The CEFR in Japan: A tale of two approaches in English and Japanese language teaching

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This article explores the varying degrees of implementation and influence of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in Japan, focusing on a comparative analysis of its introduction to English language teaching (ELT) and Japanese language teaching (JLT). Drawing on a framework that operationalizes key CEFR concepts—the action-oriented approach, the role of social agents and proficiency levels—this study analyses curriculum documents, textbooks and assessment tools. The findings reveal a marked difference in the adoption strategies: a cautious, laissez-faire approach in ELT, and a more top-down, mandated approach in JLT. The ELT context demonstrates inconsistent alignment, with some progressive teachers and materials developers filling gaps left by national curricula, while the Japanese language education context shows a strong, albeit not yet widespread, alignment in accredited institutions. The article concludes by discussing the inherent "power" of the CEFR, not as a prescriptive standard, but as a framework that can drive reform, highlighting the need for targeted training and support to achieve broader, more uniform impact.

1 Introduction

The *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (Council of Europe [CoE] 2001) has emerged as a globally significant tool for language education, providing a common basis for the description of language curricula, syllabuses, textbooks and assessments. The CEFR's core principles — the AoA, the concept of the language learner as a social agent (SA), and the illustrative proficiency scale — are believed to have had a significant influence on approaches to teaching and assessment in different parts of the world. Despite the CEFR's original intent not to be prescriptive, its adoption by national education systems often involves complex adjustments to existing educational traditions and institutional structures.

This article examines the dynamics of CEFR implementation in Japan by comparing two distinct contexts: English language teaching (ELT) in secondary schools and Japanese language education for foreign learners. Both contexts have been influenced by the CEFR, but their pathways to adoption and their resulting degrees of alignment differ significantly. The analysis is based on our observations, a survey of textbooks and tests, and an examination of official documents from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT). By contrasting these two cases, this study aims to shed light on the conditions under which the CEFR can effectively drive educational reform and the challenges that arise when its principles are introduced into different institutional environments.

2 Conceptual framework and operationalization

The CEFR views language users and learners as 'social agents' who accomplish tasks in specific contexts and fields of action. The AoA is a key concept of the framework, moving beyond decontextualized language exercises to focus on meaningful communication. As Piccardo and North emphasize, "the real-life task, where social agents are engaged, is the core of the AoA, since it provides the unifying frame within which all actions make sense and serve a purpose" (2019: 40-41).Furthermore, in this paradigm, assessment is based on "what the social agent can do in a real situation" (397). It should be noted, however, that while classroom tasks designed for learning purposes cannot really be considered as authentic and real-life in the sense that Piccardo and North mean, such tasks can be seen as having their own intrinsic pedagogical authenticity and they can serve as useful proxies for real-life tasks in the world beyond the classroom.

For the purpose of this analysis, we have operationalized the key concepts of the CEFR, i.e., task authenticity, social agents and the levels, to evaluate the alignment of educational materials and assessments. Task authenticity is used to measure the implementation of the AoA. Tasks are judged to have high authenticity if they are meaningful, contextualized communicative activities, as opposed to decontextualized drills. The concept of social agents is operationalized by examining the presence of a specific, identifiable context in test and textbook instructions. For example, a task is considered to involve a social agent if the instruction places the learner in a given situation (e.g., "You are a customer in a restaurant ..."). This practice, which has roots in communicative language testing, is crucial for assessing how well the CEFR's social agent concept is being integrated. Finally, the levels of the CEFR are evaluated by determining whether a program or assessment explicitly specifies CEFR proficiency levels.

This framework allows for an analysis of the degree of alignment, recognizing that CEFR integration is not a binary state but a continuous spectrum. This continuous model is essential for capturing the nuanced implementation observed in Japan's language educational landscape. Textbooks serve as a means of delivery, while classroom assessments and entrance examinations represent the assessment element of the education system.

3. The case of English language education in Japan

3.1 The CEFR-J project: the early years (2004-2012)

To contextualize the revision of English language education in Japan, we must first introduce the CEFR-J project (Negishi et al. 2013). This initiative comprised several government-funded research projects that investigated how to construct a language framework like the CEFR and how to properly adapt it to the Japanese context. Prior to the CEFR's publication, there was virtually no comprehensive understanding of Japanese learners' English proficiency distribution—only fragmented data from local examinations such as the EIKEN Tests existed. When the CEFR was published in 2001, it initially attracted attention from only a small group of specialists, some of whom did not fully grasp the meaning of CEFR levels and even claimed that we should aim at C level.

In 2004, we launched the KAKEN project, collecting information on international proficiency benchmarks for English while researching domestic English proficiency guidelines across primary, secondary and tertiary education levels. During our search for international standards we encountered the recently published CEFR. Its growing European influence and impressive scope, size and depth led us to abandon our plans to create original proficiency guidelines. Instead, we decided to explore the CEFR's potential as a "descriptive tool" to analyse the situations, needs, and goals of English language teaching in Japan, and to determine how it should be adapted for this purpose.

In 2008, a newly funded KAKEN project called the *CEFR-J project* brought together 15 researchers from various fields of applied linguistics. To better understand the CEFR's design and construction process, we created our own version of CEFR-aligned calibrated descriptors. Since English language learners in

Japan were predominantly at lower proficiency levels, we focused our branching on lower CEFR levels, as recommended in the CEFR (CoE 2001: 32). We developed the CEFR-J *Can Do* descriptors based on the following principles:

1. Add Pre-A1

2. Divide A1 into three sublevels: A1.1, A1.2, A1.3

3. Divide A2, B1, and B2 into two sublevels: A2.1, A2.2; B1.1, B1.2; B2.1, B2.2

4. No change for C1 or C2

5. Adapt *Can Do* descriptors to the Japanese context

We carefully developed and calibrated the descriptors in accordance with the CoE guidelines. Project members were assigned to five skill areas—spoken interaction (SI), spoken production (SP), listening (L), reading (R), and writing (W—for descriptor development. The format of the CEFR-J descriptors followed that of the self-assessment grid (CoE 2001: 26-27). While we were aware of the four modes of communication (reception, production, interaction and mediation) distinguished in the CEFR, we adopted the terms used in the self-assessment grid—understanding, speaking, and writing—which were more familiar to stakeholders at that time. In 2009, we invited Dr Tony Green from the University of Bedfordshire to conduct a workshop on descriptor development. Following his recommendations, we analysed our original descriptors by breaking them down into three components: (1) task [action], (2) condition and (3) criteria [or text for receptive skills]. Tables 1 and 2 show examples of these. We consulted the European Language Portfolio's descriptor list (Lenz and Schneider 2004) and revised our descriptors to include all three components, ensuring they were comparable across difficulty levels.

Table 1. *An example of a "broken-down" CEFR-J spoken interaction Can Do descriptor*

A1.3 Spoken Interaction	Performance	Criteria (Quality)	Condition
I can ask and answer simple questions about very familiar topics (e.g., hobbies, sports, club activities), provided that people speak slowly and clearly with some repetition and rephrasing.	I can ask and answer … questions about … topics (e.g., hobbies, sports, club activities)	simple very familiar	provided that people speak slowly and clearly with some repetition and rephrasing.

Table 2. *An example of a "broken-down" CEFR-J Listening Can Do descriptor*

B2.1 Listening	Task	Text	Condition
I can follow extended speech and complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar.	I can follow	extended speech and complex lines of argument	provided the topic is reasonably familiar.

In 2010, we completed the alpha version of the 120 CEFR-J descriptors covering Pre-A1 to B2.2 across five language activities (L, R, SI, SP, W). This approach was necessary because our main goal was to understand the construction process of the CEFR-like framework, and creating hundreds of Can Do descriptors similar to the ELP was not feasible. In summer 2010, we conducted an extensive sorting

exercise with 241 primary and secondary school teachers. The results were encouraging, with an overall Spearman rank-order correlation of ρ = .928. Based on these findings, we made minor revisions to the alpha version and prepared a beta version for a large-scale Can Do questionnaire survey in 2011.

The 2011 survey included 5,468 participants (1,685 lower secondary, 2,538 upper secondary, and 1,245 university students). Unlike the original CEFR descriptors, which were calibrated against teachers' perceptions of learner proficiency, we delivered our survey directly to students. This approach was necessary because Japanese class sizes are much larger than those in Europe, making it unlikely that teachers could accurately judge what individual students can do. After conducting IRT analysis, we revised the descriptors and released version 1 of the CEFR-J in March 2012.

3.2 The CEFR-J project: the RLD and implementation (2012-2024)

The release of the CEFR-J raised awareness among English language teaching communities in Japan about the CEFR's growing influence globally. For example, the EIKEN Tests, Japan's most widely used English assessment, began aligning its test grades with CEFR levels. In 2013, MEXT published a booklet introducing Can Do descriptors and encouraged secondary schools to create their own statements. This initiative achieved limited success, however, as MEXT did not direct schools to use the CEFR as a reference point, leaving many schools struggling to define appropriate descriptor content across proficiency levels. Nevertheless, the CEFR-J succeeded in making the CEFR more accessible to Japanese educators.

In the decade following Version 1's release, the CEFR-J project concentrated on two areas: developing Reference Level Descriptions (RLDs) for the CEFR-J and supporting various stakeholders—MEXT, local education boards, schools and publishers—in using the CEFR-J according to their specific needs.

3.2.1 CEFR-J RLD Project

Reference Level Descriptions (RLDs) involve developing resources for a specific language to make the CEFR concrete by detailing the lexis, grammar, and functions needed at each level (CoE 2005). As part of the CEFR-J project, we explored how to develop RLDs effectively using the following data-intensive methods. We assembled a new KAKEN research team with specialists in corpus linguistics, machine learning and language assessment. Between 2012 and 2020, we developed textbook and learner corpora classified by CEFR levels and evaluated machine learning methods to identify key linguistic features for level classification (Tono 2013). This work produced several open resources: the CEFR-J Wordlist, Grammar Profile, Text Profile and Error Profile. Full details are available on the CEFR-J website (https://www.cefr-j.org/download_eng.html).

Another significant initiative was the CEFR-J Can Do Test—a set of performance assessments measuring users' ability to complete tasks described in specific descriptors. We created test samples for 100 CEFR-J descriptors, with sample versions publicly available on the CEFR-J website (https://www.cefr-j.org/download_eng.html#cefrj_testasks).

3.2.2 Encouraging the use of the CEFR-J for ELT in Japan

Between 2018 and 2020, MEXT formed a working group to revise the national curriculum (Course of Study), with one of the present authors (Yukio Tono) serving as a committee member. Tono informed committee members about the CEFR's international influence and the CEFR-J project's work. MEXT subsequently incorporated several CEFR principles into the Courses of Study. The 2020 curriculum for secondary schools divides speaking into spoken production and spoken interaction, mirroring the original CEFR categories. Teaching objectives are now framed as Can Do statements, and vocabulary requirements reference the CEFR-J word list. Despite these CEFR-influenced changes, MEXT avoided explicitly stating that the Course of Study was aligned with CEFR levels, deeming such policy declarations

inappropriate for an official legal document. Consequently, those unfamiliar with the CEFR might not recognize the CEFR's influence on the revised curriculum.

In our final KAKEN project (2020-2024), we collaborated with two local schools—a lower-secondary school (LSS) in Saitama City and an upper-secondary school (USS) in Kyoto—to integrate CEFR perspectives into their programmes. For the Saitama project, we collected students' written production data over two years. Using tasks partially based on the CEFR-J Can Do Test, we administered the same writing assignments throughout this period to track students' progress from A1 to A2. In the Kyoto project, we analysed one lesson from the English textbook in detail. We partnered with a Japanese English teacher who invited us to participate in lesson planning, task development and assessment using CEFR-J resources. We video-recorded and transcribed all classes for this lesson to create the CEFR-J Classroom Observation Corpus. In this corpus, we annotated all teacher and student utterances for classroom discourse functions and language related to Can Do objectives. This observation data directly connects to the final Performance Test results, highlighting the relationship between input, interaction and output. The results were reported at the International Symposium of the CEFR-J 2025, where one of the invited speakers, Barry O'Sullivan, commented that the CEFR-J project was "one of the most successful implementation models based on a series of empirical studies and practices" (O'Sullivan 2025).

3.3 Impact of the CEFR: the case of English language teaching in Japan

The fact that the Courses of Study did not explicitly state CEFR levels suggests they are loosely, rather than strongly, aligned with the CEFR. It should be noted, however, that MEXT has decided to set attainment targets using the CEFR for their national surveys in the Fourth Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education: A1 or above for lower secondary school graduation and A2 or above for upper secondary school graduation (https://www.mext.go.jp/content/20240228-soseisk02-100000597_09.pdf).

The implementation of the CEFR principles, i.e., AoA, social agent and levels, in ELT in Japan can be examined by looking at two of the three components of the Comprehensive Learning System: delivery and assessment (British Council et al. 2022).[1]

3.3.1 Delivery: textbooks and local curricula

At the LSS level, an analysis of textbooks from a city with which our CEFR-J project group worked closely reveals a complex picture. The authorized textbooks, which follow the loosely aligned Courses of Study, show weak alignment with the CEFR's core principles such as AoA and social agent. They often contain decontextualized grammar exercises and lack authentic communicative tasks. However, many schools create their own supplementary, locally produced textbooks, which, in this specific city, show a much higher degree of alignment with the CEFR. This is mainly because the teachers involved hold beliefs that are consistent with the CEFR's emphasis on social agents and the AoA. These local materials effectively fill the gap left by the authorized textbooks, demonstrating a bottom-up, teacher-driven effort to align pedagogy with CEFR principles. However, it should be noted that this may not be the case for all the local boards of education.

Similarly, at the USS level, authorized textbooks generally exhibit weak alignment. The primary focus remains on grammar exercises and decontextualized practice, which contrasts sharply with the communicative, task-based approach advocated by the CEFR. There are some newly edited English textbooks with strong alignment with the CEFR or the CEFR-J, but their use so far seems to be limited to a small number of schools, and it will take time to familiarize teachers with CEFR-based textbooks with a strong emphasis on AoA.

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1. The Comprehensive Learning System (CLS) is a conceptual model that argues for the success of language education through the close, systematic alignment of all core system components—specifically, curriculum, delivery (teaching), and assessment—rather than treating them as independent elements (British Council et al. 2022).

3.3.2. Assessment: entrance examinations and classroom tests

The assessment landscape for ELT in Japan is highly varied, ranging from classroom tests to high-stakes entrance examinations. This variety leads to a highly uneven degree of CEFR alignment.

For LSS students, two types of high-stakes entrance examinations are crucial for admission to USS: public and private. The public USS entrance examinations show some degree of CEFR alignment, with certain sections featuring task-based and contextualized items. This partial alignment reflects a gradual shift in public sector testing. However, private USS entrance examinations often show no such features, relying instead on traditional, decontextualized grammar and vocabulary items. This disparity creates a schism in the assessment landscape, as many students take both types of tests.

For USS students, the situation is even more complex. The Japanese university entrance examination system includes the Common Test for University Admissions (CTUA), individual university entrance examinations, and commercial tests. While classroom assessments and individual university entrance examinations often lack CEFR alignment, both the CTUA and commercial tests (e.g., EIKEN Tests, IELTS) claim to be aligned with the CEFR.[2] These tests feature a high proportion of task-based and contextualized items, effectively functioning as assessments of what social agents can do in real-life situations. This creates a disconnect: USS students are taught using weakly aligned materials, but they are assessed for university admission using strongly aligned tests. This forces students to adapt to a different approach to language use for high-stakes examinations, suggesting a positive backwash effect where the CEFR-aligned tests are driving changes in student learning strategies, if not in the curriculum itself.

This approach can be characterized as a laissez-faire strategy, whereby the provision of information regarding the CEFR and the CEFR-J, in addition to the tools and tests developed, is facilitated through our annual symposium. Subsequently, the decision regarding adoption or adaptation of these materials is entrusted to educators, publishers and test providers. This approach has resulted in varying degrees of alignment with the CEFR, and the impact is uneven.

4 The case of Japanese language education

In contrast to the gradual, cautious adoption in ELT, the implementation of the CEFR in Japanese language teaching (JLT) for foreign learners has been a much more direct, top-down approach. This was primarily driven by external pressure from institutions and students in Europe and beyond who required a standardized way to measure and report their Japanese language proficiency. They needed to demonstrate their language level for academic credit or for a visa and often required CEFR-aligned certificates.

In response to this demand, MEXT took a decisive step by publishing the *Frame of Reference for Japanese Language Education* (FRJ) (Subdivision on the Japanese Language of the Council for Cultural Affairs, 2021). This was followed by a regulatory move: MEXT established an accreditation system for Japanese language schools. To be accredited, these institutions must demonstrate a clear alignment with the FRJ in their curriculum design, teaching content and assessment. This mandatory requirement has created a powerful incentive for schools to adopt the CEFR.

An analysis of accredited Japanese language schools reveals a very high degree of alignment with the CEFR. The level of admission and the target level of achievement at the end of the programme are both defined according to the CEFR. The curriculum, delivery and assessment in these institutions are

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2. References on the alignment of EIKEN with the CEFR: https://www.eiken.or.jp/eiken/en/grades/#:~:text=In%20a%20move%20to%20test,C1.

   References on the alignment of IELTS with the CEFR: https://ielts.org/organisations/ielts-for-organisations/compare-ielts/ielts-and-the-cefr#:~:text=To%20help%20test%20users%20understand,and%20other%20Cambridge%20English%20Qualifications.

intentionally designed around the AoA and the concept of social agency. This structured, mandated approach has been highly effective in achieving a high degree of CEFR alignment within the accredited sector.

It is conceivable that a high level of alignment may have been achieved in accredited Japanese language schools. The impact has been significant, but not yet pervasive; the programmes of non-accredited schools do not align with the CEFR. It appears that these non-accredited schools harbour a desire to be accredited, yet lack the necessary understanding of how to achieve this. Consequently, the implementation of training programmes that are designed to facilitate familiarity and alignment with the CEFR is imperative.

5 Discussion: the power of the CEFR

The comparison between ELT and JLT in Japan is interesting because it illustrates two different pathways for CEFR implementation. In ELT, a laissez-faire approach has led to a varied, uneven degree of alignment. Delivery in schools often lags behind, while assessment, especially in high-stakes university admissions, is moving toward CEFR principles, such as AoA and SA as well as CEFR levels. This creates a tension that is driving change from the top, with tests leading the way. The CEFR, in this context, acts as a guiding framework that educators and test providers can voluntarily adopt, with adoption often being a response to a market demand for internationally recognized proficiency standards.

In JLT, the CEFR's adoption was top-down and mandated. This approach led to strong alignment in accredited institutions but has not yet reached the entire sector. The CEFR, in this case, functions as a powerful regulatory tool, with MEXT acting as a coordinating body, monitoring its use through the accreditation process. This contrasts with the CEFR's original intent, which explicitly states, "We have NOT set out to tell practitioners what to do" (CoE 2001: xi). Nevertheless, as the CEFR provides a comprehensive framework, it possesses an inherent power to influence and structure educational systems, particularly when adopted by an authoritative body.

The key point to note is that the CEFR's power is dependent on the approach taken. A laissez-faire approach can result in instances of innovation and alignment, driven by individual educators and market forces, but this can be a slow and uneven process. A top-down, mandated approach can achieve rapid and high-level alignment within a specific sector, but it requires significant institutional support and training to ensure widespread adoption. In both cases, the CEFR acts not as a static standard but as a catalyst for educational reform.

6 Conclusion

The CEFR's journey in Japan demonstrates its adaptability and influence as a framework for language education. Both ELT and JLT have engaged with its principles, but through different mechanisms. The ELT experience highlights the power of bottom-up initiatives and high-stakes testing to drive change, even in the absence of a strict mandate. The Japanese language education experience shows that a top-down, regulatory approach can achieve rapid and strong alignment.

Ultimately, the effectiveness of the CEFR in any national context depends on the synergy between curriculum design, delivery and assessment. If a system is not fully aligned with the CEFR, educators must actively work to fill the gap themselves, supplementing textbooks and adapting assessments to align with the framework's principles. This requires significant effort but is essential for creating a Comprehensive Learning System. The CEFR provides the conceptual tools for this work, and the experiences of Japan offer valuable lessons on how to deploy them, whether through cautious encouragement or decisive mandates.

7 References

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8 Biographies

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Yukio Tono is a professor of corpus linguistics at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies and serves as Director of the World Language Center at TUFS. He received his PhD from the University of Lancaster, UK. His research focuses on corpus applications in foreign language teaching and learning, L2 vocabulary acquisition, pedagogical lexicography and resource development for the CEFR-J. He serves as principal investigator of the CEFR-J project together with Masashi Negishi.