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## Integration of Language Acquisition Models

A Compelling Case from Japan's Second Language Learning Models
Project Tokyo Case Study 6
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Language acquisition and linguistic competence is not a single capacity or skill set. Different communicative goals, genres and modalities create separable repertoires that recruit distinct cognitive and representational resources (Cummins, 2000; Schleppegrell, 2004). Everyday communicative language is the repertoire used for rapid, interactional exchanges; academic or subject-specific language is the repertoire used for representing, reasoning about and communicating disciplinary content. Although these repertoires draw on the same underlying grammar and lexicon, they differ in how items and constructions are represented, how they are processed in real time, and how they are acquired and consolidated. To that end, we can learn much from the successes and challenges experienced by Japan in teaching English as a non-native target language (Taguchi, 2020; Council of Europe, 2020).

Historically, foreign-language instruction in Japan has prioritised formal literacy skills, with classroom programmes and assessment regimes oriented chiefly toward reading and writing in the target language. As a consequence, many Japanese learners develop relatively robust knowledge of academic and subject-specific vocabulary and written forms while exhibiting comparatively limited facility in real-time oral interaction. In particular, learners frequently struggle to map orthographic knowledge onto phonological representations, which impedes rapid auditory decoding of connected oral language and constrains spoken fluency and accurate pronunciation in spontaneous conversation (Nation, 2001; Best & Tyler, 2007).

In response to these longstanding imbalances, successive Japanese government reforms have sought to strengthen oral competency from the primary level upward. Policy measures include the adoption of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) as a reference standard and explicit targets for progression through proficiency bands, with the aim that a substantial proportion of pupils attain basic oral communicative thresholds by the end of compulsory schooling. These policy shifts draw attention to an important analytical distinction: 'everyday communicative language' which differs in both structure and acquisition pathway from 'academic and subject-specific language' (North, 2007; Green, 2012).
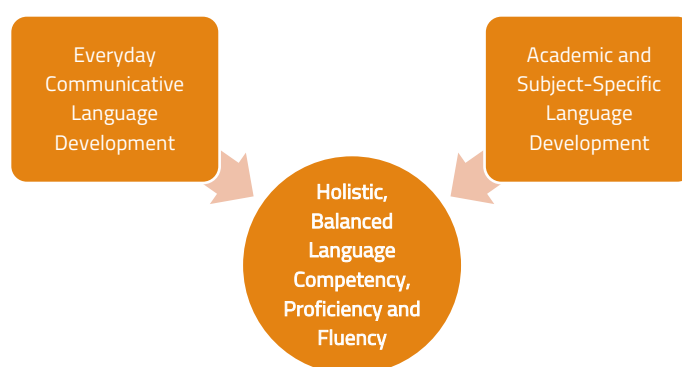


A year-long project linking Wales and Tokyo provided insight to how Wales, as a nation, can ensure balance and effective planning for the realisation of the 'Cymraeg 2025' goal of one million Welsh speakers and the Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Act 2025's intention of the CEFR as a lifelong language proficiency measure and teaching and learning tool (Welsh Government, 2017; Welsh Government, 2025).

Meeting with university level researchers, governmental departments and observations across classrooms repeatedly showed the need for a balance between language acquisition teaching for everyday communicative language and academic and subject-specific language (Darling-Hammond et al., 2017; Taguchi, 2020).

## Defining Everyday Communicative Language

Everyday communicative language refers to the set of linguistic resources that speakers deploy in rapid, predominantly oral, interaction to manage social exchange, achieve immediate communicative goals and coordinate interpersonal behaviour. This repertoire includes high-frequency vocabulary and formulaic multi-word sequences, a repertoire of pragmatic routines for opening, maintaining and closing turns, and prosodic and phonological patterns that characterise spontaneous speech. What marks this register analytically is not any single grammatical property but rather a cluster of temporal, pragmatic and representational features: rapid temporal processing, reliance on contextual and situational cues, and frequent use of routinised chunks that minimise compositional effort (Wray, 2002; Biber & Conrad, 2009).

Competence in everyday communicative language is primarily demonstrated through interactive capabilities rather than through isolated sentence production. Key components are the ability to recognise articulated speech in real time, to initiate and manage repair sequences when communication breaks down, to use responses appropriately, and to plan brief turns while simultaneously attending to incoming talk. These skills are inherently adaptive and contingent: interlocutors exploit shared scripts, and a sense of predictability to support interpretation and to pre-activate likely continuations, thereby enabling rapid comprehension and near-simultaneous response planning (Schegloff, 2007; Markee, 2000).

From a representational perspective, everyday communicative language tends to be encoded in memory as proceduralised units and richly specified phonological templates. Phonological representations in this register preserve the variable forms commonly heard in conversation; such representations support robust recognition under noisy, high-speed conditions but depend on extensive perceptual tuning to variable exemplars and speakers (Ullman, 2001; Kuhl, 2004).

Acquisition of everyday communicative language thus follows a usage-driven, experience-dependent trajectory. Frequent exposure to varying speakers and contexts, together with opportunities for purposeful interaction and immediate feedback, shows that we favour chunking, semiautomatic patterns and phonological refinement. Since the register places heavy demands on anticipatory processing and working memory for simultaneous comprehension and production, learners who lack dense interactive experience tend to show delayed or incomplete acquisition. They may possess declarative knowledge of lexical items (for example, from reading) yet fail to recognise or produce those items fluently in conversational contexts (Bybee, 2010; Hulstijn, 2001).

## Defining Academic and Subject-Specific Language

Academic and subject-specific language denotes the registeral resources required to access, construct and communicate disciplinary knowledge across the school curriculum and in specialised domains. It comprises a distinctive ensemble of specialised lexis and collocations, syntactic strategies that permit information for the speaker and listener, and discourse conventions that organise explanations, arguments and procedures in line with epistemic and rhetorical expectations of particular disciplines. This register is typically more decontextualised than everyday interactional language: meaning is less recoverable and recallable from immediate situational cues and more dependent on conceptual schemata, definitional relations and intertextual conventions (Schleppegrell, 2004; Hyland, 2004).

Acquisition of academic and subject-specific language therefore follows a different trajectory from acquisition of everyday interactional routines. It is fostered well by repeated encounters with information or experiences (such as play and experimentation), by tasks that require analytic manipulation of concepts, and by explicit instruction in lexical definitions, morphological families and genre-specific conventions such as the language of newspapers, formal letters, personal letters, and non-chronological reports (Beck, McKeown & Kucan, 2013; Nagy & Townsend, 2012).

## What it Means to Acquire a Register

To acquire a register is to form integrated memory traces that link form, meaning, use and context so that items and constructions can be retrieved and deployed under the time and modality constraints of relevant tasks. For everyday communicative language, acquisition yields proceduralised units, such as phonological templates, word sequences and routines, that permit fast perception and production in interaction. For academic language, acquisition yields declarative semantic and orthographic networks (such as definitions, collocations and genre schemata) that support precise reference, analysis and extended composition. Acquisition therefore depends on the nature and level of input and on consolidation conditions. This is where the CEFR comes to the foreground since it allows for concurrent exploration and learning of both everyday communicative language and academic subject-specific language at defined levels (A1 through to C2 levels) (Ullman, 2001; Tomasello, 2003; Council of Europe, 2020).

Tokyo Metropolitan Government's approach to the CEFR shows that it should be used not as a single checklist but as a dual-track organising scaffold that makes the two interacting repertoires definable and measurable. Tokyo Metropolitan Government's Board of Education are focusing on ensuring that their learners possess oracy, reading and writing skills measurable to A2 level by the end of compulsory schooling (Green, 2012; Figueras, Little & O'Sullivan, 2022).

## Curriculum Design Principles

The Tokyo Metropolitan Government's Teacher Training Division have been key in developing the understanding that all elements of the curriculum for the targeted second-language must be aligned and, therefore, curriculum documentation, matrices and expected outcomes all utilise the same measuring stick as their basis. Japan has learnt very clearly through its historical approach of overemphasis on reading and writing and lack of emphasis on oracy, that language acquisition policy does not work effectively if there is not one common research-based thread which establishes the nation's expectations for language acquisition model. Similarly, Japan has learnt that language acquisition should be specified as paired aims of language proficiency with regards to everyday communicative language and academic subject-specific language. In order to ensure that a research-based balance is achieved the Japanese government has implemented the CEFR as its method across all of its English language instruction. This has resulted (and is still resulting) in significant mindset change and the developing change across educational systems in Japan (Butler & lino, 2005; Taguchi, 2020).

## Dangers of an Unintegrated Language System in Wales

Japan's historic experience shows how systemic misalignment between curriculum aims, literacy practice and proficiency frameworks can produce predictable, avoidable harms. The systemic changes being undertaken in Japan are supporting a more cohesive education system.

The following dangers draw directly from Japan's historic pattern which they, as a nation, are working diligently to change. They describe what can happen in Wales if the Curriculum for Wales, literacy frameworks and the CEFR are not intentionally brought together to create complementary outcomes, coherent pedagogy and diagnostic assessment.

1. If the Curriculum for Wales, literacy frameworks and the CEFR remain unintegrated, schools will receive mixed and sometimes contradictory signals about what learners should achieve. Such fragmentation produces patchy planning and muddled learning trajectories, so pupils experience uneven progression rather than a coherent pathway toward complementary oral and academic outcomes.
2. Separate systems invite assessment regimes that measure what is easiest to quantify rather than what learners actually need, creating hidden gaps in accountability. Written attainment that is straightforward to record can be overemphasised at the expense of oral interactional skills, producing performance data that misrepresents pupils' real communicative competence and distorts school priorities.
3. Uneven capacity to bring together multiple frameworks will widen pedagogic inequality. Well-resourced schools and settings with specialist staff can design coherent dual-track programmes which ensure that learners develop everyday communicative language skills as well as academic, subject-specific language skills. Other schools and settings may fall behind with the result of growing variation in provision and outcomes tied less to learner need and more to institutional advantage.
4. Learners risk completing compulsory education with unevenly developed decontextualised academic language knowledge and the language needed for everyday social, workplace or community interactions.
5. If everyday interactional routines and disciplinary genres are taught in isolation without explicit bridging, learners struggle to transfer vocabulary, phrasing and prosodic patterns between registers.
6. Strategic national goals such as Cymraeg 2025 and CEFR-based lifelong proficiency become harder to realise when the frameworks are not aligned. Operational incoherence slows systemic progress, complicates monitoring and evaluation, and risks undermining political and professional confidence in reform initiatives.
7. Finally, teachers face increased workload and confusion when partially overlapping frameworks are implemented separately. Professional development then fragments into competing priorities. Teacher morale and retention are likely to suffer as practitioners struggle to know which approaches to prioritise in constrained classroom time.

In conclusion, as a nation, we can benefit greatest from Japan's learnings. With the passing of the Welsh Language and Education (Wales) Act 2025, which outlines the intention to utilise the CEFR as a methodology for language acquisition, Wales is poised at a watershed moment which can ensure integration and cohesive practice if we can learn from other nations' approaches (Welsh Government, 2017; Welsh Government, 2025).

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