

# Comparative Study Between International and Domestic English Proficiency Standards From a Diachronic Perspective

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**Abstract**—This paper intends to explore the relationship between international English-language proficiency scales and the English teaching syllabus for domestic universities by comparing their objectives, standards and definitions of proficiency. The results show that the development of English proficiency standards in China is always accompanied by the evolution of international language proficiency theory, and combined with its practical application in various countries. It is suggested that the college-level standard of English proficiency in China should be set based on the research of domestic and international scholars and organizations on language proficiency scales. At the same time, by drawing lessons from proficiency scales and adapting them to the English language scales used in China, a standard, comprehensive language proficiency system for teaching English can be established.

**Index Terms**—language proficiency scales (standards), English teaching syllabus, language competence, diachronic comparison

## I. INTRODUCTION

Language proficiency scales, also known as language competence standards, are used to describe a person's facility for a certain language (Han, 2006). Such scales first appeared in the United States in the 1950s, before being developed in Australia, Canada and Europe. Since the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Ministry of Education has promulgated a college-level English syllabus to guide national public education in English. Different versions appeared in the early 1960s, the early and mid-1980s, the late 1990s and the early 21st century, respectively. The required language competence standards of non-English college students in China are reflected in the teaching requirements of each stage of the College English Syllabus. This paper examines the historical evolution of both international language proficiency scales and the domestic College English Syllabus, comparing their objectives and definitions of language competence, assessing how and why they have changed, and suggesting ways in which they can be further developed.

## II. LANGUAGE COMPETENCE AND LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY SCALE

The development of an English language teaching syllabus in China can be traced historically in the academic literature, from US and European theories about linguistic competence to more recent diachronic studies in China comparing domestic and international language proficiency scales.

### A. Language Competence

International research on the issue of language competence dates back at least 70 years. Chomsky (1965) first proposed the concepts of "linguistic competence" and "linguistic performance". He believed that the first of these is the language knowledge mastered by the speaker or listener under the optimal conditions.

On the basis of Chomsky's ideas, Hymes (1973) elaborated a theory of "communicative competence", which accounts for issues such as grammatical competence, practical language use, appropriateness in a social context and the needs for language use. Bachmann (1990) further proposed a "communicative language competence" model, which includes elements such as language competence, strategic competence and the psychological mechanism. In addition, Halliday (1994) put forward the concept of "discourse competence" from the perspective of functionalism.

Chinese scholars have advanced theories and models of English competence based on linguistic, psychological and socio-cultural theory. For example, Dai (2002) points out that international language competence consists of an abstract declarative knowledge system and an automatic procedural knowledge system, as well as the practical application of language in the general sense.

Many scholars have focused on this aspect of practical application. Both Han (2006) and Yang et al. (2011) have successively proposed the formulation of a unified national English-language proficiency scale. In addition, Zhao et al. (2014) have suggested a framework for college-level English language competence from the perspective of social cognition. This integrates cognitive competence (language knowledge), functional competence (language skills), strategic competence (learning strategies) and social competence (critical thinking ability, etc.).

Li (2016) has also constructed an English language competence model for non-English majors in colleges and universities, which covers areas such as grammatical competence, communicative competence, language proficiency, sociolinguistic competence and cross-cultural communication competence.

### *B. Diachronic Comparison of International Language Proficiency Scales*

The development of a national English-language proficiency model has involved the study of similar schemes used abroad. Han (2006), for example, has introduced several influential language proficiency scales: Interagency Language Roundtable Scale (ILR), American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), International Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ISLPR), Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE), Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) and The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

On the whole, however, most scholars have reviewed local models on their own terms. Zhao et al. (2014) have analysed several college English syllabuses adopted since the founding of the People's Republic of China, based on the framework of language competence. Liu and Lu (2015) have also compared and interpreted the framework and content of four major versions of the College English Syllabus from a diachronic perspective. Wang et al. (2015), meanwhile, have conducted a quantitative and qualitative analysis of teaching targets, requirements, evaluations and a form of self-evaluation/mutual assessment on students' English competence from the perspective of language competency standards. They point out several defects when it comes to the theoretical basics, methods and definitions of language competence.

In their review of the English teaching syllabus over the past half century, Zhao et al. (2015) point out that the development of language competence standards has gone through three stages, namely "expert experience", "practitioner cognition" and "learner performance". Li et al. (2019) have further identified seven stages in college-level English development over the past 70 years, namely shrinkage, recovery, stagnation, recovery, stability, reform and deepening. They have analysed the relevant literature for both "teaching objectives" and "teaching methods" in eight versions of the College English Syllabus.

Data-driven research on the academic corpus is an inevitable trend in the development of language proficiency standards. Based on the model of needs analysis in international language learning, Yu (2016) has reviewed the objectives of the College English Syllabus in terms of language, society and the individual since the 1980s.

In summary, some Chinese scholars have combed the international literature regarding English language standards from different perspectives, but most have only analysed domestic standards of English competence when discussing domestic English syllabuses. There are few studies which compare international language competence scales and domestic college-level English competence standards from a historical perspective. The aim of this study is to fill that research gap.

## III. DEVELOPMENT PROCESS OF COLLEGE ENGLISH SYLLABUS IN CHINA

According to Li, Xing and Wang (2019), this paper divides the development process of the College English Syllabus in China into three stages: the initial stage, development stage, revision stage and reform stage.

### *A. Initial Stage (1956-1965)*

From 1956 to 1965, several English teachers had to teach Russian because it was the first international language for non-English majors in most colleges and universities. In 1956, the Ministry of Education promulgated the Notice on the Foreign Language Department of Middle School. In 1962, the trial draft of English Teaching Syllabus was formulated by Shanghai Jiao Tong University. It was applicable to various majors of five-year undergraduate education majors in higher industrial school. It was revised by the Compilation and Review Committee of Foreign Language Curriculum Materials in Higher Industrial School and officially promulgated and implemented by the Ministry of Education in 1963. However, after 1966, English education, which had just begun to develop, was once again in jeopardy.

### *B. Development Stage (1978-1986)*

From 1978 to 1986, college-level English education in China came to be regarded as important after the reform and opening up of the country. In 1980, a draft of the English Teaching Syllabus was formulated by the China Public Foreign Language Teaching Association and the National Committee of Public Foreign Language Teaching Materials for Science and Engineering in Colleges and Universities in 1980. Suggestions for revising the English Teaching Syllabus of Science and Engineering Colleges were put forward at a meeting of public English course in colleges and universities in 1982. From 1985 to 1986, the College English Syllabus for Undergraduates of Science and Engineering in Colleges and Universities and the College English Syllabus for Undergraduates of Arts and Sciences in Colleges and Universities were successively promulgated by the State Education Commission. The contents included teaching objects, teaching objectives, teaching requirements, teaching arrangements and several problems and tests to be covered through college-level English teaching.

### *C. Revision Stage (1996 -2002)*

The National Foreign Language Teaching Advisory Board under the Ministry of Education, the team conducting the project entitled "Research and Practice on the Reform of College English Teaching Content and Curriculum System for

the 21st Century”, began to revise the syllabus in 1996. The revised College English Syllabus for Undergraduates, which merged 1985 and 1986 syllabus and made some adjustments and additions, was issued by the Ministry of Education in 1999.

#### D. Reform Stage (2003-2020)

To keep up with the development of the international situation in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the reform of college-level English teaching has been officially launched. The trial version of the Teaching Requirements for College English Courses was issued by the Higher Education Department of the Ministry of Education in 2004. After a trial period of three years, it was officially published and promoted in 2007. The contents included nature and objectives of teaching, teaching requirements, curriculum setting, teaching model, teaching evaluation and teaching management. Based on the achievements of reforms for college-level English teaching, the formulation of the College English Teaching Guide was initiated in 2013. A draft of the College English Teaching Guide was first released in 2015, and the guide was officially issued in 2017. The contents included nature and orientation of curriculum, teaching objectives and requirements, curriculum setting, evaluation and testing, teaching methods and means, teaching resources, teaching management and teacher development. The latest edition of the College English Teaching Guide was released in 2020 and organically integrated the relevant contents of the China English Proficiency Scale in terms of teaching objectives and requirements.

### IV. A COMPARATIVE STUDY BETWEEN INTERNATIONAL AND DOMESTIC COLLEGE ENGLISH PROFICIENCY STANDARDS

#### A. Initial Period (1950s to 1960s)

TABLE 1  
OBJECTIVES AND DEFINITIONS IN INITIAL PERIOD

Year	Scales or Standards	Objectives	Definitions
1955	Foreign Service Institute (FSI)	Foreign language spoken proficiency of deployed military personnel	Speaking
1963	English Teaching Syllabus (trial draft) (1963 syllabus for short)	Professional reading proficiency on English books	Reading

##### 1. Objectives

The Foreign Service Institute (FSI) of the US developed a series of scales to assess the international language spoken proficiency of deployed military personnel in 1955. The system was adopted by other departments of the U.S. government and renamed the Interagency Language Roundtable Scale (ILR).

The 1963 syllabus in China emphasized the cultivation of reading proficiency with the purpose of laying a solid language foundation for students to read professional English books and periodicals in the future. From the point of view of its objectives, the ILR was originally intended to assess the oral competency of military personnel in international language. By contrast, China’s English syllabus was mainly aimed at reading proficiency.

##### 2. Definitions

The measures of language proficiency in ILR consist of 0 to 5 levels. 0 means no English, 1 is basic level, 2 is the limited work application level, 3 is an ordinary expert level, 4 is advanced expert and 5 is the highest level. 0+, 1+, 2+, 3+ and 4+ indicate that a person’s language proficiency is well above this level but does not fully meet the next level, so in practice the scale actually has 11 levels.

Take level 3, for example. Students are able to speak a language with sufficient structural accuracy and vocabulary, effectively participate in most dialogue on practical, social and professional topics, and reasonably and easily discuss specific interests and specialist areas in which they have some authority.

The 1963 syllabus in China describes language proficiency in terms of two dimensions, namely basic knowledge and skills of language. These qualitatively describe the proficiency of listening, speaking, reading and translation in terms of “can do”, as well as simply quantifying a person’s vocabulary, their reading volume and speed, and translation volume and speed.

In terms of language proficiency, ILR uses hierarchical standards and its definitions are mainly qualitative. There is no hierarchy in the 1963 syllabus, which combines both qualitative and quantitative descriptions.

#### B. Development Period (1970s to 1980s)

TABLE 2  
OBJECTIVES AND DEFINITIONS IN DEVELOPMENT PERIOD

Year	Scales or standards	Objectives	Definitions
1983	American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL)	Common language proficiency standards	Listening, speaking, reading and writing
1980	English Teaching Syllabus (draft) (1980 syllabus for short)	Professional reading proficiency on English books	Reading
1985 1986	College English Teaching Syllabus (1985 or 1986 syllabus for short)	Strong reading, certain listening and translating and preliminary writing and speaking proficiency	Reading, listening, translation, writing and speaking

### 1. Objectives

With the support of the US Department of Education, the Educational Testing Service (ETS) and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Language (ACTFL) jointly developed a set of standard items of universal proficiency for language teaching in 1983.

Building on the 1963 syllabus, the teaching objectives in the revised 1980 syllabus were divided into basic and professional reading stages. For the basic English teaching stage, the purpose is to lay a solid language foundation for students to read English scientific books and periodicals. For the professional reading stage, students should be able to read professional English books and periodicals smoothly.

The teaching objective in the 1985 syllabus is to cultivate students' strong reading proficiency, certain listening and translating proficiency as well as preliminary writing and speaking proficiency, so that students can use English as a tool to obtain professional information, and lay a good foundation for further improving their knowledge in English. The 1986 syllabus omits the proficiency of "translation" and retains the basic and professional reading stage. The teaching objectives of the two syllabuses still put reading first and emphasize the instrumental nature of English.

In terms of objectives, ACTFL is a language proficiency scale for international language teaching, which describes listening, speaking, reading and writing skills respectively, and describes language proficiency from the perspective of what language users can do with the target language (Han, 2006). The English syllabuses of 1980, 1985 and 1986 began to set targets on a hierarchical basis, focusing on reading skills, supplemented by other language skills such as listening, translating, writing and speaking.

### 2. Definitions

There are five levels of language proficiency (listening, speaking, reading and writing), that is, novice, intermediate, advanced, superior and distinguished, in ACTFL. Each of these levels is subdivided into low, mid or high. It describes the language level as a specific range of proficiency and describes the "can-do" and "cannot do statement" of an individual at each level.

The 1980 syllabus describes language proficiency according to the two aspects of knowledge and skills in the teaching requirements. Vocabulary and reading ability are described qualitatively and quantitatively from the basic and professional levels; listening, speaking and writing skills are described simply and qualitatively using "can do".

The 1985 and 1986 syllabuses inherited the classification of the basic stage and professional reading stage from the 1980 syllabus. In both, the basic stage is divided into basic and higher requirements. The teaching objectives are further specified according to the entrance level of students. At the basic stage of language, pronunciation is added, the vocabulary requirements are greatly improved, and a description of grammar is added. Phonetics, vocabulary and grammar are described both qualitatively and quantitatively. Skills (listening, writing, speaking, translation) are qualitatively described as "can do". The definition of the professional reading stage includes a brief description of vocabulary, reading and translation. It reflects the ultimate goal of cultivating students' proficiency in communication.

In terms of definitions, the language proficiency indicators of ACTFL are primarily knowledge and skills. However, it only describes the four aspects of listening, speaking, reading and writing, lacking overall indicators (Han & Chang, 2011). China's English syllabuses for 1980, 1985 and 1986 follow the same pattern.

### C. Period of Communicative Language Competence (1990s)

TABLE 3  
OBJECTIVES AND DEFINITIONS IN PERIOD OF COMMUNICATIVE LANGUAGE COMPETENCE

Year	Scales or standards	Objectives	Definitions
1994	Association of Language Testers in Europe (ALTE)	Unified international language proficiency standards	Listening, speaking, reading and writing
1995	International Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ISLPR)	Second language and international language proficiency standards for adolescents and adults	Listening, speaking, reading and writing
1996	Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB)	English proficiency standards for adult immigrants, would-be immigrants, or applicants for citizenship	Listening, speaking, reading and writing
1999	College English Syllabus (revised edition) (1999 syllabus for short)	Strong reading and certain listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation proficiency	Listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation

### 1. Objectives

In 1994, to devise a unified set of international language proficiency standards, the Cambridge University Examinations (UCLES) set up the European Association of Language Testers (EPTA), an association of language testers in eight European countries. In 1995, the Australian Second Language Proficiency Scale changed its name to the International Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ISLPR). In 1996, Canada developed Canadian Language Benchmarks to define and measure the English language proficiency of adult immigrants, would-be immigrants, or applicants for citizenship.

The teaching objective of the 1999 syllabus in China was to develop students with strong reading skills and a certain level of listening, speaking, reading, writing and translating abilities to enable them to communicate information in English. College-level English teaching should help students to lay a solid language foundation, master good language-learning methods, and improve their cultural literacy to meet the needs of social development and economic construction.

In terms of objectives, the proficiency scales formulated both by international institutions and for domestic teaching requirements in China have become highly diversified by this point. For example, the ISLPR includes two parts: a scale of specialized purpose, as well as general language proficiency. The ratings are mainly used to assess candidates' personal international language (second language) proficiency. Meanwhile, the theoretical framework of the CLB in Canada includes practical knowledge, grammatical knowledge, textual knowledge, functional knowledge and sociolinguistic knowledge.

### 2. Definitions

The ALTE takes the form of "statements that can be made", each statement more simply outlining what learners can do at each level. There are four sections of interest: general, social/travel, work and study, ranging from 'Breakthrough Level' to 'Level 5', corresponding to CEFR levels A1 to C2.

The ISLPR has six main levels, ranging from 0 (zero proficiency) to 5 (native-like proficiency). There are 12 grades, including intermediate plus and minus categories. The ISLPR covers listening, speaking, reading and writing, of which eight levels are described in detail.

The CLB includes a 12-point task-based descriptor of language competence that defines the continuous level of communication achievements for English learners. The CLB's 12 benchmarks are divided into three parts: stage 1 (basic level), stage 2 (intermediate level) and stage 3 (advanced level). The Canadian benchmarks cover four skills: listening, speaking, reading and writing.

The teaching objectives of China's 1999 syllabus are divided into a basic stage, an application and improvement stage. The basic stage is the same as in the 1986 syllabus, which is divided into basic requirements and higher requirements. The language foundation and skills have been improved compared with the 1986 version, however. The language skills and basic language knowledge are described according to CET-4 and CET-6. For example, the speed of reading is 70 words per minute; the speed of listening in CET-4 is 130 to 150 words per minute and CET-6 is 150 to 170 words per minute. The descriptions of speaking ability are more detailed. The ability of writing in CET-4 is 120 to 150 words, and CET-6 is 150 to 180 words. The ability of Chinese-English translation is added in 1999 syllabus. The vocabulary for CET-4 and CET-6 is 4,200 words and 5,500 words. Some 1,000 words have been added as vocabulary for the advanced English level.

### D. Multicompetence Period (21st century)

TABLE 4  
OBJECTIVES AND DEFINITIONS IN MULTICOMPETENCE PERIOD

Year	Scales or Standards	Objectives	Definitions
2001	Common Scale of European Language Proficiency (CEFR)	Common reference standards for language teaching and assessment	listening, speaking, reading and writing.
2004 2007	Teaching Requirements for College English Courses (2004/2007 teaching requirements for short)	Comprehensive application proficiency, independent learning proficiency, comprehensive cultural literacy	listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation
2015 2017 2020	College English Teaching Guides (2015/2017/2020 teaching guides for short)	Application proficiency, intercultural communication awareness, independent learning proficiency, cultural literacy	listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation

### 1. Objectives

In 2001, the European Commission published the Common Scale of European Language Proficiency (CEFR) in order to establish a useful reference standard for language proficiency that can be recognized and adopted by European countries. The scale focuses on the practical application of language, with the more detailed definition of specific “can-do statement” language behaviour, rather than the rigid requirements of vocabulary and grammar.

The 2004 and 2007 teaching requirements in China shift to cultivate a more comprehensive proficiency in language application, especially in listening and speaking ability. Meanwhile, it enhances the independent learning proficiency and comprehensive cultural literacy.

From the perspective of individual, society and national development, the 2015, 2017 and 2020 teaching guides both propose students’ application proficiency, intercultural communication awareness, independent learning proficiency, cultural literacy, etc., and more attention is paid to the comprehensive development of students’ linguistic abilities.

In terms of objectives, both domestic and international language proficiency sales emphasize the achievement of comprehensive proficiency standards, such as practical application proficiency, intercultural communication proficiency, cultural literacy, etc.

### 2. Definitions

The CEFR divides the language proficiency of learners into three levels: level A (beginner stage), level B (independent stage) and level C (proficient stage). Below each of these levels, there are two further levels: A1 and A2, B1 and B2, and C1 and C2. For example, language proficiency at the B1 intermediate level is defined as “can understand their encounters in work, learning environment, leisure environment, and so on” (CEFR, 2001).

The 2004 and 2007 teaching requirements divided students’ proficiency into three levels: general, higher and highest requirements. For each level, qualitative definitions were set as the main criterion, quantitative definitions as the auxiliary criterion, and the overall goal of comprehensive application ability (listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation) was more clearly defined.

The 2015, 2017 and 2020 teaching guides put forward three objectives for students’ proficiency, including basic ability, improvement ability and development ability. The standards of each proficiency (listening, speaking, reading, writing and translation) are described in detail.

In terms of definitions of language proficiency, comprehensive proficiency is described hierarchically in qualitative ways, both at home and abroad. All of them take “can do” as their primary definition, and elaborate in detail the standards reached by each level and each ability. In the 21st century, the theory of language proficiency has developed in various ways, including academic language proficiency, sociolinguistic proficiency, intercultural communicative proficiency and cultural proficiency.

## V. CONCLUSION

The development of an English proficiency standard in China is not isolated, but has an interactive relationship with the development of language proficiency scales elsewhere in the world. It has always been accompanied by the development of international language proficiency theory and combined with the practical application of that theory in various countries.

At the initial stage of development, it can be seen that China and other countries have their own language proficiency scales, and that the objectives of these scales are based on the different language development needs of their respective peoples. Since there is no theoretical basis for communicative language competence at this stage, the formulation of standards both at home and abroad is still in its infancy. Objectives and definitions are mainly based on the subjective classification of experts, and simple qualitative or quantitative descriptions. No clear language competence standards have been formed at this point.

At the second stage of development, the communicative language competence theory represented by Hymes begins to play a role. At this point, historically, the language proficiency scale and national English teaching syllabus developed rapidly in China, with the characteristics of their changes following the direction of communicative language competence.

At the third stage, language proficiency scales were introduced in many international countries and the syllabus of English teaching in China was revised. These changes followed the direction of communicative language proficiency systems and models, respectively.

At stage four in the further development of linguistic theory, the communicative language competence model suggested by Bachman has made great progress, and the CLA model of language competence has become a theoretical system. The language proficiency scale adopted by many EU countries has promoted the practical application of this theoretical system, and the English teaching syllabus in China has entered a period of deepening reform accordingly.

This study therefore suggests that the College English Teaching syllabus in China should set language proficiency standards based on the research of both domestic and international scholars and organizations on language proficiency. The standard of English proficiency should be improved by referring to international language proficiency scales and adapting them to form a Chinese English Proficiency Scale.

This study applies only to international language proficiency scales and the English syllabus as taught at the college-level in China; it does not concern such standards in primary and secondary schools. In the future, we aim to further explore the origin of Chinese English proficiency standards, international language proficiency scales and linguistic proficiency theory, in order to provide reference for the formulation of language proficiency standards or scales at home and abroad.

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