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Linking GESE Grades to China's Standards of English (CSE)

China's Standards of English Language Ability (CSE), like the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) in Europe, is a tool for setting language learning and teaching goals and supporting test development. The CSE is oriented to the education system in China and offers a common standard for English language professionals like translators and interpreters as well as learners, teachers and users. The framework describes nine levels of ability in three stages: Elementary (Levels 1–3), Intermediate (Levels 4–6), and Advanced (Levels 7–9). It comprises a comprehensive hierarchy of sub-scales that cover areas such as *language comprehension*, *language expression*, *pragmatic ability*, and *linguistic knowledge*. Since its release in 2018, the CSE has attracted much attention and several studies have been carried out to link international assessments to the CSE framework.

The **Graded Examinations in Spoken English (GESE)** is a suite of speaking and listening exams for people of all ages who want to develop communicative English language speaking and listening skills for use in real life, be it for education, work, or daily communication. There are 12 Grades in four stages: Initial (Grades 1–3), Elementary (Grades 4–6), Intermediate (Grades 7–9), and Advanced (Grade 10–12).

In 2020, Trinity College London (Trinity) commissioned researchers at Lancaster University to link the GESE exam suite with the CSE. Since the GESE and CSE were not specifically designed with each other in mind, an important first step was to show congruence between test and scale. In a preliminary claim-by-specification study, the GESE test specifications were satisfactorily aligned with relevant CSE scales and descriptors.

The subsequent main linking phase involved 14 participants with expertise relating to the test, the scale and the scale's context of use – GESE examiners, academics, and teachers, based mainly in China and the UK. The Lancaster project team used a well-documented standard-setting procedure whereby the expert judges first thoroughly familiarised themselves with the CSE and then participated in the main standard setting or linking phase. Every participant reviewed 120 GESE performances representing all 12 grades and decided how each performance matched with

the 9 levels of the CSE. Subsequently, statistical analyses of their decisions for test performances in the Pass and Merit bands informed the alignment proposed.

The results show that conventional standard-setting procedures support the expert judges in making their linking decisions. Additionally, this study used an innovative application of standard-setting by conducting it entirely online and asynchronously through the learning management system *Moodle*. This proved very successful. Engagement among the expert judges was evident and they provided very rich written evidence of their decision-making processes.

Figure A shows the GESE–CSE alignment proposed based on the expert panel's work. It shows that the expectations set at CSE Level 1 only partially represent test performance at the lowest GESE grades, which are primarily designed to encourage absolute beginners in their language learning. An implied but unspecified level of *Pre-CSE 1* has therefore been included in the figure. The figure also shows that some GESE grades (Grades 5, 8, 11) are best described as bridging two CSE levels. Satisfactory performance (Pass) is more likely to be higher in the range of the lower CSE level, and good performance (Merit) is more likely to be lower in the range of the higher CSE level. Excellent performance (Distinction) at a grade may align to a higher CSE level. This is not illustrated fully in the figure, but, for example, if a GESE Grade 6 candidate received a Distinction, this might correspond better to CSE Level 4 than to CSE Level 3. Finally, the figure shows that the highest level of the CSE (Level 9) describes language ability expectations that are beyond the scope of the GESE and are not present in GESE test performance. This is not unexpected, since the language abilities described at CSE Level 9 are often related to professional and academic contexts and to English used for specific purposes, such as by interpreters or diplomats. Despite these differences between the CSE and GESE, the analysis shows a robust link, particularly at the lower GESE Grades.

GESE		CSE
Stages	Grades	
		9
		8
	Grade 12	7
Advanced	Grade 11	
	Grade 10	6
	Grade 9	5
Intermediate	Grade 8	
	Grade 7	4
	Grade 6	3
Elementary	Grade 5	
	Grade 4	2
	Grade 3	1
Initial	Grade 2	
	Grade 1	Pre-CSE 1

Figure A: GESE–CSE alignment