

Impact Objectives

- Develop a can-do list which charts language proficiency scale in elementary school English to enhance children's autonomy and self-efficacy
- Understand what motivates students and develops their autonomy or self-efficacy and then use that to encourage their learning

A 'can-do' evaluation to learning foreign languages

Professor Emiko Izumi is collaborating with Professor Naoyuki Naganuma, Professor Mitsue Allen-Tamai, other professors and elementary school teachers on a project that seeks to study Japanese children's self-evaluation and performance-based assessment, and promote learning through can-do scales and lists



Professor Emiko Izumi
Professor Naoyuki Naganuma
Professor Mitsue Allen-Tamai

What type of studies are underway by your team as part of the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science Grant-in-Aid for Scientific Research project?

We are currently evaluating and developing the can-do list we have created, which charts language proficiency scale, in elementary school English to enhance children's autonomy and self-efficacy, to foster their ability to think, to make decisions and to express themselves and cultivate an attitude of proactive learning. Of course, there are many co-investigators and collaborators that work at other institutions - there are currently 14 people working on the research. We consider it to be unique in the sense that researchers and practitioners are united in conducting research with one aim, while going back and forth between theory and practice.

Can you outline the role of your collaborators and the value they bring to the project?

There are eight collaborative researchers from Hokkaido to Kyushu, and six

elementary school teachers involved. They have all worked in various national, public and private school types. They have a common interest in teaching and evaluating English education, as well as in the autonomy and growth of students and teachers. There are various specialties such as English pedagogy, psychology, language acquisition, child English and literacy education. I am in charge of the overall research summary, Naganuma is in charge of statistics and evaluation, and Allen-Tamai is in charge of literacy development. All other members are in charge of their specific areas of specialties and expertise, the development of evaluation scale, while the elementary school teachers perform on-site practice, collect data and present findings at academic conferences. Everyone has a good working relationship with each other, and we all inspire one another in effective ways.

Have you faced any challenges in your work?

COVID-19 has presented challenges, in that outsiders are not allowed to enter schools and classrooms. Face-to-face meetings are also prohibited which makes it difficult for the research team to get together. Of course, we continue to hold online meetings, but because we cannot meet with the children, it is difficult to address any issues or evaluate progress. We are working to develop five areas of can-do and performance tasks

according to the newly published textbooks authorised by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT) this year that will help us overcome these challenges, but we expect the project to properly resume once the pandemic threat has abated.

How are you hoping to develop this research?

English education has become a subject in elementary schools since last April, and full-scale English education using the textbooks has just begun. This will increase anxiety in teachers regarding how they will teach and evaluate the children's achievement, so we expect that lessons and evaluations will be improved by utilising the activity design and evaluation scale that we have developed. In fact, good practices and results have been shown by our research so far. It is also necessary to explore the ability to think, judge, express and learn that is required along with the knowledge and skills of language. We would like to explore the development of study skills and proactive attitude towards learning, propose further evaluation methods and continue verification. Ultimately, we want to understand what motivates students and develops their autonomy or self-efficacy and then use that to encourage their learning. ●

Engaging with foreign language learning

A team based within the Graduate School of Education at Kwansei Gakuin University has created an evaluation scale to help teachers of foreign languages ascertain their achievement and help children take ownership and support their learning

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) has been issued by the Council of Europe, and autonomy is in the context of European education and autonomous learners are being developed using can-do statements, or descriptors, and the European Language Portfolio (ELP). They have been shown to be extremely effective at helping teachers and students design and practice teaching, learning and assessment to facilitate learning foreign languages.

Professor Emiko Izumi, based within the Graduate School of Education at Kwansei Gakuin University in Japan, leads the team that started to create such a can-do evaluation scale and has continued research for many years while developing their research participants and contents. One of the chief aims is to connect elementary and junior high schools, with a view to promote the learning motivation of children and students through language activities and a can-do evaluation scale that enhances self-efficacy and autonomy. 'In order to evaluate what students are able to do using English, it is important to conduct performance-based assessment using a rubric,' outlines Izumi. 'We have made those evaluation scales publicly available as tentative plans, some of which have been put into practice. Their effectiveness will be qualitatively and quantitatively verified.'

A LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY EVALUATION SCALE

The team behind the development of the can-do evaluation tool is composed of 14 individuals with different backgrounds, including researchers and teachers in schools. Izumi is working alongside Professor Naoyuki Naganuma and Professor Mitsue Allen-Tamai. Naganuma's areas of expertise include language learning motivation and language testing theory, while Allen-Tamai has extensive experience in English education as a university teacher and has also taught English to toddlers and children.

The can-do lists that the team have developed are primarily concerned with a language proficiency scale that they want to specifically use in elementary school English. 'It is necessary to draw a profile of what kind of language communication activities can be done and what kind of communicative competencies are developed, and not in the overall level in the process of creating the evaluation scale,' explains Izumi. 'So far, in English education in junior high school and senior high school, can-do lists have been created and used as an achievement goal, but it has not been introduced in elementary schools yet.'

However, given that foreign language subjects were introduced in 2020, the team are intent on using a new approach that will help learn

English. 'The can-do scales that the team has been working on are user-oriented, with the aim of developing a set of performance-related scales that help to describe what learners can actually do in the particular foreign language tasks,' highlights Izumi. 'Of course, the ultimate goal for anybody learning a foreign language is to develop a functional use of that language, but the team want each individual to conceptualise their personal goals in the hope that they will be able to motivate them and visualise their progress over a period of time.'

CAN-DO STATEMENTS

The can-do statements are incorporated into classroom activities and contain four graded specific scales: they use self-evaluation consisted of four grades describing the process of learning, teaching and development; they clarify the objectives of the activities involved; they prepare possible steps that every child can aim for, adjust their own learning and set their own goals and do their best to achieve; and they share the objectives of the activities with the children, so they can understand why they are being asked to do what they are being asked to do. 'Our view is to encourage children's learning, support the learning process and foster an idea of autonomy - it is easier to learn something when you are engaged in the process yourself, as opposed to merely doing something you are being told to learn,' comments Izumi. ►



A can-do statement would indicate how confident or proficient a student is at achieving a certain specific foreign language activity. There are answers including: it is still difficult; I can do it with help of teachers or peers, etc. (scaffolding stage); and I can do it by myself; I can do it much better (challenging, or self-actualisation stage). Naganuma says that by collecting students' self-evaluation data based on such developmental scales and becoming more aware of what they can do, the teacher is able to better adjust and prepare lessons and decide the most suitable flow of activities. 'This prevents teachers prescribing

In a classroom setting, goals, teaching and evaluation should be integrated, but by thinking in backward design, the quality of the lesson changes, making teachers concretely image children's performance, which changes the instructions and their attitudes. Ultimately, the team believe that this will help teachers connect instructions and evaluations, make lessons more enjoyable and easier to understand, thereby increasing the satisfaction level of children and enabling them to engage with learning in an autonomous and more persistent manner.

The answers to the can-do statements provide a history of learning and development

and sticking to ideal goals at the same time as encouraging students to actively participate in the evaluation of their own abilities,' he observes. 'Importantly, the answers to the can-do statements provide reflections on learning and development, where students can look back and be aware of what they have become or are becoming able to do, can gain a sense of achievement and prepare themselves to overcome and achieve required real-world tasks in the future.' He explains that the use of the can-do scale is effective for enhancing teacher autonomy as well as learner autonomy, and thus both teachers and students will grow by self-regulation through monitoring and reflection on classes.

DESIGNING METHODS

The team's work signals an important blend of English pedagogy, applied linguistics, second language acquisition, psychology and cross-cultural communication, and the team are hoping to fill in some knowledge gaps in the course of their research. 'In practical research of English education, not only in elementary school but also in secondary and tertiary education, since teaching and learning are sometimes considered prior to evaluations, evaluations itself tend to be postponed, so we strongly feel the need of the backward design of teaching, learning and evaluations,' comments Izumi.

Izumi and the rest of the team believe that students can play a leading role in their own learning and build better relationships with their teachers and peers. They are aiming for practical research based on actual classroom situations, but not only the support of individual teachers, but also the improvement of education of the entire school and region. 'Allen-Tamai developed an effective literacy program for an elementary school, which enhanced students' English learning and motivation,' explains Izumi. 'Thus, the whole region adopted her programme. The team has also contributed to the wider community by providing several symposiums a year and workshops for creating can-do scales all over the country.'

The can-do list and evaluation examples that have been specifically developed are compiled in the form of a booklet every year and are also published online so that anyone can refer to these and use them for practice. The team is hopeful that their findings will make significant contributions to English education which may relate to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development's (OECD) Education 2030 framework and better-quality education for the sustainable development goals (SDGs). ●

Project Insights

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