

The Application of ‘Can-Do’ Statements in an Introductory German Language Classroom at a Japanese University

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In this paper, I write about my students’ use of A1 can-do statements that correspond to level A1 of the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) in an introductory German as a Second Language course. I briefly explain the CEFR, the academic direction it has taken in Japan, foreign language education at Japanese universities in general, and discuss how the A1 level can-do statements were received by my students. The purpose of this paper was to determine whether the use of CEFR A1 level can-do statements can play an effective role in an A1 level German as a Second Language classroom.

Keywords: foreign language education, CEFR, CEFR-J, can-do statements

The CEFR

The CEFR is a language framework that provides a method of learning, teaching and assessment that is applied to all languages in Europe. It was developed by the Council of Europe between 1993 and 1996 to promote transparency, coherence and learner autonomy in language learning and teaching in Europe. “With its basis in communicative competence, three important ideas that underlie or relate to the CEFR may be identified as plurilingualism, communicative language, and autonomy” (Imoto & Horiguchi, 2015, p 67).

An action-oriented approach, the framework defines three broad levels of language performance: Basic, Independent and Proficient. These bands are further broken down into six levels of performance which can be used to measure the progress of language learning. Each level can be branched into sublevels in order to meet local needs while still relating back to the common system. The three bands of performance and their six levels are as follows:

- Basic User: A1 and A2
- Independent User: B1 and B2
- Proficient User: C1 and C2

A unique point about the CEFR is that it allows for flexibility in its language approach so that language instructors, universities, and schools can establish their own sublevels relevant to their instruction while still referring to the CEFR as a whole (Council of Europe, 2001).

The CEFR's language descriptions comprise an extensive number of can-do statements, each of which states what a learner can do at every language proficiency level. "The can-do descriptions are very important for clearly arranging content of the language learning, including clarifying both the intended learner level and the structure of textbooks." (Imig and O'Dwyer, 2010, p. 5). The can-do statements are specific and clearly written, so that individual language learners can easily comprehend the linguistic tasks they should be able to master. These statements can be an empowering tool for learners in providing them with more autonomy and self-awareness about the language they are learning.

The CEFR in Japan

The CEFR is becoming increasingly attractive, because of its rich research base and global appeal, to foreign language specialists and universities in Japan. Although major English tests such as the TOEIC or Eiken still carry much weight in Japan, it is still difficult to ascertain what, if any, homegrown, foreign language education policy adequately addresses the needs of all language learners and the instructors and schools that teach them. "In fact, in the field of language policy and planning, Japanese academics go as far as to claim that there is no language policy in Japan, hence the need to learn from research-based policy such as the CEFR" (Imoto & Horiguchi, 2015, p 68).

The CEFR would seem to be the ideal solution in filling the void that exists due to the lack of a coherent foreign language education policy. Its framework is designed to oversee not only examinations but also language syllabi, curriculum guidelines, textbook content and, most importantly, through its use of can-do statements, learners' performance goals.

Also, the timing for the implementation of the CEFR in Japanese schools could not be better with the increased value placed on globalized education. "Ever since 1989, there

has been an intensification of efforts to reform English Language Teaching (ELT) in Japan. Policy initiatives such as “The Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities” launched in 2003, the implementation of “Foreign Language Activities” in elementary schools in 2011, the “Global 30” Project in higher education to promote English-medium learning in 2009 and the 2013 implementation of the revised national senior high school foreign language curriculum are all efforts initiated by the Japanese government to improve ELT practice and increase international awareness among Japanese learners” (Glasgow, & Paller, 2016, p 153). The CEFR is particularly dominant at the tertiary level of Japanese foreign language education. Universities such as Ibaraki University, Keio University, Kokugakuin University, Osaka University of Foreign Studies, Meijo University, Kansai University of Foreign Studies have made references to the CEFR in their foreign language programs (Sugitani & Tomita, 2012, p 201).

In spite of its recent popularity, particularly among university language specialists, implementation of the CEFR in Japan still has its detractors. One group of foreign-language specialists proposes the usage of a CEFR-J, which is an adaptation of the CEFR with specific English language teaching contexts in Japan. The CEFR-J is based on the same action-oriented approach contained in the original CEFR but with twice as many levels:

- Pre-A1
- A1: A1.1, A1.2, A1.3
- A2: A2.1, A2.2
- B1: B1.1, B1.2
- B2: B1.1, B1.2
- C1

The rationale for a Japanese version of the CEFR is that that the original framework does not adequately reflect the English language capabilities of Japanese students, none more so than those present at the lowest level. According to one prominent researcher of the adoption of CEFR in Japan, most language learners of English in Japan tend to be at the lower levels of the language learning spectrum, which was borne out in two surveys conducted of lower and upper secondary students, a great number of whom had not yet reached the A1 level. It is not surprising then, that Negishi proposes that a level lower than A1, the pre-A1, be branched onto the framework (Negishi, 2012).

Any review of how Japanese universities use the CEFR (or the CEFR-J) reveals that its implementation at most Japanese universities is usually limited to the usage of can-do statements and how to apply them (Sugitani & Tomita, 2012). In addition, this usage is primarily directed at the English language but not at other foreign languages. This is not surprising given the dominant role of English in Japanese educational institutions.

One exception was the introduction of CEFR can-do lists in non-English foreign language courses (German, Russian and Chinese) at Muroran Institute of Technology. Krause-Ono first implemented the use of can-do lists in German language courses at Muroran but instead of using the lists provided by the Council of Europe, she broke them down into smaller steps covering lessons over one to two weeks. The usage of can-lists was then replicated in the Russian and Chinese language classes (Krause-Ono, 2010).

Class Description

There were 35 students in my target language class who came from the Faculty of Literature represented by several majors. As is typical of Japanese university students, everyone had studied English at the secondary level for six years, but this was the first German language course for them.

The class met once a week for 90 minutes for a total of fifteen times each semester. The textbook for both semesters was *Schritte International* published by Hueber Verlag. The content of this textbook is designed at the A1.1 level and prepares learners to manage daily communicative situations that they might encounter in German-speaking countries. There are seven units that cover topics related to greetings, family, shopping, the home, free time, children and school. Each unit introduces linguistic items in short readings combined with listening support as well as speaking, listening and vocabulary exercises. A workbook is attached to the back of the textbook made up of sections that correspond to respective units in the textbook.

We covered the first three units in the first semester followed by the final four units in the second semester. At the beginning of the first semester, I spent two lessons on instructing students on the German sound system, basic sentence structure, classroom vocabulary, basic verbs and their conjugation patterns.

I provided students with weekly supplemental “mingle sheets” each containing 8-10 listed questions written in German related to the content of the textbook unit that we were covering at the time. Students posed these questions to one another and wrote the respondents' short answers in a box next to the question. They asked a different student for each question and repeated this with a different student.

I distributed a printed list of can-do statements to students on the first day of class (see Appendix). These statements were written in Japanese and reflected the content of the textbook. In referring to the statements, students could check from four choices, “can”, “almost can,” “can a little,” and “cannot”. I instructed students that they could change their answers later if they thought their capabilities had changed. The aforementioned “mingle sheet” questions were also related to the can-do statements.

Fortunately, I did not have to explain the CEFR in detail to my students because its guidelines are incorporated in their required first-year English courses, so they had a basic understanding of the CEFR levels, particularly from the A1 to B1 levels. In fact, the suggested goal of the required English course is for students to “become A2 or B1 users of English”. The textbook used in the English course contains an explanation about the CEFR written in Japanese and all English instructors explain this section on the first day of class and refer to it throughout the semester (Nakayama, Schnickel, Bulach & Yamauchi, 2017).

Discussion

While introducing the can-do statements to my students, I made it explicitly clear that they were not required to submit the list of statements they had checked off to me, nor would I give them a grade for completing them. In order to give students easy access to their statements, I had them paste the list to the inside cover of their textbooks. I also informed them that they should not feel compelled to check the boxes until they were comfortable in assessing their own capabilities. Just reading the statements was also acceptable.

Because this was the first time for me to use can-do statements in my German language class, I wanted to ensure that my students had adequate time to review the statements on their own. At the beginning of each weekly lesson, I requested that students look

at the section of can-do statements related to the textbook unit that we were covering at the time. This simple procedure took only one to two minutes, but it was vital as it set the tone for the rest of the class by reminding students of the statements as we progressed through the lesson.

It was encouraging to sometimes see students refer to their can-do statements when I walked into the classroom before the lesson had started. I observed them reading the list of statements and then skimming specific content in the unit that referred to the statements. It was obvious that my students were acquainting themselves with the content of the lesson.

I explained to my students that they could refer to the list of statements at any time during the lesson. I observed this several times in each lesson. Some students typically checked off statements after conducting an activity such as when completing a dialogue exercise or the mingle sheets, while others chose not to check them.

Whenever students engaged in pair or group activities, I circulated among them as often as I could to offer them feedback and praise. I engaged in the activities with them whenever possible and offered encouragement. I then allocated the last one to two minutes of each lesson for students to look at their statements again, which they did with diligence.

The can-do statements acted as a pedagogical tool in more ways than I had anticipated. It was not simply a checklist of language goals that students could or could not achieve. It was far more than that. It provided my students with needed direction by getting them to focus on the ‘little things’ that they needed in order to become communicatively competent at the A1 level. By breaking down the learning objectives into manageable parts, the statements provided my students with a clear guide to what they had to accomplish at that level. As I circulated among my students, they often asked me questions in German such as “*Where were you born?*,” “*Are you married?*” or “*Are you hungry?*”. They expected me, in turn, to ask them the same questions, which I did. These were small attempts at using the language, but they aligned exactly with the goals contained in the can-do statements.

In previous courses in which I did not implement can-do statements, I would typically

explain the course goals, the syllabus, the textbook and its table of contents on the first day of the course. The weekly topics listed in the syllabus mirrored the content in the table of contents in the textbook. Although I used the syllabus as a reference throughout my courses, I rarely, if ever, observed my students refer to it. The semester is long and students would show the most dedication in comprehending the material the week before the exam.

After my experience with using can-do statements, I would like to continue to use them as a regular lesson component in future German language classes. It took very little class time and no great effort on my part other than explaining the parameters of its usage and setting a dedicated pattern at the beginning and end of lessons. Whether or not it improved my students' German language capabilities cannot yet be determined but it was effective in focusing my students' attention on the subject matter throughout the semester rather than at the end of it.

Conclusion

I found the use of can-do statements in an A1 German language class has the potential to be a very effective pedagogical tool in that it can create a sense of self-awareness and focus among my students. Learning a new language, particularly right from the beginning, is a daunting undertaking for anyone. It is sometimes difficult for learners to "see the whole picture" as they progress from one lesson to the next with no clear goal in sight other than the passing of the examination at the end. Can-do statements, by breaking down the language goals into smaller linguistic steps that students can easily grasp, make the learning of a new language achievable while they are in the middle of learning it.

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Appendix: Can-Do Statements

Unit 1

	できる	だいたいできる	少しできる	できない	コメント
50まで数えることができる					
アルファベットを言うことができる					
“すみません”と言うことができる					
フォーマル／インフォーマルな場面で、人に会ったときに挨拶をすることができる					
フォーマル／インフォーマルな場面で、人に別れの挨拶をすることができる					
人に名前をたずねることができる					
自分の名前のスペリングを言うことができる					
自己紹介ができる					
自分の出身地を言うことができる					
自分の住所を言うことができる					

Unit 2

	できる	だいたいできる	少しできる	できない	コメント
話し相手に元氣かたずねることができる					
自分の家族を紹介することができる					
自分の家族について説明することができる					
人の出生地を言うことができる					
人がどんな言語を話すか言うことができる					
人が結婚しているか、独身か、離婚したか言うことができる					

Unit 3

	できる	だいたいできる	少しできる	できない	コメント
スーパーで商品について質問することができる					
お腹が空いているかどうか言うことができる					
喉が渴いているかどうか言うことができる					
一番好きな食べ物についての質問に答えることができる					
一番好きな飲み物についての質問に答えることができる					
食べ物がおいしいかどうか言うことができる					

Semester 2:

Unit 4

	できる	だいたい できる	少しできる	できない	コメント
自分の部屋を説明することができる					
自分の家を説明することができる					
特定の家具について説明することができる					
あるものが何色なのか言うことができる					
自分の家で一番好きな部屋がどこか 言うことができる					
部屋の場所を質問したり答えたりすることができる					

Unit 5

	できる	だいたい できる	少しできる	できない	コメント
自分の日課を説明することができる					
自分の典型的な一週間を説明することができる					
医師の診察を受けるために予約をすることができる					
予約を取るための短い依頼文を書くことができる					
TV ガイドを見て理解することができる					
張り紙などを見て、始まりと終わりの時間がわかる					
自分が何をしたいのか、したくないのか 言うことができる					

Unit 6

	できる	だいたい できる	少しできる	できない	コメント
自分の一番好きな休暇の場所を言うことができる					
メニューを理解することができる					
メニューから料理を注文することができる					
休暇にどこに行くか言うことができる					
休みの時に何をするのが好きか言うことができる					
自分の誕生日に何が欲しいか言うことができる					
人に趣味は何か聞くことができる					
気温について言うことができる					
天気について説明することができる					
天気についての質問に答えることができる					
天気予報を理解することができる					

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Unit 7

	できる	だいたい できる	少しできる	できない	コメント
自分が何をうまくできるか言うことができる					
自分が何をうまくできないか言うことができる					
自分が何をしたいか言うことができる					
前の晩に自分が何をしたか言うことができる					
自分がなぜドイツ語を学びたいのか 言うことができる					
誰かに何かができるかどうか聞くことができる					
授業で何を学んだか言うことができる					