

A QUALITY MATRIX FOR CEFR USE: Examples of promising practices

1 OVERVIEW

Project leader(s) contact: Etsuko Shimo

Country: Japan

Institution: Kindai University

Type of context: Programme/school level

Educational sector: Tertiary

Main focus of your project: Teaching Practices, Learning/Self-Assessment, Classroom Teacher Assessment
Teacher Education, Portfolio Use

SUMMARY

Name: 'Can Do' framework guiding teacher assessment

Abstract:

Large English language programmes face their own particular challenges, as maintaining common goals, content, quality and evaluation practices across numerous teachers, classes and students can be a constant struggle. In such cases it is not always possible to fully familiarise teachers and other stakeholders with the principles of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR, Council of Europe 2001). This practice outlines some ways in which such a familiarisation process can be implicitly implemented over time, through curricula renewal. The Faculty of Applied Sociology, Kindai University began using a 'Can Do' framework as the basis for their English learning programme. The practice is an example of the implementation of a CEFR-based curriculum in a large institution where maintaining pedagogic consistency across many teachers, classes and students is a challenge. The embedding of a standard syllabus, assignment and evaluation system inside the 'Can do' framework has led to maintenance of a good quality of English language education among a large teacher and student body.

Stage: Planning; Implementation; Evaluation

Theme: Curriculum; Assessment; Teacher education

CEFR aspects used: Descriptors, assessment with defined criteria

Main features of this example:

- 'Can Do' Framework of descriptors adapted from the CEFR
- Learner autonomy
- Portfolio approach
- Standardised teacher assessment

Quality principles particularly demonstrated: Relevance, Transparency, Coherence, Inclusiveness



2 PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Background: Kindai is one of the largest private universities in Japan with a student body of over 30,000. The Faculty of Applied Sociology English learning programme offered many opportunities to students to develop their productive skills, mainly speaking and writing, so that they can express themselves and their opinions. Each year is divided into 18 to 20 classes, and the faculty has employed five full-time teachers and some 25 to 30 part-time teachers. Both full-time and part-time teachers are a mixture of L1 and L2 (Japanese) English teachers. With more than 30 teachers and 1,000 students participating in the programme, administrators have had to devise a number of practices to ensure programme quality and standards as well as a unified, coherent vision.

Stated aims: The following goals have been set for our 'Can Do'-based curriculum:

- (a) to improve the four basic language skills in order to use English as a communication tool
- (b) to develop a positive attitude amongst students towards writing their own opinions, making presentations, and discussing issues with others in English
- (c) to improve students' abilities to work on tasks, to make presentations in English, and to interact with people of different cultural backgrounds on their own initiative
- (d) to develop autonomy by learning to set methods and goals that are based on self-evaluation activities.

Steps/stages:

1. *Descriptor adaptation and development*

In the development of the Kindai 'Can Do' Framework (KCF), the following two points were considered essential:

- (a) to create a framework that accommodates our students' levels and backgrounds
- (b) to make 'Can Do' descriptors as concrete as possible so that both students and teachers could use them without much difficulty or confusion.

The CEFR was the most important reference in the KCF development. It provided the foundation for our curriculum, particularly the philosophy of promoting learner autonomy. Most of the KCF descriptors were created based on the CEFR descriptors, but with special attention to point (b): to make descriptors as concrete as possible so that both students and teachers can use them without much difficulty or confusion. Because of this process, the final descriptors adopted in the KCF were different from the specific CEFR descriptors to which the development committee referred (Table 1).

In the KCF final descriptors, additional words or explanation (e.g. 'for half a minute', 'if preparation time is given', and 'while making use of dictionaries') were included so that such explanations could provide a clear guide for teachers designing class activities. Such explanations could also help students in their self-evaluation activities as students would actually be doing the activities described by the descriptors in classes.

For example, in one of the core courses in the programme, students are required to do 3 to 4-minute presentation assignments. For the statement, '*I can speak for more than three minutes with notes about topics of personal interests, current affairs, and about my major field of study*', students can evaluate without much difficulty whether they can do it after going through the presentation assignments. In addition, the length of students' speaking time such as 'half a minute' act as an objective evaluation indicator both for teachers and students; students do pair conversations and interview activities in class and the number of minutes they are required to speak is often specified.

| | KCF descriptors | Equivalent CEFR descriptors (CEFR 2001) |
|---|--|--|
| 1 | I can speak for half a minute (making a few sentences) about my family, people around me, living conditions, and school life, if preparation time is given according to the difficulty level of the topic. (K-4/ speaking) | I can use simple phrases and sentences to describe where I live and people I know. (A1/spoken production) |
| 2 | I can speak for more than three minutes with notes about topics of personal interests, current affairs, and about my major field of study. (K-1/ speaking) | I can present clear, detailed descriptions on a wide range of subjects related to my field of interest. I can explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options. (B2/ spoken production) |
| 3 | I can understand most of the passages and articles written for English learners at the college and university level, and passages about content in my major field, while making use of dictionaries. (K-2/ reading) | I can understand texts that consist mainly of high frequency everyday or job-related language. (B1/understanding reading) |
| 4 | I can understand passages about current affairs, and passages about my major field while making use of dictionaries. (K-1/ reading) | I can read articles and reports concerned with contemporary problems in which the writers adopt particular attitudes or viewpoints. (B2/understanding reading) |
| 5 | I can write a passage of 300 words or more about various topics in fields I am interested in while making use of dictionaries. (K-Global/ writing) | I can write clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects related to my interests. (B2/writing) |

Table 1 Example descriptors from the KCF and the CEFR originals

In order to implement the 'Can Do' framework, various methods and measures have been taken. Among those are (a) the usage of the *My Can-Do Handbook* (CDH) and other textbooks, (b) utilising unified syllabuses and evaluation systems, and (c) sharing class management information.

2. *My Can-Do Handbook* (CDH)

Full-time faculty teachers created a learning handbook (CDH) in order for both teachers and students to work effectively to achieve the curriculum goals. This handbook is similar to the ELP in that it contains assessment grids and learning record sheets (see 'language passport' and 'language biography' in the ELP; see Schneider and Lenz (2001) for details).

The handbook presents the curriculum goals at the beginning of the book, including the goal of becoming autonomous learners. The goals are designed to provide impetus to teachers to incorporate materials and activities that will assist students in achieving the goals. The pages following the curriculum goals in the CDH include:

- the KCF itself,
- the *Dekita*¹ Checklists,
- manuals of learning tools in certain courses,
- learning record pages (e.g. reading speed graphs), and
- vocabulary lists (Coxhead 2000, West 1953)

The CDH is distributed to the English teachers of the faculty at or just prior to the beginning of every academic year, as well as to all the first year students in their first English class at university, to familiarise students with the goals of the curriculum.

Students do reflection, self-evaluation, and goal-setting activities using the checklists three times in each semester: at the beginning, in the middle, and at the end. Each checklist has about 10 items, which are

¹ *Dekita* means 'I was able to do it' in Japanese.

closely linked to the KCF statements, covering all the five levels.

The CDH also contains a number of explanations and activities that link to KCF, in addition to the checklists. At the back of the CDH, there are two vocabulary lists. They are based on West's (1953) General Service List and Coxhead's (2000) Academic Word List. Teachers are encouraged to incorporate vocabulary from these lists into their class activities while students are urged to study them on their own after class.

3. *Standardised assessment*

The CDH, can be utilised as a key to a successful 'Can Do' curriculum. In addition, the standardised evaluation systems play a critical role in the effective management of the curriculum. As for the CDH, by using it as the unifying source of materials for all classes, students and teachers can share their expectations as well as reflect upon their results together. Reflection and goal-setting activities in the CDH help students monitor their learning processes and outcomes more effectively. While the CDH provides guidelines for standard activities such as assignments, the standardised evaluation systems enable all the teachers to actually focus on improving their students for the shared curriculum goals.

To assess student achievement of curriculum goals, students' abilities need to be periodically evaluated. Abilities are assessed objectively by using class tests and evaluations that are based on the abilities described in the KCF.

Since the KCF 'Can Do' descriptors outline specific tasks or performance, class evaluations are also task or action based. The tasks or assignments are not only conducted at the end of the term – they are also administered throughout the term to reinforce student competency in the skill. Many of these evaluations have been implemented on a standardised basis meaning that all teachers use the same question types, format and guidelines for evaluating performance. The standard evaluation activities include:

- (a) extensive reading assignments,
- (b) interview and conversation tests,
- (c) essay assignments and tests via writing software, and
- (d) presentation evaluation.

The assessment rubric of the test is mainly based on CEFR/KCF 'Can Do' descriptors.

4. *Networking and moderation of assessment results*

Part-time teachers use one office room and can exchange information about their class management between classes. Full-time teachers sometimes visit the office and exchange ideas about class management, and hear the opinions of part-time teachers. Feedback and opinions about standard assignments and evaluations are especially valuable because such information sharing will help all the teachers focus on the shared teaching goals and thus prompt them to prepare similar activities in their respective classrooms.

Faculty development (FD) meetings for English teachers, which have been held once a semester since the faculty's inception, are also an additional opportunity for teachers to share class management information. The meetings are held at the end of the semester or during the break between semesters, and most teachers attend. In the meetings, one of the main purposes is for teachers to reconfirm the goals of the curriculum. They also have shared ideas for effective teaching techniques and exchange reactions to their class activities.

Teachers, as stakeholders in this context, experience 'familiarisation' with the KCF 'Can Do' descriptors (North 2014) as well as with our curriculum goals, activities, and evaluations through these meetings. Such opportunities have helped the curriculum administrators (i.e. full-time teachers) to reflect on the whole programme and to integrate teachers' opinions when revising the content of standard assignments and the methods of evaluation. The latter has all been done while remaining cognisant of the close connection between these assignments and evaluations and the KCF 'Can Do' descriptors. Further discussion involving all the teachers will be useful and necessary regarding the future revision of the handbook to make it even more user friendly and thus even more helpful for English language teaching and learning. The revision

should entail, first and foremost, detailed feedback and suggestions from all of the stakeholders, especially from students and teachers as they are the ones who use the CDH on a regular basis.

Publications that have been used or produced related to this example:

This text is based on:

Shimo, Etsuko, Ramirez, Carlos & Nitta, Kaori (2017) A 'Can Do' framework-based curriculum in a university-level English language learning programme: Course goals, activities and assessment In O'Dwyer, Fergus, Hunke, Morten, Imig, Alexander, Nagai, Noriko, Naganuma, Naoyuki & Schmidt, Maria Gabriela (Eds) *Critical, Constructive Assessment of CEFR-informed Language Teaching in Japan and Beyond* (The English Profile Studies series, volume 6), pp. 118-154. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

3 ADVICE AND LESSONS LEARNT:

The main recommendations for the implementation of a CEFR-based curriculum in a large institution where maintaining pedagogic consistency across many teachers, classes and students is a challenge are summarised as follows:

- Develop or use existing appropriate 'Can Do' descriptors.
- Create one (or more) main set of guidelines – in our case the CDH – for use by all teachers and students. This text should contain the goals, 'Can Do' descriptors, activities for measuring achievement, explanation of assignments, evaluation criteria and rubrics, etc. This will allow all stakeholders to be in possession of a reference manual on the scope and substance of the language education programme. For the students, possession of such information (e.g. the checklist of 'Can Do' descriptors, the KCF, evaluation criteria, etc.) will make it clear to them the skills they should master. Having the CDH has made it easy for the students to refer to critical information during in-class activities and prior to tests or during self-learning activities outside the classroom.
- Use a common syllabus, assignments, and especially standardised evaluation activities to maintain quality and a single direction of the programme, especially among teachers. This can be accomplished through a Partner Exchange Teacher system: teachers exchange classes and do not test their own students.
- Encourage autonomous learning by teaching skills that entail real-world communicative objectives and emphasise the learning process. The skills can be basic, but then students should be expected to apply those basic skills to complete their own assignments and projects. For example, we use writing software to improve students' understanding of the basic writing skills and essay formatting. Students' then had to research and write their own essays using the skills and format taught.
- Have students periodically consider their abilities *vis-a-vis* the checklists.
- The goals and methods for autonomous learning should be revisited often to ensure students are indeed becoming life-long learners.

There are still a number of issues and challenges that need to be considered:

1. The 'Can Do' abilities should be better and more often referred to in the classroom by both teachers and students.
2. All teachers need to be fully briefed and aware of the 'Can Do' descriptors and their value in the language learning process. This should help in avoiding textbook-driven classes as opposed to a principled CEFR-based classroom.
3. If developing your own 'Can Do' descriptors based on the CEFR's statements, they need to be fully grounded in communicative theory (i.e. learning through action-based tasks with authentic, real-world communicative objectives).
4. 'Can do' descriptors' validity, usefulness, and particularly clarity will need to be demonstrated. They will likely require constant revision and refinement to serve as a context-specific, helpful learning and teaching tool.
5. Teachers will need periodic training on CEFR 'Can Do' descriptors when using them for evaluation purposes.