Foreign Language Education Reform through Action Research—Putting CEFR educational principles into practice

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This research, funded by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS)[1], has been undertaken by the JALT CEFR & LP SIG[2] in order to support numerous small-scale action research (AR) projects related to foreign language teaching in Japan and beyond from April 2020 to March 2023. Practitioners invited to participate in the project will reflect on and find ways to improve their teaching practices using the CEFR as a reference and conceptual tool, and will be provided with support and guidance to ensure that their research is conducted systematically in relation to the AR literature and reflective of CEFR principles. This paper proposes a CEFR-focused AR model (CARM) based on a critical review of the AR literature. The CARM model is the product of the first-year of this research project (hereafter referred to as the Kaken research project). Our hope is that teacher-research guided by this model will produce robust findings that practitioners and other stakeholders in language programs will find both informative and of practical use.

Keywords: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), action research (AR), practitioner-researcher, critical reflection

1 Introduction

The CEFR-focused AR model (CARM) is a reflective 3-stage model (PLAN, ACTION, CRITICAL REVIEW) that encourages teachers in stage 1 to reflect on their teaching practices and beliefs and then specify a concrete solution to a teaching-learning issue using the CEFR. Data to evaluate the efficacy of the solution are collected and analyzed in stages 2 and 3 and are then used to decide how best to proceed (e.g., how to revise the intervention) in the subsequent AR cycle. While many AR models devote a fourth stage to reflection, following Burns (2010: 141), reflection is seen as integral in each stage of the CARM model (See Sect. 5.1). Detailed guidance to ensure the research is conducted systematically and rigorously is also provided in the CARM model.

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2. The CEFR & Language Portfolio (LP) SIG is a special interest group within The Japan Association for Language Teaching (JALT).

The paper is divided into five sections. It starts by describing why action research is the perfect vehicle for teachers to systematically research putting CEFR educational principles into practice. The following section, a brief overview of the CEFR, is based on the CEFR & LP SIG's latest publication, *CEFR-informed Learning, Teaching and Assessment: A Practical Guide* (Nagai et al. 2020). An overview of action research is then provided, and includes an introduction to various AR models, ranging from the traditional (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988) to the more recent (Mertler 2020; Mills 2018). Essential features common to all AR models are highlighted to clarify how AR differs from other types of research. A model for AR that defines the research focus in relation to the CEFR and builds upon the principles of AR laid out in section 4 is then proposed. The paper concludes with a discussion of how the viability of this model will be examined over the final two years of the Kaken research project.

2 The Complementary Nature of the CEFR and Action Research

Action research (AR) has a long, rich history dating back to the 1930's, when this style of research was first defined by Kurt Lewin in the United States (Adelman 1993). Furthermore, the CEFR has been rapidly growing in influence since its publication in 2001. However, it appears that very little research exists which *explicitly* uses an AR approach to promote and evaluate CEFR-informed educational reform (Bower et al. 2017; Jaakkola et al. 2002)[3]. To the best of our knowledge no persuasive argument has yet been made for the optimal nature of AR in facilitating the planning, conduct and evaluation of teaching interventions drawing on the CEFR. In the following paragraphs we first explain why the CEFR is an ideal resource for language education AR. Second, we present four points of strong synergy between AR and the CEFR. And last, we explain how the rigorous nature of AR can improve the quality of CEFR-informed research.

The CEFR is ideal for facilitating each of the commonly defined stages of AR. The CEFR and its accompanying resources expedite the first step of AR, which is reflection on current teaching practice to identify a problem. The CEFR helps at this stage by clearly defining language proficiencies, and also by describing an action-oriented approach (Piccardo and North 2019). The CEFR can be used to identify language education problems or areas needing improvement, for example, a need for a greater focus on autonomy, for better alignment between course goals, content and assessment, or for more focus on learners' active use of language. Furthermore, the CEFR provides an abundant set of resources to draw upon at the second stage of action research: planning and implementing solutions. Through its function as a common framework, the CEFR facilitates shared understanding of language proficiency, which supports the later stages of AR: objective evaluation of research interventions and the communication of results.

In the following paragraphs, we present four areas of synergy between the CEFR and AR. Firstly, these two naturally align through a common aim of promoting teacher development based on critical reflection on practice. Reflection is fundamental to action research (McIntosh 2010; Mertler 2020). Mertler (2020: 44) states that "Action research is primarily about critical examination of one's own practice. In order for someone to critically examine her or his practice, that person must engage in systematic reflection on that practice." Fostering reflection is also a central tenet of the CEFR. "(T)he primary aim of the CEFR [...] (is) to encourage reflection on current practice in relation to the specification of what is taught and the assessment of the successful learning of that content" (Sheehan 2010). Furthermore, "The CEFR is also intended to provide a shared basis for reflection and communication among the different partners in the field [...]" (COE 2020b). The common primacy of reflection as a means to improve practice is an important facet of the synergistic relationship between the CEFR and AR.

The second synergistic aspect of AR and the CEFR is a common focus on adaptation to local contexts and local problems. Adaptation of the CEFR descriptors for specific educational contexts is encouraged

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3. The ECML AR Communities project advocates AR for language teacher professional development in Europe, but it does not specifically refer to or encourage implementation of the CEFR.

in the CEFR. The CEFR-Companion Volume states that "Users of the CEFR are invited to select the CEFR levels and illustrative descriptors that they consider to be appropriate for their learners' needs, to adapt the formulation of the latter, in order to better suit the specific context concerned, and to supplement them with their own descriptors where they deem it necessary" (COE 2020a: 42). AR is also intended to focus on small, local, context-specific problems. According to Stringer (2014: 1), it "uses continuing cycles of investigation designed to reveal effective solutions to issues and problems experienced in specific situations and localized settings". This shared adaptability to local and small-scale contexts is a key facet of the synergistic nature of AR and the CEFR.

A focus on collaboration is another important common point between AR and the CEFR. The CEFR is intended to facilitate collaboration and communication between practitioners, educational institutions and educational stakeholders by providing a common meta-language for describing language proficiency. AR is also commonly defined as a collaborative process (Burns 1999; Mertler 2018, 2020; Wallace 1998). The mutual focus on collaboration further strengthens the synergy between the CEFR and AR.

Finally, the CEFR and AR both aim at reform. The CEFR CV states that "[...] the CEFR is a tool to facilitate educational reform projects ..." (COE 2020a: 26), and according to the Glossary of Education Reform (2015), "Educators typically conduct action research as an extension of a particular school-improvement plan, project or goal—i.e., action research is nearly always (a part of) a school-reform strategy." This common focus on educational reform is the fourth and final important aligning feature of the CEFR and AR.

In addition to the natural alignment of the CEFR and AR outlined above, AR has the potential to greatly improve the quality of research into local CEFR implementation, due to its systematic and rigorous nature (Mertler 2020). While there is a growing body of literature on the implementation of the CEFR in language education (Alderson 2002; Eaquals 2008; O'Dwyer et al. 2017), the research approach used is often not explicitly defined, and criteria for conclusions reached along with solid evidential backing are sometimes lacking. We believe that by applying an AR approach, research on CEFR-informed interventions can be made more systematic and produce more robust research, from which better supported conclusions will be generated. Such solid AR research will be invaluable as a reference for practitioners and other stakeholders in language programs.

In conclusion, we strongly believe that the complementary nature of the CEFR and AR outlined in the above paragraphs makes AR the ideal research approach for investigating and evaluating small-scale, CEFR-informed educational reform. For this reason, we are actively promoting and supporting CEFR-focused AR projects in Japan and beyond as part of a Kaken project. We encourage more language education researchers to utilize an AR approach in order to broaden and deepen research into applications of the CEFR.

3 The Common European Framework of Reference of Languages (CEFR)

In the following section, a brief overview of the CEFR is provided to demonstrate the direction the CEFR encourages AR researchers to take. Firstly, a description of the *action-oriented approach* is provided. Secondly, important approaches to curriculum design known as *backward design* and *needs analysis* are described. Finally, the *comprehensive, transparent, coherent* and *neutral* nature of the CEFR is introduced to illustrate why the CEFR can serve as a metalanguage for action researchers to discuss interventions made in their local contexts.

3.1 An overview of the CEFR

First published in 2001 by the Council of Europe (COE) in English and French, the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment* (CEFR) (COE 2001) has been translated into 40 languages (COE 2020a), informing language standards, curricula and education reform both

inside and outside of Europe. Since 2001, the CEFR, its use, and the accompanying European Language Portfolio (ELP) have been thoroughly researched (Byram and Parmenter 2012; Kühn and Perez Cavana 2012; Language Learning in Higher Education 2011 Special Issue; Martyniuk and Noijons 2007), leading to the publication of the CEFR Companion Volume (CEFR/CV) (COE 2020a) that complements and expands upon the original volume.

One of the primary goals of the CEFR is to "stimulate reflection and exchange between language professionals for curriculum development and in teacher education" (COE 2020a: 11). The theoretical foundation for this inquiry is the educational values promoted in the CEFR, framed within a descriptive model of language use and competences. In practical terms, CEFR reference levels and illustrative descriptors serve as the metalanguage for discussing the complexity of language proficiency and for reflecting on and communicating decisions on learning objectives and outcomes that are coherent and transparent (COE 2020a).

Learning, teaching and assessment can first be discussed using the Common Reference Levels—six broad bands of proficiency covering four modes of communication: receptive, interactive, productive and mediative skills. These skills are articulated in CEFR Illustrative Descriptor Scales containing detailed descriptions of language use and strategies according to real-world tasks along with the competences necessary to realize these goals. The justification for defining learning objectives in terms of performance standards is explained in the CEFR, and includes "the promotion of the positive formulation of educational aims and outcomes at all levels", which in turn "inform curriculum reform and pedagogy" and "provide transparency and clear reference points for assessment purposes" (COE 2020a: 27). The original volume of the CEFR (COE 2001) has been updated in the CEFR Companion Volume (COE 2020a), with new descriptors for language activities and competences. Another important development is the ongoing work into Reference Level Descriptions (RLDs) for different languages (COE 2019b), which specify the grammar and vocabulary at various CEFR levels. The Companion Volume (COE 2020a: chapter 2) offers an excellent introduction to the CEFR, and North (2014) provides the most comprehensive and detailed description.

The CEFR is also complemented by the European Language Portfolio (ELP) (COE 2019a), both of which were conceived and introduced together in 2001. The ELP is a concrete tool encouraging language users to monitor and document their progress in relation to the Common Reference Levels and illustrative scales, enabling learners to take responsibility for their language learning.

3.2 Key aspects of the CEFR

3.2.1 Action-oriented approach and learners as social agents

The action-oriented approach views users and learners of a language primarily as 'social agents' (COE 2001: 9). The emphasis is on what the learners can do with the language (action-oriented) as opposed to what the learners should know about the language (knowledge-oriented). The action-oriented approach of the CEFR envisions curricula and courses based on real-world communicative needs, which are communicated to the learners using 'Can Do' descriptors, and proficiency is achieved (and assessed) through guidance and practice with appropriate real-life and pedagogic tasks (COE 2020a: 28).

By presenting the language user/learner as a 'social agent,' learners not only use language for social purposes, but they are encouraged and expected to take responsibility for their learning through such measures as goal-setting and reflecting on the language learning process and their progress. Learner autonomy is a central goal within the CEFR. Furthermore, learners are seen as "plurilingual, pluricultural beings (which) means allowing them to use all their linguistic resources when necessary, encouraging them to see similarities and regularities as well as differences between languages and cultures" (COE 2020a: 30).

3.2.2 Backward Design and Needs Analysis

Backward Design A curriculum or course that is based on the CEFR and an action-oriented approach starts with the specification of learning outcomes in terms of language use and then proceeds to identify the content, methodology, activity types, and assessment tools most appropriate for realizing these goals. This is known as *Backward Design* (see Richards 2013)[4]. In other words, CEFR descriptors serve as the goals for language learning (e.g., learning outcomes) and Reference Language Descriptions (RLDs) inform content selection[5]. Assessment tasks linked to 'Can Do' descriptors have the potential to reinforce use of the action-oriented approach through a positive washback effect on classroom practice as teachers are more likely to employ tasks in their lessons if their students will be assessed using similar tasks[6]. Employing *Backward Design* is challenging, but AR can help teachers document and evaluate the efficacy of this approach in a systematic way.

Needs Analysis When learning outcomes are articulated using Can Do descriptors, determining the most appropriate objectives involves a Needs Analysis, which refers to "the process of gathering information before or during a course to determine objectives that can then be analysed in order to create an inventory of aims and suitable activities for that course" (North et al. 2018: 47). The main advantage of using CEFR-descriptor scales when designing a curriculum or course is that stakeholders can help identify the important target situations, activities, and possible levels of each activity (North et al. 2018: 53). Descriptors can also "provide a detailed, flexible resource for [...] offering a 'menu' to negotiate priorities with adult learners in a process of ongoing needs analysis" (COE 2020a: 42).

There are many parallels between needs analysis and AR. In fact, a needs analysis can be thought of as a form of AR due to the importance of researching how best to accommodate the learners' needs and evaluate the appropriateness of the learning objectives that were chosen.

3.2.3 Comprehensive, Transparent, Coherent and Neutral

To serve as a metalanguage for educators (and action researchers), it is necessary for the CEFR to be comprehensive, transparent and coherent. The CEFR is quite comprehensive as it attempts to "specify as full a range of language knowledge, skills and use as possible" (COE 2001: 7). This is accomplished through a taxonomic descriptive scheme covering domains of language use along with communicative language activities, strategies and competences. The information within the CEFR must also be transparent, or "clearly formulated and explicit, available and readily comprehensible to users", and coherent, or "free from internal contradictions" due to the "harmonious relationships" between the different components of the CEFR (COE 2001: 7). In the previous section, the importance of local adaptation was made. While a proposed solution might not be appropriate for other contexts, the comprehensive, transparent, and coherent nature of the CEFR provides a shared understanding for which to view an AR project.

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4. Traditionally, course development employed Forward Design, which starts with content specification (e.g., grammar and vocabulary) then moves to methodology and later assessment. Curriculum development within the Task-Based Language Teaching literature tends to prioritize the process of teaching and learning, or Central Design.

5. RLDs are available for Croatian, Czech, English, German, French, Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish (COE 2019b), but Hulstijn (2014: 14) argues that these and other RLDs are at considerably different levels of development. Therefore, RLDs should be seen as reference works to draw upon when designing courses and assessment tasks rather than prescriptive lists to be blindly followed.

6. The justification for using pedagogic tasks is not just their link to real world contexts, but also their ability to further develop the learners' communicative competence. According to Ellis (2009: 222; emphasis added), these tasks and Task-Based Learning and Teaching in general are "based on the principle that language learning will progress most successfully if teaching aims simply *to create contexts in which the learner's natural learning capacity can be nurtured* rather than making a systematic attempt to teach the language bit by bit (as in approaches based on structural syllabus)".

It is important to point out that the CEFR is neutral in that it does not prescribe any particular pedagogical approach (COE 2020a: 29). However, decisions concerning pedagogy must incorporate the underlying principle that language learning should be directed towards enabling learners to act in real-life situations (COE 2020a: 29), and this is given priority in curriculum development through Backward Design, enacted in the classroom through the use of purposeful, collaborative tasks (material development and implementation) and reinforced with assessment tasks linked to 'Can Do' descriptors (assessment).

In addition to learner autonomy and the European Language Portfolio, these four areas—curriculum and course design, materials development, classroom implementation, and assessment—are perhaps the most common themes of CEFR-focused research, and therefore, the CARM model is built around these themes. The authors of this article have also written a practical guide to the CEFR with chapters organized around these themes, and each chapter includes exercises to guide the reader, case studies serving as examples of contextualized CEFR use, and extensive lists of resources (See Nagai et al. 2020). As mentioned earlier, one of the primary goals of the CEFR is to stimulate reflection. For the CEFR to have a lasting and significant impact on education, however, this reflection must be conducted systematically (e.g., through action research). Therefore, in the following section, the action research literature will be reviewed before proposing CARM—a CEFR-focused Action Research Model.

4 Overview of action research (AR)

The CARM model differs from other AR models in a number of ways which will be discussed in Section 5, but CARM is also informed by these models and based on a critical review of the AR literature. To keep Section 5 as brief as possible, this literature review is provided to examine the differences that exist between various models and approaches (Burns 1999, 2010; Kemmis and McTaggart 1998; Mertler 2020; Mills 2018), as well as the essential features common to them. The section ends with a discussion of rigor and how it can be incorporated into the stages and steps of AR, as exemplified by Mertler's model (2020).

4.1 What is action research?

In this section, a brief overview of action research (AR) is provided, starting with a definition of AR. According to Mills (2018: 10),

> Action research is defined as any systematic inquiry conducted by teachers, administrators, counselors, or others with a vested interest in the teaching and learning process or environment for the purpose of gathering information about how their particular schools operate, how they teach, and how their students learn. This information is gathered with the goals of gaining insight, developing reflective practice, affecting positive changes in the school environment …, and improving student outcomes and the lives of those involved.
>
> Action research is research done by teachers for themselves; it is not imposed on them by someone else. Action research engages teachers in a four-step process:
> • Identify an area of focus.
> • Collect data.
> • Analyze and interpret data.
> • Develop an action plan.

As stressed in the above definition, action research is conducted systematically (as well as rigorously) so that information can be collected, analyzed, and used to develop a future plan of action that addresses a particular problem or area for improvement.

4.2 How AR differs from other types of research

What distinguishes AR research from other types of research is that the main goal of action research is "to address local-level problems with the anticipation of f nding immediate solutions" (Mertler 2020: 14). These solutions can be based on numerical data collected and analyzed using quantitative research methodologies, narrative data (e.g., observation notes, interview transcripts, document analysis) obtained through qualitative research methodologies, or a combination of the two (i.e., a mixed-method research design). While AR can employ all three types of research methodologies, it aligns more closely with qualitative research studies, which "utilize a much broader, more holistic approach to data collection (than quantitative studies) [...] in order to gain knowledge, reach understanding, and answer research questions" (Mertler 2020: 13). These guiding research questions also tend to be more broad and open-ended than the ones for quantitative research. Last, AR is more f exible as teachers may not proceed through the cycle in a linear fashion but may f nd it necessary to go back and repeat steps as new insights emerge (see Mills 2018 visual in Table 1 for this last point; Mertler 2020: 36).
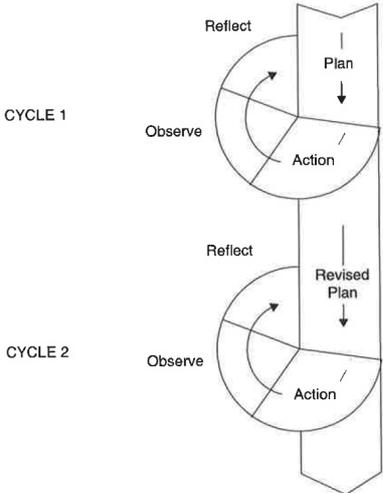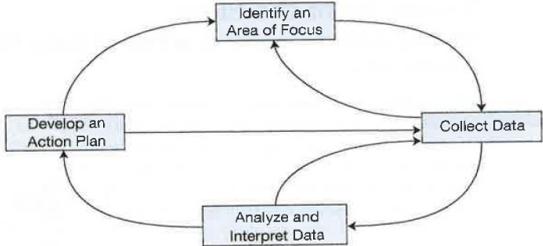
4.3 The different AR Models

One advantage of AR is its f exible nature—it can be employed for a variety of purposes and applied in dif erent ways. All AR models, however, are a rather simplistic representation of a complex process. The stages appear straightforward, and they can be, but as with any research that is conducted rigorously, there are numerous issues to be considered, including the addition of more detailed steps within each stage and the use of dif erent research methodologies to collect and analyze data. The goals and steps outlined in Mills (2018) are common to all models, including "(t)he central idea of the *action* part of AR (, which) is to intervene in a deliberate way in the problematic situation in order to bring about changes and, even better, improvements in practice" (Burns 2010: 2). Furthermore, all models stress the importance of collecting and analyzing data. According to Burns (2010: 2),

> [T]he improvements that happen in AR are ones based on information (or to use the research term, *data*) that an action researcher collects systematically. [...] So, the changes made in the teaching situation arise from solid information rather than from our hunches or assumptions about the way we think things are.

Comparing dif erent models can be challenging as key terms and the contents of each step are def ned dif erently (See Table 1). For example, in an earlier model by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), the **action** phase precedes **observation** and **reflection**. In short, the teacher is trying to determine whether their solution to a problem is ef ective. In later models (Mills 2018; Mertler 2020), developing an action plan is typically the last stage. A description and implementation of an *initial* intervention can be included in the f rst two stages (e.g., the **identification** stage in Mills 2018), but the term, **action plan**, is reserved for the *revised* intervention which is based on insights gained throughout the AR cycle (e.g., Step 4: **developing an action plan** in Mills 2018) and implemented in the next cycle. One reason for the dif erent terms and order of the stages is that later models acknowledge that some teachers may want to start by identifying and understanding the nature of the problem(s) they face before considering possible solutions (see Mertler 2020: 24). These changes can also be seen as a response to earlier criticism of AR; namely, the lack of scientif c methods and the less rigorous nature of AR research. Later, one such response (Mertler 2020) will be reviewed as it of ers concrete steps to address these issues.

Table 1. *Two AR models*

Kemmis and McTaggart (1988)	Mills (2018)
1. **Planning**: identify a problem and develop a plan of action 2. **Action**: put into action some deliberate intervention 3. **Observe** systematically the ef ects of the action 4. **Reflect** on the ef ects of the action	1. **Identifying** an area of focus 2. **Collecting** data 3. **Analyzing & interpreting** the data 4. **Developing** a plan of action

Figure 1.1 Cyclical AR model based on Kemmis and McTaggart (1988).

figure 1–1 ■ The Dialectic Action Research Spiral

It is also possible to combine these approaches as Burns (2010) has done. However, it must be pointed out that Burns (2010: 8-9) used the terms outlined in Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) to organize the chapters of her book, but assigned them dif erent meanings which more closely resemble the stages in the Mertler (2020) and Mills (2018) models. Furthermore, Burns (2010: 8) has argued that the weakness of the Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) model is that it is too f xed and rigid, and that in practice AR processes cannot be easily categorized into distinct steps and points out that some practitioners prefer to view AR as a number of interwoven processes (Burns 1999: 35-43).

The takeaway is that dif erent schools of thought exist, ranging from the f exible approach of ered by Burns (1999; 2010) to more systematic approaches (Mills 2018; Mertler 2020), with the traditional model (Kemmis and McTaggart 1988) falling somewhere in the middle. The goal of this section was to make the reader aware of these dif erences, the benef ts and drawbacks of each approach, and stress that regardless of the model chosen, it is paramount that the research is conducted rigorously.

4.4 Essential Features of AR

Despite the dif erences between the AR models, there are many features which are considered essential. Burns' (2010: 10) excellent summary is a useful complement to the discussion so far.

First, it (AR) involves teachers in evaluating and ref ecting on their teaching with the aim of bringing about continuing changes and improvements in practice. Second, it is small-scale, contextualised, and local in character, as the participants identify and investigate teaching-learning issues within a specif c social situation, the school or classroom. Third, it is participatory

and inclusive, as it gives communities of participants the opportunity to investigate issues of immediate concern collaboratively within their own social situation. Fourth, it is different from the 'intuitive' thinking that occurs as a normal part of teaching, as changes in practice will be based on collecting and analysing data systematically. Finally, we can say that AR is based on democratic principles; it invests the ownership for changes in curriculum practice in the teachers and learners who conduct the research and is therefore empowering.

Taken together, these features are seen in AR research that is conducted by teachers (often working collaboratively with others) to address teaching-learning issues in their local context. These issues are resolved in an action plan which is informed by data collected and analyzed systematically and scientifically. Next, it is necessary to consider what is meant by conducting research rigorously.

4.5 Rigor in AR

According to Mertler (2020: 26-27, citing Melrose 2001), "**rigor** refers to the quality, validity, accuracy, and credibility of action research and its findings. Rigor is typically associated with *validity* and *reliability* in quantitative studies—referring to the accuracy of instruments, data, and research findings—and with *accuracy, credibility,* and *dependability* in qualitative studies (Melrose 2001)."

Rigor, however, must be considered in relation to the intended audience of the research. A presentation for one's colleagues does not need to meet the standards for a presentation at an international conference. Furthermore, research questions and design that are in an early stage of development (e.g., the first AR cycle) are often "emergent, changeable, and therefore unpredictable" (Mertler 2020: 27), particularly if the AR is intended for more local-level dissemination. The list of ways to ensure rigor listed in Mertler (2020: 27-28) is adapted from Melrose (2001), Mills (2018), and Stringer (2007), and includes:

- *Repetition of the cycle*—it is critical to proceed through a number of cycles, using earlier cycles to inform subsequent cycles.
- *Prolonged engagement and persistent observation* are necessary to fully understand the outcomes of an action research process.
- *Experience with the process*—novice researchers may benefit by working with an experienced researcher.
- *Polyangulation of data*—multiple sources of data and other information need to be included.
- *Member checking*—providing research participants with opportunities to check and review data and analysis.
- *Participant debriefing*—another opportunity for participants to provide insight with more attention paid to participants' emotions and feelings that might have clouded their interpretations of events.
- *Diverse case analysis*—ensuring multiple perspectives, representing all stakeholders, are included
- *Referential adequacy*—"all aspects of a given action research study should clearly be drawn from and be reflective of the experiences and perspectives of those inherently involved in the study's setting. This is essentially an issue of *contextualization*. Communications—both during and following a study—should be grounded in the language of the participants to ensure their understanding (Stringer 2007)." (Mertler 2020: 28).

4.6 Step-by-Step Process of AR

Like Mills (2018), the Mertler model (Table 2) has clearly defined stages and steps to ensure their AR project is conducted systematically and rigorously. This does not mean that the researcher follows them in a linear fashion. It is quite possible to repeat (and even skip) certain steps and return to earlier stages. AR is cyclical in nature, not just because the cycle should be carried out at least twice, but AR as an iterative process is possible within a cycle as well.

Table 2. *Mertler (2020: 37) Step-by-Step Process of AR*

Planning Stage	1. Identifying and limiting the topic
	2. Gathering information
	3. Reviewing related literature
	4. Developing a research plan
Acting Stage	5. Implementing the plan and collecting data
	6. Analyzing data
Developing Stage	7. Developing an action plan
Reflecting Stage	8. Sharing and communicating results
	9. Reflecting on the (entire) process

The **planning stage** involves several activities prior to implementing the action plan.

Step 1 involves *identifying and limiting the topic* to a manageable size, taking into account time restrictions, the data collection and analysis skill levels of the researchers, and budget. The topic must be meaningful and important for the teacher, and focused on improving classroom practice.

Step 2, *gathering information,* includes talking to various stakeholders and collecting documents relevant to your topic. It has been referred to as *reconnaissance* by Mills (2018: 58-60) who argues that teachers should take time to reflect on their own beliefs, describe the situation they want to change, and explain "how and why the critical factors you've identified affect that situation" (Mills 2018: 60).

Step 3, *reviewing the related literature*, "can help you define or limit the problem, develop an appropriate research design, or select legitimate instruments or techniques for collecting data" (Parsons and Brown 2002, as referred to in Mertler 2020: 39).

Step 4, *developing a research plan,* involves stating one or more research questions, identifying observable and measurable variables central to the topic, and deciding the appropriate research methodology and data collection and analysis methods.

The **acting stage** is where the action researcher implements the plan and then collects and analyzes the data.

Step 5 is where the researcher starts by *implementing the plan and collecting data,* using techniques such as observation, field notes, interviews, surveys, examination and analysis of existing documents, and quantitative measures (e.g., checklists, rating scales, tests and other formal assessments). The use of all types of data collected through a wide variety of techniques is to encourage triangulation of the data and ensure the data's quality and accuracy.

Step 6, *analyzing the data.* Johnson (2008: 63, as cited in Mertler 2020: 42) suggests that "[A]s you collect your data, analyze them by looking for themes, categories, or patterns that emerge. This analysis will influence further data collection [and analysis] by helping you know what to look for." There should also be a final stage of data analysis once everything has been collected (Johnson 2008).

The **developing stage** is where the revisions, changes, or improvements arise, and the future actions (known as an "action plan") are developed.

Step 7 - *developing an action plan* is the ultimate goal of AR. It is "essentially a proposed strategy for implementing the results" of your AR project (Mertler 2020: 43).

The **reflecting stage** is where plans for disseminating or sharing the results of the project are specified. Furthermore, the researcher reflects on the entire AR process in this stage.

Step 8 - *sharing and communicating the results.*

Step 9 - *reflecting on the process* is a crucial step where the practitioner-researcher reviews what has been done, determines its effectiveness, and makes decisions about possible revisions for future projects.

4.7 Conclusion of AR literature review

The purpose of this section was to provide a brief overview of AR. This is offered as a starting point to guide researchers to the relevant AR literature that aligns most closely with their aims. These reference works, however, need to be reviewed for a more nuanced understanding. By highlighting the differences between different models, we can see two main schools of thought. In the model by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988), the action plan is central and found much earlier in the AR cycle. In short, a clear teaching-learning issue is identified, addressed by some sort of intervention, and data is collected and analyzed to determine the effectiveness of this intervention and further refine it. In contrast, for Mills (2018) and Mertler (2020), data collection and analysis are given priority in the *acting stage* (according to the Mertler model) and later used to develop an action plan which is to be implemented in the subsequent AR cycle. While it is still possible to collect and analyze data in relation to an *initial* intervention (which is described as part of the research plan), the term—action plan—is reserved for the (revised) future intervention. Regardless of which approach is taken, it is understood that the results of one AR cycle are implemented in the following cycle.

Section 4 proposes a model for AR in which a concrete solution to a teaching-learning issue is specified in relation to the CEFR in the planning stage. This action plan is then implemented and its effectiveness monitored through data collection and analysis. This is the approach taken in Kemmis and McTaggart (1988). Following the positions taken by Mills (2018) and Mertler (2020), detailed guidance is also provided in the CEFR-focused AR model to ensure the research is conducted systematically and rigorously, and the model is informed by the principles of AR laid out in this section.

5 CEFR-focused Action Research Model (CARM)

This section proposes a CEFR-focused Action Research Model (CARM), which is designed specifically for AR that attempts to improve and renovate current practices by following the CEFR's core philosophical concepts and principles. CARM consists of three stages: Plan, Action and Critical Review. Although this model shares essential steps with other AR models, it departs from previous models (Burns 2010; Kemmis and McTaggart 1988; Mertler 2020; Mills 2018) in a number of important ways. The following subsection overviews the CARM model and discusses crucial differences with previous AR models. Then Sect. 5.2 explains steps in each stage.

5.1 The CEFR-focused AR Model (CARM): Three-stage model

The CARM consists of the following three stages:

- Stage 1 Plan: Developing a research plan
- Stage 2 Action: Implementing solutions to problems
- Stage 3 Critical review: Analyzing research data and results and examining the entire AR cycle
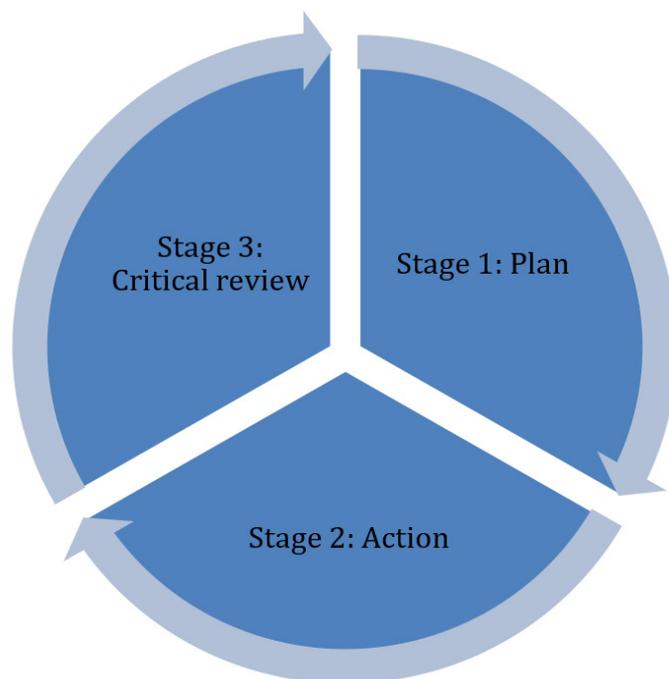
Figure 1. CARM.

CARM is crucially different from previous AR models in three ways. First and most importantly, the model is designed specifically for AR that aims to intervene and improve current practices in accordance with the CEFR's philosophical concepts and core principles. The CEFR functions as a conceptual as well as a reference tool for the AR study. The key concepts of the CEFR, such as the action-oriented approach, coherent alignment of curriculum/course, learning/teaching and assessment, learner autonomy, and learning-oriented assessment, will provide insights into research. The CEFR also functions as a common reference tool. Teacher-researchers will identify the target proficiency levels which their AR studies will focus on, using the CEFR common reference levels and a wide range of scaled descriptors. And then they will localize them for their own research purposes. Problems and issues concerning current practices will become clearer and more readily articulated when taking the CEFR key concepts and common reference levels into consideration. Solutions will be proposed at least partly by selecting the most appropriate CEFR scales and/or more detailed scaled illustrative descriptors and contextualizing them to fit the local needs.

Second, CARM differs from previous models regarding the "Reflection" stage. Previous models typically constitute four stages, having a Reflection stage as a final stage. However, CARM does not contain an independent "Reflection" stage as the final stage, resulting in a three-stage model[7]. We believe reflection is intrinsic not only at the final stage of AR but every stage. Wallace (1998: 1) asserts that one of the most effective ways of solving professional problems and developing as practitioners is through reflection. Burns (2010: 141) claims that "reflection in AR is much more dynamic than simply being the last phase in the cycle". Our proposed model, which follows Burns' claim, involves reflection at every stage. At the planning stage, practitioner-researchers reflect on current practices and their personal teaching theories behind the practice. During the acting stage, new trials and interventions are reflected upon systematically and concurrently. The final stage demands a critical reflection on the effectiveness of solutions tried out while examining collected data.

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7. The ECML Action Research Community project proposes a three-step model. Note that their "steps" are equivalent to "stages" of our model. The first step, "Breakthrough" is to help language teachers start action research. The second step, "On your way" is to help start action research and the final step, "Going further" is to restart another cycle of AR.

Third, CARM uses simple and descriptive naming for the different stages and steps. All the previous models use similar naming for steps necessary to carry out AR but differ in the classification and organization of stages and steps therein. For instance, the model proposed by Kemmis and McTaggart (1988) does not contain a "Develop" stage, which is included in Mertler's (2020) model. In the latter model, a step within the "Develop" stage is subsumed in the "Reflection" stage in the former model. We have conducted a critical examination of all the steps in the previous models, set clearer goals for each stage, and specified steps necessary to achieve the goal of each stage, yielding more transparent and concrete descriptive terms for the stages and steps therein.

As with many previous models, our proposed model is cyclical by nature as shown in Figure 1. The final stage points to the first stage of a new AR cycle.

5.2 Three stages

5.2.1 Stage 1 Plan—Developing a research plan

Stage 1 is to plan action research, most importantly formulating research questions, proposing solutions and contemplating research methodologies. To draw up a concrete research plan, the following eight steps are suggested.

1. Select a CEFR-focused AR theme
2. Reflect on your current practice
3. Gather data (information)
4. Review related literature
5. Identify specific problems/issues and formulate a research question or questions
6. Propose solutions (CEFR-informed teaching, learning or assessment)
7. Decide research methodologies
8. Consider research ethics

It is essential for practitioner-researchers to draw up a comprehensive action research study to be conducted before its initiation. The major goals of the first stage are threefold. The first is to identify problems and issues and formulate sound research questions. To reach this goal, practitioner-researchers undergo steps 1 through 5. The second is to propose solutions to the problems and issues identified, which is step 6. The results of steps 2 through 4 will aid in proposing solutions. The third goal is to consider research methodologies and how to carry out the research and ensure that it is done in an ethical manner. This goal is achieved by undertaking steps 7 and 8. Each step is explained in detail in the following sections.

(1) Select a CEFR-focused AR theme Before identifying specific problems/issues, you will determine the focus of your research. Our CEFR-informed AR Model proposes five broad areas of focus for your AR:

- Designing a curriculum or course
- Material development
- Classroom implementation
- Learner autonomy and the European Language Portfolio
- Assessment

A focus area may be related to the other areas and intertwined. In designing a course, for instance, when setting up specific learning outcomes for a course, they will be the basis for planning each lesson (Classroom implementation) and used for teacher- and learner-assessment. Hence, designing a course also involves a coherent alignment of the goals for teaching, learning and assessment. In other words, all the five areas listed above will be interrelated. Even if your primary focus is to design a course, this focus subsumes various aspects of the other areas.

If your primary interest is to align daily lesson plans into the CEFR, then your focal area will be on classroom implementation. If you are interested in student learning and motivation, your focal area will be on learner autonomy. You may be interested in developing teaching materials aligned to the CEFR or aligning a prescribed textbook to the CEFR, then your focal area will be on materials development. If you are not sure about the area of focus, you may first think about your concerns even more broadly; for instance, is your interest about your teaching or your students' learning? Then you may further think about specific aspects of your teaching or of student learning and narrow down your focal area.

(2) Reflect on your current practice To identify problems/issues, reflection on your current practice is one of the most important steps. You need to reflect on what you do in teaching and why you do it the way you do. In other words, you need to become more aware of your own teaching theory which has not yet been critically examined, particularly in relation to the CEFR principles and concepts. You may also reflect on your didactic knowledge and skills through introspection and/or dialogical communication with your colleagues. Objective description of your current practice and rationale for your teaching is an excellent way to identify problems/issues. For instance, you may consider what your daily lessons aim at and what tasks and activities your learners are engaged in to achieve those goals. Through asking such questions you may be able to critically examine what and how you are teaching. Then, you may further ask yourself about the strengths and weaknesses of your current teaching, and perhaps you will notice problems and issues in your teaching.

(3) Gather data to identify problems/issues After or while you reflect on your current practice and your teaching theory, you may carefully observe learners' performances and interaction with their peers and you. You will also collect data, such as learners' writings, recordings of spoken production, interviews, test and quiz scores, learners' class evaluation, and any other relevant information. You may also consult with your colleagues and other stakeholders about problems/issues you identified. In this way, you can more objectively confirm the problems/issues that you became aware of and provide evidence for your assertions.

(4) Reviewing related literature Reviewing literature is important for two purposes. First, it will help you identify problems and issues as well as formulate research questions. Even if you do not think there are any particular problems in your current practice, you may want to intervene or change it when you acquire new knowledge about teaching, learning and assessment. For instance, when you become acquainted with Mediation descriptors (COE 2020a), you may wonder if the objectives of your CLIL or EMI course may be more explicitly and transparently articulated through adapting these descriptors.

Second, a literature review is also necessary at a later step when proposing solutions to the problems you identified. If you want to adapt the CEFR to your local context, you may need to become more familiar with the CEFR and examine it in detail for your own purposes. Nagai et al (2020), in particular chapters 2 through 5, provide a useful guide for how to utilize the CEFR and CEFR/CV according to various themes of CEFR-focused AR studies.

(5) Identify problems/issues and formulate research questions Formulating sound research questions is an essential and crucial step which affects the rest of the AR project (Hubbard and Power 2003). A

research question determines the research methodology and type of data that you will obtain. When formulating research questions, it is important to take into consideration the following points suggested by Mertler (2020: 90-92):

1. One should try to avoid questions that require a simple yes or no answer.
2. Research questions should not be stated in a manner that assumes an answer even before data have been collected.
3. Research questions should not be too broad or too specific in scope, especially when conducting quantitative action research.
4. Research questions should be based in the body of literature that encompasses the topic. Recall that one of the purposes of conducting a review of related literature is to inform the development of research questions. A research question should not consist of a query that you simply develop of the top of your head. It should be well informed by the literature and related information that you have reviewed.
5. A research question must be answerable based on the collected data.
6. You must make sure that your research question is ethical.
7. Finally examine your research question to ensure that it is both important and feasible to answer.

(6) Propose solutions (CEFR-informed teaching, learning or assessment) After formulating research questions, you will work out possible solutions to them. In CEFR-focused action research studies, solutions will be derived through careful consideration of its core ideas such as action-oriented approach, learner-autonomy and coherence in teaching, learning and assessment. If you plan to align your current classroom teaching with the CEFR, you need to consider what part of your current practice needs to be aligned to the CEFR and to what extent. You need to select the parts of the CEFR most relevant to your current practice and then adapt them to fit your teaching. You may want to set up concrete learning outcomes for a course or each unit by specifying and modifying the most relevant CEFR illustrative descriptors. If you propose a placement test aligned with certain levels of the CEFR, you will create such a test based on the selected scaled descriptors and reference level descriptions (RLDs).

(7) Decide research methodologies You must consider in advance what types of data are necessary for examining the effectiveness of your proposed solutions. In other words, you need to consider what research methodologies you will use for your action research study. Do you need qualitative data such as observation of learners' performance, interviews with learners, and your own reflection on the intervention? Or do you need quantitative data such as quiz and test scores and quantified survey results? Perhaps, you need a mix of qualitative and quantitative data. You need to contemplate which research methodology you will adopt in your AR study, qualitative, quantitative or mixed methodology. As explained in 4.5, the degree of rigor in AR depends on the purpose of a study. To increase the reliability of your AR studies, it is essential to consider the necessary types of data carefully.

(8) Consider research ethics While conducting an action research study, teaching and research are tightly intertwined. You must protect the rights of participants in your research, who are usually learners in your classroom where the action research is conducted. You may use learner output, such as their writing, recorded speech, and/or reflection notes. Hence, at the beginning of the research, you need to explain the purposes of your action research and obtain written consent for using learner output.

5.2.2 Stage 2 Action—Implementing solutions to problems

This is the stage where you try out your proposed solutions and collect data which you need in order to critically examine the ef ectiveness of your intervention at a later stage. Stage 2 consists of the following three steps:

1. Plan for carrying out solutions to the problems
2. Carry out the solutions and ref ection
3. Collect data to critically examine the solutions

(1) Plan for carrying out solutions to the problems At this step, you will make an action plan for carrying out the solutions. To make a concrete plan you need to decide the following:

- With whom will you try the solutions?
- When will you carry out the solutions?
- How long will you try the solutions, more specif cally for an entire semester or only in selected lessons?
- What resources (e.g., supplementary teaching materials) do you need?
- What data needs to be collected, when, and how?

The following table may help you to make an action plan.

Table 3. *Action plan*

Date	What you will do		

Table 4. *Reflection on action*

Date	Points to be reflected on	Reflection

(3) Collect data for examining the effectiveness of the solutions While trying out the solutions, you also need to collect the necessary data for a later critical review. You may collect learner output such as their writings, recordings of their speeches, presentations or conversation with their peers and/or with you. You may also collect learners' reaction to your teaching through their logs and may keep your own logs.

5.2.3 Stage 3 Critical review—Analysis of research results and critical examination of the entire AR cycle

The final stage is a critical review of the effectiveness of solutions you tried as well as the entire process of the AR study, which may lead to a new cycle of AR. The stage consists of the following three steps:

1. Critical examination of the collected data
2. Critical review of the entire AR study
3. Sharing and communicating the results

(1) Critical analysis of the collected data At this step, you will critically analyze collected data to examine if the solution worked as you anticipated and solved the problems. You need to reveal the strengths as well as weaknesses of the attempts based on the data collected. While analyzing qualitative data you will conduct an inductive analysis, thereby "identifying and organizing the data into important patterns and themes" (Mertler 2020: 173) so that you can systematically and critically examine the effects of your action. When you analyze quantitative data, you need to describe and display numerical data demonstrating measures of frequency, central tendency and variability on the basis of which you can critically evaluate the solutions and interventions you tried (Mertler 2020: 155, 180-183). The critical examination of your AR study based on qualitative data, quantitative data, or a combination of both, will increase the reliability of your assessment of the intervention. The analysis may also reveal any weakness of your trial and uncover new issues, which may lead to a new cycle of AR study.

(2) Critical review of the entire AR study You should also reflect on the entire process and procedure of your AR study and examine if the study was conducted as planned and yielded the expected results. You should note the strengths and weaknesses of the study and plan a new cycle of AR.

(3) Sharing and communicating the results At this final step, you will publicize your AR so that your research is shared with practitioner-researchers who face similar challenges. You may choose an oral mode of presentation and/or a written mode. The former for instance includes discussion of your AR with your colleagues, and in workshops and conference presentations. The latter includes brief reports or fuller articles.

5.3 Summary

This section proposed a CEFR-focused Action Research Model and explained the three stages of the model and steps therein. At the time of writing (the end of year 1 of the Kaken project), invited researchers had been guided through Stage 1 of the CARM model. Table 5 includes a brief overview of four research plans that had been developed. Currently, these projects and others are being implemented as a part of Stage 2 in the 2021 academic year, but it is too early to report preliminary findings. However, the projects in Table 5 do exemplify the types of research plans we envision being produced when using CARM as a guide. Participants' experience with the model and the project in general will be commented upon in the following section after a brief introduction to the project itself.

Table 5. *Stages*

Stage 1 Plan			Stage 2 Action	
Theme	Aims	Research questions	Action and Implementation	Data collection & Expected outcomes
Course design	Localize illustrative Can Do descriptors to each course in General English program	1. How do teachers plan and conduct classes using CEFR can dos as lesson objectives? 2. How do teachers localize Can Dos to reflect classroom activities?	• Workshops • Collaborative localization of Can Dos	• Surveys at the workshops • Teachers' reflections • Institution-wide CEFR-informed learning objectives in general English program
Classroom Implementation	Navigating meaning in a mixed-level class in an EMI context	1. How can the illustrative scales of the CEFR/CV be applied to mixed-level classes? 2. How can meaning from texts and lectures be co-constructed (navigated) for students?	• Adaptation of teaching materials • Classroom activities • Classroom interaction	• Survey of the students • Interviews • CEFR/CV-informed objectives for strategies • Insight in strategies used by students to gain understanding
Language portfolio	Evaluate implementation of eELP in a university class	1. How effective is the e-portfolio to help students become an autonomous learner? 2. Can students become a more autonomous learner if they are engaged in the goal-setting of the class? 3. Is autonomous learning stimulated more if students share the e-portfolio with each other in the class? 4. Is the use of the e-portfolio also effective to change the students' positive attitude towards the class?	• Implement e-portfolio to provide opportunities for (1) self-assessment and (2) goal setting based on self-assessment	• Pre-survey • Measure how students feel about self-assessment, goal setting and learner autonomy using survey by Macaskill and Taylor (2010) • Implementation of the e-portfolio in classes • Cycle of implementation involves *Identify goal - Plan - Agreement - Action - Review* • Post-survey • Same contents of pre-survey. • Elicit impressions of the e-portfolio using ELP pilot survey (Scharer 2000).

	Stage 1 Plan		Stage 2 Action	
Textbook	Select the most appropriate CEFR-informed textbooks for the researcher's classes	1. What criteria are suitable for choosing CEFR-informed textbooks? 2. What weighting should be given to each textbook selection criteria? 3. What are the strong and weak points of current CEFR-informed textbooks on the market for typical Japanese University English courses?	• Review literature on textbook selection. • Review literature on CEFR-informed curriculum design. • Make a list of CEFR-informed textbook selection criteria.	• Order all Pre-A1 to A2 CEFR-informed textbooks on the Japanese market. • Evaluate the textbooks using the weighted checklist of selection criteria.

6 Discussion and challenges of the project

This section presents an outline of the first year of a three-year research project as well as some preliminary findings. As a core concept the project sees the CEFR as a reference and conceptual tool for educational reform and incorporates it into an action research model. The proposed CARM model itself is being put into action through a major collaborative research project funded by Kaken. Practitioners are asked to conduct CEFR-informed interventions in small-scale projects to reflect on and research their classroom teaching. There are basically three facets to the Kaken project: (1) to promote AR as a tool to improve a learning-teaching situation using the CEFR, (2) to help teachers develop the ability to conduct AR systematically and rigorously in their teaching context, and finally (3) to examine the viability of the CARM model.

As part of the Kaken research project, various AR studies are being conducted in parallel in different areas (curriculum design, materials development, classroom implementation, assessment, learner autonomy among others), using the CEFR as an informing framework. These projects will serve as the basis for a meta-study on CEFR-focused AR. The outcome will involve a thorough reflection on both aspects of the endeavor—a collection of classroom-based CEFR research projects and a pilot study of the effectiveness of the CEFR-focused Action Research Model (CARM) to guide these projects. With this dual focus and multiple layers, the researchers will strive to ensure that the procedures are methodologically rigorous and transparent at all stages.

6.1 Action research on CEFR implementation: The JSPS Grant-in-Aid research project (Kaken)

The Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) Grant-in-Aid research project—*Foreign language education reform through action research: Putting CEFR educational principles into practice*「アクショ+ンリサーチの手法を用いた言語教育改善: CEFRの教育理念を参考にして」(JSPS Kaken project no. 20K00759)—was granted in April 2020. The schedule of the research project is planned for three consecutive years, ending March 2023. This section summarizes the first year of this research project.

In the first year (2020), the core research team was to develop an action research model that fits the needs of practitioner-researchers, to initiate and plan AR projects with a wider team of researchers and to help them identify their research foci. Based on a thorough review of the AR literature, the team planned to develop an AR model that facilitates the adoption of CEFR principles. The model proposed is the CEFR-focused Action Research Model (CARM). The next step was to build a larger research team by gathering collaborators willing to conduct research using this model. In the Kaken research proposal, these members are primarily from the JALT CEFR and LP SIG, invited to participate during a forum and a workshop. At the end of the first year, each member was to develop a research plan using a specially designed workbook that follows Stage 1 of CARM. It was envisioned that the researchers would work together in groups based on the predetermined themes mentioned in Sect. 5.2.1.

In the second year (2021), AR projects are being initiated and carried out, and data is being collected and analyzed. Some of the planned interventions will be implemented in the Spring term (in Japan the beginning of the academic year), others in the fall term. Several workshops are being held throughout the second year to give participants the opportunity to reflect on and share their experiences with CARM.

The third year will be devoted to reflecting on the AR projects. Participants will further analyze their data, critically reflect on their AR study, and both aspects will be discussed in workshops and presentations, and finally, research reports and results will be written up for publication. The expected outcome will hopefully support the initial assertion that CEFR and AR are a perfect match. To do so, we plan to publish these research reports in either an edited volume or in a journal to provide evidence exemplifying how to conduct research and offer best practice case studies of CEFR-informed action research. We will also include a discussion of the viability and applicability of the CARM model and insights gained from this multi-layered research project.

6.2 Reflection and Challenges from the first year of the Kaken project.

The call for collaborators for this project was met with enthusiasm and there are currently more than twenty researchers taking part. As mentioned, it was anticipated that the teams would be grouped thematically around the five central themes: (1) designing a curriculum and / or course, (2) materials development, (3) classroom implementation, (4) assessment, and (5) learner autonomy and the European Language Portfolio. These categories roughly follow the chapters of Nagai et al. (2020). Yet, feedback from the introductory forum, workshop and a review of the participants' workbooks revealed a more complex and diverse scenario than expected. Not all of the proposed research topics fit neatly into the predetermined categories. These topics, ranging from those that have a close relationship with the themes to those with only a tenuous link, include: *reading, writing, listening, task creation, learning goals, student-centered learning, self-assessment, vocabulary, phrases, students' self-esteem,* and *leadership*. Furthermore, most participants touched upon several interrelated areas—a point taken up in Sect 5.2.1. *Reading,* for example, can be discussed in relation to teaching materials, classroom implementation, or assessment. Teachers at an early stage of defining their research focus may not have a clear idea which of these areas should be given priority.

During the workshop, one participant even argued that teaching, learning, and assessment (and by extension our themes) should not be seen as separate categories, instead they should be seen as a central thread within the CARM model. It was suggested that a better way to think of the themes would be to start from the agents in the AR. If these are teachers, for example, then the focus would be on practices, beliefs, and so on. If these are learners, the focus would be on learner development. The other foci would then include our categories (e.g., curriculum design).

As seen in the above examples, how best to guide or help participants develop and formulate specific research questions from broad areas of CEFR-related research foci is the challenge we are faced with. It requires that we think clearly about broad areas and at the same time define the specific issues within the areas that we would like to research. At this stage, the beginning of the second year of our Kaken project, it is unclear whether the participants' reluctance to commit to one of the original categories is a natural part of the process of defining one's research focus, which will resolve itself with time, or if a reconceptualization of the themes is required. It is an issue we will continue to investigate in discussion with all participants in this project.

Concerning the participants of the project, there seems to be a significant hurdle to getting involved, even though the participants are interested in the project, the CEFR, and AR. This was not anticipated in the beginning but emerged during the last three months of the first year. Participants need to acquaint themselves with the CEFR and AR in general, and with the AR model suggested here, the CARM model. This is a significant challenge and affects the participants' level of readiness. Throughout the second

year, we hope to be able to use some projects as model cases to demonstrate the process of starting an AR project and to point out that some f exibility is necessary as it might not be possible to proceed through the f rst stage of CARM in a linear fashion (or any AR model as discussed in Sect. 4).

The project also aims to provide collaborative peer-support with opportunities for participants to exchange their experiences and learn from each other as they progress through the stages of CARM. The small-scale projects, however, will not be conducted in parallel as previously thought as not only starting times, but also progress will vary considerably. Participants will proceed through the stages at dif erent speeds and in dif erent periods during the second and the third year, some researchers taking longer and some taking less time. Some may even initiate mini AR cycles within a larger one or feel the need to repeat certain steps.

As the second year is underway, we have four projects which have initiated Stage II (the intervention) (Table 5) and may even enter Stage III (reviewing) during this research year. Five additional projects are in Stage I and these research plans will be implemented in the next term. This dynamic development was not anticipated in the project proposal, but it could gain momentum as the project proceeds. Readers are probably interested in learning more details about how projects are evolving. However, as this is ongoing research, describing projects, giving preliminary f ndings or predicting outcomes are not possible at this stage. Sharing f ndings and outcomes will be the task for a later stage. We are looking forward to providing insights uncovered from these small-scale projects. Furthermore, we are continually encouraging others to get involved in this project. If you are interested, please contact us.

In summary, the goal of the project is to support numerous small-scale action research (AR) projects related to foreign language teaching in Japan and beyond, in which practitioners ref ect on and f nd ways to improve their teaching practice using the CEFR as a reference tool and CARM as a guide. As this is a JSPS Kaken project, the outcome aims to contribute substantially to foreign language education (English and other languages) in Japan.

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