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# Assembling educational standards: following the actors of the CEFR-J project

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## ABSTRACT

This study deploys Actor-Network Theory (ANT) to understand how educational standards take shape. To exemplify the inherently collective nature of standards and contingency in the process of standardisation, this study will present a case of the CEFR-J project launched by a group of Japanese university academics to modify the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR) for English-language teaching and learning in Japan. Drawing on documentary materials and in-depth interviews, I will describe how the CEFR has become a standard for English-language teaching in Japan while various actors were brought together through the CEFR-J project.

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## Introduction

Educational standards and standardisation in education have been extensively studied in the field of comparative and international education (Grek 2009; Lawn 2011; Rizvi and Lingard 2010; Waldow 2012, 2015). The literature often highlights standards and benchmarks developed by intergovernmental organisations (IGOs) – such as the OECD, the World Bank and the EU – and the aspects of standards as the soft power of education governance. More precisely, IGOs steer national policy-making by means of producing comparative numerical data (e.g., the OECD PISA tests) (e.g., Grek 2009; Lawn and Grek 2012; Rautalin 2013) and circulating particular educational discourses and trends (e.g., Beech 2009; Jakobi 2012; Rinne, Kallo, and Hokka 2004). The existing approaches to analysing the process of standardisation have provided effective tools to explain the big picture of globalisation in education and make sense of global education governance as an exercise of power over the local (Ozga and Lingard 2007; Rizvi and Lingard 2010). On the other hand, in this conceptual framework, spaces have been hierarchically categorised into ‘global’ and ‘local’ in a way that models how educational discourses and trends emerging on the global level exert influence on policymaking and practice on the local level, which is customarily interpreted as a country or a sub-national unit.

Many researchers have recently utilised alternative approaches – such as social network analysis and bibliometric analysis – (e.g., Gulson et al. 2017; Menashy and Verger 2019; Verger, Fontdevila, and Zancajo 2016) to go beyond methodological nationalism, where ‘policy processes are seen to function only within the nation’, and methodological globalism, where ‘the emphasis is more on global factors which affect national policy making’ (Takayama and Lingard 2021, 229). More hybrid ‘glocal’ approaches are also used to shed light on local and global interactions in the diffusion of reform ideas (Resnik 2007) and the development of international educational institutions in

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different locations (Resnik 2016). In so doing, researchers attempt to transcend the global-local binary in the epistemological and ontological questions of standardisation, aiming to enhance our understanding of how educational standards take shape. This study contributes to these academic ventures: Specifically, it attempts to increase our understanding of educational standards and standardisation by using conceptual ‘insertion’ from Actor-Network Theory (ANT) in education.

Standards and standardisation have been a central topic for ANT-inspired research in education and beyond, although these are approached differently from in comparative education research (c.f. Busch 2011; Fenwick and Edwards 2010; Landri 2017; Lampland and Star 2009). In ANT, there is no a priori global-local scalar distinction but *networks* that ‘are more or less long and more or less connected’ (Latour 1993, 122). Scholars scrutinising standardisation through the lens of ANT do not explain standards as a pre-existing entity that exercises a one-sided influence on (educational) policies and practices. Instead, ANT-inspired studies attempt to ‘trace the ways that educational standards achieve and maintain some durable form as a consequence of the relations’ (Fenwick and Edwards 2010, 86), and consequently, (momentarily) become an *obligatory passage point* (Callon 1986) that provides scientifically valid information and that creates problems and norms which all actors must address (Carvalho 2012).

This paper explores how a certain educational reform idea becomes a standard and how it configures a web of various actors, using the notion of actor-network as an heuristic tool to move beyond the hierarchical and binary global-local approach. It focuses on a Japanese case of educational transfer of the *Council of Europe Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (hereafter CEFR), which has been widely used for facilitating educational reform projects and describing language proficiency in Europe and beyond (Byram and Parmenter 2012). The CEFR in Japan is an interesting case that opens up an empirical opportunity to study standardisation in terms of how a European framework becomes a new educational standard in the country, even though Japan is not a member country of the Council of Europe.<sup>1</sup>

Although the CEFR authors and experts emphasise that the CEFR is not a standard but a *framework* for facilitating educational reform projects in different contexts (Council of Europe 2001; Byram and Parmenter 2012; Jones and Saville 2009), the CEFR has been used as the former for benchmarking language proficiency and promoting the outcome-oriented development of curricula and language programmes in Europe and beyond. Many scholars point out that the CEFR serves as a ‘common currency’ (Figueras 2012, 478) shared extensively by government officials, university administrators and educational practitioners across the world (Byram and Parmenter 2012; Deygers et al. 2018; Shohamy 2019). Regarding the extensive influence of the CEFR on teaching methods, materials, testing, certification systems and learning, in and out of classrooms, Shohamy (2019, 275) notes that ‘the CEFR is a finite system that has become a form of identity, an ideology, a common “language” to define the world.’ In Japan, the CEFR was recently adapted as an ‘international standard’ (MEXT 2017, 7) to the revision of the national curricular guidelines (Course of Study). It was utilised to establish a national framework of coherent and well-articulated attainment targets throughout the primary to lower/upper secondary schools (see Nishimura-Sahi 2020).

In what follows, this study attempts to understand practices of standardisation (Gorur, Sørensen and Maddox 2019), shedding light on various actors – such as academics, policy-makers, administrators, teachers, commercial actors, written guidelines and teaching materials – and the constitution of an assemblage through the transfer of the CEFR to Japan. First, I present an overview of ANT as a methodological tool, followed by a description of the research materials and the process of data collection and analysis. In the next section, I trace how the CEFR took shape in a new standard of English teaching in Japan as a consequence of the relations and translating actors involved in standardisation. Finally, I reflect on the empirical findings and discuss the implications of these for achieving a renewed understanding of what educational standards are and how standardisation occurs. In so doing, this

study aims to be of assistance to ‘opening the black box of the “globalization of education”’ (Beech and Artopoulos 2021, 443).

### **ANT sensitivity: laboratory, assemblage and translation**

ANT was developed in Science and Technology Studies (STS) from the 1980s by sociologists such as Bruno Latour, John Law, and Michel Callon. ANT-inspired concepts and ideas have been adapted and elaborated in diverse academic fields including education (see Beech and Artopoulos 2021; Fenwick and Edwards 2010; Gorur et al. 2019; Piattoeva, Klutas, and Suominen 2019; Resnik 2006, 2016). One strand of ANT emerged through a case study of Louis Pasteur’s laboratory in Paris, attempting to account for the power of science in the world (Latour 1983). In the case study, Latour examined how Pasteur’s laboratory was able to gain support from non-scientists and become an influential centre of science.

One interesting finding of the study was that scientists become ‘influential’ if they succeed in building and extending networks from scientific centres (i.e., laboratories) to the wider society (i.e., farms). In other words, the key to success does not lie with scientists’ properties or abilities, but with the successful enrolment of various entities situated beyond the laboratory and building networks that enable scientific facts and artefacts to travel far and wide (Latour 1983; Latour 1987; cf. Murdoch 2005). In recasting the question of how scientists gain their power in the world, Latour articulates a need to explore how power emerges within the network, instead of explaining how it is imposed from the outside based on the dichotomy of outside/inside, micro/macro, lab/field and science/society or the societal milieu (Latour 1983). This ANT understanding of actors constituting a non-hierarchical network is an effective tool to recast the taken-for-granted tenet of global education governance that standards are imposed from the higher ‘global’ to the lower ‘local’.

Given the emphasis on the symmetrical relation between various actors, the notion of *assemblage* is often used in ANT-inspired studies. ANT acknowledges that non-human actors – as well as human actors – are capable of changing and being changed by each other, and in so doing, configure the world (Beech and Artopoulos 2021; Bueger and Stockbruegger 2018; Fenwick and Edwards 2010.) In light of assemblage, a material object is not just a passive artefact created and used by human actors but also a proactive actor that interacts with other actors. These material objects are, in terms of educational research, curricular guidelines, written curriculum and textbooks that carry the ‘rationalities of rule’ generated by the aspiring centre out to all the local components enrolled in the assemblage (Murdoch 2005, 65). These materials or ‘delegates’ are considered *information mobiles* (Busch 2011) that enable the actors in different locations to collaborate, delegate and connect across vast distances, and consequently, standardise practices in educational activities.

These materials are also able to translate other actors in such a way that different entities – human and non-human actors – come together and form relations, making others do unexpected things. In this process, different actors ‘influence and change one another, and create linkages that eventually form a network of action and material’ (Koyama 2013, 953). In ANT, the notion of *translation* is often used to describe this process – how different actors become connected and start to behave as part of an assemblage, changing one another and forming a chain or network of action and materials. When the network created has become stable and durable, it assumes a particular role, such as becoming a standard (Fenwick and Edwards 2010; Koyama 2013; Bueger and Stockbruegger 2018). Importantly, and consistent with ANT, all assemblages are ‘made up of uncertain, fragile, controversial, and ever-shifting ties’ (Latour 2005, 28). The fragile nature of assemblages leads us to the understanding that a standard is not a robust tool governing educational practices but temporally sustained with contingent and fragile linkages.

In this paper, I use the notion of assemblage to explore how various actors in different locations – such as academics, education administrators, teachers, guidelines and educational materials – corroborated, delegated, connected and assembled a network of CEFR as a new standard for English

teaching in Japan. I also draw on the notion of translation to understand how a research project and its results translated certain actions of academics and administrators to mobilise them into a new role through the CEFR transfer.

### **Data collection and analysis**

Using ANT as a ‘sensitizing device’ (Decuyper 2019, 137) that allows researchers to explore how practices of standardisation are ‘done’ and ‘being made’, I closely traced ‘the micro-movements through which little humdrum bits, human and non-human, negotiate their joinings (or their un-joinings) to assemble the messy things’ that researchers often dismiss or explain away in our everyday worlds of education (Fenwick and Edwards 2010, 46). Having said that, it is not feasible to take all the potential actors into account due to considerations of space. Thus, I first explored the existing research on the CEFR in Japan (e.g., Nishimura-Sahi 2020; Rappleye, Imoto, and Horiguchi 2011; Sugitani and Tomita 2012; Sensui 2018) and identified a noteworthy player in terms of its vast connections with various actors. That is how I focused on the *CEFR-J project*, which is composed of a series of large-scale ministry-funded projects for modifying the CEFR for use in English teaching, learning and assessment in Japan. As this study focuses on relationality in standardisation, I decided to make this CEFR-J project the starting point of my analysis.

Aiming to understand how the CEFR became a new standard of English teaching in Japan, I applied the notion of laboratory (Latour 1983) as an analytical tool to conceptualise how the CEFR-J project (i.e., the laboratory) has ‘enrolled’ or spread into the wider society, namely, Japanese policymakers, commercial actors, and education administrators and teachers. Practically speaking, I first scrutinised project reports issued between 2007 and 2012 to outline the trajectory or pathways of the development of the CEFR-J project. I examined how the CEFR-J project was launched, who the project members were and what actual results the CEFR-J project has achieved. Secondly, I scrutinised policy documents, written curricula, and publications by the CEFR-J project members to examine how human actors are connected through these documentary materials, how the materials worked on human actors and influenced their activities, and how these changed the configuration of actors. Documentary materials were primarily collected from the website of the CEFR-J<sup>2</sup> and the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology of Japan (hereafter MEXT).

These documentary materials are, however, constrained in terms of what they document. To review the information presented in the documentary materials, I also examined events data and conducted in-depth interviews. Events data was mainly collected from the CEFR-J symposium 2020 (webinar) held on 28 November 2020. Interviews (N = 10) were conducted in June 2018 and June/July 2019 in several prefectures in Japan – Tokyo among others – with academics, an education administrator and teachers working in upper secondary schools.

I structured the following empirical section chronologically to describe the process of standardisation as assemblage, focusing on ‘the construction of the laboratory and its position in the societal milieu’ (Latour 1983, 143). First, I explore how a group of Japanese academics started up the CEFR-J project in 2004, and second, I depict how the CEFR-J project expanded and enrolled in the arena of policymaking and policy implementation. Finally, I examine how the CEFR (temporarily) achieved a durable form as a standard, with a focus on how the CEFR-J project enrolled into the day-to-day educational practices.

## **Becoming a standard through assemblage**

### ***Developing the ‘CEFRjapan’, the prototype of the CEFR-J***

In 2004, a research group consisting of academics engaged in foreign language education and corpus linguistics was launched under the leadership of Ikuo Koike, an eminent, reform-minded scholar in second language acquisition. When the research group received the Grants-in-Aid for

Scientific Research (KAKENHI)<sup>3</sup> in 2004, their initial aim was not to modify the CEFR but to determine the learning objectives for Japanese learners of English at different proficiency levels (Koike 2008; Tono 2016).

To achieve the aim, the project team conducted extensive surveys inside and outside Japan, and during the project, the growing influence of the CEFR in Europe caught the attention of the project members (Oka et al. 2008). The *CEFR reference levels* were particularly well-known as the common reference scale of language proficiency grouped into six levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1 and C2) and used as a common framework for validating language proficiency in entrance exams and ability groupings (Byram and Parmenter 2012; Shohamy 2019). 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 extensively recognised and used for purposes of comparison between language courses and assessments in different learning contexts (Majima 2010; Oda 2019; Rappleye, Imoto, and Horiguchi 2011).

In the course of their research, the Koike Project members started to consider the possibility of adapting the CEFR to develop the *CEFRjapan*, a national framework for benchmarking attainment targets for Japanese learners of English. The ‘CEFR subgroup’ was formed ‘to discuss the possibility of introducing the CEFR ideas into the Japanese context of teaching English’ and ‘to provide a tentative sample of how such standards might look’ (Oka et al. 2008, 3). However, the Koike Project ran into difficulties in combining the massive empirical data for producing the *CEFRjapan*. A member of the project team recalls how a Finnish adaptation of the CEFR came to be considered as their main reference in searching for a suitable model from which to develop the *CEFRjapan*:

We turned to Finland when much of the concrete plan was not made four years after the project started. The Finnish adaptation drew our attention, giving a good impression as a country of education success that has achieved excellent results in the OECD PISA test. Accordingly, we found the Finnish adaptation could be a model which enabled us to summarise the results of each subgroup in the form of the *CEFRjapan*. (A member of the project team, personal interview, 29 June 2018, translation by the author)

In April 2007, the project team decided to translate the Finnish adaptation into Japanese to ‘use as a model for the development of the *CEFRjapan*’ (Oka et al. 2008, 17). According to the project report, the decisive factor was the well-refined sublevels of the Finnish model – especially the lower A and B levels – that seemed to the Japanese to be appropriate for young Japanese learners of English (Oka et al. 2008). In August 2007, a project member made a three-day visit to Finland (Finnish National Agency for Education among others) to learn from the Language Proficiency Scale adapted to the Finnish National Core Curriculum. That is, all the intensive work to learn from Finland was conducted within the last eight months of the four-year project. This indicates a possibility that the project team seized upon the Finnish model for a ‘fast’ solution when running behind the schedule.

This finding shows that the existence of the Finland model played a key role in Japanese academics transferring the CEFR ideas to their context. Besides the technical element that the well-delineated proficiency levels were considered suitable for Japanese learners, there were multiple factors such as the project deadline and the ‘Finnish boom’ in Japanese education (cf., Takayama 2010) in the project team adapting the Finland model. While the global status of the CEFR attracted Japanese academics and policymakers (Nishimura-Sahi 2020), pragmatic and contingent factors affected the initial phase of standardisation in which the CEFR gradually established a position as a framework in reforming the teaching of English in Japan.

### ***Development of the CEFR-J project: capturing political interests***

In 2008, Yukio Tono, professor of corpus linguistics at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, took over the leadership of the project from Koike Ikuo and launched a new project called the *CEFR-J* to further develop the *CEFRjapan*. The main objective of the *CEFR-J* project was to specify the A

levels<sup>4</sup> in greater detail and develop a new ‘Pre-A1 level’ so that the CEFR-J could better describe the English-language proficiency levels of the majority of Japanese learners<sup>5</sup> (Tono 2016).

While developing the CEFR-J, the academics enrolled allies and tied the CEFR-J project into broader networks so that policymakers, administrators and teachers could utilise their research findings for ongoing educational reforms and everyday educational practices. The first project leader, Ikuo Koike, actively ‘advertised’ the CEFR and their research project in his publications (Koike 2008, 2009, 2013), and at a Cabinet Office-assigned council held in 2008, he made a policy recommendation to policymakers as a consulting expert in the teaching of English. He suggested establishing a national framework by modifying or ‘de-Europeanising’ the ‘international standard CEFR’, aiming to improve Japanese students’ English-language proficiency to the level of global standards (see appendices MER2008). In addition, several project members – Yukio Tono among others – attended ministry-assigned working groups and the Foreign Language Sub-committee of the Central Council for Education (CCE) after 2012 (see appendices DFLP2010; CANDO2012; ECEE2014; CC2015) to incorporate the CEFR ideas into the national curricular guidelines, the Course of Study. These academics came to be considered as the reform experts in the course of educational reform. Importantly, however, Tono Yukio emphasises that the project was not driven by the political intention to support MEXT in advancing educational reforms by collecting data and developing the CEFR-J:

I think MEXT found our CEFR-J project interesting and useful in consulting with some academics about the current issues in the teaching and learning of English. In my opinion, the CEFR was adapted to the recent reforms as it was just nicely timed with the revision of the Course of Study. We have been working on the CEFR-J as an academic project, aiming to develop practical resources for those who are working at *gamba* [the field of education such as schools]. (Yukio Tono, personal interview, 5 June 2019, translation by the author)

Following the announcement of ‘Five Proposals and Specific Measures’ in 2011, MEXT required lower/upper secondary schools to set up a framework of attainment targets in the form of a ‘CAN-DO list’<sup>6</sup> in accordance with the Course of Study (see appendices MEXT2011; MEXT2013). To support teachers in assembling CAN-DO lists for their schools, MEXT announced ‘Guidelines for Establishing Learning Attainment Targets in the Form of a “CAN-DO list”’ in 2013 in which the CEFR was introduced as one of the main references (MEXT 2013). In response to the announcement, several prefectural boards of education started to compile a practical model of a list to help teachers working for prefectural schools. Osaka is one of those prefectures that made their own CAN-DO list referring to the CEFR and CEFR-J, namely, ‘OSAKA CAN-DO list for English’ (see appendices NANIWA; OCD). In a personal interview, a former administrator of the Osaka Prefectural Board of Education explained how he found the CEFR-J in developing Osaka CAN-DO list:

I got to know about the CEFR sometime after 2008, I think. At that point, I just thought there was such a thing coming up. I started learning about the CEFR more seriously when I was asked to develop the Osaka CAN-DO list. Because it was necessary. It was clear that the national CAN-DO guidelines were prepared based on the CEFR and the prefectural guidelines should be following the national guideline. (...) I developed it regarding the CEFR of course, but the CEFR reference levels seemed to me too ‘rough’ or not precise enough [for Japanese learners]. And I came across the Japanese version of the CEFR, namely the CEFR-J, in searching for something other than the European standard that addresses the educational needs in Japan. It [CEFR-J] was very useful and helpful in preparing our CAN-DO list. (A former administrator of Osaka Prefectural Board of Education, 8 July 2019, translation by the author)

This administrator referred to the CEFR-J in preparing the prefectural CAN-DO lists because he understood that the CEFR is the original reference of the national CAN-DO guidelines and the CEFR-J seemed more adaptable than the original (and European) CEFR. The CEFR-J project extended to the policymaking and administrative arena, serving as the ‘laboratory’ providing materials needed in society, such as the references with academic legitimacy for policymaking and the applicable resource for the implementation of new curricula.

And remarkably in the research interview, the former administrator talked to me as an expert of the CAN-DO list and the CEFR-J. Preparing for the interview, he generously downloaded and printed out the CEFR-J to share it with me so that I could better understand what the CEFR and the CEFR-J are and how the Osaka CAN-DO list was developed. The Osaka CAN-DO project and the CEFR borrowing at the sub-national level translated an administrator into an expert on the current reform through an activity of brokering or intermediating the external reform ideas.

### ***CEFR-J and educational materials***

Referring to the citation of Tono above, one of the main objectives of the CEFR-J project was ‘to develop accompanying resources for the CEFR-J to facilitate its use for creating syllabi, teaching materials or classroom tasks’ (Tono 2016, 36) and to ‘provide end-users of the CEFR-J with highly usable sets of materials to put the CEFR-J into practice’ (Tono 2016, 49). Pursuing this objective, the CEFR-J team developed CEFR-oriented educational materials and resources – such as CEFR-J Wordlists and CEFR-J CAN-DO Tests – and made them publicly available on the website of the CEFR-J project (CEFR-J 2021). In addition, the project team published ‘The CEFR-J Handbook’ in 2013, aiming to share the results of the CEFR-J project with researchers and teachers interested in the CEFR-J for the learning, teaching and assessment of English in Japan (Tono 2013).

Through these additional materials and resources, the CEFR-J project has extended the network to individual end-users from educational administrators of prefectural education boards to the education industry and teachers in schools. For example, the CEFR-J Wordlists have been incorporated into *Ace Crown English-Japanese Dictionary*<sup>7</sup> (Tono 2018), of which the editor-in-chief is the CEFR-J’s project leader, Yukio Tono. Masashi Negishi, professor of English-language testing at Tokyo University of Foreign Studies, who shared the leadership of the CEFR-J project with Tono, also published a teachers’ guide on how to prepare a CAN-DO list with *Sanseido*<sup>8</sup> (Negishi and Kudo 2012). In the teachers’ guide, the authors introduce the CEFR-J as one of the main references for preparing the CAN-DO list.

Involved in the development of educational materials, the project leaders commodified their CEFR-J resources so that the outcomes of the research could be effectively channelled into everyday practices. Moreover, empirical data shows that it was worth the effort in terms of diffusing an idea or ‘atmosphere’ that the CEFR is a new standard among Japanese teachers. Almost all the teachers of English (6 out of 7 teachers) I interviewed were well-informed on the CEFR and shared a common understanding of the CEFR as an international and/or European standard for describing different language skills. Teachers in an upper secondary school explained how they came across the CEFR as follows:

Teacher A: I don’t remember the exact time when I came across it (the CEFR), but I’ve known about it for a long time.

Teacher B: Just before the CAN-DO list was brought up, some textbook companies started promoting their products giving a sales pitch that ‘we have adapted the CEFR!’. Having heard that, ‘what on earth is the CEFR?’ I thought, and researched it, and figured out that it [the CEFR] is related to CAN-DO. (...) I heard about it in a teacher training seminar as well. The lecturer was a university teacher. (Upper secondary school teachers, 8 July 2019, translation by the author)

Teacher C: I know the CEFR, of course. I think we have all heard about it at some point if one keeps up with current issues in a newspaper and TV news programme. Coverage of the CEFR has been increasing in the media. (Upper secondary school teacher, 17 May 2019, translation by the author)

As Teacher B mentioned, many textbook publishers developed their CAN-DO lists and attached them to their products. Among all the English textbooks that MEXT authorised for use in lower/upper secondary schools in the fiscal year 2021, 100% of textbooks for lower secondary schools (6 out of 6 textbook publishers) and almost 80% of textbooks for upper secondary schools (10

out of 13 textbook publishers) attached a CAN-DO list to their products (see appendices MEXT2020-a; MEXT2020-b). Although not all CAN-DO lists state the relevance to the CEFR, it is obvious that the CAN-DO list is closely related to the CEFR when teachers check the MEXT CAN-DO guidelines and a prefectural CAN-DO list (see appendices MEXT 2013; NANIWA; OCD). In addition, in the Course of Study, the CEFR is introduced as an ‘international standard’ that was referred to in setting out the attainment targets and assembling the content of learning activities (see appendices MEXT2017; MEXT2018).

## Discussion

The article provides several new insights into the process of standardisation. First, through the lens of ANT, this study shed light on the contingent nature of educational transfer and the messy practices of standardisation. While the global status of the CEFR attracted the Japanese academics and policymakers (Nishimura-Sahi 2020), pragmatic factors – such as project delay and the Finnish boom in Japanese education – affected the initial phase of educational transfer in which the CEFR gradually established a position as a standard in reforming the teaching of English.

Second, the findings of this research indicate that accessibility may be an important feature of global education standards in a new era of mobility. Owing to the rapid development of information and communication technology, individuals can directly access materials compiled by IGOs such as the Council of Europe’s CEFR and the CEFR-J when these are publicly available. No-one needs to make an official visit to Strasburg to learn in search of know-how and ‘borrow’ education policy and reform ideas. Regarding the Japanese case, accessibility is the key to the standardisation of the CEFR in Japan rather than the strong initiative by the Council of Europe. In this process, the CEFR served as an information mobile (Busch 2011) or a ‘delegate’ that disseminates the knowledge generated in the centre of science to other components enrolled in the assemblage. Operating as an information mobile, the CEFR induced actors in different locations to collaborate in the reform implementation of English teaching in Japan.

Third, the CEFR became a standard because it succeeded in assembling various actors – academics, policymakers, commercial actors, administrators and teachers – at a distance and connecting through materials. Even though the CEFR was adapted to the new curriculum, it is hard to achieve the status of a standard without educational resources that support administrators and teachers in enacting the CEFR-oriented reform agenda. The key actors enrolled in assemblages are the academics who place the fruits of their research project at the disposal of policymakers, administrators, the education industry and teachers in enacting educational reforms in their educational practices. The CEFR-J project addresses educational practitioners’ needs by providing information about the new standard in teacher training seminars and educational resources that help them to implement the new CEFR-oriented curriculum presented in the Course of Study. The perception of the CEFR as a new standard has been established while academics, their research results, written curriculum, teaching materials, commercial actors and teachers are assembled through the CEFR-J project. This finding accords with those of an earlier study, which pointed out that the scholars and experts work closely with international organisations as the ‘coproducers’ of – rather than ‘vehicles’ for the diffusion of – the ‘world education culture’ in defining and shaping international educational agendas (Resnik 2006, 178).

Moreover, educational standards are not a stable substance given from the ‘global’ and borrowed by the ‘local’ attempting to equip themselves with a certain level of competence and ensure the acquisition of this through globally well-recognized certifications to succeed in the global marketplace (Fujita 2005). Rather, an educational standard is a dynamic assemblage – a process of standardisation – consisting of human actors and various types of documentary materials that attract and influence educational practitioners.

Regarding wide media coverage of the CEFR as Teacher C pointed out, there is also a possibility that media discourse played an important role in making English teachers understand the CEFR as

something upcoming which they should know and learn about. It has become a ‘phenomenon’ that professionals can no longer ignore. Through the process of assemblage, the CEFR became an obligatory point of passage (Callon 1986) that all the above-documented actors ‘must at least appear to be aligned with’ (Fenwick and Edwards 2010, 18) and gained the ability of delegation to act at a distance through materials.

An ANT-oriented approach also made it possible to show that the standardisation of the CEFR translated the leading academics into experts of the current education reforms and made administrators into local experts on the educational reform. The CEFR-J project translated the academics into reform experts with scientific knowledge, ability and data whereby they can support reform-minded policymakers and MEXT officials. The CAN-DO project translated an educational administrator into a local expert on the upcoming reform with knowledge of the CEFR and the CEFR-J, the main references of CAN-DO, whereby he can support teachers in proceeding with educational reforms and their educational practices.

Taken together, this study has shown that the CEFR became a standard, or more precisely, gave birth to another standard – the national framework in the form of the CAN-DO list –, while various actors – academics, education administrators, teachers, publishing houses and materials such as the CEFR-J and related resources, written curriculum, guidelines and textbooks – were brought together. The CEFR attained its lasting form as a standard through ‘everyday material practices that combine and align wide-ranging objects, ideas and behaviours’ (Fenwick and Edwards 2010, 137). That said, and bearing in mind the fact that the CEFR was not familiar to all the teachers interviewed, nor widely used among teachers of English (see also Murakami 2016), the continuum is not guaranteed, but has open seams. As the ANT literature indicates, the durability of standards is achieved only in ‘a temporary and fragile stabilization’ (Fenwick and Edwards 2010, 165).

Although the societal, political and temporal context was not in the scope of this study<sup>9</sup>, its role in shaping the assemblage would be a fruitful area for further study. Earlier research has indicated that the CEFR was adapted to the reform of English teaching, aiming to improve the communicative English skills of Japanese people. Reform of English teaching has been a central national political objective in Japan since the late 1980s, framed by the accountability of education to national economic growth (Nishimura-Sahi 2020). Regarding the role of the political context fostering the standardisation of the CEFR, we could ask how socio-political and historical contexts interact with human and non-human actors in different locations to collaborate and connect across time and space. This question could be a fruitful avenue for further research bringing ANT-oriented educational studies into dialogue with the facilitative societal or political context (see Clegg 1989) and emerging research on time and temporality in education governance (see e.g., Decuyper and Vanden Broeck 2020; Lingard 2021).

Finally, it should be noted that the study at hand is also part of an assemblage. I may have given interviewees (academics, administrators and teachers) the impression that the CEFR is becoming a phenomenon of interest to researchers in education. By conducting a study on the CEFR transfer and by publishing this paper, I became involved in the standardisation of the CEFR and in co-constructing the understanding that the CEFR is a new standard for foreign language teaching.

## Notes

1. Japan is one of the observer states of the Council of Europe.
2. CEFR-J: Atarashii Nihon no eigokuyōiku no tame no hanyōwaku [CEFR-J: A new framework for English-language teaching in Japan] <<http://www.cefr-j.org/research.html>>
3. The KAKENHI grants are competitive funds provided by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS) for creative and pioneering research projects in all fields. The JSPS is an independent administrative institution to promote scientific advancement. The JSPS is a quasi-governmental organisation under the auspices of MEXT.
4. The ‘A levels’ of the CEFR are a set of common reference points describing what ‘beginner users’ of any languages can do across five language skills: listening, reading, spoken interaction, spoken production, and writing.

5. Approximately 80% of Japanese learners of English reach the A level after they have gone through 10 years of learning English in lower/upper secondary schools (Tono 2016).
6. According to the MEXT's guidelines (MEXT 2013), the CAN-DO lists is a framework for the development of communicative language teaching by utilising the achievement targets with illustrative descriptors about what their students 'can do'.
7. Published by a widely known Japanese publishing company for publishing dictionaries and textbooks.
8. Negishi is one of the authors of the Sanseido textbook NEW CROWN for lower secondary schoolers.
9. These contexts were not in the scope in this paper because in my reading of ANT literature, structures (such as the social structure) do not really interrelate with networks, but rather are made and temporarily sustained by networks (c.f. Müller and Schurr 2016). In my analysis, following what Morrison (2018) explains, I do not see the social structure as something that causes an action or a course of events, but rather, the outcome of existing networks. In other words, a structure is, to this paper, one composed of actor-networks that need to be sustained through practices connecting a myriad of humans and non-humans.

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## Appendix

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

<i>Dates of issue</i>	<i>Titles of working groups and committee meetings</i>
2008 May 16th – 17th	Meetings on Education Rebuilding held by Prime Minister Yasuo Fukuda (The 3rd 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.	Expert Committee on English Education and related small working groups (ECEE2014)
2015 Oct. – 2016 June	Central Council for Education (CC2015)

### Political reports, announcements and proposals issued by MEXT

<i>Dates of issue</i>	<i>Titles of reports, announcements and proposals</i>
MEXT 2011	Five Proposals and Specific Measures (MEXT2011)
MEXT 2013	Guidelines for Establishing Learning Attainment Targets in the Form of 'CAN-DO list' (MEXT2013)
MEXT 2017	Course of Study for Primary School (effective in 2020) (MEXT2017)
MEXT 2018	Course of Study for Upper Secondary School (effective in 2022) (MEXT2018)
MEXT 2020	Lists of MEXT-authorized textbooks for lower secondary schools (FY Reiwa 3) < <a href="https://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/kyoukasho/mext_00001.html">https://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/kyoukasho/mext_00001.html</a> > (MEXT2020-a)
MEXT 2020	Lists of MEXT-authorized textbooks for upper secondary schools (FY Reiwa 3) < <a href="https://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/kyoukasho/mext_00001.html">https://www.mext.go.jp/a_menu/shotou/kyoukasho/mext_00001.html</a> > (MEXT2020-b)

### Municipal guidelines and CAN-DO list

<i>Dates of issue</i>	<i>Titles of guidelines and CAN-DO list</i>
n.d.	Tsukaeru eigo purojekuto jigyo [Programme to cultivate 'Osakan kids with English abilities'] (NANIWA) < <a href="http://www.pref.osaka.lg.jp/shochugakko/erueigo/index.html">http://www.pref.osaka.lg.jp/shochugakko/erueigo/index.html</a> >
n.d.	Shiyoshobetten Osaka-ban eigo CAN-DO risuto [Osaka CAN-DO list for English] (OCD)

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