

# *Business English Teachers' Assessment Literacy Based on China's Standards of English Language Ability*

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**Abstract:** China's Standards of English language ability (CSE) is the first language proficiency scale in China aimed at testing and teaching English for general purposes. Taking CSE as a reference, this study proposes the key elements of business English teachers' assessment literacy. First, teachers should pay attention to the stakeholders of the test and the professional and language ability in the test content. Second, they should be able to design tests according to the needs of society for professional ability. Third, teachers should be aware of the purpose of the test, and be able to use the test feedback to backwash their teaching. To improve their assessment, participating in a large-scale examination is the first approach. Besides, attending regional workshops is also conducive to improving teachers' assessment literacy. To motivate teachers' participation, administrators in colleges and universities should establish a guarantee system to ensure the development and implementation of assessment work.

## 1. Introduction

Published In 2018, the China Standards of English (hereinafter referred to as CSE) stipulates the English proficiency level of Chinese English learners. It sets nine scales for Chinese English learners. The fifth and sixth scales correspond with college English (non-English majors). The development purpose of the CSE is to facilitate students' learning step by step and, improve the reliability and validity of tests. It also aimed at the alignment and mutual recognition of various tests, promoting the development of diversified assessments, and helping teachers implement formative and diagnostic assessments. The CSE has laid the foundation for the establishment of a comprehensive evaluation system combining summative and formative assessments in China. Assessment based on this standard is more scientific because the content design, test question formulation, rating, and score reports are based on a validated tool.

Many colleges and universities in China had set up business English as a major. However, there is no English for specific scales to guide the assessment and teaching in China. The CSE is a scale designed for English for general purposes with some specific requirements for professional development. Hence, it can serve as guidance in business English teaching and testing. Currently, CSE has aligned with some large-scale tests like TOEFL and IELTS as well as College English Tests-4/6 [1]. However, for business English majors, most of their tests are for courses that vary

from school to school. There is no shared platform to compare the ability of students in different schools. Teachers' assessment and designing of tests are quite flexible and random. The validity and reliability of the tests are questionable.

To solve this problem, the most urgent work is to improve business English teachers' assessment literacy. As a bridge between students and knowledge and skills, teachers are important in coordinating students' language skills and professional abilities. They also play a significant role in cultivating the core literacies and abilities for students' future careers. Appropriate application of the CSE is conducive to the improvement of students' abilities and the professional development of teachers. Although English teachers in China must hold teachers' certification to legitimize their teaching, most of them did not receive professional training in language testing and assessment. Based on the CSE, this study proposed the methodology and practice for the improvement of business English teacher's assessment literacy which directly affects their teaching efficacy and students learning outcome.

## 2. Assessment Literacy of Business English Teachers

Stiggins proposed the concept of assessment literacy in 1991 [2]. After that Bachman & Palmer listed some basic abilities of language assessment for language teachers, i.e., understanding of language testing concepts, basic questions and concerns that may be involved in language testing, and basic assessment paths and methods [3]. Inbar & Lourie (2013) believes that language assessment literacy is the knowledge pool required for language assessment, and it changes under different contexts and develops with the society and people's cognition [4]. Brindley claimed that the trend of testing changed from knowledge plus skills to knowledge, skills, and principles. Teachers were more specifically demanded in morality to adhere to the assessment principles [5]. Pill & Harding proposed that assessment literacy is a continuum from novice to proficient assessors [6]. Xu Yueting conceptualized teacher assessment literacy as literacy in practice. The first layer is the bottom layer, which is the "knowledge pool" of assessment, the second layer is the assessment concept, and the third layer is the macro and micro language of assessing practice. The fourth layer is the negotiation behavior in decision-making and action, the fifth layer is the learning of assessment literacy, and the sixth layer is the identity construction of the teachers. This conceptualization reflected the dynamic teacher assessment literacy from the perspective of social culture [7].

Rooted in social culture, linguistic assessment literacy is an evolving continuum that is constantly updated. But its core parts are always the same: why should we test, what to test, and how to test. Therefore, the assessment literacy construct of business English teachers includes assessment purpose(why), assessment theory, and assessment practice (what and how).

### 2.1 Assessment Theory

First, teachers should identify stakeholders of the Assessment, and whom to test. The relationship between the curriculum orientation of business English and the career development of students is different from that of primary and secondary schools. Assessments in tertiary business English courses are low-risk tests and assessments, they are not gatekeepers like Zhong Kao (entrance examination for high school) and Gaokao (college entrance examination). But their social influence is greater, if students' professional skills or knowledge did not meet the social demand, they will suffer unemployment after graduation. What should be tested is what is needed after graduation and what should be taught in class.

Secondly, what to test. Aligning the test content with students' professional skills is a principle in teaching and testing. Hence, the second important aspect of assessment theory is that teachers

should be aware of the content of the assessment. i.e., what to test. to stick to the principle of testing the skills and knowledge needed in the future. The National Standards of Teaching Quality for Undergraduate Foreign Language and Literature Majors (hereinafter referred to as the National Standard) in China stipulated language knowledge and skills from three dimensions: linguistics, professional, and general skills, and knowledge. Teachers should bear in mind the structure of business English knowledge.

The National Standard defines a certain range of test content but does not define what level students should reach. Thus, CSE can better supplement it. For example: according to the description of the scales, the ability of levels 6, 7, and 8, can provide a reference for the professional test of business English, as shown in Table 1. Taking the " National Standard " as the guidance and the ability description in CSE as the benchmark, teachers should set the content and differ testing difficulties for business English tests. This is the basic premise of validity and the key first step in teacher assessment literacy.

Table 1. Overall language ability of CSE level 6 to level 8.

CSE scale 8	Can understand different types of language materials on a variety of topics; can comprehend the message and recognise discourse features and linguistic style. λ Can skilfully use varied manner of expressions to communicate with others tactfully and effectively on an academic or specialised topic on a variety of occasions; can accurately, appropriately, and fully explain, justify, and comment on a range of related topics; can express him/herself precisely, fluently, coherently, and appropriately.
CSE scale7	Can understand language materials on a range of topics, including those related to his/her field of specialisation; can accurately identify the theme and key points of the material, objectively assess and comment on its content, and understand its deeper meaning. λ Can engage in in-depth discussion and exchange with others on a range of related academic and social topics; can effectively describe, clarify, explain, justify, and comment on such matters and express him/herself clearly, appropriately, smoothly, and in a conventional manner
CSE scale 6	Can understand language materials on a range of topics (including subjects of a more general nature) and fully grasp their key points and logical relationships; can analyse, determine, and evaluate viewpoints, attitudes, and implicit meanings therein. λ Can discuss a range of familiar topics in academic and work interactions, effectively present information about, compare, and comment on different ideas, and express his/her own opinions; can express him/herself coherently, appropriately, smoothly, and in keeping with relevant stylistic conventions and the features of a particular register of language.

Although CSE is a scale designed for English for general purposes, the higher scale (above 6) defined the related professional knowledge and general knowledge. When familiarize with the language scale, teachers should also be aware of students' knowledge background since business English has five different directions [8]. English for cross-board E-Commerce, international business, international finance, international accounting, and international marketing. Business English is different from other English majors such as linguistics, translation, and literature.

## 2.2. Assessing Practice. It Answers the Question of how to Test

In terms of assessment mode, business English course assessments (Business English Cambridge is excluded) and the classroom formative assessments are standards-referenced tests. It is different from the norm-referenced tests in primary and secondary schools. Tests are not designed for talent selection. Students' comprehensive English application ability matters, i.e., whether they can meet the requirements of effective communication in English in their future study, work, and social interaction, or whether they have a certain comprehensive cultural literacy to meet the needs of social development and international communication. Tests should be designed to assess students' ability to explore, criticize and integrate rather than test their memories.

At the same time, teachers must align students' test scores and the corresponding level of CSE. The same score from different schools may claim different language proficiency levels if the tests are not designed referring to a commonly shared standard. Thus, aligning tests for each course is a necessity for teachers. Only by sticking to the benchmark can we know where we are and how far is it ahead to reach certain goals.

Furthermore, teachers should allot time to teaching and the percentage of scores for different language skills accordingly. For example, the business English major for cross-board E-commerce more often uses the skills of reading and writing. For in this context, commodity manuals, contracts, correspondence, website commodity information, electronic mail, etc. have become the main business communication methods and contents. Therefore, enterprises have an increasing demand for written communication skills, mainly reading and writing.

## 2.3. The Purpose of Assessment: to Facilitate Learning

The ultimate purpose of business English course assessment is to promote student learning. In the assessment practice, teachers should focus on the diagnostic assessment of feedback and weaken the graded assessment. Assessment feedback should be used as an encouraging and instructive tool to help students reach a higher level of ability. The CSE provides teachers with an assessment tool and guidance in teaching and learning, and taking this as a reference to test students' ability is not only an inspection of students' language ability, but a diagnosis of language ability, so that assessment can play a washback role. Therefore, in addition to the ability to design tests based on CSE, teachers should be able to use the assessment to diagnose problems of students, and help students reduce various test anxiety.

## 3. Approaches of Enhancing Teachers' Assessment Literacy

Inbar (2017) pointed out that teachers' assessment literacy should be focused on the practical operation level so that it can facilitate teachers to conduct assessments. The trend of assessment literacy will be customized instead of unified framework research. There are several ways to improve teachers assessment literacy.

First, teachers should attend workshops for assessment, especially regional workshop, so that they have a deep understanding of the methods and principles. For example, colleges and universities in Guangdong Province should focus more on assessment criteria of cross-board E-commerce talents, for business English in this area focus more on cross-board business to meet the regional development of economy.

Second, teachers should participate on the design of large-scale tests, which is the direct way of practicing skills and theories learned. In this process, teachers can also deepen their understanding on principles, theories, and knowledge of language assessment, improving their course design and instruction in the future.

## 4. Conclusion

Language assessment literacy is constrained by specific context. It is developmental. This study proposes the framework of teachers' assessment literacy and approached of improvement. It is a beneficial supplement for the existing assessment literacy framework. However, the practice of assessment is a practical process of doing rather than knowing. With the guidance of what to test, how to test and why should we test, teachers should put more effort on the operation of assessment.

However, for a long time, assessment has been a subsidiary of teaching. In practice, the assessment and the dynamic follow-up in the later stage consume a lot of time and energy, taking up even more time than instruction, as a result, teachers are reluctant to spend too much time on the assessment. To motivate teachers to engage in assessment, Administrators must recognize the after-class assessment as part of teachers work load. This is what expected to be done in the future.

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