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NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements: An Effective Tool for Improving Language Learning Within and Outside the Classroom

Aleidine Kramer Moeller

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, amoeller2@unl.edu

Fei Yu

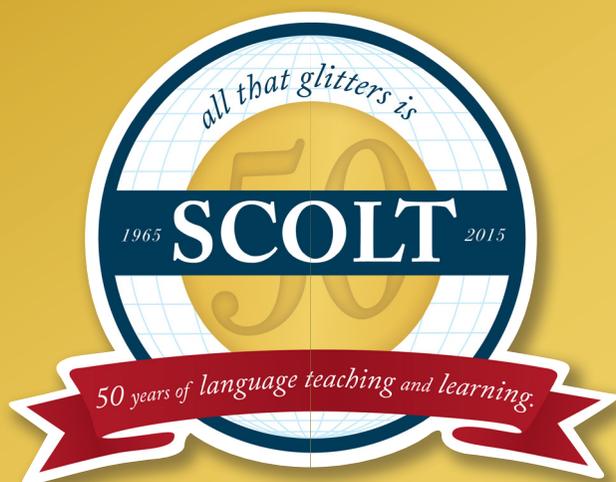
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DIMENSION 2015

Laurel Abreu
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EDITOR

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Dimension is the annual volume of peer-reviewed articles sponsored by 2015 Joint Conference of the Southern Conference on Language Teaching, the Foreign Language Association of Georgia, and the Southeastern Association of Language Learning Technology.



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David Jahner, Executive Director
P.O. Box 33615
Decatur GA 30033
Phone: 678-301-7027
<http://www.scolt.org>

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Review and Acceptance Procedures

SCOLT *Dimension*

The procedures through which articles are reviewed and accepted for publication in *Dimension* begin by the authors emailing manuscripts to the editor at SCOLT. Dimension@gmail.com.

The editor then uses a double blind review process to review the manuscripts. That is, the names and academic affiliations of the authors and information identifying schools and colleges cited in articles are removed from the manuscripts prior to review by members of the Editorial Board, all of whom are professionals committed to second language education. Neither the author(s) nor the reviewers know the identity of one another during the review process.

Each manuscript is reviewed by at least two members of the Editorial Board of Reviewers, and one of the following recommendations is made: “accept as is,” “request a second draft with minor revisions,” “request a second draft with major revisions,” or “do not publish.” The editor then requests second drafts of manuscripts that receive favorable ratings on the initial draft. These revised manuscripts are reviewed a second time before a final decision to publish is made.

The editor of *Dimension 2015* invited prospective authors at all levels of language teaching to submit original work for publication consideration without having to commit to presenting a paper at the 2015 annual meeting of the Southern Conference on Language Teaching.

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NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements: An Effective Tool for Improving Language Learning Within and Outside the Classroom

Aleidine J. Moeller
Fei Yu

University of Nebraska-Lincoln

Abstract

This article explores the theoretical foundation of the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements, developed by the National Council of State Supervisors for Languages (NCSSFL) and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), describes why and how to use these progress indicators in language education and reveals the value and impact on student learning when effectively integrated in the language classroom. These Can-Do statements serve as learning targets to document what learners “can do” with languages and can provide teachers and language programs with learning objectives for curriculum and unit design that are user-friendly, learner-centered and promote reflection and self-regulation aimed at involving the learner directly in the learning process. An exemplar for classroom implementation demonstrates how the teacher can involve learners in the reflective learning process to become self-regulated, autonomous language learners.

Background

Increasingly language educators are discarding textbooks in favor of more meaningful contexts for the teaching and learning of a second language and culture. This shift to more authentic contexts in acquiring and practicing language skills is due in large part to increased access to technology and digital media that make available authentic texts, media and social interaction at the stroke of a keyboard. Research studies have indicated that learners are more motivated when they are actively engaged in the learning process with authentic texts, audio and digital media, receive meaningful feedback and can collaborate with peers and native speakers (Bustamante, Hurlbut, & Moeller, 2012; Hall, 1995; Kern, 2006; Shrum & Glisan, 2009). According to motivation theory, three components are essential in motivating humans: autonomy, self-determination or competence, and connection to others. When these drives are fulfilled, “people achieve more and live richer lives” (Pink, 2011, p. 71).

The ability to make decisions, personalize learning and choose how to demonstrate evidence of learning is central to autonomy. The ability to collaborate with peers, teachers and native speakers provides the important affective element of connection with others. The third component, competence, is the ability to make progress, realize that progress and be able to carry out learning tasks independently,

leading to a sense of self-efficacy. All of these components for improving achievement, self-regulation and motivation were strategically embedded in the *NCSSFL-ACTFL Progress Indicators for Language Learners* (American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages, 2013a), dubbed *Can-Do Statements* and were designed to promote functional use of the target language while providing opportunities for learners to experience language and culture together. These “user-oriented” (Alderson, 1991, p.74) Can-Do statements are presented as learning indicators designed for language teachers and learners to use as a checklist of what learners can do with language, to provide guidance for what counts as progress and to assist in identifying types of evidence that document language proficiency. Teachers use the Can-Do statements to gauge proficiency growth and identify learning targets and sample activities for units and lessons. In sum, the Can-Do statements can serve as a guide for developing curriculum, creating learning tasks and as venues for language assessment.

NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements: Purpose, Function and Impact

The NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements serve a very useful purpose in guiding teachers and learners in the language learning process. One goal of primary concern to language educators is to develop curricula and assessments that promote and document continual growth in language and cultural proficiency--what are the topics, contexts, functions that should be addressed at each level of language instruction to ensure continual language development? It is for this purpose that these user-friendly Can-Do statements were developed--to assist stakeholders, most especially language learners, in communicating and assessing what and how well they can function in the target language.

The Can-Do statements are Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic and Time bound (SMART) goals (Doran, 1981; Miller & Cunningham, 1981) designed to assist individual learners in achieving their proficiency aims. Using the *Global Can-Do Benchmarks*¹, the first step in the goal setting process is to determine where a student is currently as regards language skills. Students themselves can use the Can-Do statements to self-assess their existent communication proficiency level and identify a level of language proficiency they would like to reach (at the end of the semester, year, or program). For example, a Novice Mid language learner may have the goal of moving up to Novice High in the Interpersonal Mode of Communication during the course of one semester. The learner reviews possible progress indicators, chooses the Can-Do statements that can assist in the goal setting process which also serve as the learner’s self-assessment to determine how well s/he has achieved these chosen goals:

I can say hello and goodbye to my teacher, professor, or supervisor. (Novice Mid-NM) → I can ask and talk about friends, classmates, teachers, or co-workers. (Novice High-NH)

I can say where I went. (NM) → I can tell someone how to get from one place to another, such as go straight, turn left, or turn right. (NH)

I can say or write something about the members of my family and ask about someone’s family. (NM) → I can invite and make plans with someone to do something or go somewhere. (NH)

Students can personalize these statements in ways that are meaningful to their own lives. For example, I am going to invite my best friend to go to the movies, establish a time and place to meet and arrange transportation for her. The student must think about how she can demonstrate achievement of this goal. This may consist of a recorded conversation on a mobile phone, a recorded Skype session or an actual simulation. When students have to perform tasks, they quickly realize what they need to know in order to complete the task as regards language, register and grammar structures; more importantly, they experience firsthand the gaps in their present language skills. This forces learners to notice what they need to learn and are thus motivated to fill this knowledge gap in order to successfully accomplish the task.

NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements: A Collaborative Effort

As mentioned earlier, the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do document was a collaborative effort between NCSSFL and ACTFL. The document builds on the NCSSFL's *LinguaFolio*® (NCSSFL, n.d.), which in turn was based on the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment* (Council of Europe, 2001) and is strategically aligned to *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines 2012* and *ACTFL Performance Descriptors for Language Learners* to “reflect the continuum of language learning from the Novice through the Distinguished levels and to provide a common marker for reporting performance in each mode of communication” (ACTFL, 2013a, p.3). Consisting of eleven distinct levels of language proficiency (novice low/mid/high, intermediate low/mid/high, advanced low/mid/high, distinguished and superior), Can-Do descriptors are defined in terms of the five skill/mode categories (interpretive listening, interpretive reading, interpersonal communication, presentational writing and presentational speaking) (ACTFL, 2013b). These descriptors also serve as self-assessment checklists used by language learners to determine what they “can do” with language (ACTFL, 2013a). Can-Do descriptors are located under each specific proficiency level and are not intended to be exhaustive. The *Global Can-Do Benchmarks* provide general goals for language learners and are provided at each specific proficiency level. These are further divided into progress indicators, sample learning targets, and personalized targets in the form of Can-Do statements to fit the context of specific curricula.

A Brief History of the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements

In 2003, to learn about new European language practices and promote language education policies, a cohort of NCSSFL members participated in a Goethe-Institut sponsored informational study travel program that included a meeting with the Council of Europe in Germany. Here the NCSSFL members were introduced to the *Common European Framework of Reference* (CEFR, Council of Europe, 2001) and the Can-Do descriptors used in the *European Language Portfolio* (ELP) to describe language functions at various stages of language development and learning. The ELP was of particular interest to these supervisors of world language programs as they saw the enormous potential and impact this self-assessment tool could have for language teaching and learning in the United States (Van Houten, 2004, 2007). Upon return to the United States, NCSSFL launched efforts to develop an American version of ELP, an endeavor (*LinguaFolio USA*) spearheaded by several states including

Kentucky, Nebraska, Virginia, Indiana, North Carolina, South Carolina and others. Various versions of *LinguaFolio* for elementary, secondary, and postsecondary levels emerged and were implemented, including the development of several online versions. Can-Do statements were included in all *LinguaFolio* versions and were intended to assess language learners' language performance as aligned with *ACTFL Performance Guidelines* (ACTFL,1998), that is, to document learners' ability to use language in instructional settings and familiar contexts.

In 2010, in order to further assess learners' ability to use language in real world situations independent of curriculum, NCSSFL collaborated with ACTFL to align NCSSFL's *LinguaFolio** (NCSSFL, n.d.) to ACTFL's *Proficiency Guidelines* (1986, 1999, 2001) which described what individuals could do with language in spontaneous and non-rehearsed contexts. By connecting the *LinguaFolio** with the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines*, the assessment focus of the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements shifted from language performance to language proficiency, particularly as regards what language learners could do with language in authentic situations regardless of where, when, or how the language was acquired. In 2012, with the implementation of the *ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines* and the *ACTFL Performance Descriptors for Language Learners*, NCSSFL and ACTFL revised the Can-Do statements in order to align them more closely with the new Guidelines on the one hand, and to anchor them to the *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* (National Standards in Foreign Language Education Project, NSFLEP, 2014) previously referred to as the *Standards for Foreign Language Learning in the 21st Century* (NSFLEP, 2006) on the other hand, in order to facilitate "linking classroom activities with benchmarked objectives, state and national standards, and with broad proficiency outcomes for life-long learning" (ACTFL, 2013a, p.3). Accordingly, the current version of NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements reflects the language learning continuum from the Novice through the Distinguished proficiency levels and provide a global common assessment for language competency in each mode of communication, which allows "learners to chart their progress and learning facilitators to document learner growth on nationally and internationally recognized scales"(ibid., p.2).

Worldview and Theoretical Framework

Based on research in the fields of applied linguistics and educational psychology, goal setting is regarded as one of the most important strategies to promote learner autonomy in language education (Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981; Yang, 1998). Can-Do statements provide an important venue for setting learning goals to provide students the opportunity to take responsibility for their own learning through the establishment of positive short- and long-term learning goals and to monitor their own learning experiences to ensure attainment of selected goals. Such an approach to teaching and learning reflects a sociocultural, or constructivist worldview underscoring that individuals construct their own understanding of the world through their own experiences and by reflecting on those experiences (Kelly, 1970). This worldview regards learning as an active process in which knowledge is constructed from and shaped by learners' personal experiences. Specifically, in constructivist classrooms, students are urged to be actively involved in their own learning process by developing their learning outcomes, assessing the learning

products and reflecting on their learning experiences to determine the gaps in their understanding and identify strategies to improve learning. The teachers assume the role of facilitators who create a positive learning environment and activities that will actively involve the learner in a carefully structured series of learning tasks that will ensure learners can achieve these goals. Thus, a constructivist worldview serves as the philosophical underpinning for learner-centeredness, which aligns with the Can-Do statements (Barraket, 2005).

Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978), more specifically his concept of the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), serves as the theoretical framework for the constructivist worldview. ZPD occurs when the learner (novice) is assisted by a teacher (expert), or peer, who possesses a higher skill set of the subject under discussion. The learner does not possess the necessary skill, or knowledge to complete the learning task without the assistance of the teacher, or peer. The teacher assists the learner in attaining the skill through carefully structured , or scaffolded learning tasks, guiding questions and positive interactions in the hope that the learner can ultimately accomplish the task independently. ZPD, then, is the difference between what a learner can do without help and what he or she can do with help. Vygotsky (1978) defined the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD) as

the distance between the actual development level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers... (which helps to identify) those functions that have not yet matured but are in the process of maturation, functions that will mature tomorrow but are currently in an embryonic state (p. 86).

Much like the concept of ZPD, the Can-Do statements reflect an interactive process that underscores interaction between learner and teacher/facilitator, promotes self-assessment and reflection ultimately aimed at developing self-regulation and self-efficacy. Can-Do statements provide a way for learners to assess what they can do independently (the "matured functions") and what they cannot do or what they can do only with help from others (the "embryonic functions"), which, in turn, helps learners to create appropriate action plans to fill this gap in their knowledge. Typically, this process helps learners to gradually gain control over their own learning while the teacher gradually reduces the amount of scaffolding (Monereo, 1995). Can-Do statements thus provide the means to estimate ability and provide both the current proficiency level of language learners and a direction for future learning achievable with assistance and efforts.

The constructivist worldview regards learning as a constructive and ongoing process where learners are involved in the process of self-assessment and self-reflection about their own learning, an integral part of the Can-Do statements. Moreover, the Can-Do statements are clearly linked theoretically to Vygotsky's Sociocultural Theory (1978) in that learning is regarded as a process as exemplified through the ZPD, a zone of exploration where learners require assistance to reach the Can-Do targets, which help identify what a learner can do and cannot do independently. Learners are asked to construct an action plan to seek help from qualified others and available resources in order to reach the targeted Can-Dos.

Added Benefits of Integrating Can-Do Statements

Can-Do statements have been used for self-assessment since Mat Oscarson's pioneering work related to the ELP in the 1970s and 1980s (North, 2010). Can-Do statements have long been an integral part of the language portfolio assessment process designed to facilitate learners' involvement in planning, reflecting upon and assessing their own learning experiences. Since publication of NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements as an independent document, researchers and educators have begun to turn their attention to this learning tool. Based on the review of the literature, Can-Do statements have proven to be an effective tool when effectively integrated in language classrooms. The Can-Do statements have been shown to increase learner motivation, language proficiency, and academic achievement (e.g., Collett & Sullivan, 2010; Moeller, Theiler, & Wu, 2012; O'Dwyer et al., 2008).

Can-Do Statements and Authenticity

Can-Do statements explicitly communicate what language learners can do at a specific proficiency level, which makes the language learning process transparent to teachers, students and all stakeholders. Specifically, learners select authentic, functional language objectives with Can-Do statements that fit their personal contexts and purposes (ACTFL, 2013a). Framed in a communicative approach, Can-Do statements present language learning as a practical process and encourage learners to state what they can do with the language that they have learned by including information on linguistic and cultural experiences gained within and outside the language classrooms (Gonzalez, 2009). Language learning is no longer simply learning vocabulary and grammar structures, but rather is regarded as a means of communication that includes equal attention to the development of intercultural competence, emphasizing the inextricable link between language and culture.

In addition, Can-Do statements signify language learning as an action-oriented process, meaning that "the language user or learner must draw upon a variety of both linguistic and non-linguistic competences to accomplish a task" (O'Dwyer & Runnels, 2014), which encourages task-based instruction (Little, 2006). Specifically, in language education, a task is defined as a classroom activity, or exercise that has a learning objective attainable only through interaction among participants, a mechanism for structuring and sequencing interaction, and a focus on meaning exchange (Lee, 2000). Through authentic and meaningful tasks, learners are engaged in "goal oriented communication to solve problems, complete projects, and reach decisions" that resemble real-life linguistic interaction (Pica, 2008, p. 71). Task-based learning supports the intent of Can-Do statements, which aim to promote authentic language use within and outside classrooms through specific, functional learning objectives in the form of Can-Do statements. Both task-based instruction and Can-Do statements thus allow learners to set specific goals and regularly check their progress, consequently leading to real and life-long learning.

Can-Do Statements and Learner-centeredness

By using Can-Do descriptors, learners are placed at the center of the learning process. Specifically, Can-Do statements promote learners to take control of their own learning, which, in turns, affects the instructional process. As mentioned above,

to fit specific learning contexts and curricula, NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements include not only general communicative goals aligned to the *World-Readiness Standards for Learning Languages* (NSFLEP, 2014), but also personalized goals used to accommodate specific learning content and tasks. It is emphasized that while the general Can-Do benchmarks are shared among learners at the same level of language proficiency, there are no two identical learners as everyone learns at a different pace, in different ways and for different purposes. That means, each learner is allowed to work and re-work his/her own personalized Can-Do goals supported by guidance and feedback from teachers, peers, parents and others. The personalized Can-Do statements are reconciled with the general Can-Do targets, until the learner fulfills the majority of Can-Do descriptors under a specific proficiency level. Personalized Can-Do statements make the learning process more relevant and meaningful to individual learners.

Besides the customized personal statements, research has revealed that Can-Do statements align learners' learning objectives more directly to instruction. Little and Perclova (2001) and Little (2002), in their studies about ELP, found that language instructors adjusted their instruction accordingly to include more communicative target language activities when they saw many of their students responding negatively to the "Can-Do" statements, thereby forming a closer alignment between assessment and pedagogy.

Can-Do Statements and Motivation

Can-Do statements define learning targets in terms of functional language use, that is, what learners should be able to do with the language. It follows a criterion-referenced approach by determining learners' level of language performance in relation to the content domain as reflected in Can-Do statements. Particularly, this approach assumes that language assessment determines the extent to which learners have mastered the language skills as described in the Can-Do statements, and assures that even the slightest progress among the weakest learners, who may only partially meet the criteria, experience some degree of success. Compared to the traditional norm-referenced approach, which assumes that language achievement is distributed "with the statistical regularity of the bell-shaped curve.....(with) a small number of very good learners, a rather larger number of good learners, a lot of average learners, some weak learners, and a few very weak learners" (Little & Perclova, 2001, p.54), the criterion-referenced approach with Can-Do statements is regarded as helpful to "encourage a generally positive attitude to learners" (ibid., p.55).

Even more, the positive Can-Do statements focus on what learners are able to do, rather than what they cannot do, which gives students a sense of accomplishment and is regarded as an important factor to motivate continuous learning among learners (Faez, Majhanovich, Taylor, Smith, & Crowley, 2011; Van Houten, 2007). Additionally, Can-Do statements can mitigate learning anxiety by helping students set short-term Can-Do goals as well as long-term Can-Do goals in order to reach a specific proficiency level. By dividing a seemingly unreachable goal (long-term Can-Do) into sub-goals (short-term Can-Do) that are practically achievable in a specific time period, learners, especially those who lack confidence in themselves, are more likely to be motivated.

Can-Do Statements and Learner Autonomy

Autonomy is defined as one's ability to take responsibility for his or her own learning (Benson, 2001; Dickinson, 1987; Holec, 1981), which is considered as one of the most important factors in successful language learning (Spratt, Humphreys, & Chan, 2002). Given this fact, the development of learner autonomy is identified as the pedagogical function of ELP (Little & Perclova, 2001). Particularly, Can-Do statements are used in ELP to help develop learners' capacity for reflection and self-assessment, and enable them to gradually take responsibility in planning, evaluating and monitoring their own learning. Just as its European counterpart, LinguaFolio also employs Can-Do statements to foster learner autonomy. To this end, Can-Do statements encourage learner independence and self-monitoring, two important dispositions needed by 21st century learners.

To examine the relationship between LinguaFolio with Can-Do statements and learner autonomy, Ziegler and Moeller (2012) investigated the impact of LinguaFolio intervention with Can-Do statements on student motivation, learning, achievement and the development of student ability for self-regulated learning. A one semester quasi-experimental quantitative study was conducted in first-year French and Spanish classes with a total of 168 participants in a Midwestern university. The study revealed that LinguaFolio use was linked to increased student intrinsic motivation, increased task-value, and more accurate self-assessment of learning.

Similarly, Ziegler (2014) investigated whether the ELP with Can-Do statements accomplished its desired pedagogical effect of fostering learner autonomy with a total of 575 student participants and 19 teacher participants in Germany. Using an embedded mixed methods design (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011) the effect of ELP on students was explored to see whether students using ELP were more autonomous and self-regulated in learning; semi-structured interviews with a purposefully selected subgroup of participants further explored their perception of ELP in order to triangulate the qualitative data with the quantitative results and produce "a deeper understanding of how the European Language Portfolio impacts students" (Ziegler, 2014, p.922). The findings of the study strongly support the use of ELP as a valid means to foster self-regulated and autonomous learners. Particularly, the ELP intervention with Can-Do statements was regarded as helpful in engaging students in goal-setting, self-evaluation and self-reflection on learning experiences.

Positive research results about the impact of ELP and LinguaFolio on learner autonomy confirm some of the assumed functions of Can-Do statements. According to ACTFL (2013a), Can-Do statements provide a way to help language learners chart their own progress through incremental steps, which coincides with the pedagogical function of the portfolio to demystify the learning process and help learners develop the capacity to assume more responsibility for and take ownership of their own learning. Therefore, as an important part of ELP and LinguaFolio, the role of Can-Do statements in promoting learning autonomy is indisputable.

Can-Do Statements and Achievement

The Can-Do statements were adopted in language portfolios as a response to research evidence that confirmed the positive effects of goal setting on learner performance (e.g., Edwings, 1995; Griffiee & Templin, 1997; Moriarity, Pavelonis,

Pellouchoud, & Wilson, 2001). To examine the relationship between goal setting through Can-Do statements and student achievement at the classroom level, Moeller, Theiler, and Wu (2012) conducted a five-year longitudinal quasi-experimental study through the integration of *LinguaFolio* in 23 high schools consisting of a total of 1,273 Spanish participants. Selected Can-Do statements were tied to the individual learning contexts to establish and identify short- and long-term goals focused on promoting language proficiency, self-assessment and reflection on the learning process on the part of the students. By using correlational analyses, the study found a statistically significant positive relationship between the goal-setting process and language proficiency scores in Spanish writing and speaking skills, which consequently revealed “a positive relationship between proficiency and the writing of goals, action plans, and reflections—a learner more practiced and skilled at goal setting relates positively to higher language achievement in Spanish”(ibid., p.163). Clarke (2013) investigated whether high school students who experienced foreign language study that included *LinguaFolio* goal setting through Can-Do statements achieved higher and performed better in other subject content areas in comparison to students who were not exposed to the *LinguaFolio* intervention. The inquiry question focused on the transferability of goal setting skills acquired during Spanish class to other academic disciplines. Specifically, a group comparison was made between *LinguaFolio* students (the experimental group with $n = 454$) and non-*LinguaFolio* students (the control group with $n = 164$) examining student achievement in English, math, science and reading as measured by ACT, and overall achievement measured by graduating GPA. The study revealed that students involved in the *LinguaFolio* goal setting intervention had a significantly higher GPA and higher ACT scores in math, science, English, and reading. It was noteworthy that students’ graduating GPA and ACT scores increased with each additional year of participation in the *LinguaFolio* intervention.

To determine the effects of Can-Do statements, it is critical to determine whether student learning is improved through the integration of these short term learning goals. Few empirical studies have focused specifically on the impact of Can-Do statements on student learning, however, studies on the impact of *LinguaFolio* goal setting in the form of Can-Do statements have provided evidence that *LinguaFolio* can promote student achievement (Moeller et al., 2012; Clarke, 2013). Furthermore, goal setting and self-assessment have been shown to increase motivation, task value and increased self-regulation and learner autonomy among language learners of all ages (Ziegler & Moeller, 2012; Ziegler, 2014).

Integrating Can-Do Statements into Language Instruction

Can-Do statements form the cornerstone of the language portfolio (ELP and *LinguaFolio*) in language education. As we have seen, they serve as a point of reference for setting up learning goals and provide the basis for learner self-assessment and reflection. The integration of Can-Do statements in language instruction helps to promote learner achievement and motivate students to be autonomous and life-long learners. Despite its purported benefits, research concerning how Can-Do statements can be incorporated into language classrooms to promote learning achievement remains inadequate. Specifically, the integration process is regarded as

challenging due to the fact that the majority of students are new to assessing their own language competencies. In traditional language classes, language assessment is typically carried out by teachers through either formative assessment during learning, or summative assessment at the end of a specific learning period. Student self-assessment rarely had been used in language classes until the introduction of the CEFR and ELP in Europe and LinguaFolio in the US. Sato (2010) found that due to the limited experience students have had with self-assessment and the lack of accurate self-knowledge, many students felt the process of self-evaluation to be challenging, which consequently led to carelessly formed and imprecise self-assessment results concerning their language competencies. Van Houten (2007) reported that student self-assessments revealed inconsistent and disputed results and that teachers felt unprepared to teach students how to accurately self-assess. A Special Interest Group that met in Tokyo focused on the application and possibilities of the CEFR and ELP revealed that educators were not fully aware of how to use the Can-Do statements effectively in classes (O'Dwyer et al., 2010). In order to overcome this challenge, it is necessary to assist teachers in educating them about effective ways to implement these Can-Do statements in the language curriculum.

A Roadmap for Implementing Can-Do Statements In the Language Classroom

According to ACTFL (2013a), the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements are best used by learners and learning facilitators as part of an overall reflective learning process including “setting goals, selecting strategies, self-assessing, providing evidence, and reflecting before setting new goals” (p.1) as shown in Figure 1. This section of the article introduces the reflective learning process (Figure 1), and explains how the process is informed by the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements. In each phase of the learning process, relevant learning tasks are suggested to equip learners with the skills to independently set and achieve language goals, ultimately leading them to become autonomous, self-regulated lifelong learners of language.

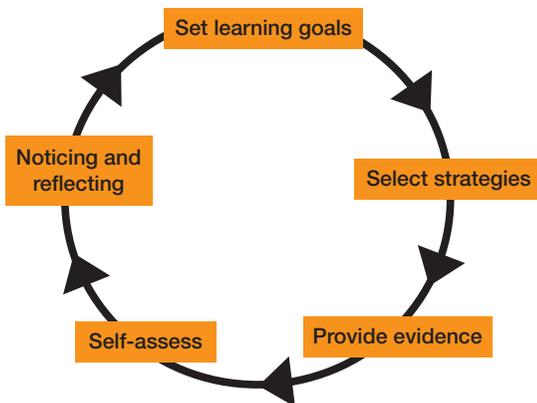


Figure 1. Reflective learning process

The learning scenario introduced in the following exemplar is situated in a beginning Chinese high school language class focused on the development of oral communication skills.

Setting Learning Goals

Using backward design, the role of the teacher is to identify the desired learning outcomes/functions and plan the appropriate learning experiences that will assist learners in achieving the desired outcomes (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005). To set up realistic learning goals, a teacher first must establish students' current language proficiency in the targeted mode of communication (in this case the interpersonal mode of communication) using the eleven distinct levels of the NCSSFL-ACTFL Can-Do Statements. To accomplish this, a shortened version of the Can-Do self-assessment checklist containing only Can-Do statements from the interpersonal mode of communication mode is used to help students self-assess their proficiency level. A shortened version, instead of a full version of the Can-Do checklist, is used here for two reasons: first, it matches the particular purpose of the Chinese speaking class, that is, to promote students' communicative skills; second, a shorter version decreases the time needed for students working on the checklist, which helps to focus students' attention and consequently increase the accuracy of their self-assessment results. The results then lead to the setting of learning goals. Specifically, if there are different current levels among students, the teacher can individualize course goals in order for students to progress to the next proficiency level based on their current proficiency level. In this case, since the majority of students in the class possess a proficiency level at novice mid, the teacher may set novice high as the semester target learning goal for the whole class, which is described by the following Can-Do benchmarks:

I can communicate and exchange information about familiar topics using phrases and simple sentences, sometimes supported by memorized language.

I can usually handle short social interactions in everyday situations by asking and answering simple questions.

After identification of the learning goals, the teacher records the five progress indicators shown below under the interpersonal communication novice high level on five separate posters and displays them on the classroom wall. As students achieve a particular descriptor, they can write their name on the corresponding poster.

1. *I can exchange some personal information.*
2. *I can ask for and give simple directions.*
3. *I can exchange information using texts, graphs, or pictures.*
4. *I can make plans with others.*
5. *I can interact with others in everyday situations.*

Specifically, Can-Do statements are divided into three levels: the Can-Do benchmarks under the novice high level of the interpersonal communication can be used as long-term goals, or as the learning outcomes of the speaking course; the progress indicators can be used as short-term goals, or the specific outcome expectations for the lesson/unit; the sample learning targets can be used as goals for daily lesson plans (NCSSFL, 2014). Can-Do Statements are not meant to be exhaustive and prescriptive. That means, learners and their teacher can create appropriate learning goals to meet

contextualized real needs in accordance with the Can-Do benchmarks and the progress indicators for a specific proficiency level. For instance, in the speaking class, under the progress descriptor concerning personal information exchange, besides the four provided sample learning targets, the teacher adds one more learning targets “I can ask and state my age and birthday” as shown below.

1. *I can exchange some personal information.*
2. *I can ask and provide my home address and e-mail address.*
3. *I can ask and state someone’s nationality.*
4. *I can ask and talk about family members and their characteristics.*
5. *I can ask and talk about friends, classmates, teachers, or co-workers.*
6. *I can ask and state my age and birthday. (Added)*

Because many students have indicated that they want to learn counting in Chinese, the teacher integrates Chinese numbers in the context of age and date.

Likewise, students might also set their own personalized goals based on the goals shared by their teacher according to their own learning experiences. However, it is important that the teacher assumes the role of facilitator to help learners set attainable learning goals by modeling the goal-setting process to ensure valid SMART goals. For example, let’s use the example of the teacher who added numbers as a learning target to allow her students to “ask and state their age and birthday.” The learner may want to personalize this by revising this Can-Do to read: “I can ask and answer my friends about their/my age and birthday in Chinese.”

Can-Do statements foster practical and realistic goals that not only make explicit what students are expected to be able to do, but also serve as a tool for teachers as they design the course and prepare daily lessons.

Selecting Strategies

After setting learning goals, learners move to the selection of the strategies to support the attainment of identified goals. Specifically, learners are involved in selecting the most effective learning strategies in accordance with their preferred learning style. However, according to scholars (O’Dwyer, Noriko, Collett, Sullivan, & Smith, 2011), it is a challenge for learners to determine the best learning strategies as most of them only use a limited range of learning techniques and are not willing to use “alternative, possibly more efficient, study methods” (p.274).

In order to help learners select effective learning strategies, it is necessary to first draw their attention to the importance of learning strategies. An effective way to introduce effective learning strategies is to encourage students to talk about learning strategies in class and share strategies with others. Additionally, the teacher can also have students discuss which identified learning goals are difficult and what kind of strategies they would need to achieve them. It would not only help students to learn from each other, but also enhance their awareness of learning strategies.

Based on student discussion, the teacher then assists students in identifying different learning strategies to use. Due to limited class time and other factors, it is impossible for a teacher to assist each individual student; however, in order to help

learners understand which strategies match their own preferred learning styles, one effective way is for the teacher to model how she herself selects effective strategies for accomplishing a learning task (Wertz & Van Houten, 2013).

For instance, in the case of the Chinese speaking class, to achieve the goal of *I can ask and state my age and birthday*, students may choose different learning strategies. Some students may choose to first practice asking and saying the age and birthday by themselves, and then use them in real conversation; some may first choose to explore how age and birthday are asked in real-life conversation, then directly use them in their own conversation; some may choose to watch a video where age and birthday are asked and talked about by native speakers, and then summarize the usage followed by use in real conversation. The best learning strategy is the one that helps the learner who is using it to achieve the targeted learning goal.

Providing Evidence

After selecting strategies and practicing the relevant tasks, learners then provide evidence to prove that they have met the goals. Learning evidence can take different forms. The ease and accessibility of digitally produced evidence makes sharing products convenient. It is important to note that no matter the form of evidence, it should substantiate and match the Can-Do statements and the specific proficiency level around which the targeted goals were identified (ibid.). The teacher plays a key role in helping students select the best and complete evidence that is most representative of what students can do relative to the targeted learning goal. Specifically, in order to demonstrate that one is proficient at a specific proficiency level, besides providing evidence, a learner “must perform consistently and with native speakers at that level” (NCSSFL, 2014, p.1).

In the case of the Chinese speaking class, for instance, in order to demonstrate that one “can exchange some personal information”, the learner may provide evidence, such as a dialogue simulating a conversation between two people or an audio clip in which the learner has a conversation with a native speaker in which personal information is exchanged. Evidence can be collected and placed in a file, or uploaded online where not only the student, but also the teacher and parents can have access to those products that document student learning progress.

Self-assessing

The selection of evidence actually initiates the self-assessment process. In this process, learners assess themselves to see what they can do and what they cannot do as to the identified learning goals reflected in Can-Do statements. This echoes with the self-assessment process involved in the goal setting stage. While the two have similar processes, the self-assessment in the first stage aims to assess learners’ interpersonal communication level before learning, the self-assessment in the current assessment stage aims to assess what has been learned and how well it was learned. Specifically, in this stage, a learner checks off a learning goal when s/he provides evidence to support that s/he can do the task as described by the goal, which consequently helps to track the learning progress.

Besides using the identified learning goals as a springboard for self-assessment, learners at this stage also create performance-based assessment rubrics to assess

specific tasks during the learning process by linking the identified learning goals, or Can-Do statements, with the task performance. The rubric could then be used to provide feedback from the teacher, peers and learners themselves. Particularly, both the teacher and learners are involved in making these assessment rubrics for specific learning tasks. Learners' contribution here is emphasized in order to develop their skill of defining what knowledge and skills are necessary when starting a learning task, which is regarded as "immensely important when learners face language challenges in their future" (O'Dwyer, 2011, p.12). This corresponds to the principles of learning oriented assessment, which promotes a positive classroom assessment culture with active engagement of both teachers and students (Carless, 2009). For instance, in the case of the Chinese speaking class, to fulfill the goal "I can ask for and give simple directions," each student is required to complete the task of asking a Chinese native speaker for directions and giving him/her directions. To develop an assessment rubric for this specific task, the teacher poses questions to all students regarding what they might expect to hear in a real and informative dialogue. The class first discusses this in groups, then brainstorms together and ultimately produces the assessment rubric, as shown in Table 1, which can be used for assessing language production. [Examples below are to appear in a box.]

<i>The conversation is in logical sequence.</i>	1 2 3 4
<i>The conversation provided relevant information.</i>	1 2 3 4
<i>The student converses articulately and confidently.</i>	1 2 3 4
<i>The student uses a clear voice with correct, precise pronunciation of terms.</i>	1 2 3 4

TOTAL:

Multiple forms of assessment, (e.g. self-assessment with the identified learning goal; self-, peer-, and teacher assessment with the performance-based assessment rubric) allow for triangulation of different types of assessment thereby increasing the reliability of assessment results.

Noticing and Reflecting

After the self-assessment stage, learners move to the final stage of the reflective learning process, the noticing and reflecting stage. In this stage, learners engage in reflection on teacher-, peer-, and self-assessment results regarding their speaking performance in order to ascertain if their targeted learning goals were achieved. If goals were attained, what was learned by working towards these goals? If goals were not achieved, what else can be done to achieve these goals? This process helps learners to focus not only on perceived weaknesses, but also on improving their proficiency by figuring out realistic learning goals in terms of Can-Do statements. For this reason, the reflection process requires learners to have a deeper understanding of learning and their learning experiences to interpret new learned knowledge in relation to their prior knowledge. Learning reflection is therefore regarded as "a complex task" (Kohonen & Westhoff, 2001, p. 24).

To help learners reflect on their own learning, the teacher can encourage them to think about the following five questions as adapted from Leni Dam in Dam (1995):

- *What am I learning?*
- *Why am I learning it?*
- *How am I learning it?*
- *How successful is my learning?*
- *What am I going to do next?*

It is important for the teacher first to guide learners to think about these questions in a conscious way (Little & Perclova, 2001), and then gradually let them reflect on their own. When learners' metacognitive knowledge and strategies grow, they are able to plan, carry out and assess their own learning, which consequently increases their ability to take responsibility for their learning (Council of Europe, 2002).

In accordance with the principles of reflective learning, the KWLS model is recommended by some researchers (e.g., Van Houten, 2007) to help students take responsibility for their own learning. The model provides a good way for learners to track and reflect on their learning. In the case of the Chinese speaking class for example, before learning how to make plans with others under the identified learning goal "I can make plans with others", the students can record what they already know (K) about making plans with others in Chinese, and what they want to know (W) about it. At the end of the class, they review what they wrote and summarize what they learned (L) and also reflect on what they still (S) want to learn in the future to improve beyond the current level. The process of filling the KWLS table is a process of reflective learning, during which the learners first connect their prior knowledge with the new knowledge to be learned, then reflect on the new knowledge learned. While it is not always easy for learners to provide a complete list for each part of the KWLS model, Can-Do statements provide a good frame of reference for learners to complete while connecting this to their personal learning experiences. By keeping track of the learning experience with the KWLS model in terms of Can-Do statements, learners may clearly see their progress toward specific targeted learning goals.

The learning reflection stage then informs the follow-up goal setting stage that starts the new round of reflective learning process. Specifically, if the targeted goals have been attained, new learning goals are set in the next iteration of the goal setting stage with Can-Do statements; if not attained, the learner either adjusts the original goal or figures out other ways to attain and demonstrate the targeted learning goal (e.g. examine alternative strategies; seek assistance through online venues, or peers/teachers).

This exemplar illustrates how Can-Do statements can be integrated in a language speaking class through the reflective learning process (see Figure 1). In addressing the integration of Can-Do statements in each part of the learning process, relevant learning activities are suggested to help equip learners with the skills to independently set and achieve language goals, ultimately leading them to become autonomous learners of language. There is no single *best* method of using Can-Do statements. While this exemplar provides some ideas concerning how to use Can-Do statements, the procedures it contains are by no means the only way such work can be done, and they are not necessarily applicable in all learning contexts. It is important for both teachers and learners to use Can-Do statements appropriately based on their own specific context.

While such a reflective learning process is time consuming, the benefits have been well documented in the research as regards learning gains. Students are more motivated, value the task of learning a language, improve their language skills, become independent learners and develop self-regulation that will equip them with lifelong skills that enhance the quality of their lives. Once students have practiced, honed and internalized the reflective goal setting process, the process becomes automatic. Much like language learning, once language is anchored in long-term memory, the act of retrieval is automatic.

The exemplar provided above provides a general overview of the how and why of using Can-Do statements in the language classroom. To gain additional extensive, practical ideas for integrating Can-Do learning objectives at the classroom level, the authors recommend Tuttle's (2014) iBook entitled *Modern Language Proficiency: Can-Do Strategies*. Tuttle tested Can-Do statements extensively with his Spanish high school students and presents practical strategies and sample lessons for implementing the Can-Do statements in all the modes of communication (interpretive, interpersonal, presentational). This book provides invaluable step-by-step guidance for classroom teachers as to how to effectively integrate Can-Do statements into daily lessons and the language curriculum.

Conclusion

Can-Do statements make language learning visible and transparent to all stakeholders involved in the language acquisition process. As confirmed through classroom-based research, self-assessment and goal setting through Can-Do statements enable learners to track their own learning progress through both short- and long-term learning targets and foster learner autonomy that encourages lifelong language learning beyond the classroom. The integration of Can-Do statements can be used to promote and link a reflective learning process with goal setting, strategy selection, evidence documentation and self-assessment as illustrated by the exemplar provided in this paper. While it is hoped that the instructional tasks involved in the exemplar can serve as a point of reference to assist both instructors and learners in better understanding how to use Can-Do statements in class, it is important to note that when applied, it must be adapted to the learners and context of each specific learning environment.

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Endnotes

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