

A Systematic Literature Review of Current Studies on Comparison Between the CEFR and CSE

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Abstract

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is widely used in the area of learners' proficiency assessments, curriculum design and learning material

development all around the world. To better facilitate the language teaching, learning and assessment, the Ministry of Education in the People's Republic of China launched the development of China's Standards of English Language Ability (CSE) in 2014. Then, in 2018, a unified English language ability framework, the CSE was developed. This study aims to examine the differences of current studies on the CEFR and CSE in terms of alignment, target audience and language, application on education, and the most frequently used methodologies. The method used is the systematic literature review (SLR). Through this method, ten articles were obtained from different databases. Based on the analysis, the findings are as follows. First, the majority of studies were in terms of the alignment between the two frameworks from the perspective of listening, reading, writing and other skills. The second largest number of studies on the comparison of the two frameworks focused on the general comparison between them. Additionally, there was only one study related to the application of CEFR and CSE in education. Based on the findings, it can be concluded that most of current studies on the comparison between the CEFR and CSE centre on the alignment and general comparison, few studies were conducted to compare the descriptors of the four English language skills. Hence, future studies should focus more on the comparison of listening, speaking, reading and writing descriptors.

Keywords: CEFR, CSE, comparison, language skills, descriptors

1. Introduction

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is an important standard widely applied to decide the learners' language proficiency levels all over the world (Zou & Zhang, 2017). There are six levels in accordance with the CEFR, from A1 to C2. To support the expansion of language teaching, learning, and assessment across the area in China, the Chinese authorities decided to develop their own framework with the CEFR as the guidance. Then, in 2018, the China's Standards of English Language Ability (CSE) was developed. The CSE has nine levels, from Level 1 to Level 9. It is used to offer guidelines for English learning, teaching, and assessment (Dunlea et al., 2019). The following figure reflects the levels in the CEFR and CSE to serve as a basic understanding of the two frameworks.

Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR)		China Standards of English	
Label	Level	Level	Label
Proficient User	C2	Level 9	Advanced Stage
	C1	Level 8	
Independent User	B2	Level 7	
	B1	Level 6	Intermediate Stage
Basic User	A2	Level 5	
	A1	Level 4	
		Level 3	Elementary Stage
	Level 2		
	Level 1		

Figure 1. The CEFR and CSE (Zhao & Coniam, 2022)

According to this figure, it can be seen that the CEFR classify learners into three categories: basic users from Level A1 to A2, independent users from B1 to B2, and proficient users from C1 to C2. Whereas CSE defines the learners into the elementary stage, the intermediate stage and the advanced stage. The elementary stage includes learners from Level 1 to Level 3, the intermediate stage comprises learners from Level 4 to Level 6, and the advanced stage is made up of learners from Level 7 to Level 9.

There are plenty of studies on the application of CEFR and CSE separately. However, there are limited number of studies on the comparison between the CEFR and CSE. To bridge this gap, this study was to find out the differences of the current studies on the CEFR and CSE in terms of methodology as well as the alignment, target audience and language and the application in education.

In accordance with the research objective stated above, the research questions are as follows:

- a. What are the differences in terms of methodology used in the current studies on comparing the CEFR and CSE?
- b. What are the differences in terms of alignment between the CEFR and CSE in the current studies?
- c. What are the differences in terms of the target audience and language of the CEFR and CSE based on the current studies?
- d. What are the differences of the CEFR and CSE in terms of their application in education?

2. Literature Review

The CEFR was established in 2001 and has been used as an international standard for language instruction and acquisition ever since. The framework, which consists of globally accepted language curricula, reference materials, and examinations, was created to offer a common foundation for language mastery (Foley, 2019). The CEFR document includes several scales that gauge a learner's proficiency in language not by their knowledge of syntax or vocabulary but rather by what they can accomplish at various levels (Read, 2019). It can be utilized in language instruction in addition to its role in language acquisition assessment. Moreover, the CEFR "was designed to provide a transparent, coherent and comprehensive basis for the elaboration of language syllabuses and curriculum guidelines, the design of teaching and learning materials, and the assessment of foreign language proficiency" (Council of Europe, 2014, p. 28). The CSE was developed to: (1) characterize the English language proficiency of Chinese English learners; (2) offer resources and recommendations for English language learning, teaching, and evaluation; and (3) enhance the current collection of language proficiency measures for worldwide alignments (Dunlea et al., 2019). Both the CEFR and CSE were applied in different fields. The following two parts provide a detailed description to the application of the CEFR and CSE respectively.

2.1 The Application of CEFR

The CEFR has been applied to a large number of language curriculum in different countries. For instance, there is the FRELE-TH in Thailand, the CEFR-V in Vietnam, the CEFR-M in Malaysia, the CEFR-J in Japan and the CSE in China (Foley, 2019). There are allegations in Malaysia that the ineffectiveness of the CEFR's implementation can be attributed to teachers' lack of preparation and comprehension of this new implementation (Mohter & Sahdhasivam, 2022). Furthermore, additional elements including teachers' proficiency level, time, motivation, understanding of material adaption, and facilities would affect the implementation of CEFR (Mohter & Sahdhasivam, 2022). Conversely, Thailand encounters difficulties in developing novice educators into proficient ones possessing the requisite theoretical understanding and hands-on expertise to effectively integrate the CEFR for English language teaching (Mohter & Sahdhasivam, 2022).

Additionally, the CEFR has been implemented in language education from three perspectives. Based on previous literature, the implementation of CEFR is described as follows.

First, there are studies focusing on testing the effectiveness of CEFR in language teaching

(Bérešová, 2017; Rifiyanti, 2023; Sahib & Stapa, 2021; Uri & Aziz, 2018). Sahib and Stapa (2021) state that both teachers and students showed positive attitude towards the application of CEFR in the process of language learning, though this implementation posed a challenge for teachers. Sahib and Stapa (2021) mention that the challenge could be overcome by offering substantial training and learning materials to teachers. Rifiyanti (2023) found the CEFR is conducive in action-oriented approach for aligning the curriculum with the determination of learners' proficiency level. Bérešová (2017) investigated the importance of CEFR in language teaching and proposed measures to improve the effectiveness of English teaching. Moreover, there are studies on the challenges and difficulties in the verge of implementing the CEFR. In Malaysia, the biggest challenge was lack of adequate time, thus it is concluded that the Ministry of Education is supposed to offer adequate time to ensure the effectiveness of implementing the CEFR in language learning (Uri & Aziz, 2018). Furthermore, there are studies in terms of applying the CEFR to improve students' language skills. For instance, Glover (2011) examined how to raise university students' awareness of their speaking skill and their speaking ability. The results demonstrated that using self-assessment statements of the CEFR made the students wrote longer, they had thorough descriptions of their speaking abilities, and they were more critical and pertinent (Glover, 2011).

Second, the CEFR has been applied in the field of proficiency level. Specifically, it has been used to test learners' English proficiency level. Babu and Mani (2018) decided the tertiary level students' English proficiency by conducting a Cambridge Preliminary Test (PET) among the participants. Due to the fact that there has not been much research conducted on English competence and the CEFR that is country- or region-specific, Waluyo (2019) examined the first-year university students' English proficiency on the CEFR levels. According to the findings, 77.3% of the pupils met the CEFR's basic user levels (A1 and A2). In the Thai educational system, these levels correspond to the skills of primary and junior high school pupils (Waluyo, 2019). For further advancements, this study recommends developing a curriculum that is targeted at the school level.

Finally, the CEFR has been employed in the area of assessment. There is a study exploring the alignment between the CEFR and TOFEL prediction scores (Supeni & Fauziah, 2020). It was found that 78 students (46.2%) were at Level A1 (Basic User), followed by 35 students (20.7%) were at Level A2 (Basic User), 43 students (25.4%) were at Level B1 (Independent User), 12 students (7.1%) were at Level B2 (Independent User), and only 1 student (0.6%) was at Level C1. In summary, more than 50% of the pupils met the CEFR's low level requirements, A1 and A2 (Basic User). Moreover, the CEFR has been aligned with some national tests in different countries (Baharum et al., 2021). This study looked at how a Malaysian university tried to show this alignment by comparing the results of its English language competency courses, known as the English Language Competence Score Average (ELCSA), to an English language proficiency examination that was aligned with the CEFR (Baharum et al., 2021). The findings concluded that a Linguaskill score of 160 (CEFR Band B2) is equal to a score of 3.25 and 3.5 on the ELCSA. Meanwhile, the CEFR has also been linked to the CSE either generally or on the basis of four English language skills. For instance,

Peng and Liu (2021) aligned the listening skill between the CSE and CEFR. Other researchers explored the alignment between the CEFR and CSE for the writing skill and reading skill, as well as the general alignment between the two frameworks (Peng, 2021, 2022; Peng et al., 2021).

2.2 The Application of CSE in China

In addition to the application of CEFR illustrated in the above part, how CSE has been applied is elaborated in the following. Before 2018, the studies on the CSE focused on the framework itself. After that, there were more articles on the application of CSE. Based on previous studies, there are generally three areas where the CSE was applied.

First, CSE was applied in the field of teaching in China. Plenty of scholars researched the impact of CSE on curriculum construction and teaching targeted for different levels of students (Wang, 2018). It should be noted that most of the studies took college and vocational college students as the sample, and a few of them focused on elementary, middle and high school students. Additionally, there are studies focusing on the theoretical analysis on how to use the CSE in order to have a better teaching effect (Liu, 2019).

Second, the CSE was applied in learning. CSE was used to decide the learners' proficiency level, improve their four English skills and make proper targets for English learning (He & Zhang, 2017). However, the majority of the studies aimed to enhance learners' reading and writing ability, and few to improve other skills (Huang & Kong, 2023). Zhang and Wang (2022) explored the influence of CSE on English writing and self-assessment. Fan and Zeng (2019) studied how to improve students' reading ability by assessing their reading ability, finding the reasons for their problems and proposing suggestions based on CSE.

Finally, CSE was applied in the field of assessment. According to the use of CSE at home and abroad, it was applied in language assessment in large numbers, with high frequency and in a wide range. (Little, 2011; Liu, 2018). Domestic researchers have discussed the application of CSE in assessment from different aspects, among which the alignment research on it dominates and most of them are empirical studies (Huang & Kong, 2023). The studies could be roughly divided into three categories. The first category mainly discussed the validity of CSE. Cai (2019) comprehensively investigated the validity of linking the IELTS writing paper and the CSE from two aspects of generalization and consistency. The results showed that generalization and consistency are important factors in judging the validity of alignment between the production-oriented language test and the CSE. Min (2019) and Zhang and Wang (2019) examined the alignment validity between the receptive language test and the CSE from the perspective of consistency and trainer responsibility. The second category mainly involves the linking between the CSE and the examination. The CSE has been aligned with world-renowned examinations such as the IELTS, Aptis and TOEFL (Pabergergious 2019; Chen & Hu 2021). However, the alignment between large-scale domestic examinations and the CSE has not yet been carried out in a large number. At present, its alignment with the College English Test Band 4 and CET-6 has been completed (Jie, 2019). The third category is on the alignment between the CSE and other frameworks, mainly focusing on the difficulty value of the descriptors. This kind of alignment can be seen in the last part of the application

of CEFR.

In conclusion, there are plenty of studies on the application of CEFR and the CSE. However, studies in terms of the comparison between them are limited. Thus, this study was conducted to show the differences between the CEFR and CSE in the area of (1) methodology, (2) the alignment, (3) target audience and language, (4) and the application in education.

3. Methodology

3.1 The Research Design

The research was based on content analysis through the specific use of systematic literature review method. This method involves “a systematic way of collecting, evaluating, integrating, and presenting findings from several studies on a specific question or topic” (Ali et al., 2021, p. 1). By methodically gathering, examining, and synthesizing the facts, it helps reduce prejudice (Edoardo & Alan, 2014).

3.2 Sampling

As for the sampling method in this study, the criterion sampling was used. It is “to review and study all cases that meet some predetermined criterion of importance” (Patton, 2014, p. 281). There are six criteria to include and exclude quality studies. The first one is that studies must be conducted since 2018, because the CSE was officially released by the China Ministry of Education in 2018 (Sang, 2023). Additionally, the articles must be selected with the key words of “CEFR”, “CSE” and “comparison”. Third, the articles must be written in either English or Chinese. Then, all the studies must be related to the field of CEFR and CSE comparison. Furthermore, the research was searched from Google Scholar and China National Knowledge Infrastructure (CNKI). Finally, all the studies selected must be accessible. Based on all the criteria, the sample here obtained was ten articles.

3.3 Data Collection

Figure 2 shows the PRISAM flow diagram which indicates how the ten studies were selected by following the steps of systematic literature review in detail. According to the procedures of systematic literature review, the first step is to decide the research objective (Lame, 2019). This study aimed to compare the two frameworks to see the differences of current studies on the CEFR and CSE in terms of methodology as well as the alignment, target audience and language and application in education. To this end, six inclusion and exclusion criteria were developed, which are explained specifically in the previous section (3.2 Sampling). The second step is to locate studies (Lame, 2019). By entering the key words of “CEFR”, “CSE” and “comparison” in Google Scholar and CNKI, there were altogether 220 articles available. Before screening, there were three duplicates to be removed. Then, it is necessary to select studies by screening titles, abstracts and full texts (Lame, 2019). There were 217 articles screened. The next step is to assess quality of the studies (Lame, 2019). By doing this, there were 46 articles that were excluded because of lack of interest. Moreover, based on the six criteria, among 171 studies, there were ten left. What follows next is to extract data of interest from included articles. Finally, the data is analysed and interpreted (Lame, 2019).

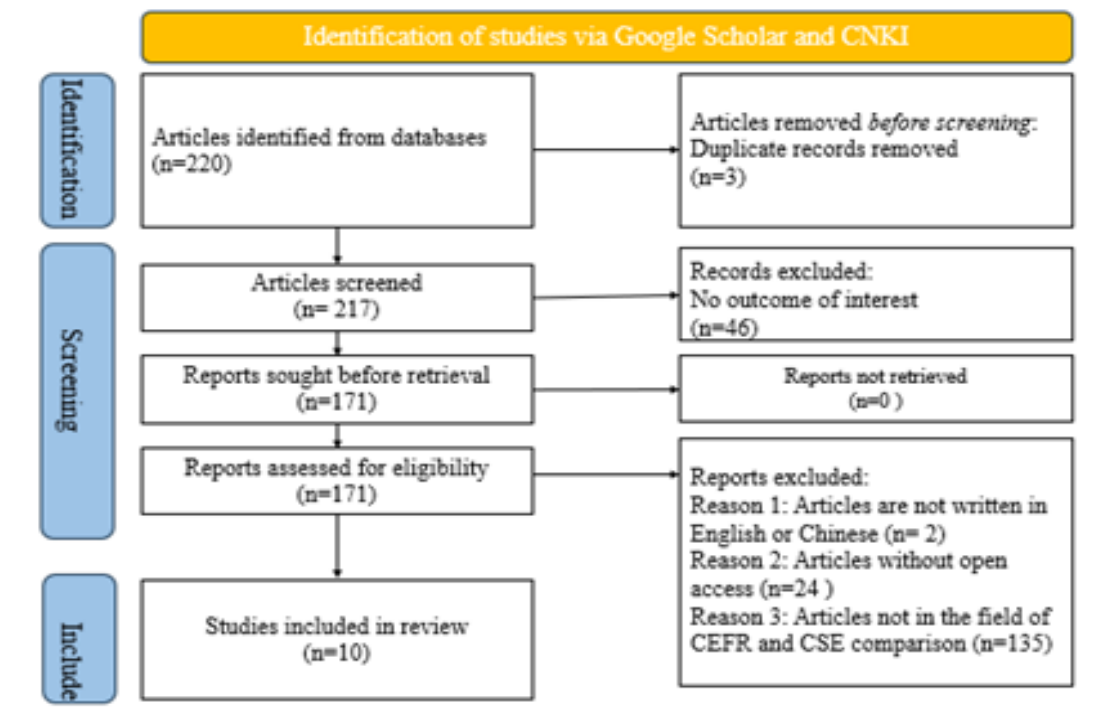


Figure 2. The PRISMA flow diagram

4. Results

The finding of this study mainly explored the comparison between the CEFR and CSE from the perspective of methodology as well as the alignment, target audience and language and application in education.

4.1 Methodologies Used

Table 1 indicates the methodology used in the 10 articles selected for this study. There were six studies using the mixed methods. That is because the CEFR and CSE are frameworks and abstract in nature. Two studies employed the quantitative method, one used the qualitative method, and one applied the systematic literature review.

Table 1. The Methodology Used

Methodology used	Number of articles
Qualitative	1
Quantitative	2
Mixed methods	6
Systematic literature review	1

4.2 The Alignment Between the CEFR and CSE

Table 2 indicates the categories of current studies on the comparison between the CEFR and CSE. There are seven articles in terms of the alignment between the CEFR and CSE, two articles are on the target language and audience comparison between the CEFR and CSE, and only one research is with respect to the application of CEFR and CSE in education.

Table 2. The Categories of current studies on the comparison between the CEFR and CSE

Categories of current studies on the comparison between the CEFR and CSE	Number of articles
Alignment between the CEFR and CSE	7
Target language and audience comparison between the CEFR and CSE	2
Application of the CEFR and CSE in education	1

As it is presented in Table 2, the majority of ten related studies is in terms of the alignment between the CEFR and CSE. The studies were conducted by Zhao and Coniam (2022), Coniam et al. (2022), Dunlea et al. (2019), Peng et al. (2021), Peng (2022), Peng (2021), and Peng and Liu (2021). Their studies are explained as follows.

Zhao and Coniam (2022) conducted a quantitative study on approximately 2,500 Year 1 non-English major college students as participants by using a test and a questionnaire as the instruments. The findings of the research are as follows. First, the correspondence between the CSE and CEFR frameworks is permissible when using Can-Do statements from both frameworks. Second, the correspondences suggested in the current study largely mirrored those reported in other studies, notwithstanding some differences from the earlier studies on the alignment between the CEFR and CSE (Zhao & Coniam, 2022). Similarly, Coniam et al. (2022) had 2,500 freshmen from an esteemed university in China. The methodology used in this research was mixed method with a test, expert judge rating and a questionnaire as the instruments. It was found that it is possible to establish the comparability of the CEFR and CSE in reading and language usage assessments. Moreover, the alignment between the CEFR and CSE is similar to the findings in other studies (Coniam et al., 2022).

There are two studies in terms of the alignment of all English skills between the CEFR and CSE. The first study was conducted by Dunlea et al. (2019) on the alignment between the CEFR and CSE. The methodology used was content analysis with experts, students and teachers as the participants. The study revealed that CSE L2 matched to CEFR A1, CSE L3 to A2, CSE L4 / L5 to CEFR B1, CSE L6 / L7 to CEFR B2, CSE L8 to CEFR C1, and CSE L9 to CEFR C2, which was the case for all skills. The second study was conducted by Peng et al. (2021) involving 5441 teachers as raters, and 23260 students to participate in a mixed method study by using content comparison and a questionnaire as the instruments. Based on the results of the study, Peng et al. (2021) conclude the alignment between the CEFR and CSE for all skills as follows. In general, the CSE Level 1 was equivalent to the CEFR Level Below A1, the CSE Level 2 to the CEFR Level A1, the CSE Level 3 to the CEFR Level A2, the CSE

Level 4 and Level 5 to the CEFR Level B1, the CSE Level 6 to the CEFR Level B2, the CSE Level 7 to the CEFR Level B2 and C1, the CSE Level 8 to the CEFR Level C1 and C2, and the CSE Level 9 to the CEFR Level C2. Figure 3 shows the findings of the two studies. It is evident that the two studies focused on different levels of CSE. Dunlea et al. (2019) covered only Level 2 to Level 9 of the CSE, but Peng et al. (2021) explored all the alignment of nine levels of the CSE to CEFR.

Dunlea et al. (2019)		Peng et al. (2021)	
CSE Level	CEFR Level	CSE Level	CEFR Level
L2	A1	Level 1	Below A1
L3	A2	Level 2	A1
L4/ L5	B1	Level 3	A2
L6/ L7	B2	Level 4 and 5	B1
L8	C1	Level 6	B2
L9	C2	Level 7	B2 and C1
		Level 8	C1 and C2
		Level 9	C2

Figure 3. The CEFR and CSE Level Alignment (Dunlea et al., 2019; Peng et al., 2021)

In addition, Peng (2022) researched the reading skill alignment between the CEFR and CSE. The sample comprised of 5,441 teachers and 23,460 students. Mixed methods were applied with the questionnaire and semi-structured interview as the instruments. Finally, the alignment in reading skill between the two frameworks was concluded as follows. The CSE Level 1 equalled to the CEFR A1 Level below, the CSE Level 2 to the CEFR A2, the CSE Level 3 to the CEFR Level A2 and B1, the CSE Level 4 to the CEFR Level B1, the CSE Level 5 to the CEFR Level B1 and B2, the CSE Level 6 to the CEFR Level B2, the CSE Level 7 and Level 8 to the CEFR Level C1, and the CSE Level 9 to the CEFR Level C1 and C2.

Peng (2021) studied the alignment between the CEFR and CES with respect to the writing skill. The participants in this study were 5441 teachers and 23643 students. In this research, the quantitative method was employed with the questionnaire as the instrument. After the whole process of data collection and analysis, the following findings were gained. Specifically, the CSE Level 1 and Level 2 could be matched with Level A1 and A2 of the CEFR. The CSE Level 3 was equal to the CEFR Level A2, the CSE Level 4 and 5 to the CEFR Level B1, the CSE Level 6 to the CEFR Level B2, the CSE Level 7 to the CEFR Level C1, the CSE Level 8 to the CEFR Level C1 and C2, and the CSE Level 9 to the CEFR Level C2 and above.

Peng and Liu (2021) conducted a mixed methods study with 5441 teachers and 23643

students as the participants. The instruments used included a questionnaire and a semi-structured interview. Based on the analysis, the alignment in the field of listening skill between the CEFR and CSE was found. Level 1 in the CSE corresponded primarily to CEFR Level A1, Level 2 of CSE to Level A2 of CEFR, Level 3 of the CSE to Level A2 and B1 of the CEFR, Level 4 of the CSE to Level B1 of CEFR, Level 5 of the CSE to Level B1 and B2 of the CEFR, Level 6 of the CSE to Level B2 of the CEFR, Level 7 of the CSE to Level C1 of the CEFR, and Level 9 of the CSE to Level C2 of the CEFR.

Figure 4 is provided to see the alignment between the CEFR and CSE more clearly. In this figure, the alignment between the CEFR and CSE in terms of reading, writing and listening skill is presented. It is apparent that different researchers had different opinions on the alignment between the two frameworks related to the three English skills.

Reading Skill (Peng, 2022)		Writing Skill (Peng, 2021)		Listening Skill (Peng & Li, 2021)	
CSE Level	CEFR Level	CSE Level	CEFR Level	CSE Level	CEFR Level
Level 1	A1 Below	Level 1	A1	Level 1	A1
Level 2	A2	Level 2	A2	Level 2	A2
Level 3	A2 and B1	Level 3	A2	Level 3	A2 and B1
Level 4	B1	Level 4 and 5	B1	Level 4	B1
Level 5	B1 and B2	Level 6	B2	Level 5	B1 and B2
Level 6	B2	Level 7	C1	Level 6	B2
Level 7 and 8	C1	Level 8	C2	Level 7	B2 and C1
Level 9	C1 and C2	Level 9	C2 and	Level 8	C1
				Level 9	C2

Figure 4. The Alignment between the CEFR and CSE in terms of Reading, Writing and Listening Skill (Peng, 2021, 2022; Peng & Liu, 2021)

4.3 The Target Language and Audience Comparison Between CEFR and CSE

Based on Table 2, there are two studies with respect to the target language and audience comparison between the CEFR and CSE. The following is the detailed elaboration on them.

Sun and Pu (2021) mention the differences between the CEFR and CSE with regard to the target language and audience. By applying the mixed methods, they compared the differences between the CEFR issued in 2001 and the CEFR Companion Volume. In their study, the divergences between the CEFR and CSE were stated. As for the target language, merely the English proficiency level can be determined according to the CSE, while based on the CEFR, the proficiency levels for other languages can also be decided. As for the target audience, it was mentioned that the CSE only involves language for the abled people, but the CEFR also incorporates the sign language for disabled people. Additionally, CSE covers descriptors for

young children. Whereas the CEFR does not.

Wang (2019) applied the qualitative method to discuss the target language and audience comparison between the CEFR and CSE. Two findings are the same as what Sun and Pu (2021) found. Specifically, Wang (2019) also concluded that the CEFR contains the sign language, and the CSE can be used to determine the language proficiency for young children. What is different is that there are language ability descriptors in the CEFR, but not in the CSE.

4.4 The Application of CEFR and CSE in Education

In addition to the comparison on the target audience and language, the third comparison between the CEFR and CSE is their application in education. Zhu et al. (2023) used the systematic literature review as the method to explore the application of CEFR and CSE. It was found that the CEFR and CSE were used in education by researchers, teachers, and test makers. They were also utilized by researchers to design novel assessment models, testers to determine student alignment, and teachers to determine students' competence levels and devise innovative teaching strategies.

5. Conclusion

Based on the analysis of previous studies in three categories, it can be concluded as follows. First, based on the studies on the alignment between the CEFR and CSE, the alignment lacks clear agreement among the authors in recategorizing the CSE levels according to the CEFR levels. The rationale behind this is that according to the former studies, different scholars draw different alignment between two frameworks. Thus, it can be implied that there should be more clear definitions and guidelines in realigning the levels of CEFR and CSE. Second, according to the findings of studies on the target language and audience comparison between the two frameworks, it can be summarized that different frameworks cater to different needs. It was found that the CEFR provides descriptors for sign language, and the CSE is designed to test the English proficiency of young children, teenagers and adults. Additionally, the study on the application of CEFR and CSE in education shows that teachers, test developers and others began to be aware of the usage of CEFR and CSE. Although the two frameworks were used by them for different purposes, it is reflected that they began to realize to use them, which is a significant milestone.

The limitation of this study is that there are only ten articles from Google Scholar and CNKI, so that there could be other articles from other databases available for further analysis.

In addition to the conclusion and limitation of this study, what follows next is the recommendations for future research. First, future studies should focus on the comparison of listening, speaking, reading and writing descriptors to show deeper analysis and more differences between the CEFR and CSE. Furthermore, as most of the studies employed mixed methods, further studies can be conducted by applying a qualitative method, a quantitative method and systematic literature review.

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