

# *Analysis of China's Assessment System of Foreign Language Proficiency from the Perspective of Cooper's Accounting Scheme*

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**Abstract:** Constructing an assessment system of foreign language proficiency is one of the most significant language education policy reforms in China in recent years. The development of "China's Standards of English" is an important foundation for the construction of the assessment system, which has garnered considerable attention from experts and scholars. This paper, adopting a language planning perspective, utilizes Cooper's Accounting Scheme as a theoretical framework to analyze the construction of China's assessment system of foreign language proficiency from eight aspects. The analysis demonstrates the reasons behind the successful advancement of the construction of the assessment system of foreign language proficiency, and shows the profound impacts and benefits of this language policy on various stakeholders. Additionally, the paper offers specific recommendations to expedite the construction of a new foreign language proficiency assessment system.

## 1. Introduction

To address the issue of the lack of uniformity in English proficiency standards and assessment systems (He & Zhang, 2017) and to better serve the examination and enrollment system as well as teaching (Lin, 2015), the State Council issued the "Implementation Opinions of the State Council on deepening the reform of examination and enrollment system" (hereinafter referred to as the "Implementation Opinions") in September 2014. The "Implementation Opinions" explicitly proposed strengthening the "construction of national assessment system of foreign language proficiency", marking the first time that a comprehensive reform of foreign language teaching and assessments was clearly requested at the national level (Lin, 2015), which is of profound significance. "Building a new foreign language proficiency assessment system" has been regarded as one of the most important language education policy reforms in China in recent years, and the development of "China's Standards of English" (CSE) is a crucial foundation for the construction of the assessment system. As the first English proficiency assessment standard for English learners in China, the CSE is of milestone significance for promoting both English education and testing development in China (He & Zhang, 2017; Wang, 2018; Zheng & Wu, 2023).

Currently, scholars have conducted numerous studies and achieved certain results regarding the theoretical foundations of the CSE development (e.g., Han & Huang, 2018; Liu J& Han, 2018; Pan, 2019), the principles and methods of the CSE formulation (e.g., Bai et al., 2018; Jin & Jie, 2017; Zeng, 2017), and the specific applications of the CSE in language learning, teaching, and testing (e.g., Chen, 2019; Peng & Liu, 2021, 2023, 2024; Zhang & Wang, 2022). However, few studies have discussed this topic from the perspective of language policy and planning. Therefore, this paper analyzes the language education policy of “China’s national assessment system of foreign language proficiency” from the Perspective of Cooper’s Accounting Scheme in language policy and planning. The aim is to gain an in-depth understanding of the impact and significance of the development and promotion of the CSE, summarize relevant experiences, and provide certain recommendations for accelerating the construction of the new foreign language proficiency assessment system[1-5].

## 2. Language Planning and Cooper’s Accounting Scheme

Language planning is the discipline that studies the conscious efforts to change the structure and functions of a language. It is fundamentally problem-driven, with its existence and primary purpose rooted in addressing the mismatch between social development and the linguistic situation (Liu, 2022). Language planning as an independent discipline has a history spanning six to seven decades. Over this half-century of development, scholars have continuously explored patterns, summarized practical experiences, and proposed numerous typical analytical models and frameworks for language planning (Liu, 2022). One of these classic theoretical frameworks is Cooper’s Accounting Scheme. Drawing on and assimilating insights from other disciplines, Cooper approached language planning from the perspective of language spread. In his book *Language Planning and Social Change* (1989), he introduced the “Accounting Scheme”. According to this comprehensive framework, Cooper posits that language planning activities can be analyzed from eight perspectives, as detailed in Table 1.

Cooper’s Accounting Scheme is hailed as a “paradigm of interdisciplinary research” and is considered the first generalized theory of language planning with strong applicability for analyzing different types of language planning cases (Liu, 2023). Therefore, this study adopts Cooper’s Accounting Scheme to analyze the process of constructing China’s National Assessment System of Foreign Language Proficiency from these eight perspectives.

Table 1: Cooper’s Accounting Scheme

Number	Content
1	What actors
2	Attempt to influence what behaviors
3	Of which people
4	For what ends
5	Under what conditions
6	By what means
7	Through what decision-making process
8	With what effect

## 3. Examining the Construction of China’s National Assessment System of Foreign Language Proficiency through Cooper’s Accounting Scheme

As a milestone in the development of the foreign language proficiency assessment system, the CSE not only serves as a guideline to address foreign language assessment issues but also reflects the value orientation of China’s language education policy. As one of the foundational elements of the

foreign language proficiency assessment system, the CSE was completed in February 2018. The following sections analyze and evaluate the construction of China's National Assessment System of Foreign Language Proficiency based on Cooper's Accounting Scheme, covering eight key aspects.

### 3.1 What Actors

The "Construction of the Foreign Language Proficiency Assessment System" was formally proposed by the State Council in the "Implementation Opinions". As a foundational and crucial component of this system, the CSE was proposed by the National Education Examinations Authority (NEEA) and the Language and Text Information Management Department of the Ministry of Education, approved by the State Language Work Committee, and drafted by dozens of experts and scholars in the field. CSE has been under development since 2014, and was finally officially released in February 2018 and implemented from June 2018 onwards.

The development process of the CSE was led by the NEEA. Throughout its development, the NEEA not only established a leadership team to ensure close coordination and communication among its various departments, including the Evaluation Office, Foreign Language Office, and Research Office, but also organized an expert working committee at the project's core, under which a number of sub-project groups were established (He & Zhang, 2017).

Thus, the development and promotion of the CSE were proposed at the national level, with continuous support from the Ministry of Education and oversight by experts throughout the process. These initiatives ensure the scientific rigor and authority of this language planning activity, and are a major reason why the development of the CSE has progressed smoothly[6-9].

### 3.2 Attempt to Influence What Behaviors

Overall, the development and promotion of the CSE primarily impact behaviors related to English learning, English teaching, and English assessment. Additionally, it significantly influences the formulation of language education policies, setting learning goals, evaluating learning outcomes, drafting teaching plans or syllabi, developing education policies, and assessing language proficiency (Liu, 2015).

In English assessment, the CSE provides a unified standard for English examinations, allowing learners' language proficiency at various stages to be tested and recognized (He & Zhang, 2017). In English teaching, based on the CSE's emphasis on comprehensive abilities such as listening, speaking, reading, writing, interpretation, and translation, teachers can strengthen the cultivation of the comprehensive use of language skills. They can set corresponding teaching goals based on different learning stages and adopt appropriate teaching methods tailored to individual needs (Shu, 2014). In English learning, the CSE offers a reference for the cultivation of English learners' abilities at different stages, aiding in the formulation of scientific learning goals (He & Zhang, 2017).

### 3.3 Of Which People

He and Zhang (2017: 747) constructed a network of key stakeholders for the CSE, as illustrated in Figure 1. This interactive network is closely interconnected through administrative jurisdiction, upstream and downstream cooperation, and parallel operations (He & Zhang, 2017). The network of stakeholders indicates that the target groups of China's foreign language proficiency assessment system construction are quite extensive, encompassing individuals, institutions, or groups affected by the CSE, primarily including test organizers, teachers and educational institutions, English learners, and users of test results[10-13].



Figure 1: A network of key stakeholders for the CSE (He & Zhang, 2017: 747)

### 3.4 For What Ends

Language and society are closely intertwined, and with the development of economic globalization, English proficiency has become an increasingly valuable human resource. Although English has been a compulsory subject in Chinese middle schools, high schools, and universities since the 1980s, there was a lack of corresponding proficiency assessment standards. This has led to poor comparability in English proficiency exams in China, not only hindering learners from evaluating and mastering their language skills, but also bringing confusion to stakeholders such as teachers, educational institutions, and employers. In this context, the development of authoritative, high-quality, highly recognized, and unified English proficiency assessment standards has become a common demand of multiple stakeholders at this stage in China (He & Zhang, 2017).

In response to this shared demand, the CSE was developed as the first unified English proficiency reference standard system for Chinese learners that integrates English learning, teaching, and assessment (Liu, 2015; Zheng & Wu, 2023). It aims to provide multi-level descriptions of English proficiency based on language use, addressing the issue of the lack of uniformity in English proficiency standards and assessment systems.

The CSE aims to provide standardized descriptions of English proficiency levels tailored to China's national context, and to align with major domestic academic tests (e.g., high school entrance examination), entrance tests (e.g., the national college entrance examination, and the postgraduate entrance examination), college English tests, and public English proficiency tests (He & Zhang, 2017). Additionally, the CSE seeks to align with internationally recognized frameworks (e.g., the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, CEFR) and English proficiency exams (e.g., TOEFL, and IELTS), thereby promoting the internationalization of the CSE and China's English proficiency assessment system (He & Zhang, 2017).

### 3.5 Under What Conditions

The successful implementation of a language policy often depends on the conditions under which it is carried out (Liu, 2023). The conditions for language planning include political, economic, social, demographic, and ecological factors.

Politically, the State Council issued the "Implementation Opinions", which explicitly proposed to strengthen the construction of "the foreign language proficiency assessment system". The NEEA and the State Language Work Committee issued the CSE, supporting its development and promotion. These documents and policy support provided a clear direction for the construction of China's foreign language proficiency assessment system.

Economically, with the ongoing advancement of economic globalization, international trade, and study exchanges have become increasingly frequent and close, highlighting the importance of English proficiency as a human resource (He & Zhang, 2017). This has increased the motivation for people to learn English, with more learners seeking to have their proficiency levels assessed and recognized through objective, fair, and systematic standards. Consequently, the demand for constructing China's

foreign language proficiency assessment system emerged. Moreover, the CSE was developed under the organization of the Ministry of Education, with its high development costs primarily borne by the government. The involvement of the national government sector in organizing and providing financial support is another key reason for the smooth advancement of this policy[14-17].

### 3.6 By What Means

The methods and means of implementing language planning are diverse, including authoritative issuance, mandatory implementation, extensive promotion, and persuasion. In terms of constructing the foreign language proficiency assessment system, the planning was led by authoritative national institutions, with various promotional measures covering almost all types. The primary approach was authoritative, top-down implementation. Specifically, the methods and means can be summarized into three categories: authoritative issuance of language policies and research outcomes, mandatory integration of research outcomes into textbooks and teaching standards, and extensive promotion of the application of CSE in various stages of foreign language teaching and assessment.

The national government attaches great importance to constructing China's National Assessment System of Foreign Language Proficiency. The development of the CSE was led by the Ministry of Education, involving over a hundred experts, scholars, and professionals over two years. Following its authoritative release, continuous research was conducted, with new findings periodically published by authoritative institutions such as the NEEA.

Since its release, the CSE has guided textbook design, gradually influencing and impacting teaching. For example, the *Curriculum Guidelines for University English Language Teaching (2020 Version)* has integrated relevant content from the CSE in its teaching objectives, requirements, evaluation, and testing sections. Textbooks like the *New College English (4th Edition)*, edited by Zhejiang University, and published by the Foreign Language Teaching and Research Press have also incorporated findings from the CSE (Zheng & Wu, 2023).

Additionally, the CSE has begun to play a role in foreign language teaching and assessment at various educational stages, covering listening, speaking, reading, writing, interpretation, and translation skills, and encompassing language learning, teaching, and assessment. In terms of foreign language assessment, renowned large-scale English tests such as IELTS and TOEFL, and local-scale English tests at institutions like Shanghai Jiao Tong University English proficiency test, have completed alignment with the CSE (Zheng & Wu, 2023). Furthermore, Wu and Zhang (2018) conducted a survey on the application expectations of the CSE and found that respondents generally predicted that the CSE would play a role in a variety of areas, such as exams, syllabi, textbook development, teacher training, and classroom activities.

### 3.7 Through What Decision-making Process

The construction of China's foreign language proficiency assessment system was primarily carried out through the issuance of important documents at the national level.

On September 4, 2014, the State Council issued the "Implementation Opinions", which explicitly stated the need to "strengthen the construction of national education examination institutions, national question banks, and the national assessment system of foreign language proficiency". This was the first time the Chinese government had clearly outlined requirements for comprehensive reforms in foreign language teaching and assessment (Lin, 2015). The Ministry of Education subsequently initiated the construction of China's foreign language proficiency assessment system.

In February 2018, the Ministry of Education and the State Language Work Committee jointly released the CSE, marking China's first English proficiency standard for all educational stages and a significant outcome in implementing the State Council's "Implementation Opinions".



Since 2018, the CSE has been promoted and applied in various levels and types of English teaching, learning, and testing. To better serve the reform of foreign language teaching and assessment in China, and to promote the cultivation of high-quality talents, the NEEA organized a research team to expand the CSE. This effort has resulted in the development of new scales covering typical language activities, proficiency characteristics, and interpretation and translation knowledge.

### 3.8 With What Effect

Evaluating language planning has always been challenging. Grin (2003) noted that optimal language policies maximize social values while minimizing policy costs. Assessing whether a policy promotes the maximization of social value is an important standard from a macro perspective of national language education policy.

Some scholars have evaluated the CSE from the perspective of language economics. For instance, He and Zhang (2017) used language economic concepts such as supply and demand, cost and benefit, and efficiency and fairness to systematically explore and explain the economic effects of the CSE. Wang (2018) also evaluated the CSE using economic methods, providing new perspectives and approaches for its assessment through cost-benefit analysis and positive-sum game of stakeholders.

Previous studies have shown that the CSE provides both individual and social benefits, characterized by “one party’s investment, multiple benefits” and “short-term investment, long-term benefits”. It will significantly impact the construction of the national assessment system of foreign language proficiency, the reform of the national college entrance examination, the development of national question banks, and the comprehensive reform of the enrollment and examination management systems (He & Zhang, 2017; Wang, 2018).

For example, the promotion of the CSE can reduce the development costs of various foreign language exams, ensure test fairness, promote coordination and cooperation between different tests, enhance comparability, and form a unified English proficiency assessment system, fundamentally addressing the issue of multiple exams coexisting. Additionally, it provides guidance for setting teaching goals, selecting or compiling textbooks, evaluating teaching effectiveness, and designing teaching plans (He & Zhang, 2017; Wang, 2018)[18-22].

## 4. Conclusion

Constructing a national assessment system of foreign language proficiency is one of the most significant language education policy reforms in China in recent years. The development of the CSE is an important foundation for the construction of the assessment system, which has garnered considerable attention from experts and scholars. Using Cooper’s Accounting Scheme as a theoretical framework, this paper analyzes the construction of China’s national assessment system of foreign language proficiency from eight aspects, providing a deeper understanding of the impact and significance of developing and promoting the CSE, summarizing experiences, and offering suggestions to expedite the construction of the new assessment system.

The analysis shows that the construction of the foreign language proficiency assessment system is a language planning activity proposed at the national level, supported by the Ministry of Education, and participated by experts throughout the whole process. The CSE, as the important foundation for the construction of the assessment system, aims to provide language learners with multi-level descriptions of English proficiency-oriented to language use, and to fundamentally solve the problem of the lack of uniformity between English proficiency standards and assessment systems. At present, the construction of the foreign language proficiency assessment system has achieved a series of rich results, showing the characteristics of “one party’s investment, multiple benefits” and “short-term investment, long-term benefits”. Since the promulgation of the CSE, it has brought far-reaching

benefits to various target groups such as test organizers, teachers, educational institutions, English learners, and users of test results. However, to maximize public social benefits while meeting individual needs, the continuous development and application of the CSE must be advanced. This includes accelerating the integration of the CSE with language teaching and assessment at various stages, improving exam quality and social recognition, and strengthening alignment with international language proficiency tests.

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