



Creating In-class Self-directed Learning through Can Do Objectives, Portfolio use, and Formative Assessment

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This paper reports on the introduction of in-class self-directed learning in an intensive English program at a woman's university in Japan. This self-directed learning was organized around can do descriptors, and supported by a portfolio and formative assessment. This new curriculum emerged from our use of the CEFR. A second reason for this change stemmed from an increased lack of student engagement during teacher-directed instruction. For self-directed learning, a student determined what can do's she wanted to learn, and what activities she would study to learn these skills. This student control also involved deciding what can do's to be individually tested on and when. At the end of the academic year, students ($n = 37$) completed a 12-item Likert scale survey to assess the curriculum changes. The results revealed that students had mixed support for self-directed planning. Specifically, students indicated a lack of confidence in making study plans. Students did like the use of can do's, but wanted more language guidance for them. Students also strongly favored the use of the portfolio and formative assessment. An analysis of student can do test results for the year revealed that students made greater gains than were possible with the prior teacher-directed curriculum.

Keywords: CEFR, self-directed learning, process-oriented portfolio, restricted formative assessment, learner autonomy, self-handicapping, individualized learning

Introduction

The introduction of student self-directed learning into our language curriculum emerged from our English department's referencing of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) to transition the curriculum from a knowledge-based curriculum to one more competency-based. This change in curriculum stemmed from a need to offer students at our non-competitive women's university language education that gives them stronger language skills needed for an ever increasingly competitive job market. The CEFR is widely known in Asia amongst academics, but to date its application in at least Japan is still quite infrequent (see Schmidt et al., 2017). An underlining goal of the CEFR is to facilitate learner autonomy or 'ability to learn'. The accompanying European Language Portfolio is one tool meant to be used for this purpose. Arguably, any systematic attempt to apply the principles of the CEFR appears to push it users to a curriculum that is more student self-directed. In our case, through growing experience with the CEFR, we eventually produced a curriculum that was can do, student self-directed, and included both a process-oriented portfolio and a strong emphasis on formative assessment. To date in Japan, there are few language programs with all these features, outside of a few progressive self-access programs at a number of competitive universities. What also makes our program

different is that the students in it are overwhelmingly low attainers. These students in addition to having had little success in learning English also show low self-confidence in their learning ability, and, furthermore, tend to have an overdependence on their teachers for most aspects of their learning. Few teachers would assume that self-directed learning would be a good fit with such students. After a detailed description of the curriculum and its development, this paper reports on the findings of a student survey that was undertaken to analyze student learning attitudes to key components of the curriculum. The survey questions focus on four basic research themes:

1. Student responses to the use of can do descriptors as primary learning objectives.
2. Student responses to use of a process-oriented portfolio to plan, assess, and demonstrate learning and achievement.
3. Student responses to self-directed learning which involves choosing can do objectives and planning learning to achieve them.
4. Student responses to formative assessment (assessment for learning) as the primary mode of testing.

To support the survey findings, data of student achievement in terms of can do skills acquired over the course of the academic year will be presented to provide a fuller picture for the reader.

Literature Review

For those unfamiliar with the CEFR, it has three basic parts. The first is its action-oriented approach, which Trim (2012) one of its authors writes is “an attempt to characterize comprehensively, transparently, and coherently the act of language communication in terms of what competent language users do and the competences (knowledge and skill) that enable them to act” (p. xxxiv). The second feature of the CEFR, and its least known, are the four chapters that serve to stimulate professional dialogue through reviewing methods of learning and teaching. The third, and its most well-known feature, is its global communicative competency scale comprised of three broad brands each with two skilled based levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2) that are expressed as can do statements. The global popularity of the CEFR, (see Byram & Parmenter, 2012) results from the thoroughness of the development and empirical validation of its scales. Hulstijn et al. (2010) suggest they are the best researched of their kind. The empirical foundation of these scales as North (2014) reminds users, is based on teacher and expert perceptions of language competency and not on SLA processes or SLA research.

To support our can do curriculum we designed a student portfolio based on the European Language Portfolio (ELP). Our reason for introducing a student portfolio was in response to a lack of student use and awareness of the CEFR scales and descriptors. We learned very quickly that the CEFR’s scales and descriptors had little value if students did not understand them or apply them to their own language learning. This was one example where use of the CEFR pushed us to involve the students more actively in their learning. The original ELP was released in the same year of the CEFR to support the CEFR’s central themes of comprehensiveness, coherence, and transparency in language learning and teaching. Like the CEFR, the ELP has gradually gained traction over the past decade in Europe (see Kuhn & Cavana, 2012). Not limited to Europe or language learning, portfolio/e-portfolios in general have over the years gained in popularity in higher education (Zubizarreta, 2009; Penny Light et al., 2012; Reynolds & Patton, 2014) around the world. The original ELP, consists of a language passport, language biography, and dossier. The language passport encourages students to summarize language learning experiences and self-assess using the CEFR’s global scales. The language biography contains among other resources can do descriptors which allow students to identify specific skills they currently have or need to acquire. Lastly, the dossier is for displaying evidence of language competency. Our portfolio contained these three features plus sections we designed to plan and document studying and thus make it more process-oriented

than the ELP.

The CEFR motivated us towards portfolio use, and the introduction of a portfolio led us to adopt more individualized learning with formative assessment. We realized that if we wanted to facilitate more one-to-one contact between teacher and student during class, which a process-oriented portfolio requires, then we needed to move away from our previous class culture which could be characterized as predominately teacher-directed. For testing, it also meant moving away from summative assessment, usually done at the mid and end of term times, towards more formative assessment. Formative assessment as Carless (2011, p. 6) explains is a concept open to multiple interpretations. The most popular definition defines it as a process by which students and teachers use evidence of student work and performance to assess the student's learning as well as decide next steps for learning, and how to achieve them – assessment for learning. Carless (2011) further explains that formative assessment has variations that can be placed on a continuum ranging from restricted formative assessment to expanded formative assessment. With the former it is mostly teacher-directed and convergent in that the learning focus is on pre-selected behavioral objectives, like for example, can do descriptors. In contrast expanded formative assessment is mostly student-led and involves divergent assessment which focuses on what the student knows and can demonstrate in a more open-ended way. It is characterized by constructivist learning such as Project-based learning. For actual student learning in the classroom, one can place differentiated learning and individualized learning on the same side as restricted formative assessment, and personalized learning with expanded formative assessment. Zmuda et al. (2015) define differentiated learning as the teacher predominately tailoring the same materials, processes, and outcomes to fit individual students. With individualized learning students have more control over pacing, focuses, and when they want to demonstrate ability. Personalized learning on the other hand draws heavily from constructivist views of learning where students actively plan and create projects and problems to study including deciding how their work should be assessed. Our curriculum could be described as self-directed (individualized) learning supported by restricted formative assessment with the can do descriptors being the convergent learning objectives.

As briefly mentioned in the introduction our change to more student self-directed learning did not entirely result from working with the CEFR. Classroom realities acted as important catalysts for the change. As a non-competitive women's university, we accept students with very low English proficiency (pre-A1 and A1) and accompanying low levels of confidence towards their own learning abilities. In recent years, we have had a higher intake of students who have at times demonstrated a limited interest in doing any learning in the classroom. These students regularly 'turnoff' during instruction, and show little effort during pair and group work. We identified this behavior as 'self-handicapping' which as Hattie (2012) explains is when a student chooses to create barriers to learning, like strategically reducing effort to deflect potential failure away from his/her own abilities (p. 47). The more substantial problem is that this behavior negatively impacts the learning of other students in the class. We concluded that self-handicapping by an increasing number of first-year students was both a cause and an effect of their prolonged overdependence on teachers. Because of this we felt that these students did not fully understand what their roles and responsibilities were as learners.

Ironically, we decided that the best remedy for this problem was to give the students more control of their learning. In short, we wanted the students to clearly experience having almost complete responsibility for their own learning and its outcomes. We hoped that giving the students more control with clear achievable can do goals supported by formative assessment and a process-oriented portfolio would help build student self-confidence and reduce disruptive procrastination. For our more productive students we also thought more control over their learning would allow them to progress at a better rate than was previously possible with teacher-directed classes. Cautiously, we understood that giving students control over their learning does not mean they are engaging in autonomous learning. Autonomous learning as Little (1991) explains also involves control over the cognitive processes of learning (e.g., detachment, critical reflection, decision-making). Furthermore, these cognitive skills as Benson (2001) notes only successfully emerge if teachers play an active role in the students' learning.

Context and Curriculum

For our self-directed can do portfolio curriculum we incorporated five courses from our current intensive CEFR-referenced English program for both first and second year students. We did not include all the classes from the intensive course because some teachers were uncommitted to more student-directed learning. Both first and second year intensive courses each enrolled just over 20 students. One individual class would run for 30 weeks over the academic year. For each student year, we selected two writing classes, two speaking classes, and one listening class. With these weekly classes, we introduced a self-directed can do learning system as the main part of each lesson, roughly 40-60 minutes of a 90-minute lesson. For the remaining class time, teachers focused on learning activities not directly tied to the can do descriptors (e.g., proficiency test practice, extensive reading, vocabulary building).

At the start of the new semester we provided students with a list of can do descriptors for each class. First year students received A1 to A1+ can do descriptors while second year students received A2 to A2+ descriptors. We compiled these lists by triangulating them from the EQUALS/ALTE and ELP descriptor banks, and from legitimate CEFR-referenced textbooks. Students marked the descriptors they believed they could do without any further study. Students then put these lists at the front of each course section in their portfolios. Throughout the academic year, a student had to at her scheduling take a test for each descriptor she marked as one she felt she could do. If a student failed a can do test, or felt she lacked ability for a descriptor, the next step would be to make a self-study work plan for that can do.

In-class Self-directed Learning System

Making a self-study work plan consisted of two steps. First, students identified lexico-grammatical language present in the descriptors they each planned to study. Students did this by brainstorming and referencing course textbooks and supplementary materials. For the second step, a student would choose at least five language learning activities and tasks that she would complete before requesting to take the can do descriptor test. We gave the students reference guides for course materials that helped them find appropriate activities and tasks for each descriptor. For the listening class, we put all activities including tests online. Once a student prepared her work plan she then presented it to the teacher for discussion and approval. Students could consult the teacher anytime during the planning. In the early stages of the semester, most students had to regularly edit their work plans because of choosing activities with unrelated language. A student after receiving teacher approval could start completing the activities/tasks. To promote self-directed learning, we established a rule that once a student regularly demonstrated the ability to prepare work plans she then no longer needed teacher approval. After completing all the activities, the student presented them to the teacher before receiving the answer key to self-mark. With this last step as well, students could bypass the teacher once they demonstrated responsibility for self-marking. By the midpoint of the academic year all students had graduated from needing teacher approval for the work plan steps.

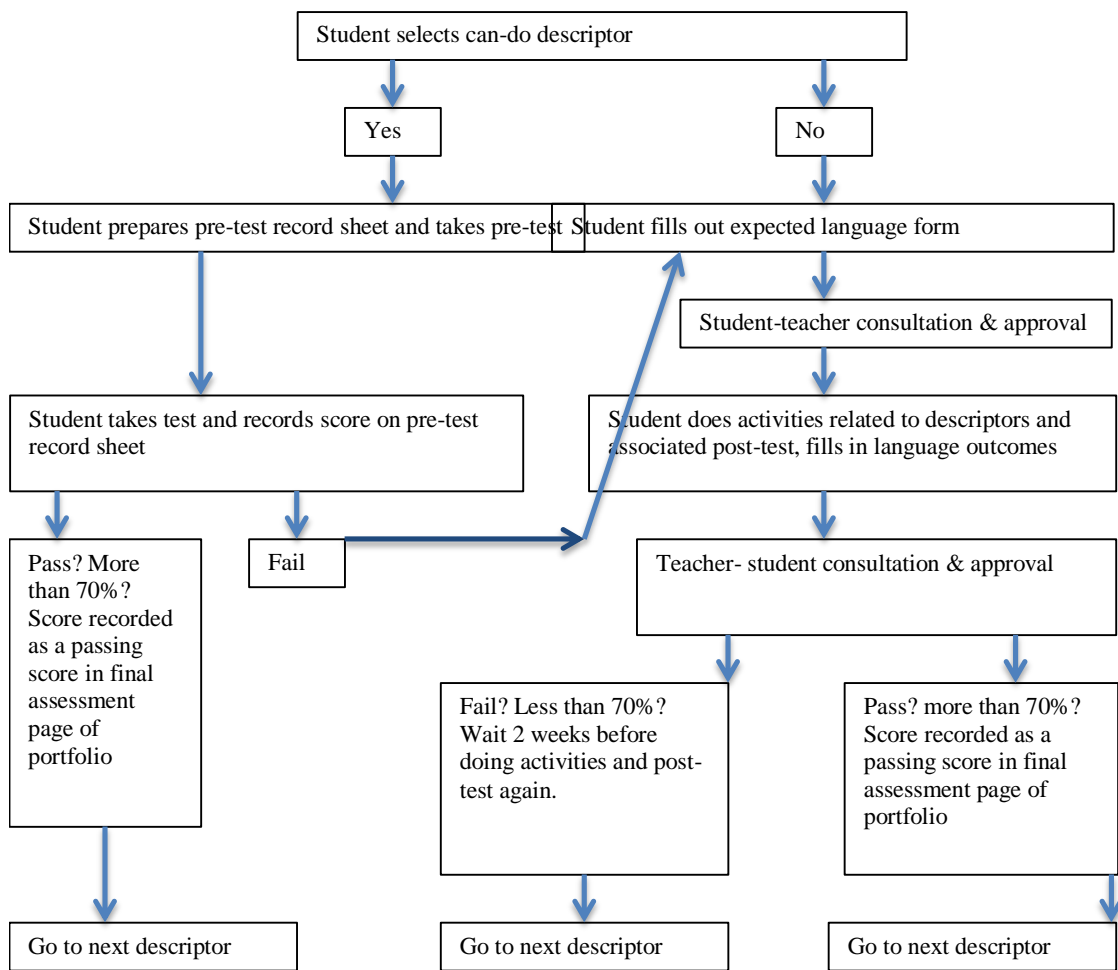


Figure 1. Example of learning and assessment sequence for A1 listening class

After self-marking a student could request to take the corresponding can do test in the next class. We assessed student ability for a descriptor with an equivalent task. Speaking teachers conducted the speaking tasks one to one, whereas with the writing and listening tests the teacher normally tested numerous students at the same time on different tasks. For all the classes, teachers tried to provide constructive feedback as immediately as possible. Typically, a speaking teacher would test 6-12 students individually per class. Each speaking test took between 2-5 minutes while writing and listening tests lasted about 5-10 minutes. When a student passed the test, the teacher after giving feedback then signed his/her name next to the descriptor that was listed in the transcripts in the biography section of the portfolio. This signature indicated that the student had demonstrated ability for that descriptor.

Method

At the end of the academic year we administered a 12-item Likert scale survey to our students to assess the self-directed can do portfolio curriculum. These questions were formulated and translated to the L1 (Japanese) by three bilingual members of the program. During this process, care was taken to ensure that the questions were easy enough for the students to understand and recognize what part of the program each referred to. Before students completed the survey, each question was clearly explained to them. Each of the questions offered students (n=37) five choices (1 = not at all, 2 = not really, 3 = okay/so so, 4 =

quite a lot, 5 = very much). We included a neutral category ‘okay/so so’ because we did not want to superficially force the students to either favor something or not. We felt that the second part of the survey which required students to write explanations for each survey choice would provide sufficient information to account for any neutral choices.

The survey had four themes: the self-directed study system, the can do descriptors as main objectives, the one to one formative assessment, and the portfolio. For analyzing student written responses, we assigned them to positive, critical, or neutral/non-specific categories. The largest response that we had for the neutral/non-specific category were non-responses or no comments. The student had decided not to write a response. The second largest type of response for the neutral category was for the students to write simple neutral comments like, “either is fine”, “we need both”, “I don't know” and, “it is useful and not useful”. In most cases these responses corresponded with a ‘so so’ choice on the survey. In addition, we added unclear or irrelevant responses to this category. For example, one student in response to question 7 on one to one testing wrote, “the more tests we pass the less we have to study”. In fact, students have to study and practice more as they challenge unfamiliar can do's. Overall, the students gave few neutral responses, and in some cases non-relevant comments did show thought and insight. For the positive and critical categories, a comment clearly had to reflect either opinion for it to be included. Every comment was categorized into one of the three categories. After that we identified main and important themes which are presented below with the survey results.

Participants

Every student in the first (19 students) and second (18 students) years of study in the English department completed the survey, except for four students who were studying overseas at the time. Most of the university's departments are non-competitive including the English department. Almost all the students entering our department did so because of their inability to gain acceptance into better ranked universities. Upon entry, student English language profiles are around the pre-A1 and A1 levels, with very few students having complete A1 skills. As mentioned previously, most students have poor study skills and limited or low motivation. Despite this, a small number of students who generally achieve at least A2 on the CEFR do manage to secure jobs in the tourist industry (e.g. hotel staff, airport ground staff) where using some English is a requirement. For the survey, students completed it during the final class of the year. They completed it anonymously and were provided with as much time as they needed. On average, it took about 30 minutes to complete. Students were told that this feedback would be used to assess and improve the program, including dropping features that students did not support.

Results

Student Opinions about In-class Self-directed Learning

The first three questions applied to the self-directed or individualized study system. Two of these questions produced the lowest means and the most critical responses.

TABLE 1

Self-directed Learning and Making Study Plan

	Mean	SD
1. Do you prefer only having to study can do goals you cannot do?	3.03	1.24
2. Do you prefer not to study can do goals you think you can do?	2.68	1.03
3. Do you like having to make your own study plans?	2.62	1.30

Question one had a slightly positive mean with 14 students giving supportive follow-up explanations. One student from this group wrote, “*I want to study only what I cannot do because it more efficient*”, while another student wrote, “*I learn more by only studying what I cannot do*”. In contrast 20 students expressed issues with only studying can do descriptors they lacked mastery for. Of this group, 13 of these students commented that it is important to review the can do descriptors they passed. As one student wrote, “*it is important for us to review*”. This was the most common response for the question. Another student wrote, “*I lose my motivation if I only study what I cannot do*”. Question two asked the opposite of the previous question. We added this question to clearly ask if students liked not having to study can do’s they had ability for. As the result shows students responded critically to this question. Only eight students preferred not having to study can do’s they already had ability for because as one student wrote, “*it makes good use of class time to study only what I need to*”. In comparison 25 students (68%) criticized the curriculum for not including the opportunity to review can do descriptors. One student reflecting the most common response from this group simply wrote, “*we need review*”. Question three on self-directed planning produced the lowest mean (2.62) in the survey, and the most critical comments, especially from the second-year students. Despite this, 14 students still gave supportive comments with nine of these students writing that they liked choosing activities and tasks to study. One student commented, “*it is good that I can decide what and how I want to study*”. Three students also from this group thought it was a more efficient way to study, as one student wrote, “*self-study is more useful than the teacher’s lesson*”. In contrast, 21 expressed problems with the self-study system. Half of this group did not feel that they made good study work plans. A student wrote, “*I don’t know how to prepare well*”, while another wrote, “*I don’t know if I am doing this right*”. A third student commented, “*I choose only easy activities to do*”. On this basic theme eight other students noted that they thought the teacher is better at making lesson plans than the students. Three other students thought self-planning used up too much class time without recognizing it was meant to be done outside of class, and that many students did prepare work plans outside of class.

Student Opinions of Can Do Descriptors as Course Objectives

The next three questions in the survey relate to the use of can do descriptors as course objectives.

TABLE 2

Can Do Descriptors as Course Objectives

	Mean	SD
4. Do you like having a list of can do descriptors to show what the objectives are for each course?	3.35	1.00
5. Do you think can do descriptors make learning English clearer/easier?	3.08	1.01
6. Do you like having a syllabus organized around can do goals rather than grammar?	2.84	1.09

The results for the fourth question revealed that students had favorable opinions (3.35) of can do descriptors used as main course objectives. In the past, most teachers in our department used language targets and or vaguely written themes (e.g., *the past*) for objectives. In support, 28 students gave survey selections with positive explanations. Of these, 24 students thought the can do descriptors helped them understand the goals of each class as well as identify their own language strengths and weaknesses. One student reflecting the most common response wrote, “*the can do’s allow me to better see what I am studying and need to study*”, while another student wrote, “*having clear goals with these can do’s makes me try harder*”. In contrast, eight students gave critical explanations. Half of this group reported having trouble understanding the can do descriptors in the L2. The mean (3.08) for the fifth question masked a difference between the first and second year students with the former group showing greater support (3.42 to 2.72) for the question. For a few questions in the survey, first year students noticeably favored features of the program more than second year students. We attributed this difference to first-year students expecting university to be different from high school, and our second-year students having to readjust to

new unexpected changes in the curriculum. For the fifth question, despite what the mean showed, 22 students (14 first year and 8 second year) gave positive comments similar to the reasons in the first question. One student from this group in comparing past English learning experiences wrote, “*now is better because I understand my weak points and I can study more effectively*”. Nine students gave critical comments, but only four students addressed the actual question. The same four students, like in question four, restated their troubles understanding the descriptors in English, “*I have difficulty understanding what each descriptor means*”. The mean for the sixth question showed that students did not necessarily prefer a can do syllabus over one organized as lexico-grammatical targets. In support of a can do syllabus, 12 students gave positive reasons similar to those in the first two questions. Despite the either-or wording of the question, 15 students thought having both types of information are important for their learning. Six students wrote critical responses with four students preferring a lexico-grammatical syllabus because as one student wrote, “*grammar and vocabulary are easier to follow*”.

Student Opinions of Testing System with Formative Assessment

The three questions on testing produced some of the highest means on the survey.

TABLE 3
Individualized Testing and Assessment

	Mean	SD
7. Do you like having the chance to take a can do test each class with the teacher?	3.78	0.92
8. Do you like choosing when and which can do test you can take?	3.70	1.00
9. Does having the chance to take a can do test each class with the teacher help your English ability?	3.70	0.90

For question seven, students demonstrated a clear preference for regular testing with formative assessment. A majority (27 students) supported their survey choices (3.78) with positive comments. Of this group, 15 students valued getting immediate and detailed feedback, for example, one student wrote, “*the teacher gives me clear and useful feedback*”, a second student wrote, “*it is now easier to ask and learn from the teacher*”. Six students felt that regular testing improved their English ability while on a similar point three wrote that the testing forced them to study or use English more. As one student noted, “*I must use more English than in the past because I talk to the teacher more*”. Only five students had comments that we categorized as critical. Despite this low number, two students pointed out an important issue of teachers applying different testing standards. For question eight it appeared that students liked being able to choose when and what tests to take. Overall 28 students gave positive responses with 15 students simply noting that they like having this decision-making authority. Relatedly, ten students wrote that they liked being able to take tests at their own pace, with two students thinking it helped them achieve better results because as one student wrote, “*it allows me to be better prepared for the tests since I get to choose when and what test*”.

As with the previous question only a small number of students gave critical responses for question eight. Five of the seven students who wrote critical responses reported that because of self-selecting they tended to choose only easy can do descriptors. One student wrote, “*I get lazy and only choose easy can do's*”, and another student suggested, “*we can postpone addressing our weak points*”. For the last question on testing we wanted to know if students noticed any impact on their English resulting from increased talking time through testing with the teachers. Students responded favorably (3.70) on whether the testing helped them improve their English. Overall 27 students or 73% gave positive follow-up comments that echoed the positive themes of the previous questions about receiving immediate and individualized feedback from the teachers. As one student wrote, “*this system helps me notice which grammar confuses me*”, and a second student wrote, “*it is an easier and more useful way to learn English*”. Of this group, 10 students also noted an improvement in their English, for example one student

wrote, “*I can express myself better and listen better now that I work more with the teacher*”, while a different student wrote, “*yes because native-speaker teachers talk to me face to face*”. A third student noted, “*I can see by working with the teacher one to one whether I am able to make myself understood to him/her, this helps a lot*”. With this question only a few students gave criticisms, and these too were similar to the ones given with the two previous questions.

Student Opinions of Process Portfolio

The final three questions in the survey concerned the use of the portfolio. This was every students’ first time using a learning portfolio and most of the teachers first experience with one as well.

Table 4
The Portfolio and Its Use

	Mean	SD
10. Do you like having to keep a portfolio of your classwork?	3.43	1.04
11. Do you like having records signed by teachers of can do tests you passed?	3.89	1.05
12. Do you think the portfolio helps you learn English better than in high school?	3.22	1.06

Students for question ten, especially the first years (4.36 to 3.29) showed very favorable opinions towards using a portfolio. Only one student from the first-year class expressed dissatisfaction with it. In qualifying their choices overall 25 students gave positive comments. Twenty-two students singled out the usefulness of being able to see what work and tests they had completed, and what they needed to further study. A student wrote, “*it is good to have all our documents in one place*”, and another wrote, “*with the portfolio it is easier to review and prepare*”. One other student wrote, “*having a record of teacher feedback is important for my learning*”. Six students provided more critical responses. Four students from this group simply did not like having to carry it to each class.

With question eleven, students appeared to strongly favor having records of test successes validated with teacher signatures. In total 29 students gave positive explanations for their survey choices. Twenty-five students all similarly felt it helped build their confidence. Reflecting the views from this group, one student explained, “*it is a good idea and gives me a sense of achievement*”, while a second said, “*I can have a record of my achievements which helps me study and builds my confidence*”. Only three students responded critically. Two of these students wrote that they found the signatory system confusing. For the last question, we wanted to find out how students would compare their portfolio experience with past experiences (e.g., high school) where none had used a portfolio in such a central role in their learning. The mean results were slightly less positive than previous questions, nonetheless 26 students gave supportive explanations for the portfolio. Twelve students simply noted that they liked having a portfolio in comparison to not having one. Sixteen students thought it was useful because it made it easier to organize and manage their learning. For example, one student wrote, “*it allows me to plan my own learning and goals*”, while a second student wrote, “*I can study better than in high school because I can better see my strengths and weaknesses*”.

Discussion

For the first three questions of the survey we asked students their opinions about having to prepare, mostly on their own, study plans for individual descriptors as well as having the choice to opt out of studying descriptors if they could demonstrate ability for them on tests. Students, especially the stronger ones, showed moderate support for studying only what they felt they could not do. This group of students believed it allowed them to be more productive with their learning. However, most students strongly

disagreed with the practice of not reviewing successfully passed descriptors. We believe this stemmed from their concern about losing these language skills because of the few opportunities they have to use English outside of class. Nevertheless, we did feel that students failed to understand, mainly from inadequate explanation on our part, that most of the challenging descriptors at A1 are repeated in A2, but with higher language quality requirements. As well many students did not know that in the third year of the program these can do skills are reinforced and expanded on as the curriculum moves horizontally on the A2 level from the personal domain to the occupational domain (e.g., from describing a free time routine to describing a work routine).

The final question in this section asked students how they felt about individualized learning where they had control over what they choose to study. This produced the lowest mean of the survey, and some of the more critical comments from students. A third of the students did like the system, again the stronger students, while over half of the students indicated that they 'did not really like it' or 'not at all'. We think this finding resulted from the students' lack of familiarity and/or confidence with self-directed planning. We partially exacerbated their lack of confidence by not providing enough lexico-grammatical guidance to make planning easier. Despite this result, students did manage to consistently plan accurate work plans after a short adjustment period. We saw this accurate planning as evidence that students were paying more attention to their language learning than in the past, which was a major reason why we introduced self-directed learning in the first place.

One major success of the self-directed study system not covered in the survey is that many students achieved language gains that were impossible with the prior teacher-directed curriculum. For the new curriculum, and the three skills (writing, listening, speaking), we had 60 can do descriptors for the first year, and 69 for the second year. The first-year students on average passed 22 can do descriptors for the year, with a range in the group between 15 and 42 descriptors passed. For the second-year students, on average they passed 30 with a range between 21 to 56 descriptors passed. Our analysis revealed that student test results spread evenly across the three skills. With our previous curriculum for the same classes, for each student year, we calculated that students would have 'studied' and been 'tested' on about 30 descriptors a year. No student with the teacher-directed curriculum could exceed the 30-descriptor mark. In contrast, with the new self-directed curriculum 16 students or 43% of the total number of students passed over 30 descriptors. Moreover, teachers with the old curriculum made tests by compiling a set of descriptors into a single test. As it was a single test, students typically only needed to demonstrate ability for half of the descriptors to pass the test.

Surprisingly, we also witnessed most students opting out of studying many of the descriptors intensively focused on in the old curriculum in favor of just taking the test, which the majority passed on their first attempt. With the previous curriculum, it now appears that many students already had sufficient ability for almost half of these teacher-selected 30 can do descriptors that we focused on during the academic year. This error on our part with the previous curriculum, resulted from a lack of clear information of student proficiency, and our tendency to have lower expectations of their proficiency upon entry into the university. These combined with time constraints, and our desire to show student progress, meant that we tended to choose descriptors that were in hindsight not challenging enough for the students. The self-directed learning system showed us that to a certain extent students are better judges than teachers in knowing what they can and cannot do in a language.

The self-directed curriculum allowed our students to be more productive with their language learning than was possible with the old curriculum. As part of this improved student production, we saw a substantial decrease in disruption from students who did not want to learn in class. By moving to an individualized system, away from teacher-directed instruction, a student or a few students could no longer disrupt the learning of the other students. In addition, we saw a substantial decrease in self-handicapping as students could no longer be over dependent on the teacher. The more productive students soon became the clear 'mood makers' for the classes. This was a dramatic change in the classroom culture for our department. Despite this success, it should be noted that four self-handicappers who had in the past engaged in disruptive behavior to derail any learning by them or other classmates, unsurprisingly, gave

the most critical comments throughout the survey towards the self-directed learning curriculum. These second-year students in spite of having been more productive and successful with their learning than in the past still preferred the previous teacher-directed whole-class curriculum. We believe this choice stemmed from an unwillingness or lack of readiness to invest self-effort in their learning. A year of self-directed learning failed to substantially impact the deep-rooted self-handicapping mindsets of these students. Probably, the most significant factor for this mindset is that all four of these students first graduated from the university's junior and senior high schools through an 'escalator system'. With this system students are almost always passed by teachers regardless of what they achieve in class. Simply, these four students preferred what they were used to, which was avoiding learning, but still passing their courses.

For the second set of questions in the survey we wanted to investigate student opinions about having can do objectives, including if they preferred them to their past experiences where objectives were typically grammar targets and/or general themes. The results revealed that the majority of students thought the can do descriptors helped them understand the goals of each course, and identify their own language strengths and weaknesses. A few students struggled understanding the descriptors in the L2. Unsurprisingly, this same group of students also preferred lexico-grammatical targets. Overall, most students wanted both can do descriptors and language targets. They wanted clearer guidance on what lexico-grammatical language fits with each descriptor. In response, we have started to reference the English Profile and the British Council – EAQUALS Core Inventory for General English which both but in different ways identify language that appears at each CEFR level.

The third part of the survey focused on the testing system which allowed students to choose what descriptor they wanted to be tested on and when. The results revealed that students had very positive views about having this control. Students overwhelmingly found the mostly one to one formative assessment with its feedback as beneficial for their learning and opportunities to use English. One major reason we introduced the one to one testing was to create more social contact between teacher and student, and as a result give the student more opportunities to use English. We discovered from past experiences that students for any task pushed their production more, and generally tried harder, when they worked with the teacher rather than with another student who they shared the same L1 with. With the old teacher-directed curriculum, the chance to complete a language task with the teacher was limited to the twice a year testing periods, or the occasional 'pairing up' or 'dropping in' of a teacher during task work between students. With the new curriculum students had access to one to one assessment and feedback five times a week if they wanted it. Since, all the teachers were native-speakers, we think students saw this as an 'authentic' opportunity to use and learn English. Finally, the results for the last part of the survey revealed that the students favored using a portfolio over not using one. The main reasons appear to be the transparency and coherence the portfolio provided for their learning. For example, students especially liked having teacher validated records of their learning successes.

Conclusion

The findings of the survey generally confirmed what we observed during the academic year. From the findings, we can identify a number themes that teachers in similar contexts might want to consider with their language curriculum. Our students indicated a strong preference for learning, teaching, and tools that make their study of English more transparent and coherent. Specifically, students liked the portfolio and can do descriptors. Both helped students better self-assess their learning goals. However, with the can do descriptors students did not like the lack of lexico-grammatical guidance which is not a new criticism (Kedde, 2004) of the CEFR. One concern teachers may have with using can do descriptors as targets is that they potentially prioritize shallow or short-term behavioral performances while ignoring long-term language development. From the beginning, we understood that descriptors ultimately need to reflect deep linguistic competences, and our overall curriculum which includes courses not discussed in the

article addressed that. We also agree with Little (2009) that the A1 level and some of A2 descriptors are generally narrow behavioral objectives that can be learned and demonstrated relatively quickly, sometimes after a few hours of study. The small victories our students gained from passing can do tests served an important confidence building tool for them in our program.

Our study also showed that students strongly favor close interaction with their teachers within a culture of formative assessment. This increased contact did not come without any issues for teachers. For a few teachers in the program pedagogical practices like self-directed learning and formative assessment were completely new to them. As a result, these teachers struggled with increased one to one student contact which was compounded by the fact that they also lacked a sufficient level of competency in the students' L1 to engage in more detailed advising and feedback. A few teachers initially found it very difficult to 'fail' a student on a test while sitting face to face with them. It took time for teachers and students to appreciate that constructive feedback accompanying a poor test result was a crucial part of a student eventually acquiring that specific language skill. Overall, the biggest challenge we had with self-directed learning was as Little (1991) warns getting teachers to "dare to trust" students (p. 45). Even with the obvious evidence, some teachers at the end of the academic year still seemed hesitant to recognize that students could at some level self-direct their learning.

The last major theme of the study is that testing can be a positive learning tool in programs where students generally have had bad experiences with it. In our context testing is often seen as detrimental to student motivation for a variety of reasons (Kikuchi, 2013); however, the results from this study show that the issue is less about testing per se, and more about what purpose the testing serves, and how it is conducted. Students preferred having the choice to decide what tests they take and when they take them. Our students also seemed motivated by testing because it served an important role in developing their abilities in English. Rather than putting off testing or avoiding it, we discovered that almost every student chose to be tested on a weekly basis, and approached it as an opportunity to work productively with the teacher. The more central role testing played in our program, namely, 'assessment for learning' made us teachers aware that we need to better develop our expertise in test development, advising, providing feedback, and assessing students. The reforms we implemented to facilitate a change in the mindset of our students, and how they learn, has now required us teachers in the program to start making fundamental changes in how we approach and understand teaching.

Lastly, there are several points to be made about future research and limitations of this study. While the results of the study provided us with important information for improving the curriculum, there is nonetheless a need to collect more data for further analysis. For future research, the plan is to continue to conduct the survey every year in order to increase the subject pool. In addition, we think it is necessary to add a semi-structured interview to clarify student survey choices and comments. During the analysis of the survey there were numerous times when more elaboration from students on their comments would have helped give us a richer understanding of their opinions on the key features of the program. The most important limitation of this study is the lack of evidence of actual learning and teaching that occurred in our self-directed classrooms. While the student comments and achievement results provide indirect evidence, there is still a need to better demonstrate and analyze what kind of learning and teaching takes place in a self-directed program like the one in this study. By doing this we hope to provide skeptical teachers (and practitioner researchers) with more convincing reasons to try out a self-directed learning curriculum.

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