

# Comparison of Self-Assessment and Teacher Assessment on Students' Ability in Expressing Intentions in Writing Based on the CSE

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## ABSTRACT

The study is to testify whether intermediate level English learners could use China's Standards of English Language Ability (The CSE) to give an accurate assessment on their ability in expressing intentions in writing. By compare 36 second-year English majors' self-assessment with 3 teachers' assessment, the analysis shows that there is no consistency between students' self-assessment and those from teachers. The results highlight that training students on applying pragmatic knowledge in writing and self-assessment are likely both required if The CSE is to be used for measuring ability in expressing intentions in writing.

**Keywords:** *The CSE, pragmatic ability, self-assessment, written expression*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The self-assessment for students arises out of the belief in student autonomy as an educational goal [1]. It is advisable for learners of English to constantly evaluate their current English proficiency, to measure how far away they are from their expected level, and decide what they can do to realize their goals. The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) and European Language Portfolio (ELP) have been proved to support reflective learning in which goal setting and self-assessment play a central role [2]. The descriptive can-do statement of CEFR could help language learners to self-assess their English proficiency and provide effective guidance for them to improve their English [3].

For Chinese learners and users of English, they could use China's Standards of English Language Ability (The CSE) to locate the weaknesses in their English ability and compose a feasible study plan for themselves [4].

China's Standards of English Language Ability (The CSE) was published on February 12th, 2018 by the Ministry of Education of the People's Republic of China and State Language Commission, and was officially put into implementation on June 1st, 2018, to meet the needs from Chinese learners and users of English to assess their levels of English abilities. The CSE defines the levels of English ability of Chinese learners and users of English and describes the features of their English language ability at each CSE level. Both Chinese teachers and students could use it as a yardstick for English teaching and learning [5]. China has placed the fostering of pragmatic abilities of English as one of the most important objectives in English teaching. Chinese learners of English have shown a general imbalance in their English competencies. Their reading and

writing skills usually exceed their listening and speaking skills [6]. However, even with reading and writing skills as relatively stronger points of their English abilities, their pragmatic abilities are not reaching a compatible level [7]. The CSE, describing the knowledge and strategies needed to comprehend and express intentions in certain situations, could be used by Chinese learners and users of English, as a reference to improve their levels of pragmatic comprehension (interpreting the speaker's/writer's intention) and pragmatic expression (expressing intentions in speaking/writing).

However, whether Chinese learners of English could effectively use The CSE to help their English learning and improve their pragmatic abilities still needs to be proved. Therefore, this study was designed to use The CSE as a reference to compare students' self-assessment and teacher assessment on students' pragmatic ability in expressing intentions in writing, to justify whether they would mirror each other.

## 2. METHODS

### 2.1. Participants

45 second-year college students studying English as their major were invited to participate in the study. 9 of them were not able to finish all tasks and were omitted from the result analysis. Among the rest 36 participants, only 11 of them have heard of The CSE, but no one has used it before. It should be noted that each student's performance in prior standard tests was not taken into account in this study. The participants were randomly chosen from their classes.

Three teachers were invited to participate in the study. All of them were familiar with The CSE and had been teaching English writing for more than 3 years. Two of them had to evaluate all students' writings and assess their corresponding level of pragmatic ability in expressing intentions in writing. If they had any disagreement, the third teacher had to give her assessment, and the final result should be based on the agreement of the three.

**2.2. Procedure**

The purpose of using The CSE and how to use it to assess language abilities were first explained by the teacher to students. Then students were required to assess their overall language ability and the ability in expressing intentions in writing based on the descriptions of different levels in The CSE. Finally, students had to finish four writing tasks within a time limit. It was an in-house writing test in which no cell phone or dictionary was allowed. Unlike the 9 levels of overall English abilities, there are only six levels of ability in expressing intentions in writing. Level 1 and Level 2 are both about using simple language to write greeting cards, notes of appreciation, and routine letters. No student diagnosed themselves under Level 3, so the three teachers only designed four writing tasks in line with Level 3 to Level 6 in expressing intentions in writing, and students had to finish all the four tasks (Table 1). Finally, teachers used a set of criteria consisting of language expression (written interaction), language knowledge (organizational knowledge, pragmatic knowledge), and expression strategies (planning, execution) from The CSE to assess students' writings. They had to go over all tasks finished by each student, and then used them as references for their final decision.

**Table 1** Expressing intentions in writing (Level 3-6)

CSE Level	Genre	Intentions
CSE 6	Formal letter	appeal; justify or rebut something; express solicitude
CSE 5	Formal letter	articulate complaints; offer suggestion; give recommendations; express sympathy; conduct negotiations; suggest initiatives or to give counsel
CSE 4	Standard informal letter; Simple formal letter	warn; tactfully request or refuse something; tactfully offer a suggestion; express regret; ask or notify someone of something
CSE 3	Brief routine letter	apologize or ask for forgiveness; reject or permit something; ask or notify someone of something

**3. RESULTS AND ANALYSIS**

The 36 students' self-assessment on their overall English ability and their ability in expressing intentions in writing are shown in Table 2 and Table 3.

**Table 2** Students' self-assessment on overall English ability

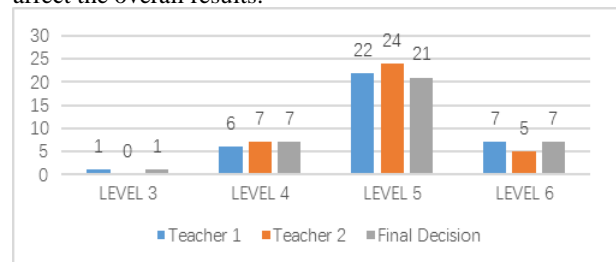
Overall CSE Level	Number	Percentage
CSE 6	5	13.9%
CSE 5	12	33.3%
CSE 4	15	41.7%
CSE 3	4	11.1%

**Table 3** Students' self-assessment ability in expressing intentions in writing

Expressing intentions in writing	Number	Percentage
CSE 6	3	8.3%
CSE 5	9	25%
CSE 4	21	58.4%
CSE 3	3	8.3%

As is shown in Table 1, there are discrepancies between students' self-assessment on overall English ability and their ability in expressing intentions in writing. Generally, students gave a lower rating of the latter than that of the former.

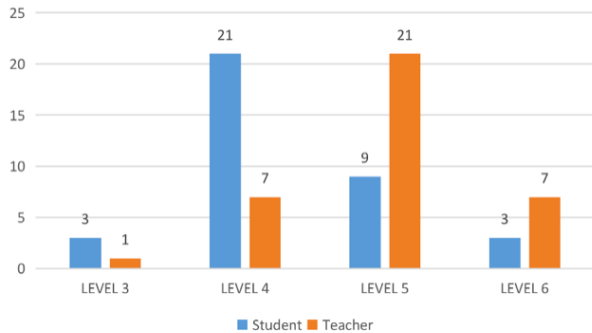
There is no significant disagreement shown in teachers' assessment (Fig. 1). Though one teacher preferred to stress the importance of organizational knowledge (grammatical knowledge and textual knowledge) in expression, it didn't affect the overall results.



**Figure 1.** Teachers' assessment on students' ability in expressing intentions in writing

As seen from the descriptive statistics for the comparison between student's self-assessment and teachers' assessment in Fig. 2, students gave a significantly lower rating for themselves. It could also be easily found that the most distinct discrepancy falls on Level 4 and Level 5. It seemed that students tended to underestimate their ability in expressing intentions in writing and most students did not have a clear and accurate diagnosis of their writing

ability. Their self-assessment did not correspond closely with the assessment from the teachers.



**Figure 2.** Comparison of students' Self-assessment and teachers' assessment

#### 4. PROBLEMS

In the afterward interview, all students said they were confused by the descriptions of expressing intentions in writing in The CSE.

Students generally determined their level by identifying the keywords in the description of each level. For example, first, they used words expressing situations, such as "brief routine letter" Level 3, "standard informal letter" and "simple formal letter" in Level 4, and "formal letter" in Level 5 and 6, as preliminary criteria. If they had trouble making a decision, then they used words expressing intentions, such as "forgiveness", "regret", "sympathy", "solicitude" to put them in the corresponding level. Confusion often appeared at this stage. As at least three such words are listed in each level, students struggled whether they should use the percentage of fulfillment (one student described it as "whether I could express over 50% of the intentions at the same level") to decide their level, or successfully expressing one was enough. So most of them had chosen the level they were most confident in, and usually the lowest level.

Students who had been rated by the teachers as Level 5 and underrated themselves as Level 4 were most confused in understanding the two levels. Upon initial reading, the words used to express intentions in these two levels had no significant difference. For example, "suggestion" was used to describe both levels. So students used words that express genre, i.e., "standard informal letter" and "formal letter" as the sole criteria to rate themselves. However, they were still puzzled whether they had the ability in expressing the same intentions in different situations. So most of them turned to the relatively easier one, Level 4. Students who were not intimidated by the phrase "formal letter" (Level 5 and Level 6) made their decisions based on similar assumptions.

These 3 students who rated themselves Level 3 had similar confusion, so they had chosen the lowest level for themselves.

#### 5. DISCUSSION

Students who participated in this study have all claimed that they hadn't received professional training in practical writing before. Though they had been taught how to write a letter in primary school and junior high school, the purposes of writing such letters were mostly under informal social circumstances. After three years of high school and one year of college, they became more confident in their organizational knowledge (grammatical knowledge and textual knowledge), however, when they were asked to determine whether they had the ability in expressing intentions in formal occasions, they still lacked confidence in their pragmatic knowledge (functional knowledge and sociolinguistic knowledge).

The discrepancy between teacher assessment and student assessment on their ability in expressing intentions in writing results from inadequate training in practical writing. Some students admitted they lack the knowledge and skill of expressing different intentions in formal occasions, while others said they were not certain that they had such ability.

#### 6. CONCLUSION

The results of the study show the most apparent discrepancy falls on intermediate levels, which is due to students' lack of pragmatic knowledge and inaccurate understanding of the descriptions.

The study implies that if The CSE is used by learners and users of English to improve their language ability, the role of pragmatic knowledge plays in language application should be stressed. Functional knowledge and sociolinguistic knowledge that focus on the application of language in different social contexts should also be an important part of language training.

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