cognitive and developmental stages that could influence learning processes and outcomes. Additionally, the participants had a similar level of Japanese vocabulary knowledge, which meant that their ability to connect English words to familiar concepts in their first language was comparable. This uniformity reduced the likelihood of significant disparities in foundational linguistic connections and facilitated a more accurate analysis of how English vocabulary and literacy skills developed in a consistent context. Moreover, having participants at the same developmental stage made it easier to identify any significant variations, whether positive or negative, in growth, as external developmental differences were controlled, allowing the analysis to focus solely on the impact of the educational methods and materials used.

CIS conducts periodic assessment tests to monitor and evaluate students' progress, primarily focusing on Guided Reading Levels (GRL), a system developed by Irene Fountas and Gay Su Pinnell. This system allows educators to quickly assess students' reading abilities and assign appropriate materials, reducing stress by avoiding overly difficult texts. It also helps structure reading instruction to promote steady progress in English proficiency. Reading levels are categorized alphabetically from A (beginning readers) to Z (texts at or above an eighth-grade level). Books are assigned to levels based on the following factors:

- Word repetition

- Sentence length

- Total word count

- Sentence complexity

- Number of different words

- Inclusion of supportive illustrations

- Amount of high-frequency (or most common) words

Since multiple Guided Reading Levels (GRL) exist within each grade, this method provides a precise way to align reading materials with individual needs. For instance, instead of assuming all second graders read at the same level, dividing the grade into levels I, J, K, L, and M allows more students to access books that sustain their motivation and confidence (Crowe, 2022).

CIS assessed the participants GRL using the "Where-to-Start Word Test" from the Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System. Participants were presented with a series of word lists and asked to read them aloud, with their reading levels determined based on the GRL scale. This system recommends starting with the Beginning list for kindergarten and first-grade students, progressing to Level 1 for second grade, and up to Level 8 for junior high school third grade. At CIS, GRL assessments were not standardized by age alone; they were

tailored to each participant's background. Participants were exempt from initial GRL assessments if they met any of the following criteria:

1. No prior attendance at English schools

2. Under fifth grade

3. No exposure to English-speaking environments at home

The list of words from Beginning Level to Level 4 is shown in Table 4, and the rating chart is shown in Table 5.

Table 4

Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System Where-to-Start Word List

Beginning Level Word List							
me	I	can	to	my	we	in	like
it	up	mom	the	and	he	look	is
see	come	get	at				
Level 1 Word List							
jump	here	little	went	has	girl	will	have
ball	make	play	was	bike	with	they	this
bed	feet	one	said				
Level 2 Word List							
want	friend	puppy	basket	could	dark	down	road
plant	away	morning	three	cool	drop	grass	when
first	train	queen	scream				
Level 3 Word List							
plate	year	noise	under	twisted	giant	knives	what
around	because	forest	once	scramble	again	careful	breakfast
batter	suddenly	badge	village				
Level 4 Word List							
science	serious	nature	station	graceful	heavy		against
excuse	traffic	plastic	ocean	perform	delicious		pebble
understood	destiny	future	reward	anger	honey		
Level 5 Word List							
speechless	slumber	courage	region	appearance	gracious		
honorable	ambition	expression	protective	cushion	population		
needle	marriage	obedient	baggage	justice	lately		
bushel	lunar						

(Fountas & Pinnell, 2017)

Table 5

Where-to-Start Chart

*Equivalent Grade Level	Kindergarten First Grade	Second Grade	Third Grade	Fourth Grade	Fifth Grade	Sixth Grade
Number Correct	Beginning	Level 1	Level 2	Level 3	Level 4	Level 5
0-5	A	A	E	I	M	P
6-10	A	B	F	J	M	P
11-15	A	C	G	K	N	Q
16-20	B	D	H	L	N	Q

*The grade level is based on the United States of America.

CIS also uses the following assessment tests for the participants in addition to the Fountas & Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System: Words Their Way; Word Study in Action, the Alphabet Assessment Reproducible 3 & 4, High-Frequency Words Set A & Set B1, Benchmark Passage Running Record, Benchmark Passage Quick Check (all from Reading A-Z), and the Dolch Sight Word Assessment. The selection of assessment types is based on each participant's level as well as their maturity. These assessments aim to determine the participants' reading levels based on the GRL system and help educators align learning materials with their needs. CIS uses GRL for recommending books for reading and selecting textbook levels and uses Common Core English for their learning objectives (shown in Table 3).

4.2 Participants: Group I and Group II

Tables 6 and 7 provide detailed profiles of these participants. In Group I, two participants had not received formal English education before enrolling at CIS, while two had limited exposure to English through Disney World of English, an online-based learning resource. Three participants of this group attended the same private kindergarten, where basic English activities were conducted from time to time regularly. All participants enrolled at CIS at least one year before starting elementary school.

Group II was selected for data analysis due to the participants' relatively early start with CIS and their concurrent exposure to English instruction under the revised MEXT objectives starting in the third grade. All of the Group II participants had attended CIS for over three years (as shown in Table 7), during which they became familiar with the program's routines, effectively integrating English learning into their daily lives. This consistency allowed them to progress at their own pace, with periodic structured assessments aligning their advancement with individual readiness rather than grade-level constraints. This individualized approach contrasts the MEXT curriculum, which typically follows a standardized progression and limits personalized or accelerated learning opportunities. When students begin learning English with CIS, regardless of their starting age or grade, the program aligns their progress with three foundational objectives from the Common Core Standards shown in Table 3: *Print Concept*, *Phonological Awareness*, *Phonics, and Word Recognition*. These objectives serve as individualized benchmarks for each student. For children who begin their English education before elementary school, Group II participants all had sufficient time to achieve the kindergarten-level objectives of the Common Core sequentially.

Table 6

The Group 1 Participant Profiles

Name	Student HN	Student RM	Student RN	Student TT
Kindergarten Type	Private	Private	Private	Public
Age at the Enrollment	4 years & 10 months	4 years & 9 months	4 years & 9 months	5 year & 10 months
Exposure to English	none	Disney Text	Disney Text	none
CIS Starting Date	May 2021	May 2022	May 2022	January 2023
Type of Assessment	Trial Lesson	Trial Lesson	Trial Lesson	Trial Lesson
Assessed GRL	A	A	A	A
Starting Textbook	Let's Begin 1	Let's Begin 1	Let's Begin 1	Let's Go 1
Second Textbook	Let's Go 1	Let's Go 1	Let's Go 1	Let's Go 2
Third Textbook	Let's Go 2	Let's Go 2	Let' Go 2	

Note: the above data was last updated in March 2024

Table 7

Group II Participant Profile

Student Name	Student IB	Student ET	Student MM	Student YS
Starting Age at CIS	First Grade	Kindergarten	First Grade	First Grade
Years with CIS	5 years & 3 moths	4 years & 10 months	3 years & 10 months	3 years & 3 months
Last Assessment Grade Feb 2024	Fifth Grade	Fourth Grade	Third Grade	Third Grade

Note. This data was last updated in September 2024.

4.3 Materials

CIS used the *Let's Go* series for kindergarten to first-grade students because it is simpler and more age-appropriate for younger learners. Its structured approach effectively builds foundational English skills. CIS transitioned to the *Wonderful World* series by National Geographic Learning to better support older students. In 2022, this change was introduced for the "Elementary Basic English Class," targeting upper elementary students. The shift was prompted by a noticeable decline in student interest in *Let's Go*, which, while effective in some contexts, presented challenges for the CIS program. The *Let's Go* series was designed for daily instruction in Expanding Circle countries, where English is a core subject. However, CIS operates on a once-a-week class schedule, often taking over a year to complete a single book, making *Let's Go* less suitable for its needs.

Additionally, *Let's Go* posed challenges for older elementary students. While it effectively covered foundational skills, its cartoonish design (as shown in Figure 1) and repetitive format often felt overly childish for students beyond the second grade. This mismatch and the difficulty of mastering foundational skills led to decreased motivation and interest. Moreover, the series' uniform appearance made it difficult for students to perceive progress, creating a sense of stagnation.

CIS trialed the *Wonderful World* series with upper elementary students to address these concerns before fully adopting it. This series introduced engaging, age-appropriate topics and visually appealing real-world imagery (as shown in Figure 2), making it a better fit for older students' developmental stages and interests. For example, *Wonderful World* features real people from around the world, with each unit beginning with a one-page spread showcasing a specific country. This approach helped students develop global awareness, and many enjoyed using a globe to locate the featured countries during lessons. Students became incredibly excited when they saw a picture of Japanese children in uniforms (*Wonderful World 1*, p.68). The content encouraged active participation, reigniting enthusiasm for learning English.

Furthermore, *Wonderful World* provided appropriately challenging material that matched students' maturity levels, resulting in improved attitudes, increased interest, and more effective learning outcomes. Since its implementation, it has proven to be a more suitable choice, fostering a stronger sense of progress and engagement. Group II participants first used *Let's Go* before transitioning to *Wonderful World*, which ultimately proved more effective and practical for older students.

Figure 1

A Page from Let's Go
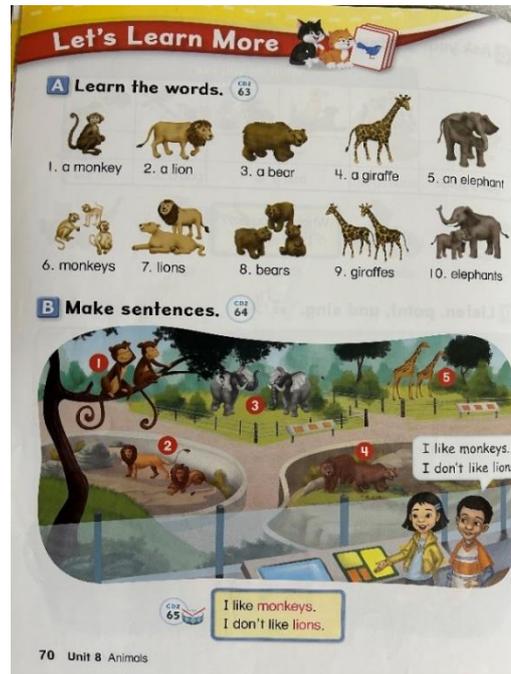
Note. Photocopy. Frazier et al., 2020, p. 70

Figure 2

A Page from Wonderful World 1

Note. Photocopy. Cengage Learning, Inc., 2019, p. 42

Chapter 5 Results and Discussion

5.1 Group I Result

The participants began with the *Let's Begin 1* series from Oxford University Press (2018), part of the broader *Let's Go* materials designed for children learning English as a Foreign Language (EFL). This series emphasizes foundational skills, such as recognizing letters and sounds, and follows the unique structure of Ritsuko Nakata's MAT Method. Instead of introducing the alphabet in traditional sequential order, the MAT Method organizes letters into sound groups, prioritizing vowels followed by consonants in phonetic clusters, as shown in Table 8. Observations revealed that the structured, repetitive format of *Let's Begin 1* helped participants overcome letter recognition and phonics challenges. For example, three participants in Group I were exposed to English activities during kindergarten and initially relied on singing alphabet songs while tracing the letter charts in *Let's Begin 1*. While they were able to name the letters, their ability to recognize individual letter shapes was limited due to the non-alphabetical sequence presented in the book. Therefore, two participants took longer than Student TT, who did not have any form of English learning in the kindergarten year, to learn the alphabet and phonics. This observation emphasizes the effectiveness of the MAT Method, which encourages students to recognize letters and sounds independently of the traditional alphabetical order or reliance on singing alphabet songs.

Table 8

Let's Begin 1 Alphabet Learning Order Based on MAT Method

The Vowels	Aa Ee Ii Oo Uu
The EE Group	Cc Gg Bb Dd Pp Tt Vv Zz
The EH Group	Ff Ll Mm Nn Ss Xx
The EI Group	Jj Kk
The Mixed Group	Hh Qq Rr Ww Yy

(Frazier et al., 2022)

Let's Begin 1 provided structured practice focusing on Print Concepts, Phonological Awareness, Phonics, and Word Recognition, essential literacy skills. The first significant

change observed was participants becoming more comfortable with lowercase letters. For instance, they began writing their names using lowercase letters. While not all participants fully understood the rules of capitalization, gentle and consistent reminders were given during instruction. They began self-correcting during writing practices as they gained confidence with lowercase letters. As shown in Table 9, all three participants tested with Alphabet Assessment Reproducible 4 (Lazel, Inc., 2024), which tests students' ability to recognize uppercase and lowercase letters, scored 100%. Figure 3 shows the assessment and students' ability to recognize uppercase and lowercase letters when presented in non-sequential order.

Figure 3

Student HN Alphabet Assessment Reproducible 4
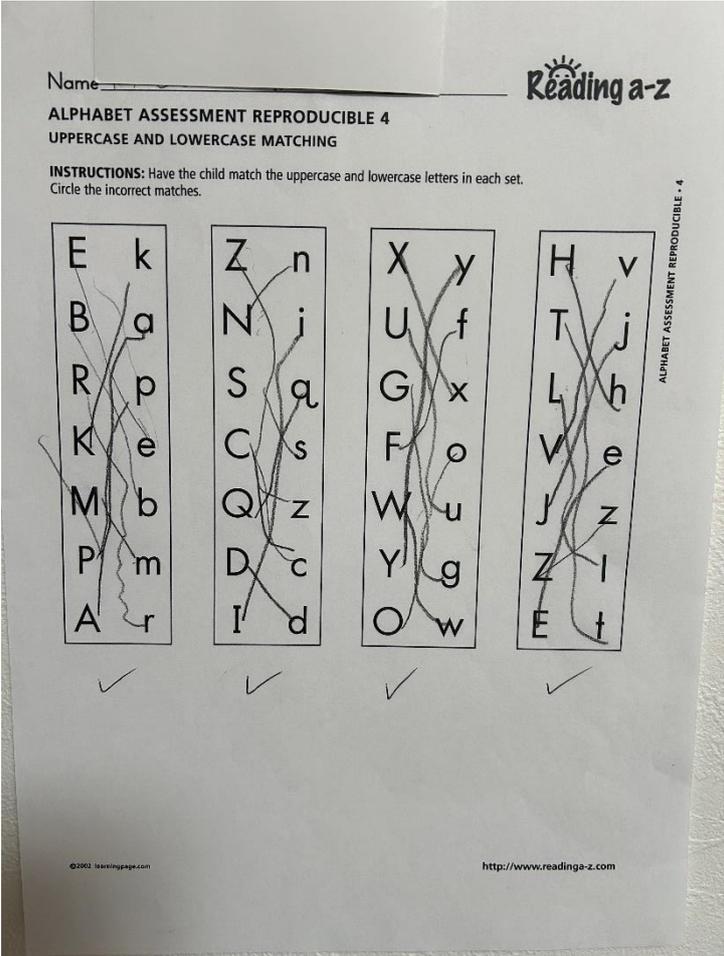
Note: Photocopy. Lazel, Inc., 2024

Another notable development was their understanding that letters could correspond to multiple sounds. Participants started differentiating letter sounds from letter names and

experimented with various sounds to recognize or decode words. As shown in Figure 4, one participant called letter sounds instead of letter names. In Figure 4, where the teacher's note says 'sound,' a student pronounced the correct letter sound instead of alphabet names. They also became resourceful, actively searching for words containing the letters they wanted to sound out. This collaborative learning environment fostered peer support, with participants frequently helping each other identify letters and words.

Figure 4

Student TT Alphabet Assessment Reproducible 3
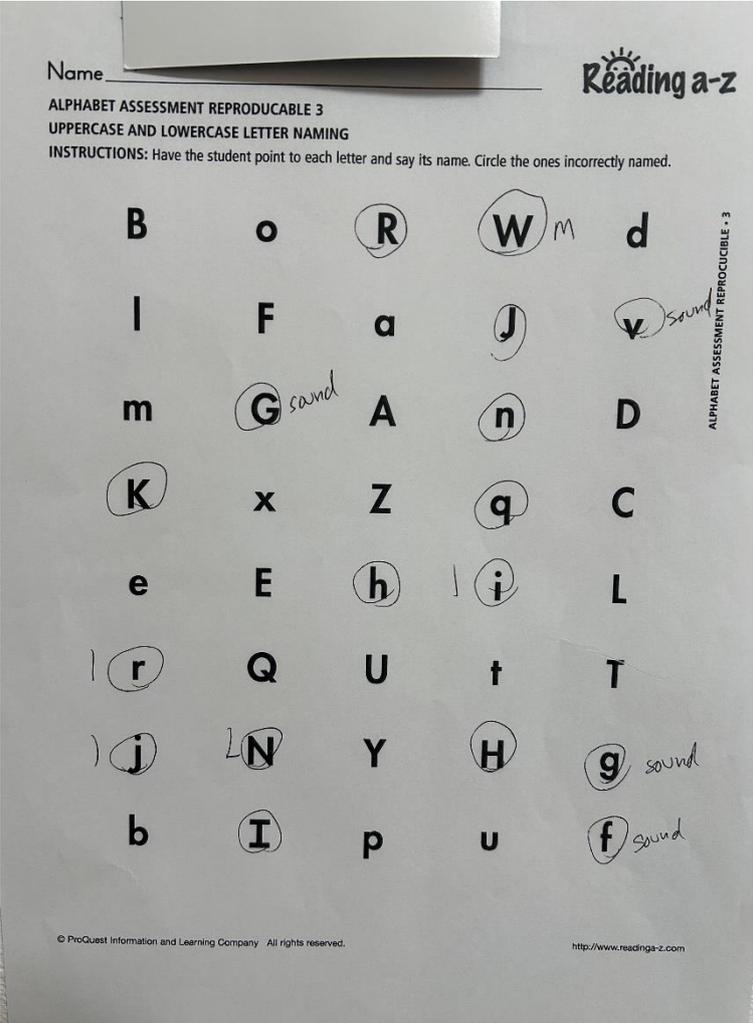
Note: Photocopy. Lazel, Inc., 2024

However, some challenges emerged when participants encountered specific font styles. Certain letters, such as uppercase "I," lowercase "l," "q," and "j," were difficult for

them to distinguish. Lowercase "d" and "b" were often confused, mainly when presented in isolation. These difficulties underscored the importance of exposing early learners to various font styles and explicitly explaining letterforms. Needless to say, mastering these foundational skills was a crucial step in the participants' journey toward English proficiency, as evidenced by their progress and subsequent assessment outcomes.

Table 9

Group I Assessment Results

	Name	Student HN	Student RM	Student RN	Student TT
Beginning of CIS	Type of Assessment	Trial Lesson	Trial Lesson	Trial Lesson	Trial Lesson
	Result	A	A	A	A
Assessment Conducted in March 2023	Where-to-Start Word List	Beginning 3/20 (15%)	Beginning 0/20 (0%)	Beginning 19/20 (95%) Level 1 18/20 (90%) Level 2 15/20 (75%)	*Beginning
	Result	A	A	F/G	A
Assessment Conducted in February 2024	Alphabet Assessment Reproducible 3	Incorrect Letters: W,d,l,J,v, m,G,D,q,U, Y,u	Incorrect Letters: R,W,d,I,n, D,K,x,q,g	n/a	Incorrect Letters: R,W,J,v,G, n,K,q,h,I,r,j, N,H,g,f
	Alphabet Assessment Reproducible 4	100%	100%	n/a	100%
	High-Frequency Words Set A	14/23 61%	10/23 43%	n/a	4/23 17%
	Benchmark Passage Running Record			GRL E: Reading Accuracy 95%	30%
	Benchmark Passage Quick Check			GRL E: Reading Comprehension 3/5	
	Dolch Sight Word Assessment			First Grade Level: 34/41 83%	

(as of March 2024)
*Student TT just enrolled about 2 months before the assessment conducted in March 2023. Therefore CIS did not conduct an actual assessment test.

5.2 Group II Result

The assessment results for Group II, shown in Table 10, highlight the participants' progress. First, Student ET's GRL increased from B to K in one year. The observation for this significant improvement is that once students reach the kindergarten-level objectives at CIS, all students are encouraged to read by taking books from the CIS library home for fun, resulting in work on *the Fluency* objective in the Common Core Standards (2010): "read emergent-reader texts with purpose and understanding." CIS' use of the library also serves the purpose of exposing students to as many words as possible so that students then have new foundational skill objectives in the Common Core Standards for first-grade reading standards. Another observation for Student ET's improvement is a positive result of CIS's transition from *Let's Go 2* to *Wonderful World 1*, a textbook that provided more challenging and relatable content for elementary school students maturing from lower to upper grades. The *Wonderful World's* real-world, integrated content made English learning enjoyable. Second, Student ET thrived in a competitive learning environment with Student IB. In other words, Student ET and IB enjoyed learning together by competing, such as who had the most correct answers or finished faster in solving practice problems. The friendly competition between them motivated both students when they were engaging in- game activities and art projects. While Student IB also showed progress, moving up two GRL levels, Student IB's improvement was not as pronounced as Student ET's. One notable observation is that reading habits may have influenced the disparity in GRL improvements between those two participants. Student ET's engagement with books probably accelerated his GRL development. Figure 5 shows how Student ET read a passage of ninety-seven words. His accuracy score on pronouncing words is not high (81%), however Figure 6 shows how well he understood the content. Student IB's result was similar, with 85% accuracy in reading words correctly; however, his understanding of the passage got four corrects out of five.

Figure 5

Student ET's Benchmark Passage Running Record Result

Note: Photocopy. Lazel, Inc., 2024

Figure 6

Figure 6 Student ET's Benchmark Passage Quick Check

Note: Photocopy. Lazel, Inc., 2024

In contrast, Students MM and YS enjoyed their learning through supportive interaction with each other. Their learning focus highlighted a constructive approach to overcoming learning difficulties. For example, both Student MM and YS had anxiety issues towards the unknown. They showed emotional discomfort, such as tears or staring at the teacher's face without a word. When CIS switched class texts from *the Let's Go* series to *the Wonderful World* series, students showed enthusiasm for learning, and Students MM and YS began to engage in class activities without showing fear. It is because how each lesson is structured the same. For every lesson, students knew what they would encounter, removing some anxiety to focus on learning English. Students knew what to expect in each lesson. It

also gave students the power to move forward with lessons when they try to learn on their own or miss classes.

For Group II, all participants started MEXT English education after they learned English with CIS. All participants reported that vocabulary learned at their elementary schools was easy. They also expressed that they understood many words from MEXT textbooks without Japanese definitions or pictures to describe them. Their feedback suggests that CIS's literacy-focused curriculum enabled the participants to experience English positively in elementary school. The study also suggests that once students have reached fluency in kindergarten fundamental skills, they are ready to read books independently. Therefore, actively engaging students with reading could develop higher literacy skills closer to students' actual grade level. These findings suggest the importance of aligning developmentally appropriate instructional materials and creating an environment promoting individual motivation.

Table 10

Group II: 2024 Assessment Result

	Student IB	Student ET	Student MM	Student YS
*2023 GRL	F	B	n/a	n/a
Assessment Grade Feb 2024	Fifth Grade	Fourth Grade	Third Grade	Third Grade
Benchmark Passage Running Record	GRL H: Reading Accuracy 85%	GRL K: Reading Accuracy 81%	GRL D: Reading Accuracy 86%	GRL D: Reading Accuracy 86%
Benchmark Passage Quick Check	GRL E: Reading Comp. 4/5	GRL K: Reading Comp. 3/5	GRL D: Reading Comp. 1/5	GRL D: Reading Comp. 1/5
Dolch Sight Word Assessment	Third Grade Level: 32/41 78%	Third Grade Level: 34/41 83%	Primer Level: 35/52 67%	Primer Level: 48/52 92%
			First Grade Level: 28/41 68%	First Grade Level: 31/41 75%

*GRL was assessed by Where-to-Start Word Test (shown in Table 4), a part of CIS end-of-year assessment. n/a means there was no assessment done.

CIS's structured curriculum, aligned with Common Core Standards, provided students and teachers with the tools to understand what to expect in learning English to produce fluency and further skills in reading comprehension and writing sentences. The transition to the *Wonderful World* series proved that students are influenced by the content of materials being developmentally appropriate. Based on the result of Group II, supportive and competitive classroom environments can encourage students' progress. Additionally, one particular student's GRL improvement demonstrates the effectiveness and importance of giving opportunities for independent reading.

6.0 Conclusion

This research identifies the potential benefit of integrating foundational literacy skills, aligned with Common Core Standards for Kindergarten to Grade 1, into Japan's English Language Education (ELE) frame work. The specific standards examined in this study include Print Concepts and Phonological Awareness. Objectives set for the Common Core Standards, specifically under Print Concepts, Phonological Awareness, Phonics, and Word Recognition, provide a robust framework for early language acquisition.

The assessment data from Group I and Group II confirm the effectiveness of this approach. Group I and Group II students who experienced phonology-based instruction showed notable gains in reading CVC words, reading comprehension, vocabulary retention, and sight word recognition. These outcomes suggest that adopting Common Core Standards objectives strengthens early literacy and enhances students' ability to acquire English as a language to communicate. The student data used in this research highlights the remarkable improvement of students from Groups I and II. The data shows the impact of relatable and age-appropriate materials on students' engagement. The reinforced structured assessments and competitive learning environments help maintain students' motivation.

However, the new MEXT curriculum and objectives for elementary school ELE mainly emphasize memorizing phrases to practice speaking, which does not help learners gain critical foundational literacy skills to read English words. This phrase-focused approach limits students' ability to learn words by association. Common Core Standards literacy objectives can give Japan's elementary school curriculum a clear direction to build stronger the English foundation, leading to more advanced academic and conversational English.

Despite its promising findings, this study has limitations. Its small sample size and short observation period restrict the generalizability of the results. Future research should involve larger, more diverse groups of students and extend the study duration to provide a

more comprehensive understanding of the effectiveness of integrating Common Core Standards into Japan's ELE framework. Longitudinal studies could also investigate how early literacy skills impact students' academic achievements in higher education or their practical use of English in real-world scenarios. Future research could explore how foundational literacy skills could be effectively integrated into Japan's national curriculum across various regions and schools. Additionally, researchers could examine the impact of diverse teaching materials and methodologies, such as digital resources or immersive learning environments, on students' literacy development. Comparative studies may provide valuable insights by analyzing outcomes between students taught under the phrase-based MEXT curriculum and those exposed to literacy-based Common Core Standards instruction.

This study highlighted three realistic recommendations for the current MEXT system. First, it recommends incorporating foundational literacy objectives from Common Core Standards, such as Print Concepts and Phonological Awareness, into Japan's elementary school curriculum. This alignment would address gaps in the current MEXT framework between elementary and junior high school English. In other words, it will enable students to develop strong literacy skills that prepare them for future academic and practical use of English in junior high school.

Second, revising teaching materials to incorporate more real-world content by using real-life pictures and less cartoonish imagery of people can help students engage and spark their interest. Materials like *Wonderful World* exemplify this approach, offering age-appropriate topics and real-people imagery that resonate with students while learning English.

Finally, promoting good reading habits and ensuring access to diverse books are critical for accelerating language proficiency. It is unrealistic to have enough English books for all students at every school; however, textbooks can list a few stories based on GRL's beginning reading level. Encouraging students to read widely and providing structured

opportunities to practice reading can significantly enhance their vocabulary, reading comprehension, and confidence in English. Adopting Common Core Standards to align Japan's ELE framework will ensure that students acquire both academic skills and practical communicative abilities. Ultimately, such changes will position Japan to compete with countries using English effectively as a second language.

References

Allen-Tamai, M. (2011, March 1). *Shougakkou-deno Manabi-wo-Sodateru Eigo-Kyouiku-no Tokuchou-ni-Tsuite*. (The Features of Learning-centered English Lessons at Public Elementary Schools). Action Research Center for Language Education, Article Review Vol. 5-3-2, 17-26.

Cengage Learning, Inc. (2019). *Wonderful World 1 Second Edition*. Cengage Learning, Inc.

Common Core State Standards Initiative. (2010). *English Language Arts Standards*. https://www.thecorestandards.org/

Common Core State Standards Initiative. (2010, June 2). *English Language Arts Appendix A: Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts & Literacy in History/Social Studies, Science, and Technical Subjects.* https://corestandards.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/09/ELA_Standards1.pdf

Crowe, A. (2022, January 17). *Reading Levels Explained: What They Are & How They Are Assessed*. Prodigy. https://www.prodigygame.com/main-en/blog/reading-levels/#:~:text=Guided%20reading%20levels%20(GRL)%20explained,frequency%20(or%20most%20common)%20words

Fountas, I. & Pinnell, G.S. (2017). *Fountas and Pinnell: Benchmark Assessment System 1*. Heinemann

Frazier, K., Graham, C., Hoskins, B., and Nakata, R. (2022). *Let's Begin 1 Student Book*.
Fifth Edition. Oxford University Press.

Frazier, K., Graham, C., Hoskins, B., and Nakata, R. (2020). *Let's Go 1 Student Book*.
Fifth Edition. Oxford University Press.

Hosoki, Yukiko. *English Language Education in Japan: Transitions and Challenges*. March
2021 (pp.199-215). Kyushu International University Journal of International
Relations.

Kihara, R. (2019, February 16). 「*Eigo-ha Chiisai-koro-ni Hajimeta-hou-ga-ii*」 *To-iu Gokai:*
Yamikumo-ni Hajimete-mo Imi-ga Nai. (The misconception that "it's better to start
learning English at a young age": there's no point in just starting at a young age).
Tokyo Keizai Online. https://toyokeizai.net/articles/-/265982?page=2

Lazel, Inc. (2024). *Learning A-Z Assessments*: *Alphabet Letter Naming*.
https://www.raz-plus.com/assessments/alphabet-letter-naming/

Lazel, Inc. (2024). *Learning A-Z Assessments*: *Benchmark Passages & Running Records.*
https://www.raz-plus.com/assessments/benchmark-passages/

MEXT. (2021). *Gaikokugo-Katsudou/Gaikokugo-hen Shougakkou-Gakushuu-Shidouyouryou*
(Heisei-29-nen Kokuji) Kaisetsu. (Foreign Language Activities/Foreign Language
Edition Explanation of the Elementary School Curriculum Guidelines Announced in
2017). https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20220614-mxt_kyoiku02-100002607_11.pdf

MEXT. (2021). *Gaikokugo-katsudou・gaikokugo-hen Shougakkou-gakushuu-shidou-youryou (Heisei 29 nen Kokuji) Kaisetsu* (The National Curriculum Standards for Grade 3 and Grade 4 in Elementary School, Chapter 4 Foreign Language Activities). https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20201218-kyoiku01-000011246_1.pdf

Otsu, Yukio. 2009. *Kiki-ni-Tatsu Nihon-no Eigo-Kyouiku*. Keio University Press.

Reading Rockets. (2024). *Reading 101: A Guide for Parents – Reading Basics*. https://www.readingrockets.org/literacy-home/reading-101-guide-parents/reading-basics

Spivey, B. L. (n.d.). *Six Early Literacy Skills Predict Reading and Writing Success*. Handy Handout, article #378. https://www.handyhandouts.com/viewHandout.aspx?hh_number=378&nfp_title=Six%2BEarly%2BLiteracy%2BSkills%2BPredict%2BReading%2Band%2BWriting%2BSuccess#:~:text=Early%20literacy%20skills%20include%20Vocabulary,learning%20to%20read%20and%20write

Tokyoshoseki. (2019). *Let's Try! 1*. Tokyoshoseki Co., Ltd.

Watanabe, N. (2020). *Phonology-Based Instruction for Pre-Literacy Japanese Elementary Students*. JALT2020: 46th Annual International Conference on Language Teaching and Learning & Educational Materials Exhibition. 2020, November 16-24. pp. 98-106. https:// doi.org/10.37546/JALTPCP2020-13.

Yamamoto, T. (2009). *Kono Jugyou-wa Nani-wo Mezasu-no-ka? Shougakkou-Eigo-Kyouiku –ni-Okeru Aimaisei-no Monndai.* (What Is the Aim of This Class? The Ambiguity in Elementary-School English Education). Forum of Language Instructors, Volume 3, pp. 49-63.

Yano Research Institute, Ltd. (2024, January 26). *2030-Nen-no Gogaku-Bizinesu-Shijyou-ni Kannsuru Chousa-wo Jisshi.* (Survey on the language business market in 2030). Press Release No. 3369. https://www.yano.co.jp/press-release/show/press_id/3369