A Comparative Study of the Chinese Proficiency Grading Standards for International Chinese Language Education and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

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ABSTRACT

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| **Aims:** Language is the key to understanding a country and its culture, and standards are crucial for mastering a language. Based on the current state of global language education cooperation and exchange, this paper explores the differences in language proficiency descriptions between the Chinese Proficiency Grading Standards for International Chinese Language Education (CPGSICLE) and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), both of which hold significant positions in academia.  **Methodology:** A comparative analysis from multiple perspectives was used in the study.  **Results:** By comparing and analyzing the similarities and differences in their descriptor system construction, descriptive perspectives, and core features, the study reveals that the CPGSICLE excels in quantitative evaluation and highlighting the unique features of the Chinese language, while the CEFR demonstrates outstanding strengths in cross-language comparison and the description of communicative competence.  **Conclusion:** This research provides essential references for language teaching and assessment practices, contributing to the comprehensive evaluation and effective improvement of students’ language proficiency. |

*Keywords: analysis of descriptor differences; Chinese Proficiency Grading Standards for International Chinese Language Education; Common European Framework of Reference for Languages; language proficiency standards*

1. INTRODUCTION

With the increasing frequency of cross-cultural communication, language proficiency, as the cornerstone of international exchange, has become critically important in assessment and standardization (Chen & Yang, 2016; Atasheva, 2024). The *Chinese Proficiency Grading Standards for International Chinese Language Education* (CPGSICLE) and the *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages* (CEFR), as two widely influential language proficiency assessment systems, play pivotal roles in promoting the internationalization and standardization of language education.

The CPGSICLE jointly issued by the Chinese Ministry of Education and the National Language Commission, were officially implemented on July 1, 2021. This document is China’s “first comprehensive normative standard for evaluating the language skills and proficiency of foreign Chinese learners (Wang, 2023). It not only clarifies the language proficiency requirements for learners at different levels but also provides corresponding teaching and learning resource recommendations, offering strong support for the standardization of international Chinese language education (Zeng & Xiao, 2021). The CEFR, developed by the Council of Europe, aims to promote language education exchange and cooperation in Europe and globally, providing learners with a clear and coherent path for language proficiency development. It serves as a common foundation for language teaching syllabi, curricula, tests, and textbooks in Europe and worldwide.

Descriptors are key components of language standards. By refining and describing the typical features of language proficiency levels, they clearly present the theoretical framework of language standards and the distinguishing points between different proficiency levels. Their structure and content are important bases for scientifically formulating language standards. Accurate descriptors serve as a ruler for measuring learners’ overall language proficiency and specific language skills, providing essential references for objective evaluation (Yang et al., 2012). A descriptor system is an overall framework for constructing level descriptions based on the underlying language proficiency model (Faez et al., 2021). A complete language standard typically establishes a descriptive system from both vertical and horizontal dimensions: vertically defining the distinguishing features of language proficiency levels and horizontally defining the objects, scope, and content of language proficiency descriptions (Liu et al., 2022).

Both the CPGSICLE and the CEFR hold significant positions in the field of language education. However, some interesting questions should be answered. Are there differences in their descriptors? How do these differences affect the description of language proficiency? What characteristics do their descriptors exhibit? These questions have not yet been fully explored. Therefore, this paper will compare the descriptor system construction, descriptive perspectives, and core features of the CPGSICLE and the CEFR.

2. Comparison of Descriptor System Construction between the CPGSICLE and the CEFR

The design of language proficiency scales is divided into vertical and horizontal dimensions: the vertical structure grades proficiency through a typical feature system, with each level having distinct characteristics to accurately reflect learning progress; the horizontal structure is a descriptive parameter framework that defines the scope of language proficiency covered by the scale, including listening, speaking, reading, and writing, ensuring comprehensiveness and precision in evaluation. The combination of these two dimensions forms a comprehensive and detailed language proficiency assessment system.

**2.1 Grading Description System**

The core of the grading description system lies in precisely defining and distinguishing students at different language proficiency levels. This precision relies on detailed and scientific level divisions from the lowest to the highest levels. Such divisions are not only key elements in constructing a rigorous language description system but also directly affect the accuracy of the description results. If the divisions are too fine, the boundaries between levels may become blurred, failing to distinguish students’ language proficiency. If the divisions are too broad, the differences in language proficiency within the same level may be too large, making it impossible to accurately assess individual students’ language abilities (Chung et al., 2019). Therefore, the precision of level divisions is crucial in constructing a language description system. Each level is required to accurately and comprehensively reflect the language proficiency characteristics of students at that level, which demands that descriptors precisely capture and depict the typical language behaviors and performances of students at that level, ensuring clear and effective differentiation of language proficiency across levels. The step-by-step division from the lowest to the highest levels is an important foundation for ensuring the rigor and accuracy of the description system, providing a detailed and scientific portrayal of students’ language proficiency progress.

The CPGSICLE strictly follow a new framework and paradigm of “three stages and nine levels” for level division, which is reflected in the syllable table, vocabulary table, character table, and grammar outline. The elementary, intermediate, and advanced stages provide an overall definition and description of Chinese proficiency, covering language materials, social communication, topic expression, communication strategies, Chinese culture and cross-cultural communication skills, and language quantification indicators. After the overall description of each stage, detailed descriptions of the three levels within that stage are provided (Xia & Zhang, 2024). However, the CPGSICLE does not subdivide the language quantification indicators for higher levels. This division emphasizes the progressive and phased nature of Chinese learning, making it suitable for non-native Chinese learners. The setting of each level not only focuses on basic listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills but also emphasizes learners’ practical application abilities in specific contexts and their understanding of culture.

In contrast, the EFR provides a three-stage, six-level language proficiency scale, including the beginner stage (A1, A2), the independent stage (B1, B2), and the proficient stage (C1, C2). The Extended Version adds a Pre-A1 stage as a halfway point between 0 and A1, but only describes part of the overall language proficiency (Zhang, 2021). The CEFR’s three-stage, six-level scale places more emphasis on the macro development of learners’ communicative competence. Each level covers a broader range of language skills and communicative scenarios, emphasizing learners’ ability to improve their practical language use. Although the CEF’’s level divisions are not as detailed as those of the CPGSICLE, its macro divisions facilitate cross-language and cross-cultural comparisons, providing convenience for international exchange and educational cooperation.

As important references for language proficiency level division, the CPGSICLE and the CEFR show significant differences in system construction and application orientation. The CPGSICLE, with their refined three stages and nine levels framework, delve into various elements of language learning, highlighting the processual and comprehensive nature of Chinese learning and providing a systematic and progressive learning path for non-native Chinese learners. The CEFR, with its macro three-stage, six-level layout, emphasizes learners’ comprehensive performance in actual communication, and its universality and cross-cultural characteristics make it an effective bridge for international language education exchange. Although the two have different emphases, they jointly provide rich theoretical support and practical guidance for the field of language teaching and assessment.

**2.2 Language Proficiency Assessment System**

In the construction of language standards, the descriptive parameters that horizontally define the objects and scope of description form the core of the description system, deeply reflecting the theoretical basis of the grading standards (Chemnad et al., 2024). What factors are included in the description objects of language standards—language proficiency? Scholars hold different but complementary views on the definition of language proficiency. Bachman’s communicative language ability model emphasizes that language proficiency consists of organizational competence and pragmatic competence. Organizational competence includes grammatical competence and textual competence, involving the correct construction of sentences, understanding of sentence meanings, and composition of texts. Pragmatic competence focuses on how to organize and use language symbols to refer to things and ideas, including illocutionary competence and sociolinguistic competence. Additionally, the model introduces strategic competence, divided into assessment, planning, and execution stages, ensuring that communication strategies achieve communicative goals in specific contexts (Li & Bai, 2022).

Currently, internationally renowned language proficiency standards or scales are all based on the theory of communicative language ability, simulating language communication activities to comprehensively describe and assess language proficiency. They not only emphasize the accuracy of language structure but also highlight its effective use in diverse contexts, providing a more comprehensive and practical framework for language proficiency assessment. Both the CPGSICLE and the CEFR demonstrate a high regard for the dynamic use of language in language proficiency assessment, emphasizing that the effective evaluation of information and negotiation of meaning in real communicative contexts are important components of language proficiency. However, they adopt different strategies when constructing language skill classification systems.

The CPGSICLE, as a language proficiency assessment standard for Chinese learners, clearly divides language proficiency into five basic skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation. This classification is intuitive and easy to understand, covering all aspects of language learning. However, it does not list interactive skills separately but implicitly includes them in these five basic skills. This means that under the framework of the CPGSICLE, interactive ability is regarded as a manifestation of the comprehensive use of listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation skills, rather than an independent skill dimension.

The CEFR adopts a more detailed and comprehensive classification method for language skills. It divides language skills into four independent parts: input, output, interaction, and mediation. Among them, interactive ability is explicitly emphasized as an important language skill, reflecting the CEFR’s emphasis on the interaction and negotiation process in language communication. Additionally, the CEFR Extended Version keeps pace with the forefront of multilingual education development, introducing the concept of multilingual and multicultural competence and developing corresponding scales. This innovation not only enriches the connotation of language proficiency but also reflects the new trends of language education in the context of globalization.

In the construction of language standards, descriptive parameters form the core of the description system, reflecting the theoretical basis of grading standards. Current international language proficiency standards or scales are based on the theory of communicative language ability, emphasizing the effective use of language in diverse contexts. The CPGSICLE, targeting Chinese learners, divide language proficiency into listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation, with interactive skills implicitly included. The CEFR offers a more detailed classification of language skills, emphasizing interactive ability, and the CEFR Extended Version introduces the concept of multilingual and multicultural competence. These diverse standards and models not only promote innovation in language teaching methods but also indicate that future language education will focus on cultivating comprehensive language literacy adapted to diverse scenarios.

3. Comparison of Descriptive Perspectives between the CPGSICLE and the CEFR

In constructing language proficiency description systems, both the CPGSICLE and the CEFR adopt multidimensional and multilevel descriptive methods, but they have unique features in their descriptive perspectives, reflecting different theoretical foundations and teaching philosophies.

**3.1 Descriptive Perspectives of Multiple Evaluation Dimensions**

Learners’ Chinese proficiency is defined as their ability to understand and express language in specific contexts, relying on accumulated language knowledge, non-linguistic information, and strategies. Based on this, the CPGSICLE constructs an evaluation system with three core dimensions: communicative competence, topic and task content coverage, and language quantification indicators. Specifically, communicative competence focuses on the integrated use of five skills: listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation. For example, Level 4 expects learners to engage in basically complete, coherent, and effective social communication on relatively complex topics. Topic and task content are closely tied to typical daily language activities and communicative scenarios, providing specific and practical communicative task examples for each level. At Level 4, learners are required to engage in in-depth discussions on topics such as community life and health conditions and complete tasks like medical communication and writing part-time job advertisement replies. As mentioned earlier, the CPGSICLE also includes language quantification indicators, with descriptors structured as “what can be done + degree of completion + topic and task + language quantification indicators”. The “degree of completion” is reflected in listening speed, speaking intonation, vocabulary and grammar, reading speed, and writing speed. Syllables, characters, words, and grammar level indicators are presented quantitatively. This combination of qualitative and quantitative descriptions enhances the operability of the scale, facilitating teachers’ curriculum design and formative assessment, as well as improving the scientific validity and convenience of student self-evaluation.

The CEFR describes language proficiency from two aspects: language activities and strategies, and language communicative competence. Language activities and strategies include input, output, interaction, and mediation, covering listening, speaking, reading, and writing. Language communicative competence includes linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence, and pragmatic competence. The CEFR defines the three components of communicative language competence as follows: Linguistic competence includes knowledge and skills related to vocabulary, phonetics, syntax, and other aspects of the language system, independent of the sociolinguistic values and pragmatic functions derived from language variation; Sociolinguistic competence refers to the grasp of sociocultural conditions in language use; sensitivity to social conventions affects language communication between people from different cultural backgrounds; Pragmatic competence refers to the ability to use language resources and the context and discourse in interactive communication to produce functions. Linguistic competence includes lexical competence, grammatical competence, semantic competence, phonetic competence, orthographic competence, and orthoepic competence; sociolinguistic competence includes markers of social relationships, rules of politeness, popular wisdom, register differences, dialects, and accents; pragmatic competence includes discourse competence and functional competence (Luan & Fu, 2022).

**3.2 Problem-Oriented or Content-Oriented Approaches**

The CEFR views language learners or users as social individuals who use language to complete tasks in various social contexts, thereby developing their comprehensive abilities and communicative competence. Language users apply these abilities to complete communicative tasks in four domains (public, occupational, educational, and personal), choosing appropriate language strategies to complete four types of language activities (input, output, interaction, and mediation) (Liu, 2021).

The CPGSICLE, as a language proficiency standard specifically for students learning Chinese as a second language, defines Chinese language proficiency as learners’ ability to comprehensively use five language skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation) to communicate in Chinese on various topics.

The former’s language forms include oral input (listening), textual input (reading), oral output (speaking), textual output (writing), oral interaction, textual interaction, oral mediation, and textual mediation, while the latter’s language forms are listening, speaking, reading, writing, and translation.

In describing listening skills, the CEFR focuses on understanding oral materials in different contexts, from simple daily conversations to complex academic lectures. Each level specifies the speech speed, accent, vocabulary, and sentence structure complexity that learners can understand. In oral expression, the CEFR emphasizes learners’ fluency, accuracy, and appropriateness in using language, from simple self-introductions to debating complex topics, with clear standards set for each level. In reading comprehension, the CEFR requires learners to understand and analyze different types of texts, such as news, novels, and academic papers, with text difficulty, length, and complexity increasing with the level. In writing skills, the CEFR emphasizes learners’ ability to write various texts, such as letters, reports, and essays, with writing techniques, grammatical structures, and vocabulary requirements specified for each level.

The descriptors for listening, speaking, reading, and writing in the CPGSICLE are more detailed, with particular attention to the characteristics of the Chinese language. For example, in listening, the CPGSICLE not only requires learners to understand oral materials but also emphasizes sensitivity to Chinese phonetics, intonation, and speech speed. In oral expression, the CPGSICLE places more emphasis on learners’ accuracy and naturalness in phonetics, intonation, vocabulary choice, grammatical structure, and expression. In reading comprehension, the CPGSICLE not only requires learners to understand the literal meaning of Chinese texts but also emphasizes their ability to comprehend deeper meanings, cultural backgrounds, and author intentions. In writing skills, the CPGSICLE places more emphasis on learners’ standardization of Chinese character writing, correctness of grammatical structures, richness of vocabulary, and clarity of expression.

The translation skill in the CPGSICLE is a unique highlight, reflecting the more diverse application scenarios involved in learning Chinese as a second language. The descriptors for the translation skill in the CPGSICLE include requirements for accuracy, fluency, cultural adaptability, and language style. From elementary to advanced levels, the requirements for the translation skill gradually increase. Elementary learners may only be able to translate simple sentences, while advanced learners need to accurately translate complex texts, paying attention to maintaining language style and conveying cultural backgrounds.

4. Core Features of the Descriptors in the CPGSICLE and the CEFR

**4.1 Combination of Quantitative and Qualitative Descriptions**

When constructing the language proficiency description system, the CPGSICLE skillfully combines quantitative and qualitative descriptions to comprehensively and accurately reflect learners’ Chinese proficiency. Quantitative descriptions are reflected in specific quantitative requirements for language elements, such as syllables, characters, vocabulary, and grammar. For example, at the elementary Level 1, it is explicitly stated that learners need to master a certain number of syllables, such as approximately 200 Chinese characters, and achieve basic accuracy in pronunciation. These quantitative indicators not only provide clear goals and schedules for teaching but also offer objective and operable bases for evaluation. At the same time, the CPGSICLE also emphasizes qualitative descriptions, highlighting learners’ ability to use language for communication in different contexts. By describing learners’ specific performances in listening, speaking, reading, and writing, such as being able to use simple language for daily communication and reading and understanding simple texts, learners can gain a more intuitive and comprehensive understanding of their language proficiency. At the elementary Level 1, learner should be able to understand and use simple daily expressions, such as greetings, farewells, numbers, time, dates, and family members, and read and write simple Chinese characters.

Compared to the CPGSICLE, the CEFR places more emphasis on qualitative descriptions when describing language proficiency. It focuses on the specific tasks or activities that learners can complete at different language levels, such as being able to engage in simple and direct communication on familiar topics or being able to understand and use complex language structures for debates or discussions. This descriptive approach is closer to real-life language use scenarios, helping learners apply language in authentic communicative contexts. At the CEFR’s A1 level, learners should have the abilities to understand and use familiar daily expressions and very basic phrases to meet concrete needs, introduce themselves and others, and ask and answer simple questions. At the B2 level, learners should have the abilities to communicate fluently and accurately on a wide range of topics and use language spontaneously and effectively for social, academic, and professional purposes.

The combination of quantitative and qualitative descriptions is a common feature of the CPGSICLE and the CEFR in describing language proficiency, but their specific implementations differ. The quantitative indicators in the CPGSICLE provide clear goals and schedules for teaching, helping learners improve their language proficiency step by step. Qualitative descriptions, on the other hand, emphasize the practical communicative functions of language, helping learners develop their language application abilities. In practical applications, the combination of the two can assess learners’ language proficiency, considering both the accumulation of language knowledge and the practical use of language skills. For example, when assessing learners’ Chinese proficiency, quantitative indicators such as the number of characters and vocabulary mastered can be used, along with qualitative descriptions such as learners’ oral expression and reading comprehension abilities, to arrive at a comprehensive and accurate evaluation result.

**4.2 Language Specificity and Universality**

The CPGSICLE is designed specifically for those learning Chinese as a second language, exhibiting distinct language specificity (Starr, 2009). It considers the linguistic characteristics and teaching needs of Chinese, highlighting unique language elements and grammatical structures when describing language proficiency. For example, when describing learners’ writing abilities, it particularly emphasizes the standardization and accuracy of Chinese character writing. Additionally, the CPGSICLE incorporates the actual situation of Chinese culture and society, including in-depth understanding and expression abilities related to Chinese history, culture, and society at advanced levels. This language specificity not only makes the CPGSICLE more aligned with the practical needs of Chinese teaching but also helps learners understand and integrate into Chinese culture. This language specificity imposes varying degrees of requirements on learners based on their levels. At advanced levels, learners should be able to understand and express content related to Chinese history, culture, and society, such as traditional festivals, customs, and literary works.

Compared to the CPGSICLE, the CEFR exhibits stronger universality. It is not tailored to any specific language but provides a framework applicable to multiple languages. This universality allows the CEFR to be widely used in teaching activities and assessment of different languages, such as English, French, and German (Zhang & Liu, 2024). At the same time, the CEFR also emphasizes describing the specific tasks or activities that learners can complete at different language levels, which are universal and applicable to multiple language and cultural backgrounds. For example, in the CEFR, regardless of the language, learners at the B1 level should be able to engage in simple communication on familiar topics and understand and use daily expressions and simple sentence structures.

The differences in language specificity and universality reflect the design philosophies and application scopes of different language proficiency scales (Chemnad, et al., 2023). The language specificity of the CPGSICLE makes it more targeted and practical in Chinese teaching, enabling it to reflect learners’ Chinese proficiency and learning needs. In Chinese teaching, teachers can design teaching activities and assessment methods based on the requirements of the CPGSICLE. The universality of the CEFR facilitates its global application, allowing learners from different language and cultural backgrounds to find learning paths and assessment standards suitable for them. In English teaching, teachers can design teaching activities and assessment methods based on the requirements of the CEFR, helping learners improve their English proficiency.

However, in practical applications, it is necessary to balance language specificity and universality. Although the CPGSICLE has significant advantages in Chinese teaching, it may require adjustments and improvements when extended to other languages. Similarly, while the CEFR excels in universality, it may need appropriate supplements and refinements based on language characteristics and teaching needs in specific language teaching.

**4.3 Cultural and Value Orientations**

When describing language proficiency, the CPGSICLE reflects Chinese culture and value orientations. It emphasizes that learners should not only master language skills but also understand and disseminate Chinese language and culture. At advanced levels, learners are required to understand and express content related to Chinese history, culture, and society (Chen, 2016). This cultural orientation not only helps improve learners’ language proficiency but also promotes the international dissemination of Chinese culture (Chau et al., 2024). By learning and understanding Chinese culture, learners can grasp the context and connotations of the Chinese language, thereby using the language more accurately for communication. In Chinese learning, learners need to understand cultural knowledge such as traditional festivals, customs, and etiquette to appropriately use related vocabulary and expressions in communication. At the same time, this cultural orientation helps cultivate learners’ cross-cultural communication abilities, enabling them to adapt to communicative needs in different cultural contexts.

Compared to the CPGSICLE, the CEFR places more emphasis on cultivating cross-cultural communication abilities. It highlights language learning in multilingual and multicultural contexts, requiring learners to understand and respect communicative methods and values in different cultural backgrounds. When describing language proficiency, the CEFR emphasizes learners’ communicative abilities and adaptability in different cultural contexts. In the CEFR, learners need to understand and respect communicative habits and values in different cultures, such as polite expressions and non-verbal communication methods. At the same time, learners also need to possess the ability to communicate in different cultural contexts, such as adapting to different communicative styles and understanding and respecting communicative rules in different cultures. The improvement of these cross-cultural communication abilities helps cultivate citizens with an international perspective, enabling them to adapt to the demands of globalization.

The differences in cultural and value orientations reflect the educational goals and social functions of different language proficiency scales (Caplan, 2002). The cultural orientation of the CPGSICLE strengthens the role of Chinese as a tool for cultural dissemination. By learning and understanding Chinese culture, learners can use Chinese for communication. At the same time, this cultural orientation also helps cultivate learners’ cross-cultural communication abilities, enabling them to adapt to communicative needs in different cultural contexts.

The cross-cultural communication abilities emphasized by the CEFR highlight the role of language as a tool for promoting international understanding and cooperation. By cultivating learners’ cross-cultural communication abilities and international perspectives, they can respect communicative methods and values in different cultural backgrounds, thereby promoting international exchange and cooperation.

In today’s world, with the deepening of globalization and the blending of diverse cultures, cross-cultural communication abilities have become one of the important indicators for measuring a person’s comprehensive qualities (Brouzos et al., 2024). Therefore, the differences in cultural and value orientations between the CPGSICLE and the CEFR provide us with different educational ideas and practical paths, helping cultivate talents with international perspectives and cross-cultural communication abilities.

5. Conclusion

This paper conducts an in-depth comparison of the construction of their descriptor systems, descriptive perspectives, and core features of the CPGSICLE and the CEFR, revealing their similarities and differences in language proficiency assessment. The research results show that the CPGSICLE excels in quantitative indicators and the unique features of the Chinese language, while the CEFR demonstrates outstanding strengths in cross-language comparison and the description of communicative competence. In terms of theoretical and practical value, both provide important references for language teaching and assessment, contributing to the standardisation and internationalization of language education. In terms of practical teaching applications, the study suggests flexible selection and integration of both based on different language characteristics and teaching needs to more comprehensively assess and improve students’ language proficiency. At the same time, future research can further explore the integration paths of the two in cultivating cross-cultural communication abilities, contributing to the cultivation of talents with an international perspective.

**DISCLAIMER (ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE)**

The author hereby declares that NO generative AI technologies such as Large Language Models (ChatGPT, COPILOT, etc.) and text-to-image generators have been used during the writing or editing of this manuscript.

Consent

The study did not involve human beings. It did not require consent from participants.

Ethical approval (where ever applicable)

The study did not involve human beings. It did not require ethical approval.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has declared that she has no known competing financial interests that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

COMPETING INTERESTS DISCLAIMER:

Authors have declared that they have no known competing financial interests OR non-financial interests OR personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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