

# **The Effect of Using CAN-DO Lists on EFL Learners' Proficiency and Motivation: A follow-up after the 2017 study**

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This study, done in 2018, is a follow-up for Kobayashi (2018), which examined the effect of using CAN-DO lists on (a) EFL learners' proficiency and (b) their awareness, in terms of their CAN-DO self-evaluation results and in terms of the results of a motivation questionnaire addressed to them. In the present study, just as in the 2017 study, two CAN-DO lists were used in two groups of participants respectively: one focusing on communication and one on grammatical points.

The proficiency in English of the participants of the present study was lower than that of the 2017 participants. The research questions of the present study were 1) Which of the two lists contributes to the improvement in students' English proficiency and motivation? 2) What do students think of using a CAN-DO list to judge their English ability? 3) How do the results of this study compare with those of the 2017 study? In April 2018, the participants took the TOEIC Bridge test, assessed their own English proficiency using a CAN-DO list, and answered a questionnaire about motivation. In July, the same sorts of datasets were collected from the two groups. Moreover, the participants answered a questionnaire about using a CAN-DO list.

Intrinsic regulation improved marginally in the grammar-vocabulary group but identified regulation deteriorated significantly in the communication focus group. About half of the participants answered that a CAN-DO list can be helpful for studying English.

As regards the comparison between the two studies, a smaller proportion of participants in the 2018 groups turned out to think that a CAN-DO list is helpful than in the 2017 groups. Also, use of the grammar-vocabulary focus list seems to improve participants' intrinsic motivation more if the original level of this kind of motivation is low, as in the case of the present study.

**Keywords:** CAN-DO list, CEFR, CEFR-J, motivation

## **1 Introduction**

Since 2012 the Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Technology (MEXT) has been promoting the project to improve university entrance examinations and cover the four skills (reading, listening, speaking and writing)

in the examinations. High school students will have to prepare for English examinations of this new type. The ministry has recommended that teaching English should be based on CAN-DO lists, which cover the four skills. It is thus increasingly important that each high school should make effective use of a CAN-DO list suitable for its students.

A survey by MEXT showed that only a limited number of the high schools in Japan made a CAN-DO list, less than half of those schools have data about how well students have achieved the ministry's goals, and an extremely small proportion of them have introduced a list to students. If there were research that showed that CAN-DO lists could be effective for students, teachers would use them more properly. That would improve students' motivation and self-supporting ability.

## **2 CAN-DO Lists**

### **2.1 Background**

The background to my study is the recent reform in the teaching of English initiated by MEXT. Specifically, there have been two major developments in its policy. The first is its recommendation that CAN-DO lists should be introduced to the secondary school English classroom. Back in 2013, the Ministry published Guidelines for making individual CAN-DO lists and delivered them to high schools in Japan. A goal mentioned in the guidelines is to have students come to have a sense of achievement by realizing that they can do something using their foreign language skills. This would in turn improve their motivation. Many schools in Japan made their own CAN-DO lists in accordance with the guidelines. A survey in 2015 by the Ministry showed that 69.6 % of the high schools in Japan did make a CAN-DO list but only 30.7 % of the schools have data about how well students have achieved the ministry's goals and only 22 % of the schools have introduced a list to students at all.

The second development concerns university entrance examinations. From 2020, the Ministry will start giving a new standardized university entrance examination. But examinees can instead submit scores from private proficiency tests covering the four skills; the results of these private tests are measured against the CEFR (the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment) scale. The Ministry's aim is to stop giving its own test and begin using only the scores of privately administered tests for university entrance examinations. These two developments have made it necessary for English teachers in Japan to focus on all the four skills in English classes by using a CAN-DO list of some kind. That is the reason the study in 2017 was conducted to research on the effect of the use of CAN-DO lists. As a follow-up to it, the study in 2018 was conducted in a different situation.

## **2.2 CAN-DO Lists**

CAN-DO lists may be categorized in a continuum stretching between two separate purposes. At one end of the continuum, there are lists for self-evaluation by learners. At the other end of it, there are lists for interpreting test scores. CEFR, CEFR-J and the CAN-DO lists locally prepared by schools may be placed toward the self-evaluation end and most of the proficiency tests, such as EIKEN, GTEC (Global Test of English Communication), and TOEIC (Test of English for International Communication), toward the score interpreting end.

CEFR was made public in 2001. It may be applied to any foreign language learning situation. There are six broad levels of ability: The Basic User (levels A1 and A2), the Independent User (B1 and B2), the Proficient User (C1 and C2). It covers five language skills: Spoken Interaction, Spoken Production, Listening, Reading and Writing. For all five skills at each level, there are sets of detailed Can-Do statements.

CEFR-J is a CEFR scale specifically designed for students in Japan. The levels are special CEFR levels that suit the Japanese learners of English. When the researchers developed CEFR-J, they had to consider the following facts: 1) Non/Basic Users (A1 and A2) account for more than 80% of Japanese learners of English. Independent Users (B1 and B2) account for less than 20%. 2) Number of Proficient Users (C1 and C2) is almost nil. Therefore, the Japanese list is skewed toward lower levels. The CEFR-J scale was developed out of the CEFR scale by using the following principles. Its designers added Pre-A1, divided A1 into three levels: A1.1, A1.2, A1.3, A2 into two levels: A2.1, A2.2, B1 into two levels: B1.1, B1.2 and B2 into two levels: B2.1, B2.2. There is no change for C1 and C2. In this way, the CEFR-J designers wrote their CAN-DO descriptors so that they fit the Japanese context (Tono, 2013).

Eiken Foundation of Japan has introduced the list since 2006 for interpreting test scores. The list provides CAN-DO statements describing the ability to use language in each of the four major skill areas—reading, listening, speaking, writing—for each of the seven EIKEN grades. The primary aim of the EIKEN list is to help test users gain a better understanding of the levels of language ability targeted by the EIKEN tests.

## **2.3 Previous Research**

### **2.3.1 Previous Research**

The previous research which is particularly worth noticing concerns those three lists, namely, CEFR, CEFR-J and the EIKEN list. The research can be categorized into four groups.

The first group comprises studies aimed at formulating criteria for students' ability. At Waseda University, researchers developed materials in accordance with CEFR and formulated a mapping table indicating how they relate to the CAN-DO statements. At Keio University, a study was conducted

to show the possibility of formulating a framework for language education at the institution using CEFR.

The second group is made up of reports on using CAN-DO lists to standardize coverage of class work among teachers. Osawa and others (2012) studied the relation between learners' TOEIC Bridge scores and their self-assessment using the EIKEN CAN-DO list. They mentioned that before the period in which the survey was conducted, participants who had higher English abilities tended to have more confidence when they assessed their proficiency using the CAN-DO list themselves. At that time, there was a significant correlation between the score and confidence shown in their CAN-DO self-evaluation. After the survey, however, there was no significant correlation between the test score and the CAN-DO list self-evaluation. They concluded that the instruction during the period in question may not have related closely with the content of CAN-DO statements. Consequently, they argued that it is necessary to inspect what the students should study and what they study during the lectures. Nakanishi and others (2010) studied EIKEN test scores and students' self-assessment using the EIKEN CAN-DO list. They mentioned that it may have been difficult for students to evaluate themselves on communication activities which they rarely did in their daily lives and that having to consider too many statements may have been a burden on the participants. They suggested that it may be necessary to make CAN-DO lists with grammatical categories, with which students are familiar, and to match the content of instruction with the items on the list.

The third consists of studies designed to examine the reliability of CAN-DO lists. Runnels' research (2014) identified some factors that could affect the reliability of difficulty judgements on can-do statements: the content of the can-do statement itself (criteria information, clarity and familiarity of the item, number of skills covered) and characteristics of the population of respondents (familiarity of the tasks, content of the class work, homogeneity of the population) (p. 85). Tokeshi and others (2016) also examined the reliability and correlation with an English proficiency test and self-ratings of CEFR-J Can-Do Descriptors at college. The study "concluded from the analysis that self-ratings of CEFR-J CAN-DO Descriptors are not strongly reliable. In addition, self-ratings of CAN-DO Descriptors and the English proficiency test are not strongly correlated" (pp. 13-14).

The last group was a group of studies on the effects of using CAN-DO lists. Yoneda and others (2011) studied the relation among three variables: (a) participants' self-assessment using a CAN-DO list (b) their TOEIC Bridge test scores and (c) their motivation. There were no differences in motivation between the participants who assessed themselves using the list and those who did not. A CAN-DO list might raise English abilities of low achievers. They also mentioned that, as far as the range from CEFR A1 to B1 is concerned, there were low correlations between the scores of TOEIC Bridge and the results of participants' self-assessment using CAN-DO list.

As the summary of the previous research, three points may be made.

(1) There is not so high correlation between CAN-DO list self-assessment and

test scores. (2) Use of CAN-DO lists may not affect students' motivation or confidence. (3) Use of CAN-DO lists may not have a positive effect on English abilities. While there have been studies on the relation between variables mentioned above, there has been little research based on an analysis of the CAN-DO lists as they are categorized by the aspects of English proficiency that these lists are intended to measure. Classified by such aspects, lists may be considered to fall under two different types. First, a list may focus on a learner's ability to communicate, as measured against the CEFR scale. Second, a list may focus on a learner's grammar and vocabulary, which are regarded important in MEXT's curriculum guidelines.

### **2.3.2 Previous Research by Kobayashi 2017**

Using a list based on a learner's ability to communicate and a list based on a learner's grammar and vocabulary, research was conducted in 2017 focusing on CAN-DO lists as they are categorized by the aspects of English proficiency. The research was to examine which of the two CAN-DO lists contributes to the improvement in students' English proficiency and motivation and what students think of using a CAN-DO list to judge their English ability.

The examinees were 58 third-year students at an average public high school, enrolled in two classes. One class, with 28 participants, was called the grammar focus group and was given a grammar and vocabulary focus CAN-DO list. The second class, with 30 participants, was called the communication focus group, whose students were given a communication focus CAN-DO list. In May both groups assessed their English proficiency using the lists respectively and took a simplified TOEIC Bridge test. They responded to a questionnaire about motivation. In July the same three kinds of sets of data were collected. In addition to these data sets, qualitative data were obtained in July from both groups using a questionnaire about the use of a CAN-DO list.

In the period from May to July, external regulation in the communication group showed a significant growth ( $t = -1.96$ ,  $df = 29$ ,  $p < 0.06$ ); there was no significant between-groups difference in May or in July. Neither group showed significant improvement in TOEIC Bridge score. The results of the qualitative study by the KJ method showed that the number of participants who wrote positive comments on their experience of using a CAN-DO list was greater in the grammar focus group than the communication focus group. As analyzed in the framework of self-determination theory, both groups' extrinsic regulation increased significantly. When it comes to intrinsic motivation, however, a significant increase between May and July was observed only in the grammar focus group. However, amotivation in the grammar focus group rose significantly. The comments from the students in the grammar focus group were more positive than those from the students in the communication focus group.

### 3 Study

This study, done in 2018, is a follow-up for Kobayashi' study conducted in 2017 (published in Kobayashi 2018). The same methods were used though the subjects and their level of English proficiency were different. The research questions of this study are 1) Which of the two CAN-DO lists contributes to the improvement in students' English proficiency and motivation? 2) What do students think of using a CAN-DO list to judge their English ability? 3) How do the results of this study compare with those of the 2017 study?

#### 3.1 Research Method

The school where data were collected in 2018 is a public high school, which shall remain anonymous. The proficiency in English of the participants of the present study was lower than that of the 2017 participants, whose school shall also remain anonymous. Participants of the 2018 study were second-year students, enrolled in two classes, with 30 and 26 participants respectively. In one class, which shall be called the grammar focus group, students were given a CAN-DO list with a grammar and vocabulary focus. Three data sets were collected from this group in April 2018. First, they assessed their English proficiency using the list. Second, they took a simplified TOEIC Bridge test. Third, they responded to a questionnaire about motivation. In the other class, which shall be called the communication focus group, participants were given a CAN-DO list with a communication focus. The same kinds of data sets were collected from this group in the same month. Four months later, in July 2018, data were collected again from the grammar focus group using the grammar-focus CAN-DO list, the simplified TOEIC Bridge test and a motivation questionnaire. The same kinds of data sets were collected from the communication-focus group using the communication-focus list, the simplified TOEIC Bridge and the questionnaire. In addition to these data sets, qualitative data were obtained in July from both groups using a questionnaire about the use of a CAN-DO list.

When I formulated the grammar focus list, I consulted CEFR-J A1 to B2. When I formulated the communication focus list, I consulted four versions of the Eiken CAN-DO list corresponding to Steps 5 to 2. On the basis of the results of a proficiency test given in April, I assumed that participants in the two classes had the same English ability ( $t = -0.2$ ,  $df = 68$ ,  $p = 0.8$ ).

#### 3.2 Method of analysis

About the analysis of the participants' ability of English, the following method was used. The participants took a simplified TOEIC Bridge test which was made based upon the TOEIC Bridge test by the researcher. It consisted of 20 questions in the listening comprehension section and 22 in the reading

comprehension section. Concerning motivation, participants assessed their motivation by themselves in April and July. The questionnaire about motivation used for the research was one written by Hiromori (2006), based on self-determination theory (Deci & Rian, 2000). The questionnaire consisted of 25 questions, each with a 6-point Likert scale ranging from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The differences were analyzed by using the within group *t*-test. The qualitative questionnaire was analyzed by the KJ method.

## 4 Results of the Study

### 4-1 Results in 2018

Regarding the comparisons using the simplified TOEIC Bridge test, there was no significant difference between the groups in July ( $t=0.18$ ,  $df=54$ ,  $p = 0.86$ ). There was no significant within-group difference between the scores of April and July either: the grammar focus group ( $t = 0.78$ ,  $df = 29$ ,  $p = 0.44$ ) and the communication focus group ( $t = -0.37$ ,  $df = 25$ ,  $p = 0.71$ ).

The comparisons in motivation between the data from April and those from July indicated that the identified regulation in the communication focus group showed a significant decline during this period ( $t = 2.85$ ,  $df = 25$ ,  $p < 0.009$ ) and the intrinsic regulation in the grammar focus group showed a significant increase ( $t = -1.83$ ,  $df = 29$ ,  $p < 0.08$ ).

Table 4 shows the results of qualitative studies in 2017 and 2018. Concerning the results in 2018, these are the responses to three questions, and they indicate that CAN-DO lists do not seem to help them improve their attitude for studying English. Concerning the analysis of motivation of the participants who answered, "A CAN-DO list motivates me," there was a significant difference between April and July in the intrinsic regulation of the grammar focus group ( $t = -3.11$ ,  $df = 8$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). Table 1 shows the answers to "Which list is useful for you?" and about half of the participants in both groups answered, "I don't know." Table 2 shows the answers to "Which skills in the lists are difficult for you?" "I don't know" was the majority of the answers but no one answered "Reading" as a difficult skill.

Table 3 shows the positive comments from the participants in 2018. Though it may be difficult for them to use CAN-DO lists effectively, some of them seem to think CAN-DO lists may be helpful for them to learn English. However, there were fewer positive comments in 2018 than in 2017.

Table 1: the answers to "Which list is useful for you?" in 2018

Group	Eiken CAN-DO	CEFR—J	Both	I don't know
Grammar Focus	13%	13%	17%	46%
Communication Focus	14%	9%	18%	50%

Table 2: the answers to “Which skills in the lists are difficult for you?” in 2018  
(% of yes- and no- answers )

Group	Reading	Listening	Speaking	Writing	I don't know
Grammar Focus	0	4%	9%	4%	83%
Communication	0	15%	20%	5%	60%

Table 3: Comments in 2018

<b>Comments from the Grammar Focus Group</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•It became easier for me to learn English.</li> <li>•I got better at listening comprehension than before.</li> <li>•I came to think I should study more. •I think it improves our ability.</li> <li>•CAN-DO statements are arranged from easy ones to difficult ones for each skill, that would encourage the students who are not good at English.</li> </ul>
<b>Comment from Communication Focus Group</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•I realized what I can do and what I cannot.</li> <li>•It raises my motivation to study English.</li> <li>•I want to overcome my weaknesses.</li> <li>•I can see what areas I have difficulties in.</li> </ul>

Table 4 the results of the questionnaires in 2017and 2018

	Group	2017		2018	
		Yes	No	Yes	No
A CAN-DO list motivates me	Grammar Focus	70%	7%	33%	50%
	Communication	46%	21%	41%	59%
Students who equate their goal with CAN-DO items	Grammar Focus	76%	8%	46%	45%
	Communication	62%	19%	36%	64%
A CAN-DO list improves my English	Grammar Focus	73%	12%	35%	42%
	Communication	44%	21%	50%	50%

#### 4.2 Comparisons in 2017 and 2018

Regarding the results on motivation in 2017, only the external regulation in the communication focus group showed the tendency of significant increase between May and July in 2017, as mentioned before. Comparing to the results in 2018, there was no significant decrease in either group in 2017. About progress in English proficiency, there was no significant increase or decrease, in 2017 or 2018. Table 4 shows the comparison between the results of the qualitative questionnaire in 2017 and those in 2018. As far as the participants

in 2017 are concerned, their answers were yes to all the questions, but in 2018 the participants' responses showed the opposite tendency, suggesting that the 2017 participants recognized the value of using a CAN-DO list for learning English. The analysis of motivation of participants who answered, "A CAN-DO list motivates me." shows there was a significant increase in external regulation between May and July in the communication focus group ( $t = -2.21$ ,  $df = 11$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ). In the grammar focus group, there was a marginally significant increase in intrinsic regulation ( $t = -2.01$ ,  $df = 15$ ,  $p < 0.06$ ), external regulation ( $t = -2.00$ ,  $df = 15$ ,  $p < 0.06$ ) and amotivation ( $t = -2.13$ ,  $df = 15$ ,  $p < 0.05$ ) between May and July.

Table 5 shows the answers to "Which CAN-DO list is useful for you?" obtained in 2017, presenting a sharp contrast against 2018, when about half of the participants answered that they do not know. This proportion is much greater than that in 2017. The participants in 2017 seem to understand the meaning of CAN-DO lists more than those in 2018. Table 6 shows the results of the answers to "Which of the four skills was an area in which it was most difficult for you to respond to the items in the list?". No participants found reading difficult, which was the same result as in 2018.

Table 5: The answers to "Which list is useful for you?" in 2017

Group	Eiken CAN- DO	CEFR-J	both	I don't know
Grammar Focus	32%	14%	23%	31%
Communication Focus	35%	25%	15%	25%

Table 6: The answers to "Which skill of the lists are difficult for you?" in 2017

Group	Reading	Listening	Speaking	Writing	I don't know	No skill
Grammar Focus	0	14%	21%	7%	19%	39%
Communication	0	7%	7%	3%	39%	43%

Comparing the surveys conducted in the two years, we may say that the following points are particularly worth noticing. (1) There was no significant progress in English proficiency either in 2017 or 2018. (2) Regarding external regulation, there was an increase in the 2017 communication focus group but no change elsewhere. (3) Regarding intrinsic regulation, there was an increase in the 2018 grammar focus group but no change elsewhere. (4) Regarding identified regulation, there was a decrease in the 2018 communication focus group but no change elsewhere. (5) An interesting finding was obtained from those participants who said that use of a CAN-DO list increases their motivation. Among the 2017 participants, there was a marginal increase in intrinsic regulation, external regulation and amotivation in the grammar focus group.

There was a significant increase in external regulation in the communication focus group. Among the 2018 participants, there was a significant increase in internal regulation, but only in the grammar focus group.

#### **4-3 Summaries**

The answers to the research questions are the following:

1) Which of the two CAN-DO lists contributes to the improvement in students' English proficiency and motivation? Intrinsic regulation improved marginally in the grammar focus group. The identified regulation deteriorated significantly in the communication focus group. There was a significant increase in the intrinsic regulation between April and July for the students in grammar focus group who answered that the list motivated them.

2) What do students think of using a CAN-DO list to judge their English ability? About half of the participants think a CAN-DO list can be helpful for studying English. The rest of them think a list is either not helpful or unnecessary. These results were contrary to the results in 2017.

3) How do the results of this study compare with those of the 2017 study? Neither CAN-DO list affected the improvement in students' English proficiency. Students in 2017 seemed to have more positive attitude for using CAN-DI list. Both lists affected some areas of regulation in motivation. It seems that the grammar vocabulary focus list may give more positive influences on motivation.

#### **5 Discussion**

These results seem to suggest that the CAN-DO lists which were used for this research did not prove to be effective in improving students' proficiency. One possible reason for this is that participants had some difficulties understanding the items in the lists as the answers to the qualitative questionnaire indicated.

The participants in 2018 have a high measure of amotivation. But their motivation may improve if an appropriate CAN-DO list is used. In fact, intrinsic regulation improved marginally in the grammar focus group. Also, the comments by participants who answered the lists motivated them showed some positive effects on motivation in both 2017 and 2018. Participants both in the 2017 study and in the 2018 study indicated that CAN-DO statements for reading comprehension are not difficult to judge, probably because their daily lessons largely focus on reading. It must be necessary for teachers to increase lessons based on other skills (listening, speaking and writing) to help students to understand their abilities in these three skills properly.

#### **6 Conclusion**

The conclusion that I was able to reach in 2017 was the following. The study seems to show that CAN-DO lists vary in the degree to which they help learners to improve their motivation and English proficiency and that the significance of some lists is conveyed to learners better than that of other lists. If this is indeed the case, it is teachers' responsibility to choose lists most appropriate for their learners. The 2018 study seems to support the validity of this conclusion.

## 7 Pedagogical Implications and limitations

From the above research it seems that two pedagogical implications may be inferred. First, CAN-DO lists and the content of instruction should be closely linked. We saw that students may have failed to comprehend the meaning of some of the items in the CAN-DO lists, probably because of the lack of connection between the lists and the lessons. It will therefore be effective for the improvement of learners' English to design an appropriate CAN-DO list for each activity in each lesson. Second, CAN-DO lists should be formulated with the level of the students taken into consideration, as we saw from the differences between the results of the studies conducted in the two different years, when students at different levels were focused on. It will be worthwhile to conduct studies to find out what sorts of CAN-DO lists are appropriate for students at what levels.

This study is not without limitations. Instruction given in the classes may not have been appropriate for making students understand their respective lists thoroughly. No appropriate explanation has been found for the increase in amotivation in the grammar focus group in 2017. Further research would clarify these and other issues regarding the use of CAN-DO lists.

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