



On China's Standards of English Language Ability: A Literature Review

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Abstract

Before the implementation of the *China's Standards of English Language Ability*, there has been no unified language proficiency scale in our country, which has limitations on our assessment of language ability and teaching implementation. The Ministry of Education and the State Language Commission issued the China English Proficiency Scale on April 12, 2018, which came into effect on June 1. The implementation of the Scale not only breaks the lack of language ability assessment in our country, but also provides a unified and systematic basis for measuring learners' English reading ability, and also provides an important reference value for English reading learning and teachers' teaching. This paper expounds the background, implementation and application of the Scale in theory and practice, and provides reference value for scholars, teachers and students. It provides a certain theoretical direction for the development and application of the Scale.

Subject Areas

Language Education

Keywords

China's Standards of English Language Ability, Language Proficiency Scale, Reading Ability

1. Introduction

In 2014, our country pointed out that it was necessary to push for the establishment of a foreign language assessment system. This system was an evaluation system covering all education stages from primary school to college, covering comprehensive ability of listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating, covering foreign language learning, teaching and assessment. The major work of

establishing the system was formulating a national foreign language proficiency scale and it was a basic work. In the same year, the work of establishing *China's Standards of English Language Ability* (CSE) began. After several years of research, *China's Standards of English Language Ability* was released on April 1, 2018. To know more detailed information and development about CSE, this study makes a literature review on it. Through making this literature review, we can find some achievements about it. Also, we can find some gaps during the application of the CSE.

Based on the communicative language competence model and taking the method of use-oriented, CSE scientifically describes or evaluates language competence, and uses clear and intuitive descriptors to describe each level of language competence as “can-do”. Guided by the use of language, CSE provides self-assessment criteria for learners through clear stratification and description of language ability and meets diversified learning needs. At the same time, it provides a reference for stratified teaching and ensures the scientificity of various English tests. It divides learners' English reading ability into nine levels and three stages (basic, improvement and proficiency), including the general ability scale, sub-scale and self-test scale. The general ability scale includes the general ability scale of language. It also includes each general ability scale of listening, reading, speaking, writing, organization ability, pragmatic ability, interpretation and translation ability. Each education stage can make a connection with CSE. Level 1 and level 2 correspond to primary school, level 3 to junior school, level 4 to senior school, level 5 and level 5 to college, level 7 to English major' s students and level 8 and level 9 to foreign language elite. Liu Jianda pointed out that the descriptors collected by the CSE included all kinds of English curriculum standards, syllabus, examination syllabus and other language proficiency standards from all levels in China [1]. The descriptive language of the CSE was comprehensive and closely related to English teaching at all levels in China. The descriptive language of the CSE was comprehensive and closely related to English teaching at all levels in China. Hu Huawei also pointed out that the CSE was helpful in improving the continuity of English learning and teaching in China and it can help teachers and students plan their learning objectives systematically, evaluate their language ability accurately, and obtain learning resources accurately.

2. Literature Review

Han Baocheng states the study of language proficiency scales has been for nearly sixty years so far, whose achievements appearing in North America, Australia, Europe, and so on [2].

In 1950s, to cultivate military personnels' foreign language ability in America, Foreign Service Institute constructed series of spoken English standards to test their spoken level. In 1980s, this standard was adopted by other government branches, which was called the Interagency Language Roundtable Scale. It was

expanded from a single oral ability to listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating these five skills, which provided references for later scale's development. Meanwhile, the Educational Testing Service introduced the scale development into the field of foreign language teaching and started the Common Yardstick Project. On the basis of ILR, the American Council for the Teaching of Foreign Languages was formulated, which not only covered four basic skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing, but also covered the cultural level of the learners. The above three scales are all developed under the influence of structuralist behaviorist psychology and use language knowledge as the descriptive index.

In 1990s, America put *Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century*, which made detailed learning aims for 9 languages. It guided foreign language teaching from kindergarten to K-12. Different from previous scales, this Standard was based on communicative competence theory, stressing the cultivation of communicative competence. It illustrated five foreign language teaching aims: communication, culture, connections, comparisons and communities. In the same period, Canada compiled the Canadian Language Benchmarks to evaluate English levels for adult immigrants.

Under the influence of FSI, Australia constructed International Second Language Proficiency Ratings, which described the second foreign language ability of teenagers and adults. It has the same theoretical basis as ILR and ACTFL and describes four skills.

In European language scales, the most representative scales are the Association of Language Testers in Europe and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. Both are based on communicative competence theory. The former started with different communicative activities and described the language using tasks in different language environments. The latter adopted an approach of action-oriented approach, which divided language activities into three types: productive, receptive and mediating. On the one hand, it described the language ability as a whole and then presented the language ability according to the types of communicative language activities.

Before the CSE appeared, there were no unit foreign language scales in our country. However, our scholars have been conducting related research and offered many beneficial suggestions to build a unified foreign language ability scale. Han Baocheng introduced some foreign influential language scales and their formulation background, level division and descriptive features. He also commented on the advantages and disadvantages of those scales. Meanwhile, he proposed that a unified English proficiency scale should be set up in our country. Yang Huizhong and Gui Shichun stated the need to construct a unified English proficiency scale in Asia, whose scale should combine qualitative analysis and quantitative analysis [3]. Yang Huizhong, Zhu Zhengcai and Fang Xujin pointed out that the level of foreign language teaching in China is complex at present. And there are many kinds of foreign language examinations and the

corresponding teaching and examination syllabus also differ in the description and grade division of language ability, which causes a lot of inconvenience to the organization of language teaching and the interpretation of test scores. They put forward the principle of formulating a national unified language proficiency scale [4]. Wang Shuhua drew on CEFR and developed a set of English Comprehension Scale for Chinese Students [5]. Considering China's political environment from the macro and micro perspectives, they argued that the establishment of it is not just a matter of professional aspects. We should take into account China's education system and the current situation of English teaching.

The research on the scale at home and abroad provides valuable experiences for the development of an English proficiency scale of our own. However, we must pay attention to the differences in the teaching environment and education system with other countries, which will affect the formulation of our language proficiency scale. We need to be based on the national conditions and the current situation of English education in China.

3. Studies on CSE

Since the CSE was released, many scholars have continuously studied it.

From the theoretical perspective, there are some scholars presenting the CSE from several aspects like the principle, method, and scientificity of development. Li Minzi and Zeng Yongqiang talked about the construction and validation of the Typical Activities Scales of Reading in the CSE. They illustrated the relationship between reading ability and typical reading activities, discussed the framework of typical reading activities from both horizontal and vertical dimensions, elaborated on the methods and procedures of constructing and validating the Typical Activities Scales of Reading, and ended with some suggestions on its application. Its aim was to offer a sound theoretical foundation and practical guidance for the application of the Typical Activities Scales of Reading in English learning, teaching and assessment [6]. Kong Wen and Li Qinghua focused on the construct of a business English-speaking competence scale, which proposed a theoretical model composed of a descriptive scheme of descriptors and salient features of descriptors, with the aim of providing reference for developing a common business English scale in China [7]. Jin Yan and Jie Wei (2020) explored how impact studies of language proficiency scales can be conducted by using the Speaking Scale of the CSE (CSE-SS) as an example. After reviewing research on the worldwide application of language proficiency scales, introducing the intended purposes of the Speaking Scale of CSE and discussing the major challenges of its application, the author further proposed a framework for research on the impact of language proficiency scales and set out a research agenda for the CSE-SS impact studies [8]. Jia Yidong and Wu Zunmin expounded relevant theoretical and practice issues in establishing the Learning Strategy Scale of English Organizational Competence (EOC) in the CSE, thus providing a theoretical basis and practical guidance for the scale application. It defined the con-

struct of EOC, discussed the relationship between the EOC learning strategies and components in the framework of EOC, explained the design principles of the EOC Learning Strategy Scale and elaborated on the methods and process of the scale development. It also provided some suggestions for the future validation of the EOC Learning Strategy Scale [9]. Feng Li and Yan Ming addressed the theoretical issues of “description” by elaborating on its ontology, epistemology and methodology based on the development of the Translation Proficiency Scale of the CSE. It put forward three modes of Event, Action and Result for description, and provided a detailed analysis of the mode of Event and its elements. And the paper will inform the development of various language proficiency scales [10].

From a practical perspective, some scholars studied from some aspects such as the self-construction of CSE and linking the CSE with English tests. Deng Hua and Deng Jie validated the construct of the writing strategy scale of the CSE in terms of categories and proficiency levels of 49 descriptors. This study adopted exploratory factor analysis and Rasch analysis to analyze the data. The study showed the writing strategy scale of CSE has a satisfactory construct validity and the reasons for the problematic descriptors are unveiled and suggestions for the revision and application of the CSE writing strategy scale are provided [11]. Wu Sha explored the factors affecting the adoption of the CSE which was based on the theory of Grounded Theory. And the result showed that the CSE was adopted at various educational levels mainly for testing, teaching and learning resource building [12]. Xu Yi, Yang Yang and Mu Lei presented the quantitative and qualitative validation of descriptor levels in the Interpreting Scale of the CSE. The results of the many-faceted Rasch analysis show a moderate goodness of fit and adequate discrimination of the descriptors, which proved that to some extent the levels of the descriptors were appropriately targeted to the interpreting competence of the participants in validation [13]. Zhang Jie and Zhao Liang explored the validation of the listening ability descriptors of the CSE from learners’ perspective. It combined quantitative questionnaires and qualitative in-depth interviews in an attempt to investigate the students’ feedback on the use of the listening ability descriptors for China’s Standards of English. They found the students were mostly positive about the quality of the listening ability descriptors, and they were able to evaluate their listening ability by using the descriptors. However, some obvious deviations are found between the student’s interpretation of the descriptors and the designers’ intentions, mainly due to the deficiency in logic mainly due to the deficiency in logic, clarity, semantic structure and difficulty indicators of some descriptors and the student’s lack of relevant experience [14].

4. Conclusions

For this study, there are some limitations. First of all, it just summarizes recent year’s development. For the future study, more information on it can be ex-

plored. Secondly, this study just analyzes two aspects about CSE, more perspectives can be used in the future. Some comparisons about CSE with other scales can be listed in future studies.

The implementation of the CSE has a great influence on the assessment of English language ability, which can improve English learning, teaching and testing. Through this literature review, people can find the situation about CSE's application and self-development. On the other hand, people can also find some weakness when it is applied to practice, which provides opportunity for us to improve in the future.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Appendix (Abstract and Keywords in Chinese)

论《中国英语能力等级量表》——文献综述

摘要：在《中国英语能力等级量表》(以下简称《量表》)实施之前，我们国家一直没有一个统一的语言力量表，这对我们评估语言能力以及教学实施都具有局限性。2018年4月12日，我国教育部、国家语言文字工作委员会颁布了《中国英语能力等级量表》并于6月1日起开始实施。《量表》的实施不仅仅打破了我们国家语言能力评估缺失的局面，而且为衡量学习者的英语阅读能力提供了一个统一且系统的依据，也为英语阅读的学习和教师的教学提供了重要的参考价值。本文通过阐述《量表》产生的背景、实施以及在理论和实践方面的应用，为广大学者、教师以及学生提供了参考价值；为之后《量表》的发展以及应用提供了一定的理论方向。

关键词：《中国英语能力等级量表》，语言力量表，英语阅读