

THE IMPACT OF THE CEFR ON FOREIGN LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN JAPAN

Zorana Vasiljevic

Bunkyo University, 3337 Minami-Ogishima, Koshigaya, Saitama 343-8511, Japan

Abstract

Over the last decade, the Japanese Ministry of Education has undertaken multiple reforms aimed at improving foreign language education and ensuring young Japanese people are ready to respond to the challenges of globalization. Many of the new guidelines have been modelled on the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The present paper examines the impact that the CEFR has had on the national curricula, teaching practices, and assessment in Japan. After a brief review of the origin and goals of the CEFR, it discusses the development of the CEFR-J project, the introduction of 'Can-Do' descriptors in national curricula, and the development of CEFR-based teaching materials and tests. Positive changes as well as challenges are examined, following which recommendations are made for improving current policies. Special attention is given to developing the language competencies of Japanese teachers of English.

Keywords: CEFR, CEFR-J, foreign language policies in Japan, English education in Japan

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 CEFR: Its origin, goals, and basic principles

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages or CEFR is a set of guidelines designed to validate the language abilities of foreign language learners. It was developed by the Council of Europe as the central component of the "Language Learning for European Citizenship" project between 1989 and 1996, and was first published in 2001. Thereafter, it has been translated into about 40 languages, gaining recognition in Europe and beyond.

The CEFR was designed as a descriptive rather than a prescriptive document. It was made language and context neutral so that it could be applied to any foreign language learning situation. The goals underpinning its creation were to establish a plurilingual and pluricultural European identity and develop educational policies that would promote "democratic citizenship, social cohesion and intercultural dialogue" (Recommendation CM/Rec, 2008). In the CEFR scheme of language use, plurilingualism denotes an individual's ability to use more than one language appropriately. This concept differs from multilingualism, which refers to the co-existence of different languages at a particular geographical location. In the CEFR model, the aim of language education is not to help learners achieve a native-like mastery of one or more languages, but to help them develop a linguistic repertoire in which all language abilities play a role. Knowledges of the different languages a person may acquire formally or informally through different life experiences are seen as interrelated and interactive components of general communicative competence: they represent an important linguistic resource that can help learners accomplish tasks, construct their identity, and gain new competencies. The CEFR guidelines advocate a policy of teaching two foreign languages in addition to the mother tongue and stress the importance of giving young people the opportunity to acquire plurilingual competence during formal education (Council of Europe, 2001).

This emphasis on plurilingual competence has created the need to formulate and scale descriptors of language proficiency that will enhance the transparency and coherence of courses, syllabuses, and language qualifications across Europe and facilitate communication between all stakeholders so that they can coordinate their efforts and meet the needs of specific learners in diverse learning contexts.

Although the CEFR does not discuss specific teaching practices, a reflective action-oriented approach to language learning and teaching provides a conceptual basis for the framework. Language is seen not as a subject to study but rather as a vehicle for communication. Language users are considered 'social

agents' who engage in language activities to accomplish real-world tasks. This means that language use is socially conditioned and dependent on the cognitive, emotional, and volitional resources an individual has at his or her disposal. In line with these theoretical assumptions, the CEFR approaches communication in terms of the knowledge and skills that language users need to perform specific communicative acts. These competencies are divided into general and communicative competencies. General competencies include declarative knowledge, practical and intercultural skills and know-how, existential competence, and the ability to learn, while communicative competencies entail linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic knowledge. Each of these competencies is complex and entails different kinds of knowledge and skills. For example, declarative knowledge encompasses knowledge of the world, sociocultural knowledge, and intercultural awareness, while the ability to learn includes language and communication awareness, general phonetic skills, and heuristic skills. The CEFR recognizes that the ability to perform in real-life communicative situations requires mobilisation of both general and communicative language competencies, as well as appropriate communicative strategies.

The CEFR proposes four main domains of language use: educational, occupational, public, and personal. Within each domain, learners engage in language activities, which the CEFR model organizes into four modes: 1) reception (listening and reading), 2) production (speaking and writing), 3) interaction (spoken or written exchanges between two or more individuals), and 4) mediation (facilitating communication between individuals or groups who cannot communicate directly by translating, interpreting, explaining data, summarizing, synthesizing, etc.). The framework also specifies the parameters that shape the context of language use: (1) situational context, (2) text type, (3) topic, and (4) conditions or constraints.

The two most widely recognised features of the CEFR are its global proficiency scale and 'Can-Do' descriptors. The original CEFR proficiency scale comprised three broad bands, each divided into two-proficiency levels: Basic User (A1-A2), Independent User (B1-B2), and Proficient User (C1-C2).

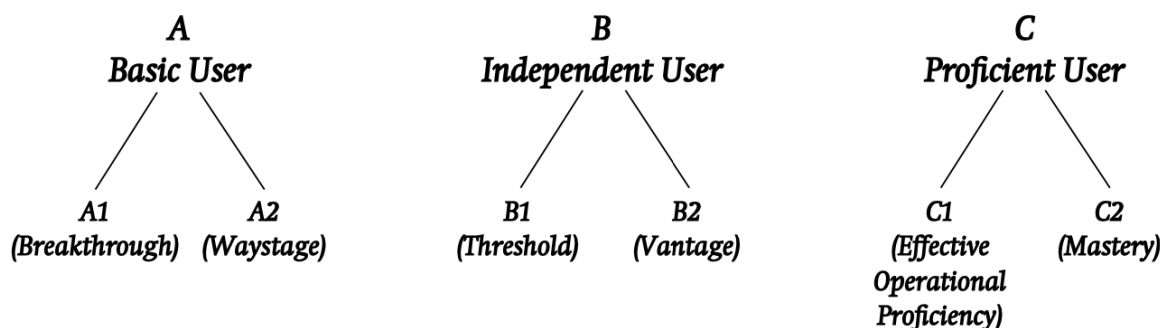


Figure 1. The CEFR global proficiency scale (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 23)

It is essential to understand that the top C2 level does not imply native-speaker proficiency or the maximum achievable level by non-native speakers, but rather the precision of expression and appropriateness of language use seen in successful language learners. Thus, there exist non-native speakers such as simultaneous interpreters and literary translators who operate at a level above C2 (Council of Europe, 2018).

The skills and competencies at each level have been empirically validated and are presented through illustrative descriptors known as 'Can-Do' descriptors or statements. These reflect the CEFR assumption that language proficiency equates to the ability to perform communicative language activities by drawing upon general and communicative language competencies and appropriate communicative strategies. The CEFR does not make a distinction between language competence and language performance. In the CEFR model, language competencies are acquired through communication and enacted in communication.

The 'Can-Do' statements are characterized by positive wording. The focus is on what learners can do rather than on their deficiencies. Other characteristics are clarity, precision, and conciseness. They are available for the global six-level scale as well as for different kinds of language use (reception, production, and interaction) and, since 2020, mediation. Whilst each level should be taken to subsume the levels below, learners usually do not acquire all skills and competencies associated with a certain level at the same time. Their proficiency is fundamentally uneven and conditioned by their needs, background, and their life and learning experiences. One important contribution of the CEFR is its recognition of partial competence as a reality of language learning. It acknowledges that language development has a qualitative dimension that corresponds to the vertical movement along the global scale (CEFR levels) as well as a quantitative (horizontal) dimension that is reflected in the range of communicative activities in which a learner can engage. Both dimensions should be seen as a continuum. The 'Can-Do' descriptors are designed to capture both quantitative and qualitative changes in learners' language skills. Although descriptors first appear in the level at which learners are most likely to be able to perform the task in question, they should not be seen as exclusive to, or mandatory for, a specific level. Because language competencies develop unevenly, learners at lower levels may sometimes be able to perform the tasks associated with higher levels, and learners at higher levels may still need to develop some competencies associated with lower levels. It should also be noted that each Can-Do descriptor has been developed and calibrated as an independent criterion statement and can be used on its own (Council of Europe, 2001; 2018).

The 'Can-Do' statements are neither learning objectives nor learning outcomes. They simply describe the use of language by learners that can be observed at different stages of language development. Nevertheless, these statements have proved extremely useful in defining learning objectives, selecting and developing learning materials, and the assessment of learning outcomes (Broek & van den Ende, 2013). They have made it possible to build competency-based national and institutional curricula as well as to align individual learner achievement to global standards. 'Can-Do' statements embody the philosophy of action-based learning and offer coherent and transparent criteria that can be used for teacher- or self-assessment. They are considered an effective way of promoting learner autonomy and out-of-classroom learning (Kohonen, 2009; Lenz, 2004).

1.2 The CEFR Companion Volume (the CEFR-CV)

The introduction of the CEFR into the education systems of EU member states has had a positive impact on national curricula, language teaching, development of learning materials, learner autonomy, teacher training, and assessment practices. The proficiency scales and 'Can-Do' descriptors have been widely utilized by policy makers, educational institutions, and language assessment bodies (Byram & Parmenter, 2012; Martyniuk & Noijons, 2007).

However, there have also been some criticisms of the framework regarding either its scientific foundation or its use. Hulstijn (2007), for example, pointed out that empirical validation of the CEFR scales was based on the judgments of teachers and experts rather than SLA research. Furthermore, as a language independent and action-oriented approach, the CEFR defined the communicative functions that learners should be able to perform at different proficiency levels, but did not specify how those functions should be realized in a specific language. The underlying assumption was that completion of any communicative task will require a comparable level of proficiency regardless of the language. However, this assumption has not been validated by empirical research (Little, 2007). Alderson (2007, p. 661) raised concerns that the language of illustrative descriptors was often "vague, undefined, and imprecise", and pointed out that numerous supporting guidebooks, supplements, and materials attest to the demand for clarification as to how the CEFR was to be applied. Concerns have also arisen regarding the lack of scales for mediation. Alderson (2007) reported that examination boards, particularly in Central Europe, continued to test translation in language proficiency exams, even though the CEFR scale did not include illustrative descriptors for mediation. The CEFR has also been found to be unsuitable for teaching young learners, language for specific purposes, or CLIL. Finally, concerns have been expressed that the CEFR upholds a native speaker norm, despite the difficulties in defining native speaker linguistic competence and the increasing irrelevance of the native speaker model in English as a lingua franca interaction. In short, although the CEFR had wide acceptance and a significant impact

on language education, there was a need for partial revision of the guidelines and extension of the CEFR scales.

The CEFR *Companion Volume* (the CEFR-CV) was made available online in 2108 and published in print in 2020. The basic CEFR principles have been reenforced and the illustrative descriptor scales have been expanded. The new volume introduces pre-A1 proficiency level and presents more elaborate descriptors for the six criterion levels and plus levels (levels between the criterion levels). Written Reception activities now include 'Reading as a Leisure Activity' while the Spoken Interaction category includes 'Using Telecommunications'. 'Sustained Monologue: Giving Information' is a new scale in the Spoken Production category. The descriptors for online interaction have also been added. Mediation has been reconceptualized with the focus changing from negotiation of meaning in the sense of getting the message across to co-construction of new meaning and knowledge (North, 2022). The CEFR-CV mediation descriptors offer a comprehensive operationalization of this new construct. Mediation combines reception, production, and interaction. It can take place within one language or between languages. The descriptors for mediation activities cover mediation of texts, concepts, and communication while the descriptors for mediation strategies outline strategies for concept explanation and text simplification. Analysis and criticism of creative texts, including literature, can now be found in the 'Mediating a text' section. New scales that consider the cognitive, social, and experiential capacities of young learners have also been developed and organized into two main age groups (7-10 and 11-15), both starting at pre-A1 level. The scale for phonological control has been revised with more attention given to sound articulation and prosody. Whereas the 2001 guidelines based the phonology scale on the native speaker-norm, the 2018 guidelines emphasize intelligibility. The CEFR-CV highlights the centrality of learner agency and an action-based approach to learning. More attention has also been paid to the use of pluricultural competencies in communicative situations, bringing language education closer to the Council of Europe's mission of plurilingual and pluricultural learner-centred education. Finally, a number of stylistic modifications have been introduced to make the descriptors gender-neutral, and new descriptors for sign language have been added to promote social inclusion (Council of Europe, 2018).

2. THE IMPACT OF THE CEFR ON LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN JAPAN

The flexibility of the CEFR guidelines and an increasing demand for quality assurance, coherence and transparency in foreign language teaching have made the CEFR model popular beyond Europe. Several countries in the Asia-Pacific region, such as Japan, Korea, China, Malaysia, Thailand and Vietnam, have adopted some of the CEFR principles in their language policies (Foley, 2019; Pham, 2017).

2.1 The five proposals

The Japanese translation of the CEFR guidebook appeared in 2004 and generated considerable interest among foreign language educators and, somewhat later, policy makers. One of the earliest official documents to refer to the CEFR in Japan was *Five Proposals and Specific Measures for Developing Proficiency in English for International Communication* (the 'Five Proposals' for short), published by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) in 2011. Recognizing that existing ELT practices were inadequate to prepare young Japanese people to respond to the challenges of globalization, MEXT outlined five measures aimed at improving the quality and standards of foreign language education.

These were as follows:

1. making learning objectives transparent by describing attainment through 'Can Do' descriptors
2. fostering students' motivation to learn English
3. making effective use of assistant language teachers (ALTs), ICT, and other resources
4. improving the language proficiency of teachers
5. modifying university entrance exams to align with a global society (MEXT, 2011).

The first proposal concerned the assessment and verification of the attainment levels of students. The Course of Study (Japanese national curriculum) stipulated that after graduation from junior high school, students should attain EIKEN grade 3 or above, which corresponds to A1 level on the CEFR scale, while high-school students should have at least EIKEN Grade Pre-2 level (A2 on the CEFR scale). In terms of skills, junior high school students were expected to be able to read and listen to basic English, understand speakers' or writers' intentions, and express their own views verbally and in writing using basic English. For high school students, the objectives also included accurate understanding and transmission of information and the ability to convey intentions in English. To make learning objectives transparent and ensure continuity through different levels of education, MEXT instructed junior and senior high schools to establish learning targets and monitor their completion in the form of 'Can-Do' lists. Learning was to be formally assessed and the test results used to improve teaching and learning.

The second proposal aimed to address the declining interest of young people in learning English and going abroad. MEXT guidelines stressed the importance of using educational materials that reflect real English usage and giving students opportunities to get to know Japanese people who use English in their work, undertake internships, participate in international exchange in English with foreign schools, and study abroad.

The third proposal aimed to extend students' contact with English. MEXT recognized that language learning required opportunities to use the language. Specific measures included giving a more active role to assistant language teachers (ALTs) in class and out-of-school activities, and more efficient use of ICT with audio-visual content, drills, and opportunities for international exchange.

The fourth proposal concerned the reinforcement of English skills and teaching abilities of English instructors. MEXT recognized that the objectives outlined in the Course of Study could not be completed without improving qualifications and performance of teachers. Universities were assigned a key role in teacher training, which alongside the enhancement of language proficiency also included the development of learning materials and instruction in teaching methodology. Use of standardized tests such as EIKEN, TOEFL, and TOEIC to assess instructors' proficiency was encouraged. Specific measures also included an emphasis on cooperation among instructors and the selection of successful schools that would serve as models.

The fifth proposal concerned the revision of university entrance exams. MEXT recognized that university entrance exams did not always test the skills required by the global community. The introduction of four skills in the university entrance admission process was proposed and the use of standardized tests such as TOEFL and TOEIC for university admission purposes was encouraged.

2.2 Accomplishments

Over the last decade, these objectives have been met with some success. Foreign language education has been given a more prominent place in the national curriculum. This is reflected in the introduction of Foreign Language Activities in the elementary school curriculum in 2011, the objective of which was to enhance students' motivation to learn foreign languages and increase their understanding of foreign cultures. Between 2011 and 2019, English was taught in the fifth and sixth grades of elementary school for a total of 35 lesson hours per year (approximately one lesson hour per week). In 2020, English became an official subject for which students now receive grade points. Foreign Language Activities were moved to the 3rd and the 4th grades, and reading and writing activities were added to the 5th and the 6th grade curriculum with the annual fund of classes totalling 70 hours or two lesson hours per week. Learning goals stipulated by the new Course of Study encompass making students aware of the linguistic differences between Japanese and foreign languages, developing their communicative competencies and ability to express thoughts and feelings in accordance with the context of communication, and deepening their understanding of foreign cultures. The content includes familiar topics such as daily and school life, food, shopping, as well as several topics related to Japan. Learning benchmarks have also been revised. The number of words that students are expected to acquire at elementary school has been set at 600~700 words (MEXT, 2017d).

Following the implementation of the new Course of Study for junior high schools in 2021, the number of English classes has increased by 30% from 105 to 140 classes per year or four classes per week.

English is recommended as the language of instruction and attention is given to the development of four language skills and context-based communication. A distinction is made between more autonomous language use in spoken production and more collaborative spoken interaction. Greater emphasis is placed on improvisational communication and skill integration. The structural syllabus has been replaced with real-life communicative functions and notions. The new Course of Study specifies language learning situations. The content is grouped into “daily topics” such as self-introduction, shopping, travel, home or school life, “things of interest” such as sports, movies, music, or school events, and “social topics” such as environmental issues, science, technology, international cooperation, and human rights. The size of the target vocabulary has been raised from 1,200 to 1,600~1,800 words (MEXT, 2017b).

The Course of Study for high schools was implemented in 2022. English is designated as the principal language of instruction and more emphasis is placed on the development of productive learning skills. Upper secondary schools are not a part of compulsory education and schools have more flexibility in designing their curricula. English Communication I, with an annual class fund of 105 hours, is the only compulsory subject. However, it is common for schools to offer English Communication II and III, with an annual class fund of 140 hours each, and English Expressions I-III, each with 70 annual lesson hours per course. The objective is for students to acquire 1,800~2,500 new words during their upper secondary education (MEXT, 2018b). This means that under the new Courses of Study, students should learn between 4,000 and 5,000 new words by the time they graduate from high school. The target language includes not only single words but also formulaic phrases and idiomatic expressions.

Improvements have also been made in the course contents and methodology. With a general goal of preparing students for a dynamic, global and ever-changing world, MEXT reforms aim to develop students’ ability to “think, make decisions and express themselves”, fostering their humanity and nurturing their lifelong-learning skills and ability to apply the newly acquired knowledge in their personal lives and society at large (MEXT 2017a, 2018a). These objectives are also reflected in the foreign language policies. More emphasis has been given to problem solving and hands-on learning. Students are expected to learn how to critically evaluate, select, and integrate information from multiple sources and organize this according to the purpose and circumstances of communication. They should be able to construct and express arguments, convey their opinions, intentions, and emotions, express agreement and disagreement, stimulate communication, and repair breakdowns in communication if necessary (MEXT 2017a, 2018a).

Commentaries by MEXT on the Courses of Study for foreign languages in junior and senior high schools explicitly refer to the CEFR principles (MEXT 2017b, 2018b). The emphasis is on building students’ communicative abilities, which is based on the assumption that language is acquired through use in social contexts. In line with the CEFR guidelines, MEXT requires schools to develop activity-based syllabuses based on real-world communicative needs and to communicate learning objectives to students through ‘Can-Do’ statements. The use of competency descriptors seeks to enhance the transparency of the learning objectives and assessment criteria and ensure continuity of development as learners progress through different levels of education.

The MEXT guidelines stipulate that classroom activities should simulate real-life tasks and help students develop five skills outlined in the CEFR (spoken interaction, spoken production, reading, listening, and writing), as well as sociolinguistic, pragmatic, and strategic competencies. Communicative activities are set in specific communication settings that follow the CEFR guidelines. Particular attention has been given to the development of productive skills. Students are expected to learn to communicate in both verbal and written modes. Learning tasks and class activities are to be designed in such a way as to give learners opportunities to use the vocabulary and expressions they have learned. Presentations, debates, and discussions have become a compulsory part of the high school curriculum, while essay writing is taught through elective courses where the focus is on the writing process. Interactional communication, with two or more people co-constructing discourse, lies at the core of language learning. Through pair-work and group activities, learners develop their language skills and acquire conversational strategies such as asking follow-up questions, turn-taking, requesting and giving clarification, switching the topic, and so on. The MEXT guidelines acknowledge that these complex competencies cannot be acquired in

a single lesson. Comprehensive syllabuses, continuity between lessons, and transfer of content and knowledge across different fields of study are needed.

Efforts have also been made to increase the transparency and coherence of national curricula. The CEFR-J was a government-funded project which aimed to develop standards for foreign language teaching, learning, and assessment based on the CEFR guidelines that would be applicable to the Japanese context. Prior to the CEFR-J, Courses of Study were based more on intuition and experience than on empirical research (Negishi, 2012). There were no clear guidelines regarding the content students should work with, no generally accepted proficiency goals in Japanese national curricula, and no agreement on how their attainment should be assessed (Negishi, 2022).

Like the original CEFR, the CEFR-J is an action-oriented framework consisting of multi-levelled ‘Can-Do’ lists across five areas of competence: listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, and writing. However, while the CEFR has six levels, the CEFR-J has 12 (Pre-A1, A1.1, A1.2, A1.3, A2.1, A2.2, B1.1, B1.2, B2.1, B2.2, C1, C2). Modifications to the level scale were made because the original CEFR levels were difficult to apply to the Japanese context. Empirical data revealed that about 80% of Japanese learners were classified as being at A-levels even though they had 10 years of English instruction at secondary and tertiary levels (Negishi, Takada, & Tono, 2012). Therefore, more precise descriptions of proficiency were needed for low-level learners and false beginners. Thus, a pre-A1 level was introduced. In addition, A1 level was branched into three sublevels (A1.1, A1.2, A1.3), while A2, B1, and B2 levels were each divided into two sublevels. No modifications were made to the C1 and C2 levels as there was little empirical data for the high-proficiency bracket. Figure 2 provides an overview of the CEFR and the CEFR-J level scales.

CEFR			CEFR-J	
Proficient User	C2		C2	
Level: Advanced	C1		C1	
Independent User	B2		B2.2	
Level: Intermediate			B2.1	
	B1		B1.2	
			B1.1	
Basic User	A2		A2.2	
Level: Beginner			A2.1	
	A1		A1.3	
			A1.2	
			A1.1	
			Pre-A1	

Figure 2. CEFR and CEFR-J proficiency levels

Like the original CEFR, the CEFR-J views the learner as a ‘social agent’ who engages in authentic communication, co-constructs meaning in interaction, and exerts autonomy in the learning process. Learners’ competencies are defined through ‘Can-Do’ descriptors. However, while the CEFR ‘Can-Do’ statements are language and context neutral, the CEFR-J was developed for pedagogical purposes and focuses on teaching English in Japanese secondary schools. The descriptors were modified to specify

the tasks, their themes, and the conditions of learning activities for different levels of proficiency, facilitating their use by teachers, material writers, and test makers (Nagai & O'Dwyer, 2011). The list consists of 647 descriptors for the five CEFR competencies (69 for spoken production, 137 for spoken interaction, 124 for listening, 146 for reading, and 171 for writing). For each descriptor, information about the level and the skill category is provided. There is a general version and, for A-levels, a version for young children.

The descriptors can be linked to the CEFR-J Wordlist. The list covers Pre-A1 to B2 levels and includes 7,570 lemmas with codes denoting each part-of-speech and information about the semantic domain for noun entries. This helps teachers and material writers identify in which thematic domain the words are used at different levels of proficiency, facilitating their integration into the specific learning tasks that can help learners develop the competencies outlined in the descriptors (Tono, 2017). Supporting resources for teachers and researchers such as the *CEFR-J Guidebook* (Tono (Ed.), 2013) and the *CEFR-J Resource Book* (Tono & Negishi (Eds.), 2020) have also been made available. In 2013, MEXT published the *Handbook for Setting Learning Attainment Targets in Foreign Languages in Each Junior and Senior High School in the Form of 'Can-Do' Lists* (the 'Handbook' for short). The document is intended to help secondary school teachers, principals, and prefectural boards of education establish and use 'Can-Do' lists for teaching and assessment. Schools are expected to set attainment targets in the form of 'Can-Do' descriptors for each grade and each language skill "based on their realities", communicate those targets to the students, and refer to them regularly for the purpose of monitoring students' progress and future programme revision. The Handbook clarifies the background and the purpose of 'Can-Do' lists and outlines the procedures for their integration into school programmes. Teachers are reminded that 'Can-Do' lists should not be linked to extrinsic goals such as passing university entrance exams and that competencies should not be defined as grammatical structures but rather descriptions of what a learner can do in the target language. The Handbook illustrates the communicative contexts and competencies that students should develop at junior and senior high school.

For instance, for the language function of "conveying emotions", the following guidelines are provided:

expressing gratitude (JHS)	praising (JHS/HS)	expressing hopes (HS)
complaining (JHS)	apologizing (JHS/HS)	expressing appreciation (HS)
expressing surprise (HS)	expressing concerns (HS) etc.	

(MEXT, 2013)

(* JHS = junior high school: HS = high school)

Concrete examples make it easier for teachers to select and develop teaching materials, organize teaching units, and identify possible deficiencies in the school programmes. 'Can-Do' lists help connect teaching objectives with the assessment criteria and promote collaboration among teaching staff. They also make it easier to engage learners in self-assessment, and provide a basis for feedback and reflection. Sharing learning attainment targets with students is intended to foster positive attitudes towards foreign language learning and help learners sustain their motivation. Therefore, teachers are advised to set the attainment targets so that all learners can meet at least 60%~70% of the objectives. This is an important point of difference between the CEFR and the CEFR-J. While the CEFR provides general level descriptions, the CEFR-J aims to facilitate implementation of the new Courses of Study and attainment targets are set to be achievable by all students.

The CEFR-J has had a considerable impact in Japan. By specifying the vocabulary and grammatical patterns necessary to carry out specific tasks at different levels of proficiency, it has made attainment goals transparent and promoted action-oriented practices in language teaching. The CEFR-J 'Can-Do' statements have been used by thousands of public and private organizations, schools, and publishing companies for the development of their own 'Can-Do' lists, and the improvement of teaching and testing materials. Some CEFR-J descriptors were even incorporated into the revised version of the Council of Europe CEFR A1-level competency descriptors (Tono, 2017).

The CEFR has also exerted a considerable influence over language testing in Japan. For instance, efforts have been made to align the scales of popular proficiency exams such as EIKEN, TOEIC, or GTEC with the CEFR levels. The Educational Testing Service (ETC), which administers TOEIC, the Society for Testing English Proficiency (STEP), which administers EIKEN, and the Benesse Corporation, which administers GTEC, have supplied ‘Can-Do’ lists that clarify the language functions that learners can perform at different levels of proficiency.

‘Can-Do’ descriptors also provide a reference point for reflective learning practices. They encourage learners to reconsider their learning objectives and outcomes. Even before the implementation of the CEFR, reflection has been a common educational practice in Japanese schools. Teachers would normally leave several minutes at the end of the class for learners to think about what they learned and thought during class. However, the students tended to reflect at an affective rather than a cognitive level with comments such as “I enjoyed the class”, “The activity was fun”, etc. (Takada, 2017). The introduction of ‘Can-Do’ self-assessment criteria stimulates learners to go beyond this affective level and think about their learning in concrete, goal-oriented terms.

Finally, the CEFR has also had an impact on teaching Japanese as a foreign language. To promote Japanese language education in European secondary schools, there was a need to align the curriculum to the CEFR ‘Can-Do’ descriptors. In 2010, the Japan Foundation published ‘Standards for Japanese Language Education’, which provided criteria for teaching, learning, and assessment of Japanese as a foreign language based on the CEFR principles. ‘Can-Do’ statements that indicate levels of Japanese proficiency were developed and grouped into four categories: (1) ‘Can-Do’ language activities, (2) ‘Can-Do’ communication strategies, (3) ‘Can-Do’ texts, and (4) ‘Can-Do’ language competencies, which included linguistic, sociolinguistic, and pragmatic knowledge (Sugitani & Tomita, 2012). The pamphlet can be downloaded from the Japan Foundation website and is currently available in six languages. The Japan Foundation also published a series of textbooks titled *Marugoto: Japanese Language and Culture*, in which these principles are put into practice. The textbooks challenge the traditional form-focused Japanese language teaching style and instead emphasize reflective learning, self-assessment, and the development of intercultural understanding (Yokoyama, 2017).

2.3 Challenges

New education reforms aimed at aligning the curriculum, teaching, and assessment and which emphasize communicative competence and student autonomy are certainly a move in the right direction. However, the original objectives of the reform outlined in the ‘Five Proposals’ have only been partially achieved.

Implementation of the CEFR approach and effective use of ‘Can-Do’ descriptors require understanding and embracing the CEFR view of the language learner as a ‘social agent’ and language learning as a variety of language use. However, empirical data suggest that there is still some confusion and uncertainty among teachers as to what ‘Can-Do’ lists are and how they can be used to improve teaching and learning practices.

In 2013, the Eiken Foundation conducted a survey of secondary school teachers’ perceptions of the MEXT ‘Can-Do’ list initiative. Responses were received from 915 schools. The results revealed that 58% of teachers did not understand the relationship between the ‘Can-Do’ lists and the Courses of Study, and 42% reported only partial understanding. At the time of the survey, which took place two years after the ‘Five Proposals’ were published, only 10% of the responding schools had set up ‘Can-Do’ lists, 11% were working on them, 43% were planning to make them, and over a third (35%) had no plans. Furthermore, 36% of the schools that had prepared their own ‘Can-Do’ lists, or were about to finish them, had not started using them and 58% of those which had implemented them were struggling to use them effectively. About one in five teachers felt that the purpose of ‘Can-Do’ lists was unclear. Time constraints and differences in students’ proficiency levels also posed difficulties (Eiken Foundation of Japan, 2013, cited in Takada 2017, p. 55).

A more recent survey conducted by MEXT in 2021 of the current situation regarding the implementation of English policies at public junior high schools revealed that ‘Can-Do’ lists were prepared by 94.7% of the schools surveyed. However, in only 47.6% of cases were those lists shared with the students, and

only 67.5% of the schools collected data on how well the students met the attainment targets (MEXT, 2022b). Data for senior public high schools collected in the same year indicated that ‘Can-Do’ lists were prepared for 96.4% of English related courses and made public in 67.6% of cases. The figures for target attainment were available for 63.3% of the courses (MEXT, 2022c).

The current scenario where schools have developed ‘Can-Do’ lists but are hesitant to use them is indicative of a mistrust of top-down policies and a lack of understanding regarding the purposes and meaning of ‘Can-Do’ statements. The original CEFR and the CEFR-J ‘Can-Do’ descriptors describe language competencies and represent long-term learning targets. MEXT has requested schools to develop their own ‘Can-Do’ descriptors for each grade and each language skill based on the reality for each school, which are to be used as attainment targets. As Bower et al. (2017a) point out in their report on the curriculum reforms at Hiroshima Bunkyo Women’s University, adjusting the curriculum to the CEFR-J can be as time consuming as making a new curriculum. Furthermore, writing clear and consistent ‘Can-Do’ descriptors requires knowledge and experience. No training or expert assistance has been provided to public school teachers in this regard. The university instructors who engaged in the CEFR-based curriculum reforms reported difficulties in reaching a consensus on the meaning of some CEFR-J descriptors (Bower et al., 2017a) and distinguishing between some of the lower levels of proficiency in the CEFR-J, particularly in reading and spoken interaction (Bower et al., 2017b). Some ‘Can-Do’ statements were found to be too vague, while others were found to be too specific to provide a basis for multiple lessons (Bower et al., 2017b). Although Bower et al.’s (2017a; 2017b) reports were based on experience with the CEFR-J alignment of a university programme, it can be assumed that secondary school teachers have experienced similar problems.

Furthermore, teachers in public schools face constraints with regard to material selection as they can only use government-approved textbooks. Developing a CEFR-based curriculum involves not only the development of illustrative descriptors but also the alignment of language functions, vocabulary, grammar, topics, text types and tasks (Bower et al., 2017a). This means that public school teachers have been presented with the daunting task of developing curricula based on the CEFR-J descriptors and then formulating ‘Can-Do’ statements for the individual teaching units so that attainment targets can be met. Given that one of the objectives of the MEXT reform was to facilitate the transition between different stages of education, it is not clear why the development of ‘Can-Do’ descriptors has been left to individual schools and instructors. *English Profile*, a free online resource developed by the University of Cambridge, identifies vocabulary and grammar points suitable for teaching at each CEFR level. If consistency and transparency of attainment goals are the objectives, it seems more reasonable and practical to have local textbook publishers adjust the materials to CEFR levels and provide the grade-based and lesson-based ‘Can-Do’ style attainment goals. Defining lesson objectives at the beginning of each chapter through ‘Can-Do’ descriptors would make it easier for teachers and learners to understand lesson goals and monitor students’ progress.

Another problem commonly reported by teachers and learners are difficulties in using ‘Can-Do’ statements to assess learners’ abilities. Nakanishi et al. (2010) compared students’ Eiken test scores, their self-assessment using the Eiken ‘Can-Do’ list, and teachers’ perceptions of students’ abilities. The results revealed that students found it difficult to evaluate their communicative abilities. There were also descriptors that assumed experience abroad which many students did not have. Having to consider multiple ‘Can-Do’ statements was perceived as a burden. Conversely, teachers’ evaluation of students’ abilities using ‘Can-Do’ descriptors revealed a tendency to overestimate such abilities. Considerable differences in teachers’ judgments of learners’ abilities were also observed. Some teachers felt that descriptors for grammatical competencies were missing. Finally, teachers reported difficulties in judging the level of a class as a whole based on learners’ responses to ‘Can-Do’ lists.

The problems above can be partially traced to misguided implementation of the CEFR principles. The original purpose of self-evaluation was not to convert learners into language assessors but to encourage them to engage with their learning. For self-assessment purposes, ‘Can-Do’ statements should be approached primarily as behavioural criteria (Little, 2010). To be used effectively, the descriptors must be accessible to learners. Self-assessment criteria should be specific, transparent, and aligned with the learning objectives. The wording of ‘Can-Do’ statements should be simple and concrete, referring to

tasks that learners have done in class or experienced in real life. Indicating a degree to which they can perform a certain task may be easier than responding to a binary yes/no question. For low-level (pre-A1~A1) learners, providing descriptors in L1 may be helpful. Limiting the number of 'Can-Do' descriptors to 30-40 per survey can prevent learner fatigue (Nakanishi et al., 2010).

Teachers may also benefit from formal training in the CEFR-informed assessment of language skills and competencies. They should be provided with examples of student output at different levels and with suitable texts for each level for receptive skills (Bower et al., 2017a). In a study by Nakanishi et al. (2010), teachers expressed concerns about the lack of 'Can-Do' descriptors for grammatical categories. These concerns reflect limited awareness of the CEFR approach where proficiency is defined in terms of actual language performance rather than linguistic knowledge, and which purposely avoids setting descriptors for grammatical accuracy or making explicit references to grammar. Expert guidance should help teachers gain a better understanding of the role of assessment in the CEFR approach and produce greater consistency in how they evaluate the performance of learners.

The literature on CEFR-informed language teaching and learning commonly states that working with 'Can-Do' descriptors promotes learners' autonomy and fosters their motivation (Kohonen, 2009; Lenz, 2004; Nagai et al., 2020). However, some empirical evidence raises concerns about these claims. Yoneda, Nishimura, and Hosokawa (2011), for example, found no difference between the motivation of learners who used 'Can-Do' lists and those who did not. In Kodate's (2017) study, students were awarded 10% of the grade for self-study that involved the CEFR-based materials and 'Can-Do' self-assessment statements. Kodate observed that learners often lacked the critical, constructive skills needed for self-evaluation. Furthermore, she questioned whether the form of self-study that earned students these points could really be taken as an example of learner autonomy. She reported that students seemed to view out-of-class study activities as another assignment they had to complete to get a better grade rather than as a means of developing a sense of ownership of their learning process and outcome. At this stage, there is little empirical evidence to suggest that the use of 'Can-Do' descriptors contributes to proficiency or changes in learning practices and strategies.

Confidence is also an issue. Ozawa et al. (2012) found that despite a positive correlation between learners' proficiency test scores and their 'Can-Do' list self-evaluations, their confidence regarding 'Can-Do' items did not increase in line with improvements in test scores. Some practice in answering the 'Can-Do' list style questionnaire using samples of work that vary in quality should also help learners understand how to approach self-assessment tasks. Learners also need to know what to do with their assessment results. 'Can-Do' lists can help them identify their weaknesses, but autonomy is exercised when learners are able to take appropriate steps to overcome them.

The principal objective of the MEXT reform was the development of global human resources. English was introduced in primary schools on the assumption that early language instruction would make it possible for students to attain at least B1 level by the time they complete upper secondary school, and then develop B2 competencies at the tertiary level of education (MEXT, 2017c; Tono, 2017). These attainment goals are problematic given that the motivation for the reform was to prepare Japanese students to better communicate in a global society. In Europe, where learning two foreign languages is common, most countries define B1 as the minimum level of attainment for the first foreign language and A2 for the second foreign language at the end of junior high school. Upon completion of high school, students are expected to have B2 proficiency in the first foreign language and B1 in the second (European Education and Culture Executive Agency, 2017). In Japan, where most students learn only one foreign language, B2 proficiency at the end of high school should be an attainable goal. Yet even with the targets lowered, meeting the objectives has proven difficult. Data from a MEXT survey released in 2022 indicated that only 47% of junior high school students reached A1 proficiency or higher on the CEFR scale. The percentage of high school students who met the target of A2 proficiency level stood at 46.1% (MEXT 2022b). It is estimated that in order to progress from A2 to B1 level, students need 300 hours of instruction (Education First, 2019). At most universities, non-English majors receive three hours of English instruction per week during the first two years of their studies. That amounts to 180 hours of guided instruction, which for most learners will not be sufficient to acquire B1-level competencies.

One of the reasons for the underperformance of students is the learning environment, specifically, the low level of English proficiency of the instructors. The European Profiling Grid (2011) stipulates that for an initial teaching qualification, candidates should have a B2 certificate in the target language and oral competence at C1 level, in addition to having completed course training and a minimum of 60 hours of supervised teaching practice. However, a large number of Japanese instructors in primary and secondary education are at B1 level. English has been introduced to primary schools, but a large majority of primary school teachers are not professionals when it comes to teaching English and do not themselves possess English skills. A survey of 306,064 primary school teachers revealed that only 4,595 or 1.5% had a B2 level of English (MEXT, 2022a). The proportion of junior high school and high-school teachers with a B2 or higher level proficiency was 40.8% and 74.9%, respectively (MEXT, 2022b, 2022c). It is undoubtedly the case that good teaching requires more than language proficiency. As Tsang (2017) points out, after teachers reach a certain level of proficiency, their pedagogical skills and personality become more important. However, a certain proficiency threshold is necessary in order to teach effectively. Teachers do not need to have a native-like command of the language, but they must be able to provide good language models, maintain fluent use of the target language in the classroom, correct learners' errors, and provide appropriate feedback (Medgyes, 2001; Richards, 2010). Language proficiency has also been found to affect teachers' confidence in their pedagogical ability and their sense of professional legitimacy (Richards, 2010; Seidlhofer, 1999). Teachers who lack confidence in their teaching ability were found to be less motivated and not as flexible in their teaching practices (Medgyes, 2001; Tschannen-Moran & Hoy, 1998). Increasing the number of language classes with underqualified instructors is not likely to lead to improvements in students' proficiency levels. For Japanese language reform to succeed, language training of pre-service and in-service teachers needs to be a high priority.

Aware of these teacher proficiency issues, MEXT introduced The Japan Exchange and Teaching Programme (JET) in 1987. The programme was intended to improve foreign language education and to promote understanding between Japanese people and those of other countries. It has grown from 848 participants from four countries in 1987 to 5,723 participants from 50 countries in 2022. The total number of participants has exceeded 75, 000 (JET, n.d.).

JET Programme members are expected to engage in team teaching with Japanese instructors as assistant language teachers (ALTs). The intention is for them to be a cultural and linguistic resource for both students and teachers. However, results on the effectiveness of the JET Programme have been mixed. While some studies (e.g., Tajino & Tajino, 2000; Ushiro, 1997) report effective team-teaching practices, others highlight problems that result from cultural friction, differences in understanding regarding the roles of JETs and ALTs, and inadequate language skills among both ALTs and JETs (Kushima & Nishihori, 2006).

ALTs differ significantly in terms of academic background and teaching experience. Whilst they must meet certain requirements regarding the country of origin, language ability, and age, a TESL/TEFL qualification is not required. This means that some ALTs hold degrees in education and have teaching experience in their home countries, while others are new to language teaching and possibly more interested in cross-cultural exchange than education. A substantial number lack Japanese language skills, an understanding of the Japanese education system, and training on a practical level. They are often perceived as passive towards team-teaching by their Japanese colleagues (Kushima & Nishihori, 2006). In many cases, the JET is seen as responsible for lesson planning and material selection, while the role of ALTs is to provide models of 'authentic English'. Foreign instructors are often introduced and treated as a celebrity whose job is to entertain the students rather than teach. This kind of approach is both ineffective and counterproductive. It reinforces stereotypes of the Japanese teacher as a 'grammar expert' and the foreign instructor as a 'conversation partner' who is always happy and entertaining, but cannot explain anything about the language.

Effective team teaching requires competent instructors and collaboration in the planning and delivery of a lesson. Team-teaching is not a solution for the lack of language skills possessed by Japanese instructors or the lack of teaching skills among foreign teachers. Japanese instructors must have a solid command of the four skills and ALTs must have an adequate teaching qualification before they enter the classroom. In addition, ALTs should receive not only general information about life in Japan but

also information about teaching practices, the Japanese school system, and the daily lives and academic level of Japanese students (Kushima & Nishihori, 2006). Foreign instructors should not be seen as assistants to Japanese teachers. Team teachers should be partners of equal status but with clearly defined roles. A joint training or orientation sessions for ALTs and JETs prior to the commencement of a school year during which these roles could be confirmed is therefore desirable.

One of the MEXT (2011) proposals concerned modifications to university entrance exams. MEXT recognized that successful implementation of educational reforms requires coherence between curricula, teaching practices, and assessment methods. To make university entrance exams consistent with high-school competency-based curriculum objectives, MEXT argued for the introduction of a four-skill English test in the Common Examination for University Admission. However, the proposal was met with resistance by several stakeholders due to concerns about the standards and fairness of the assessment of students' productive skills. Different proficiency tests such as TOEIC or TOEFL were developed for different purposes, and have different content and different scale ranges, which makes comparison of the results difficult. Conversion of the scores to the CEFR scale is also problematic as CEFR levels were determined by the test companies and CEFR benchmarks were sometimes changed. Furthermore, the CEFR 'Can-Do' descriptors are not detailed enough to constitute criteria for ranking candidates in high-stake exams (Allen, 2020).

Currently, with the exception of so-called Admission Office exams that often include an interview, entrance exams devised by Japanese public and private universities tend to only test students' receptive skills, along with their knowledge of vocabulary and grammar. Discrepancies between the objectives outlined in the Course of Study and the entrance exams put high-school teachers and learners in a difficult position as they have to choose between 'balanced curriculum' and exam preparation.

In Japan, the CEFR proficiency scales and 'Can-Do' statements have become the overriding focus of attention. Plurilingualism and pluriculturalism – two main tenets of the CEFR – have generated little interest in Japan. Although it is common to hear the cliché that knowledge of foreign language opens doors to cross-cultural communication and understanding, the concept of plurilingualism has not been embraced in the Japanese education system. English remains the main and often the only foreign language taught in Japanese schools. A perceived need to learn other foreign languages is lacking. The new curricula highlight the importance of strengthening students' Japanese identity and their ability to discuss Japanese culture and traditions in English. However, textbook content related to foreign cultures remains limited.

The COVID-19 pandemic interrupted international cooperation at a number of levels. However, even before the pandemic, the percentage of English instructors with overseas study experience was low. MEXT data collected in 2016 revealed that only 51.1% of junior high school teachers in public schools had such experience. In terms of duration, 15.8% stayed less than a month, 15.3% spent between two and six months, 10.8% spent between six months and a year, and only 9.1% spent more than a year abroad (MEXT, 2017a). Similar results were obtained from a survey of public high school teachers. Almost a half (48.7%) of these teachers had no overseas study experience. Of those who had, 15.1% spent less than a month abroad, 12.9% spent between two and six months, 12.8% spent between six and twelve months abroad, and only 10.5% spent more than a year abroad (MEXT, 2017b). Whilst a short-term stay abroad can have a positive effect on language learning motivation, it is not sufficient for learners to develop sociocultural competence, that is, the ability to use the language and behave in a situationally and culturally appropriate manner. Development of sociocultural competence is of the utmost importance for language teachers as they need to bridge cultural divides, ensure their learners are sensitive to social conventions, and help them acquire the subtle norms of verbal and non-verbal behaviour necessary for effective communication.

3. CONCLUSION

The CEFR has influenced the development of the learning and assessment framework in Japan. It has had an impact on national and institutional curricula, the interpretation of scores on high-stake English proficiency exams such as TOEIC and EIKEN, creation of proficiency standards for foreign language teaching, material design, and teaching and testing practices. It motivated a shift from a linear progression through grammatical structures to contextualized language use and from the traditional teacher-centred mode of instruction to learner-centred education.

Whilst MEXT reform represents a move in the right direction, concrete results are yet to materialize. Japan remains one of the countries with the lowest levels of English proficiency in the world. In a 2022 survey by the Swiss Education Company *Education First* (EF), Japan ranked 80th out of 111 non-English speaking countries and regions (Education First, 2022).

A degree of time-lag between the implementation of the reforms and their results can be expected. However, the ways in which the policies are implemented can have a significant impact on the results. Even the best policies can fail if institutions do not support them. Implementation of the MEXT reform has been plagued by a lack of understanding of the principles of the CEFR, insufficient teacher training, and inadequate supporting resources. Japanese teachers have limited knowledge and exposure to the CEFR. The CEFR proficiency levels are still frequently and wrongly equated with the score bands of standardized tests. The CEFR-J was supposed to provide an external standard framework adapted to the Japanese context. Indeed, the project was meticulously developed by a small team of dedicated experts. However, it is questionable whether a cost-benefit analysis would uphold the time and effort invested in it.

To begin with, the CEFR was initiated to provide a common basis for the elaboration of curricula, textbooks, and examinations with the aim of enhancing the transparency of language courses, syllabuses, and qualifications (Council of Europe, 2001). The development of *national* CEFR scales seems to defy the original purpose. Furthermore, the CEFR has been developed and tested in various learning contexts for over 20 years. Supporting resources are plentiful and freely accessible. Lexical and grammatical inventories for English based on the CEFR global proficiency scale are also available. The CEFR-J launched in 2008 does not reflect any of the modifications made in the CEFR Companion Volume. Although some supporting materials have been provided by CEFR-J developers, they are few and limited in the number of examples they offer. Instead of investing time and resources in the development of bilingual CEFR-J descriptors from which teachers are to write new sets of teaching unit 'Can-Do' objectives, it would seem more reasonable to incorporate the original CEFR descriptors into the Japanese national curricula and locally published textbooks, and then educate teachers on how to adjust instruction and assessment to the CEFR parameters.

Subdivision of levels is also problematic. Branching of the CEFR levels and introduction of the pre-A1 level were intended to facilitate communication between the relevant stakeholders and help Japanese students recognize their progress and sustain their motivation. However, the Council of Europe guidelines clearly state that "level A1 (Breakthrough) is probably the lowest 'level' of generative language proficiency which can be identified" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 31). The CEFR recognizes that there may be a range of specific tasks which learners can perform effectively using a very restricted range of language before they reach A1 level and that in some contexts, such as instruction of young learners, it may be appropriate to elaborate descriptors for these competencies. That said, it is generally difficult to speak of a language proficiency below A1 level, and, as discussed before, instructors have encountered difficulties when trying to distinguish between some of the lower proficiency levels on the J-CEFR scale and assess learners' progress. Furthermore, even if the sublevels could be clearly defined, that would not change the fact that the proficiency of Japanese students is extremely low compared to learners in other countries. Rather than trying to identify the competencies that Japanese students may have before they reach the lowest level on the official scale, efforts should be directed at identifying and addressing the causes of persistently low proficiency rates among these students.

Low proficiency among teachers may be the root of the problem. Successful implementation of the language education reform requires competent and qualified instructors. Raising the English proficiency

of Japanese teachers should be a government priority. There is a pressing need for a comprehensive national programme for teacher professional development with instruction offered both in Japan and abroad. As in Europe, teacher trainees should acquire at least B2 level proficiency and C1 level oral skills before they can obtain their teaching licences. Proficiency data should not be based on self-reporting. All in-service teachers should be required to take four-skill proficiency tests and undertake additional training if they do not meet the required standards. Time frames should also be set. Teachers should not be allowed to return to classrooms before they can demonstrate that they possess the competencies expected of language teachers.

Japan has witnessed decades of failed language reforms and wasted resources. With proper implementation of the CEFR principles, English teaching in Japan could improve dramatically. However, for that to happen, efforts should not be directed at ‘twisting’ global policies to fit the Japanese context, but at adopting the language policies and teaching models that have been proven to work. Effective foreign language education cannot be “teacher-proof”. Competent and qualified instructors are crucial for the learning process. If teachers are to prepare students for an increasingly complex, globalized world, they themselves must have professional global competencies. Tackling the problem at its root is the first step toward achieving this substantive goal.

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