Research on CEFR and Application in Business English Assessment

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Abstract: This paper mainly describes the application of CEFR (European common language reference framework) in Business English assessment. This paper introduces the basic framework and construction principles of CEFR, including its language activity description and grading system based on behavior oriented method. This paper expounds the application of CEFR in language teaching, learning and testing, and points out that CEFR has a high degree of overlap and reference value in Business English evaluation. This paper discusses the factors and methods to be considered in the construction of business English evaluation system, including needs analysis and data collection. It points out the application and influence of CEFR in Europe and other regions as a unified reference standard for language competence.

1. Introduction

With the interaction between China and other countries in the fields of politics, economy, technology, and social development, the requirements for foreign language proficiency are becoming increasingly diversified, work-based, and professional. ESP education has also begun to flourish and become a hot topic in the current reform of English education in Chinese colleges and universities.

Business English, as one of the most important branches of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), not only needs to be studied by undergraduate students majoring in Business English, but also by non-English major college students for their future practical work. Business English is a basic course which combines both language training and general business knowledge. It is one of significant programs for non-English major undergraduate students both to increase their practical English ability and to achieve their all-around development purposes. Learning of Business English involves the training of English skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Business English is not only a bridge and link for students to enter the future workplace, but also a powerful pillar for English learners to study abroad and improve their daily cross-cultural communication skills. Colleges are constantly deepening its teaching reforms and emphasizing cultivation of all-round students.

Due to the lack of macro guidance policies and quality standards, ESP teaching in China is still in a state of no guidelines or rules to follow. There are problems such as vague teaching objectives, arbitrary classroom teaching, and lack of evaluation systems, which seriously limit the further development of ESP. Meanwhile, there is also a lack of emphasis on the Business English Proficiency Scale and Level Evaluation System in China. It is urgent to develop a unified and standardized Business English proficiency level scale, scientifically divide the Business English language proficiency level, and provide systematic and clear competency standards reference and guidance for Business English teaching, learning, and evaluation.

The most widely used and extensively researched language scale in the world is the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). Since its introduction in 2001, CEFR has become an important guiding document in the field of foreign language teaching in various European countries, and is playing an increasingly important role in global language education and testing. This paper introduces the content and structure of CEFR, as well as focuses on analysing its advantages and disadvantages, and explores the scientific principles and methods for constructing the Business English competency level scale in China, in order to provide inspiration for future Business English scale construction.

2. Background Introduction of CEFR

As a multi-ethnic and multilingual region, language testing institutions in various European countries had their own systems, and descriptions of language proficiency levels varied. People often explore: what is the meaning of a person's level on a language test certificate, what abilities do they possess, and is the certificate obtained in different countries comparable? With the breaking of barriers between EU countries and the increasing cross-border mobility of human resources, establishing a unified evaluation standard for foreign language proficiency has become an urgent issue that needs to be addressed.

CEFR is mainly developed by the Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE), following the common standards established by ALTE members. ALTE was founded in 1990 and currently has 34 members, offering exams in 27 languages. ALTE members are mainly authoritative institutions for language exams in various European countries, including the University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations in the UK, Test Def Institute in Germany, Alliance Francaise in France, and Instituto Cervantes de la Universidad de Salamanca in Spain. The main task of ALTE is to evaluate the quality and fairness of exams provided by member organizations; to develop common standards for language testing at each stage, including project development, proposition, exam implementation, grading, score reporting, exam analysis, and comprehensive reporting; to improve language testing in various countries through joint projects, sharing best practices, and organizing professional group activities; to provide training on language testing and assessment work; to facilitate cross-border recognition of language certificates in European countries [1].

CEFR was passed by a resolution of the European Commission in November 2001. As a common standard and important basis for organizing language teaching and proficiency exams, it provides benchmarks for European countries to guide teaching, textbooks designing, and implementing exams in language learning [2]. As a practical tool, CEFR sets clear phased standards for language learning, allowing for a set of comparable methods for evaluating language learning outcomes across different countries and languages. Language proficiency certificates can be mutually recognized, making business communication more convenient, and the flow of human resources more convenient.

Currently, CEFR is internationally recognized as an authoritative scale, and many examination institutions associate its examination items with it. The level standards for exams (such as the Bosch and Cambridge Business English Certificate) launched by the ESOL Examination Center at the University of Cambridge are set according to the CEFR level standards.

3. Feature Analysis and Evaluation of CEFR

The Common Reference Framework for European Languages: Learning, Teaching, and Evaluation, was developed over a decade by linguists from 41 countries organized by the European Council in the context of European integration. Formulated by the European Council, CEFR is a unified framework for language teaching and evaluation in Europe, providing a common theoretical basis and unified reference standards for language teaching planning, curriculum design, language testing, and textbook development across Europe.

3.1 Theoretical Foundation

The theoretical foundation of CEFR came from continuous study by linguists. The theories of pragmatic competence and communicative language competence have created theoretical foundation for the establishment of CEFR. The concept of "pragmatic competence" was first proposed by Chomsky, who distinguished between grammatical competence and pragmatic competence. The former belongs to linguistic information, while the latter belongs to non-linguistic information, including personal information on using and understanding sentences, background knowledge, etc. Pragmatic competence refers to the use of language resources and the contextual and discourse generating functions in interactive communication, including discourse function and discourse ability. Thomas and Leech (1983) proposed "pragmatic language ability" and "social pragmatic ability". The former refers to the ability to use language rules based on grammatical ability and correctly use

language forms to implement a communicative function in a certain context, while the latter refers to the higher-level pragmatic ability, which refers to the ability to follow social rules of language use for appropriate communication. Pragmatic competence is an important component of communicative competence, which largely determines the success of communication. Bachman proposed a communicative language ability model, which explains that language ability includes organizational ability and pragmatic ability, among which pragmatic ability is divided into action ability and social language ability. CFER adopts and applies the basic language communication model, which aims to cultivate learners' ability to use language for communication, including language proficiency, sociolinguistic competence, and pragmatic competence. CEFR highlights the importance of pragmatic competence and the dynamism of language use. In CEFR, discourse ability refers to the mastery of discourse tone, discourse mode, and discourse coherence, including speech acts, conversational meanings, and idioms.

3.2 Content and Structure

The scale is based on the theory of communicative language ability, and adopts a basic framework of behaviour oriented methods to describe language activities as "Can do". It is systematically developed using a combination of intuitive, qualitative, and quantitative research methods. Due to the different requirements of different populations for language proficiency level scales, Alderson (1991) classified language proficiency level scales into three categories: user oriented, evaluator oriented, and instructional and test oriented. Its essence is a guiding document consisting of 9 chapters, totalling over 260 pages. Among them, Chapters 1-3 introduce the development purpose and concept of CEFR; Chapters 4-5 are the core content of CEFR, which lists over fifty informative scales to comprehensively and systematically describe the language proficiency levels of foreign language learners from different dimensions; Chapters 6-19 discuss the application of CEFR in language teaching, learning, and testing.

CEFR has two dimensions: quality and quantity. The quality dimension refers to a descriptive system for grading language activities; The quantitative dimension is the application of different types of reference levels that matching language activities at all levels. CEFR comprehensively divides the language application environment into three categories: social/travel, work, and learning, based on the required abilities, relevant knowledge and skills, and communication situations and fields. It provides a detailed description of the typical practical communication abilities that learners should possess from the perspectives of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. CEFR divides language proficiency into three levels: A- basic level, B- independent use, and C- proficient use; Each level is further divided into two levels, A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, and C2, forming a total of six levels. (appendix)

On the basis of system description, CEFR has more detailed Can Do statements for different types and environments. For example, in terms of describing listening ability, for telephone activities, the description is as follows: Making and Answering phone calls, Taking phone messages/notes; Environment: workplace (office, factory, etc.), residence, hotel room, etc.; Language skills: listening/speaking; Level: A1: Not applicable; A2: Can record simple messages; Can make external phone calls and deliver simple and prepared information, such as: "Mr. X's flight has been delayed and he will arrive this afternoon."; B1: Can record slightly complex messages with clear explanations from the speaker; B2: Can record or dictate daily messages, in situations where the other party's expression is unclear, they can request clarification or explanation, and only occasionally have misunderstandings about the content; C1: Can achieve most communication purposes using the phone; C2: Can confidently communicate over the phone, even if the sound quality is poor or the speaker's voice is not standard.

3.3 Advantages and Innovation

The structure of CEFR's descriptive framework, the classification of descriptive language levels and the target of using the scale have made breakthroughs, which greatly improves the scientific nature and professionalism of the scale, and further promotes the development of the theory and

practice of the construction of the language competence scale, laying the foundation for CEFR's world influence.

Theoretically, CEFR has absorbed the research results of linguistics and pragmatics over the years and scientifically built its descriptive structure, which can be described as a milestone achievement in the development of linguistics in recent years.

In terms of structure, based on the reality of language teaching and social needs, CEFR developers extensively investigated the typical language learning and using tasks of foreign language learners, and finally determined more than 30 typical language activities, which were classified into the description system of the scale framework such as Input, Interaction and Output.

CEFR also broke the Convention in terms of descriptive language collection and grade setting. Previous scales were developed in a top-down way. Language experts or teachers determined descriptors and their order based on subjective judgment and selection, and there was no evidence of validity. The collection of CEFR descriptors uses a real corpus as the material, and the scientific nature is greatly guaranteed. In the process of quantifying descriptors, CEFR developers used Rasch model, an advanced statistical tool, to analyse and verify the ability levels and stability corresponding to each descriptor, and selected the most effective descriptors to be included in each parameter item of the scale framework, which not only ensured the professionalism and reliability of the scale classification, but also created a scientific and technological route for developing the scale based on the language ability descriptor library. From the construction of the scale framework to the collection, adaptation and writing of the descriptive language, each step has been carefully demonstrated, with full reference to expert opinions and empirical data analysis results.

Thanks to its solid theoretical foundation and scientific and technological route, CEFR has not only broken through the functional limitations of a single scale, but also expanded the concept of the language competence scale to the guidelines and action programs in the field of foreign language teaching and evaluation, and has become a unified competence reference standard for European countries to formulate syllabus, plan courses, compile textbooks, and develop examinations. In recent years, countries and regions outside Europe have also begun to study and apply CEFR, or try to introduce CEFR into the local language teaching system, or carry out the research on the aligning of localized examinations and competency standards with CEFR. According to the official website of the Japanese language proficiency test (JLPT), the CEFR level reference will be marked on the Japanese language proficiency test certificate from 2025. China launched the China's standards of English language ability (the CSE) scale in 2018, and some researchers began to introduce the aligning relationship between CSE and CEFR.

4. Application of CEFR in Business English Assessment

Business English is the most important branch of ESP, and the lack of its scale is a great regret for business English Teaching in Colleges and universities in China. From the above analysis, we can find that CEFR's evaluation system for business English has a high degree of overlap and reference. The establishment of business English scale can be developed according to the idea of CEFR. The typical language activities in the business English scale should be highly practical, can be described hierarchically, and have good scalability [3]. It is an effective method to imitate CEFR to carry out requirement analysis to determine these language activities. When conducting demand analysis, a variety of research methods can be used, such as questionnaire survey, interview, observation, text analysis, etc.; Diversified data sources are also very important and critical. The data should fully involve business English learners and teachers. In addition, the corpus of practitioners and industry experts, English recruitment from the human market, and the requirements of state-owned enterprises, private enterprises and foreign enterprises on the foreign language ability of employees should be taken into account. On the other hand, business English communicative activities are often endless, because each language activity can be divided into activities and genres, producing a series of activities. For example, the activity of "writing a report" can be divided into "writing a business plan report" and "writing a market analysis report". If all subdivision activities are included in the scope of the scale, the whole scale evaluation system will be too cumbersome; On the contrary, if the

language activities in the business English scale are too general, it will reduce the practical guiding value of the scale. Therefore, it is necessary to refer to CEFR when building the framework, balance the refinement and operability of the scale, and constantly adjust and revise the scale according to the actual situation in the development process.

5. Conclusion

Business English is widely offered in colleges and universities at all levels in China, which shows that both colleges and higher vocational colleges are aware of the importance of this course. Different levels of teaching and learning have different needs for improving and mastering Business English ability. Due to the lack of business English ability evaluation system, a small number of learners can only seek the help of foreign scales and tests. For example, the Business English Certificate (BEC) and the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) from the United States. These examinations are developed based on different political, economic and linguistic environments from China, and cannot fully meet the needs of China's social, economic and linguistic development. Because the teaching and evaluation of Business English is in a state of no rules to follow at the time, energy and learning resources of learners are wasted in many cases. Referring to the most mature and influential development method of CEFR scale, it is an urgent undertaking to establish the Business English evaluation scale in China.

References

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[2] Council of Europe. (2001) Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment. 22-23.

[3] Serafini,J. E. (2015) Needs Analysis for Specialized Learner Populations: Essential Methodological Improvements. English for Specific Purposes, 12-21 .

Appendix. Common Reference Levels: global scale

Proficient User	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarise information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognise implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organisational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
Independent User	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes and ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g. very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography,

Basic User		employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.