The CEFR-J: Adapting the CEFR
for English Language Teaching in Japan

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The CEFR-J is a new framework for English Language Teaching in Japan, adapted from the CEFR. This short paper will report on the development of the CEFR-J, focusing on the characteristics of 'can do' descriptors, how our original 'can do' descriptors were created and validated through a series of empirical studies. Three additional resources accompanying the CEFR-J are also described; the CEFR-J Wordlist, the CEFR ELP Descriptor Database, and the CEFR-J Inventory of English. We hope that the CEFR-J will help promote more function-based, action-oriented approaches in ELT in our country.

CEFR-J は日本の英語教育において CEFR を適用した新しい枠組みである。この小論では CEFR-J の開発の経緯を、can do ディスクリプタの特徴、作成方法、妥当性検証の研究などに触れながら紹介する。さらに 3 種の活用資料（CEFR-J 語彙表、CEFR ELP ディスクリプタ・データベース、CEFR-J Inventory of English）の解説も行う。CEFR-J が我が国の英語教育をより機能ベース、行動志向のアプローチに変えていくきっかけとなることを期待している。

1. Introduction

Various attempts have been made to reform the system of English language teaching in Japan and yet it is an undeniable fact that Japanese EFL learners' proficiency levels are extremely low among major developed countries in the world. One of the deficiencies of the current system is that they do not set clear attainment goals for learners as real language users. Whilst goals such as passing entrance examinations to college are realistic, they do not seem to provide motivations to continue to learn a foreign language for true communicative purposes and from the perspective of life-long education.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe 2001) has been gaining much attention these days not only in Europe but also in the rest of the world, as a generic framework of language proficiency for teaching, learning and assessment. The CEFR provides comprehensive views of what people can do with language, and seems to be very useful in setting truly communicative, functional goals for learners. Throughout various surveys in and out of Japan in the past eight years, we are convinced that the adaptation of the CEFR will be a major step ahead toward more drastic reforms in English education in our country.

Recently, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) published a report on the five proposals and specific measures for developing proficiency in English for international communication[1], in which it is recommended that students' language skills should be assessed using can-do lists, which shows the influence of the CEFR. Also the Nihon Hoso Kyokai (NHK) recently adapted the CEFR for the new framework for their foreign language programs on TV and radio. Time is ripe now for discussing the implementation of the CEFR into the Japanese contexts, by working on specific languages such as English.

2. The process of developing the CEFR-J

2.1. Preliminary stage

Since the CEFR itself is a generic, language-independent framework, various attempts have been made to adapt the framework for individual languages[2]. Our newly developed framework called the CEFR-J is one of such attempts. The project dated back to 2004, when Professor Ikuo Koike at Meikai University launched a government-funded (Japan Society for the Promotion of Science [JSPS] grant-in-aid for scientific research or *Kaken*) project of compiling a comprehensive proficiency guideline, which was intended to cover English language education from primary to tertiary as well as adult education. We conducted a broad range of surveys on the goals of English language learning, including all levels of schools as well as companies in Japan. The surveys included 100 'Super English Language High Schools' (SELHi), 150 secondary schools integrating junior and senior high schools, and 354 primary schools. We also conducted surveys abroad, not only in major European countries, but also in neighbor countries and regions, i.e. China, Korea, and Taiwan. In the second half of the four-year project (2006-2007), after a large-scale questionnaire survey on 7,354 business persons, we decided to focus on the possibility of adapting the CEFR in Japanese contexts. The final report (2008) included a tentative version of the list of our original 'can do' descriptors along with more detailed proficiency levels.

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[1] http://www.mext.go.jp/english/elsec/1319701.htm
[2] For details, see the description of Reference Level Descriptions at the CEFR website (http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/DNR_EN.asp).

2.2. The launch of the CEFR-J project

In April, 2008, we received another JSPS grant-in-aid for scientific research (Kiban A). The main purpose of the project was to compile a CEFR-based new framework designed specifically for English language teaching in Japan, which is called the 'CEFR-J.' In order to implement the CEFR into Japanese contexts, it was assumed that further breakdown would be needed for lower proficiency levels. In Negishi, et al. (forthcoming), the surveys on Japanese ordinary people's English proficiency reveal that more than 80% of Japanese EFL learners are Non/Basic Users (A1 or A2), with less than 20% in B levels (Independent Users) and almost nil in C levels (Proficient Users). Since the Council of Europe (2001) also explicitly states the possibility of further branching of the CEFR levels whenever necessary, we have decided to subdivide A and B levels and also add Pre-A1 level to the entire framework.

The CEFR-J has the following levels:
[Pre-A1] | $_{A1}$[A1.1/ A1.2/ A1.3] $_{A2}$[A2.1/ A2.2] | $_{B1}$[B1.1/ B1.2] $_{B2}$[B2.1/ B2.2] | [C1] [C2]

The numbering closely follows the original CEFR in such a way that it "allows further subdivisions to be made without losing the reference to the main objective being referred to." (Council of Europe 2001:32)

2.3. The compilation and improvement of the alpha version

First, a project member worked in team to develop 'can do' descriptors for these subdivided levels in order to launch the alpha version of the CEFR-J. Descriptors were created with reference to 'can do' lists already available for English proficiency tests such as STEP (Eiken) as well as the European Language Portfolio (ELP) in various European countries. The alpha version was further refined by consulting with a CEFR researcher such as Tony Green at University of Bedforshire, who kindly offered us an opportunity to familiarise ourselves to the CEFR descriptors and the process of how to create and validate descriptors.

Tony Green advised us to break down descriptors into subcomponents to examine their contents and qualities. For instance, 'can do' descriptors for productive skills can be broken down into (1) *performance*, (2) *criteria*, and (3) *condition*, as in Table 1:

Table 1. An example of a broken- down CEFR- J spoken interaction 'Can do' descriptor

A1.3 Spoken Interaction 'Can do' descriptor	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.

In the case of receptive skills, the term 'performance' could be simply 'task' and 'performance criteria' will be replaced by the quality of 'text' itself. Therefore, the 'can do' statement for listening (B2.1), for example, can be broken down into the following subcomponents, as is shown in Table 2.

Table 2. An example of a broken- down CEFR- J listening 'Can do' descriptor

B2.1 Listening 'Can do' descriptor	Performance	Criteria (Quality)	Condition
I can follow extended speech and complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar.	I can follow ...	- extended speech - complex lines of argument	- provided the topic is reasonably familiar

In this way, draft descriptors were examined, vertically and horizontally, for consistencies. The wordings were changed, whenever necessary, by cross-checking relevant descriptors in lower and higher levels. Then, the broken-down 'can do' descriptors were reassembled.

2.4. Sorting tasks

There are many different methods of validating the order of 'can do' descriptors (See, for example, Appendix A in Council of Europe, 2011). One of the approaches Tony Green recommended was sorting tasks. Council of Europe (2011) states as follows:

> **Sorting tasks:** Once draft descriptors exist, informants can be asked to sort them into piles according to categories they are supposed to describe and/or according to levels. Informants can also be asked to comment on, edit/amend and/or reject descriptors, and to identify which are particularly clear, useful, relevant, etc. The descriptor pool on which the set of illustrative scales was based was developed and edited in this way. (ibid: 210)

We conducted this sorting task experiment with 150 English teachers, ranging from primary schools to universities. Using the alpha version, half of the descriptors was randomly selected from each of the five skills and twelve levels, and the teachers were asked to sort them according to the proficiency levels. The results show that teachers' sorting results had extremely positive correlations with the levels defined in the alpha version of the CEFR-J[3] (r = .93 across teachers from primary to tertiary levels; r = .93 across all the five skills). After analyzing the results, we revised the draft descriptors in the alpha version and produced the beta version in 2010. For further details of the experiment, see Ozeki and her team's report in Tono (2012).

2.5. The student 'can do' questionnaire and IRT analysis

The beta version of the CEFR-J underwent further validation processes. Based on the beta version, a new questionnaire battery was designed to examine whether the descriptors in the beta version would truly reflect what Japanese EFL learners thought they could do. Each of the 'can do' descriptors in the CEFR-J were presented in the questionnaire with four-point Likert scales. The questionnaire was administered to 5,468 students, including 1,685 in junior high schools, 2,538 in senior high schools and 1,245 in universities. The results were analysed using two-parameter logistic model in Item Response Theory (IRT). It was found that the order of descriptors were mostly appropriate, with a few exceptions (Pre-A1 in Listening; B1.2 in Reading, A1.1 in Spoken Interaction, and A2.2 in Spoken Production). Based on the results of IRT analysis, further adjustments of the descriptors were made either by changing wordings in the descriptors to maintain the original order, or by re-ordering the descriptors according to the IRT results. The CEFR-J was finalized in March, 2012 as Version 1 and released to the public.

3. The resources for using the CEFR-J

Since the CEFR-J is a mere list of 'can do' descriptors, it is essential to provide

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[3] This is based on the report made by Hitoshi Muranoi in the final report (Tono 2012).

supplementary resources for teachers to use the CEFR-J effectively. We aim to provide three types of resoruses: the CEFR-J Wordlist, the ELP 'Can do' Descriptor Database, and the CEFR-J Inventory of English.

3.1. The CEFR-J Wordlist

The wordlist is based on the analysis of major English textbooks used in Asian regions: China, Korea and Taiwan. The original research was conducted as a part of the previous *Kaken* project (2004-2007). These countries/regions were homogeneous in the sense that they all introduced English from primary school, and in EFL contexts similar to Japan. Since Japan had not formally introduced English teaching at primary school level by the time this study was conducted, we did not include Japanese textbooks into our database. We divided the textbooks into the following five sub-categories based on the CEFR levels assigned to these textbooks based on the analysis of each country/region's national curricula:

Pre-A1 corpus:	Primary school Grade 3 − 6
A1 corpus:	Lower secondary school Grade 1
A2 corpus:	Lower secondary school Grade 2 − 3
B1 corpus:	Upper secondary school Grade 1 − 2
B2 corpus:	Upper secondary school Grade 3

Then we decided the CEFR level of vocabulary by extracting words that appear at a certain CEFR level onwards. By filtering the vocabulary by limiting to only those which appeared across all the subsequent levels of textbook corpora, the vocabulary which might have appeared incidentally was excluded. It also prevented us from expanding the wordlist endlessly and made our wordlist more realistic and usable.

Altogether, there were 5,639 words covering Pre-A1 to B2 levels. The number is rather modest, but this vocabulary is an essential set in the sense that all three region textbooks covered this vocabulary at specific CEFR levels. Now we are preparing the wordlist in such a way that we present each unit of the wordlist by 1,000 word range for the sake of convenience, and present 1,000 words for the first two levels (PreA1 & A1; A2) and additional sets of 2,000 words for B1 and B2 respectively, totaling 6,000 words. This number is a realistic goal for average learners of English as we mentioned earlier. We recommend that the first 2,000 words should be used as productive vocabulary, while the other 4,000 could be first learned as receptive vocabulary and gradually shifted toward productive knowledge.

activity	A0	n	Leisure activities	
actor	A0	n	Work and Jobs	Film
afternoon	A0	n		
age	A0	n	Personal information	
airplane	A0	n	Ways of travelling	
airport	A0	n	Travel and services vocab	Things in the town, shops and shopping
animal	A0	n		
answer	A0	n		
apple	A0	n	Food and drink	
apron	A0	n	Objects and rooms	
arm	A0	n	Personal information	
art	A0	n	Hobbies and pastimes	Education

Figure 1: The CEFR-J wordlist (Pre-A1 level nouns)

The wordlist is unique because it has additional features, i.e. the assignment of general as well as specific notion tags to relevant words. This is based on the Core Inventory (North,

Ortega and Sheehan 2010) and the T-series (van Ek and Trim 1990). We plan to annotate the noun list with these notion tags so that the end-users can extract the data based on the notion categories. Figure 1 shows a case of extracting Pre-A1 level nouns only with specific notion categories.

3.2. The ELP 'Can do' Descriptor Database

The ELP 'Can-do' Descriptor Database is based on the analysis of can-do descriptors collected from various versions of the European Language Portfolio. Altogether, more than 2,800 can-do descriptors were examined.

Duplications were removed and very similar descriptors were merged into one. Finally, we had a list of 647 descriptors and then translated them into Japanese. This list will help curriculum or syllabus designers to have more specific images about what each CEFR level learners can do. There is no such list available so far in Japan, and we hope that this kind of database would be very useful to ensure smooth implementation of our framework into Japanese education system.

The final image of the database is illustrated in Figure 2. We can extract can-do statements with Japanese translations in a very flexible manner, limiting the search to either CEFR-levels or skill levels or both. For A1 and A2 level descriptors, two versions of translations are provided; one for general users and the other for younger learners. This aims to support teachers and syllabus/materials developers who intend to apply our framework to primary education and teaching English to kids.

Lev.	Category/Code	ELP descriptor(s)	一般的日本語訳	小学生児童向けの訳
A1	IS1-A1	I can say who I am, ask someone's name and introduce someone.	自分が誰であるか言うことができ、相手の名前を尋ねたり、相手のことを紹介することができる	自分の名前を言ったり、相手の名前を聞いたり、相手の紹介ができる
A1	IS1-A1-1	I can ask and answer simple questions, initiate and respond to simple statements in areas of immediate need or on very familiar topics[1.2000-CH]	簡単な質問をしたり、簡単な質問に答えることができる。また必要性の高いことや身近な話題について発言したり、反応することができる	簡単な質問をしたり、簡単な質問に答えることができる。また身近なことについて話したり、質問に答えることができる
A1	IS1-A1-1	I can make myself understood in a simple way but I am dependent on my partner being prepared to repeat more slowly and rephrase what I say and to help me to say what I want.	簡易な方法であれば通じるが、ゆっくり繰り返してくれたり、自分が言った事を言い直してくれたり、自分が言いたいことが言えるよう助けてくれるような相手に依存している	相手がゆっくり話したり、自分が言ったことを確認してくれるなど、やさしい人だったら自分の簡単な英語は通じる
A1	IS2-A1	I can understand simple questions about myself and my family when people speak slowly and clearly (e.g. "What's your name?" "How old are you?" "How are you?" etc.).	相手がゆっくりはっきり話してくれれば、「名前は？」「歳は？」「調子はどう？」などの自分や家族についての簡単な質問を理解することができる	相手がゆっくりはっきり話してくれれば、自分や家族についての簡単な質問が分かる

Figure 2: Extracting 'can do' lists from the Database

The CEFR-J Wordlist and the ELP 'Can do' Descriptor Database will be released toward the end of 2012 and made publicly available at the CEFR-J website. Together with more generic English reference level descriptions such as the English Grammar & Vocabulary Profile and the Core Inventory for General English, we hope that our resources will also provide clear ideas for teachers and syllabus/materials designers in their tasks/materials development.

3.3. The CEFR-J Inventory of English

After the release of the CEFR-J in March, 2012, we launched a new JSPS-funded project of working on Reference Level Descriptions (RLDs) for the CEFR-J. RLDs are descriptons of the

CEFR reference levels for individual languages. This should be based on the CEFR level description. It identifies the forms of a given language (words, grammar, etc.), mastery of which corresponds to the communicational, sociolinguistic, formal and other competences defined by the CEFR[4]. At the moment, two different sets of RLDs have been available for English; the English Profile[5] and the British Countil/EAQUALS Core Inventory for General English[6]. The former is a collaborative research programme using corpus data and other tools to produce detailed RLDs for English. The English Vocabulary Profile and the English Grammar Profile have been released at the English Profile website. Hawkins and Filipovic (2012) report on the first release of the English Grammar Profile in details.

Whilst these RLDs are useful in their own right, it is necessary to link words and grammar of English to more specific 'can do' descriptors available in the CEFR-J. Especially the English Profile only offers the RLDs for A2 and above levels, due to the lack of A1-level learner data. Thus, we decided to launch our own project of producing RLDs for the CEFR-J, based on corpora of several Japanese EFL learners, including the JEFLL Corpus (Tono 2007), the NICT JLE Corpus (Izumi et al. 2004), and the GTEC for STUDENTS Corpus (Tono and Watanabe 2010). We aim to evaluate different methods of criterial feature extraction from corpora in order to best define language features which will serve as criteria for specific CEFR(-J) levels. Our ultimate goal is to produce a set of RLDs for A1 level in general as well as specific RLDs for the CEFR-J by 2015.

4. Future directions

The MEXT recently formed a committee to establish a guideline of producing 'can do' descriptors for junior and senior high school English teachers, which is one of the steps for putting the 'five proposals' into action. As committee members, we feel that it is crucial for teachers to understand the basic characteristics as well as necessary prerequisites for 'can do' descriptors. Otherwise, any statement could be in a 'can do' format, and a statement tends to be either heavily grammar-oriented, such as "I can understand sentences with to-infinitives," or processing-oriented, such as "I can read 200 words per minute." All these elements should be a part of descriptors in the form of 'conditions' or 'criteria,' and cannot be descriptors themselves. Very core elements of "performance" or "action" should be there in order to make them fully "action-oriented". Unless we demonstrate the process of creating 'can do' descriptors properly, teachers will waste their time on making pseudo-descriptors.

It is our wish that the process of creating good 'can do' descriptors, which we learned through the compilation of the CEFR-J, can be shared with others. With all the resources available for the CEFR and the CEFR-J, the next major issue would be how to train teachers or syllabus/materials designers so that they can implement 'can do' descriptors into actual classroom tasks or teaching materials. We hope that the CEFR-J will contribute greatly to improving the situation of English language teaching in our country. We welcome feedback from the readers and prospective users of the CEFR-J.

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[4] Cited from the description of RLDs at the CEFR official page
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[6] http://www.teachingenglish.org.uk/publications/british-council-eaquals-core-inventory-general-english

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