The Possibility of the Implementation of
the Action-Oriented Approach
to Japanese Junior High Schools
Through the Use of the CEFR-J

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Abstract

The CEFR-J, a framework of reference for Japanese EFL learners based on the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages), was publicized in the form of a temporary version in 2010 (Tono, 2010). The next research phase is two-fold: the validation of the can-do descriptors and the exploration of the possibility of its implementation. The present study focuses on the latter, estimating the readiness for the implementation of the CEFR-J in junior high schools (JHSs) in Japan. A survey was conducted to examine whether the 30 language tasks stated as A1 descriptors in the CEFR-J were experienced by 447 JHS students. The results show that over 50% of the participants said that they had experienced 28 out of 30 activities, suggesting that the current pedagogical practice in JHSs is relatively compatible with the learner-centered, action-oriented approach, which is one of the tenets of the CEFR. On the other hand, results also revealed that a few language tasks students actually did in class were not perceived as having been experienced, suggesting that raising students’ awareness as language users may be one of the key issues in the integration of the educational philosophy of the CEFR.

1. Introduction

It has been pointed out that the impact of the CEFR has not been so much in the area of curriculum design and pedagogy as in the area of assessment and certification (Heyworth, 2004; Little, 2007). There is particular concern about practitioners’ understanding of the action-oriented approach. North (2007) states that many people equate the action-oriented approach with just using can-do descriptors for self-assessment and role plays. Oka (2008), Sakai (2009), Koishi (2009) and Byram (2009) echo his claim, insisting that educational philosophy behind can-do descriptors has not been fully understood by researchers and educators.

The difficulty of implementing the CEFR can be seen in the limited use of the European Language Portfolio, or ELP. Out of 2,500,000 copies of the ELP accredited and published by 2007, only 584,000 copies have been used (Scharer, 2008), a usage rate of 23.4%. Muranoi (2010), in a
report of his site investigation of schools in Spain, states that the use of the ELP in school education is limited despite the fact that it is widely known among teachers. Takada (2010) conducted a site investigation in Finland and reports that, even in schools where the implementation of the CEFR has been successful, some teachers and students felt challenged to adapt themselves to a portfolio-oriented pedagogy. Kohonen (2001, 2006), who led the ELP project in Finland from 1998 through 2001, cautions against a hasty inclusion of can-do descriptors in reflective activities, and suggests that educational change needs to be a gradual process, progressing in sufficiently small steps.

The difficulty of integrating the CEFR into pre-existing courses can be attributed to various factors, such as the discrepancy between the traditional teacher-centered approach and the action-oriented approach, and the fact that the CEFR is not primarily geared to school use. The major source of difficulty, however, seems to be the complex nature of the CEFR. Morrow (2004) suggests that the CEFR is a “detailed map” and states that it gives language teachers/learners details of the topography so that they can plan their own route for their journey. One of the potential difficulties, he continues, is that “the map is so detailed that they may not always be able to see the wood from the trees” (p.8).

The first step in planning our route is to specify where learners are situated on the journey of language learning. In other words, we need to have a clear picture of Japanese EFL learners based on empirical data in order to plan for educational change. Previous studies have shown the CEFR-based English language abilities of adult learners (Negishi, 2010), college students (Saida, 2008), and junior and senior high school students (Negishi, 2010). Along with these studies, the relationship between learners’ perceptions of their skills in doing language tasks specified in the descriptors of the CEFR-J, and their actual skills to do them, is also being investigated by the research group that has developed the CEFR-J. However, it has not been determined whether learners have actually done the language tasks stated in the descriptors of the CEFR-J. The present study attempts to fill this gap by conducting a questionnaire survey asking JHS students if they have done the 30 language tasks labeled as A1 of the CEFR-J.

It is hoped that this “have-done” survey will provide the can-do survey with complementary data because respondents tend to underestimate their ability to accomplish language tasks they have never experienced. This study can also serve as preparatory work for introducing a can-do list to the current teaching and learning context, which was suggested by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) (2011). The findings are expected to estimate teachers’ and students’ readiness for the implementation of a can-do list.

The research questions are as follows.

a. Have students who learned English for three years in public JHSs in Japan experienced the language tasks stated in the CEFR-J descriptors labeled as A1?

b. What are possible problems in integrating the CEFR-J in the current teaching practice in JHSs?
2. Method

2.1 Participants

Four hundred and forty-seven students in the third year from 12 public JHSs in one prefecture responded to the questionnaire. The five regional educational boards were asked to select three schools each to participate in the survey. Four regions agreed to participate.

After the survey results were analyzed, the teachers of the participating schools were invited to have a follow-up interview with a researcher, to which one teacher responded. She was a teacher with 17 years of teaching experience at a JHS, taking in-service training in a school of education at a university when the interview was conducted.

2.2 Instrument

The questionnaire consisted of 30 A1 descriptors from the CEFR-J. A1 is subdivided into three branches: A1.1, A1.2, and A1.3, each of which has two descriptors per category, the categories being listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, and writing. A1 descriptors were selected because 92% of learners who completed three years of English language learning in JHSs are labeled as either A1 or pre-A1 (Negishi, 2010). Since the descriptors are written for professionals in the field of language teaching and learning, some wordings were modified or simplified for JHS students. For example, “in a series of sentences” was replaced by the plainer “with more than one sentence.” Some wordings that refer to conditions were deleted if the deletion was unlikely to affect the responses. This decision was made because of the concern that rather long sentences used in descriptors might distract JHS students’ attention. The research group that has developed the CEFR-J learned from a validation study that dealing with the CEFR-J descriptors is a daunting task even for experienced teachers and researchers. Since descriptors are written in general terms, example sentences and phrases were added to some of them to help participants’ understanding. These examples were taken from the preparatory version of the CEFR-J (Midorikawa, 2010).

The answers were “have done” or “haven’t done” dichotomous data. It was explained to respondents before filling in the questionnaire that communication that takes place in the classroom with non-native speakers can be counted as “have done.”

2.3 Procedure

The survey was conducted in late February and early March in 2011, just before the participants graduated from JHSs. The follow-up interview with the teacher was conducted in May. She was shown the results of her students and asked the following questions:

a. Are there any language tasks whose percentages of experience are higher or lower than you expected?

b. What language activities do you associate with each descriptor?
2.4 Analysis

The percentages of respondents who said they had, and who said they had not, experienced each language task were calculated. The data obtained from the interview with the teacher were qualitatively analyzed.

3. Results and Discussion

As Tables 1 through 5 show, more students have experienced the tasks than have not in 28 out of 30 language tasks. Over 70% of participants have done nine language tasks. These figures show that the participants seem to have at least some opportunities for language use despite the criticism that English language teaching in some secondary schools is grammar-centered (MEXT, 2011). While it is true that the 12 schools were not randomly selected in the sense that they agreed to participate in the survey, we should note that they are ordinary public schools that accept students in local areas without a screening process. The findings imply that the action-oriented approach suggested by the CEFR may not come as a surprise in the current teaching practice. The results of each category will be discussed below, complemented by the information provided by the teacher in the follow-up interview.

3.1 Listening (Aural Reception)

Table 1 shows the participants’ responses to the descriptors in the listening category.

Table 1
The Ratio of Students who Have/Have not Experienced A1 Tasks: Listening

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A1.1</th>
<th>Listening tasks</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
<th>Missing (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Listen to short, simple instructions. (e.g. Open your books to page 30.)</td>
<td>92.2</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Listen to key information necessary for everyday life such as numbers, prices, dates, days of the week.</td>
<td>92.8</td>
<td>7.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1.2</td>
<td>Listen to short conversations or presentations about familiar topics. (e.g. hobbies, sports, club activities)</td>
<td>76.7</td>
<td>22.6</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Listen to concrete information (e.g. places and time) on familiar topics encountered in everyday life. (e.g. The meeting starts at nine thirty.)</td>
<td>72.7</td>
<td>27.3</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1.3</td>
<td>Listen to explanations of cultural practices and customs that are unfamiliar to me.</td>
<td>61.1</td>
<td>38.9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Listen to instructions about procedures (e.g. cooking, handicrafts) with visual aids.</td>
<td>51.2</td>
<td>48.5</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The percentages of respondents who said they had experienced listening tasks (Tasks 1-6) are relatively higher than in the other four categories. This suggests that one of the objectives of the current Course of Study (MEXT, 1998) – the development of practical communicative abilities such as listening and speaking – has been at least partly accomplished. In particular, classroom tasks (Tasks 1 and 2) recorded higher percentages than other tasks. Over 90% of respondents said they had listened to simple instructions and key information such as numbers, prices, and dates.

Fewer respondents have done A1.3 tasks than A1.2 tasks. That is to say, fewer respondents have listened to unfamiliar topics (Task 5) than to familiar topics (Tasks 3 and 4). Similarly the percentage drops for those who have listened to a series of instructions (Task 6) compared with those who have listened to a single-sentence instruction (Task 1) such as “Open your books to page 30.” It seems the participants are not sufficiently exposed to discourse-level input.

### 3.2 Reading (Visual Reception)

Table 2 shows the participants’ responses to the descriptors in the reading category.

#### Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Ratio of Students who Have/Have not Experienced A1 Tasks: Reading</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>language tasks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A 1.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A 1.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A 1.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A noticeable result is that Task 8, which is a real life task, recorded 90.4%. Although the amount of exposure may be very limited, students seem to pay attention to some of the written English they encounter in daily life.

We should also note that Task 10 recorded 58.4%, the lowest figure in the reading category. This was rather surprising because letters, postcards, and e-mails are included in all the six JHS textbooks authorized by the MEXT, and besides, the respondents were informed in advance that classroom activities are considered to be examples of “experience of language use.” The discrepancy between what learners actually did and what they perceive they have done will be discussed in a later section.

3.3 Spoken Interaction

Table 3 shows that around 70% of the respondents have done most of these speaking activities. This finding, like that of the listening category, may reflect the objectives of the current Course of Study, which emphasizes listening and speaking skills.

Table 3
The Ratio of Students who Have/Have not Experienced AI Tasks: Spoken Interaction

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>language tasks</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
<th>Missing (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>A1.1</strong> Ask and answer questions about time, dates, and places.</td>
<td>78.5</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A1.2</strong> Ask and answer questions about personal topics (e.g. family, daily routines, hobbies).</td>
<td>65.3</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A1.3</strong> Respond simply in basic, everyday interactions, using a limited repertoire of expressions.</td>
<td>69.8</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A1.4</strong> Exchange simple opinions about familiar topics (e.g. sports, food, likes and dislikes).</td>
<td>73.2</td>
<td>26.8</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A1.5</strong> Make, accept and decline offers.</td>
<td>57.3</td>
<td>42.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>A1.6</strong> Ask and answer simple questions about very familiar topics (e.g. hobbies, sports, club activities).</td>
<td>67.6</td>
<td>32.0</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The lowest percentage of experience in this category (57.3%) was recorded in Task 17. A possible interpretation suggested by the interviewee is that 15-year-olds may feel uncomfortable declining offers due to peer pressure. Another factor that she said may come into play is the respect Japanese people have for maintaining harmony, which is part of the Japanese national
character. These comments suggest that we should be sensitive to these affective and socio-cultural factors in the classroom setting.

3.4 Spoken Production

This category saw the two lowest percentages of experience of all the 30 descriptors: Task 21 at 41.8% and Task 23 at 41.4%. What is common to these tasks is the fact that they involve the expression of opinions. Producing a series of sentences is also an unfamiliar task for nearly half of the respondents, as the percentage of Task 24 shows. These findings suggest that JHS students need to have more opportunities to express their opinions and to produce discourse instead of independent sentences. This chimes in with the addition of a new item to the content of Course of Study for Lower Secondary Schools revised in 2008 (MEXT, 2008): “to give a speech on a provided theme.”

Table 4
The Ratio of Students who Have/Have not Experienced A1 Tasks: Spoken Production

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>language tasks</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
<th>Missing (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Convey personal information (e.g. about my family and hobbies).</td>
<td>58.8</td>
<td>40.7</td>
<td>0.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1.1</td>
<td>Convey simple information (e.g. times, dates, places). (e.g. Let’s meet at three.)</td>
<td>62.0</td>
<td>37.8</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1.2</td>
<td>Express simple opinions related to limited familiar topics.</td>
<td>41.8</td>
<td>56.2</td>
<td>2.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Give simple descriptions of everyday objects. (e.g. This sweater is a gift from my grandmother.)</td>
<td>61.1</td>
<td>38.7</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A1.3</td>
<td>Express simple opinions about a limited range of familiar topics with more than one sentence.</td>
<td>41.4</td>
<td>57.9</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Describe simple facts related to everyday life with more than one sentence.</td>
<td>52.6</td>
<td>46.5</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.5 Writing (Written Production)

Table 5 shows that the figures are relatively moderate in this category, with most language activities being experienced by around 70% of participants. Whereas 41.4% have made speech production (Task 23), more participants have made written production. For example, 71.6% have written short texts about matters of personal relevance (Task 27), and 75.4% have
written a series of sentences about hobbies and likes and dislikes (Task 30). This gap may be explained by positive backwash effects of public high school entrance examinations. As of 2007, 54.6% of the 47 prefectural educational boards required test takers to write over 20 words (Tabata, 2008), which probably encourages JHS students to practice writing. This interpretation was confirmed by the teacher who was interviewed after the survey. Although entrance examinations are often criticized as a major factor that prevents the implementation of communicative language teaching, they seem to exert positive effects in encouraging writing short passages.

Table 5
The Ratio of Students who Have/Have not Experienced A1 Tasks: Writing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>language tasks</th>
<th>Yes (%)</th>
<th>No (%)</th>
<th>Missing (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Fill in forms with such items as name, address, and grade.</td>
<td>65.8</td>
<td>33.3</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write short phrases and sentences giving basic information about myself (e.g. name, address, family) with the use of a dictionary.</td>
<td>69.8</td>
<td>30.0</td>
<td>0.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write short texts about matters of personal relevance (e.g. likes and dislikes, family, and school life).</td>
<td>71.6</td>
<td>28.4</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write simple postcards, messages, short memos about events of personal relevance (e.g. Meet at 6 in front of the gate.).</td>
<td>56.8</td>
<td>43.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write short texts about my experiences with the use of a dictionary.</td>
<td>69.1</td>
<td>30.9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Write more than one sentence about my hobbies and likes and dislikes.</td>
<td>75.4</td>
<td>24.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.6 Qualitative Data of the Follow-up Interview

The researcher showed the interviewee the results of the survey of her own students and asked her two questions: (a) Are there any language tasks whose percentages of experience are higher or lower than you expected? (b) What language activities do you associate with each descriptor? The results will be reported in this order.

3.6.1 The discrepancy between pedagogical reality and students’ perceptions

Fewer students than she had expected said that they had done the following activities.
Task 5 (Yes: 67.8%, No: 32.1%) Listen to explanations of cultural practices and customs that are unfamiliar to me.

Task 9 (Yes: 71.7%, No: 28.3%) Choose what I like from a fast-food restaurant menu that has pictures or photos.

Task 23 (Yes: 66.0%, No: 34.0%) Express simple opinions about a limited range of familiar topics with more than one sentence.

Task 24 (Yes: 66.0%, No: 32.1%) Describe simple facts related to everyday life with more than one sentence.

The interviewee speculated that Task 5, which was covered in another course named “international understanding” and taught by a native-speaking teaching assistant, may have slipped her students’ mind when they answered the questionnaire. Some students may have looked back on what took place in the English classes taught by the Japanese teacher of English rather than on their overall foreign language experience.

As for an activity that corresponds to Task 9, the interviewee has engaged her students in a role play that includes ordering/taking orders at a fast food restaurant. She recalled that the task was achieved in a controlled way, probably making the students perceive it as an exercise rather than real communication.

Her explanation for the lower rates of Tasks 23 and 24 was similar. In her class, expressing facts and opinions was a part of communication activities designed to familiarize the students with target grammatical items. These tasks were done in a controlled situation with some scaffolding provided by the teacher. The students may have hesitated to say that they had experienced these tasks because they did not do them independently. However, if the tasks had required them to use language more flexibly, communication breakdown might have happened. The more authentic a language task is, the more demanding it is for learners. There is no simple answer to how to strike a balance between the authenticity of language tasks and their feasibility as classroom tasks. It is an issue to be considered in each educational context, which seems to be a difficult part of the implementation of the CEFR-J.

More students than the interviewee had expected said they had done the following activities.

Task 8 (Yes: 88.7%, No: 9.4%) Read simple words and phrases or short sentences in signs and posters I come across in everyday life. (e.g. No food.)

Task 25 (Yes: 84.9%, No: 15.1%) Fill in forms with such items as name, address, and grade.

With regard to Task 8, although English signs and posters were not shown in the classroom, 88.7% of the interviewee’s students have read them. Considering that bilingual signs and posters have become more common in Japan, encouraging students to pay more attention to them may be one way to raise awareness about how the target language is used in real life. The response to Task 25 revealed a methodological problem. The students usually write their names in Roman letters on worksheets and answer sheets, but they have never written their addresses. Including three items
(name, address, grade) in one descriptor may have misled the participants.

3.6.2 Language activities

The language activities the interviewee associated with the descriptors are shown below. They indicate that language tasks stated in the A1 descriptors are performed in a variety of ways, suggesting that the CEFR-J can serve for school use.

a. The activities are part of classroom English. (Tasks 1, 2, 13, 15, 25)
   The students are familiar with “simple instructions” (Task 1) such as “stand up” and “sit down.” They “respond simply in basic, everyday interactions” (Task 15) by saying “Here you are” and “Thank you” when they pass out and receive handouts.

b. The activities are included in the textbooks. (Tasks 7, 9, 10)
   The students “read very short, simple, everyday expressions” in the textbooks (task 7).

c. The activities are performed to provide an opportunity to use target language forms. (Tasks 3, 14, 16, 18, 19, 20, 21)
   The students “listen to short presentations” (Task 3) when their teacher tells them about her family with a hidden agenda to introduce the third person singular. They “ask and answer questions about personal topics” (Task 14) to use fixed expressions such as “How many brothers or sisters do you have?” or “What time do you usually ...?” They “exchange simple opinions about familiar topics” (Task 16) to practice sentence patterns such as “Do you like ...?” “Does she like ...?” or “Which do you like better ...?” They “ask and answer simple questions about very familiar topics” such as hobbies to practice using gerund.

d. The activities are performed to prepare for high school entrance examinations. (Tasks 11, 24).
   The students read longer “texts of personal interest” (Task 11) than those in the textbooks because reading comprehension of longer passages is part of the public high school entrance examinations. The students “describe simple facts related to everyday life with more than one sentence” (Task 24) to improve their production skills, also because it is part of the entrance examinations.

e. The activities are performed as making a speech. (Task 17, 26, 27, 30)
   The students write “short texts about matters of personal relevance” (Task 27) and “about my hobbies and likes and dislikes” (Task 30) to prepare a draft of a speech.

f. The activities are led by a native-speaking assistant language teacher (ALT). (Task 6)
   The students “listened to instructions about procedures” when they made Christmas cards with the ALT.

As seen above, many of the A1 descriptors are linked with language activities that take place in the classroom. Considering that the interviewee is an experienced teacher, we should not conclude that this is the typical English classroom in Japan. However, these findings imply that the CEFR-J can be compatible with the pre-existing syllabus under the right conditions.
4. Pedagogical Implications

The present study was conducted to answer the following research questions.

a. Have students who learned English for three years in public JHSs in Japan experienced the language tasks stated in the CEFR-J descriptors labeled as A1?

b. What are possible problems in integrating the CEFR-J in the current teaching practice in JHSs?

The answer to the first question is that students who have experienced the tasks surpassed those who have not in 28 out of 30 language tasks. Overall, they have opportunities to use the target language through various language tasks stated in the A1 descriptors. A weakness of the current teaching practice, though, is that less than 50% of the students surveyed have expressed simple opinions using more than one sentence. Another weakness is that communicative tasks may not be necessarily perceived as genuine communication but as class assignments. These weaknesses are the answer to the second question. That is, although the integration of the CEFR-J into the English language teaching in JHSs may be feasible, teachers are expected to try to elicit more language output in a learning environment where students can express their feelings or convey messages in a carefree manner.

Based on the above results, this section discusses two issues: the compatibility of the CEFR-J with grammar-based syllabuses, and students’ awareness as language users/learners.

4.1 The Compatibility of the CEFR-J with the Current JHS Programs

It may be beneficial to discuss the compatibility of the CEFR-J with the current JHS programs on the presumption that classroom instruction goes hand in hand with textbooks, for using the textbooks authorized by the MEXT is mandatory in Japan. Keddle (2004), a syllabus designer, mentions that the clash between existing grammar-led syllabuses and the performance-based syllabus of the CEFR was a source of difficulty in her attempt to write materials for 11-16 year-olds in Italy. She suggests that the CEFR designers’ “soft touch” over grammar “creates an unnecessary barrier for teachers and course designers working with it” (p. 50). Her claim seems to foreshadow the challenge we may encounter in the application of the CEFR-J in the Japanese educational context. Although the Course of Study for Lower Secondary Schools (2008) presents situational/functional language along with grammatical items as content to be covered in three years of JHS, the textbooks authorized by the MEXT are basically grammar-based.

At the same time, however, the Course of Study recommends that grammar, which supports communication, should be taught in language activities where target items are required. As was reported in the previous section, the interviewed teacher with 17-year teaching experience has been following the recommendation of the Course of Study by engaging her students with form-focused communicative tasks, which correspond to seven CEFR-J can-do statements (see
3.6.2, c). It shows the possibility of partial incorporation of the action-oriented approach to grammar-based textbooks.

The results of this “have-done” survey also let us know what additional language tasks teachers should engage their students in. For example, we found that Task 24 (describing simple facts related to everyday life with more than one sentence) is relatively unfamiliar to students. We could overcome this weakness by making some additions or modifications to the language activities in the textbooks. The following, for instance, is an excerpt from a textbook for third-year JHS students (Niisato, et al., 2011).

Follow the example and talk with your friends about what you have done so far.

[Example]  A: How long have you played soccer?

B: I’ve played it for two years [months / weeks / days].

After the objective of this activity is achieved, we may ask students to add another sentence, such as “I practice every weekend,” or “I played in the local tournament this summer,” thus stimulating the production of output.

We should not be so optimistic as to expect that all the can-do statements will be incorporated into authorized JHS textbooks, but it would be worth trying to develop language activities based on the CEFR-J and compatible with the JHS course design at the same time.

4.2 Students’ Awareness as Language Learners/Users

As has been previously described, a few real-life tasks learners did in the classroom were not perceived as experienced tasks by some learners. One example is that 58.4% responded they had read correspondence (Task 10) when all of them should have read this type of text because letters and/or e-mail messages are included in every JHS textbook authorized by the MEXT. Another example, which was provided by the interviewee, is that fewer students than she expected said that they had chosen what they liked from a fast-food restaurant menu (Task 9) though they had in fact done a role play in which they ordered at a fast-food restaurant.

One possible interpretation of this discrepancy is related to the research method. Respondents were asked to circle “yes” if they had experienced the listed language tasks in any context, regardless of whether they took place inside or outside the classroom. However, they may have taken the language tasks they achieved under their teacher’s guidance to be unauthentic, thus answering they have never experienced them. In future studies, this problem will be solved if the questionnaire asks them about the experience of each task in two situations, that is, inside and outside the classroom.

Another interpretation, which is relevant to the action-oriented approach of the CEFR, is that this discrepancy reflects learners’ lack of awareness as language users. In other words, learners may not be taking as active and participatory a role as they should be. Regarding the task of ordering at a fast food restaurant, for example, the interviewed teacher recalled that her students used a model dialogue between a sales clerk and a customer, replacing some food vocabulary
items with those of their own choices. She speculated that some students perceived the role play as a substitution exercise instead of a real-life task. A similar interpretation is possible for the task of reading correspondence. For some students, letters printed in textbooks may have been perceived as a text they are required to read rather than as an authentic text that describes the writer's travel memories and his or her feelings, for they are addressed to an imaginary person instead of to the learners themselves.

Those who identify themselves as language learners may read all types of texts as teaching materials whether they are letters, menus, narratives, or newspaper articles. On the other hand, those who identify themselves not only as language learners but also as language users may assume different roles depending on what types of texts they read, such as an addressee, a customer, or a subscriber. It is a challenge for EFL teachers to create a learning environment in which learners engage themselves in real-life tasks as language users.

JHS students, who are on the whole beginner learners, often need material control and teacher intervention in doing communicative tasks. With that in mind, material writers are expected to design language tasks that are meaningful for learners, and teachers are expected to expose learners to a variety of tasks, so that they can act as language learners and users in the classroom. We should note that the application of the CEFR-J entails the implementation of the action-based approach of the CEFR, which views language learners and users as "social agents," or "members of society who have tasks to accomplish" (Council of Europe, 2001; p.9).

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