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Essential Skills and Canadian Language Benchmarks: Considerations in comparing conceptual frameworks

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1. Introduction

This report provides a conceptual comparison of the Canadian Language Benchmarks (CLB) and the Essential Skills (ES). Its objective is to serve as background and introduction to an HRDC initiative which will focus on creating a comparative methodology for examining the ES in reference to the CLB.

The report begins with a general overview of the CLB and ES, describing the purpose and organization of each framework. This is followed by a more detailed comparison in which the various components of the two frameworks are examined. Finally, recommendations are made and guidelines are suggested to inform a methodology for designing and validating an approach to comparing the two frameworks.

2. Overview of the Canadian Language Benchmarks

2.1. Purpose and Development

The Canadian Language Benchmarks were created in response to a national call for standardization across English as a Second Language (ESL) programs throughout the country. The document was intended to describe levels of ability in ESL in a comprehensive and systematic manner that could be understood and interpreted consistently by language training providers nationwide. The descriptors within the document are intended to inform classroom placement, curriculum development and outcomes criteria.

The Canadian Language Benchmarks were developed and refined over a five-year period. The initiative began in 1995 with the creation of a draft document (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 1995), which was field tested on a national basis. Revisions to this draft document were informed by results of the field testing, by the collaborative efforts of a national working group, and by research undertaken in the development of the first CLB-based assessment, the Canadian Language Benchmarks Assessment (CLBA) (Peirce & Stewart, 1997).

In 1996, the Canadian Language Benchmarks Working Document (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 1996) was produced. This version of the benchmarks included more detailed descriptors of task requirements and performance criteria. For four

years, this working document was used in the field, and subsequently, another revision was undertaken to produce the current version, the CLB 2000 (Centre for Canadian Language Benchmarks, 2000a). The comparative discussion in this report is based on an examination of the CLB 2000, and unless otherwise noted, all commentary on the CLB from this point forward is made in reference to that version of the document.

2.2. Format and Content

The CLB 2000 addresses four language skills – reading, writing, listening, and speaking. Each skill is organized into three stages – basic, intermediate, and advanced – and each stage comprises four levels of ability, or benchmarks, for a total of 12 benchmarks in each skill.

The information provided for each benchmark is categorized under the following headings. "Global Performance Descriptors" give an overview of general characteristics of the target behaviour, "Performance Conditions" describe situations and limitations that apply, and "What the Person Can Do" affords a description of language functions compatible with the benchmark. These headings are rounded out by "Examples of Tasks and Items," a detailed description of the characteristic features of tasks that exemplify a benchmark, and by "Performance Indicators", a list of criteria that describe successful performance.

2.3. Construct Definition

The construct of interest in the CLB 2000 is communicative language proficiency. The communicative paradigm has been evolving since the unidimensional view of the language construct, which was so prevalent in the 1960s, has given way to a theoretical model that acknowledges four skill areas and takes into account the functional and contextual aspects of communication. Canale and Swain (1980) first posited a four-dimensional model comprising linguistic, discourse, strategic, and socio-linguistic competencies, while Bachman and Palmer (Bachman, 1988) later devised a three-pronged approach which included language competence, strategic competence, and psycho-physiological mechanisms. These multidimensional models are considered superior to earlier models of general language proficiency because they reflect the best features of the communicative approach to teaching. They describe the ability to use language to accomplish communicative tasks, rather than simply a grammar-based knowledge of language (Swain, 1984).

The CLB 2000 is based on a model of language that takes into account the functional and contextual aspects of communication. The language construct is defined in a manner that most closely aligns with the Bachman and Palmer model, acknowledging that proficiency in a language involves aspects of competence and performance, both of which are influenced by skill and method factors relating to modality, situation, and context. The underlying principle is a belief that language is intended for communication and that the ability to communicate successfully is best described in terms of meaningful task performance under relevant situational conditions. The

target construct is defined as "communicative proficiency" or "a person's ability to accomplish communication tasks" (CCLB 2000a, VIII). The approach is said to be learner-centred, task-based, and competency-based, a competency being defined as "demonstrable application of knowledge and skills" (CCLB 2000a, VIII)

3. Overview of Essential Skills

3.1. Purpose and Development

The concept of Essential Skills grew out of a questioning of earlier notions of basic skills, which had most commonly been conceptualized under the broad headings of reading, writing, and numeracy. In the late 1980s, this common conception began to be challenged. The new perspective held that while reading, writing, and numeracy skills are certainly necessary to successful performance, they are not in and of themselves sufficient. Prior to 1993, a number of projects and studies were carried out in Canada, Australia, Great Britain, and the United States, all of them focussed on developing criteria to identify and describe the key abilities that facilitate successful performance in the workplace and in life. However, there were two main inadequacies in the work that had been completed to this point. The first was the fact that most of these initiatives centred around the effects of the skills, in other words on what the skills allow a person to achieve, rather than on the skills themselves. The second was the fact that levels were not taken into account in the skill descriptions (Jones, 1993 & 1994).

In 1994, Human Resources Development Canada (HRDC) undertook the Essential Skills Research Project (ESRP) with the goal of identifying and cataloguing the skills and abilities that are essential to success in all occupations. In order to describe and document these skills, the ESRP project team devised a set of scales (ES) adapted from the International Adult Literacy Survey (IALS) and the CLB, and drawing on research conducted in Australia (Key Competencies), the United States (Secretary's Commission on Achieving Necessary Skills), and Great Britain (Adult Literacy and Basic Skills). The ESRP involved over 3,000 interviews aimed at determining how to describe Essential Skills in relation to a range of jobs, professions, and trades.

This research has informed the main activity associated with the ES scales - the development of Essential Skills Profiles (ESP). An ESP is a summary that describes, for a particular occupation, the representative Essential Skills and how an employee would actually apply each of these skills in successfully carrying out the job. ESPs are developed through a systematic process that involves interviews with employees within a National Occupational Classification (NOC). A completed ESP describes a specified range of essential skills and also outlines the complexity of those skills.

ESPs are used for course and curriculum development in training programs, to inform career decisions and educational choices, and in research projects on employment.

Other potential uses suggested for the ESPs include task development, classroom activities, and workplace needs assessment (HRDC, 2003).

3.2. Format and Content

In any discussion of Essential Skills, it is important to distinguish between the scales themselves (ES) and the compendium of occupational profiles (ESP) that is being compiled by HRDC. In reviewing literature for this paper, the authors have observed that many writers on the subject do not clearly make this distinction.

The Essential Skills include:

- Reading Text
- Document Use
- Writing
- Numeracy
- Oral Communication
- Thinking Skills
- Working with Others
- Computer Use
- Continuous learning

In the ES framework, a skill domain is expressed in terms of complexity levels. For most skills, there are five such levels. It is important to note that the essence of Essential Skills is captured within these complexity ratings. In other words, the ES is really a collection of complexity scales. It is the Essential Skills Profiles that provide example tasks from the workplace based on interview data. An ESP provides examples which depict the representative tasks associated with the Essential Skills that apply to a particular occupation. Each task is rated for complexity. Adult educators, workplace trainers, and others turn to ESPs to learn how workers apply their skills in their jobs, while the ES provides the framework for analyzing tasks by skill domain and level of complexity.

3.3. Construct Definition

The skills that are addressed in the ES framework are defined as "enabling skills" (HRDC, 2003). This means that these skills facilitate an individual's ability to perform work functions and to carry out other life tasks. These are not the specialized, technical skills required for success on the job, but rather the more general skills that allow workers to learn, to adapt, and to apply their technical knowledge in their everyday lives and in the workplace. The term "enabling" embraces the notion that the Essential Skills are prerequisites to success. For example, many workers have to read and comprehend work orders before they are able to complete repairs or carry out other job responsibilities. In this example, it is the reading skill that enables the worker to apply the necessary job-related knowledge.

The Readers' Guide to Essential Skill Profiles (HRDC, 2003) states that these nine skills

- help people perform tasks required by their occupation and daily life.
- provide people with a foundation to learn other skills.
- enhance people's ability to adapt to change.

It is therefore assumed that those who possess these essential skills at the required levels will be more readily employable than those who do not.

The ES approach to defining skills implies a multidimensional view of the construct. The emphasis is on demonstrating knowledge and ability by performing concrete tasks in order to succeed in real-life situations. Because the ES is very broadly-based, language is not the only construct of interest in this framework. In fact, of the nine skills that are identified as essential, only four relate directly to the language proficiency construct.

For the purposes of comparative study, only those components of Essential Skills that reflect the language proficiency construct are to be examined, as these are the only skills that can be reliably aligned with the CLB framework.

4. Considerations in Comparing Constructs

The construct definitions presented in the previous sections suggest that both frameworks indicate a practical and multidimensional approach to the application of skills. The ES describes a broad domain of essential life skills which include a language component, while the CLB is confined to language skills only. The following chart summarizes the components of CLB and ES that are to be the focus of a comparative study linking the two frameworks.

Canadian Language Benchmarks	Essential Skills
Reading	Reading Text Document Use
Writing	Writing Document Use
Listening Speaking	Oral Communication

Both the CLB and the ES take a communicative approach to the above language skills. Each scale is based on the performance of authentic, meaningful, contextualized tasks. In this sense, they are similar. However, there is a fundamental difference in the way that the two scales are intended to be applied. In the CLB, the focus is on the degree of proficiency demonstrated by the person who performs the communicative task, while the ES focus is on the complexity of the task itself. For example, in each of the four CLB skills shown above, competence would be expressed in terms of the ESL learner, as in the following statements: "He is at

benchmark 4 in speaking" and "She is at benchmark 7 in writing. In contrast, for each of the four ES skills shown above, complexity would be expressed in terms of the workplace task, as in the following statements: "That document has a reading complexity level of 4" or "That task has an oral communication complexity level of 2".

This distinction is a fundamental consideration in determining precisely what is to be the focus of the comparative study. With respect to the CLB, the comparison could be confined to the scales themselves, or it could be based on an analysis of tasks, materials, and assessments that relate to the CLB descriptors. With respect to the ES, the comparison could be limited to an examination of the complexity scales themselves, or it could be broadened to include the use of ESP tasks, ratings, and descriptions. Since the ultimate goal of the comparative study is presumably to create a framework for locating either learner performance or task difficulty within the context of both scales, consideration should be given to the methods that currently exist for placing learners and tasks. In the case of the CLB, placement of learners is not accomplished by direct use of the document, but by means of tasks and assessment procedures that have been developed for this purpose. In the case of ES, the scales are applied directly to workplace tasks by profilers who have undergone standardized training in the alignment of tasks to complexity levels.

5. Considerations in Comparing Scales

For comparative purposes, the following fundamental observations apply to both sets of scales across all of the linguistic skill domains.

- o The CLB is a compendium of descriptions of ESL learner performance, classified according to skill and level. With a benchmarks approach, it is the individual's level of ability that is the most important organizing factor. The main question answered by the CLB is, "What does a person need to be able to do in order to place at this benchmark level?" The ES is compendium of descriptions of task complexity, classified by skill and level. With an Essential Skills approach, the task complexity becomes the organizing factor. The main question answered by ES is, "What qualities must a task possess in order to place at this complexity level?"

- o Both the CLB and the ES scales range from no reportable skill to the highest reportable level of proficiency or complexity. CLB describes this range across 12 levels, while the ES achieves it in 5 levels.

- o Neither framework is a test. Both the CLB and ES are examples of domain descriptions that can be used to build specifications for assessment development. Because the CLB was originally designed to inform classroom placement and instruction, its contents are more appropriately associated with low-stakes assessment. The ES, as a document intended for workplace use, is more likely to be associated with high-stakes decisions.

o HRDC has defined quality standards to align task descriptions and complexity levels to the ES. For the CLB, curriculum task development standards are set by the institutions responsible for creating the curricula. CCLB has established a set of criteria for responsible test development to assist individuals in determining the quality of assessment instruments based on the CLB.

6. **Considerations in Comparing Tasks**

If the comparative study is to include an analysis of representative tasks, the following considerations apply.

o CLB tasks are classified according to language skill and level of difficulty, regardless of the context in which they occur. They are general in nature and cross a range of genres and contexts, including social, academic, business, and community. ES tasks are closely tied to Essential Skills Profiles, which provide example tasks classified according to the occupational contexts in which they occur.

o Successful performance on a language task is a function of comprehension and production. While other non-linguistic factors come into play, these are not the intended focus of the CLB framework. Success on a workplace task is also a function of comprehension and production. However, if native-speaker proficiency is presumed, then the requirements for successful performance on ES may extend beyond those indicated in the CLB. For example, two employees performing the same ES task may approach it differently, use different combinations of skills, apply skills in different proportions yet still be considered successful. In this situation, a worker can reasonably be expected to draw on background knowledge, experience and cultural expectations in order to successfully perform a workplace task. With regard to the CLB, the degree to which the same expectations are reasonable assumptions is a delicate matter that raises issues of fairness and accessibility.

o A workplace task might be viewed through the lens of either CLB or ES, or through both. Both frameworks are meant to assist individuals in recognizing existing skills sets and in preparing to acquire new skills where necessary. A task-based comparison using examples from the workplace provides a sound meeting ground for the two frameworks. The same workplace task might be analyzed for its language requirements using the CLB, or for its literacy requirements and workplace expectations using the ES.

o ES may be inherently better suited for task placement because it was designed with this purpose in mind. Since the ES scales have relatively few complexity distinctions, an individual might feel more confident in attempting to place a task on the ES scale than in attempting to place the same task at one of the twelve CLB benchmarks. Task placement may prove to be somewhat more difficult on the CLB, not only because of the number of benchmarks, but also

because the document is primarily a description of learner behaviour rather than task complexity.

o CLB-based tasks are available as components of curriculum and assessment materials through many sources across Canada. It is likely that the majority of these available tasks would be authentic-seeming rather than authentic. This simply means that many of the tasks that are used for ESL classroom instruction and, in particular, for assessment purposes, may not be presented in the precise format and style that would apply in a real-life context. Issues of fairness and equitability demand that tasks intended for ESL placement be as consistent and culturally accessible as possible (Norton & Stewart, 1999). In contrast, tasks that are associated with the ES are more likely to have been culled directly from workplace contexts. They tend to be authentic rather than authentic-seeming, and are presented in their original forms with little or no modification.

7. <u>Considerations in Comparing Skills</u>

7.1. Reading

The CLB and ES are similar in their approaches to reading in that both documents describe comprehension of materials that are authentic, meaningful, and relevant. However, the following issues arise when consideration is given to a comparison of the two frameworks.

o In the CLB, the difficulty of reading materials is described across twelve levels according to features such as length, complexity of structure, vocabulary, and genre. In ES, the five levels for reading text are based on length, degree of integration or synthesis required on the part of the reader, and the extent to which the reader must infer to extract meaning.

o The CLB does not make a clear distinction between text and document use. Although both formatted and unformatted genres are included in the framework, all of the tasks and competencies that relate to reading are captured under the same umbrella. In the ES, text is distinguished from document use. Text is characterized as one paragraph or more of continuous discourse, while documents are described as "information displays". Used frequently by workers on the job, typical examples of ES documents include charts, graphs, tables, entry forms, signs, labels, and lists. It is likely that document use plays a more prominent role in the ES because the vast majority of workplace reading is applied to this genre. While documents are described in the CLB, they are not given the same emphasis, perhaps because the varying complexities within an authentic document make it difficult to place it under a single benchmark.

o Entering text or numbers is often required in ES document use and in many of the formatted tasks that comprise the CLB reading task battery. In ES, numeracy skills

embedded in document tasks are often extracted and assigned a separate numeracy complexity rating. The extent to which numeracy plays a role in success on such tasks in CLB is not a consideration of the framework.

o ES complexity ratings for continuous text are based on IALS levels and are assigned to the text as a whole. This is similar to the CLB approach whereby all reading materials at a given benchmark level are grouped together according to difficulty. When it comes to document use, however, the two frameworks diverge. In the ES, the levels for document use are described along three dimensions. For any given document, each of the three dimensions is assigned a separate rating, so that one rating could be higher than another within the same document. Ratings from the three dimensions are then considered in order to assign an overall complexity rating. The three ES dimensions for document use are: complexity of the document itself; complexity of finding and/or entering information; and complexity of information use. In the CLB, an entire formatted text (for example, an employment form) is categorized under one benchmark regardless of variations in difficulty across the sections of the form.

o Because the ES has been approached primarily from a first-language perspective, inability to perform at ES reading level 1 is an indication of illiteracy. Because the CLB describes second-language competence, inability to perform at CLB reading benchmark 1 may indicate first-language illiteracy or lack of knowledge in a second language (English).

7.2. Writing

Both the CLB and ES frameworks for writing describe the production of authentic textual materials. However, the following issues arise when consideration is given to a comparison of the two frameworks.

o ES addresses three dimensions in the complexity of a writing task: length and purpose of writing; style and structure; and content of writing. CLB also attends to the purpose, audience, and length of text. However, given the second-language emphasis of the CLB, its performance criteria are extended to include some of the typical limitations associated with a learner's struggle to communicate in English. For example, at writing benchmark 6, the learner "demonstrates good control over simple structures, but has difficulty with some complex structures and produces some awkward sounding phrases", and at writing benchmark 7, "discourse patterns are typical of first language" (CCLB, 2000a, p. 104). Because ES task success is viewed from a first-language orientation, the emphasis is on the production of comprehensible and appropriate text without regard for second-language interference and without consideration for the language learners' struggles to cope with unfamiliar grammar and spelling conventions.

o In ES, writing is defined as text production which is longer than one sentence, with texts shorter than one paragraph assigned to ES complexity level 1. CLB

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Stage I begins with text production at the letter and word level in order to lay a pathway for individuals who do not possess language skills. Texts shorter than one paragraph can fall anywhere within CLB Stage I, depending on other indicators.

o Both frameworks allow for complexity to be assigned to text entry in forms; however, writing as a function of document use is more fully explored in ES. ES complexity in entry forms is based on the three dimensions of document use, and amount of text entry is one of the three considerations. CLB assigns complexity based on global descriptors of the document's appearance and the amount of text to be entered. CLB examples favour application forms at various levels of complexity; no examples of text entry in documents appear at CLB 11 or 12.

o Because the ES has been approached primarily from a first-language perspective, inability to perform at ES writing level 1 is an indication of illiteracy. Because the CLB describes second-language competence, inability to perform at CLB writing benchmark 1 may indicate first-language illiteracy or lack of knowledge in a second language (English).

7.3. Oral Communication

The Essential Skills for Oral Communication have been aligned to the levels described in the Canadian Language Benchmarks Working Document (CIC, 1996) in the following manner.

ES 1	ES 2	ES 3	ES 4
CLB Listening/Speaking benchmark 5/6	CLB Listening/Speaking benchmark 7/8	CLB Listening/Speaking benchmark 9/10	CLB Listening/Speaking benchmark 11/12

As a result, one can assume that the theoretical underpinnings of the two frameworks are similar. For this reason, there are few issues to be presented with reference to a comparison of oral skills. The most important considerations are the following:

o In the most recent and relevant version of the Canadian Language Benchmarks, the CLB, 2000, listening and speaking are presented as separate skills, acknowledging the fact that learners are seldom at exactly the same level of proficiency in both. The ES alignment to benchmarks has been based on an earlier version of the CLB in which the oral skills were conceptualized as integrated. For this reason, the ES makes no distinction between speaking performance and listening comprehension.

o The ES describes oral communication tasks from a native-speaker perspective, so that variables of spoken production such a pronunciation, grammar, and first-language interference are not components of the scales. The CLB

speaking scales describe ESL learner performance and, as such, address features of non-native discourse that impede fluency and comprehensibility.

o The CLB listening scales capture the efforts of non-native listeners to comprehend spoken English at varying speeds and levels of complexity. The focus of the ES scales is not on the struggle to understand what the words mean, as native proficiency in the skill of listening is more likely to vary according to the degree to which the listener can concentrate, organize and process the information, and respond in an appropriate manner.

o The lowest ES complexity level corresponds with CLB benchmark 5. This means that CLB learners at listening or speaking benchmarks 0 to 4 are not able to complete even a basic-level ES oral communication task. This may not be an issue if the purpose of the comparative study is to examine the ES in relation to the CLB. However, if the purpose is to examine the CLB in relation to the ES, a significant gap exists.

8. <u>Guidelines for Methodology</u>

The above discussion demonstrates that a successful comparison of ES and CLB can be accomplished, but that it will be a complex undertaking. In the interest of informing the design and validation of a comparative framework, the following guidelines and suggestions are presented.

8.1. Task Alignment

In consideration of potential difficulties associated with aligning tasks to the two scales, we would caution against a methodology that would rely on task placement as a starting point for comparison. While it might appear that the CLB and ES could be successfully aligned through an attempt to place a battery of original language tasks on each of the scales, in our experience, we have found that it is very difficult even for experts to agree on such placement. Whether the framework is CLB or ES, every language task can be conceived of as consisting of aspects that can be associated with the framework, and aspects that are unique to the context and peculiarities in which the task is embedded. Because of these unique aspects, every *actual* task is by definition an imperfect reflection of any framework, no matter how carefully it is designed to mirror an organizing framework. That is, it cannot be free of aspects that lie outside the framework.

8.2. Expert Panels

Given that the research process to design and validate a workable comparative framework necessarily involves an extensive range of complex and difficult decision-making, in general, we recommend that a panel approach be considered. Such an approach works particularly well in cases where it is necessary to compare frameworks or to locate tasks within a framework. If, for example, a panel is asked to

make independent decisions prior to group discussion, then the extent of their agreement before discussion can be used as a measure of how reliable the results of their work are likely to be. In turn, discussion among panel members to arrive at consensus can be instrumental in revealing any vagueness or inconsistency in how various elements have been phrased, as well as in shedding further light on the meeting points of the two scales and on areas where they diverge. This approach works best with larger panels (four members, for example), but it is also useful with as few as two members.

8.2. Sample Methodology

One possible methodology would involve convening three panels. One panel would work from a CLB base, matching ES information to the CLB. A second would do the opposite, that is, work from an ES base and match CLB information to the ES document. A third panel would compare and amalgamate the work of the other two. Each panel would consist of two individuals; six different people would be preferable. The two members of each panel would bring complementary backgrounds, one expert in ES, and the other expert in CLB**.**

The perspective taken in the following is that the ES documents are fixed, but that the CLB document is a work in progress that might be revisited or revised at some future time.

The first task would be to design a data coding and management system that all could work with efficiently. That is, a numbering or coding system that would include, from the CLB,
- Global performance descriptors
- Performance conditions
- What the person can do
- Examples of tasks and texts
- Performance indicators

and from the ES
- Complexity ratings
- Examples
- Profiles
- Modes of communication (oral skills only)
- Environmental factors (oral skills only)
- Other information

Examples of possible coding systems might be
- Legal numbering systems with subheadings, such as 1, 1.2, 1.2.3, etc
- Letter-number combination systems such as SW1, SW1.2, for *S*peaking and *W*hat the person can do, etc.
- Simple numbering systems from 1 to N
- Some combination of the above.

It would be efficient if all three panels (all six individuals) began by adapting a trial coding system and then working with it for a short period of time before finalizing it. This work might be facilitated by advice from an expert in the management of complex textual databases. Once a coding system was agreed upon, it would be advantageous to engage a text processing specialist to produce electronic copies of the CLB materials and the relevant sections of the ES materials, all coded as agreed.

Each of the first two panels would then engage in the main task of matching information from one system into the other. There would be two results from these analyses. First would be a series of statements such as "Item X in ES matches Item Y in CLB." Second would be a judgment by the panel members of the difficulty of doing each matching. One possible way of doing this would be by using categories such as:

- Match made verbatim or with low inference
- Multiple matches made (e.g., item in one source matches more than one item in other source)
- Match made with high inference
- Match could not be made

The hope and expectation is that the majority of matches will be in the first category, and that the two panels, working from different perspectives, will in large part agree. The role of the third panel would be to identify the extent of agreement and disagreement between the first two, and to guide the group to a single consensus document.

It should be noted that the goal of panel discussion is not to make agreement between CLB and ES as high as possible. It is, rather, to produce a conceptual Venn diagram to show the nature and extent of overlap between the two systems and the uniqueness of each. The two scales were developed independently for entirely different purposes. Disagreement is a reflection of the complexity of language rather than the skill level of either the original writing teams or those doing the comparison.

In should also be noted that discrepancies between CLB and ES are likely to occur in clusters. For any ES occupation profile, a particular cluster may be either central, irrelevant or somewhere in between. That is, the CLB-occupation match may be only loosely related to the CLB-ES match.

9. Conclusion

Based on an examination of the CLB and ES, it can be concluded that the linguistic components of these two documents are suited for use in a study to investigate the design and validation of a comparative framework. In the course of this research, due consideration should be given to the fundamental distinctions between the two scales and to the key issues and cautions that have been raised in this paper.

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