

# Furthering elementary English education in Japan

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## Developing task design and evaluation to foster students' competence and autonomy in elementary English education in Japan: Focusing on Can-Do and Performance Assessments

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In 2020, foreign languages were introduced as a subject in the upper grades of elementary school in Japan. The main objective is to develop communicative competence in English education in Japan.

It has consequently raised the urgent question of how it should be assessed.

### Evaluating English education in Japan

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Over the past decade, we have been conducting research on the instruction and evaluation of elementary school foreign language activities and English as a team across school types and regions. The 15 members of our team include university researchers specialising in foreign language education, practitioners in elementary schools, and overseas co-researchers. We have examined both the theoretical and practical aspects of the project. The research is being supported by a Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research.

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has been issued by the Council of Europe, and autonomy is in the context of European education, and autonomous learners are being developed using can-do statements and the European Language Portfolio (ELP).

They have been shown to be extremely effective at helping teachers and students design and practice teaching, learning and assessment to facilitate learning foreign languages. As indicators represent highly transparent proficiency development and action-oriented approaches, we refer to them as our research frameworks. To increase students' self-esteem, self-efficacy, and metacognition, a four-level can-do evaluation scale was developed to assist them in self-evaluating their abilities in English.

### The research has the following features

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Pedagogical tasks are assigned in all four skills and five skill areas (listening, reading, speaking [interaction], speaking [production], and writing), and research is conducted on how to evaluate the three perspectives required by the courses of study: (1) knowledge and skills, (2) abilities to think, make decisions and express oneself, and (3) motivation to learn and humanity. Specifically, we design authentic tasks that foster thinking, making decisions, and expressing themselves, cultivate proactive learning, and ask students to reflect after each task. This enables them to know how far they have come, their progress, their challenges, and how to move forward, aiming to become autonomous learners capable of self-regulated learning.

## **A user-friendly Can-Do evaluation scale**

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The evaluation scale is designed to be user-friendly and help develop a set of performance-related scales. We want individuals to conceptualise their personal goals so that they can be motivated and their progress can be visualised. A can-do statement indicates how confident or proficient a student is at achieving a specific foreign language activity. There are four levels of answers including it is still difficult; I can do with help of teachers or peers, etc. (scaffolding stage); and I can do it by myself; I can do it much better (challenging or self-actualisation stage).

By collecting students' self-evaluation data based on such developmental scales and becoming more aware of what they can do, the teacher is able to adjust better and design lessons and decide the most suitable flow of activities. Importantly, the answers to the can-do statements provide reflections on learning and development, where students can look back and be aware of what they have become or are becoming able to do, can gain confidence and prepare themselves to overcome and achieve the required real-world tasks in the future.

## **Performance-based evaluations**

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In addition, we are conducting performance-based evaluations using English for tasks in accordance with the purpose, scene and situation, developing rubrics, and having the students self-evaluate these rubrics to see the changes in their performance. Children are also involved in creating the rubrics and work collaboratively with their teachers and classmates to develop them. This embodies the concept of assessment with children, assessment as learning, and assessment for learning.

By analysing common teaching materials for foreign language activities, as well as textbooks approved by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) for foreign language studies at elementary and junior high schools, we are developing activities designed to meet the needs of students and the local community, as well as utilising textbooks and collaborating between elementary and junior high schools.

## **Furthering English education in Japan: the importance of reading and writing**

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An important element of elementary and middle school collaboration is the teaching of reading and writing. The primary focus of English instruction in elementary school is listening and speaking, while reading and writing are introduced in the upper grades. We have conducted research focused on how to introduce and teach literacy to children, specifically developing and implementing a bottom-up approach, such as alphabet knowledge, phonemic awareness, and phonics, as well as a top-down approach, such as picture book reading and storytelling. As a result, we believe that balancing bottom-up and top-down approaches is critical. We are evaluating the changes that have been

observed in the children with continued can-do evaluations. In addition, a pre- and post-test was conducted to verify the effectiveness of the approach to determine whether self-assessment correlates with English proficiency. Questionnaires were also administered.

## **Qualitative and quantitative research**

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In this way, improvements have been made through qualitative and quantitative research. As part of the collaboration in this research, elementary school teachers conducted the activities, and through monitoring and reflection, they completed a reflection form regarding the intervention of activities in class and assistance (scaffolding) for students. The use of the can-do scale is also effective for enhancing teachers' autonomy and awareness raising.

The can-do list and evaluation examples are compiled in the form of a booklet and published every year (8 books already), which is also available on our website. So, anyone can refer to them and practice.

To build networks, train teachers, and disseminate research findings, symposiums and workshops on evaluation are held several times a year throughout Japan for elementary school teachers in charge of English, people involved in children's education, students in teacher training programs, and supervisors of boards of education.

## **Digital textbooks to promote English education in Japan**

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As part of the GIGA School Initiative of MEXT, one PC terminal was distributed to each student starting in 2022. Digital textbooks for students will be introduced in the 2024 school year. This has led to students recording and reviewing their own performance many times to improve their performance for performance evaluation. Teachers can easily assess and give feedback on students' video clips. It is now possible to write, submit, and share reflection sheets digitally instead of on paper.

## **Assessments and creating digital portfolios**

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Furthermore, we are engaged in research on ICT-based assessments for students and children of the digital native Z and Alpha generations, as well as developing digital portfolios.

To bring smiles to children and support teachers, we would like to continue our research and practice on how to teach and evaluate foreign languages and contribute to the development of foreign language education.