

The Development of the CEFR-J: Where We Are, Where We Are Going

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Abstract

We do not have any agreed-upon attainment targets in English language teaching in Japan, and do not have any consensus on a teaching methodology to adopt to attain such targets. Therefore, we have an urgent need for a common language framework in order to discuss foreign language learning, teaching, and assessment.

Some of my surveys show that it is possible to use the CEFR descriptors for English language teaching in Japan, but that we need some modifications. The fact that the population of Japanese EFL learners skews towards the lower levels suggests the need for the branching of the CEFR A1-B2 levels. The development process of the CEFR-J, a modified version of the original CEFR for English language teaching in Japan, and the accompanying validation studies were reported.

As we can see from English Profile Programme and *A Core Inventory for General English*, there is a gap between teaching and learning. It is absolutely essential for us to have a clear image of the relationship between the two in order to fully implement the CEFR-J for English language education in Japan. It is emphasized that we need to develop supplementary materials in order to fully implement this new framework in Japan.

Keywords: CEFR, CEFR-J, can-do descriptors, EFL, adaptation

1. The History of TUFS

Despite the bright new façade of the present campus, Tokyo University of Foreign Studies (TUFS) has quite a long history for a Japanese university. Its origins can be traced back to Bansho Shirabesho (Institute for Research of Foreign Documents), established by the Edo shogunate in 1856. The history of studies of foreign countries in Japan can be said to have begun with that government-run school. Although the subsequent history of TUFS is quite complicated, it is generally agreed that foreign language studies commenced in 1876, and that TUFS itself was founded in 1897. TUFS offers 26 languages to undergraduate students as their major, and it has been producing thousands of language experts since its foundation. Based on its history of more than 100 years, TUFS claims to be *the* centre of research in and education of foreign languages in Japan.

According to the grand design for the university, our mission is to send graduates out into the world with “advanced language proficiency.” However, as far as I know, there are no agreed-upon attainment targets in English language teaching in TUFS, and there is no consensus on a teaching methodology to adopt in order to attain such targets. Although this might sound a little surprising, unfortunately this kind of situation seems to be prevalent in

English language teaching in Japan. Therefore, we have an urgent need for a common language framework in order to discuss foreign language learning, teaching, and assessment. Well-known language frameworks include ACTFL (American Council on Teaching Foreign Languages) Proficiency Guidelines and Canadian Language Benchmarks. As for English language education in secondary schools, we have the “Course of Study,” or national curriculum, but it only includes teaching objectives and a list of things to teach. On the whole, these frameworks, including the Course of Study in Japan, are based on intuition and experience. On the other hand, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is a product of empirical research combined with a long history of work by language teaching specialists.

The CEFR “provides a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks, etc. across Europe. It describes in a comprehensive way what language learners have to learn to do in order to use a language for communication and what knowledge and skills they have to develop so as to be able to act effectively. The description also covers the cultural context in which language is set. The Framework also defines levels of proficiency which allow learners’ progress to be measured at each stage of learning and on a life-long basis” (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 1). The CEFR “is now accepted as *the* international standard for language teaching and learning” (North, Ortega, & Sheehan, 2010, p. 6), and its influence is spreading across and beyond Europe. It should be noted, however, that the CEFR is a language-independent framework, in which an action-oriented approach is adopted.

The CEFR divided linguistic skills into listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, and writing. Language ability is described based on the six common reference levels. Although the CEFR is a common framework for languages in Europe, we may be able to use this framework for English language teaching in Japan.

2. Background to the CEFR-J

2-1. Applicability of the CEFR to Japanese Learners of English

I carried out a couple of surveys in order to investigate the applicability of the CEFR to Japanese learners of English. The instrument used was the CEFR can-do questionnaire extracted from DIALANG self-assessment statements (SAS) (Council of Europe, 2001, pp. 231-234), and it was translated into Japanese. 360 Japanese university students participated in this survey. I treated the answer to each questionnaire item as a response to a test item. The answers were can-do or can’t-do dichotomous data, and the item difficulties were calculated by Xcalibre.

The items for each skill were ordered along the -3 to +3 scale, as shown in Figures 1-3. As you can see from these figures, most of the items were arranged in the order of the CEFR levels. Therefore, it can be assumed that the order of difficulty of the CEFR descriptors, which were created in Europe, are more or less the same for Japanese EFL learners.

Figure 1 Order of Difficulty of CEFR Reading Descriptors

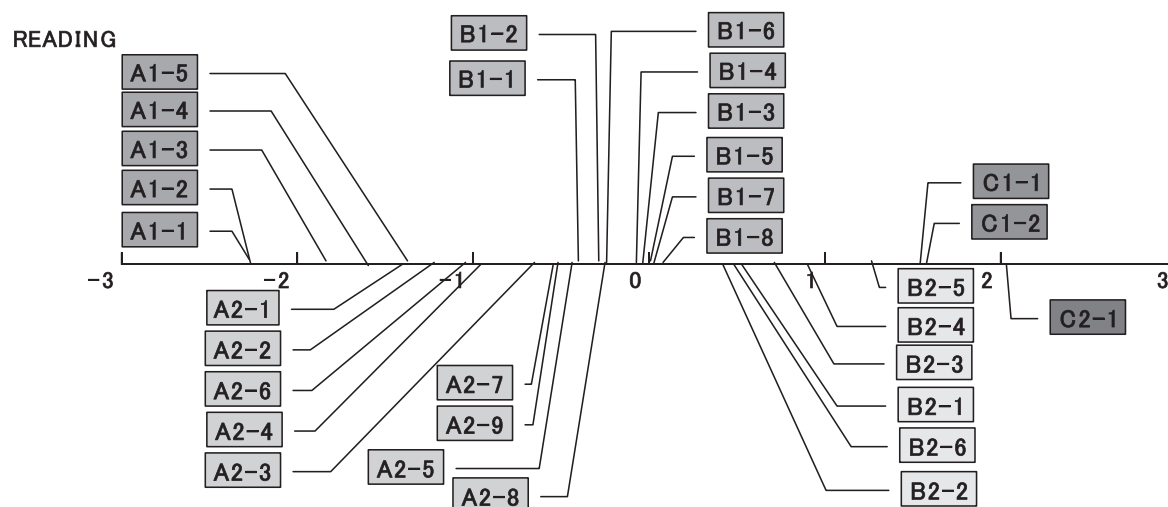


Figure 2 Order of Difficulty of CEFR Listening Descriptors

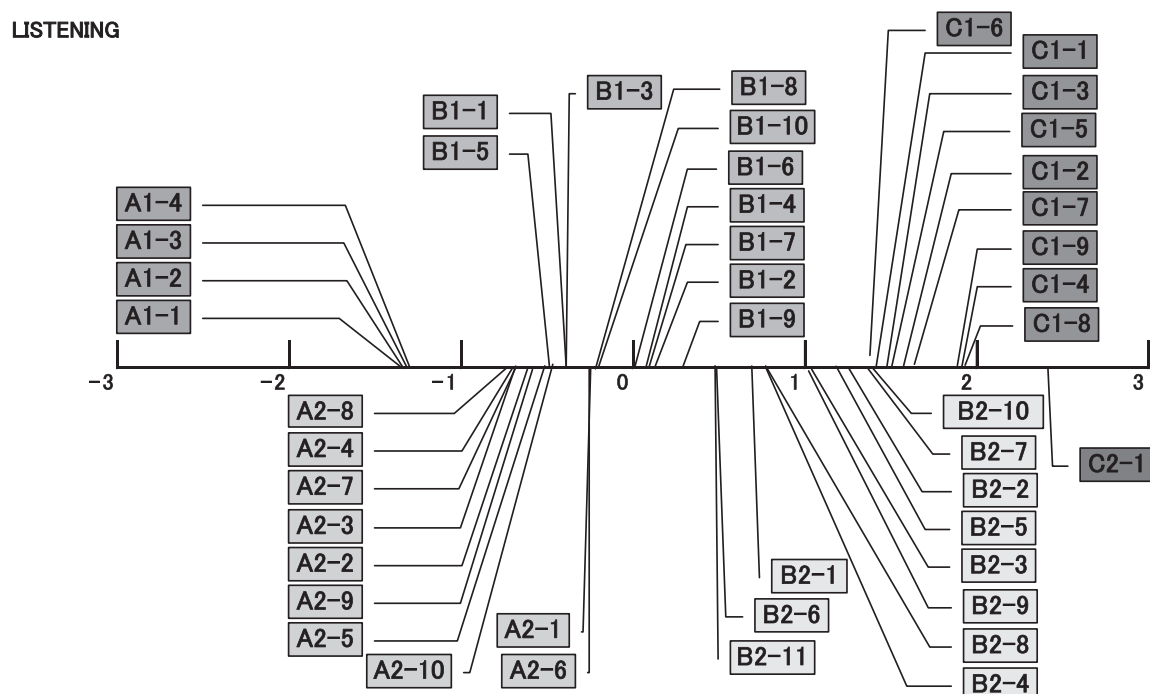
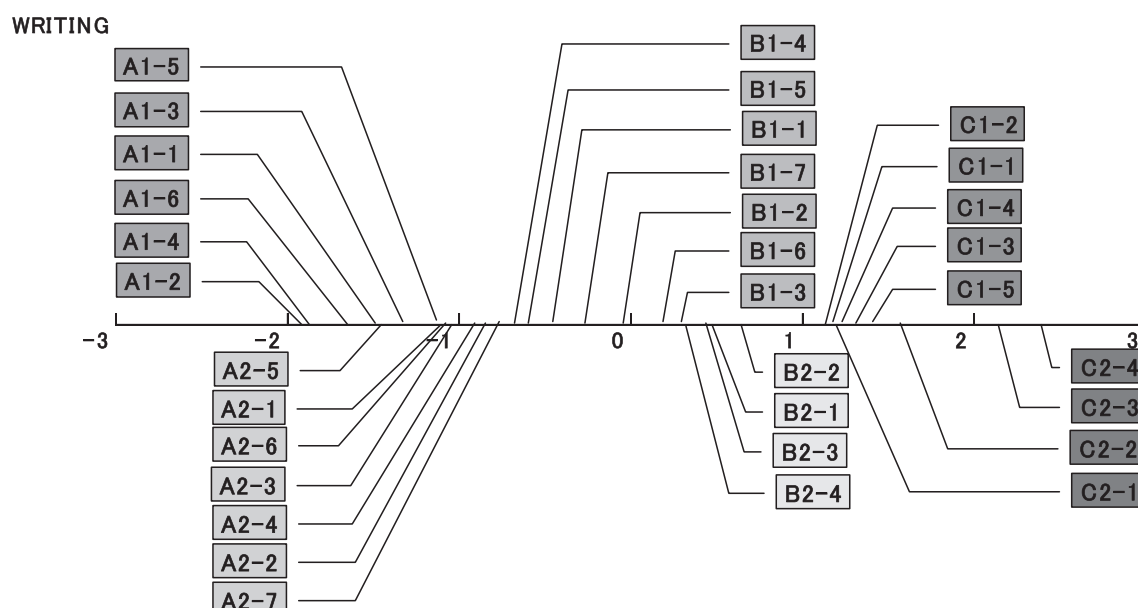


Figure 3 Order of Difficulty of CEFR Writing Descriptors



However, it is worth noting that there were some “outliers” that did not belong to the cluster of the descriptors in the corresponding CEFR level. One of the interesting Reading outliers was A1-5: “I can understand short, simple messages, e.g. on postcards.” This A1 item turned out to be more difficult than the A2-1 descriptor: “I can understand short, simple texts containing the most common words, including some shared international words.” This might be because Japanese postcards tend to contain much more information than their European counterparts, and therefore the Japanese EFL learners considered it to be more difficult than it was originally assumed in the CEFR. Another example was Reading A2-8 “I can understand simple instructions on equipment encountered in everyday life - such as a public telephone.” This was originally an A2 item, but it turned out to be at B1. The participants might have been unfamiliar with “instructions on equipment” written in English, and considered it to be more difficult. In summary, the CEFR can-do descriptors were ordered more or less the same with Japanese learners. However, the tasks with which they had little experience in real life or in the classroom were judged to be more difficult than the levels they were originally assigned to, whereas the tasks they had experienced were judged to be easier.

This was followed up by the next research project, in which I investigated if we might be able to adjust the difficulties of the outlier can-do descriptors by providing examples. The methodology adopted for this research was basically the same as for the previous study, except for the fact that the outlier items were administered with examples. The responses were based on a Likert-scale, and item difficulties were calculated using Facets. The participants were 727 Japanese senior high school and university students. Although the written scripts for the listening descriptors made the items more difficult, many of the outlier CEFR can-do descriptors were successfully adjusted with the help of the examples. Hence the

need for real examples for unfamiliar can-do questionnaire items. From these surveys, we can conclude that it is possible to use the CEFR descriptors for English Language Teaching in Japan, but that we need some modifications.

2-2. Distribution of Japanese EFL Learners' CEFR Levels

At the next stage, I considered the appropriateness of the branching of the CEFR levels for Japanese EFL learners. In so doing, I first attempted to identify CEFR levels for Japanese EFL learners. However, it is extremely difficult to get “a representative sample” of an entire nation, based on exam results, and to align them to the CEFR levels. Although a number of documents have been published, and an increasing number of English proficiency tests claim to be aligned to the CEFR levels, not all the English proficiency tests administered in Japan meet the standard.

Eventually, however, I obtained the results of two interesting surveys, which seemed to be both appropriate and relevant. The English proficiency level of Japanese secondary school students was investigated in the first survey. This data is unique in that all the students of a particular prefecture in Japan took an English proficiency test aligned to the CEFR levels (refer to the aligning table reported in <http://www.eiken.or.jp/news/kyoukai/081031r01.html>). According to this survey, at the end of three years of learning English, 57% of the students had not reached A1, 35% were at A1, and 7% were at A2. At the end of five years, 50% had not reached A1, 33% were at A1, 13% at A2, and 4% above A2.

Figure 4 Distribution of Japanese Lower Secondary School Students According to CEFR Levels

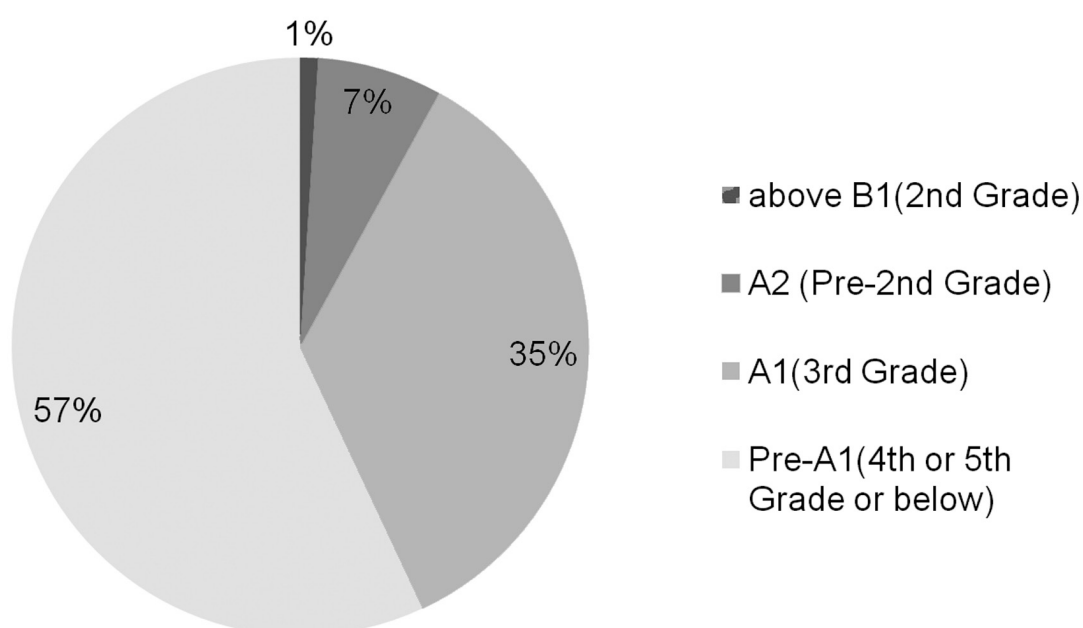
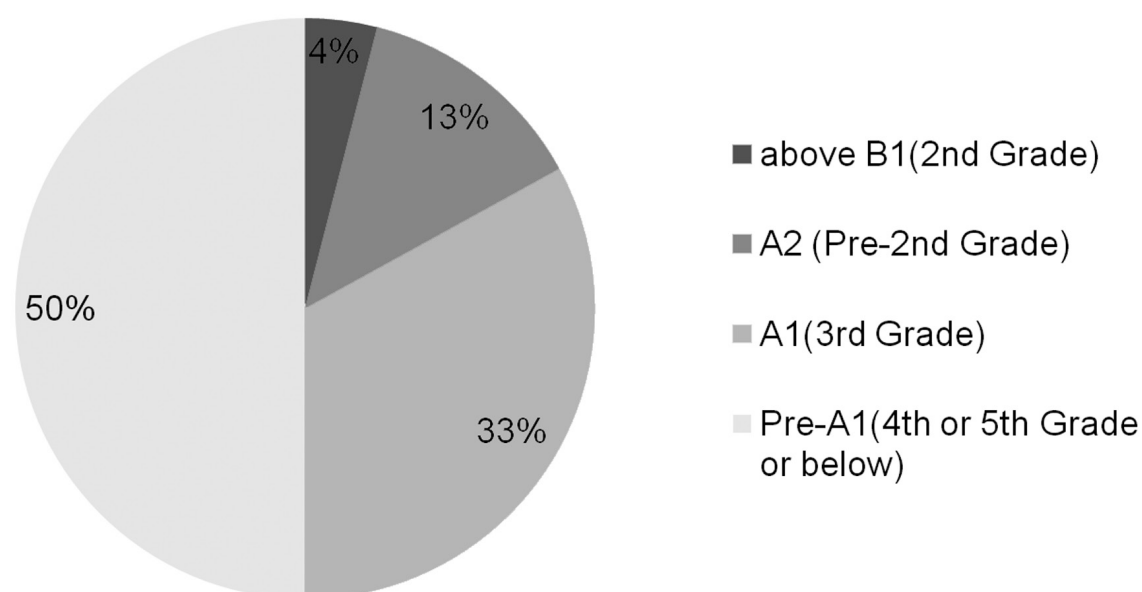


Figure 5 Distribution of Japanese Upper Secondary School Students According to CEFR Levels



In the other survey, the English proficiency levels of all the employees of an electronics manufacturer in Japan were investigated. This manufacturer is listed in the First Section of the Tokyo Stock Exchange and has 7,171 employees. The following table is the aligning table for the Global Test of English Communication and CEFR levels.

Table 1
Aligning Table for the Global Test of English Communication and CEFR Levels

CEFR		Minimum GTEC Score				
		Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking	Total
Proficient	C2	240	220	220	220	900
User	C1	200	200	200	200	800
Independent	B2	180	150	160	160	650
User	B1	140	130	130	140	540
Basic User	A2	100	90	90	100	380
	A1	Below the each above				

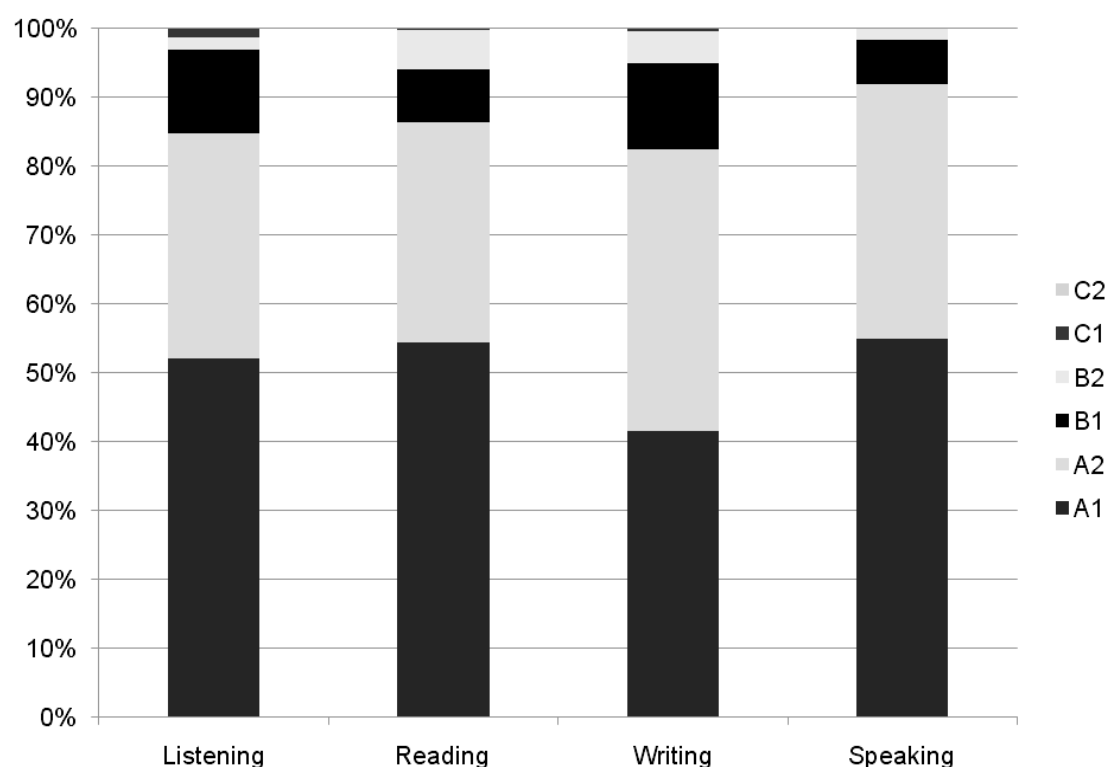
The CEFR level distribution of the employees is as follows.

Table 2

Distribution of the Employees of an Electronics Manufacturer in Japan According to CEFR Levels

CEFR	Listening	Reading	Writing	Speaking
C2	0.11%	0.08%	0.11%	0.01%
C1	1.13%	0.20%	0.32%	0.01%
B2	1.94%	5.69%	4.66%	1.70%
B1	12.06%	7.67%	12.49%	6.39%
A2	32.66%	31.98%	40.97%	37.04%
A1	52.11%	54.39%	41.44%	54.85%

Figure 6 Distribution of the Employees of an Electronics Manufacturer in Japan According to CEFR Levels



As you can see from the above table and figure, more than 80% of the employees are at A levels, whereas very few people are at C levels.

According to the above surveys, more than 80% of Japanese EFL learners are Non/Basic Users (A1 and A2), less than 20% Independent Users (B1 and B2), and Proficient Users (C1 and C2) are almost nil. The EFL learner population in Japan can be assumed to be heavily skewed towards lower levels. The Council of Europe (2001, p. 7) states that “the construction

of a comprehensive, transparent and coherent framework for language learning and teaching does not imply the imposition of one single uniform system. On the contrary, the framework should be open and flexible, so that it can be applied, with such adaptations as prove necessary, to particular situations.” Thus the need to adapt the CEFR to English Language Teaching in Japan is clear.

3. Development of the CEFR-J

The development of the CEFR-J was initiated by the Koike Grant-in-Aid for a Scientific Research Group, and it was subsequently taken over by the Tono Group. The results of the above surveys suggest that there is a need to subdivide the lower CEFR levels and also to add a lower stage before A1. As for the validity of the introduction of so-called pre-A1, different ideas have been voiced. However, the Council of Europe (2001, p. 31) clearly states: “Level A1 (Breakthrough) is probably the lowest ‘level’ of generative language proficiency which can be identified. Before this stage is reached, however, there may be a range of specific tasks which learners can perform effectively using a very restricted range of language and which are relevant to the needs of the learners concerned. ... In certain contexts, for example with young learners, it may be appropriate to elaborate such a ‘milestone’.” We decided to include pre-A1, because Japanese learners are not sufficiently familiar with the English alphabet, and also because a great number of Japanese learners do not reach A1, as defined by some test alignment tables.

The fact that the population of Japanese EFL learners skews towards the lower levels suggests the need for the branching of the A1-B2 levels. Regarding this issue, the Council of Europe (2001, p. 32) states: “The advantage of a branching approach is that a common set of levels and/or descriptors can be ‘cut’ into practical local levels at different points by different users to suit local needs and yet still relate back to a common system. The numbering allows further subdivisions to be made without losing the reference to the main objective being referred to.”

The established principles for the development of the CEFR-J are as follows:

1. Add Pre-A1
2. Divide A1 into three levels: A1.1, A1.2, A1.3
3. Divide A2 into two levels: A2.1, A2.2
4. Divide B1 into two levels: B1.1, B1.2
5. Divide B2 into two levels: B2.1, B2.2
6. No change for C1 and C2
7. Adapt can-do descriptors to the Japanese context

We collected descriptors available in Japan such as GTEC for STUDENTS Can-do Statements, the STEP EIKEN Can-do List, and descriptors developed by SELHi (Super English Language High Schools). We also collected the descriptors found in the CEFR and

the European Language Portfolio (ELP), and compiled them in an Excel file, so that we can search for relevant descriptors electronically.

The descriptors in the initial version of the CEFR-J included a number of inconsistencies in their wording. We consulted Dr. Tony Green, and he advised us to dissect the descriptors. Each descriptor was broken down into three categories: The descriptors for productive skills, i.e. Spoken Interaction, Spoken Production, and Writing, were dissected into (1) performance, (2) criteria, and (3) condition (see Table 3), whereas those for receptive skills, i.e. Listening and Reading, were dissected into (1) task, (2) text, and (3) condition (see Table 4).

Table 3

Example of Dissected CEFR-J Spoken Interaction Can-do Descriptor

A1.3 Spoken Interaction	Performance	Criteria (quality)	Condition
I can ask and answer simple questions about very familiar topics (e.g. hobbies, sports, club activities), provided that people speak slowly and clearly with some repetition and rephrasing.	I can ask and answer ... questions about ... topics (e.g. hobbies, sports, club activities)	simple very familiar	provided that people speak slowly and clearly with some repetition and rephrasing.

Table 4

Example of Dissected CEFR-J Listening Can-do Descriptor

B2.1 Listening	Task	Text	Condition
I can follow extended speech and complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar.	I can follow	extended speech and complex lines of argument	provided the topic is reasonably familiar.

We checked the consistencies vertically and horizontally, and changed the wording where necessary. Then, we reassembled the dissected can-do descriptors.

We are now in the validation phase. The validation started with the analysis of responses from Japanese teachers and learners. We asked Japanese teachers to put the can-do descriptors in order of difficulty, and asked for their comments on the descriptors. As for learners, we are collecting their self-assessment data through Internet can-do questionnaires, and also carrying out performance tests based on the descriptors for listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, and writing in order to analyse the relationship between their self-assessment and their actual performance.

The research into the validation of self-assessment required us to develop corresponding tasks to selective can-do descriptors, the by-product of which will hopefully be the benchmark performance and texts for the CEFR-J. For listening and reading tasks, we needed to identify appropriate spoken and written texts and tasks for each level. For spoken interaction, spoken production, and writing, we needed to identify appropriate tasks and criteria for each level. However, in these processes, we discovered that each member has different ideas about what the tasks and texts should consist of.

As we finalized the beta version of the CEFR-J, we received feedback from CEFR specialists in the UK, including Dr Tony Green. He gave us very detailed comments on the wording of the descriptors, and we revised them accordingly. He posed us a question: “Are we aiming to make a Japanese version of the self-assessment grid as in the CEFR or a Japanese version of the ELP?” Dr Neil Jones (personal communication, September 21, 2010), another CEFR specialist in the UK, reviewing the entire CEFR-J, stated that the present set of descriptors was “primarily directed at the teacher,” and therefore we would need another set of descriptors for younger learners. According to Dr Jones, it is essential, at first, “to orient the teachers in the notion of proficiency levels and give them a starting point for organizing their teaching and interpreting learners’ progress,” and then “to get the kids to understand the goals of language learning in these action-oriented terms, and develop their capacity to reflect on their current level and to direct their efforts to move forward.” He echoed Dr Green in posing a question about what the purpose of the development of the CEFR-J was.

We have developed a Japanese version of the self-assessment grid as in the CEFR, and we will amend this as necessary. After we finish the validation of the descriptors in the grid, we would like to develop a Japanese version of the ELP, based on the above descriptors, and develop teaching materials, assessment tools, etc. At the same time, we need to provide detailed descriptions of language-specific linguistic features related to the CEFR levels, since we use this non-language specific framework for English.

As for the use of the CEFR for English language teaching, there are two intriguing developments in Europe. One is the publication of *A Core Inventory for General English (CIGE)* (North et al., 2010), and the other is the English Profile Programme (EPP). North et al. (2010: 8) stated the following in *CIGE*: “The intention of this project is to make the CEFR accessible to teachers and adult learners of General English. It is an attempt to answer the question put by many teachers over the years of what to teach at each CEFR level. It maps the communality of interpretation of the CEFR for English in terms of curriculum content for 16+. ... the aim is not to tell teachers what to teach or to prescribe a particular teaching methodology.” In Appendix D, there is a mapping of language contents according to the CEFR levels. As you can see from North et al. (2010), *CIGE* can be assumed to be a fairly exhaustive reflection of English language *teaching* all over the world.

On the other hand, the aim of the EPP “is to create a ‘profile’ or set of Reference Level Descriptions for English linked to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). These will provide detailed information about the language that learners

can be expected to demonstrate at each level, offering a clear benchmark for progress that will inform curricula development as well as the development of courses and test material to support learners, teachers, and other professionals involved in the teaching of English as a foreign language” (retrieved from <http://www.englishprofile.org/>). The main feature of the EPP is that it is based on actual English learner data.

If you compare findings obtained from the EPP and *CIGE*, you will find some interesting differences between them. For example, although “question forms” are *taught* at A1 and A2 levels, according to *CIGE*, the EPP shows that these forms are *acquired* at B1, a later stage than many practitioners might expect. Definite and indefinite articles are interesting examples: they are *introduced* at A1, according to *CIGE*, whereas the evidence from the EPP suggests that the *acquisition* of these grammatical features comes at a much later stage, i.e. B1-C2, to speakers of languages without definite and indefinite articles. Speakers of languages without definite and indefinite articles have significantly higher rates of missing determiner errors in L2 English across B1-C2 than speakers of languages with articles (Hawkins & Buttery, 2010).

4. Conclusion

Having looked at the recent research into the use of the CEFR for English language teaching, the first question I raised in the paper needs to be revisited. That is, what is the CEFR? *CIGE* is a reflection of English language *teaching*, while the EPP presents the results of English language *learning*. As you can see, there is a gap between teaching and learning. This gap may be obvious to second language acquisition researchers, but not so obvious to English language teachers in general. It is absolutely essential for us to have a clear image of the relationship between the two in order to fully implement the CEFR-J for English language education in Japan. We propose to conduct surveys both of English teaching in Japan and of the actual attainments of Japanese English learners within the framework of the CEFR-J.

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The bio-data

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