

Alignment of CSE with CEFR on Language Listening Ability of Intermediate User

Zhanglong Mao

School of Foreign Languages, University of Electronic Science and Technology of China, Chengdu, Sichuan, China

maozhanglong@qq.com

Keywords: CEFR, CSE, Alignment, Listening Ability

Abstract: Language ability scale is an essential tool to assess language competence. This paper compares and analyses the listening descriptors in CEFR and CSE. Intermediate users and learners of English make up the majority of college students in China. The paper discloses that Can-do descriptions is the common descriptions in both scales through qualitative research. Quantitative research reveals that ratio of descriptors distribution of same level is significant in CEFR B2 to CSE level 6 and CEFR B1 to CSE level 5. This study is corner stone for further alignment research between language proficiency standards. Language teachers and intermediate language users and learner, college students specifically, can refer to the results of study in training of listening comprehension.

1. Research background

Language ability is the starting point and foothold of language teaching and language testing. In order to do well in language teaching and language testing, people must clearly explain what language ability is and describe language ability. In the current development of language learning, teaching, and testing, language proficiency ability is widely acknowledged to be described in multidimensional approaches. On the basis of this analysis of the learning/teaching situation, it is seen as fundamentally important to define, clearly and explicitly, objectives which are worthwhile in terms of learner needs and realistic in terms of their characteristics and resources.

Two kinds of language proficiency scales are analyzed about its features in the paper. Alignment of two scales can be extremely useful and be applied by not only language teachers and learners but also textbook writers, examiners and publishers.

2. General Information of CEFR and CSE

2.1. Introduction of CEFR

The latest version of CEFR, short for Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment, was issued by Council of Europe in 2018. [1] CEFR has had a far reaching impact for language learning, teaching and assessing for Europe and even for the world. As a systematic summary of the theoretical and practical achievements of European language teaching for more than a century, the publication of CEFR not only has a significance of epoch-making milestone, but also points out the development direction of language teaching in the new century. It has become the most influential guiding document for language teaching in EU countries. At the same time, it also provides an important reference for countries or regions outside the EU to build a unified language ability evaluation system.

A frame of six broad levels is given by CEFR to cover different language proficiencies which are widely accepted by language learner, users, and teachers among European countries and many other places, such as Japan. Because CEFR is not simply a descriptor of English. The six levels are from A1 to C2 as follow, while they are also featured by three kinds of language users: basic user, independent user, and proficient user.

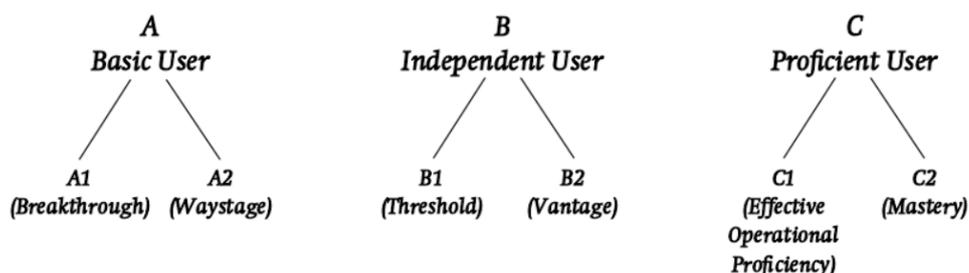


Figure 1 Six levels of CEFR language ability scales. [2]

2.2. Introduction of CSE

For a long time, there is no universal standard for Chinese English learners and users to adopt to. Chinese English learners and users can hardly tell their English levels due to lacking of a national standard unless they take TOFEL or ILES. After more than 3 years researching by over 400 experts and scholars in the field, China’s Standards of English Language Ability (The CSE) is developed by National Education Examinations Authority and Department of Language Information Management, Ministry of Education of the People’s Republic of China in 2018. [3]

China’s Standards of English Language Ability (the CSE) defines the levels of English ability of Chinese learners and users of English, and describes the features of their English language ability at each CSE level. English ability is classified by three stages – elementary stage, intermediate stage and advanced stage. And English competence is further divided into nine levels in detail, with every three levels corresponding to one stage. The CSE is also applicable to English assessment, and can be used as a yardstick for English teaching and learning as well.

CSE levels	
English ability development stages	Level
Advanced stage	Level 9
	Level 8
	Level 7
Intermediate stage	Level 6
	Level 5
	Level 4
Elementary stage	Level 3
	Level 2
	Level 1

Figure 2 Nine levels of CSE language ability scales. [3]

2.3. Listening Descriptors for College Students and Intermediate Learners and Users

This paper focus on alignment of listening abilities of intermediate language users (independent user) because they are formed by majority of language learners and users in college. At this stage, two different scales can be put together to be compared and analyzed. Recent study disclosed that CSE are relevant to CEFR in many aspects. If CSE can be aligned with CEFR in the listening parts, it is critical for English learners and users since measurement can be made in a more precise means. It also provides convenience for language teachers to frame test question and exams. This paper desires to find whether connection exists in listening comprehension descriptors with the 2 scales.

3. Comparison and Analysis on Listening Descriptor in CSE and CEFR

3.1. Similarities of Descriptors in CEFR and CSE

Some significant similarities are noticeable in two scales. Both scales use CAN DO approaches to illustrate language competences in listening comprehension thus comparison and analyse can be made reasonably and systematically. The CAN DO descriptors not only describe what type of interactive communication can be made by users or learners at a certain stage or level, but also it shows linguistic characteristic of language input and output.

At the beginning, 'Highly informative spoken discourse' in level 6 in CSE can be equal to 'propositionally and linguistically complex speech' in B2 in CEFR. These two descriptor intend to emphasis a complex listening situation in which listeners are involved in. Obtaining main ideas and supporting details in CSE level 5 is relevant to 'understanding the main points of standard speech, identifying both general messages and specific details' in CEFR B1. The 2 scales also include working situation in their descriptors. 'Understanding common interactions in the workplace' in CSE level 6 is a counterpart of 'understanding straightforward factual information about common everyday or job related topics' in CEFR B2.

What's more, the two scales believe that topic of listening materials must be familiar to listeners. Descriptors such as 'spoken discourse in his/her own field' in CSE level 6, 'spoken language on general topics' in CSE level 5, 'interactions on familiar topics' in CSE level 4, 'topic is reasonably familiar' in CEFR B2, 'technical discussions in his/her field of specialization' in B2, 'speech on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure' in B1. Appearance of these descriptors indicates that for intermediate level language users and learners, listening comprehension ability is closely related to how familiar the listeners are with topics of listening materials.

3.2. Discrepancies of Descriptors in CEFR and CSE

Due to different developing background, discrepancies are still obvious between the 2 scales. In the part of listening comprehension, speed of listening material is a very crucial factor in CSE. 'At a normal speed' in CSE level 6, 'Can understand spoken language delivered at a normal speed' in CSE level 4 are two examples of taking speed of listening materials into account, while there is no speed descriptor in CEFR. On the other hand, listening materials must be articulated and clear are mentioned in CEFR many times. Accent and dialect are considered important factors in CEFR which is more applicable in a real sense than speed of listening material. 'In a standard dialect' in CEFR B2 and 'in a generally familiar accent' in B1 descriptors reveal that CEFR take those language varieties seriously.

Listening for speaker's attitude, views and intentions appears several times in CSE. Descriptors can be seen in level 6: 'Identify the speakers' attitudes and intentions', and in level 4: 'identify speakers' views and intentions'. CEFR do not use same kind descriptor, it focuses on authenticity of language context. By using descriptors as: 'speech on both concrete and abstract topics' in B2, 'straightforward factual information about common every day or job related topics' in B1, 'understand enough to be able to meet needs of a concrete type' in B1, CEFR want its users can be more real situation oriented.

Some descriptors are unique when comparison is made on the 2 scales. One instance is that 'identify logical relationships and understand the cultural connotations of expressions', which is a special descriptor in CSE. CEFR do not consider culture factors and reasoning skills, maybe for the reason that CEFR developer are from EU countries and they are not aware of huge culture gaps may occur when CEFR is used in non- Indo European language family areas.

3.3. Alignment of CSE with CEFR on Language Listening Ability

Alignment can be found according to the previous comparison and analysis. CEFR and CSE are both developed based on the theory of Communicative Language Ability Model by Bachman and Palmer. [4] To demonstrate the communicative function of language, CEFR and CSE adopts an action-oriented approach to describe language competence, which treats language users and learners as social actors who perform communicative tasks in specific contexts or situations with specific language behaviours. Both CEFR and CSE belong to the behaviourally anchored rating scale, which

states that a person 's English proficiency level can be anchored by several typical linguistic behaviours, i.e., different levels of people have different ' linguistically capable things ' that can be specifically identified by voting by teachers and experts. The following charts shows the amount of descriptors of listening abilities in CSE and CEFR.

Table 1 Distribution of Listening Descriptors in CSE and CEFR, % Indicates Concentration Ratio of Descriptors.[5]

CEFR	A2	B1	B2
CSE5	55%		
CSE5	24%		
CSE6		21%	
CSE6			53%

To be more accurate, descriptors in CSE level 6 distribute more than one scale in CEFR. There are about 53% of descriptors can match descriptors in B2, some of the rest part is in B1, which takes about 21%. Other descriptors are unique in CSE. The same kind of distribution can be found in level 5 descriptors as well. About 55% of descriptors in level 5 aligns with B1 in CEFR. From comparison of similarities and discrepancies, descriptors in CSE level 6 can be aligned with that in CEFR B2 while descriptors in CSE level 5 can be aligned with that in CEFR B1. In most cases, strong similarity and relevance are presented in the description of these two levels. The essence of alignment is the comparison of descriptors in listening comprehension between CSE and CEFR.

4. Conclusion

This study establishes a correlation between CSE and the international scale CEFR, which is conducive to enhancing understanding of China 's foreign language proficiency assessment system in the world, and promotes mutual recognition of language proficiency assessment systems in different countries. It has implications for the construction and use of language standards, and has theoretical and practical significance for the development of foreign language teaching and testing in the new era.

Acquiring and mastering one or more second languages become a necessity for most people in the present era. CSE in China are applicable for its alignment with CEFR, language users and learners in China can figure out their language competences clearly and be aware of their language level both in China and in European countries. The alignment of CSE with CEFR provides a direct means to language learners and teachers from colleges in China. Teachers can find better approaches to explore their teaching methods, measurement and assessment. College students also benefit from the alignment if they want to study abroad or they just desire to improve their language competence. By using the CSE and CEFR at the same time to assess themselves, college students can build their confidence and belief that what they learn in class and out of class is not only to pass exams, but real improvement can be made in their language abilities.

References

- [1] Council of Europe. (2018) Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. Companion Volume with New Descriptors. <https://rm.coe.int/cefr-companion-volume-with-new-descriptors-2018/1680787989>.
- [2] Council of Europe. (2001) Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. 22-23.
- [3] Ministry of Education, National Language Working Committee. (2018) China's Standards of English Language Ability. 2-3.
- [4] Bachman, L., Palmer A. (1996) Designing and Developing Useful Language Tests. Language Testing in Practice, 71.

[5] Li Manli, Li Jiapan. (2020) Characteristics of Language Ability Scale at Home and Abroad. CHINA EXAMINATIONS,338.38-39.

Appendix

Listening comprehension level	CEFR descriptors	CSE descriptors
B2(CEFR) level 6(CSE)	<p>Can understand the main ideas of propositionally and linguistically complex speech on both concrete and abstract topics delivered in a standard dialect, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialization.</p> <p>Can follow extended speech and complex lines of argument provided the topic is reasonably familiar, and the direction of the talk is sign-posted by explicit markers.</p>	<p>Can understand highly-informative spoken discourse in his/her own field; summaries main ideas; and identify speakers' organizational patterns.</p> <p>Can understand common interactions in the workplace when produced at a normal speed; and identify the speakers' attitudes and intentions.</p>
B1(CEFR) level 5(CSE)	<p>Can understand straightforward factual information about common everyday or job related topics, identifying both general messages and specific details, provided speech is clearly articulated in a generally familiar accent.</p> <p>Can understand the main points of clear standard speech on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure etc., including short narratives.</p> <p>Can understand enough to be able to meet needs of a concrete type provided speech is clearly and slowly articulated.</p>	<p>Can understand spoken language on general topics when delivered at a normal speed; obtain main ideas and supporting details; identify logical relationships and understand the cultural connotations of expressions.</p> <p>Can understand radio, film, and TV programs on general topics and grasp main ideas.</p>
Level 4 (CSE)		<p>Can understand spoken language delivered at a normal speed on general topics that are of personal interest distinguish primary from secondary information based on discourse features; and grasp the main idea.</p> <p>Can understand interactions on familiar topics and identify speakers' views and intentions.</p>