

【原著】

Creation of Pre-A1 Level Self-Access Materials for University Students Using CEFR-J

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CEFR-J を用いた大学生向け Pre-A1 レベル自主学習教材の開発

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Abstract

One of the roles of self-access centers, which have been drawing attention and interest by Japanese universities, can be said to cater for learners at different levels and with various needs. At Hiroshima Bunkyo Women's University, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has been employed as a reference for developing self-access materials as well as English class curricula. After A1 to B2 level materials were first developed targeting the majority of students in their first and second years, studies and observations suggested that Pre-A1 level materials would benefit students at the lowest end. To meet this need, Pre-A1 level materials were created in 2015 with reference to the CEFR-J. This paper will illustrate how these materials were created and are used by students. In particular, it will discuss the pedagogical background, the reasons behind the decision to develop lower level materials, steps taken to create CEFR-J-informed Can Do statements and materials, and students' usage of the materials. It will also discuss some of the difficulties faced in developing the materials and share ideas for creating Pre-A1 level materials for students at the tertiary level.

概 要

日本の大学において注目と関心が寄せられているセルフアクセスセンターの役割の一つに、習熟度やニーズの異なる学生への対応があげられる。広島文教女子大学では、ヨーロッパ言語共通参照枠（CEFR）が、英語の授業カリキュラムだけでなく自主学習教材の作成にも用いられている。1・2年次生の大半を対象に A1 から B2 レベルの学習教材が作成された後、学生に対する調査と観察から Pre-A1 レベルの教材が最も習熟度の低い学生層に有益であろうということが分かった。このニーズに応えるべく、2015年に CEFR-J を参照し Pre-A1 レベルの教材が作成された。本稿ではこれらの教材がどのようにして作成され、学生に使用されているかを説明する。とりわけ、教育的背景やより易しいレベルの教材を開発するに至った理由、CEFR-J を参照し Can Do ステートメントや教材を作成した手順、学生の教材利用状況について述べる。また、教材開発において困難であった点や大学生向けに Pre-A1 レベルの教材を作成する際のアイデアについて述べる。

1. Introduction

Recent years have seen an increase in the number of students with low English proficiency entering universities in Japan. This is partially caused by the decreasing number of 18-year-olds and universities allowing students with various backgrounds and skills to enter through different types of entrance exams (Kuniyoshi, Jimbo, Ishida, Kimura, Sakai, Sasajima, Haenouchi, Kochiyama, Someya, Sawazaki, Lange, Nakahara, & Ono, 2005). One of the roles of self-access centers can be said to cater for students with a wide range of levels and needs. The Self-Access Learning Center (SALC) at the Bunkyo English Communication Center (BECC) offers various types of services and learning experiences with, among other things, study spaces, language advising, and lounge conversation opportunities. As a large part of the SALC's educational services, in-house materials were created specifically to support students taking first- and second-year English classes at the university. At the BECC, the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001) is used as a reference for both curriculum design and SALC in-house materials (for further information, see Bower, Runnels, Rutson-Griffiths, Schmidt, Cook, Lehde, & Kodate, 2017 and Bower, Rutson-Griffiths, Cook, Schmidt, Lehde, Kodate, & Runnels, 2017 for curriculum development, and Kodate, 2017 for SALC materials creation). As will be explained in the subsequent sections, after creating self-access materials at the A1 level and above, it was decided to create Pre-A1 level materials using the CEFR-J for students with the lowest English proficiency. This paper describes the rationale for choosing the CEFR-J as a reference and steps taken to create the materials. It will then examine students' usage of the materials and share ideas for creating Pre-A1 level materials for university students.

1.1 Self-Access Materials at Hiroshima Bunkyo Women's University

The relationship between the self-access center and the curriculum or classes differs depending on the policies of the institution; namely, the center and the curriculum can run independently or collaboration can be sought to some degree. Depending on the relationship, the roles of materials chosen or developed for the center may also differ accordingly. At Hiroshima Bunkyo Women's University, there is a strong tie between the center and the class curriculum side, and the in-house materials developed in the SALC called "SALC Activities" play the following important pedagogical roles:

- To achieve the learner autonomy objective of the [General English] curriculum
- To support, reinforce, and further develop students' understanding of the [General English] contents (Kodate, 2017, p. 227)

There are five departments at the university with about 300 students in total in each year. All the first-year and second-year students took General English classes at the BECC until 2016, and the second-year English class has been elective since the academic year of 2017. As part of their class assignments, they come to the SALC to choose four SALC Activities per semester, one from each skill: listening, speaking, reading and writing. They download the chosen activities onto their

iPads and complete and submit them to their class teachers electronically. Through the SALC Activities, it is hoped to supplement the curriculum, offer additional language support, and encourage students to reflect on their language and language learning, and consequently extend their usage to other parts of the SALC.

1.2 Low-Level Learners

In order to support students at various levels, 32 SALC Activities covering the four skills and four levels (A1, A2, B1, and B2) were created with reference to the CEFR and have been available to students since 2015. However, as Kodate (2017) pointed out, a close look into students' language level distribution suggested that creation of lower level activities would benefit those who have not achieved the A1 level. Every year, all the first-year students take an in-house placement test and are streamed into three levels: A1–A2 level, A2–B1 low-level and A2–B1 high-level. Representative samples of those three levels then took the Oxford Online Placement Test ($n=101$) in 2015. According to the results, 7% of the freshmen were identified as Pre-A1 users, 43% as A1 users, 47% as A2 users, and 3% as B1 users. Prompted by these results, it was deemed that lower-level materials would be beneficial for those students at the Pre-A1 level.

After introducing the SALC Activities in the first semester of 2015, representative groups of low-level students' activities were shared with one of the creators to check the students' post-activity reflection comments. Many of those who chose A1 level activities indicated that the activities were difficult for them. This observation reaffirmed that there is a need for Pre-A1 level activities, and eight Pre-A1 level activities were created in 2015 and have been available since April 2016.

1.3 CEFR-J for Pre-A1 Level SALC Activities

According to the study conducted by Negishi, Takeda, and Tono (2012), approximately 80% of the Japanese learners of English they studied fell in A level on the CEFR scale. In order to cater for Japanese learners, it was thought that finer grades within A1, A2, B1 and B2 as well as Pre-A1 level should be created. As a result, the CEFR-J was created with three sublevels in A1, two sublevels in A2, B1, and B2, and Pre-A1 level (Tono, 2013).

Table 1 *Sub-categories in CEFR-J*

CEFR	-	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1	C2
CFER-J	Pre-A1	A1.1	A2.1	B1.1	B2.1		
		A1.2	A2.2	B1.2	B2.2		
		A1.3					

At the SALC, all the activities from A1 to B2 were created with close reference to the CEFR. When it was decided to create Pre-A1 level activities, employing the CEFR-J as a reference seemed most appropriate for the following reasons.

First of all, at the time of creation, A1 was the lowest level of the CEFR, and reference to Pre-A1 was not available. Without any indication of what language needs lower-level learners might have, it seemed difficult to decide on the content of the Pre-A1 materials. Also, rather than relying on the creator's subjectivity, objective criteria for making material goals and deciding appropriate target levels seemed necessary. The CEFR-J, on the other hand, offers Pre-A1 level descriptors, and studies have been conducted to test the validity of the levels of the CEFR-J (Tono & Negishi, 2012). Just like the CEFR, the CEFR-J Can Do descriptors offer ranges of skills that learners can perform and can be used as objective criteria for teachers to determine what language and skills should be incorporated when making materials.

As far as the CEFR-J Pre-A1 level Can Do descriptors are concerned, however, some of them need to be modified when considering university students, who have received at least six years of English education, and whether or not they have successfully acquired the desired skills from their learning. For instance, one of the reading Can Do descriptors is "I can recognise words in a picture book that are already familiar through oral activities" (The CEFR-J (English) Version 1.1), and it seems to suggest that the descriptor is oriented towards younger learners. Also, considering the fact that most students have received English education prior to entering university, some of the criteria seem to have already been met. For instance, a writing Can Do descriptor "I can write upper and lower-case letters and words in block letters" and a reading Can Do descriptor "I can recognise upper- and lower-case letters printed in block type" (The CEFR-J (English) Version 1.1) are concerned with elementary steps in learning English, and it is reasonable to expect university students have learned these skills.

Also, it seemed difficult to use some of the CEFR-J Pre-A1 Can Do descriptors for self-access materials as they are. A speaking Can Do descriptor "I can express my wishes and make requests in areas of immediate need such as 'Help!' and 'I want...'", using basic phrases. I can express what I want by pointing at it, if necessary" (The CEFR-J (English) Version 1.1) would require a degree of modification when trying to make self-access materials to support the suggested skill as it is difficult to create the situation described within the self-access context.

In order to create materials that support learners at the lowest level of the CEFR scale, the CEFR-J descriptors were used as a reference to determine the level and content, and the Can Do statements for the materials were created with our students' educational background and learning context in mind.

2. Creation of Materials

This section describes how the Pre-A1 level SALC Activities were created. The steps below were taken to make the activities, and each step will be explained with an example activity.

1. Create the Can Do statement
2. Create the main task that reflects the skill described in the Can Do statement

3. Create the warm-up and practice exercises that help students accomplish the main task
4. Create the reflection exercise

2.1 Can Do Statements

As the very first step to create new activities, Can Do statements were made with reference to the CEFR-J descriptors. As exemplified in Tono and Negishi (2012), Can Do descriptors consist of three parts: *performance*, *criteria*, and *condition* (see Table 2 for an example). As for receptive skills, *performance* can be replaced with *task* and *criteria* with *text* respectively. To make Can Do statements for the SALC Activities, the criteria and conditions were kept as they were as much as possible, and the main performance or criteria were changed where appropriate to tailor them to our students. To show an example, a Can Do descriptor, “I can catch everyday, familiar words, provided they are delivered clearly and slowly” (The CEFR-J (English) Version 1.1) was broken into the three components as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2 CEFR-J original descriptor (Pre-A1 Listening)

Can Do descriptor	Performance/Task	Criteria/Text	Conditions
I can catch everyday, familiar words, provided they are delivered clearly and slowly.	I can catch	everyday familiar words	provided they are delivered clearly and slowly

An important part of creating materials is to decide what to teach. For this descriptor, one needs to think what words are “everyday” and “familiar” for one’s students. The majority of our low-level first-year English students only use English in class or in the SALC, and numbers are one category of words they hear on an everyday basis. For example, students often hear page numbers, activity numbers, and student numbers in class and the SALC. Once the target language was narrowed down, the criteria or text was modified, and conditions were kept for creating the activity but omitted from the Can Do statement that students read for simplicity. As illustrated in Table 3, a Pre-A1 SALC Activity Can Do statement “I can catch numbers being spoken in class and the SALC” was created with reference to the original CEFR-J Can Do descriptor “I can catch everyday, familiar words, provided they are delivered clearly and slowly” (The CEFR-J (English) Version 1.1).

Table 3 Creation of Can Do statement for a Listening SALC Activity

Pre-A1 Listening Can Do descriptor	Performance/Task	Criteria/Text	Conditions
I can catch everyday, familiar words, provided they are delivered clearly and slowly.	I can catch	numbers being spoken in class and the SALC	provided they are delivered clearly and slowly

2.2 Exercises

Once the Can Do statement is created, the content of the main task is narrowed down. The main activity itself should reflect the skills suggested in the Can Do statement. For the activity with the listening Can Do statement explained above, two very short dialogues and a monologue were created. As the main task should allow students to use and practice the language in situations encountered every day, the context for all the conversations or speeches was set either in class or in the SALC, and the task requires students to catch and write down the numbers spoken in the sentences. The listening scripts for the main task are shown below (the parts that students write down are shown in italics):

Q1: We have a speaking test next Friday. Please come to Room *831* by *11* o'clock.

Q2: Okay, everyone. Go to Page *18*. Study Activities *8* and *10*.

Q3: A: Can I have your student number?

B: It's *170569*.

Once the main task has been decided, now the focus turns to the warm-up exercises. In order to decide what kind of exercises should be made for an activity, two questions can be asked:

- 1) Which language aspects do students need help with?
- 2) What does the activity need to teach students in order to help them complete the main task?

Because these Pre-A1 level activities are used by the lowest-level learners in the self-access context, it requires a lot of basic language input. The warm-up exercises in these activities are designed to help students learn all the necessary words and phrases they will hear in the main task and include practice tasks from very simple ones to ones similar to the main task in order for students to build their skills. The exercises leading up to the main task in this listening activity are presented in Table 4.

Table 4 *The organization of the exercises in the listening SALC Activity*

Order of the exercises		Tasks
1	Warm-up exercise	Listen to short conversations and select the correct pictures
2	Practice exercise 1	Listen to numbers from 1 to 20 and circle the numbers difficult to catch
3	Practice exercise 2	Listen to and write down the numbers being spoken
4	Practice exercise 3	Study the words that appear in the main exercise and match the English to Japanese
5	Practice exercise 4	Listen to numbers spoken with the words studied above and decide whether or not the pictures presented are correct

6	Practice exercise 5	Put the words in the correct order and construct sentences that may appear in the main exercise
7	Main task	Listen to a short speech or conversation and write down the numbers being spoken

2.3 Reflection Exercise

In all the SALC Activities, students are asked to reflect on their performance or understanding after completing the main task. Because these Pre-A1 activities tend to have rather simple tasks, and the language is limited compared to the higher level activities, most of the reflection questions ask about very specific performance or understanding. For the example activity, students were asked whether it was difficult to complete the main exercise, and if so, what was difficult. Students were asked to indicate the areas they felt were difficult to deal with in English from the following six choices:

- It was difficult to catch one-digit numbers.
- It was difficult to catch two-digit numbers.
- It was difficult to catch randomized serial numbers.
- It was difficult to catch numbers spoken in sentences (e.g., “Go to Room 413”).
- The numbers were spoken too quickly to catch.
- Nothing was difficult.

Although this may limit students’ answers, it was deemed appropriate as many students at this level probably have not had sufficient chances to reflect on their English skills, and the questions were designed to serve as a brainstorm for their reflection.

2.4 Pre-A1 SALC Activities

Following the steps described above, eight activities made up of two activities for each skill were created in 2015. The theme and main task for each skill are presented in Table 5.

Table 5 *Pre-A1 Level SALC Activities Created in 2015*

	Activity Theme	Main Task
Listening	Letters of the alphabet	Listen and write down the letters of the alphabet being spoken
	Numbers	Listen and write down the numbers being spoken
Reading	Basic verbs	Identify the verbs often used in lesson materials
	Basic nouns	Identify the nouns often used in classroom instruction

Speaking	Likes and dislikes	Say what activities you like and dislike Ask what activities others like and dislike and respond to the answers
	Self-introduction	Give a short self-introduction
Writing	Romanization	Write words in Japanese romanization
	Upper- and lower-case letters	Use upper-case letters correctly

3. Students' Usage

Having illustrated how the Pre-A1 level SALC Activities were made, this section discusses how they were actually used by students. In order to investigate students' usage of the activities, two kinds of investigation were conducted: students' total activity choices and students' activity usage in low-streamed classes. The former investigation was carried out in September 2017, and it looked at all students' activity choices in one semester (Semester 1, 2017) by tracking the number of downloads for all the activities. As shown in Table 6, although it varies widely among skills, 7.3% to 16.3% of the downloaded activities were Pre-A1 activities.

Table 6 *Pre-A1 Activity Usage (Semester 1, 2017)*

	Total downloads (all levels)	Number of Pre-A1 activity downloads	Pre-A1 proportion
Listening	635	57	9.0%
Reading	711	60	8.4%
Speaking	657	107	16.3%
Writing	703	51	7.3%

The latter investigation was conducted in September 2016. Six classes of 20–30 students were asked to participate in the study. The students in these classes were non-English majors and were allocated in A1–A2 level classes. 82 students signed the consent form for their SALC Activity folders to be shared with the researcher for analysis. This showed which activities were chosen by low-level students in one semester (from April to August, 2016).

Out of all the listening activities ($n=75$) selected by the students, 13 were Pre-A1 activities (17.3%), and 14 out of the 98 reading activities (14.3%), 17 out of the 67 speaking activities (25.4%), and 11 out of the 95 writing activities (11.6%) were Pre-A1 activities (Table 7)¹. This means that at least

1 Although students were asked to choose one activity for each skill per semester as mentioned above, some chose multiple activities for one skill instead of one activity per skill or as extra voluntary work. This study includes all the activities the students worked on, regardless of how many activities were done by the individual students.

11% of the students demanded Pre-A1 activities for each skill in the examined six classes.

Table 7 *Number of Pre-A1 SALC Activities chosen by students in low-streamed classes in Semester 1, 2016*

	Total activities done by students in low-streamed classes	Number of Pre-A1 activities done by students in low-streamed classes	Pre-A1 proportion
Listening	75	13	17.3%
Reading	98	14	14.3%
Speaking	67	17	25.4%
Writing	95	11	11.6%

The activities completed by students from low-streamed classes in Semester 1, 2016 were collected to see which tasks or language aspects these low-level students struggled with and whether or not some instructions or tasks need to be revised. The themes of the activities for each skill and the numbers of samples which were available for observation are shown in Table 8, and some of the notable observations are presented in the following sections.

Table 8 *Number of student activity samples from Semester 1, 2016*

	Activity Theme	Number of Samples
Listening	Letters of the alphabet	8
	Numbers	4
Reading	Basic verbs	11
	Basic nouns	2
Speaking	Likes and dislikes	13
	Self-introduction	4
Writing	Romanization	9
	Upper- and lower-case letters	2

3.1 Listening

Each activity asks students to reflect on their performance or understanding at the very end of the activity. It asks them to rate their achievement of the skills described in the Can Do statement from four choices: 'I can do it easily', 'I can do it', 'I can do it, but still need more practice', and 'I can't do it'. For the listening activities, four out of 12 students said they can now do it after completing the activities, and eight said they need more practice.

Having observed their answers in the activities, some weak areas of these low-level students were revealed. Some students seem to find it difficult to catch some isolated letters such as /v/ and

/b/, and the reason may be that there is no /v/ sound in the Japanese language. Other letters they found difficult include /l/ and /r/. Although there are both /i/ and /e/ sounds in Japanese, the fact that /i/ is pronounced like a short /e/ when used in romanization probably confuses some low-level students. Some students reported that they can understand which letter is pronounced but writing it down as they listen is still difficult. Some students said when letters or numbers are pronounced randomly (e.g., a password, unfamiliar names, randomized serial numbers), it was difficult to catch. Some reported that catching letters or numbers when they are pronounced in sentences was particularly difficult.

3.2 Reading

After completing the reading activities, four out of 13 students said they can do it easily, five said they can do it, three said they need more practice. One student skipped the reflection section. Although they seemed to have done the tasks relatively well on the whole, some students reported that they needed to look at the Japanese translation for the words introduced in the activities in order to complete some tasks.

3.3 Speaking

As for the speaking activities, two out of 17 students said they can do it easily, 12 said they can do it, and three said they need more practice. The main task of one of the activities has students ask a teacher what they like and dislike and simply agree or disagree with the stated opinions with the phrases *me too* and *me neither*. Although the activity explained the difference between *me too* and *me neither* and had students practice using them before the main task, the phrases still seemed to be confusing for many students, and listening to their recorded conversations proved that few used them correctly. Also, there was frequent hesitation in their speech, and it took them a long time to construct simple sentences. Some students reported that they were nervous in front of a teacher and/or it was difficult to speak without looking at any prompts or visual aids. On the positive side, students used words that were not provided in the warm-up tasks, and when asked to reflect on their performance and plan for the future, some showed interest in talking about extra topics.

3.4 Writing

Out of 11 students, two said they can do it easily, seven said they can do it, and one said they need more practice. One student skipped the reflection section. It was noticeable that many of these students needed go over Japanese romanization. In particular, these students seemed to confuse the two systems of romanization, *Kunrei* romanization and *Hepburn* romanization, and they tended to make mistakes on spellings such as *shi*, *tsu*, *chi*, and long vowels.

4. Ideas for Pre-A1 Level Materials for University Students

This section discusses some of the Pre-A1 level of the CEFR-J original Can Do descriptors and suggests possible ideas for creating materials for low-level students at the tertiary level.

4.1 Listening

One of the Pre-A1 level listening Can Do descriptors is “I can recognise the letters of the English alphabet, when they are pronounced” (The CEFR-J (English) Version 1.1). This is indeed an elementary level, but it can still be difficult for even higher-level students to recognize some sounds which are not used or distinguished in their mother tongue. As mentioned above, Japanese does not have the /v/ sound, and neither /l/ nor /r/ is present in the language, making it difficult for Japanese learners of English to recognize or distinguish the sounds. Depending on the students’ mother tongue, teachers can make exercises that focus on the sounds deemed difficult for them to catch, and exercises which are as simple as listening to and writing down isolated letters would be good practice. For more practical tasks, teachers can make exercises that are set in situations that students are likely to encounter and have them listen to unfamiliar names or email addresses being spelt. Setting up a situation where students ask a teacher how to spell unknown words may be a good exercise, too. For students who use technology in class, having students listen to website addresses or passwords may also be good practice.

4.2 Reading

One of the Pre-A1 level reading Can Do descriptors is “I can recognise words in a picture book that are already familiar through oral activities” (The CEFR-J (English) Version 1.1). It should be noted that this descriptor concerns words that the learners often hear but may find difficult to recognize when they are written. For creating materials for university students, teachers can make a list of words that students often hear in class such as *ask*, *partner*, *choose*, and *answer*. Teachers then can make exercises that have students read these words written in simple instructions on the whiteboard, in textbooks, or in handouts.

4.3 Spoken Production

Using the spoken production Can Do descriptor “I can convey very limited information about myself (e.g. name and age), using simple words and basic phrases” (The CEFR-J (English) Version 1.1), teachers can make exercises that help students to state their hometowns, department names, club activities, or part-time jobs in addition to their names and ages as suggested by the original descriptor. Having students brainstorm ideas for the topics they want to be able to talk about when they introduce themselves may promote students’ interest in learning more words and phrases. This brainstorming exercise can be placed before or after the main task.

4.4 Writing

One of the Pre-A1 level writing Can Do descriptors is “I can write upper and lower-case letters and words in block letters” (The CEFR-J (English) Version 1.1). Teachers may assume that their university students have already acquired the skill suggested by the descriptor. However, what may still be useful for even higher-level students is practicing using upper-case letters correctly and reviewing romanization. For the former, teachers can make exercises that have students correct mistakes in upper-case letter usage in written materials such as reports, letters, and emails. For the latter, having students fill in documents with proper nouns (e.g., immigration forms, hotel check-in forms) or write the names of their favorite people or things from their

countries (e.g., favorite Japanese singer, favorite Japanese movie) using romanization may be good exercises.

5. Remarks

This paper first discussed the educational background and the reasons for creating CEFR-J-informed low-level self-access materials at the BECC. The results from an external English proficiency test and observations in the low-streamed classes led to the decision to create Pre-A1 level materials to cater for low-proficiency students. Although the CEFR was used as a reference for creating the English class curricula and already existing self-access materials, it did not have a Pre-A1 level at the time of creation. Therefore, the CEFR-J, which includes a Pre-A1 level as well as sub-levels of A1 to B2 levels, was chosen as a reference for creating the materials. The CEFR-J Pre-A1 Can Do descriptors were particularly useful in creating Can Do statements for the materials and deciding the learning content for students. As illustrated above, the Can Do statements were first created with reference to the CEFR-J by contextualizing the descriptors for the targeted students. After creating the Can Do statements, the main tasks, supplemental exercises, and reflection tasks were created.

Having illustrated the steps taken to create the materials, this paper discussed students' usage of the materials. Two investigations conducted revealed that 9% to 16.3% of the materials chosen by the students in the first- and second-year English classes were Pre-A1 level with the speaking materials being the most popular among the four skills and that, unsurprisingly, the number of the students who chose Pre-A1 level materials increased when the low-streamed classes were examined. Looking into the actual students' material samples showed which tasks and language aspects that these low-level students may struggle with. As for suggestions for teachers at other institutions to create Pre-A1 level materials, it could be argued that it is crucial to take into account their students' learning backgrounds and current learning contexts as well as practical usage of the language. In our case at the BECC, it was deemed helpful to deal with those basic language tasks and skills (see Table 5 for the activity themes and main tasks created for the students) in the context students may encounter in class and the SALC. Finally, examination into students' actual usage also serves as a reference to ensure the quality of the materials and decide on future material content.

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