

The Effect of Using CAN-DO lists on EFL Learners' Proficiency and Awareness

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Abstract (200 words)

This study attempts to examine the effect of using CAN-DO lists on (a) EFL learners' proficiency, as measured by the TOEIC Bridge test, 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. Two CAN-DO lists were used for the study: one focusing on communication and one on grammatical points.

The research questions were 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? The participants of this research were 66 third-year students, enrolled in two classes, at a high school in Japan. In May 2017, they took the simplified TOEIC Bridge test, assessed their own English proficiency using a CAN-DO list, and answered a questionnaire about motivation made up of Likert scales. In July, they also took the TOEIC Bridge, self-assessed their English using a CAN-DO list, and answered a motivation questionnaire. Moreover they answered a qualitative questionnaire about using a CAN-DO list.

Keywords

CAN-DO list, motivation

Introduction

The Education and Science Ministry 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 the Ministry showed that about 70% of the high schools in Japan made a CAN-DO list but only 30 % 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.

If research 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.

1 CAN-DO lists

1.1 The types of CAN-DO lists

CAN-DO lists may be categorized by two separate criteria. First, they may be placed along a scale from 1) lists for self-evaluation by learners to 2) 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, and TOEIC, toward the score interpreting end. The other criterion is whether the list focuses on communication or it focuses on grammatical points. For example, EIKEN and GTEC focus generally on communication while CEFR-J tends to focus generally on grammar.

1.2 Previous Research

There is some research on how a CAN-DO list improves students' motivation and their English abilities. Yoneda, Nishimura, and Hosokawa studied the relation among CAN-DO lists (CEFR A1 to B1), motivation and English abilities. They found some relation between the lists and English abilities but the motivation stayed the same regardless of whether a list was

used or not.

Tokeshi, Norman, Tsukayama, and Nashiro concluded from their analysis that learners' self-rating using CEFR-J CAN-DO Descriptors is not highly reliable. They stated in addition that learners' self-rating using CAN-DO Descriptors and their English proficiency test scores are not strongly correlated.

2 Method

The research questions were 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?

The participants of this research were 66 third-year students at a high school in Japan. They were enrolled in two classes, consisting of 31 and 35 students respectively. In May 2017, they took the simplified TOEIC Bridge test, assessed their own English proficiency using a CAN-DO list, and answered a questionnaire about motivation. In July, they also took the TOEIC Bridge, self-assessed their English using a CAN-DO list, and answered a motivation questionnaire. In addition, they answered a qualitative questionnaire about using a CAN-DO list. They received the same instruction in English in class, but each class used a different CAN-DO list.

3 Results

The results are the following. 1) There was no significant in-group difference in English proficiency or motivation between May and July in either group, except for the fact that external regulation in the communication group showed significant difference during the period; there was no significant between-group difference in May or in July. 2) The number of students who wrote positive comments on their experience of using a CAN-DO list (comments to the effect that it may have increased their motivation) was greater in the class that used the list covering grammatical points than in the class that used the list focusing on communication. Actually, as analyzed in the framework of self-determination theory, it was their intrinsic motivation that showed a significant increase between May and July.

6 Discussion and Conclusion

This outcome may be interpreted to indicate

two points: (a) use of a communication-oriented list increases students' external regulation, possibly because such a list makes them conscious of the practical purpose of learning English; (b) the statements in the grammar-oriented CAN-DO list are more concrete and thus easier for students to understand with the result that they were better able to identify specifically what they should focus on as they tried to improve their proficiency in English (in fact, the responses given by those who used the grammar-oriented CAN-DO list and made positive comments on the use of the list indicated that their motivation increased during the treatment period).

This study has such limitations as the small number of participants and the short treatment period. The study nevertheless 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 a list most appropriate for their learners.

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