



The Role of English Language Proficiency Standards in Academic and Career Success in Iran

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to examine the significance of English language proficiency standards in fostering academic and career success in Iran. The development of English language proficiency is intricately linked with the needs of Iranians for achieving their academic and professional goals. Notably, there is a growing interest in learning English language in Iran, like in the other countries, since it lies in the fact that English language, as a globalized language, plays a pivotal role in both academic achievement and career advancement. The study first delves into the English language proficiency standards, which include five levels, illustrating the diverse abilities exhibited by English language learners within each language proficiency level. Second, it explores the factors which have tremendous impacts on academic and career success in learning English language, with the aim of maximizing the effectiveness of English language learning for English language learners. Furthermore, it highlights the extensive array of English training courses available in Iran, conducted in educational institutions, which contribute significantly to enhancing English language proficiency among learners and optimizing English language learners' perspective on the English language. Finally, the outcomes of this investigation indicate that the number of interested English language learners in Iran has been increasing in recent years, as they demonstrate a profound awareness and a deeper understanding of the global significance of the English language and recognize its transformative effects on their academic and professional success, thereby opening up vast opportunities for international communication and engagement.

Keywords: English language proficiency standards, English language learners in Iran, English training courses in Iran, academic success, career success

1. Introduction

It is widely accepted that learning English as a global and universal language is essential for both academic and career success for millions of people whose first language is not English. Those interested in enhancing their academic and career opportunities see English as a facilitator for their various goals of success. Moreover, it is evident that this attitude not only inspires academic and career aspirations but also promotes success and competitiveness for those who make an effort to achieve it. There are various driving forces behind this perspective

regarding improving academic and career opportunities that encourage people to learn the English language proficiently. English is a prestigious language and a compulsory subject in educational institutions in Iran; it is a prerequisite for academic and career success and is associated with international communication for the Iranian people. The development of English as an international language is related to the growing demands and needs of Iranians for English proficiency. Rose and Galloway (2019) believe that the main purpose of English-language education has undergone a global shift from teaching it primarily as an academic subject to teaching it for communication, as this approach is linked with the needs of learners.

The study presented in this paper aims to elaborate on the noteworthy issue of the role of English language proficiency standards as an important matter for Iranians to succeed in academic and career life. It will clarify English language proficiency and its standards, analyze how English language tests assess proficiency, describe two well-known English language proficiency scales, point out factors that significantly impact eagerness in English learning among Iranians whose goals are to achieve success in academic and career life, and illustrate a wide range of online and offline courses in the English language in Iran provided by educational institutions. These opportunities allow Iranians to learn English as a means of communication, creating a pathway for them to prepare for higher education and better job prospects in Iran and other countries.

2. English Language Proficiency and Its Standards

English language proficiency indicates the levels of English learners' skills and competencies in speaking, writing, listening, and reading. Bachman (1990, p.16) defines language proficiency as "knowledge, competence, or ability in the use of a language." It is worth mentioning that there is a distinction between linguistic knowledge and communicative competence, or language performance, which refers to how to use knowledge of the English language effectively in real-life situations. Regarding this matter, Davies and others (1999) illustrate that defining a model of language proficiency is an essential part of assessing it. When applied to language, proficiency addresses the extent to which an individual can use language in real-life situations. English is used as a means of communication around the world; therefore, it is essential for English learners to have a deep understanding and awareness of learning English for communication, which is considered vital for academic success and career advancement. Thus, competency in English is crucial to ensure that learners possess sufficient language skills to communicate effectively with others in real-world contexts. Considering this significant subject, Harsch and Malone (2021) highlight a key difference between "language" and "competence," illustrating the distinction between a learner's understanding of the language and their actual ability to utilize that knowledge in practical situations. This indicates a disparity between what learners understand and how well they can apply that understanding in real-life contexts.

It is clear that there is a wide range of English tests evaluating language proficiency at varying levels. The aim of all tests is to evaluate four language skills: receptive skills (listening and reading) and productive skills (speaking and writing). The results of these tests indicate the level of English learners. Various common English language tests, such as IELTS, TOEFL, GEPT, CELP, Duolingo, Aptis, and Cambridge English tests (KET, PET, FCE, CPE, and CELPIP), can be taken at approved test centers in different countries. The two internationally recognized English language tests are the International English Language Testing System (IELTS) and the Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL); their scores provide proof of adequate English language proficiency and serve as indicators of learners' competence and ability in English, as well as their readiness for academic and career success. As cited in Oliver

and others' essay, Graham (1987) notes, however, that these tests define proficiency in different ways. The following image illustrates the various levels of English language proficiency as assessed by different standardized tests in Iran and worldwide.



Figure 1: APG: Average Point Grade
G: Grade

IELTS is an internationally standardized test, available in both online and offline formats, designed to assess the English language proficiency of learners with a non-English speaking background who wish to study or work in an English-speaking country. According to the IELTS Handbook (2005, p. 2), this test has two formats: Academic and General Training. The Academic test is for admission to universities and higher education institutions, focusing on the language skills needed in academic contexts, including a more advanced vocabulary and complex reading passages. The General test is intended for those looking for a job or pursuing immigration, emphasizing everyday English and including reading and writing tasks that are more relevant to social and workplace scenarios. It is important to note that the primary differences lie in the reading and writing sections, with the Academic test featuring more challenging content relevant to university studies, while the General test is more practical and applicable to daily life and employment. The overall band score of the IELTS test indicates learners' language proficiency, based on the average of the four skills: Listening, Reading, Writing, and Speaking. Both types of IELTS tests are scored on a scale from 0 to 9. The table below, taken from the British Council IELTS, explains English language proficiency based on IELTS scores in terms of the four skills and general grades.

Table 1: <https://takeielts.britishcouncil.org/teach-ielts/test-information/ielts-scores-explained>

Band score	Skill level	Description
Band 9	Expert user	You have a full operational command of the language. Your use of English is appropriate, accurate and fluent, and you show complete understanding.
Band 8	Very good user	You have a fully operational command of the language with only occasional unsystematic inaccuracies and inappropriate usage. You may misunderstand some things in unfamiliar situations. You handle complex detailed argumentation well.
Band 7	Good user	You have an operational command of the language, though with occasional inaccuracies, inappropriate usage and misunderstandings in some situations. Generally, you handle complex language well and understand detailed reasoning.
Band 6	Competent user	Generally, you have an effective command of the language despite some inaccuracies, inappropriate usage and misunderstandings. You can use and understand fairly complex language, particularly in familiar situations.
Band 5	Modest user	You have a partial command of the language, and cope with overall meaning in most situations, although you are likely to make many mistakes. You should be able to handle basic communication in your own field.
Band 4	Limited user	Your basic competence is limited to familiar situations. You frequently show problems in understanding and expression. You are not able to use complex language.
Band 3	Extremely limited user	You convey and understand only general meaning in very familiar situations. There are frequent breakdowns in communication.
Band 2	Intermittent user	You have great difficulty understanding spoken and written English.
Band 1	Non-user	You have no ability to use the language except a few isolated words.
Band 0	Did not attempt the test	You did not answer the questions.

Unlike the IELTS, which offers both Academic and General Training versions, the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) primarily focuses on assessing the English language proficiency of non-native speakers in an academic context and is available in paper-based (PBT), computer-based (CBT), and internet-based (iBT) formats. Rebarber and others (2007) highlight that the TOEFL is one of the most widely recognized and esteemed English language assessments internationally, essential for international students seeking admission to universities worldwide (p.63). It assesses skills in listening, reading, speaking, and writing, all of which are critical for academic success. Many universities require TOEFL scores as part of their admission criteria to ensure that students can thrive in an English-speaking academic environment. Regarding the three types of TOEFL tests, the table below, taken from the iSchoolPrep site, describes the differences among them.

Table 2: <https://ischoolprep.com/blog/toefl-ibt-vs-pbt-vs-cbt-a-detailed-comparison/>

TOEFL iBT	TOEFL PBT	TOEFL CBT
The TOEFL iBT is more widely available than the PBT.	They are available in a few countries where internet access is limited. However, the ETS recently announced that they would discontinue the PBT version and only offer iBT.	The CBT tests have been completely replaced by iBT since its introduction. The computer-based exam was phased out in 2006.
The iBT can last anywhere from three hours and 20 minutes to four hours and 10 minutes. This is due to the longer texts and two essays in the writing section of the iBT.	The TOEFL PBT has a duration of 2.5 hours.	The CBT exam is 3.5 hours long.
The test is scored as follows: Listening (0-30), Reading (0-30), Speaking (0-30), and Writing (0-30), with a total score of 0-120.	TOEFL PBT scores are reported on a scale of 31 to 68 for each section. The individual scores are then scaled to produce the overall score, which is somewhere between 310 to 677.	The TOEFL CBT is scored as follows: Listening (0-30), Structure/Writing (0-30), and Reading (0-30), with a total score between 0-300.
The iBT can be taken almost any Friday or Saturday of the year.	The few PBT locations only offer the exam once a month at most. Paper tests are more expensive to proctor, transport, and assess, which is why this version of the TOEFL is less widely available.	There are no available slots for the TOEFL CBT exam.
The TOEFL iBT exam has a separate section for assessing spoken English.	The PBT does not assess speaking skills at all. In addition, the PBT version only has an essay.	The CBT version has a section for spoken English.
Test takers can be confident that the iBT will be accepted at nearly every university in the English-speaking world.	TOEFL PBT is still used for university admissions, but its acceptance is declining.	The CBT is no longer valid for university admissions.

According to the Educational Testing Service (ETS), the TOEFL iBT is a computer-based test that evaluates all four essential academic English skills—reading, listening, speaking, and writing—in a way that reflects their actual application in a classroom setting. This ensures that you can effectively present your English language proficiency to universities where it truly counts. The table below, taken from the Educational Testing Service (ETS), elaborates on the grades and levels in each skill for the TOEFL iBT. Based on the explanation in ETS, the score range is 0–30 for each section of the TOEFL iBT test. Each score range is divided into four or five proficiency levels to help you more accurately assess a test taker's skills.

Table 3: <https://www.ets.org/toefl/institutions/ibt/interpret-scores.html>

Skill	Proficiency Level
Reading	Advanced (24–30) High-Intermediate (18–23) Low-Intermediate (4–17) Below Low-Intermediate (0–3)
Listening	Advanced (22–30) High-Intermediate (17–21) Low-Intermediate (9–16) Below Low-Intermediate (0–8)
Speaking	Advanced (25–30) High-Intermediate (20–24) Low-Intermediate (16–19) Basic (10–15) Below Basic (0–9)

Skill	Proficiency Level
Writing	Advanced (24–30) High-Intermediate (17–23) Low-Intermediate (13–16) Basic (7–12) Below Basic (0–6)

Karjo and Ronaldo (2019) emphasize that TOEFL and Academic IELTS are the two well-known tests used by the vast majority of universities worldwide to measure the English proficiency of EFL (English as a Foreign Language) and ESL (English as a Second Language) learners who seek to achieve academic success and continue their education at higher institutions, both within their countries and abroad. As cited in Karjo and Ronaldo's essay (2019), both tests are so popular that Leung et al. claim they are “almost household names in professional circles.” Achieving an acceptable score on these English tests, depending on the universities and their programs, is one of the most important aspects of academic achievement and career success for students aiming to further their education with a high level of English proficiency.

3. Two Well-Known Language Proficiency Scales

Explaining the levels of English Language Proficiency (ELP) can be challenging due to the wide range of acceptable English tests. The two common proficiency scales widely accepted for evaluating English language learners are the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR), which includes six levels, and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL), which involves five levels. From a pedagogical perspective, CEFR serves as an international standard for assessing language learners’ abilities, while ACTFL assesses English proficiency through four components: speaking, listening, reading, and writing. These components describe an individual’s language skills in terms of proficiency and the ability to use language to achieve communication goals, aligning with the world-readiness standards for language learning. The content of each part of the test is based on a variety of informal and formal materials covering general, social, professional, and academic topics. The table below indicates the CEFR and ACTFL levels.

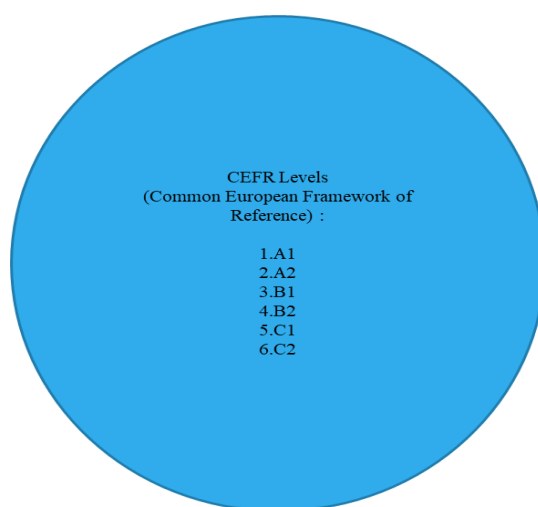


Figure 2: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/level-descriptions>



Figure 3: https://www.actfl.org/uploads/files/general/Resources-Publications/ACTFL_Proficiency_Guidelines_2024.pdf

It is important to note that, regarding the explanation of CEFR, the six levels (A1 to C2) are regrouped into three broad categories: Basic User, Independent User, and Proficient User. The table below, taken from the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) site, illustrates each level of language proficiency. CEFR is used to evaluate results in the IELTS and other English language proficiency tests.

Table 4: <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/table-1-cefr-3.3-common-reference-levels-global-scale>

Proficient User	C2	Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read. Can summarize information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation. Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.
	C1	Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognize implicit meaning. Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions. Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes. Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organizational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.
Independent User	B2	Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialization. Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party. Can produce clear, detailed text on a wide range of subjects and explain a viewpoint on a topical issue giving the advantages and disadvantages of various options.
	B1	Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc. Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst travelling in an area where the language is spoken. Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.
Basic User	A2	Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to areas of most immediate relevance (e.g., very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment). Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters. Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.
	A1	Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type. Can introduce him/herself and others and can ask and answer questions about personal details such as where he/she lives, people he/she knows and things he/she has. Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.

It is significant to highlight that the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) provides a structured approach to language proficiency that is beneficial for academic success. By clearly defining levels of language ability, from A1 (basic) to C2 (proficient), the CEFR helps learners set achievable goals and track their progress. This framework not only enhances students' communication skills across various contexts but also facilitates their ability to engage in academic discourse, participate in international programs, and meet the language requirements of higher education institutions. Ultimately, proficiency in accordance with the CEFR can significantly boost students' confidence and competitiveness in a global academic environment.

Considering the ACTFL Proficiency Guidelines (2024, p. 4), the five major levels are described as follows:

- **Novice:** Can communicate basic personal details and fulfill limited needs with learned phrases.
- **Intermediate:** Can participate in brief conversations on familiar subjects and respond to simple Questions and transactions.
- **Advanced:** Can discuss personal and public topics, narrate experiences, and address complications with detailed communication.
- **Superior:** Can articulate opinions, engage in hypothetical discussions, and explore abstract concepts using sophisticated language.
- **Distinguished:** Can negotiate, persuade, and adapt language to suit various audiences across diverse topics.

It is essential to emphasize that while other criteria for assessing English proficiency are valuable, the ACTFL proficiency levels outlined in the 2004 publication serve as the best framework for academic and career readiness by providing clear benchmarks for language proficiency. Mastery of these levels equips learners with essential communication skills, enhancing their competitiveness in diverse professional environments.

4. Crucial Factors Affecting Academic and Career Success in Iran in Relation to English Language Proficiency

When it comes to learning English, it is of the utmost importance for Iranians with a non-English speaking background. They take advantage of learning opportunities in their cities and enroll in bilingual educational institutions, English institutes, and organizations that offer business courses in English. This is aimed at acquiring qualifications for communicating in English while studying for a PhD in their field of study in Iran and other countries. Additionally, they seek admission to universities abroad for Bachelor's, Master's, PhD, and postdoctoral degrees, and they need to communicate competently in English for their current jobs, attend international meetings, correspond in English, and find employment where proficiency in English plays a vital role in interviews and workplaces.

Generally speaking, students' proficiency and competence in the four English language skills are highly emphasized during their education in Iran, serving as a driving force for their academic success. English prepares students for meaningful instruction and academic performance in subjects taught using the language (Kong et al., 2012, p. 20, as cited in Ghenghesh's essay). Regarding higher education in Iran and the diversity of learners' needs and goals in terms of English language proficiency, the Ministry of Culture and Higher Education in Iran has specified that PhD students must achieve an intermediate level on English tests and obtain an average point grade (APG). Therefore, PhD students in their fields of study must meet the English requirements for university admission and comprehensive exams in advance. IELTS and TOEFL are accepted for PhD students in Iran. Additionally, there are

other English tests valid only in Iran that are similar to the TOEFL Paper-Based test, such as EPT, TOLIMO, MSRT, and MHLE. MHLE (Ministry of Health and Language Examination) is for university students who wish to participate in the Doctor of Medicine exam (MD exam). EPT (English Proficiency Test), MSRT (Ministry of Science, Research, and Technology), and TOLIMO (Test of Language by Iranian Measurement Organization) are requirements for all PhD students in their fields of study. Consequently, every university in Iran accepts specific English proficiency tests that align with different fields of study, emphasizing the significance of English language skills in higher education. These assessments not only provide a standard for evaluating students' language abilities but also significantly contribute to shaping admission criteria and promoting academic success in various academic areas.

Numerous English institutes in Iran offer high-quality English education, both in person and online, playing a crucial role in students' language acquisition while applying the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) to ensure effective learning outcomes. According to Little and Erickson (2015), proficiency scales such as the CEFR can act as a reference framework within an educational system, facilitating the constructive alignment of curricula, teaching objectives, learning outcomes, educational standards, and assessments. Notable examples of these institutes include Iran Language Institute, Afarinesh IELTS House, Bayane Bartar, Irsafam, and Tehran IELTS, each recognized for their effective teaching methods and comprehensive programs, offering various branches throughout the country that enhance student achievement and learning outcomes. O'Day and Smith (2019) emphasize that a coherent instructional system with strong alignment among standards, instruction, and assessment is expected to promote student achievement and learning outcomes.

A key point to consider is that Iranian employers in most companies and offices emphasize the role of English language proficiency for their workforce to facilitate communication with international companies. Knowledge of at least one foreign language is becoming a requirement for more jobs as the decade progresses (Bourgoin, 1993, p. 1, as cited in Bloch, 1995). As a result, these factors significantly impact academic and career success in Iran regarding English language learning.

Several educational institutions offer General English and Business English courses. Many of these institutions provide general English courses at various levels, alongside preparation classes for IELTS, TOEFL, and other English exams, as well as Teacher Training Courses (TTC) for individuals interested in teaching English. To facilitate English language acquisition for learners, a range of educational institutes in Iran offers diverse English courses that significantly enhance students' academic success and career prospects. These programs are grounded in standardized educational practices in Iran and globally, enabling teachers to effectively guide students in achieving academic success and career advancement by equipping them with the essential skills and knowledge needed for their future endeavors. As cited in Wolf et al. (2023), Porter (2002) asserts that in standards-based education, standards are crucial for driving the instructional system and determining what content to teach and assess. Notable institutes that offer General English and Business English courses in Iran include the Industrial Management Institute (IMI), Business Training Center (BTC), and Academic Center for Education, Culture, and Research (ACECR), all of which have various branches throughout the country.

The Industrial Management Institute (IMI), founded in 1962, is the oldest and most prominent consulting firm and business institute in Iran. It offers management courses and Business English courses, termed English for Occupational Purposes, covering topics such as Negotiation Skills, International Contracts (Legal and Commercial Terms), Business Correspondence, Foreign Purchase and Order, and Business Conversation. The Business

Training Center (BTC) features a Commercial English Language Department that offers the Market Leader Course at various levels. The Academic Center for Education, Culture, and Research (ACECR), established in 1980, is a public, non-governmental higher education institution that provides general English courses at different levels, as well as Business English courses, which include Business Correspondence, International Contracts, and Effective Business Writing.

Focusing specifically on these institutes, it is evident that these institutes offer a range of effective and practical English courses, helping learners progress toward their academic and professional goals. Furthermore, there is a growing awareness in Iran of the importance of achieving a high level of English proficiency for academic and career success. These institutes not only provide foundational language skills but also equip students with the tools necessary for success in a globalized world. As the demand for English proficiency continues to rise, these programs play a crucial role in preparing learners for various opportunities.

5. Conclusion

The awareness of the importance of English language proficiency and its positive impact on academic success and career achievement is growing in Iran. The majority of Iranians strive to demonstrate their proficiency in the four essential English skills—speaking, listening, reading, and writing—and aim to achieve acceptable scores on various English tests and courses. They understand that a strong foundation in English enhances their language competency and communication skills, ultimately helping them reach their academic and professional goals. The Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) and the American Council on the Teaching of Foreign Languages (ACTFL) provide valuable frameworks for supporting this success in Iran, as they do in other countries. This strong desire for a high level of English proficiency equips Iranians to thrive both domestically and internationally.

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