Aligning Courses in the World Language Center with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

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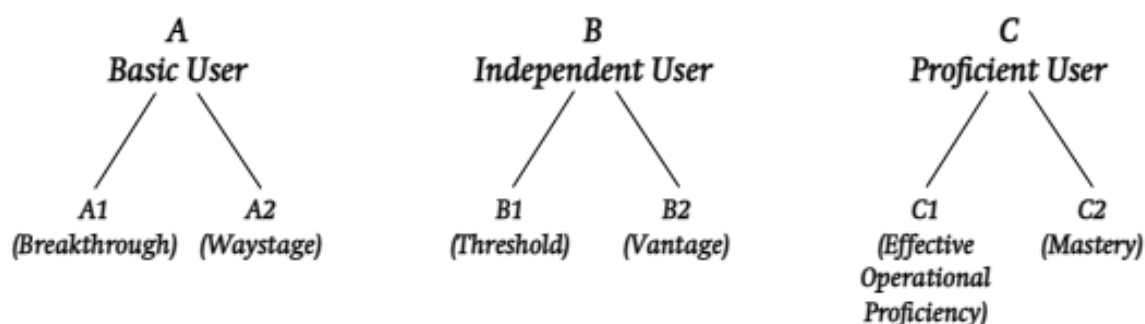Keywords: CEFR, Curriculum Reform, Language Education, TESOL

In 2018 the World Language Center (WLC) of Soka University celebrated its 20th anniversary, an opportunity that the WLC Director, Hideo Ozaki, seized upon to revitalize courses and programs by aligning them with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). Leading up to that point, many changes had occurred in the role of the WLC and the role of English at Soka University, resulting primarily from the WLC moving to a new building in 2012, and the university being awarded status as a Top Global University in 2014. Within the WLC, changes included opening of a new Self Access Center in 2012, the combination of "Eigo" communication courses and English for Academic Purposes (EAP) courses into the present English 1 & 2 and English 3 & 4 courses (Tanaka, 2018), the introduction of the WLC study abroad program, and plans to emphasize humanistic & self-directed learning approaches in the WLC. University changes include the rise of English-medium programs, most prominently establishment of the Faculty of International Liberal Arts (FILA); the consolidation and expansion of Faculty-based English programs, particularly in the Faculty of Economics and the Faculty of Business Administration; and the growth of study-abroad programs, including double-degree programs with substantial study periods at partner universities in the UK.

While this proliferation of new English learning options is overwhelmingly positive, it entails complexity that can cause duplication and confusion. A systematic framework provided by CEFR can clearly differentiate objectives, content and level of each option to avoid duplication and enable both students and instructors to make the best possible choices when selecting and planning courses, saving valuable time and resources. In addition, the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science, and Technology (MEXT) proposed that a range of commercial four-skills standardized tests (e.g. TOEFL, IELTS, TEAP, EIKEN), scaled against CEFR levels, should be accepted for university entrance English exams.

Originally planned to be introduced in

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        A                          B                          C
   Basic User            Independent User            Proficient User
    /    \                  /     \                    /       \
  A1      A2              B1       B2                C1         C2
(Breakthrough) (Waystage) (Threshold) (Vantage)  (Effective  (Mastery)
                                                  Operational
                                                  Proficiency)
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2020, government mandating of the proposal was postponed and then abandoned in 2021, but a number of private institutions such as Rikkyo University decided to accept such four-skills tests for admission (Osaki, 2022). If Soka University follows this example, CEFR aligned WLC courses will serve to coherently bridge students' previous English learning experiences and levels with their university studies.

Despite these and many other benefits associated with CEFR, only a modest number of "innovators" in Japan, around 2.5% of relevant institutions, have adopted elements of CEFR according to the latest data we could find (Schmidt et al., 2017). As for all innovators in CEFR-adoption, implementation requires comprehensive planning, which emphasizes both bottom-up and top-down approaches. Thus, since 2019 the WLC has carefully planned and begun a project to align its courses and programs with the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), as outlined in this paper. First, CEFR is introduced, and the process of CEFR alignment is overviewed. After that, details of the WLC CEFR alignment project are given, including course descriptions, syllabuses, a needs analysis, and finally, future directions.

CEFR

CEFR was put forward in 2001 as "a common basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses, curriculum guidelines, examinations, textbooks etc. across Europe" (Council of Europe, 2001, p. 1). It is a comprehensive checklist for the application of communicative language knowledge and skills at specific levels, providing a reference for language proficiency and progress. It adopts an action-oriented approach foregrounding contextualized communicative competence, activating linguistic knowledge as skills and strategies. CEFR is best known for its "common reference levels" of language proficiency, summarized in Figure 1.

Specific proficiencies indicated by the common reference levels A1 to C2 are presented in increasing detail in CEFR "Table 1" - the global scale, "Table 2" - the self-assessment grid, which describes five skills, listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, and writing, and "Table 3" - qualitative aspects of spoken language use, including range, accuracy, fluency, interaction, and coherence. Specific language skills and competences are extensively described by "illustrative descriptors," more commonly known as

'Can do' statements, in chapters 4 and 5 of CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001). The six common reference levels are further divided into "plus" levels, such as A1+ and A2+ (or A1.2 and A2.2). The "plus levels represent a very strong competence at a level that does not yet reach the minimum standard for the following level," but they are not shown in tables 1 to 3. However, they are specified in chapters 4 and 5 by a horizontal line between illustrative descriptors, with the plus level above the base "criterion" level (COE, 2018, p. 36). There is, however, much more to CEFR than the common reference levels.

Transparency and Coherence

CEFR is able to articulate objectives of WLC courses and delineate them as it was created with transparency and coherence at its core. "It aims to facilitate transparency and coherence between curriculum, teaching and assessment within an institution and transparency and coherence between institutions, educational sectors, regions and countries" (COE, 2018, p. 25). It is transparent as it is clearly formulated, explicit and readily comprehensible to users. It is coherent as it avoids internal contradictions by describing relations among education components, such as needs, objectives, content, materials, programmes, methods, and assessment (COE 2001, p. 7). Transparency and coherence enable the comprehensive inventory of communicative language elements which comprises CEFR to be used as "signposts" for the items comprising a curriculum. Furthermore, these explicit and consistent signposts facilitate discussions among instructors, learners, administrators and other stakeholders in an educational setting, resulting in widespread

communication, cooperation, and understanding; and most importantly, they allow learners to become partners in the learning-teaching process (North, 2014, pp. 108-111).

Action Oriented Approach

CEFR adopts an action-oriented approach that is "an innovative stance in seeing learners as language users and social agents, and thus seeing language as a vehicle for communication rather than as a subject to study" (COE, 2018, P. 27). Embracing a socio-cultural view that language is acquired through interaction, and resourceful, contingent and contextualized use (e.g. Firth and Wagner, 1997; Johns, 1997; van Lier, 2000), CEFR encourages a move away from linear syllabuses that present sequences of grammatical structures, themes or functions, toward syllabuses based on needs analyses and organized around real-life tasks. Such "Backward Design" (Nagai et al. 2020, p. 4), first determines what the learners need to be able to do with the language, and then designs the curriculum according to real-life tasks, guided and described by 'Can do' descriptors (COE 2018, p. 26).

CEFR Alignment

The main implications of CEFR concern curriculum planning, but as "alignment", the most important point in relating a curriculum to CEFR is to build on and avoid a sharp break with the previous existing curriculum by adopting a "little-by-little" approach (North, 2014). In contrast to design or planning of new curriculums, CEFR alignment is defined here as the process of modifying syllabuses, other documents, methods, content or

assessment used in existing language programs in line with the common reference levels, illustrative descriptors, and other elements and values associated with CEFR, to a desired extent. The thorough literature search by Bower et al. (2017) found no relevant, detailed case study of such an alignment attempt, but noted some "how-to" guides including North (2014), which provides a detailed process along with suggested tools to carry out an alignment based on the experiences of several European commercial language schools. Bower et al. (2017), together with Shimo et al. (2017) in the same volume filled that gap in the literature, providing richly detailed, inspirational models for the WLC alignment project, though they describe smaller and faculty-based programs respectively. In addition, North (2014) along with accounts of curriculum renewals and applications using CEFR in mostly Japan were highly instructive. Such accounts detail CEFR-based design of new curriculums (Nagai,

2010), the application of specific components of CEFR, such as 'Can do' statements for summative or formative assessment (Nagai, 2010; Naganuma, 2010; Runnels, 2014; Smith 2010, Ware et al. 2011) and the European Language Portfolio (Horiguchi et al., 2010; Little, 2010; Washinosu, 2009, in Majima 2010), and adaptations of CEFR descriptors to use as objectives for institution-wide curriculums (Negishi, 2012), including for multiple languages (Majima, 2010; Tono, 2014).

Among these applications of CEFR, the WLC alignment project has adopted one of the most highly collaborative models which seeks to involve instructors as much as possible at every step. While strong leadership is also essential to maintain momentum and direction, strong involvement of instructors is essential to ensure that their input, understanding, approval, and initiatives are prioritized at each step, thus maximizing their ownership of the project, ensuring its implementation, and ultimately its success

Figure 2. Preliminary objectives and timeline

Spring 2018	● Initial discussions to update WLC programs ● Directors and coordinators begin familiarization with CEFR
Fall 2019	● Familiarize instructors with CEFR (two workshops) ● Align 2020 Course Descriptions with CEFR levels and illustrative descriptors (one workshop in December) ● Conduct pilot needs analysis survey among students
Spring 2020	● Launch aligned English 1 & 2 Course Descriptions ● Many initiatives postponed due to Corona pandemic
Fall 2020	● Align 2021 English 3-4 Course Descriptions with CEFR levels and illustrative descriptors (one workshop) ● Conduct needs analysis survey among students
Spring 2021	● Launch aligned English 3-4 Course Descriptions ● Introduce adaptation and application of illustrative descriptors in classrooms and syllabuses
Fall 2021	● Renegotiate and Revise English 1-4 Course Descriptions (2 workshops) ● Some instructors begin to plan and write English 1-4 Syllabi using CEFR illustrative descriptors
Spring 2022	● Self Access Center pilots use of illustrative descriptors in conversation programs and starts to integrate a CEFR language portfolio into its consultation service. ● Draft WLC CEFR guide book

(O'Dwyer, 2015), while hopefully avoiding many of the difficulties in institution-wide alignments (Schmidt et al., 2017). Details of the process and plans so far are outlined in Figure 2 and detailed below.

Familiarization

In preparation for the project and to facilitate strong leadership, it was first necessary for the WLC Director, Assistant Director, the English 1 & 2 Coordinator and the English 3 & 4 Coordinator to familiarize themselves with details of CEFR and its application. This began in spring 2018, and involved reading many of the core documents from the COE website (COE, 2021) and the edited volume published by the Framework and Language Portfolio Special Interest Group of the Japan Association for Language Teaching (Schmidt et al., 2010), and attending seminars run by that group and the publisher Pearson. We quickly appreciated the warning from Nagai (2010, p. 87) that for novice users "the density of information provided by the CEFR may be overwhelming." The extensive coverage of language acquisition processes in the CEFR, couched in its own jargon including synonyms for core concepts presented a very steep learning curve. For example, can do, can do statement, descriptor, 'Can do' descriptor, are common synonyms of the most standard form, illustrative descriptor.

As a result, it was obvious that implementing CEFR-based reforms, which depend entirely on buy-in from the 45 full-time and part-time WLC instructors, would require incremental implementation with ongoing specific and practical training, discussion and input of instructors, and regular review over a number of years. While this crucial stage seems to be overlooked by North (2014) in his descriptions of European language schools, it is emphasized in Bower et al. (2017) who emphasize the importance of instructor training and engagement in a university project in Japan. Equally instructive is the case study by Horiguchi et al. (2010) which describes an ambitious but largely unsuccessful attempt to introduce a European Language Portfolio with little instructor-training, consultation, or consideration of instructors' autonomy.

Thus, we began the alignment process with two workshops to introduce and discuss CEFR and curriculum alignment. In addition, we decided to limit initial alignment to first-year core-courses, English 1 & 2, leaving alignment of second-year core-courses, English 3 & 4, for the following year. English 1 & 2 are four-skills courses that meet twice a week, each bearing 2 credits in first and second semesters respectively. They are considered one course in course descriptions and for the purposes of planning. English 3 & 4 are similar, but they meet once a week, each bearing 1 credit for each semester, so focus on two or 3 skills usually. By taking all of these four courses, students can meet the six-credit English requirement for graduation. A wide range of faculty-based and elective courses are mostly left outside the scope of the present project. We also decided to limit participation in the alignment process to full-time instructors as we felt the commitment required was too much for part-time instructors.

Preliminary objectives

Two 90-minute familiarization workshops were conducted between 3 July and 17 October 2019. The first workshop was held as a

regular, non-compulsory, Professional Development session. Out of the 26 instructors only seven attended, even though the importance of the major reforms to be introduced was emphasized. As a result, the following workshops were made compulsory, and were each repeated once so that all instructors could attend. Workshops 1 and 2 introduced CEFR, the purpose of alignment, and started conversations about course objectives. The two workshops were very similar, with the topics covered as follows.

- What is CEFR?
- Why align our curriculum with it?
- What are the CEFR levels and how do they relate to WLC levels?
- How can we align our courses?
- What are our overall course objectives for each level?
- What is the timeline for alignment?

Documents

After familiarization, we started to work on planning documents, which North (2014) notes as the fourth stage of five in his process. We began with the most general of these documents, course descriptions, as these are the basis of course syllabuses, and they encapsulate the "objectives" and include some examples of the "methods" that North (2014) lists as his second and third stages respectively. At the same time we began planning student needs analysis surveys to provide their input into the new, aligned course descriptions. With course descriptions in place, alignment of syllabi began in 2021, a large-scale student needs analysis was conducted, and a survey of currently used textbooks and possible CEFR-aligned textbook options is being conducted. Other documents under con-

sideration are a localized version of the European Language Portfolio (ELP) and a WLC guide to the CEFR for both students and instructors. Discussion of these documents, tools developed for their alignment, and surveys constitutes the remainder of this paper.

Course Description Alignment

Course Descriptions in the WLC are documents that state the course entry requirements, objectives, and textbooks, and are used by instructors to guide the design of their syllabuses. They were usually written by course coordinators with little or no input from the instructors or students of the courses; thus, CEFR alignment has provided an opportunity to increase instructor ownership as it prioritizes their input. After the two familiarization workshops, a third workshop in December 2019 aimed to agree on course objectives and rewrite them using CEFR levels and illustrative descriptors to replace the existing English 1 & 2 course descriptions. Instructors were grouped according to one of three levels of the courses that they taught. The first and second-year core-courses are divided among four faculties, and streamed into four levels, A, B, C, and D, but the highest level D has a CLIL approach suited to each faculty, and has only one instructor and class for each faculty. Thus, that level was not covered in the workshop.

Basic or Academic Objectives

The most general objective to find consensus on is the extent to which each level focuses on basic interpersonal communication skills (BICS) and cognitive academic language proficiency (CALP) (Naganuma, 2010,

Figure 3. Continuum of objectives from BICS to CALP in English 1 & 2 A to D levels

BICS A   B   C   D CALP
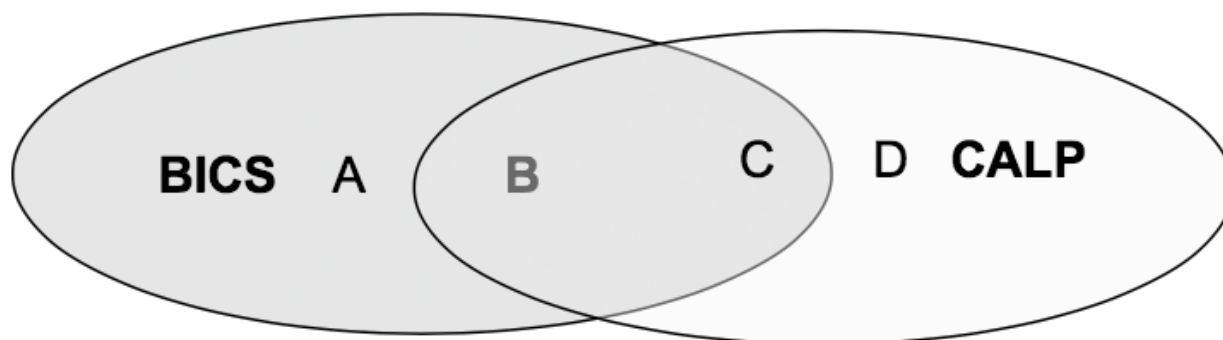
p. 23; North, 2014, p. 20), commonly referred to as general English and English for academic purposes (EAP) respectively. Clarifying this was a priority because these objectives had been met in two separate courses until the last curriculum review in 2013 (Tanaka, 2018), when they were combined into the new course, English 1 & 2, with little discussion about how those objectives were to be incorporated. This issue had been raised and discussed in the previous CEFR workshops and was quite contentious, with many believing that proficiency in BICS was needed at the basic level of most of our learners, and others arguing that as a university, all levels should include or focus on CALP. The final outcome was that course goals from basic (level A) to upper intermediate (level D) would cover a continuum from mostly BICS to mostly CALP, as indicated in Figure 3.

CEFR Level Setting

The next task was to decide CEFR entry levels and goals for each of the four English 1 & 2 levels. The existing levels are set using TOEIC with students streamed according to scores from that test. As shown in Table 1, entry TOEIC scores for all of our English 1 & 2 levels, level A up to level D, fall within the CEFR A2 range. This problem, a much narrower band of foreign language proficiencies in Japan compared to Europe, led to the development of a more finely graduated version for use in Japan, CEFR-J (Negishi, 2012).

Intuitively, however, the global scale description of CEFR A2 did not seem to accurately describe the large range of proficiencies among the approximately 1000 students taking first-year courses, so CEFR-J was not adopted, and the equivalent CEFR entry levels in Table 2 were chosen for two main reasons. First, many of the students at lower lev-

Table 1. CEFR A2 & TOEIC equivalence, WLC class levels, and CEFR A2 Global Descriptors (Tannenbaum and Wylie, 2013)

CEFR A2 TOEIC Range	WLC Class Levels	CEFR A2 Global Scale Description
225-545	Level-D 487～ Level-C 397-485 Level-B 283-395 Level-A ～280	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.

els have, as is widely acknowledged in Japan, little to no experience of using English, and the TOEIC placement tests have no productive component, so it was assumed that WLC A-level TOEIC scores overestimated active abilities, and they were better considered A1+ level. Second, the highest D-level students include many international and returnee students well over the basic TOEIC 485 requirement, many with active English experience, so they were assumed to cluster more closely to B1 level. This left English 1 B and C-levels to correspond with CEFR A2 and A2+ respectively. These entry levels were estimated and presented to the instructors, who accepted them readily. The main focus of discussion in the third workshop was about goals, also suggested based on reasonable proficiency gains for the 90 hours of instruction over the year in English 1 & 2 .

During discussion of the goals, some felt that the CEFR illustrative descriptors at those levels were not challenging enough. In particular, level-C instructors felt that their students could produce English that fit CEFR B2 illustrative descriptors. Against that view, it was argued that the descriptors refer to what students could do by themselves in a situation with expert C2-level speakers, or in a test situation, rather than with typical classroom tasks and activities supported by scaffolding such as templates, multiple drafts, and sympathetic peer and instructor support. In the spirit of collaboration and promoting

Table 2. CEFR and TOEIC equivalents (Tannenbaum and Wylie, 2013), entry levels and goals for levels A to D of first-year (English 1 and 2) and second-year (English 3 & 4) courses

CEFR Level (TOEIC Equiv.)	First-Year Entry Levels (TOEIC)	First-Year Goals	Second-Year Goals
B2 (785-940)			D
B1+		D	C
B1 (550-780)	D (487 ~)	C	B
A2+	C (397~485)	B	A
A2 (225-545)	B (283~395)	A	
A1+	A (~280)		
A1 (120-220)			

instructors' ownership, some B2 descriptors were included in the C-level course descriptions, while the overall goals were agreed on at B1 (Table 2). This disagreement seems to have been due to the dual-role of CEFR Can-do descriptors as both classroom goals and testing criteria, which is indeed an acknowledged weakness of CEFR (Green, 2010). This matter will become more important as descriptors are used more widely in the WLC, so will be pursued in future workshops on norming and assessment.

Course Objectives

The next step was to align the objectives in the course descriptions. In preparation for the workshop, the existing course descriptions were "translated" from their previous format into a CEFR format. That is, the previous list of skills, activities and assignments were replaced with the most similar CEFR skill areas and illustrative descriptors from the agreed CEFR levels estimated above. Figure 3 shows the original English 1 & 2B speaking objectives at the top, with related 'Can do" statements copied directly from CEFR (COE, 2001) beneath it. This rough translation was

Figure 3. An extract from an initial working version of an English 1 & 2B syllabus used to choose illustrative descriptors in the December 2019 workshop

Speaking
By the end of the course, students should be able to participate in spoken interaction of various kinds. This should include presentations and discussions. Other possible speaking activities include: poster presentations, debate, interview or role-play. Students will also develop skills including but not limited to: asking and answering questions, sharing information, agreeing and disagreeing, discussing advantages and disadvantages, and making suggestions.

The input and output goals above should be integrated, for example by using the reading/listening done for the meaningful input goal as a base for presentation/discussion.

OVERALL SPOKEN PRODUCTION
Can give a simple description or presentation of people, living or working conditions, daily routines, likes/dislikes etc. as a short series of simple phrases and sentences linked into a list.

Spoken Interaction
Can interact with reasonable ease in structured situations and short conversations related to work/free time, including asking and answer questions, appropriate greetings, address, and leave-taking, provided the other person helps if necessary.

Informal Discussion
Can identify the topic, exchange opinions and compare things, what to do in the evening, at the weekend, respond to suggestions, agree and disagree.

Formal Discussions

Monologue

Monologue – Putting a case/debate
Can explain an opinion, especially what she likes or dislikes about something, why he/she prefers one thing to another, making simple, direct comparisons.

Addressing Audiences
Can give a short, rehearsed presentation on a topic pertinent to his/her everyday life or familiar subject, briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions, plans and actions.
Can cope with a limited number of straightforward follow up questions if he/she can ask for repetition and has help with formulation of his/her response.

refined and formatted, then circulated to instructors before the workshop.

In the workshop, groups of instructors read through and compared the draft CEFR course descriptions with the originals to get a feel for the new format. They then discussed the objectives now expressed as CEFR illustrative descriptors, considering what was appropriate, what should be removed, and what should be modified or added. This detailed examination of descriptors more intensely spotlighted CEFR levels, and ultimately some descriptors were included that were higher or lower than the overall agreed course goal.

Tools

In order to facilitate ready access to the large range of descriptors, two tools were employed. First, a Google Sheet with all illustrative descriptors hyperlinked to skills, activities and strategies was created and shared with all instructors to browse and become familiar with before the workshop. Second, posters listing all descriptors were printed and hung on the walls for reference during the workshop and discussions. Some groups of instructors annotated the lists, marking the descriptors they agreed were appropriate objectives for their courses and level. These annotations communicated objectives chosen within level-groups to the other groups, promoting consistency among the various levels. Each group was given an A0 poster-sized yellow sheet with a rubric onto which they made notes, indicating descriptors that should be

Figure 4. Course description notes produced by instructors at the December 2019 CEFR alignment workshop
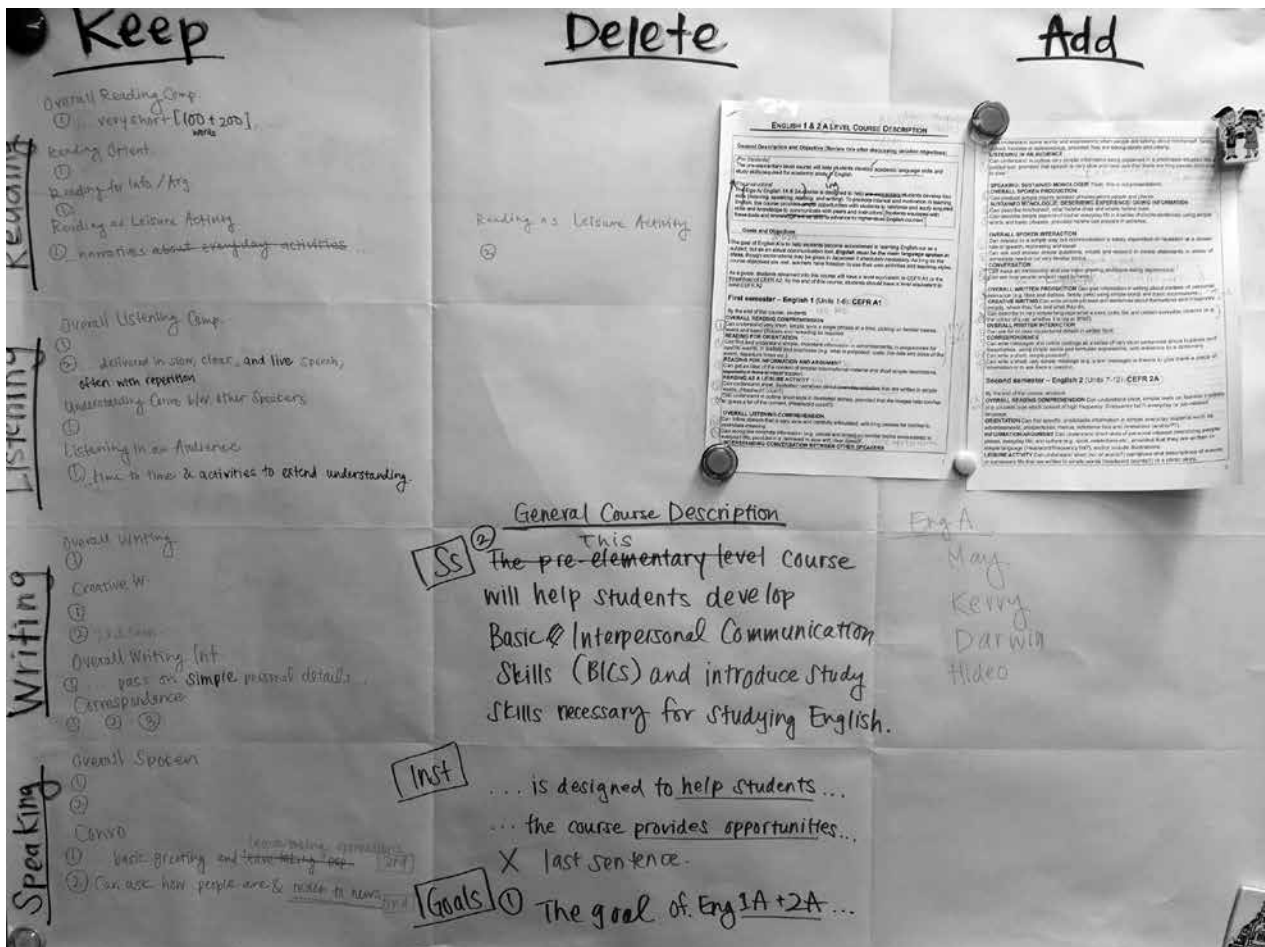
kept, deleted, and added in each skill area. This further enabled the workshops facilitators and each group member to monitor consistency of objectives and levels among the groups. Groups also annotated the draft course descriptions (white sheets) with their suggestions (Figure 4).

After the facilitators checked the posters for basic consistency and checked that group members were satisfied with them, the posters and annotated draft-course descriptions were collected. The WLC Assistant Director then redrafted the course descriptions according to the workshop notes on the posters and drafts. Care was taken to include specific wordings suggested by instructors to maintain their ownership, while also checking for consistency among the three levels of descriptions. The new CEFR aligned course descriptions were sent to all instructors, including part-time instructors who had been informed about but not involved in the alignment process, for comment; all instructors accepted them without comment and used them to produce course syllabuses as usual for the following academic year. An extract of a final version can be seen in Figure 5. A similar workshop was conducted for English 3 & 4 course descriptions in the second semester of 2020. Rather than posters discussed by groups in a classroom though, due to the COVID pandemic restrictions it was conducted in an online Zoom conference with course descriptions collaboratively annotated using Google Docs.

Syllabus Alignment and Localization

The next planning documents that need to be aligned are the syllabuses. Syllabuses in the WLC are the descriptions of the content of each class in a course, including supplementary materials, skills, tasks, assignments, activities and assessment criteria, which individual instructors prepare based on the

Figure 5. An extract from a final version of the CEFR aligned English 1 & 2 course description negotiated at the December 2019 workshop.

Detailed Objectives (CEFR A2 unless otherwise noted)
1. SPEAKING
Can give a simple description or **presentation** about people, living or working conditions, daily routines, likes/dislikes etc... as a short series of simple phrases and sentences linked into a list. Can interact with reasonable ease in structured and short **conversations**, provided the other person helps if necessary.
Presentation
- Can give a short, rehearsed presentation on a topic related to his/her everyday life or familiar subject, briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions, plans and actions.
- Can explain what he/she likes or dislikes about something, why he/she prefers one thing to another, making simple, direct comparisons.
- Can cope with a limited number of straightforward follow up questions if he/she can ask for repetition and has help with formulation of his/her response.
Conversation
- Can manage simple, routine exchanges without undue effort; can ask and answer questions and exchange ideas and information on familiar topics in predictable everyday situations.
- Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters to do with work and free time.
- Can handle very short social exchanges but may not be able to understand enough to keep conversation going of his/her own accord.
- Can use a simpler word meaning something similar to the concept he/she wants to convey (B1).

course description, course textbooks, their own judgements, and class needs. Aligning syllabuses involves each instructor rewriting the syllabus of their own classes using illustrative descriptors. The descriptors should be "localized," that is, modified by the instructor to indicate contextual specifics of the classroom tasks (Nagai et al., 2020). This involves focusing the generic CEFR descriptor to reflect the materials used and actual proficiencies practiced by learners, and thus the content of each class (COE, 2001; Nagai et al., 2020, North, 2014). This needs to be done in a principled and consistent manner to retain the transparent and coherent reference to CEFR levels (Nagai et al., 2020, p. 71), so we began by holding two workshops on localization in the first semester of 2021. Then, from second semester 2021 we will work with willing instructors to localize descriptors for their classes, which they will then be able to enter into their syllabuses, thus developing the skills and habits to create CEFR aligned syllabuses for the following years.

Because instructors write these themselves and include their own judgements about timing, pacing, additional materials and content, and most of all methodologies, special care is being taken to employ the "little-by-little" approach, with as much collaboration as possible. Thus, while the two workshops on localization were compulsory for full-time instructors, a request was made for willing instructors to work together with the CEFR alignment team to localize illustrative descriptors for their classes and syllabuses, rather than requiring all instructors to begin this process.

The first localization workshop was conducted by the WLC CEFR alignment team on 5 May 2021, and began with a recap and update of the alignment project before explaining the rationale and process of localization. This was followed three weeks later by an invited speaker, a leading authority on CEFR in Japan, Prof. Noriko Nagai. In this very practical workshop, the structure of illustrative descriptors was reviewed and the process of localization was practiced. Instructors were given extracts from their course textbooks and related CEFR descriptors. Instructors then modified the generic descriptors to reflect the specific textbook exercises and the methodologies that they would use in their classes. Prof. Nagai then gave feedback on these to ensure that the localized versions maintained the integrity of CEFR descriptors and CEFR principles, and thereby maintained a clear "audit line" back to the original CEFR descriptors (North, 2014, p. 143).

Questionnaires at the end of both workshops showed very marked increases among instructors in both their understanding of CEFR in general and their understanding of illustrative descriptors and localization in particular, suggesting the value and success of the workshops. Similar evaluation surveys will be repeated at the end of all workshops as important means of monitoring and constantly improving the project by incorporating instructor feedback. These results will be published in 2023 under the Grants-in-Aid for Scientific Research (KAKEN) project "Language education reform using the action research approach: Consulting the CEFRs educational principle," project number 20K00759.

Tools

These localized descriptors can be linked to course content using a "curriculum map"

(North, 2014). The map links descriptors topically to specific course objectives, textbook units and activities, and supplementary materials, and also temporally to weeks of a semester or specific classes. Our map was developed as a tool for instructors who volunteered to apply localized descriptors in their classes. The map consists of a Google Form in which instructors enter details of their class, the activity, and materials used; they also enter the generic CEFR descriptor they chose, together with the localized version they created to fit the context. The materials included the specific page numbers of the required textbook, as well as supplementary materials used by individual instructors, with an option to add a hyperlink to websites or folders on the WLC Google Drive in which the materials are held. All participating instructors can access this data through a shared spreadsheet, which provides a window into how their colleagues are choosing and adapting CEFR descriptors in their classes, allowing them to collaborate and share materials. A curriculum map could be a highly prescriptive guide in a tightly coordinated program or course, but in our context in which instructor and learner autonomy are highly valued, the initial purpose of the WLC map is for communication and sharing among instructors. It is hoped to provide instructors with a menu of their own and others' lesson objectives and tasks that they can choose from, copying and pasting CEFR aligned details into their online syllabi for students reference. Separate maps have been created for the first year and second year courses.

Needs Analysis

At the core of its educational philosophy, the CEFR emphasizes the strong sense of students being language users with agency and autonomy rather than just language students (North et al., 2018). As such, their priorities and objectives must be prioritized in the curriculum design and content. To that end, CEFR-based curriculum design employs Richard's (2013) Backward Design model. The traditional Forward Design model assumes that target learning skills such as vocabulary and grammar dictate the direction of curriculum and learning of the students. In contrast, the Backward Design model prioritizes goals of the students first. With their goals in mind, curriculum designers can select language teaching-related components, such as lesson content or activities, with the focus on learners achieving their goals (Nagai et al., 2020).

However, as this is a curriculum alignment process rather than a curriculum design process, we are emphasizing the little-by-little approach advocated by North (2014). That means first working on the course description and syllabus alignment activities described above before making substantive content or methodology changes. Then, in the next stages of the project when WLC instructors have become familiar with CEFR, they may be more likely to accommodate the results of an analysis of learners' needs and wants. In that sense, we are not employing a pure Backward Design model starting from learner needs, but rather turning the ship around from a basically top-down Forward Design model, eliciting and responding to instructor needs and wants first. Now, on that base of instructor

empowerment, we have begun the process of incorporating learner needs in the syllabuses as the CEFR alignment processes and documents develop.

Incorporating learner needs should be done at a macro course description level, a meso syllabus level, and a micro classroom level (Nagai, 2020); the needs analysis reported here is the WLC's first attempt to incorporate learner input at the macro and meso levels, and will be a model for instructors to apply at the micro level. Another important role of the needs analysis survey is to provide a baseline of student satisfaction with WLC courses and textbooks. These items were included in the survey, which will be re-administered periodically so that changes in student responses to them can be monitored as reference points showing the overall effectiveness of the CEFR alignment project.

To collect students' needs, we administered a pilot survey in fall 2019 to 546 students who were in the target WLC English courses. The pilot questionnaire was then modified and was approved by the Soka University Institutional Review Board for Human Research (IRB). The online questionnaire consisted of six sections: student information, preferred purposes for studying English, the degree to which various skills and activities are used in their class, the perceived effectiveness of the activities, the degree to which students felt their English improved, and satisfaction with textbooks. These six areas were included in order to gauge students' immediate needs and their perceptions of current classroom activities, which were considered by instructors for inclusion in revised course descriptions at the 2021 workshops. In addition to the main survey, another follow-up survey was administered to students who volunteered to provide details on their first survey responses. The surveys targeted students in the first and second-year courses at all levels, A, B, C, and D, but the analysis largely excludes D level because of low numbers and response rate.

Respondents

Of 1444 students, 447 responded to the first online survey, giving a response rate of 31%. The respondents were divided into two groups for analysis, first-year English courses (English II and English Communication for Science (ECS) II) and second-year English courses (English IV, and English for Science and Engineering (ESE) II). Data from courses for the Faculty of Science and Engineering course are reported in this section and will be used in future alignment processes, but are not dealt with elsewhere in this paper. Table

Table 3. Total number of students enrolled in 2020 target courses

Levels	First-Year		Second-Year	
	English II	ECS II	English IV	ESE II
A	263	73	66	n/a
B	420	68	184	36
C	123	28	63	8
D	72	n/a	24	16
Total	878	169	337	60
	1047	397		

3 contains the breakdown of students enrolled in the target courses in the 2020 fall semester.

Preferred purposes for learning English

Students were asked to state their preferred purposes for learning English. As Table 4 indicates, there were nine options from which the participants were asked to choose as many as they wished. The majority of them, in both groups and across levels, reported their preference for learning English used in daily life (95%), followed by TOEIC test preparation (46.6%) and travel English (36.2%). At the other end of the rates, English for academic purposes and academic standardized tests (TOEFL and IELTS) were much less popular reasons for studying English.

Intensity of Skills

In this section, participants were asked to indicate the extent that the four skills, reading, writing, listening, speaking, were practiced in their courses using a five-point Likert scale, 1 being "not enough," 3 being "appropriate," and 5 being "too much." As shown in Table 5, participants in the first-year courses, English II and ECS II, reported that they practiced writing, reading, and listening to a quite appropriate extent, averaging around 3 to 3.4; however, speaking practice received a slightly higher mean value as compared to other skill areas across the levels (M=3.5). Despite small differences, as class levels increase from lower to higher, levels A to D, there is a tendency to feel that there is too much practice across all skills. The same trend continues in the second-year courses,

Table 4. Students' preferred purposes for studying English

	Preferred English Purposes	Number	Rate
First Year	Daily English	385	95%
	TOEIC	199	49%
	Travel	154	38%
	Study abroad	124	31%
	Business	108	27%
	Academic	90	22%
	TOEFL	68	17%
	English for Specific Purposes	39	10%
	IELTS	9	2%
Second Year	Daily English	38	90%
	TOEIC	17	40%
	Travel	7	17%
	Business	6	14%
	Academic	5	12%
	Study abroad	5	12%
	TOEFL	1	2%
	English for Specific Purposes	0	0%
	IELTS	0	0%

Table 5. Means of students' perceived intensity of use of the four skills in class

Course & levels (N=447)		reading	writing	speaking	listening
First Year	A (137)	3.2	3.0	3.3	3.3
	B (142)	3.1	3.2	3.6	3.4
	C (107)	3.4	3.4	3.6	3.3
	D (18)	3.6	3.7	3.6	3.5
	Total mean (404)	**3.3**	**3.3**	**3.5**	**3.4**
Second Year	A (3)	3.0	3.0	3.0	3.0
	B (12)	3.2	3.1	3.6	3.6
	C (21)	3.3	2.7	3.7	3.2
	D (7)	4.0	3.7	4.3	4.3
	Total mean (43)	**3.4**	**2.9**	**3.8**	**3.3**

English IV and ESE IV, except for writing, which is not recommended for second-year courses. In particular, the intensity of the speaking activities averaged 3.4, suggesting there may be too much emphasis on those activities. Most strikingly, and emphasizing the trend, students in the highest level D indicated they practiced all skills too much, especially speaking and listening, which were closest to 5, "too much", both averaging 4.3. However, given the low number of responses among second-year students, this issue needs to be followed up in individual classes at micro level, to confirm that students really feel that they practice speaking too much.

Use of activities

This section investigated which specific English activities were used in classrooms. The activities presented in the questionnaire (Table 6) were listed by WLC instructors at an alignment workshop as those they used in the classroom. As Nagai et al. (2020) suggest, this type of bottom-up approach is desirable to "analyze an extensive list of concrete tasks for a given domain, identify parameters common to these tasks, and organize them under a 'type task" (p.211). We asked students which activities were used in their classes to gauge how pervasive specific activities were, and how effective students thought they were.

These activities are categorized into three groups based on how commonly they are used in classes: high, medium, and low usage. The results for first-year courses show a wide range of activities across the four skills and complementary activities, such as vocabulary and grammar, are used with high or medium prevalence, and only songs had low usage. In contrast, second-year courses had fewer high usage activities, and more low-use activities. This contrast is expected, as first-year courses comprise two classes a week, and course descriptions stipulate practice in four skills, reading, writing, listening and speaking, whereas second-year courses have only one class a week, and their descriptions state that writing is optional, not required.

Comparing the results of the two groups, the overall trend suggests that the WLC courses use speaking as their core activities in both groups. In contrast, writing-related activities (e.g., paragraph and essay writing and email writing), grammar exercises, and

Table 6. Use of Activities

High (90% or above)		Medium (70% to 89%)		Low (69% or below)	
First-Year					
group discussions	99.3%	essay writing	89.1%	songs	47.6%
discussion	96.8%	reading non-textbook	88.1%		
vocabulary practice	96.8%	presentation	86.4%		
paragraph writing	93.6%	listening (non-textbook)	83.9%		
grammar exercises	93.3%	roleplay	82.9%		
reading textbook	93.1%	videos	80.7%		
textbook questions	92.6%	game	76.7%		
listening textbook	90.1%	quick writes	73.5%		
		email writing	73.3%		
Second-Year					
discussion	98.0%	presentation	86.0%	roleplay*	69%
pair/group discussions	98.0%	listening non-textbook	86.0%	game*	67.0%
vocabulary practice	90.0%	reading textbook *	86.0%	email	64.0%
		textbook questions*	83.0%	writing*	64.0%
		reading non-textbook	79.0%	videos*	38.0%
		essay writing	76.0%	quick writes*	29.0%
		listening textbook*	76.0%	songs	
		paragraph writing*	71.0%		
		grammar exercises*	71.0%		
* activities that have high prevalence in first-year courses than second-year courses					

usage of textbooks become less common in second year courses.

Effectiveness of activities

The effectiveness of the activities was measured using a five-point Likert scale; 1 was "very ineffective," 3 was "neither," and 5 was "very effective." The results are again categorized into three groups: high, medium, and low. Since no activity averaged less than 3, all activities were considered to be of high or medium effectiveness. As Table 7 shows, most

Table 7. Effectiveness of Activities

First-Year					
High (4 or above)		Medium (3 to 3.9)			
pair/group discussions	4.29	listening non-textbook	3.89	textbook questions	3.83
discussion	4.18	Reading textbook	3.88	email writing	3.8
presentation	4.08	quick writes	3.87	games	3.78
paragraph writing	4.03	grammar exercises	3.87	roleplay	3.78
videos	4.0	reading (non-textbook)	3.86	songs	3.33
essay writing	4.0				
vocabulary practice	4.0				
Second-Year					
High (4 or above)				Medium (3 to 3.9)	
pair/group discussions	4.44	videos	4.19	quick writes	3.94
reading textbook*	4.36	listening non-textbook*	4.19	essay writing*	3.91
reading non-textbook*	4.33	textbook questions*	4.14	paragraph writing*	3.9
listening textbook*	4.28	roleplay*	4.1	songs	3.83
discussion	4.24	game*	4	email writing	3.81
presentation	4.22	grammar exercises*	4		
vocabulary practice	4.21				
* activities that do not have higher effectiveness in first-year courses					

first-year students reported that the activities conducted in their courses were somewhat effective. In particular, output activities, both writing and speaking, were perceived as highly effective. In contrast, the second-year students indicated that almost 80% of the activities are categorized in the high effectiveness group.

To test the correlation of the two variables, activity usage and students' perceived effectiveness of the activities, Pearson Correlation test was employed using the software R. The results from the first-year courses indicate that the two variables are highly positively correlated $r(16)= .824$. $p < 0.001$ (95% CI = .58, .93). Similarly, similar results were yielded for the second-year courses, $r(16)= .752$. $p < 0.001$ (95% CI = .45, .89). Compared to the first-year courses, the results from the second-year courses yielded a smaller coefficient because activities such as roleplay, games, email writing, videos, and quick writes received a higher score in effectiveness while the actual usage of the activities was not high. Overall, this high correlation between the activities mostly used in classes and the effectiveness of activities seems to indicate that students feel the content of classes is effective in improving their English skills. Al-ternatively, they may feel that the activities are effective simply because instructors favor them. Further research, including at micro level, is needed to clarify that.

Overall Satisfaction

This section aimed to uncover any general dissatisfactions with courses, and will serve as a baseline for overall evaluation of the CEFR alignment in future iterations of the survey. The first item asked students about their perceived improvement in English proficiency at the end of their English course(s). They were asked "do you think your English has improved in this course," with responses on a five-point Likert scale, 1 being "I do not think so at all" and 5 being "I very much think so." As can be seen in Table 8, except for English 3 & 4 C-level, the majority of students reported that they improved their proficiency in English in their course.

Another question in this section was about their satisfaction level for the textbooks used in their classes. They reported the level of satisfaction using a five-point Likert scale, 1 being "I am not at all satisfied with the textbook" and 5 being "I am very satisfied with it." If they did not use any commercial textbooks, they were instructed to skip the ques-

Table 8. Students' reported improvement on their English proficiency

	Level A	Level B	Level C	Level D
English 1 & 2	3.7	3.8	3.9	4.1
English 3 & 4	4.3	4.0	3.4	4.3

Table 9. Students' reported satisfaction level for their textbooks

	Level A	Level B	Level C	Level D
English 1 & 2	3.7	3.6	3.5	3.9
English 3 & 4	4.0	3.6	3.9	3.8

tion without answering it. Table 9 summariz-es responses for this question. Since all the classes and levels show averages above 3.5, it is safe to say these groups of students are generally satisfied with the current materi-als.

It is important to note that the above sta-tistics were introduced here primarily to pro-vide baselines of overall satisfaction levels, and we hope to see improvements in future surveys with more respondents.

Implications

Based on the findings, the following impli-cations can be drawn. First, students show little interest in English for academic purpos-es (EAP). Students seem to prefer learning English for other, BICS-oriented, purposes such as daily English, travel English, and TOEIC. For example, the proportion of stu-dents who want to learn CALP was a mere 22% for first-year English courses. This prag-matic tendency expressed by the students re-mains strong in the second-year courses as well. Thus, the courses that currently focus on CALP, that is especially C and D level-courses, should be reconsidered.

Secondly, data on intensity of skills, and the use and effectiveness of activities indicate that WLC courses focus heavily on language production, and students find these activities most effective. The finding supports instruc-tors' continued use of active learning and the improvement of productive skills. Thus, some of the less commonly used activities with low-er perceived effectiveness such as role play, games, and songs should be revisited in fu-ture workshops negotiating objectives of CEFR aligned courses. Given that students overwhelmingly would like to study daily English, those underutilized activities may be effective if used appropriately.

Future Directions

Textbook Alignment

In 2021, the CEFR alignment team began analyzing CEFR documentation on existing textbooks, and surveyed a range of similar, alternative textbooks. This analysis identified three categories of textbooks. The first group, Unaligned, are textbooks with no CEFR doc-umentation and no suggested CEFR level. Group two, Leveled, refers to books that have been assigned a CEFR level by publishers,

Table 8. Levels and alignment status of WLC textbooks for English 2 and 4

Course	Course CEFR Target	Textbook & CEFR Level	Publisher	Group
English 2A	A2	World Link Intro, 3rd Ed (2015), CEFR A1	Cengage	Aligned
English 2B	A2+	World English 1. (2nd Ed.) (2015) CEFR A2	Cengage	Aligned
English 2C	B1	New Language Leader: Pre-Intermediate Course Book. (2014) CEFR B1	Pearson	Aligned
English 4B	B1	In Focus: Book 1 (2014). CEFR B1	Cambridge	Leveled
English 4C	B1+	In Focus: Book 2 (2014). CEFR B1+	Cambridge	Leveled

but no other alignment documents. Group three, Aligned, refers to textbooks in which the publisher has provided CEFR documentation for each chapter and activity. National Geographic: Cengage (Cengage) and Pearson Longman Education (Pearson) provide CEFR documentation for most of their latest textbooks. Level and alignment status of currently used textbooks are shown in Table 8.

In Fall 2021, the WLC will hold a course description review workshop which will include discussing the appropriateness of current textbooks, including relevance in terms of BICS or CALP, CEFR levels, and content. Table 8 suggests that the English 2A textbook may be too low, and while the English 4C textbook appears to be levelled appropriately, instructors in the last alignment workshop noted that the content was not engaging. With input from the documentation collected and analyzed by the CEFR team, decisions regarding these and all textbooks will be made by consensus among instructors who have to use the books. This will be an ongoing process at annual workshops.

WLC CEFR Handbook

A succinct, bilingual guide to the CEFR levels and descriptors for both students and instructors is an urgent priority for at least three reasons. In order to use descriptors in the classroom to introduce task objectives, goal setting, reflection, or assessment, students must understand the rationale and use of the CEFR, which are time consuming and difficult to explain, especially in English to basic level classes. Also, part-time instructors who have little time to spare and have little background in CEFR and the WLC alignment project, but will be expected to begin in-

troducing it in their classes in the next year, will appreciate a concise reference. Finally, a coherent overview of CEFR alignment which all stakeholders can refer to will provide a clear reference to take issue with, contribute to, and confirm common understandings through. A good example is the "My Can-Do Handbook" described by Shimo et al. (2017), which will inform a first edition of a WLC guide to be drafted before launch of CEFR aligned syllabi in the first semester of 2022.

European Language Portfolio

Another integral element of CEFR is the European Language Portfolio (ELP). This is a learner tool which most directly promotes learner autonomy and life-long engagement through its three components: the passport, an overview of an individual's proficiencies in languages indicated by the Common Reference Levels; the biography, a description of processes and reflections on an individual's language learning experiences and a statement of goals; and the Dossier, a showcase of selected products demonstrating achievements described in the passport and biography (Schneider & Lenz, 2003). When implemented fully, it supports understanding and use of core CEFR concepts and descriptors, which in turn raises awareness of linguistic and cultural identity, and development of independent language learning habits. The most relevant program is the WLC's English Consultation Room, which advises students on how to monitor and improve their English learning, and thus it will likely have the greatest input into a WLC version of the ELP.

Assessment of Students

One of the main applications of CEFR, giv-

en its common reference levels described by detailed illustrative descriptors, is for summative and formative assessment of students (Nagai, 2020). At present, assessment methods and content are left largely up to individual WLC instructors, on the assumption that they follow course descriptions to create syllabuses which specify the content of classes, and students will be assessed on the degree to which they can demonstrate proficiency in the content. There may be advantages in introducing a unified assessment regime, such as a "backwash" of CEFR descriptors through the curriculum (Nagai et al., 2020), but they are likely not justified at present due to the huge cultural shift it would bring to the WLC and challenges in coordinating the 45 instructors and dozens of classes.

Conclusion

It is four years since the WLC Director suggested a project to align WLC courses with CEFR. It has been a daunting task, and has taken a long time for even the initiators to feel comfortable with. However, as the project progresses, the benefits are coming into ever sharper focus. Most prominent among them, the workshops which originally focused on technicalities of CEFR are now moving towards using CEFR as a metalanguage among instructors to discuss goals, objectives, materials and methods. The collaborative, bottom-up processes to reach consensus on documents, which previously were seldom discussed, has great potential to create a collegial atmosphere, even during the pandemic which began just a few months after the project began. As we hopefully move back to life on-campus, and classes, and workshops can once again be held face-to-face rather than online, collegiality and learner engagement are expected to improve even further. In the next stages, the project will move towards raising awareness of CEFR among students and part-time instructors, whose wants and needs will become more integrated into WLC programs. Evaluation of the CEFR alignment project will be continued with cycles of post-workshop surveys of instructors, needs analysis surveys among students, and also qualitative assessments as the project begins to employ portfolios. We strongly believe this monitoring will show that the values embedded in CEFR, autonomy, transparency, coherence, and action-oriented learning, will steadily boost communication, achievement and satisfaction among all stakeholders, to the benefit of the WLC, the university, and most of all our students.

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