


# Enhancing Japanese elementary and junior high-school foreign language education

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## **Our ongoing research, fuelled by last year's research grant, delves into the theme of "Evaluation of Foreign Language Education Fostering Children's Thinking, Judgment, Expressiveness and Autonomous Attitude in the Digital Age"**

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This multi-year endeavour aligns with the significant changes unfolding in Japanese education, particularly the revision of elementary school curriculum guidelines, now entering its third year.

The era of VUCA, marked by Volatility, Uncertainty, Complexity and Ambiguity, has ushered in a period of profound educational reform. The dominance of AI, DX and digital advancements underscores the need for a substantial paradigm shift in perspectives on learning, instruction, and evaluation. Japan stands at the forefront of this transformative journey, with the current educational landscape demanding the most extensive post-war reform.

### **Assessment connecting elementary and junior high schools and units – using Can-Do assessments**

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The 2020 academic year witnessed the introduction of a new curriculum, aiming to accelerate and formalise English education in Japan. However, a notable challenge has surfaced concerning the connection of foreign language subjects from upper elementary grades into junior high school foreign language education. This transition often results in a decline in student motivation, difficulty in grasping English concepts and, at times, a growing aversion to the language.

To address this challenge, a meticulous analysis of Ministry of Education-approved textbooks for elementary and junior high schools was conducted. The analysis encompassed language materials, topics, situations, language activities, tasks and achievement goals. Commonalities were identified, leading to the creation of a Can-Do evaluation scale draft for establishing effective connections between elementary and junior high school English education.

After the analysis, practical evaluation activities, such as the presentation of travel guide posters, were introduced across different stages. The criteria for evaluation were systematically designed to progressively develop students' abilities. For instance, the topic

“Introduction of a Country I Want to Visit” for sixth graders builds upon a fifth-grade topic requiring students to not only introduce a country but also elucidate reasons for their desire to visit and its benefits of traveling there.

The criteria are as follows: “I can make a travel guide and introduce a country I want to visit, the reasons why I want to visit it and the benefits of traveling there.” (1) It is still difficult to introduce countries and reasons for wanting to go. (2) I can manage to introduce a country and some reasons why I want to go there. (3) I can introduce a country and reasons for going and its benefits of traveling there. (4) I can introduce a country, reasons for going, and its merits in an easy-to-understand way so that friends will want to go there.

The instructional process encompasses various stages, beginning with activities designed to stimulate critical thinking and facilitate learning. During the planning/anticipation stage, students engage in goal setting and achievement planning, employing backward design to envision the final activity. This involves considering which country they wish to explore, what activities they want to undertake and whether they can effectively express these ideas, recorded as videos for self-assessment.

Moving to the monitoring/ implementation control stage, situated in the middle of the learning process, students exchange thoughts about their chosen countries, familiarise themselves with expressions and engage in repetition of the targeted language expressions and small talk. Integration with social studies involves researching countries, their attractions and their features based on individual interests.

The use of sticky notes organises expressions, while video presentations introduce the selected country and its reasons for exploration. Information from travel agencies is connected to students’ final presentations, which include writing down their understanding, showcasing photos and evoking interest. Individual practice and best-suited learning are implemented as needed, leading to self-assessment and goal adjustments.

The concluding reflection/self-reflection stage, marking the end of the learning process, involves sharing thoughts about the chosen countries, utilising information and communications technology (ICT) to organise expressions and preferences. Students create travel guide sheets, read model travel guide posters, select a country and compose sentences.

Prior to the final activity, students observe demonstrations by their teachers, make comparisons and evaluate demonstrations using rubrics. This stage aims to increase awareness, culminating in the creation of a presentation memo and preparation of presentation materials on tablets, with the option to create digital posters.

Engaging in interactive activities during the final activity, students conduct peer- and self-evaluations, record interactions, share them and continually improve their skills. This comprehensive approach integrates reflection, self-assessment and collaborative learning,

fostering a holistic and effective educational experience.

## **Foreign language education: Learning orientation assessment and learner-teacher autonomy**

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Actual classroom practices were strategically employed to assess the impact of the proposed evaluation. The focus was on examining whether students' self-efficacy, competence and autonomy increased through reflection sheets based on Can-Do evaluation scales, performance assessments using rubrics and teacher reflections.

The continued use of six key Can-Do statements in the design of activities has sought to promote teacher autonomy. They are: (1) Activity design: "In the staged design of activities, are there any points where you made improvements or felt challenges?" (2) Implementation: "Looking back at the lesson, did the staged design of activities function well?" (3) Student observation: "Reflecting on the lesson, were there insights gained through monitoring students during the activities?" (4) Student reflection: "Reading students' self-assessment and comments, were there insights gained into students' awareness of the activities?" (5) Student intervention: "Based on observations and students' reflections during the lesson, did you intervene with students (or plan to)?" (6) Activity adjustment: "In the implementation of this activity or the design of the next activity, did you make adjustments to the stages (or plan to)?"

This approach aimed to create a symbiotic relationship between teacher autonomy and student autonomy.

To further support teacher autonomy, the research emphasised three stages in lesson design: Planning (anticipation), Monitoring (observation) and Reflection (introspection). These stages focused on developing teachers' self-efficacy for tasks, fostering process-oriented/mastery goals and promoting metacognition and self-evaluation.

## **E-portfolios to record learning footprints**

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The Central Education Council's emphasis on ICT as a tool underscores the need for integrated approaches, such as individual optimisation using tablets and digital textbooks, collaborative learning and continuous improvement of teaching through active, dialogical and profound learning.

Our research project has focused on integrating teaching and assessment using ICT, with a specific emphasis on the creation and utilisation of e- portfolios. Described as "learning footprints" of children, e-portfolios serve as electronic records of the active learning process, allowing students to reflect and connect their experiences to future learning steps.

## **Future directions**

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As we build our research and practices across units, semesters and grades, our aim is to refine and implement an approach to teaching and assessment using e-portfolios, Can-Do statements and performance evaluation. This approach seeks to facilitate the development of students' self-efficacy and competence, ultimately fostering autonomous learners in the Japanese education system.

This comprehensive overview encapsulates our commitment to enhancing Japanese foreign language education by combining rigorous evaluation practices with innovative pedagogical approaches, particularly in the dynamic landscape of the digital era.

### **More About Stakeholder**

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#### Kwansei Gakuin: Exploring humanity, co-existence, and education in Japan

Kwansei Gakuin is one of the most prestigious private schools in Japan. With our history dating back to 1889, we aim to transform education in Japan for the future. Founded in Kobe by the American missionary Reverend Walter Russell Lambuth, M.D., Kwansei Gakuin is now a comprehensive and integrated institution spread across eight campuses aiming [...]