Will the ELP Be an Effective Tool to Enhance Learner Autonomy in the Teaching and Learning of English at the Secondary School Level in Japan?

Masahiro TAKAYAMA

1. Introduction

The purpose of the present paper is to discuss whether or not it is appropriate to introduce the ELP (European Language Portfolio) into the English language curriculum at secondary schools in Japan. The paper offers a literature review and considers the possible advantages and disadvantages of putting the ELP to use in actual classrooms. Here this study provides an overview of case studies of the ELP, specifically in secondary schools in European countries and points out some of the common problems. It also refers to a current Japanese educational context in foreign language teaching and learning in relation to the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment) and a perspective on the use of the ELP in English classes in secondary schools in Japan. It also aims to suggest what the teacher should know or be aware of when putting the CEFR to use in an actual daily teaching situation.

To begin with, I would like to briefly refer to the concept and meaning of the ELP. What is the ELP? It is a document in which those who are learning or have learned one or more languages can record and reflect on their language learning and intercultural experiences (Council of Europe 2001; Little 2011). Here I will describe the relationships between the CEFR and the ELP. Mostly in European countries, the ELP has been introduced to educational institutions as an instrument to facilitate the implementation of the CEFR. The ELP has three components: a language passport, a language biography, and a dossier. The CEFR defines six global levels of proficiency with descriptors or can-do statements for various language activities with aspects of quality in performance. Those CEFR's can-do statements are presented in the form of checklists in the language biography section of the ELP. In other words, the CEFR is a mere framework that shows descriptions of ability in any European language with descriptors that function as guidelines for learning a language. Whereas, the ELP is a specific tool to implement the CEFR.

Secondly, I will look at some merits of the ELP. According to Figueras (2012), the ELP "facilitated the understanding and dissemination of the CEFR approach and the familiarization with the

phrasing of the descriptors, with the result that these have influenced the drafting of language objectives in curricula, in language programmes, and in lessons" (p.480). Here the focal point is the ELP's pedagogical function, hence, pedagogical efficacy gained by the implementation of the ELP in classes. Furthermore, the ELP will make it possible for learners to become agents in their own learning process by self-assessing their performance in communicative activities, which may eventually lead to fostering learner autonomy.

As Moonen et al. (2013) say, the CEFR has become an important reference framework in foreign language education. It has provided a common basis for describing the skills needed to reach different levels of language proficiency. The ELP was developed by the Language Policy Division of the Council of Europe, piloted from 1998 to 2000, and launched in 2001 (ECML 2011) to apply the CEFR in practice; the CEFR and the ELP were developed in parallel.

The present paper describes how other countries, specifically those in Europe have utilized the ELP in order to realize the objectives of the CEFR, and then refers to the CEFR-J, or a modified version of the CEFR in Japan. The paper also provides a rationale for using the ELP to support the development of learner autonomy in a Japanese educational context, and refers to how modern technologies can help promote the introduction of the ELP into classes.

2.　Research background

There are mainly two things to be considered here: one is the overview of some case studies or pilot studies on the use of the ELP in European countries that actually introduced the CEFR some twenty years ago into their foreign language education; the other is the overview of the CEFR-J, or a modified version of the CEFR in Japan with a brief reference to how the CEFR-J was put together and its impact on the teaching and learning of a foreign language, especially English, in a specific Japanese educational context.

Firstly, I will look at some case studies of the ELP in European countries. The Council of Europe (2001) has recommended the actual implementation of the ELP as a pilot study for the embodiment and dissemination of the CEFR's concept in European countries. There are two aspects of the CEFR that the ELP deals with: one is that learners use a self-assessment grid in their language passport to reflect on their own learning; and the other is that learners use checklists of "can-do statements" in their language biography in order to confirm their learning objectives, check their own learning process, and evaluate their own results. However, it is to be noted that many teachers have to adapt or modify the way of learners' self-assessment and so-called "can-do statements" lists of the ELP when they use them in their classrooms (Little 2011). As a case study in Dutch secondary education shows, teachers design materials in communicative tasks with a certain CEFR level in mind, or they select, adapt and apply rubrics to assess specific skills (Moonen et al. 2013). However, it ought to be added

that even such adaptations or modifications of the ELP are not prevalent because what teachers mostly do in their daily teaching and assessment is limited to the use of CEFR-related textbooks and preparation for national examinations aligned to the CEFR (Moonen et al. 2013). When we think about how common the CEFR has become in actual teaching situations, we also need to turn our attention to the teacher's workload arising from the introduction of that new language policy. The ELP pilot project in the Czech Republic refers to the same problem that the teacher is faced with: the increase in workload. In its report they say that some teachers regard the ELP as an extra workload additional to their teaching duties (Little 2003).

In the Finnish ELP pilot project for upper secondary schools, they were concerned with two important aspects of the ELP: one is to integrate the ELP with regular, everyday classroom work and the other is their strong belief that learning to reflect on one's own learning in the ELP will be useful in promoting lifelong learning because it provides the necessary tools for monitoring progress, discovering suitable learning skills, and developing self-awareness and meaningful self-assessment (Little 2003). They report that students found peer assessment and their own self-assessment proved to be very effective in motivating themselves to do reflective learning, and the teachers gave their feedback in the dossiers. In their final report detailing the whole three-year cycle of activities using the ELPs at the end of the school term, they concluded positively that although both students and teachers were tired with too much work, they all had a sense of achievement.

Next, I will look at a case study in a French technical school. It summarizes how the ELP was used to plan and evaluate the writing of a detective story as a whole-class project. Interestingly, it refers to the difficulty of introducing the ELP to the classrooms in that the ELP cannot easily be combined with classical teacher-centered methods, and learner autonomy has to be put into context (Little 2003). It implies that the ELP requires the change in attitude of both teachers and learners as it has to be merged with a communicative approach where learners' own choice and responsibility for learning, and self-assessment are more focused on, and the teacher's role is to facilitate learners to be engaged in more communicative activities than before.

In the ELP pilot project in Greece, they report that they carried out research to adapt the descriptors to Greek educational realities; the descriptors presenting linguistic tasks were tailored to the learners' age and language proficiency.

As we have seen in some case studies of the ELP in European countries above, there is both positive and negative feedback. Most of the positive comments refer to the usefulness of the ELP in having learners understand the benefit of the communicative approach to language learning; hence to foster mutual understanding and tolerance between communities having different languages and cultures. Whereas, negative comments are mainly about the total increase of teachers' workload with their strenuous efforts to adapt and modify the ELP to each of their local educational contexts. As it is

clearly stated in a case study in Switzerland, harmonization between the ELP and traditional teaching elements such as syllabuses, teaching aids, examinations, and introduction of self-assessment is not yet adequate (Little 2003). It is to be noted that how to bring the ELP and each local educational context into agreement has been an obstacle to overcome in many European countries.

Secondly, I will look at the CEFR-J, or a modified version of the CEFR in Japan. As Figueras (2012) clearly refers to the CEFR's non-compulsory nature with a structure open to multimodality and adaptation, the ELP's descriptors have been tailored to particular local educational contexts in each country. As descriptors or can-do statements on the CEFR's six global levels of proficiency are somewhat abstract and not suitable for learners of English in Japan (Yoneda et al. 2013), descriptors are subdivided into numerous scales from Pre-A1 to C2. What is clearly shown in such subdivision of the CEFR's scales is that there is a need to specifically target A1 and A2 learners of English because approximately 80 % of Japanese learners of English belong to A level, and thereby the CEFR's descriptors had to be drastically adapted to suit such a reality (Tono 2016). That is why the CEFR-J subdivided A1 and A2 into 6 levels: Pre-A1, A1-1, A1-2, A1-3, A2-1 and A2-2. As for independent learners' levels B1 and B2, they are subdivided into 4 levels: B1-1, B1-2, B2-1 and B2-2. There is no change for advanced learner levels C1 and C2. Therefore, the CEFR's 6-level scale was subdivided into a 12-level scale for the CEFR-J. The group of researchers of the CEFR-J made the CEFR-J's can-do descriptor database based on the ELP descriptors, where they extracted 2800 descriptors from the website of the Council of Europe, reconstituted them into 647, and translated them into Japanese (Tono, 2016). They made strenuous efforts to carefully select and check the validity of descriptors both in qualitative and quantitative research methods and have carried out pilot studies in many educational institutions across the nation on a large scale. However, "Despite significant activity on implementing the system at many institutions across the nation, currently there are few published resources or examples specific to a Japanese context from which other teachers, learners or institutions could draw upon (Runnels 2014)." It implies that the awareness and the use of the CEFR-J among English teachers are limited and the impact of the CEFR-J has not been reached far nationwide, yet. I will consider the reason in the following paragraph.

Lastly, from the aspect of the dissemination of the CEFR-J, I will look at a specific Japanese educational context in contrast with that of European countries. As Sugitani & Tomita (2012) point out, "The impact of the CEFR in Japan has been seen predominantly in universities (p.200)," the CEFR has so far had little influence on foreign language education at the secondary level yet. In a country like Japan where the implementation of the course of study set by the educational policy of the central government is mandatory, and therefore little choice in school textbooks and syllabus or course design for teachers to make within the firmly-set curriculum, it is unlikely that the CEFR-J will have an impact on secondary schools in general. However, the situation may change because the next

curriculum revision will be carried out in 2021 for junior high and 2022 for senior high schools in Japan, and the target levels of English proficiency will clearly be indicated in five skills, such as listening, reading, spoken production and spoken interaction, and writing, which are aligned with the CEFR-J's can-do statements (Central Education Council 2018). Furthermore, the Japanese Ministry of Education (MEXT), which has used existing English language proficiency tests such as *Eiken*, TOEFL, TOEIC, etc. in setting the target levels of proficiency for learners of English in each educational system, will also align them to the CEFR levels (Central Education Council 2018). It also aims to make more than 50% of junior high school learners of English attain A1 in the CEFR and make the same percentage of senior high school learners of English attain A2 in the CEFR (Central Education Council 2018).

3. Discussion

Based on the research background in the previous chapter, I would like to clarify what ought to be considered for the implementation of the ELP in the Japanese educational context. I will discuss both positive and negative influences of the ELP in terms of dissemination of the CEFR approach in foreign language education, and then consider the possibility of overcoming the obstacles that are peculiar to a Japanese context. I will also look at a perspective on using the ELP models electronically as an educational tool.

Firstly, I will briefly refer to European people's belief in the role of the CEFR in a foreign language teaching and learning. In many European countries the CEFR's pedagogical purpose has been supported not only by teachers of tertiary institutions but also by primary and secondary school teachers. It is mainly due to the existence of the ELP Validation Committee, which was set up by the Council of Europe's Steering Committee for Education in order to assure the conformity of the European Language Portfolio models to the ELP Principles and Guidelines (Council of Europe 2018). The ELP Validation Committee (EVC) has played an active role in disseminating the use of the ELP across European nations since its foundation in 2000. They accredited and validated a huge number of the ELP models from a variety of educational institutions (Council of Europe 2018). As Kuhn & Cavana (2012: p.57) say, "In the interest of overall quality and validity of the ELP scheme, in future it may be necessary to review validated and registered ELP models from time to time." It clearly shows that they will continue to provide academic assurance and support to the participating schools or institutions in the ELP scheme. With such a historical background, people in European countries came to trust the ELP, and they believe that the CEFR has had an active role in promoting autonomous language learning, for the CEFR has enabled them to develop their ability to live in a multilingual and multicultural Europe and foster mutual understanding and tolerance between communities having different languages and cultures.

However, in the case of introducing the CEFR to an educational context in Japan by using the ELP, the above European people's belief in the role of the CEFR cannot necessarily be accepted in Japan; compared to European countries, Japan is primarily a monocultural, monoracial and monolingual country and thereby has no need to share the same concept or purpose of the CEFR with plurilinguistic and pluricultural European countries. As we confirmed in the research background, the English proficiency level index of the CEFR will be included in the next revision of the foreign language policy by the Ministry of Education. The reason for the inclusion of the CEFR's six global levels of proficiency in the existing goals of language ability is obvious: to improve Japanese people's communication skills in a foreign language in regard to the standardization of the target language proficiency around the world. In other words, the primary goal of introducing the CEFR to Japan focuses on the development of Japanese people's foreign language proficiency but not on raising their awareness of plurilinguistic and pluricultural societies. Indeed, as McCarthy (2016) says, "There is undoubtedly growing pressure around the world for standardization and common understandings with regard to what levels of language proficiency actually entails" (p.99). Therefore, it is to be noted clearly that the main purpose of introducing the CEFR to a Japanese pedagogical context ought to differ from the CEFR's goals in educational contexts in Europe.

Secondly, as case studies above show, teachers have trouble introducing the ELP into their classes in some European countries; they have struggled to make the ELP models relevant for their local educational situations. The same kind of difficulty will certainly be anticipated in a Japanese educational context. That is one of the main reasons why the CEFR's can-do statements were drastically revised to match the Japanese context in the form of the CEFR-J. However, in contrast with European case studies, as Japan has a long tradition of teacher-centered method in the teaching and learning of English, and secondary schools are under tight control across the nation by the Ministry of Education, specifically in designing syllabuses and choosing textbooks, it is even more difficult to try to use the ELP in classes. Though it is true that "While some junior and senior high schools and teachers do experiment with their own curricula, and may be aware of the CEFR, they are still very much the exception rather than the rule (Sugitani & Tomita 2012: p.204)," the situation may change with the introduction of the CEFR proficiency levels into the next revision of the curriculum in 2021 and 2022. What is currently needed is more studies of the implementation of the ELP in secondary schools. Tono (2013) points out that it is necessary to develop methods of the effective use of the ELP which connects teaching and assessment when language teaching based on the target levels of the CEFR's can-do statements is carried out. I will look at the possibility of what aspect of the ELP ought to be focused on in a Japanese educational context. What components of the ELP will be crucial in its implementation? As shown in the case studies in Greece, for example, learners think that "the ELP encourages them to think about their own learning process and to develop strategies for acquiring

communication skills (Little 2003)." It implies that learners' awareness of their own learning process is important: self-assessment tasks that encourage learner engagement and personal reflection will be effective to let learners know more about their own abilities or language skills. Having students do some communicative tasks and reflect on their fulfillment of them as part of formative assessment procedures will be challenging but pedagogically very meaningful even in a Japanese context. It is partly because both teachers and students have not been accustomed to the implementation of learner-centered teaching and learning in classes in Japan. As Kissling & O'Donnell (2015) say, "Language awareness arising from the purposeful, repeated practice of self-assessment will ideally result in learners becoming more aware of their own communicative strengths and challenges, or improved self-efficacy," learners' own language awareness through self-assessment will make them more self-directed or autonomous in language learning. Thus, even in a less learner-centered pedagogical situation like Japanese secondary schools there is a possibility in which the teacher may use the ELP as a tool to have the students take notice of their own learning processes and develop their communi-cative strategies on their own volition.

Lastly, as we have seen in European ELP case studies, the teacher's additional workload in rela-tion to the use of the ELP in classes cannot be ignored; as Little (2012) points out, "the ELP is a personal document," and thereby it is very demanding for the teacher to have her students do their own self-assessment and report their own final progress in learning at the end of the coursework. It is very unrealistic to expect a new language policy such as the ELP to be implemented smoothly in classes if the teacher's workload becomes much heavier than before. Modern technology such as e-portfolio like *Mahara* may further facilitate the use of the ELP and will eventually resolve such underlying problems with regard to the workload of both teachers and learners. As Kuhn & Langner (2012) point out, "As with the ELP, *Mahara* considers each portfolio to be strictly the property of the learner … a *Mahara* portfolio is also a social platform … (p.175)." It implies that a *Mahara* portfolio will enable learners to develop, deploy and manage their documents easily over a computer network on an individual basis. Cavana (2012) says, "Although most of the Council of Europe-validated ELPs are paper based, over recent years some electronic ELPs have been developed (p.152)." If the digitiza-tion of the ELP advances rapidly, as Cavana (2012) points out, "a digital environment can be seen to allow more autonomy for the user … the possibility to access tests, questionnaires and updating facili-ties … learners can manage their progress and update their profile in relation to their learning strategies … enables learners to archive and store information easily and share it with other users (p.152)." It clearly shows that the digitization of the ELP has lots of pedagogical merits; hence it fur-ther facilitates a foreign language learning by alleviating the burden of both teachers and learners. It is also important to realize that as Alvarez (2012) points out, "there are certainly some challenges to developing, using and sharing technology and these will need to be addressed by any developer but

also by any user (p.139)." It implies that learners also need to know about some technological aspects of an electronic portfolio that entail a great deal of work. It can be said that introducing e-portfolio models is challenging at present but has a great potential to make it a more useful tool in promoting the use of the ELP in a Japanese context.

4.   Conclusions and implications

This paper pointed out that the implementation of the ELP in secondary schools would be a difficult task in Japan. The main reason is that there has been a tight governmental control over school education which makes it less flexible for teachers to design syllabuses, choose teaching materials, and decide what and how to teach. A long tradition of teacher-centered methods of education at school is another factor to be considered less harmonious with the use of the ELP.

However, the pedagogical efficacy of the ELP provides the prospect of developing students' language awareness through self-assessment with which students can motivate themselves to become self-directed or autonomous learners in communicative language learning. Though the impact of the CEFR in Japan has largely been seen in universities so far, it ought to be noted that the CEFR's action-oriented approach aiming at developing communicative competence and the self-assessment aspect of the ELP can be combined with even traditional teacher-centered methods of English teaching and learning in high schools in Japan, as the case study in a French technical school clearly suggests. However, the idea of developing "learner autonomy" should not be prioritized in a syllabus design in a Japanese educational context; it should rather be regarded as something that can initially be guided and trained by teachers because the notion of learner autonomy is, as Smith (2003) says, "a western concept inappropriate for 'non-western' students." Although it is empirically known that the concept of learner autonomy has not been highlighted in classroom practice in Japan, there is a view that "the exercise and development of learner autonomy can be seen as an educational goal which is cross-culturally valid" (Smith 2008). It implies that even in a pedagogical context in Japan students possess the power to control their own learning to some extent and there is room for improvement in teaching and learning methods towards developing learner autonomy.

Lastly, I referred to the possibility that self-assessment in the ELP could support the development of learner autonomy. As Yoneda et al. (2013) point out, most of Japanese high school students' English competency in terms of the CEFR's six global levels of proficiency varies from A1 to A2. Their research has proved that the threshold level with which learners can correctly assess their own English language proficiency in their self-assessment is A2. It may provide the prospect that if self-assessment activities of the ELP are introduced into classes where most of the students' English proficiency is A2, it is expected that the students themselves can manage and develop their own communicative learning in a more effective way. By actively engaging in self-directed learning together with reflec-

tive and collaborative learning in classes, students may eventually improve their English ability to B2 on the CEFR's six-scale level of proficiency, and the acquisition of learner autonomy, which is an ultimate goal of the CEFR, will be achieved as well. Furthermore, the recent development of computer technology may reduce the burden of the fulfillment of the ELP components such as self-assessment and recording the learner's own progress: Hence, the workload problems of both teachers and learners would be resolved.

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