

A CEFR-based approach to helping students construct personal English-learning goals

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Students learn English for a multitude of reasons, and studies around the world have linked personal goal-setting to higher levels of motivation, ownership and language achievement. One of the aims of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is to help students establish learning objectives, but there has been little research done on this, especially within higher education. We conducted a study at a university in Japan to investigate whether CEFR could act as a common tool to help students construct personal English-learning goals. The four stages of our project were (I) a paper-based survey of all first-year students, (II) a focus group interview with English teachers at a local high school, (III) a 15-week action research project with a class of environmental science students, and (IV) follow-up interviews 17 months later. We found that CEFR functioned well as a universal, personal and open-ended framework for helping students think about and formulate their future goals.

1. Introduction

In thrall to content and qualifications, we have forgotten the deeper purpose of education. In the rush to make young people successful exam passers, we have overlooked the deeper need to become successful people, eager to learn and grow in the real-life world of work, leisure and relationships. (Claxton, 2008, p. ix)

What is the purpose of learning English? What is the definition of a successful English-speaker? It is not possible to give a single answer to these questions: around the world, students with a multitude of different backgrounds and personal circumstances are learning English for a multitude of different reasons. Often, however, people's success at English — the determination of whether or not their English is fit for purpose — is measured in the same way, by taking an exam. The value of these exams is that they provide a common standard for measuring success: it is one exam for all. The flip-side to this, and the drawback of these exams, is that, in the real world, there is no single reason why people study English in the first place, and no single set of English-speaking competencies that constitute success.

Personal learning goals provide a way for students to plan and measure their progress in terms of the deeper purpose of their lifelong English studies. Clearly, personal learning goals lack the status and authority of formal exams — there is no stamped certificate that acts as evidence as to what has been achieved. But personal learning goals can motivate students in a different way to exams, being more a form of internal, self-driven motivation, as opposed to external or forced motivation. (It is

interesting to note that the Japanese word for study, as in studying for exams, is made up of two characters, the second of which represents the idea of compulsion or being forced to do something.)

Studies suggest that personal goal-setting is one of keys to students taking responsibility and ownership of the learning process (Turkay, 2014). In the area of language learning, a statistically significant relationship has been identified between the goal-setting process and language achievement (Moeller et al, 2012). Nevertheless, it is far from easy for students to make meaningful and realistic goals for language learning. Languages are abstract and complex systems (Bley-Vroman, 1989); although curriculum descriptions present students with a clear and accessible pathway toward learning a language, “the day-to-day reality of teaching is far less accessible to scrutiny and is infinitely dispersed” (Tudor, 2003, p. 6).

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, or CEFR, was created partly to address this challenge. The framework is based on a series of can-do descriptors. According to the Council of Europe (2020), CEFR makes it possible to:

- (a) establish learning and teaching objectives
- (b) review curricula
- (c) design teaching materials
- (d) provide a basis for recognising language qualifications thus facilitating educational and occupational mobility.

Within teaching and learning communities, CEFR is perhaps most closely associated with point (d) above, followed by points (c) and (b). As far as we (the authors of this paper) are aware, there has been little research carried out into point (a) at university level, particularly the effectiveness of using CEFR to support the development of students’ personal English-learning objectives and goals for life. We decided to investigate this at the university where we worked in Japan. This is a small public university near Kyoto that is divided into four schools: engineering, environmental science, humanities and nursing. Here we have a body of students with an enormous variety of potential career and life paths stretching out in front of them, which involve English in very different ways, and to very different degrees of importance. Given this variety, could CEFR act as a common tool to help these students construct personal learning goals for their English?

A Japanese version of CEFR, known as CEFR-J, was created in 2012 (Tono, 2019). The reason for creating a country-specific version of CEFR was that the level of English spoken in Japan is much lower than in Europe, and consequently more sub-levels were needed at the lower end of the scale. The relatively low standard of English in Japan is illustrated by a (EF, 2021) survey that rates Japan as “low proficiency” for English skills, and ranks it 78th among non-anglophone countries and regions. For comparison, other populous countries with a “low proficiency” rating include Brazil (ranked 60th), Ethiopia (63rd), Turkey (70th) and Indonesia (80th). It is important to note that CEFR-J is not well known among students in Japan. Part of our research, therefore, would involve introducing students to the concept of a language framework built around can-do descriptors.

2. Methods

This paper describes and discusses four stages of our project that were conducted between January 2019 and January 2021. Stage I was a paper-based survey given to all 537 first-year students at our university (Taniguchi & Jones, 2021). The survey questions are attached to this paper as an appendix. The form was written entirely in Japanese, so as to create a level playing field between students of different English levels. The initial questions in the survey were designed to discover if students had goals for their English-learning, and, if not, why not. Next, students were given a self-assessment exercise to familiarize themselves with CEFR-J’s can-do descriptors. The final questions were designed to gauge students’ initial reactions to the idea of using these as the basis for personal learning goals.

Stage II of our research project was a focus-group interview with English-language teachers at a local private high school in Japan. The aim here was to gain insights into the language-learning goals

and ambitions of students as they work toward university-level education. This was a 90-minute discussion involving three teachers.

Stage III was a semester-long action research project at our university. We team-taught a compulsory English course to a class of 30 first-year students in the school of environmental science (Taniguchi & Jones, 2022). Our course consisted of one 90-minute class per week, and ran for 15 weeks. The theme we chose for the course was “English is a skill for life”. The syllabus and lesson plans were designed to include elements related to goal-setting, lifelong learning, language frameworks, and can-do descriptors. The syllabus also contained many elements of a general English communication course (the course textbook was “Breakthrough Plus Level 2” (Craven, 2012). There were two assessment points during the course: a written test at the halfway point, and a speaking test at the end.

Stage IV took place 17 months after the end of the stage III course, when the students were nearing the end of their second year at university. Three students came for one-to-one follow-up interviews, which were designed to see how much of the course they remembered. The selection of the students was based on (a) random choosing, (b) wanting to include an above-average, average and below-average student (based on the assessment results), and (c) the availability for interview of the students themselves. Students were given no indication in advance of what the interview would be about. It was stressed that their participation was entirely voluntary, and there would be no consequences for them whether they accepted or refused the invitation. Each of the three students came for an interview on a different day. During the course of each interview, each student confirmed they had not spoken to any of their classmates about the content of the discussion, and were given no forewarning about the kinds of questions we might ask.

We decided not to make audio or video recordings of the various activities within stages II, III and IV. We felt that the presence of recording devices would severely inhibit participants, and we were keen to encourage an open and free-flowing exchange of ideas and contributions.

3. Results

3.1. Stage I, Paper survey

When all first-year students at our university were asked “Do you have a written list of goals for your English?”, 4% of them said yes, 9% said they had a mental list, and 58% said they had some ideas. In response to the follow-up question “If you don’t have a written list, why not?”, 40% of students said they had never thought about it, 25% said they did not know how, and 15% said it was because they did not know their goals.

After completing an exercise to familiarize themselves with CEFR-J, students were asked “Do you think that can-do statements could help you to make a list of goals for your English?” They gave a cautious welcome to the idea, with 56% replying “yes, a bit” and 20% replying “maybe”. A small group of students gave a strong welcome to the idea: 16% replied “yes, a lot”. Who were the students who gave a strong welcome to the above idea? The breakdown showed that it includes students from all four schools, with humanities students being the most enthusiastic. The group also included students at all TOEIC levels, with those having relatively low or relatively high scores being the most enthusiastic.

3.2. Stage II, Focus group

The most notable finding of the focus group with high-school English teachers was their anecdotal evidence from overseas trips. These trips involve groups of high-school students having to use English to communicate with local students in a foreign country, for example, China. The evidence from the teachers included the observation that “lower-level [English] classes use more non-verbal communication” and “tend to be better communicators”. There was also an observation concerning the lessons that students take away from their overseas experiences. Upper-level students, who are

perhaps disappointed with the results of their communication, tend to conclude that “we should learn English more” and “we need deeper communication”. On the other hand, lower-level students, who may be pleasantly surprised by their communication success, tend to reach the conclusion that “we don’t have to study English” and “we don’t need deeper communication”.

Of course, the teachers felt that these were not the best lessons for students to derive. In their words, they felt that a better conclusion for upper-level students would be that they needed to develop “broader” communication skills. A more helpful conclusion for lower-level students would be “OK, we can survive. Next, going deeper will open up new levels”. The teachers saw it as part of their role to help students interpret their experiences, and draw the most useful lessons from them on their own, through their goal setting.

3.3. Stage III, Action research

We began our 15-week English course for 30 first-year environmental science students by introducing the concept of “English is a skill for life”. We stressed to students that they were entering a new phase of their English learning. In the educational stages in Japan up to and including high school, there is a tendency to regard English as a skill needed to pass exams and, ultimately, gain a university place. Now, having safely arrived at university, students were able to focus on English as a skill that would enrich their future lives. As part of this, when students made their traditional name cards for the course, we asked them to include some of drawing or illustration to indicate one of their life goals. All students responded with great energy. Figure 1 shows the name card of a student whose ambition was to conduct research into whales.



Figure 1. Name card

Also, instead of taking an attendance register each week, students were asked to write a short check-in note when they arrived at the class, and to put it in an attendance box. In addition to writing their name, students were asked to mention one goal they had for the coming week, or some achievement from the previous week. Again, students responded positively. Figures 2 and 3 are examples of typical messages.

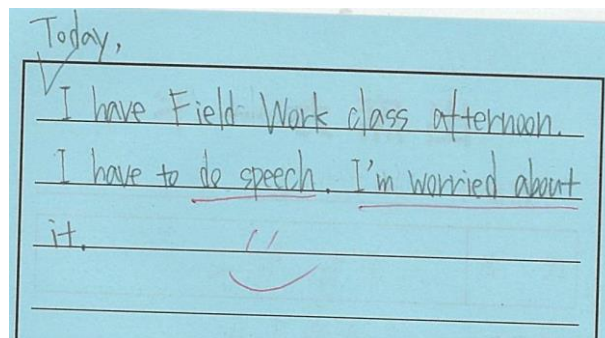


Figure 2. Goals.

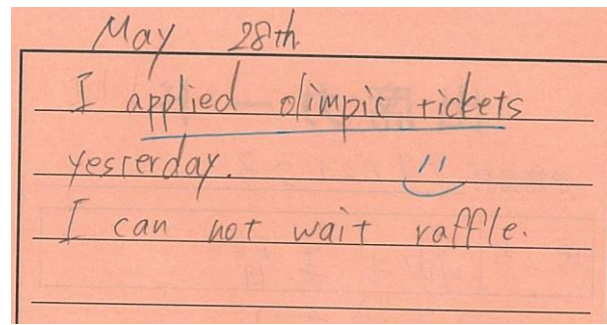


Figure 3. Experiences.

From the beginning of the first class, the entire course was conducted solely in English. Even when working one-to-one with a partner, or as part of a larger group, students were encouraged to avoid Japanese and conduct their communications in English only. For most of the time, students managed to do this successfully, and we were happy to allow students to use the occasional phrase of Japanese among themselves.

Throughout the course, students were asked to consider how English could benefit their life or professional career. For the written test at the halfway point of the course, students were asked to write an essay titled “My future: How I might use English in my life”. All students were able to visualize ways that English could be important to them, and this formed part of the marking criteria for the test; the evaluation rubric assessed how well students addressed or extended the topic, and applied or added to the material studied in class. Figures 4 and 5 are extracts from two of these essays.

getting government. As a result, there are more opportunities to speak English in

■■■■■■ I'll use English for my job. City hall member often use English

when foreign people comes city hall. So, I think city hall member must can

speak English. People come to the city hall when they are troubled by life. If

city hall member can't speak English, going city hall is hard for foreign people.

The most important thing for city hall member is communication skills.

Figure 4. Essay extract

■■■■■■

The first reason is that I think that being able to use English is very cool. Because most Japanese can't speak English. Such time if Japanese speak English, I think it's very cool. And if I can speak English, around people will be surprised. For example, Ota yuki's presentation. He is Japanese but his presentation is all English. That was so cool. I want to be speak English fluently that much.

■■■■■■ The second reason is that English is an international language. So I

Figure 5. Essay extract

“Ota yuki” in Figure 5 refers to a fencer, who, despite being nervous about his English, gave a highly influential presentation as part of Tokyo’s bid to host the 2020 Olympic Games. In one of our classes, we used Ota’s presentation as part of a discussion about how communication skills can be more effective than language skills for expressing ourselves. (This also built upon the finding from our stage II focus group, about the need for some students to develop “broader” communication skills.)

Students were given a number of exercises to introduce the CEFR-J framework, and the concept of can-do statements. In one exercise, students interviewed a partner about their self-perception of their current English level, and their ambitions for their English level in five years’ time. Some typical results of this exercise are shown in figures 6 and 7.

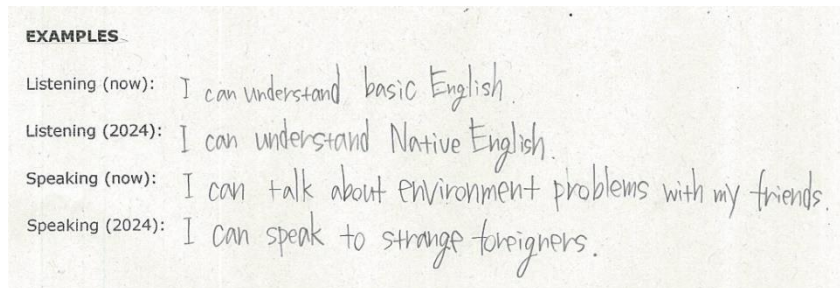


Figure 6. Self-perception

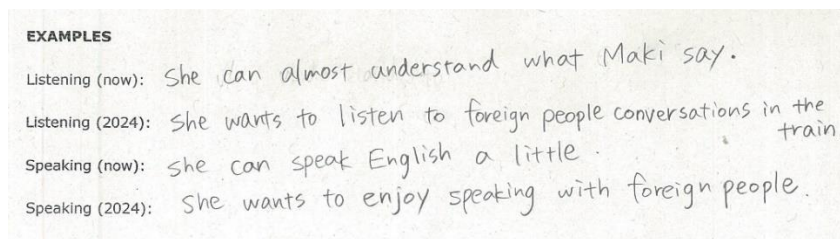


Figure 7. Self-perception

At this point in the course, students were asked to think about developing strategies to realize their English-language ambitions. Together with the students, we developed the model shown in Figure 8.

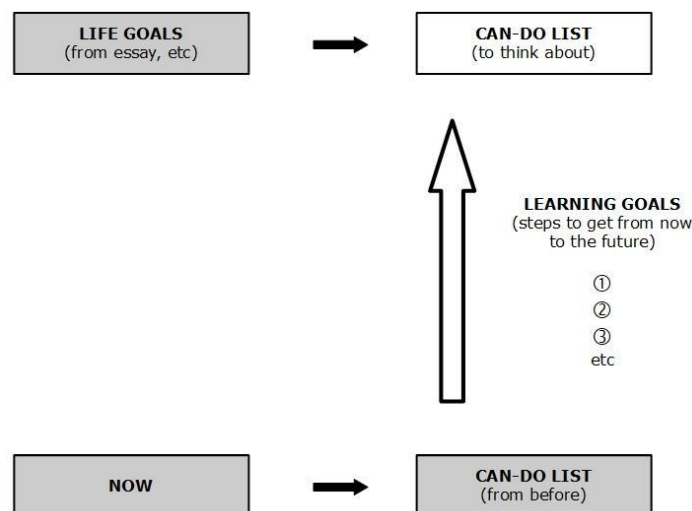


Figure 8. Proposed model

For the speaking test at the end of the course, students were asked to give a short presentation titled “My future: How I can keep levelling up my English”. All of the students were able to look ahead beyond university, and put forward simple and specific strategies. Again, this formed part of the marking criteria for the test. Figures 9, 10 and 11 are some of the note cards one student used for this presentation.

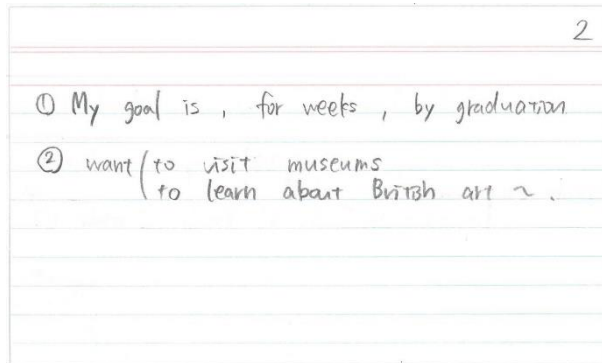


Figure 9. Note card

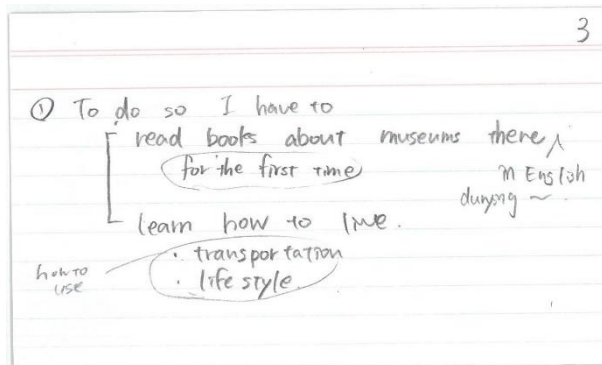


Figure 10. Note card

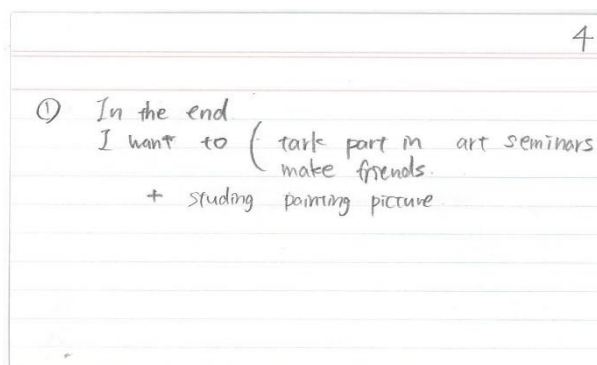


Figure 11. Note card

After the completion of the course, students were asked to reflect on the value of can-do statements and the CEFR-J framework in terms of forming goals and strategies. Figures 12 and 13 show typical responses.

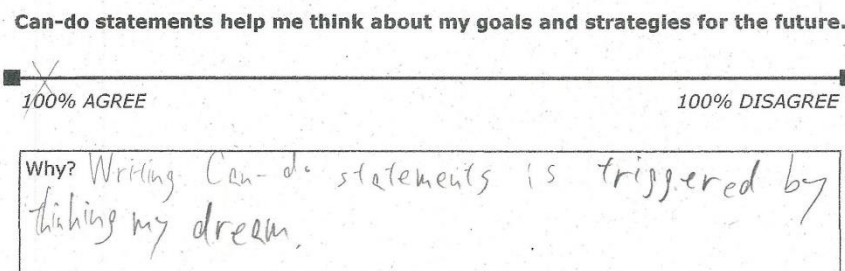


Figure 12. Responses on can-do statements

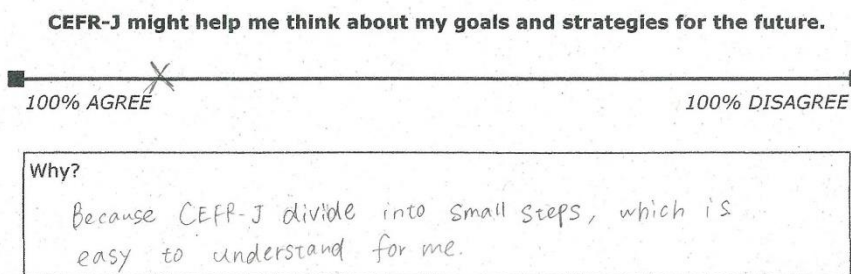


Figure 13. Responses on can-do statements.

Tables 1 and 2 show the overall results for the above questions. The AGREE-DISAGREE line has been divided into 11 zones, and the number of the crosses in each zone has been recorded.

Table 1. Survey response

“Can-do statements help me think about my goals and strategies in for the future”

100% AGREE

100% DISAGREE

12	7	5	1	-	2	-	-	-	-	1
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Table 2. Survey response

“CEFR-J might help me think about my goals and strategies for the future”

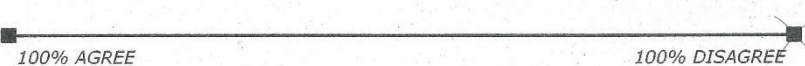
100% AGREE

100% DISAGREE

10	9	3	2	-	2	-	-	1	-	-
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We were grateful for the two cases of disagreement, since negative feedback tended to be more useful than positive feedback — particularly when it revealed specific doubts, uncertainties and other issues. These two negative responses are shown in Figures 14 and 15.

Can-do statements help me think about my goals and strategies for the future.



Why? The reason is that the time you make the Can-do list is useless. You should use the time for practice of English.

Figure 14. Negative feedback.

CEFR-J might help me think about my goals and strategies for the future.



Why? I think I don't want to read CEFR-J because CEFR-J is very long.

Figure 15. Negative feedback.

3.4. Stage IV, Follow-up interviews

The first student from stage III who attended a follow-up interview 17 months later (hereafter referred to as student #1) was above average in terms of their grade for the course. We both observed that this student was extremely relaxed and comfortable using English in a conversational way.

Student #1 presented us with mixed messages. On the one hand, we began by asking what they could recall about the final presentation they gave at the end of the course (17 months earlier). The student could recall nothing, even when they were shown the note cards they had used for their presentation. On the other hand, student #1 could recall much of the general content of the course. For example, unprompted by us, the student talked in some detail about how we focussed on “goals and strategies” throughout the course, even if “I can’t remember *my* goals and strategies”.

The next student (student #2) was below average in terms of their final grade. It was notable that this student switched from English to Japanese near the beginning of our discussion.

Once again, we began by asking the student what they could remember about their final presentation. The initial response of student #2 was “can’t remember”. A few moments later, however, the student had almost perfect recall, which closely matched the note cards we later shared with the student. One of the personal learning strategies that student #2 had described in their presentation was listening to English songs. Unprompted by us, the student described in some detail the English songs they were currently listening to (i.e., 17 months later).

The final student (student #3) had achieved an average grade for the course. They used English throughout our follow-up discussion (although during some ‘small talk’ after the interview had finished, they switched to Japanese).

Student #3 had set out very clear goals and strategies during their final presentation: they had a clear vision of a particular country they wanted to travel to during their second year in order to practice English. During our interview, student #3 had near-perfect recall of the content of the course, and the details of their own goals and plans. Unfortunately, they had been unable to put their plans into action because the covid crisis had prevented them from leaving Japan. Nevertheless, the student had come up with alternative strategies for English practice (e.g., studying TED Talks).

4. Discussion

In Stage I, our paper survey of all first-year students, revealed that, in general, students did not have personal-learning goals for their English, and were willing to consider CEFR as a way of addressing this. In Stage II, the high-school teachers in our focus group gave us the cautionary tale of how students can arrive at goals that may not be for the best for them, and how they need help in making sense of the highly complex process of learning a language. Our Stage III semester-long action research project demonstrated to us that students were able to use a CEFR-based approach to forming meaningful and relevant English-learning goals and strategies. Finally, in Stage IV, our follow-up interviews with students confirmed that general ideas and specific strategies from stage III remained in students' minds 17 months later, when the students were at a totally different phase of their undergraduate university career.

To us, CEFR proved its value as a tool for personal goal setting in three ways. Firstly, CEFR is universal. No two of the students we worked with during this project were alike. The ambition of one student (Figure 1) was to study killer whales, while the ambition of another (Figure 4) was to get a job in their local city hall. These future career paths could hardly be more different, and, in both cases, it would be difficult to find an exam that dealt specifically with the unique set of skills required for each line of work. Nevertheless, all the students in our stage III group were able to work together constructively using a CEFR as the basis for thinking about personal English-learning goals.

The universality of CEFR was also shown by the results of our stage I paper survey. Across all four schools at our university, and across all English levels, students welcomed the idea of using CEFR to help them formulate personal English-learning goals. To recap, these four schools are engineering, environmental science, humanities and nursing. Each of these schools is very different in terms of the way it prepares students for the future. For example, the highlight of the undergraduate programme for humanities students tends to be a year abroad at an overseas university, whereas for nursing students it is interacting with members of the public at a local hospital. Likewise, the pre-existing English levels that students bring from high school are very different. As we saw during the stage II focus group, the attitudes towards English that students bring from high school can also vary considerably. Indeed, one of the key challenges of teaching compulsory English courses at our university, such as the class for environmental science students in stage III, is that these classes are not streamed by TOEIC score or other indicator of English level.

At the same time, it is interesting to note that the students who gave the strongest welcome to CEFR in stage I were humanities students, and students with relatively low or relatively high TOEIC scores. Students within the humanities school tend to have more of a linguistic background than students within the other schools, and this may help them to more readily grasp the potential of a language-learning framework such as CEFR. Similar factors may be at work for students with relatively high TOEIC scores. On the other hand, for students with relatively low TOEIC scores, it may be that the opposite applies: they tend to have less of a linguistic background, and may be more open to the idea of a language-learning framework that can give them support in this area.

Secondly, and following on from the above, CEFR is a personal framework. The theme of our Stage III course was "English is a skill for life" (as opposed to the more traditional view among Japanese students that English is simply an exam subject) — we encouraged students to think less in terms of English goals, and more in terms of life goals, and the can-do abilities needed to reach them. The CEFR-based approach was able to accommodate this way of thinking in an effective way. During our Stage IV follow-up interviews, we were struck by how 'sticky' the ideas from Stage III appeared to be.

What do we mean by 'sticky'? In our Stage IV follow-up interviews, student #2 and student #3 had excellent recall of the personal goals and learning strategies they had developed in Stage III. It is important to remember that Stage III took place during the first semester of the students' first year, whereas Stage IV took place at the end of the second and final semester of the students' second year — a gap of 17 months. During this time, students were free to forget everything, especially as the

Stage III English course was a compulsory class that did not deal specifically with the students' chosen major (environmental science). Despite all this, details had remained in students' minds.

The feedback that students gave immediately after the end of Stage III emphasised the personal element of the course: "Writing can-do statements is triggered by thinking my dream", as the student from Figure 12 wrote. Likewise, in their end-of-course presentations, students were able to talk about levelling up their English skills in a very personal way, from their personal goals ("My goal is...", figure 9), to their personal strategies ("To do so I have to...", Figure 10), to the general outcomes they personally wanted in life ("In the end...", Figure 11).

Thirdly, CEFR is an open-ended framework. The focus of our Stage III course was firmly on the future, well beyond the end of the students' undergraduate university careers. Of course, some students have little or no idea about what they want to do after graduating. This is a completely normal and reasonable approach to life, and we were reassured by the Stage IV feedback from student #1, who could not recall their own personal goals from Stage III, but had good recollection of the general principles and strategies we discussed. This indicates that students can benefit from thinking about the development of can-do abilities, even if there are uncertainties or changes within their own minds about what specific abilities they might need for their self-development. In a similar way, the sad case of student #3 — who had clear plans, but had been forced by the covid crisis to adapt them — showed that a CEFR-based approach is flexible enough to handle the inevitable roadblocks and diversions that stand between students and their life goals.

It is interesting to consider student #1's "how I might use English" essay and "levelling up" presentation from Stage III. It is not that this student was bereft of ideas for the future — it is more that they lacked a single big vision for what they wanted to do. We found this still to be the case when we questioned student #1 at Stage IV: the student was happy, relaxed and confident about their future, but vague about exactly it might entail. Likewise, the student was positive about the CEFR-based approach to forming personal goals and strategies, despite the fact that, in their words, "I can't remember *my* goals and strategies".

The value of CEFR as an open-ended framework was also highlighted by the feedback in Figure 13, on how CEFR might help students think about future goals and strategies: "Because CEFR-J divide into small steps, which is easy to understand for me." This is, in fact, one of the key principles that underpins CEFR: according to the definition of Carson (2016, p. 156), CEFR is a framework that "permits the language learning process to be broken down into a coherent series of transparent, manageable steps".

The negative comments (Figures 14 and 15) we received about the use of can-do statements gave us two more reflections. The first negative comment was that time would be better spent on practising English, rather than making can-do lists. To us, this suggests that we did not do a good enough job of helping this student understand that, if this process is done in English, it is a form of highly targeted language development. For example, as part of the essay on how English might be helpful in the future, this student had to look up many new words. By the very nature of the essay, all of this new vocabulary was extremely relevant to this student's career ambitions.

The second negative comment demonstrated that long lists of can-do statements can be off-putting and hard to process. To us, this underlines the importance of personalization, and of giving students lots of time and space to think about all of the above, and providing lots of ways for them to process their thoughts, for example, partner interviews, essays and presentations. When students were making, sharing and discussing their own can-do lists, this student who wrote the second negative comment was as engaged in the process as any other member of the class.

5. Conclusions

Even among a class of first-year university students taking the same major (in this case, environmental science), there was little commonality between students in terms of their life goals, and the English

skills required to achieve these. This supports the notion that, in general, there is no single purpose for learning English, and no single definition of a successful English-speaker.

Nevertheless, within this same class of students, CEFR functioned well as a common tool for helping students think about and construct personal English-learning goals. CEFR demonstrated its potential as a universal, personal and open-ended framework that could be applied to a wide path of career ambitions, and also in cases where students had no firm future plans.

The biggest limitation of our research was that, notwithstanding the enormous variety of their life goals, the students were of the same nationality and cultural background. Japan tends to be regarded as a monolingual and monocultural nation, and there exist “concerns about a growing insularity among young Japanese” (Fujita-Round & Maher, 2017, p. 1). In other countries, there are fewer such concerns — the Netherlands, for example, has been ranked first for English skills (EF, 2021), and 40% of first-year students at Dutch universities are from overseas (Centraal Bureau voor de Statistiek, 2022). An interesting question for future research would be to look at whether, within a very different cultural environment such as this, CEFR has a similar role to play in terms of helping to nurture students’ internal, self-driven motivation through the process of forming personal English-learning goals.

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We were interested to find that a wide range of teachers, in an extensive range of educational settings, instinctively agreed with the findings of our research. To us, this was further evidence of the universal relevance of the CEFR framework.

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About the authors

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Appendix: Stage I, Paper survey questions

Translated from Japanese

(A) About this survey

Do you have a list of goals for your English learning...? We would like to know! This survey will take you about 5 minutes to complete, and it's completely anonymous (please don't tell us your name or student number).

Thank you for helping us with our research — Maki Taniguchi + Graham Jones

(B) About you

(1) Your USP school

- Environmental science
- Engineering
- Human cultures
- Human nursing

(2) Your year

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

(3) Your gender

- Female
- Male

(4) Your most recent TOEIC score

- 10-99
- 100-199
- 200-299
- 300-399
- 400-499
- 500-599
- 600-699
- 700-799
- 800-899
- 900-990

(C) About your goals

(1) Do you have a written list of goals for your English?

- Yes, I have a written list
- No, but I have a mental list
- No, but I have some ideas
- No, I don't have any goals
- Other (please write here) _____

(2) If you don't have a written list, why not?

- I have never thought about it
- I don't know how to do it
- I don't know what my goals are
- I'm not interested in improving my English
- Other (please write here) _____

(D) Making goals

One way to make a list of goals is with 'can-do' statements. For example: "Right now I can do X. In the future, I want to be able to do Y."

Here are some can-do statements about different English levels. What do you think your level is now? Where would you like to be five years from now (in the year 2023)?

Here students were given a series of can-do statements, in Japanese, from CEFR-J for listening and speaking. For each series, students were asked to select a can-do statement for

- This is my level now
- I'd like to be here in 5 years

(E) About the can-do statements

(1) Do you think that can-do statements could help you to make a list of goals for your English?

- Yes, they would help a lot
- Yes, they would help a bit
- Maybe — I'd like to know more
- No, they wouldn't help
- Other (please write here) _____

(2) If you don't already have a list of written goals for English, has this survey encouraged you to think about making one?

- Yes, I will think about it
- Maybe — I'd like to know more
- No, I don't think a written list will help me
- No, I'm not interested in improving my English
- Other (please write here) _____