My Language Passport:

An Evaluation Method for Elementary and Junior High School English Classes with Instructor Feedback

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Abstract

There are various methods to evaluate the English ability of elementary school and junior high school students, and there has been much discussion about which is the most effective. In 2014, Naruto University of Education's Affiliated Fuzoku Elementary School implemented a new evaluation method known as My Language Passport (MLP). It is now used by the fifth and sixth grade elementary school students and the students at Fuzoku Junior High School. The link between schools, the use by both instructors and students, and the detailed emphasis on Listening, Speaking, Reading, Writing, and Culture goals make MLP an ideal rubric for evaluating the progress of students. For this study, surveys were conducted with the participation of all current English instructors, as well as former instructors at The Naruto University of Education's Affiliated schools, to reflect on the use of MLP both in and outside the classroom. Surveys showed favorable results in most categories. More than half of participants wrote that the most useful aspect of MLP was that it gave students a clear goal. More than half agreed that the class time spent using MLP was productive. Nearly three-quarters of respondents had an initial interest in MLP, although for roughly half, MLP had little or no effect on the final grades of students.

(Keywords: Foreign Language Education, Evaluation Methodology, Rubric)

1.　Background

1.1 Foreign Language Assessment Rubric

Prior to 2014, a need was recognized for a detailed method with which to evaluate the progress and achievements of students in English education from the fifth grade of elementary school to junior high school. Considering that English will become a compulsory subject in 2020 for elementary school students in grades 5 and 6, there are many challenges and considerations that must be accounted for in a new rubric. Feedback was encouraged from Fuzoku Junior High School English instructors and Fuzoku Elementary School English instructors. In order to ensure the progress of students was recorded as clearly as possible, it was determined that a singular rubric utilized by both students and teachers would be the most effective. It was also necessary to implement the new rubric prior to English becoming a compulsory subject from the fifth grade in the year 2020. Then, the evaluation system used in My Language Passport (MLP) was developed by the Center for English Language Education at Elementary Schools (CELEES) at Naruto University of Education.

1.2 Development

MLP was based on the CanDo List from the Ministry of Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology (MEXT, 2015).   It adopted a similar format as the European Language Portfolio (ELP) developed by the National Center for Languages and The Council of Europe (Council of Europe, 2011). MEXT currently requires students to meet goals pertaining to Listening and Speaking in elementary level English classes. MLP attempts to expand these criteria significantly to also include Reading and Writing, which are expected to become requirements in 2020. It was also determined that there should be a fifth category to record the acquisition of knowledge related to indirect experiences involving foreign culture simply titled Culture. This category was designed to increase students' awareness of inter-cultural experiences and to record their attitude toward experiencing foreign culture such as interacting with their ALT, researching foreign countries or participating in activities with foreign guests. In this regard, MLP seeks to ensure that students have an opportunity to set goals toward gaining knowledge and experience of foreign culture. Since English is not yet a compulsory subject, this evaluation method was meant to serve as a detailed rubric of the abilities and achievements of students, a record of their self-reflection comments, to assist in the evaluation by the instructor, and to serve as a complete record for junior

figure 1 A student fills out MLP.

high school instructors to verify at a glance which levels the students had reached and what their motivations would be going forward (figure 1).

Students, too, are encouraged to keep a positive attitude and a willingness to learn through charting their own progress. Such a format that allows students to focus on both lesson content and the learning process, thus giving them a more active awareness of their own learning, has roots in task-based Communicative Language Teaching (CLT). Nunan (2004) points out that, "What matters is both processes and outcomes are taken care of and there is compatibility between them" (p. 10). Many researchers have emphasized that the focus of learning should be on "means" as well as "ends" and MLP attempts to accomplish this by going into detail recording the learning process.

1.3 Implementation

MLP was first implemented at the start of the 2014-2015 school year in the fifth grade English classes at Fuzoku Elementary School. After receiving feedback from both students and instructors, MLP was used the following years in both fifth- and sixth-grade English classes. A separate MLP was developed for use in Fuzoku Junior High School with a similar format to the elementary MLP. After MLP was implemented, an English instructor commented that she'd never used material like it before. She was worried at first but found it to be an interesting and new way of providing evaluation. The ease of use is a factor that was considered for both students and instructors. MLP has a simple format. The same template is used for each unit (figure 2).

figure 2 A page from the fifth-grade section, Unit 1, of MLP.

When introducing a new unit, the instructor provides the task or theme at the top of the page. After that, the instructor has two choices: She can either set the goals explicitly for students or lead a class discussion in which she asks the students for feedback, their opinions, and to add any additional ideas. For the latter method, instructors who have taken into consideration the motivation and goals agreed upon as a class have noted a positive attitude amongst students. Collectively setting realistic targets for themselves tends to increase student motivation toward accomplishing the goals that they themselves have set as a class. Ellis (2003), on the task-based teaching method called a 'process syllabus' advocated by Breen and Candlin, explains that, in contrast to "the procedural

syllabus [which] provides a specification of the tasks to be used in the classroom, the process syllabus is constructed through negotiation between the teacher and the students" (p. 32). The instructor has their curriculum in mind, but it is up to the students to determine the specific goals of each unit, the process of which is recorded in MLP. This is not without precedent, as Wilcox (1997) wrote, regarding active portfolios, "classroom assessment strategies become models for students to follow as they learn to manage and monitor their own learning. Students who actually use a variety of peer and self-assessment tools begin to understand how assessment and learning connect" (p.36). When the learning process itself is made active, students and instructors both respond positively. An elementary English instructor commented after using MLP, "It's easy and quick to fill in their goals for each category if teachers tell them what to write. But, I think it's important for students to think of their own goals themselves with their own words. […] I try to pull their own words as much as possible."

2. Aims

This paper seeks to describe MLP for a general audience as well as to present the initial reactions of current and former English instructors at Fuzoku Elementary and Fuzoku Junior High schools who have used MLP since its introduction. MLP has elicited positive feedback from instructors and students. In addition, detailed results of the use of the rubric are clarified, including: ease of use, flexibility, average time spent, motivation and student progress, scoring and the effectiveness of MLP in determining the final score for students. It is hoped that this rubric will become a model for elementary and junior high schools throughout Japan looking for an effective, detailed evaluation method with which to chart the progress of English language acquisition. Although this study focused on the feedback from English instructors, it should be noted that there was observable engagement and motivation of students regarding MLP, which should be of interest for future studies.

3. Format and Usage

3.1 Content

The structure of MLP is designed for use over two consecutive years. The first half is used in the fifth-grade classes and the second half is used in the sixth-grade classes. There are five goals for students to focus on per unit: Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking and Culture.

The goals are customizable in that the instructor, with or without the help of students, determines what the class aims to achieve by the end of each unit. MLP is recommended for use on average twice a month in the fifth and sixth grades.

Once a unit is completed, students carry out a self-evaluation for each goal and write a self-reflection regarding their impressions of their abilities or achievements. It should be noted that students in Fuzoku Elementary School write feedback at the end of each class assignment in other subjects, so this is something that they are used to doing. With this emphasis on self-reflection and an awareness of their achievements, students become part of the language learning process. They are "involved in a reflective experience which enables him/ her to relate current learning to past, present, and future, even if these relationships are felt rather than thought" (Kohonen, 2005). The English instructor then checks their comments, signs the MLP, and, if possible, offers comments. The instructor can record their progress and abilities according to each of the units (figure 3). Additionally, a Teacher's Check is periodically carried out by either the English instructor or by the Assistant Language Teacher (ALT). Teacher's Check activities involve, but are not limited to, reading a picture book aloud, answering questions in a one-on-one interview, giving a short presentation, or completing an information gap activity. Figure 3 below contains the Speaking and Listening checks that were carried out throughout the school year. Communication ability, such as the time students spend interacting with their ALT or talking with their classmates in English, is emphasized here. It is also possible for the instructor to add new criteria as he or she sees fit, as seen in the right image, bottom line.

figure 3 Listening and Speaking checks, pages 24 and 25, respectively, with dates conducted.

Figure 4 shows the Reading and Writing checks that were carried out throughout the same

year. The criteria can be broadly defined, covering a wide range of activities from phonics and sight word reading to writing a letter to a junior high school pen pal or using a picture dictionary. The instructor evaluates the progress students have made and factors it in to their final score.

figure 4 Reading and Writing checks, pages 26 and 27, respectively, with dates conducted.
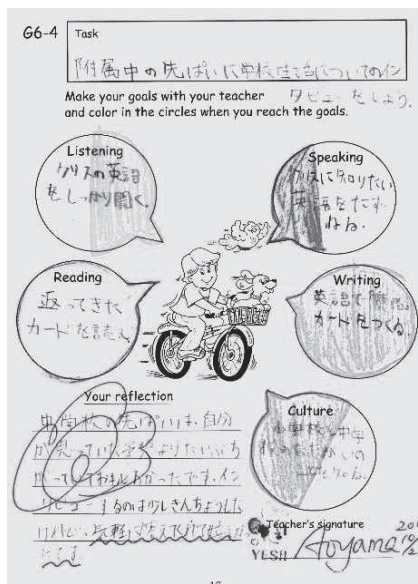
3.2 Use in the classroom

figure 5 MLP page showing completion of the JHS Penpals Unit.

Two example activities that utilized the multiple goals of Reading, Writing, Listening, Speaking, and Culture in MLP are as follows. In the first activity, fifth-graders were given a map of the area around Tokushima Station. They were then tasked with selecting their "favorite place," and writing directions, in English, how to get there. They practiced reading their scripts to their partner, completing an informal self-check. After that, they guided their classmates to a location on the map. Finally, they came to their ALT one-on-one and, reading their script, guided him from Fuzoku Elementary School to another location while the ALT followed along on a map. They were critiqued on speed, clarity of voice, pronunciation, and expression. The second example activity, for sixth-graders, involved creating and writing survey questions in English. These questions were answered, also in English, by their former,

senior classmates, attending Fuzoku Junior High School. After a few weeks, the sixth-grade students received the replies. They read about the daily lives of the JHS students, and presented them to their class, comparing the replies with examples from their daily lives.

Figure 5 is the corresponding passport page, listing the goals decided upon as a class. The instructor checked the student's reflection and signed the bottom of the page signaling the criteria had been met.　This student colored half or less of three out of five goals, meaning they felt they reached an understanding, but not a mastery of the goal.　However, they appear confident in their reading and writing ability.　By the end of the fifth grade, students will have finished half of MLP. After completing their final project, they will receive congratulatory praise from their English instructor and their ALT.

Students will complete the final two pages of MLP at the end of the sixth-grade school year. In Figure 6, the elementary school English instructor's message is seen in the left image amongst the stickers the student received after completing various activities at the end-of-the-year party. The center image shows the letter that the student wrote to their future Fuzoku Junior High School English instructor. The English instructors from Fuzoku JHS visited the sixth-grade English class during the last week of school, met the students, listened to their introductions, and signed their MLPs, as seen on the right.
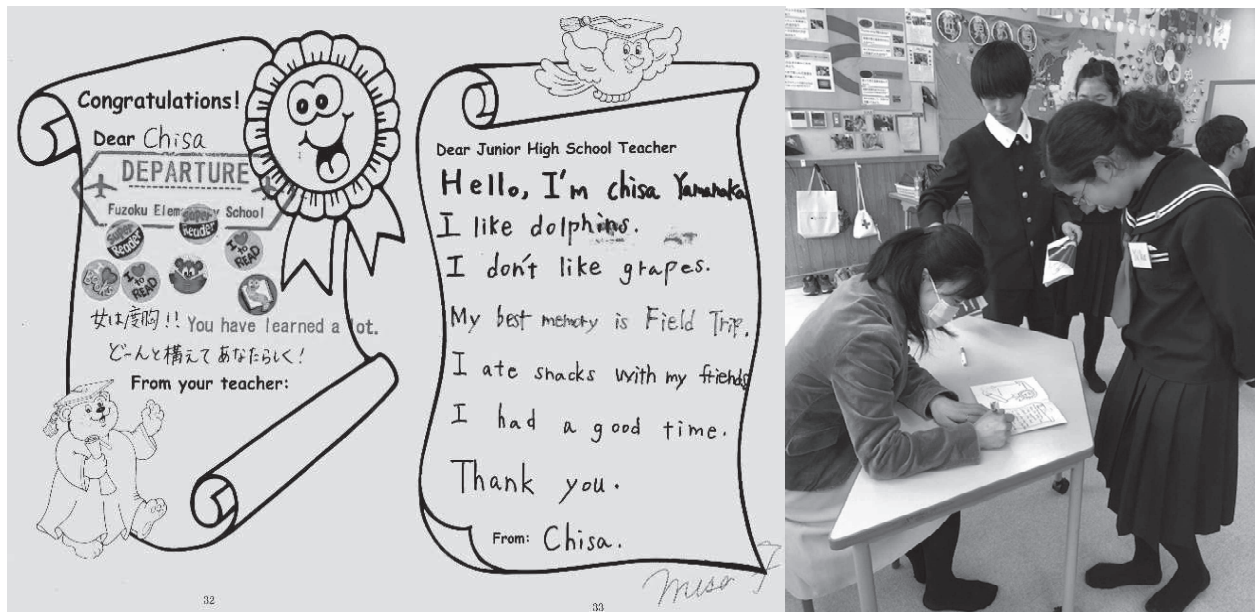

figure 6 The last two pages in MLP.　A message from the 6th grade English instructor (left), a letter to future JHS English instructor (center).　An English instructor from Fuzoku JHS visits the class and signs a student's MLP.

4.　Method

4.1 Participants and procedures

The survey participants included five current and two former English instructors at The Naruto University of Education Affiliated Junior High School and Elementary School in Tokushima City, Tokushima. Three of the instructors were employed at Fuzoku Junior High School and four were employed at Fuzoku Elementary School. Two instructors have used MLP since its inception. Students did not receive surveys but were observed by instructors in order to record their general impressions. Student MLPs were also consulted for verification and other factors. The participants were encouraged to write comments as much as possible in order to clarify their survey answers. Five participants answered in Japanese and two answered in English. The English answers appear in italics, the answers translated from Japanese appear in italics in quotes. Comments by students, from MLP, appear in quotes (with no italics) and were also translated from Japanese.

4.2 Instructor Commentary

The following is a selection of the instructors' comments, describing, in their own words, their impressions of using MLP.

Referring to the effectiveness of MLP in terms of charting the progress of students, an instructor wrote: "*Each student seemed to have a clear goal because it can be set with five perspectives. I witnessed a student who wrote, for example,* 'I couldn't meet the goal of Speaking in this unit, so I want to do better in the next unit.' *They had a clear grasp of the goals.*"

Another comment mentions a student's acknowledgement that: "It was hard to read aloud, at first, but now I know how to be careful of my English pronunciation when reading." The instructor adds: "*In this way, some students were able to reflect on their achievements. However, it was difficult to include MLP during class time. I felt like I could not spend enough time to make students aware of the details regarding how much they had improved or which accomplishments they had reached.*"

Regarding class time spent on MLP, an instructor commented: "*While foreign language activities are often only seen as fun, using MLP gave those activities each a clear goal so students could see the reason behind the activity. However, it's time-consuming to set a goal, note it, color it, etc. Once students got used to it […] they completed it faster. In Fuzoku Elementary School, we have English classes twice a week, so we had time to use MLP in class. Also, a specialized English instructor was in charge, so it went smoothly. Depending on the situation at other public elementary*

schools, it is important to recognize their specific needs and to think how to effectively use MLP. Fuzoku Elementary School students write comments in other subjects besides English, so they're used to writing sentences. Some students may feel overwhelmed to include five perspectives for one unit."

Impressions of student attitudes were generally consistent, and most instructors mentioned the positive motivation of students. One instructor commented that, being able to *think about the skills of Listening, Reading, Writing and Speaking,* students can think about which skills they want to learn. *Otherwise, some goals are often the same*. In addition, *[Students] can have a positive attitude because they think/consider the goal [of each unit].*

Another instructor commented: Junior high school students *show their interest* in using MLP and *both teachers and students can be concerned [about] four skills and Culture* when using it. A different instructor, expecting more resistance, commented on how well the junior high school students followed directions in filling out the goals for each unit.

Neatly and *positively* were words used to describe how students wrote and checked their goals. Other positive comments include: *They seem to be happy when they see their progress. Especially when they compare their ability at the beginning and the end of the unit. "MLP is effective for teachers to discover what students think about their own learning. It seemed that the students felt how much they'd grown by reviewing their own record of learning."* In contrast: *"There was confusion amongst students using MLP for the first time. They mastered it, however, and some seemed bored with it by the end of the sixth grade."*

Regarding suggested improvements, one instructor mentioned: *"It was difficult to evaluate all units of MLP over the course of two years (for sixth graders) during the Teacher's Check. The content of the textbooks ['Hi, Friends!' 1 and 2] did not always agree with the structure of MLP, which was concerning. I suggest that if the goal is narrowed or is more flexible, so that the instructor can modify the goal to fit the class activities after the fact, then MLP would be easier to use during the annual skill checks."* We need more goals for each unit based on the English textbook, another instructor wrote.

One comment stated: *"[MLP] is best used as a record. I do not want to design a class based on it. The students should manage [MLP] themselves, not the instructor, due to the extra work involved in handing out MLPs, leading the students in filling out the goals and reflection, and collecting MLPs at the end of the class. I have no spare time to utilize it effectively except during the Teacher's Check."* Other instructors wrote that they would like *a guidebook for teachers (how to use it),* and that if there were a Can-Do List corresponding to the "We Can" textbook, it would be better. Finally, a comment stated: *If the student reflection section were to be expanded, some*

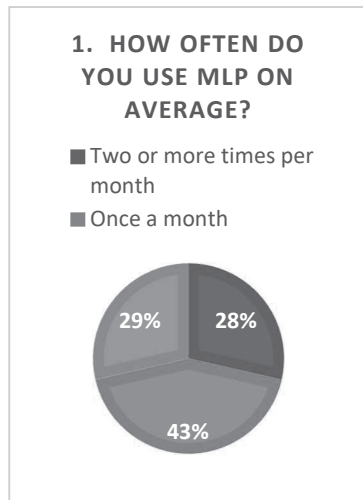*students would be encouraged to write reflections in English.*

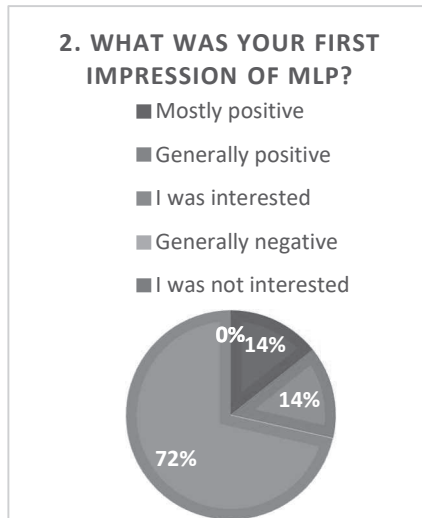## 5.   Results

1.   HOW OFTEN DO YOU USE MLP ON AVERAGE?

■ Two or more times per month
■ Once a month

29%   28%
43%

figure 7 How often do you use MLP on average?

2.   WHAT WAS YOUR FIRST IMPRESSION OF MLP?

■ Mostly positive
■ Generally positive
■ I was interested
■ Generally negative
■ I was not interested

0% 14%
14%
72%

figure 8 What was your first impression of MLP?

3.   DID MLP FACTOR INTO STUDENTS' FINAL SCORE ?

■ Greatly affected
■ Somewhat affected
■ It influenced
■ Did not affect

14%
43%   14%
29%
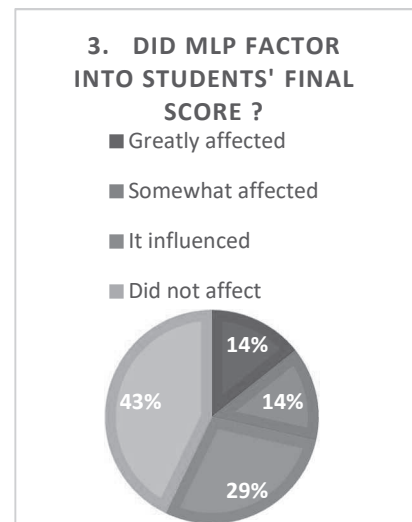
figure 9 Did MLP factor in to the final scores of students?

4.   HOW EFFECTIVE IS MLP IN CHARTING STUDENT PROGRESS?

■ Very effective
■ Generally effective
■ Effective to a degree
■ Less than effective
■ Not effective

0% 14%
43%
43%
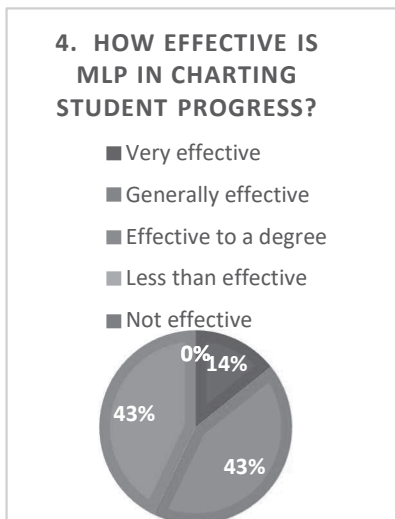
figure 10 How effective is MLP to chart student progress?

5.   HOW MUCH TIME IS SPENT CHECKING MLP?

■ Less than 3 hours per week
■ Less than 5 hours per week
■ About 2 hours per month
■ Only during Teacher's Check

14%
14%   43%
29%
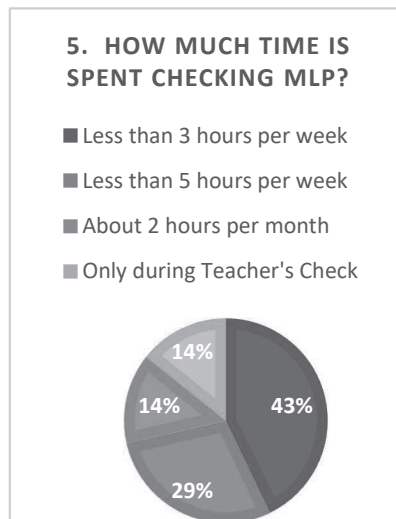
figure 11 How much time outside of class is spent checking MLP?

6.   WHAT IS THE MOST USEFUL ASPECT OF MLP?

■ Each student can have a clear goal
■ To be able to think of their own goal
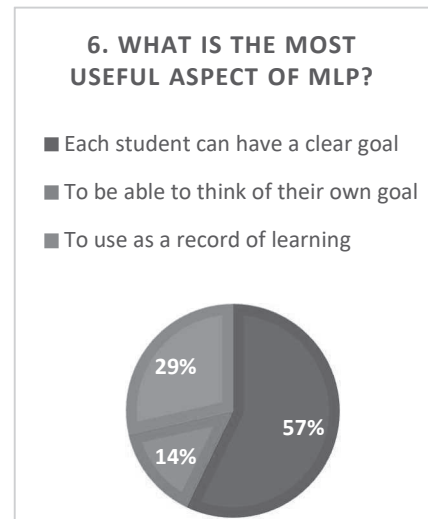■ To use as a record of learning

29%
57%
14%

figure 12 What is the most useful aspect of MLP?

The results of the survey indicate positive feedback for nearly all categories. For question 6, Figure 12, instructors wrote in their opinions of the most useful aspect of MLP. More
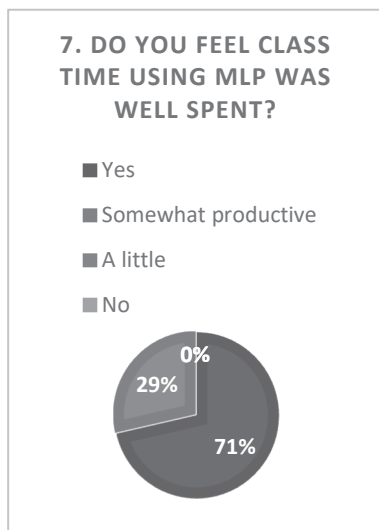
7. DO YOU FEEL CLASS TIME USING MLP WAS WELL SPENT?

■ Yes
■ Somewhat productive
■ A little
■ No

0%
29%
71%

figure 13 Was class time using MLP well spent?

than half, 57%, had the same impression that MLP gave students a clear goal.

First impressions of MLP showed five out of seven instructors were interested, seen in Figure 8, and the categories of mostly positive and generally positive had one instructor each, with no negative impressions. Instructors did not use MLP as much as is recommended, with only two out of seven using it more than twice per month as shown in Figure 7. Five out of seven also agreed that the class time spent using MLP was well spent and productive, as Figure 13 shows.

Three instructors who used MLP on average less than 3 hours per week, seen in Figure 11, also answered that it was not a determining factor on the final scores of students. Further revision of MLP is necessary regarding detailed content, frequency of use, and ease of use to ensure accessibility and flexibility, depending on the grade level and class content. With additional revision, instructors will feel confident using it to help determine final scores especially related to Teacher's Check activities, the motivation and participation of students, and the progress they demonstrate over the course of one or more years.

6. Conclusion

This paper describes, for a general audience, a new method for evaluating the English abilities of students from the fifth grade of elementary school through junior high school, My Language Passport, as well as the feedback received regarding MLP from both current and former English instructors at both Fuzoku Elementary School and Fuzoku Junior High School. In addition, the initial reactions of current and former English instructors at Fuzoku Elementary and Fuzoku Junior High schools who have used MLP since its introduction are presented. In addition, detailed results of the use of the rubric were clarified which make MLP a valuable and flexible method for evaluating the progress of students. Such a rubric is expected to become a necessary component of the English curriculum, as a compulsory subject, from 2020.

Surveys conducted with the participation of all current English instructors as well as former instructors describe the usage, frequency, and general opinions on the implementation of MLP. The surveys showed favorable results in all categories. More than half of participants wrote that the most useful aspect of MLP was that it gave students a clear goal. Five participants agreed

that the class time spent using MLP was well spent whereas two said it was somewhat productive. Five out of seven had an initial interest in MLP. And, for three out of seven, MLP had little or no effect on the final grades of students. These results reflected the amount of time spent using MLP in the classroom and checking it outside the classroom: low rates of less than 3 hours per week, once a month or less.

The use of MLP from the 2014-2015 school year up to now has met the need for a detailed rubric which can be utilized by both students and instructors. Based on the positive feedback of instructors and the demonstrated motivation of students, it can be considered initially successful. It is now necessary to demonstrate that MLP, when used regularly, can be more than simply a detailed record. It can be a significant factor in determining the final scores of students in English classes. It is clear from the results that, although English instructors have a positive view of MLP, more revisions and training are needed to ensure the rubric is used effectively as it is intended. Finally, it is necessary to continue revising the contents, frequency, and ease of use in order to ensure accessibility and flexibility, depending on grade level and class content, for the continued success of MLP.

7. References

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