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To cite this article: Oshie Nishimura-Sahi (2020): Policy borrowing of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) in Japan: an analysis of the interplay between global education trends and national policymaking, Asia Pacific Journal of Education, DOI: [10.1080/02188791.2020.1844145](https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2020.1844145)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02188791.2020.1844145>



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Published online: 29 Nov 2020.



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Policy borrowing of the Common European Framework of Reference for languages (CEFR) in Japan: an analysis of the interplay between global education trends and national policymaking

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to show the complex overlapping and interaction with exogenous influences in the processes of national policymaking by analysing a case of policy borrowing in Japan. Specifically, it explores the political circumstances under which the *Council of Europe Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) was introduced to foreign language education policy at the national government level in Japan. The results suggest that the CEFR was borrowed selectively as a practical solution to achieve prolonged educational and political agendas promoted by multiple actors such as academics, the Ministry of Education (MEXT), and a group of politicians and business associations. This study moreover shows that the CEFR borrowing occurred under manifold interplays between multiple global education trends and domestic needs for Japanese citizens to acquire a practical communicative command of English to strengthen their international economic competitiveness.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 30 April 2020
Accepted 25 October 2020

KEYWORDS

Global education policy; policy transfer; policy borrowing; Japan; foreign language education; CEFR

Introduction

Education policies and policy ideas which circulate around the world are termed *global education policy*, constituting a major area of interest within education policy studies in general and the field of comparative and international education in particular (e.g. Edwards, 2018; Meyer & Ramirez, 2000; Mundy, Green, Lingard, & Verger, 2016; Rizvi & Lingard, 2010; Verger, Altinyelken, & Novelli, 2012). In order to make better sense of the nature of globalization in education, many researchers in the field have explored the worldwide diffusions and adaptations of globalized educational ideas and identified the needs for further research on the complex overlapping and interaction with exogenous influences in the processes of national policymaking (Larsen, 2010; Ozga & Lingard, 2007; Steiner-Khamsi, 2012; Waldow, 2012).

Although there is a rich body of existing research on Japanese education policy that attempts to “read the forces of history and the interplay of the domestic and the international in the construction of educational patterns” (Cowen, 2000, p. 339) (e.g. Kariya & Rappleye, 2010; Rappleye, 2012; Shibata, 2010; Takayama, 2011), only few studies have approached foreign language education policies in a broader context (cf. Aspinall, 2012; Kubota, 2015; Terasawa, 2018). The current paper attempts to bridge the research gap by providing an empirical analysis of the complex interconnections between global education trends and the politics of foreign language education policy in Japan. To this end,

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this paper explores the political circumstances under which a global education policy was introduced into the national foreign language education policy in Japan.

The case I explore is a framework for facilitating educational reform projects or, more specifically, the *Council of Europe Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (hereafter CEFR). The CEFR is one of the global education policies which has exercised “unquestionable influence” (Figueras, 2012, p. 477) on language learning, teaching and assessment in Europe and beyond. In the last two decades the CEFR has been translated into more than 40 languages and has contributed to the elaboration of language syllabi, the design of educational materials and assessment practices in second/foreign language education in numerous institutions in various countries (Byram & Parmenter, 2012; Figueras, 2012; Martyniuk & Noijons, 2007).

In Japan, the CEFR has been increasingly employed, especially in tertiary education institutions and culture institutions (e.g. the Goethe Institute and the Japan Foundation) in the last decade (Majima, 2010; Sensui, 2018). At the national level, the CEFR was recently incorporated into the new national curricular guidelines (Course of Study) (MEXT, 2017, 2018), and used as a platform to align private-sector English-language tests in the new standardized university entrance exam system¹ as part of the reform of the National Centre Test for University Admissions (National Centre Test for University Admissions [NCUEE], 2018). Despite the apparent proliferation of the CEFR in national education policy, no detailed study on the borrowing process has so far been presented. By examining how the CEFR was borrowed for use in formulating reform agendas of Japanese foreign language education and exploring the manifold interplays of exogenous and endogenous influences in the policy process, this paper contributes to a better understanding of the nature of global education policy.

The paper is structured as follows: the introduction section provides a brief overview of the CEFR, followed by an outline of the conceptual framework and the existing studies on the nexus between global education trends and the politics of Japanese education policy. In the second section I describe the research materials and the process of data collection and analysis. In the third section I explore how the CEFR was incorporated into the national education policy in Japan as to what aspects of the CEFR were borrowed and the political circumstances which gave rise to Japanese interest in the CEFR. Finally, I reconsider Japan’s CEFR borrowing by shedding light on the “complex interplay of global and local forces” (Ozga & Lingard, 2007, p. 68).

CEFR: overview of the global education policy

Against a background of increasing mobility in education, trade and industry among European countries in the 1960s, the Council of Europe identified a need to modernize language teaching so as to effectively develop learners’ communicative ability and to achieve a transparent and coherent common framework providing comparability between language courses and assessments in different learning contexts (Trim, 2012). To address the need, the CEFR has been developed and elaborated by language experts working under the aegis of the Language Policy Division – currently the Education Department – of the Council of Europe for over 50 years (Council of Europe, 2018).

The CEFR comprises various contents such as guiding philosophy and ideology (the idea of plurilingualism), enabling structures (the idea of learner autonomy and lifelong learning) and processes/techniques (the action-oriented approach to language learning and teaching) (Rappleye, Imoto, & Horiguchi, 2011). However, the CEFR is particularly well-known for the *common reference levels* grouped into three broad categories: Basic User (A1 & A2), Independent User (B1 & B2) and Proficient User (C1 & C2). Besides the reference levels, the *CEFR level descriptors* – also known as *Can-Do descriptors* – which provide concrete examples of what learners “can do” in any language at each level of proficiency is well recognized, especially among language professionals. The reference levels have been extensively applied by various stakeholders such as government officials and administrators at universities and the level descriptors have been used by educational practitioners for the outcome-oriented development of curricula and language programmes (Figueras, 2012).

Looking at the reasons given for the global diffusion of the CEFR, earlier studies point out that the CEFR has attracted policymakers and education practitioners aiming to develop language curricula and courses based on real-life communicative needs and tasks by promoting learner engagement and autonomy (Figueras, 2012; Trim, 2012). From the *proficiency* perspective guided by “what language learners/users can do”, the CEFR aims to support them as “social agents” to develop the communication competences required of the members of a multicultural society (Council of Europe, 2018). Parmenter and Byram (2012) also note that the adaptability of the CEFR attracted local policymakers in various countries. As the CEFR authors state in the document, the CEFR was designed as a tool for local education practitioners, administrators and policymakers to facilitate educational reform projects addressing their needs (Council of Europe, 2001). The increasing importance of common frameworks for validating language proficiency is also considered to be a major advantage of the CEFR because performance in international language proficiency tests has been used as a means of policymaking (Parmenter & Byram, 2012; Shohamy, 2019).

Regarding the earlier studies on the global diffusion of CEFR, in the analysis section I examine what aspects attracted Japanese actors’ attention and what contents were actually borrowed in order to understand under which political and social circumstances such CEFR contents were needed.

Global education policy and educational policy transfer

Educational policy transfer research has been developed in the field of comparative and international education to better understand the changing feature of education policies that “travel” from one education system to another and become “global” in the process (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012). Policy transfer research has contributed greatly to answering such questions as why, how and under what circumstances external references are made to reform ideas from elsewhere and how the “borrowed” ideas are adapted to different education systems at national, regional, sub-national and institutional levels (e.g. Cowen, 2009; Cowen & Kazamias, 2009; Phillips & Ochs, 2004; Steiner-Khamsi, 2014; Steiner-Khamsi & Waldow, 2012). This study draws on the body of literature on policy transfer and related concepts – such as policy borrowing – in analysing the “context-specific reasons” (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014, p. 156) of CEFR borrowing to the Japanese context.

While the so-called world culture approach attempts to explain the diffusion of global education policies based on a linear and top-down – from the Western centre to the periphery – understanding of policy processes (e.g. Meyer & Ramirez, 2000; Ramirez, 2012), other comparativists tend to analyse global education policies through micro-level analysis taking the so-called “Globally Structured Agenda for Education” (GSAE) approach to global education policy (Dale, 2005; see also Verger, 2014). Questioning the isomorphism thesis proposed by world culture theorists, some comparativists have attempted to understand the “local logic” (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012, p. 456) underlying policy transfer. That is, they explore the local meaning, adaptation and re-contextualization of policies borrowed from elsewhere and minutely describe divergence among the processes of internalisation/indigenization of global educational policies (Schriewer, 2000; Steiner-Khamsi, 2014). Importantly, the ultimate goal of educational policy transfer research in comparative policy studies is not to provide a thick description of the local context, but to interpret and understand “the power, legitimacy issues and political processes that explain policy change” in an era of globalization (Steiner-Khamsi, 2012, p. 467). Using the GSAE approach to global education policy as my interpretive framework, I investigate the policy process of CEFR borrowing to the Japanese context to describe the complex interplay between global education trends and national policymaking.

The nexus between global education trends and the politics of Japanese education policy

Scholarship throughout the 1980s and early 2000s often described the politics of education in Japan without closely examining external influences on national policymaking (e.g. Aspinall, 2001;

Schoppa, 1991). Scholars have recently started to advance an approach that situates Japan in the larger global context to understand the complex external and internal relations in the policy processes (Kariya & Rappleye, 2010; Rappleye, 2012; Shibata, 2010; Takayama, 2011).

Studying the politics of structural education reform in Japan from the late 1980s to the early 2000s, Nitta (2008) identifies several influences of global education trends in Japanese education policies. He points out that the Japanese crisis discourse in the late 1980s took shape in the interplay with a global trend or wide-spread belief that failure in public education threatens the economic competitiveness of the nation state (Nitta, 2008). In addition to the accountability of education to national economic growth in a globalizing world, education politics in Japan during the 1990s and 2000s shifted to the globally diffused New Public Management (NPM) approach: The central government attempted to improve educational performance by conducting quality assurance through external school evaluation and standardized tests rather than by providing “inputs” such as human and financial resources and facilities (Nitta, 2008; see also Fujita, 2010; Gordon & LeTendre, 2010; Rappleye, 2012).

In terms of global education discourses promoted by intergovernmental organizations, Takayama (2014) claims that the Japanese policy discourse of the mid-1990s closely paralleled the global education discourse such as lifelong learning promoted by the OECD and UNESCO. He points out that the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan (hereafter MEXT) attempted to incorporate the global education discourse into the educational reform pursued under the slogan *ikiru chikara* [zest for living].

Importantly, the effects of global education trends on national policymaking are never straightforward (Takayama, 2011; see also Nitta, 2008; Rappleye, 2012). That is, some global education trends have had an actual effect on national policymaking while some are just intentionally utilized by multiple stakeholders under the rhetoric of “globalization” to proceed with the reforms they pursue or divert attention from issues that hinder the progress of reform (Kariya & Rappleye, 2010; Takayama, 2011; Willis & Rappleye, 2011). Taking into account the existing discussion on the intertwined effects of global education trends on Japanese education policy, this study explores specifically how the global education trends documented above interacted with the process of CEFR borrowing.

Materials and methods

The primary research material used in this qualitative study consists of policy documents: minutes of working groups and councils, policy reports and recommendations issued by the Prime Minister’s Cabinet Office and MEXT in the period 2000–2017 (see appendices). These documents were primarily collected from the websites of the respective Japanese governmental offices. I also conducted an interview and examined policy recommendations proposed by Japanese business associations – the Japan Business Federation (*Keidanren*) and the Japan Association of Corporate Executives (*Keizai Doyukai*) – and media materials – the daily newspapers *Asahi*, *Yomiuri* and *Mainichi* – as supplementary data. The interview was conducted in June 2019 in Tokyo with the Unit Chief of the Foreign Language Sub-committee of the Central Council for Education. Policy recommendations were retrieved from the websites of *Keizai Doyukai* and the official channel for the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of Japan (FCCJ) on YouTube.

This paper is part of a larger study analysing the process of CEFR transfer from the European educational space to Japan. I began my qualitative content analysis (Mayring, 2014; Schreier, 2014) by screening the collected policy documents to select those aspects that relate to the research questions. Having reduced the size of the dataset, I selected six committee meetings and 24 policy reports and recommendations for further analysis. The selected documents were categorized into several coding frames such as “national framework” and “university admission reform” in a data-driven way to specify how the CEFR was incorporated into national education policy in Japan. Second, I closely analysed the language and reasoning adopted in the selected policy documents in order to understand how MEXT constructed meaning around the CEFR borrowing in response to the existing political needs for a foreign language education policy in Japan. In analysing the policy texts, I examined the political circumstances in which the political needs emerged, and accordingly,

gave rise to Japanese interest in the CEFR. Finally, to examine the Japanese case of CEFR borrowing in the broader context, I revisited the findings of my analysis, reflecting the existing literature on the external influences on the politics of Japanese education policies.

Results: the borrowing of CEFR to the national foreign language education policy in Japan

The *CEFR level descriptors* and *reference levels* were selectively borrowed in order to meet practical needs: Specifically, the needs for 1) establishing a national framework or, more precisely, national attainment targets with illustrative descriptors that enable teachers to promote communicative language teaching in accordance with the Course of Study, and 2) introducing private-sector proficiency tests as part of the national standardized university entrance exam (see Table 1). The results also indicate that the practical needs have been formulated to pursue policy agendas emerging already in the late 1980s.

In the following sections, I explore the policy processes as to what aspects attracted Japanese academics and policymakers, what contents of the CEFR were borrowed and how the borrowed CEFR contents were incorporated into the education policy at the national government level in light of the previous debate on foreign language education reforms in Japan.

The CEFR and the revision of the course of study

The policy process

Scrutinizing the MEXT-issued policy documents, I observed that the need for a national framework was first stated in the late 1980. The Second Report of the Ad Hoc Council on Education Reform² (hereafter AHCE), issued in 1986, assumes Japan's foreign language education – especially English-language teaching – to be “extremely inefficient”, and calls for improvement through a fundamental reform. The fundamental transformation of English-language teaching was pursued through shifting the grammar and translation-oriented pedagogy to communicative language teaching. To this end, the Second Report proposed several reform agendas including the introduction of clear goals of English teaching at each school level.

This AHCE agenda has been repeatedly proposed in the Japanese education policy documents right up through the present. Although the term *mokuteki* [goals or aims] has been changed into *tōtatsumokuhyō* [attainment targets] in the course of reforms, the main agenda of setting a coherent national framework for benchmarking attainment goals of English education throughout all school levels remains in the MEXT-issued policy documents after the AHCE (see appendices CCE2016; MEXT2001; MEXT2002; MEXT2003; MEXT2009; MEXT2011; MEXT2013-a; MEXT2013-c; MEXT2014-b). In order to address the agenda, the scores and various levels of private-sector language tests – such as EIKEN, TOEIC and TOEFL – were provisionally used as an indicator of national attainment targets during the 2000s (see appendices CCE2003; CO2008-a; CO2008-b; CO2011; MEXT2003; MEXT2011). Although these tests enjoy wide recognition domestically and internationally, they were not perceived as unproblematic.

From the MEXT's point of view, using scores of external ready-made tests as an evaluation framework was inappropriate because “these tests are not designed in accordance with the

Table 1. The borrowed contents and attractive aspects of the CEFR

Incorporated into:	The revision of the Course of Study	The reform of university entrance examinations
Borrowed contents	CEFR reference levels CEFR level descriptors	CEFR reference levels
Attractive aspects	- Adaptability - Idea of learner autonomy - Global status of the CEFR	- Instrumental value as an alignment tool for comparing scores of different tests - Global status of the CEFR

Course of Study” (MEXT, 2009; Erikawa, 2018, p. 316)]. MEXT considers that national attainment targets should be closely related to the curriculum and the attainment targets set for each school level need to be coherent in order to achieve a systematic and well-articulated implementation of communicative language teaching throughout all educational stages (Erikawa, 2018; MEXT, 2009).

In 2004, to establish such a national framework for benchmarking attainment goals throughout all school levels, a group of researchers engaged in English education started a research project which has been largely funded by MEXT. Having found the CEFR in searching for an ideal external model to address the research goal, the research group put their focus on developing a modified version of the CEFR (CEFR-J) to be used in English-language teaching in Japan (Koike, 2008).

In addition to modifying the CEFR, the project leader Ikuo Koike also “advertised” the CEFR-J to policymakers in a Cabinet Office -assigned council. In a meeting of the Education Rebuilding Council,³ held in May 2008, Koike – with Yukio Tono who took over the CEFR-J project after 2008 – claimed that there was a need to develop national attainment targets to improve Japanese students’ English-language proficiency to the level of global standards. He explained that what his MEXT-funded project group has been undertaking was this task, that is, establishing such a national framework by modifying or “de-Europeanizing” the “international standard CEFR” (see appendices MER2008). A comment by the Unit Chief of the Foreign Language Sub-committee of the Central Council for Education (CCE)⁴ indicates that the existence of the modified version was significant with respect to the adaptation of the CEFR to the new Course of Study:

The impact of the CEFR on ... the revision of the Course of Study is significant. It has a great meaning that Koike-sensei and Tono-sensei developed the CEFR-J. Owing to the large-scale project, the CEFR became considered to be an adaptable reference in the Japanese context. If it remained an “European” framework, it would not have been used. (The Unit Chief, personal interview, 5 June 2019, translation by the author)

This comment by the Unit Chief is further supported by the fact that several CEFR-J project members (such as Yukio Tono) were invited to MEXT-assigned working groups and the Foreign Language Sub-committee of CCE after the publication of the CEFR-J in 2012 (see appendices DFLP2010; CANDO2012; ECEE2014; CC2015) to successfully incorporate the CEFR ideas into the curriculum. In this regard, the adaptability of the CEFR attracted academics and policymakers in Japan as well as in different countries (Parmenter & Byram, 2012). Moreover, the active promotion and cooperation by academics also directed the attention towards the CEFR in Japan as early as in the 2000s, when it was not yet well known as an international standard outside Europe.

The borrowed contents

Since the beginning of 2010s, the CEFR has increasingly strengthened its presence in Japanese education policy documents. In March 2013, MEXT announced “Guidelines for Establishing Learning Attainment Targets in the Form of a ‘CAN-DO list’” of which the format clearly overlaps with the *CEFR level descriptors*. The CAN-DO lists serve as a framework for the development of communicative language teaching by utilizing the achievement targets with illustrative descriptors about what their students “can do” (MEXT, 2013a; cf. Council of Europe, 2001). After the publication of the CAN-DO Guidelines, the *CEFR reference levels* were also marked in a MEXT-issued policy document along with the scores and various levels of private-sector language tests as an indicator of national attainment targets for students to achieve by the end of each education stage (MEXT, 2013b).

In 2016, CEFR borrowing was finally proclaimed in the new Course of Study to be implemented in 2020. In the new curriculum for foreign language education in lower/upper secondary schools, the achievement targets and language activities were established by referring to the CEFR.

In order to achieve the coherent and well-articulated aims throughout the primary to lower/upper secondary schools, the attainment targets for each language activity (listening, reading, speaking interaction and production, and writing) were assembled by referring to the international standard, the CEFR. The CEFR was also referred to in assembling the content of learning activities to be conducted aiming at the attainment targets. (MEXT, 2017, pp. 7–8, 2018, pp. 7–8, translation by the author)

As documented above, the CEFR was introduced as an “international standard” in the new curriculum. The rhetoric of “international standard” has been used in several policy documents since the beginning of the 2000s. For example, in 2003 the “Action Plan to Cultivate Japanese with English Abilities”, the term “international standard” is used to refer to the attainment target of the level of English-language proficiency which all Japanese citizens are expected to achieve (MEXT, 2003). Moreover, Ikuo Koike used similar rhetoric when he introduced the CEFR to the committee members of Education Rebuilding. This MEXT’s choice of words indicates that the status of the CEFR as an international standard was an appealing aspect for Japanese policymakers who have pursued the reform agenda proposed in the early 2000s.

In addition to the adaptable nature and the global status of the CEFR, it seems that a global education discourse of learner autonomy reflected in the CEFR also attracted MEXT’s attention. The CCE supported the adaptation of the CEFR as part of the national curricular guidelines by identifying the aspects common to both the CEFR and the Course of Study:

The aim of the CEFR is to cultivate the user/learner as an “autonomous social agent” who exemplifies *ikiru chikara* [zest for living]: the abilities to learn, think and act by oneself as the basis of lifelong learning. In this regard, the CEFR and the Course of Study correspond well with each other in terms of their aims. (CCE, 2016, p. 194, translation by the author)

The CEFR and the reform of university entrance examinations

The policy process

Another remarkable reform agenda proposed in the Second Report of AHCE is the use of private-sector language tests in university entrance examinations (Ad Hoc Council on Education Reform [AHCE], 1986; Erikawa, 2018). This agenda has also been repeatedly proposed in the Japanese education policy documents since the 1980s (see appendices CO2011; CO2013; LDP2013; MEXT2001; MEXT2002; MEXT2003; MEXT2011; MEXT2013-b; MEXT2014-b; MEXT2017-c).

The main reason behind the reform agenda is an urgent need to measure all four English skills – listening, speaking, reading and writing – in university entrance examinations, especially in a national standardized examination entitled the National Centre Test (hereafter Centre Test).⁵ The reform advocates argue that the inclusion of speaking and listening tests in university entrance exams promotes communicative language teaching in schools due to the “washback” effect, that is, the impact of testing on curriculum design, teaching practices and learning behaviours. Outsourcing English-language tests is, for the advocates, the only means to test all four skills in university entrance exams (Yasukochi, 2014). The TOEFL tests in particular have gained great popularity among Japanese business persons and politicians for measuring all four skills and thus being more communication-oriented than the EIKEN tests (FCCJchannel (Official channel for the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of Japan), 2013; Yoshida, 2013).

Although demanded by a group of politicians and Japanese business sectors, the use of external tests as part of the national standardized exams has been considered problematic by language education experts among others. One of the obstacles was the irrelevance of external ready-made tests to the Course of Study in terms of its purposes and aims. Some of experts in language education and testing point out that external tests are inappropriate as a means to assess examinees’ English abilities acquired through the primary and lower/upper secondary education in schools (Hato, 2005; Torikai, 2018).

Another obstacle was the conflict in the selection of suitable tests. Most recently, in 2013, a Liberal Democratic Party’s (LDP) education reform panel as well as Hiroshi Mikitani,⁶ the CEO of Rakuten (Japan’s biggest e-commerce retailer) and the representative director of the Japan Association of New economy (*Shin-Keizairenmei*), proposed that the government use the TOEFL tests for university entrance exams (FCCJchannel (Official channel for the Foreign Correspondents’ Club of Japan), 2013; Yoshida, 2013). The idea of using only TOEFL for the university admissions has been strongly opposed not only by language education experts opposing the reform but also by those supporting the reform, but arguing that the level of difficulty of TOEFL is too high for most Japanese students. In this debate on the selection of tests, reform advocates started seeking for a way to use several

external tests in university entrance exams (Yasukochi, 2014). In an interview with Tetsuya Yasukochi, a reform-minded lecturer at Japanese cram schools, a Diet member Toshiaki Endo, the head of the above-mentioned LDP educational reform panel, commented:

Endo: We suggested TOEFL, which is selected by many foreign universities as the principal English-language test for foreign applicants, but some people fiercely opposed the idea as it's too difficult (for the Japanese examinees).

Yasukochi: I agree. (TOEFL is) not such test for everyone. It's a significant test which is internationally well-recognised, though.

Endo: Right. As you said, it would be great if we could find a way to align scores and levels of different tests. (Yasukochi, 2014, translation by the author)

The borrowed contents

In 2017, MEXT officially announced that the *CEFR reference levels* would be adapted to the upcoming reform of the Centre Test as a platform to align scores and levels of seven private-sector tests – such as the EIKEN, TOEFL, IELTS and TOEIC tests⁷ – (MEXT, 2017). In the following year 2018, Toshiaki Endo (LDP) answered in a newspaper interview that he was the one who suggested the use of the CEFR:

I proposed using the CEFR because it was difficult to select a single test and each test provider announced the correspondence of scores of their tests to the CEFR reference levels. (Ujioka, 2018, p. 27, translation by the author)

This finding shows that the CEFR reference levels attracted Japanese policymakers' attention as a practical tool to enable the use of several external tests in the national standardized university entrance examination. Regarding the fact that several Japanese experts in testing and English-language teaching had been sceptical about using the CEFR reference levels as an alignment tool in the national standardized university exams (Negishi, 2015; Yoshida, 2015), it was significant that the LDP politician found the CEFR and suggested using it in the university admissions system in terms of the decision-making of borrowing the CEFR.

Moreover, using the CEFR reference levels as an alignment tool was a reasonable solution as regards another obstacle, that is, the irrelevance of private tests to the Course of Study. As the CEFR had been partly incorporated into the Course of Study as a framework for benchmarking national attainment targets, it has appeared as a common platform that matches with the national curriculum and external ready-made tests. The above-mentioned Unit Chief of the Foreign Language Subcommittee of the CCE describes the interrelation of the CEFR, the Course of Study and university entrance exams as follows:

The CEFR was introduced to MEXT as a point of reference in assembling a national framework in the form of CAN-DO lists that were accordingly incorporated into the new Course of Study. We initially did not assume the CEFR also to be incorporated into the entrance exam system, but, proceeding with discussion, we turned to consider it as changing entrance exams is necessary to implement the agendas presented in the Course of Study. These two matters are fundamentally interrelated. (The Unit Chief, personal interview, 5 June 2019, translation by the author)

Although it seems that these two cases of CEFR borrowing were initially separate in terms of purpose – the revision of the Course of Study and the reform of the Centre Test –, they became increasingly interconnected under the ultimate educational aim, the improvement of Japanese citizens' communicative abilities in English.

Together these results provide important insights into the role of the CEFR in the reform of university entrance exams: the CEFR played a central role in introducing external tests because it was the only means to solve both persistent obstacles to implementing the reform. The CEFR succeeded both in providing a technical solution to align scores of different tests and in bridging the gap between external ready-made tests and the Course of Study.

Discussion

The findings of this study have shown that the *CEFR reference levels* and *level descriptors* were borrowed to address policy agendas emerging already in the late 1980s. The adaptable nature, the concept of learner autonomy and the global status of the CEFR were the attractive aspects to the Japanese advocates of fundamental educational reform to raise the Japanese students' English-language proficiency to the level of global standards (Table 1). In this regard, the CEFR had a “salutary effect on protracted policy conflict” as a “coalition builder” (Steiner-Khamsi, 2014, p. 156) between the call for the use of internationally well-recognized standards and tests and the local educational needs and priorities. In this section of the paper, I revisit Japan's CEFR borrowing by reflecting the existing literature on the complex interplay of external and internal influences in the politics of Japanese education policy.

First, a global trend of the increasing accountability of education in national economic growth (cf. Nitta, 2008) became one of the triggers of the Japanese interest in the CEFR. Based on an understanding that the economic competitiveness of the country can be enhanced by improving the communicative English-language abilities of Japanese people, effective communicative language teaching has been on the national policy agenda in Japan since the late 1980s. Kubota (2015, 2018) notes that the teaching of English has been seen as a means of human capital development since the 1980s in Japan, and English communication skills – particularly in speaking and listening – have been regarded as an essential quality of *gurōbaru jinzai* [global human resource/capital] in the Japanese policy discourse. Based on the principle of market competition, cultivating *gurōbaru jinzai* with practical English abilities has been regarded as an important national agenda for the nation state to survive in an increasingly competitive international market economy (Erikawa, 2018; see also Hirota, 2009; Yonezawa, 2014).

In these political circumstances, the CEFR was borrowed as a practical solution to renew the Course of Study and use private-sector English-language tests in entrance exams so that English-language teaching in Japanese schools could shift from the “old” grammar- and translation-oriented pedagogy to “modern” communicative language teaching. The CEFR was borrowed due to the complex interplay of global policy trends, that is, the perceived high relevance of education for the economic growth of the country and the related imperative to improve communicative skills in English.

Second, this study shows that Japan's CEFR borrowing occurred under manifold interplays between multiple global education trends and domestic needs. As I introduced earlier in this paper, education politics in Japan during the 1990s and 2000s shifted to the New Public Management (NPM) (Fujita, 2010; Nitta, 2008; Rapple, 2012). In this regard, establishing a national framework with attainment targets and outsourcing English-language tests in entrance exams were the political tools for soft governance for MEXT to improve the performance of communicative English teaching. These means are NPM reform tools that enabled MEXT to control the quality of English teaching by setting national attainment targets. In this system, individual students are expected to improve their English skills to the level of “international standard” by achieving the national attainment targets and to demonstrate their proficiency in competitive university entrance examinations by taking private-sector language proficiency tests.

Another outcome of my analysis is the complex interplay among global education discourses promoted by different intergovernmental organizations (IGOs) in the borrowing of the CEFR by Japan. The CEFR perspective of learners/users as “social agents” resonated with Japanese education policy due to the similarity with the Japanese education slogan “zest for living” since the mid-1990s. And the slogan “zest for living” is, as Takayama (2014) pointed out, closely linked to the global education discourse of lifelong learning promoted by the OECD and UNESCO. In other words, the global education discourse of lifelong learning promoted by the above-mentioned IGOs resonated with the notion of “social agent” by the Council of Europe in the process of CEFR borrowing. The result shows the relational and heuristic nature of global education policies. That is, the relations

between different global education discourses and the “borrowers” are interacting in such a way that the country borrowing an external educational idea creates another need for external models through policy transfer.

Finally, taking into account the Japanese interest in the CEFR as an international standard, Japan’s CEFR borrowing may be explained as a part of standardization. Global standardization of knowledge/qualifications occurs in such a way that all individuals attempt to equip themselves with a certain level of knowledge and competencies and ensure the acquisition of these through globally well-recognized and respected certifications in order to succeed in the global marketplace (Fujita, 2005). In this regard, it may be explained that the *CEFR reference levels* were admired by the Japanese borrowers for their universality and the *CEFR level descriptors* for the fact that they had been adapted to different education systems in many countries. The global status of the CEFR is an attractive aspect to the borrowers because it ensures a certain quality of English teaching and assessment when it is incorporated into their reform projects.

This study may be of assistance to highlight that the existing ways of conceptualizing educational transfer are prominent tools to analyse a borrowing process and explore the interplay between global education trends and national policymaking. On the other hand, in conducting this research, I determined that the existing conceptual perspective to policy transfer leads us to produce a simplified account of the structural influence of global education trends on national educational reforms due to the binary division between the “global” and the “local”. Further research needs to explore more closely the ways in which global education policies and trends are co-constructed together with global-cum-local actors.

Notes

1. MEXT recently announced its postponement until the fiscal year 2024 (“Ministry’s blunder on English tests drives exam-takers from pillar to post,” 2019).
2. The AHCE was convened by then Prime Minister Yasuhiro Nakasone in 1984 and issued four reports on educational reform between 1985 and 1987. The AHCE recommendations included the promotion of school choice, independence and individuality in the schools, the privatization of education and the centralization of the educational administration aiming at transcending postwar education while promoting individuality and internationality in society (Okano & Tsuchiya, 1999, as cited in Takayama, 2011).
3. The meeting in question was the third session of *Kyōikusaiseikondankai* [Education Rebuilding Council] held under the Fukuda Cabinet. The Council is the one-prior to *Kyōikusaiseijikkōkaigi* [Education Rebuilding Implementation Council] which was established in 2013 under the Second Abe Cabinet and integrated into the policy making apparatus.
4. CCE is an organization that proposes policy recommendations on important matters related e.g. to sports, lifelong learning and education (including the revision of the Course of Study) in response to requests from the MEXT. Takayama (2014) notes that MEXT maintains its control over CCE through the member selection and assigning its own bureaucrats as secretaries at CCE meetings.
5. The National Centre Test is a national standardized examination which has been conducted for admissions to national, public and private universities since the academic year 1990 school year. In 2006, the listening comprehension section was added to the subject area of English which had had only a reading section.
6. Hiroshi Mikitani has been involved as an advisor to government- and MEXT-assigned councils for educational reforms.
7. In July 2019 the Japanese operator of TOEIC announced that it would not provide its test as part of the national standardized university exam system because the administration process would be far more complex than they had expected (“Japan should clarify use of private English tests for univ. entrance exam,” 2019).

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Nelli Piattoeva, Jaakko Kauko, Keita Takayama and the EduKnow research group of Tampere University for their generous support and helpful suggestions on an earlier draft of this paper. My deep appreciation also goes to anonymous reviewers for their constructive and encouraging comments.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Geolocation information

Japan

Funding

This work was supported by The Finnish Cultural Foundation (Satakunta Regional Fund) under Grant [75192338]; The Scandinavia-Japan Sasakawa Foundation under Grant [RG19-0003].

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Appendices

Minutes of working groups and committee meetings of MEXT and the Cabinet Office

<i>Dates</i>	<i>Titles of working groups and committee meetings (code numbers)</i>
2000 Jan. – 2001 Jan.	Committee meetings on Revision of English Education in Japan (REE2000)
2002 Jan. – 2002 May	Committee meetings on English Education Reform (EER2002)
2008 May 16 th – 17 th	PM Fukuda's Education Rebuilding Council (教育再生懇談会), the 3 rd meeting (MER2008)
2010 Nov. – 2011 June	Commission on the Development of Foreign Language Proficiency (DFLP2010)
2012 Aug. – 2014 Mar.	Working Group to Develop MEXT CAN-DO Lists (CANDO2012)
2014 Feb. – 2014 Sep.	Experts Committee on English Education and related small working groups (ECEE2014)
2015 Oct. – 2016 June	Central Council for Education (CC2015)

Political reports and proposals announced by MEXT, AHCE, CCE and NCUEE

<i>Dates of issue</i>	<i>Titles of reports and proposals (code numbers)</i>
AHCE 1986	Second Report of PM Nakasone's Ad Hoc Council on Education Reform (AHCE1986)
MEXT 2001	Final Report of Committee to Revision of English Education in Japan (MEXT2001)
MEXT 2002	Strategic Plan to Cultivate "Japanese with English Abilities" (MEXT2002)
CCE 2003	Final report of the Central Council for Education: On the Basic Act on Education and the Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education (CCE2003)
MEXT 2003	Action Plan to Cultivate "Japanese with English Abilities" (MEXT2003)
MEXT 2009	Comprehensive Plan for Reform of English education (MEXT2009) *
MEXT 2011	Five Proposals and Specific Measures (MEXT2011)
MEXT 2013a	Guidelines for Establishing Learning Attainment Targets in the Form of "CAN-DO list" (MEXT2013-a)
MEXT 2013b	The Second Basic Plan for the Promotion of Education (MEXT2013-b)
MEXT 2013c	English Education Reform Plan Corresponding to Globalization (MEXT2013-c)
MEXT 2014a	Final Report of Working Group on Introduction of Private-Sector Language tests (MEXT2014-a)
MEXT 2014b	Five Proposals for English Education Reform Plan Corresponding to Globalization (MEXT2014-b)
CCE 2015	The current situation, achievements and challenges of primary school English (CCE2015)
CCE 2016	Final Report of the Central Council for Education (CCE2016)
MEXT 2017a	Course of Study for Primary School (effective in 2020) (MEXT2017-a)
MEXT 2017b	Course of Study for Lower Secondary School (effective in 2021) (MEXT2017-b)
MEXT 2017c	Guidelines for the new university entrance exam system (MEXT2017-c)
NCUEE 2018a	Press announcement on the standardized university admission exam system: Selected language tests (NCUEE2018-a)
MEXT 2018b	Course of Study for Upper Secondary School (effective in 2022) (MEXT2018-b)

Political reports and proposals announced by the Cabinet Office (CO) and LDP

<i>Date of issue</i>	<i>Titles of reports and proposals (code numbers)</i>
CO 2000	Final report of PM Obuchi's Commission on Japan's Goals in the 21st Century (CO2000)
CO 2008a	First report of PM Fukuda's Education Rebuilding Council (CO2008-a)
CO 2008b	Economic and Fiscal Reform 2008: "Basic Policies" (CO2008-b)
CO 2011	Interim Report of the Council on Promotion of Human Resource for Globalization Development (CO2011)
LDP 2013 April	Policy recommendation on improving students' academic standards made by The Liberal Democratic Party's education reform panel (教育再生実行本部) (LDP2013)
CO 2013 May	Third Proposal of PM Abe's Education Rebuilding Implementation Council (教育再生実行会議) (CO2013)

* Comprehensive Plan 2009 was not implemented after all due to the regime change from LDP to Democratic Party of Japan.