

## Multisensory Approach to Teaching Reading and Writing for Young EFL Learners

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### Abstract

Reading and writing are the most challenging of all skills for English as a Foreign Language (EFL) learners. A specific method of teaching these skills to young Japanese EFL students has not yet been established. Hence, this study explores the possibilities of using the Orton Gillingham Approach, which was originally developed by Dr. Samuel Orton and Anna Gillingham for use in children with dyslexia. Although this approach has been primarily used for dyslexia in English-speaking countries, its essential elements can be applied to young EFL learners who struggle with alphabetical letters. There are ten basic elements in this authentic approach; however, the study first focuses on incorporating the multisensory elements into the Japanese EFL context. Educators have become interested in multisensory learning, with many of them realizing the limitations of visual and auditory-focused teaching without the kinetic and tactile process. It has been suggested that the tactile element is new and appealing to some students, especially in recognizing alphabetical letters.

Keywords: EFL students; alphabetical reading

### INTRODUCTION

In Japan, the teaching of English was officially introduced in elementary schools as part of the academic curriculum in 2011. It was termed “Foreign Language Activities” as a subject, and students became familiar with English sounds through speaking and listening. It was only for the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> year students, aged 11–12 years. Students in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> years were not taught English, except in pilot schools and in some schools that made it a priority. In a new curriculum that started in 2020, the teaching of English in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> years became compulsory. The subject, “Foreign Language Activities,” was renamed “English,” and students learned four skills: reading, writing, speaking, and listening. The classes were doubled to two classes weekly. Furthermore, foreign language activities, as a subject, are now being taught in the 3<sup>rd</sup> and 4<sup>th</sup> year as was done in the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> year before 2020. The teaching of English reading and writing to elementary school students has now become a challenge for many teachers and researchers in Japan. Consequently, it is vital to explore appropriate ways of teaching reading and writing to young beginners.

Before 2020, English reading and writing were taught only from the 1<sup>st</sup> year of junior high school. Teachers have struggled with beginners of English studies who had difficulties with reading and writing. It was common to hear that “some students just do not recognize words in alphabetical letters,” or “some students stutter terribly in pronouncing English words,” or “they do not ever remember how to read the alphabets.” The difficulty of learning to read and write in a foreign language notwithstanding, some students just seemed unable to understand English no matter how hard they tried. Furthermore, it was puzzling to the English teachers that such students had no difficulty reading Japanese.

## PROBLEMS FACED IN ELEMENTARY SCHOOL ENGLISH TEACHING

The teaching of English in elementary schools is an existential challenge. By starting early to teach English reading and writing in schools, learning difficulties will manifest and be handled early. This will help to stop the “refugees” in English phenomenon in which students who are unable to learn English reading and writing fall into a vicious educational circle. Despite their best efforts, their inabilities in English learning persist, and they are repeatedly encouraged by their teachers, who push them to study so hard until they are fatigued and resentful of the subject. Most often, they give up trying and stop learning altogether. Consequently, faced with the possibility of a lifetime of inability to read and write in English, they end up in a dilemma—not knowing what to do. Without reading and writing skills, it becomes complex to advance in English at school. In this situation, such students are likened to “refugees” of the English learning process.

Reading and writing in English are challenging for Japanese learners. They often exhibit characteristics that are like those of dyslexia in native English speakers. Although this study is not focused on dyslexia itself, it is important to define dyslexia in the context of EFL learners who have similar symptoms. According to the International Dyslexia Association (2002), developmental dyslexia is defined as a specific learning disability that is neurobiological in origin. The characteristics are difficulties with accurate and fluent word recognition and poor spelling and decoding abilities. These difficulties are typically the result of a deficit in the phonological component of language. In many cases, the deficit is unexpected since other cognitive abilities are intact.

## TYPES OF DYSLEXIA

Wood (2006) defined the different types of dyslexia. The first is phonological dyslexia, also called dysphonetic or auditory dyslexia or syohphnosia, and it is the most common type. It is characterized by difficulty in identifying phonemes (sounds within words) and matching letters to sounds. The second is visual dyslexia, also called dyseidetic or surface dyslexia or dyseidesia. It is characterized by difficulty in pronouncing words that are not used regularly, such as “who” and “any,” despite the preservation of the ability to pronounce words. Therefore, such words have to be learned largely by sight. The third, mixed dyslexia, is a combination of phonological and visual dyslexia, also called dysphoneidetic dyslexia. It is characterized by the tendency to have severe deficits in reading and cognitive functions, such as visual motor integration, visual perception, and working memory. The fourth is dysnomia, also called semantic dyslexia, anomia, or naming-speed deficits. It is characterized by difficulty finding and remembering the right words. Affected individuals would often say “the thingy” or another appropriate or wholly inappropriate word. The fifth is double deficit dyslexia, which refers to both phonological dyslexia and dysnomia occurring together. The last is mild dyslexia or dyslexic symptoms, which may manifest in varying degrees and do not require special education in school. The different types of dyslexia are illustrated in Figure 1.

Wydell (2003) explains the cause of developmental phonological dyslexia. The phonological deficit is particularly evident in English, where the orthographic system is quasi-regular and the learning of complex orthographic-to-phonological mappings is tasking even for a normal reader. As an example, she lists “ea” in bead and neat compared with bread and head. In the English orthographic system, reading and writing by matching sounds and letters can be difficult even for native speakers of English who are familiar with English sounds.

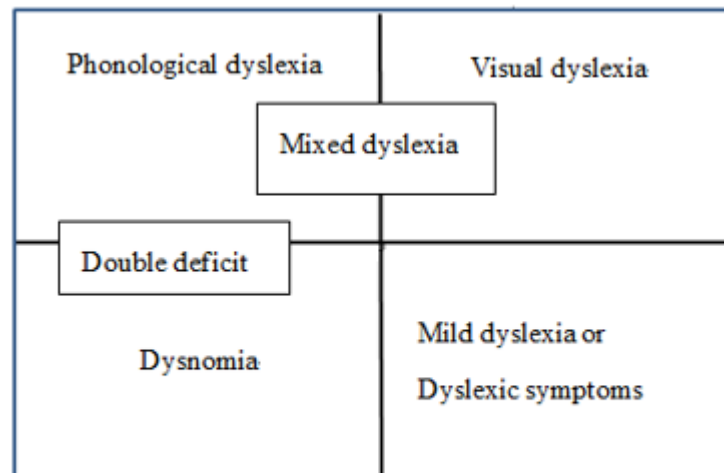


FIGURE 1 Figure Types of dyslexia  
(original model based on the study of Wood, 2006).

### TYPES of DIFFICULTIES for EFL LEARNERS in JAPAN

According to Wydell (2003), a high proportion of English speakers with developmental dyslexia are within the phonological category. Difficulties with letter-sound correspondence are common in EFL learners in Japan. Although English learners with such difficulty in reading and writing are often called “slow learners,” they are not diagnosed with dyslexia. The severity of dyslexia varies among individuals, and many Japanese EFL learners exhibit characteristics that are like “mild dyslexia” or “dyslexic symptoms.” The similarity here notwithstanding, those learners with difficulty in English reading and writing often have no such difficulty with their native language. The difficulty may be caused by the orthographic system unique to English. It could be possible that some Japanese EFL learners have visual dyslexia and dysnomia only in English. In the native language, they may have had slight difficulties as children, which they probably overcame through the many available daily resources and their own mental strategies. Encountering a new language may cause a flare-up of the symptoms, which could manifest as mixed or double deficit dyslexia.

This study does not assume that learning difficulties equate to dyslexia. Generally, Japanese learners could have reading and writing difficulties like dyslexia; however, the focus is not on students’ dyslexia in English. In EFL teaching, it is essential for teachers to know that the underlying cause of a student’s difficulty in English reading and writing may be a dyslexic inclination, not laziness or dullness.

### JAPANESE WRITING SYSTEM

To understand Japanese EFL learners’ difficulty in English reading and writing, it is necessary to know the basic Japanese writing system (Table 1). There are three scripts: *Kana*, *Hiragana* and *Kanji*. *Kana* and *Hiragana* are logographic. *Hiragana* is used for function words, inflection of verbs, adjectives and adverbs. *Kana* is used for foreign loaned words. *Kanji* is used for nouns and the root morphemes of inflected verbs.

Here is an example of how to mix these scripts into one sentence in Japanese. To translate the sentence “we study the possibilities of the use of Orton Gillingham Approach for young Japanese EFL learners” into Japanese, it is written thus: “私たちは日本人の若年EFL学習者のためのオートンギリハムアプローチの活用の可能性を研究する”. In this writing, *Hiragana* is used in the single underlined parts, *Kana* in the double underlined parts, and *Kanji* in the wavy underlined parts according to the meaning and usage. *Hiragana* and *Kana* are logographic, therefore, in Japanese, matching the print of a *kana* character to its own sound is an accustomed practice.

Table 1 Japanese Writing System

	Logographic		Morphnographic
	Kana	Hiragana	Kanji (Chinese Character)
Function words↔		ところが	
Inflections of verbs↔		歩く	
Adjectives↔		かわいい	
Adverbs ↔		ゆっくりと	
Nouns ↔			英語
The root morphemes of inflected verbs ↔			話す
The root morphemes of inflected adjectives			美しい
The root morphemes of inflected adverbs			上手に
Foreign loan words	インターネット		

## LETTER TYPES

Alphabetical letters consist of phonograms and ideograms. Japanese *Kana* and *Hiragana* are phonograms from a syllabary, while alphabets are segments of phonograms (Wydell, 2003). In *Kana* and *Hiragana*, individual characters and their sounds are mutually related. Consequently, Japanese EFL learners are often confused with reading English words because phonemes depend on the alphabet's location within the word. For example, an alphabetical letter "a" can be pronounced [æ] in "cat," but [ei] in "take". One letter does not correspond with one sound.

## SUMMARY of DIFFICULTIES for JAPANES EFL LEARNERS

From the foregoing, the difficulties in English reading and writing for Japanese EFL learners are appreciable. First, they have phonological challenges from limited phonological exposure to English sounds and the difference in letter-sound correspondence between the English and Japanese writing systems (Wydell & Butterworth, 1999). Second, they have visual input challenges from limited visual exposure to alphabetical words in everyday life and the limitation of "sight reading," which is habitually used in Chinese characters. Third, they have semantic challenges from the unstable memory of the meaning, sounds, and spellings of English words.

## SOLUTIONS

It is crucial to provide solutions and appropriate support to EFL learners with difficulties. To overcome these difficulties, the first step is to understand the students' individual difficulties and learning styles and then adjust the teaching methods to each learning style. One of the potential solutions is the Orton Gillingham Approach (OG approach). This approach can be applied to Japanese learners of English who,

though not diagnosed with dyslexia, exhibit similar symptoms. Since this approach is carefully designed for young native English speakers with learning difficulties and adaptable to different individual learning styles, it is presumed that the same approach would be helpful and suitable for young Japanese EFL learners.

### **LEARNING STYLES**

Dyslexic inclinations can be supported through individual learning styles. Cassidy (2004) states that learning style is determined by an individual's response to a given learning opportunity. Many researchers have adopted different frameworks to explain learning style. The research by Gardner (1993) proposes that humans have seven different types of intelligences that reflect different ways of interacting with the world. They are linguistic, visual-spatial, logical-mathematical, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal and intrapersonal.

The British Dyslexia Association (2012) simplifies learning styles by categorizing learners into three: visual, auditory, and kinesthetic, including tactile, by responses from 12 items, such as concentration, way of thinking, conversation, etc. The premise of our study is based on this simple framework.

### **OG APPROACH**

The OG approach emphasizes the important elements for understanding fundamental values and views of using different sensory. There are some elements of the OG approach that Japanese EFL teachers have overlooked. Although designed for use in dyslexia, the OG approach has now also been adopted in classroom teaching. The lesson plans should target the students' varying needs and accommodate the different learning styles by incorporating multisensory strategies in the classroom. There are seven essential elements of the OG approach (MacLeod-Vidal & Smith, 2021); however, only two of them are most applicable to young Japanese learners of English.

Phonics is a popular method of learning English alphabets but a majority of teachers depend on analytic phonics without being familiar with the other types (Arao & Kimura, 2019). In teaching phonics, the OG approach incorporates both analytic and synthetic methods. In analytic phonics, whole words are divided into its component parts and analyzed, for example, bus, bat, bed, to learn the connection between letters and sounds. (Ikeda & Nakamura, 2020). This process requires learners to be relatively familiar with words and their sounds in advance, and it could be puzzling for EFL beginners with negligible exposure to English words in daily life. Conversely, in synthetic phonics, the connection between letters and their sounds is learned first, and then the connection is synthesized into learning to read and write. (Ikeda & Nakamura, 2020). Consequently, the learners become able to pronounce unknown words regardless of their experiences with English.

### **LANGUAGE TRIANGLE**

The OG approach is multisensory and follows the visual, auditory, and kinesthetic learning styles in the language triangle (Bishop et al., 2018). The OG approach suggests specific implementable ideas for young learners in English reading and writing. These practical ideas could be applicable to Japanese EFL learners with difficulties like dyslexia.

According to the OG approach language triangle, learners need a strengthening and mutual association of their visual, auditory and kinesthetic stimuli. There are three levels of association. The first, also known as Association 1, combines the use of all three senses (visual, auditory, kinesthetic-tactile) by associating a symbol with the name of a letter. This has been done by most young EFL learners in Japan by singing alphabetic songs and chants. It is common, friendly for learners, and incorporates visual and auditory stimulation. Associating symbols with the sound of letters occurs by analytic phonics. Associating symbols with the feel of letters occurs when the letters are spoken and written. Association 2 focuses on auditory

training for oral spelling. The teacher makes the sound of a letter, and the student says its name. This is auditory to auditory association. Finally, Association 3 focuses on written spelling in which learners associate a symbol with the kinesthetic stimulation of writing it and then associate the sound of the letter with the feel of writing it.

### **PROPOSED STRATEGIES**

Teachers have generally disregarded the kinesthetic aspects in educational practice. Therefore, it is worth strengthening the connection between the visual and the kinesthetic and between the auditory and the kinesthetic by incorporating them into the methods of teaching. (Eide & Eide, 2012). It is important to promote the roles that kinesthetic and tactile stimuli play in reading and writing. Kinesthetic stimulation involves large muscle movement while an alphabet is printed; however, in the process of learning, if students move their bodies in alphabetical shapes, it is not only visual but also a kinesthetic experience. Tactile stimulation is a sensation in the mouth and on the fingertips. When books have three-dimensional alphabets instead of prints, students can have the tactile experience of the shapes of alphabets with their fingertips. Reading a book in conventional teaching has relied much on visual stimulation.

Writing alphabets in pencil gives a kinesthetic and tactile experience, and using alphabetical stamps or blocks also gives learners different stimuli. Learners should be encouraged to pay attention to the sensation in their fingers and hands when using writing tools instead of just admiring their writing.

One method frequently used in teaching phonics is the sand tray. As students write in the sand with their fingers, they feel the sand moving to form the letter, which is a tactile stimulus. The students can see the letter written in the sand, which is a visual stimulus. They use large movements to write in the sand, which is kinesthetic stimulation. They also say the name of the letter and the sound it makes as they write, which is an auditory stimulus.

In the OG approach, every phonogram is a representation of a sound and it is presented through an association (visual, auditory, and kinesthetic), and each of these associations is linked and presented simultaneously. The individual pathway makes an imprint on the brain and thus strengthens the learning process

### **DISCUSSION**

In Japan, English teachers often rely on visual and auditory stimuli in the classroom, which is unsuitable for some students. According to the OG approach, it is essential to use various learning pathways instead of focusing only on one. In 2019, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) adopted the School with Global and Innovation Gateway for All (GIGA school), a policy which encouraged all the schools to develop an ICT environment with a digital device for each student (MEXT, 2019). Many schoolteachers were keen to learn how to use ICT, which emphasizes visual and auditory stimuli. Although ICT provides students with a lot of information, it does not offer kinesthetic and tactile experiences such as handwriting. We need to develop alternatives that are focused on the learning triangle to compensate for this lack.

### **CONCLUSION**

The current study discusses the challenges of reading and writing that young Japanese EFL beginners encounter, including the causes and solutions. Methods of reading and writing for English-speaking children with dyslexia have been established and practiced in English-speaking countries. Although the Japanese EFL learning context is clearly different from that of the native English speaker, there are some common elements that could benefit Japanese EFL students with English reading and writing difficulties.

The learning triangle concept with the three sensory elements of the OG approach gives insights into different teaching styles. The conventional teaching practice, especially in the early stages of reading and

writing English, is rooted in relating auditory and visual stimuli to reading aloud and orthography. Kinesthetic stimulation is hardly ever considered in teaching. Presently, students are being encouraged to work on ICT devices that continually rely on visual input. It may now be necessary to enhance kinesthetic stimulus in teaching. Future research should explore ways of kinesthetic stimulation of alphabetical reading and writing through digital devices.

Although this study discusses the possibilities for teaching through different sensory stimuli within the concept of the OG approach, it is limited by not suggesting concrete ways of teaching for young Japanese EFL learners.

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