Pearson

Mike Mayor

The Global Scale of English

Reflections on 10 years of innovation

Global Scale of English

Fast-track your progress

The Global Scale of English represents the most significant advance in performance-based approaches to language learning, teaching and assessment since the development of the Common European Framework of Reference.

– David Nunan PhD, *Professor Emeritus of Applied Linguistics, University of Hong Kong*

The Global Scale of English: reflections on 10 years of innovation

In July 2014, after a couple of years' development work, Pearson launched the Global Scale of English (GSE) Learning Objectives for Adults – a set of Can Do statements to support the learning, teaching and assessment of Adult learners. Ten years on and that initial set of Adult learning objectives now form just a small part of the resources and tools that have been developed to support learners, educators, ministries of education, employees and employers around the world. As we celebrate the 10th anniversary of the launch of the GSE, it seems fitting to look back and reflect on how far we have come.

Global Scale of English

Fast-track your progress

In this article, I'll outline our original vision for the GSE before digging deeper into the tools and resources that we have developed to ensure that we can fast-track learning by embedding best-practice teaching and assessment into all stages of the Pearson English Journey.

> "Our vision was to create an ecosystem linking learning, teaching and assessment that would address the questions being asked of the CEFR and provide teachers with practical tools that would support them in their day-to-day teaching."

The GSE vision

In the early 2000s, Pearson, like most UK-based ELT publishers, aligned its courses and assessments to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages[1] (CEFR). Launched in 2001, it soon became the most recognized standard for language learning, teaching and assessment around the world. As it became more widely known, both in Europe and the rest of the world, it became apparent that CEFR was being used in many different contexts – contexts for which it had never been intended. As a result, educators and publishers started to ask a number of questions:

- CEFR was developed for European languages and a European context for language learning. Was the framework appropriate for the teaching of English in non-European contexts?
- CEFR was developed for adults and young adults (15+). Was it appropriate for younger learners?
- CEFR targeted general English. How relevant and useful was it for academic or business English?
- 65% of the CEFR Can Do statements (learning objectives) addressed Speaking, and overall, 65% targeted the A2-B2 levels. How much help was the CEFR for the other skills (Reading, Writing, Listening) and for the lowest and highest levels of proficiency?
- CEFR was generally seen as having six proficiency levels (A1 to C2). These levels were wide and took many hours/years to move between. How could you use these levels to measure and demonstrate progress on a regular basis?
- Many CEFR Can Do statements were high level and educators needed to take them and adapt them to suit their teaching context, including breaking them down into shorter-term goals. How many teachers had the time or experience to do this?

When we embarked on the development of the GSE, our vision was to create an ecosystem linking learning, teaching and assessment that would address the questions being asked of the CEFR and provide teachers with practical tools that would support them in their day-to-day teaching.

Let's take a closer look at what the GSE[2] is, how it is used and why it has been endorsed by educators, institutions and governments around the world.

Students often complain about their lack of perceived progress and will welcome the opportunity to work towards certain defined objectives.

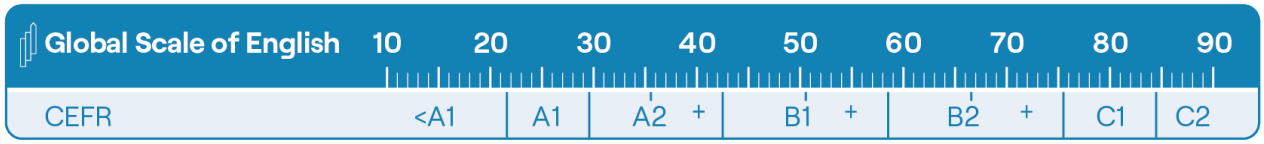
– **Barbara Gardner,** *Learning Technologies training Coordinator, Study Group*

> These GSE frameworks support the Pearson strategy of "lifelong learning" and enable us to track progress across different ages and stages on the same proficiency scale.

What is the GSE?

The GSE is both a **proficiency scale** *and* a **framework of learning objectives** (Can Do statements) describing what a learner can be expected to do at each point on that scale.

The numerical **proficiency scale** (10–90) was originally developed as the reporting scale for PTE Academic, using the original CEFR research data to ensure correlation with that industry standard.



The **framework of learning objectives** was developed to extend the CEFR Can Do statements – to address the gaps noted above and the needs of audience-specific learners. Like the CEFR, the GSE defines language proficiency in terms of the things that a learner "Can Do" in English and supports a skills-based approach to language learning. It is divided into five separate frameworks:

GSE Learning Objectives for

- Pre-Primary Learners[3]
- Young Learners[4]
- Adult Learners[5]
- Academic English[6]
- Professional English[7]

These GSE frameworks support the Pearson strategy of "lifelong learning" and enable us to track progress across different ages and stages on the same proficiency scale.

Whilst grammar and vocabulary knowledge are not the ultimate indicators of proficiency, they still need to be learned and taught and so, unlike the CEFR (which is a framework for all European languages), the GSE database also includes **Grammar**[8] and **Vocabulary**[9] aligned to the 10-90 scale.

Whilst our work is anchored in academic research and technical analysis, we know, as former teachers ourselves, that the information needs to be easy to use and readily accessible to have any impact on the day-to-day work of educators. To this end, we created a free searchable online database containing all of the learning objectives, grammar and vocabulary: the GSE Toolkit[10].

Proficiency in a language is a combination of 'how many things you can do' and 'how well you can do them'. The GSE Learning Objectives are used to quantify 'how many things' a learner can do, whilst the **GSE Assessment Frameworks** (for Adults[11] and Young Learners[12]) have been developed to address the question of 'how well' is the learner performing. The GSE Assessment Frameworks provide criteria for all four skills to support teachers in their informal assessment of learners.

In 2022, Pearson acquired Mondly[13], a global online language learning platform and app, with content for over 40 languages. Pearson English became Pearson Languages and it was a logical next step to expand the GSE frameworks to create the Global Scale of Languages[14] (GSL), initially for Spanish, French, German and Italian with more languages to follow.

> "By embedding GSE into our courseware and assessments, we are able to build a truly connected solution, ensuring... that all learners have the best opportunity to successfully learn English."

How does the GSE work?

The GSE defines the language functions (ie. the things that you can do in English) that learners need to master to be considered at a certain level of proficiency. By embedding GSE into our courseware and assessments, we are able to build a truly connected solution, ensuring that all educators (even those with limited experience) are able to deliver best-practice teaching and assessment and thus ensuring that all learners have the best opportunity to successfully learn English. Best practice has a foundation of core principles that inform the learning journey. The GSE enables us to fast-track learners' progress via the Pearson English Journey.

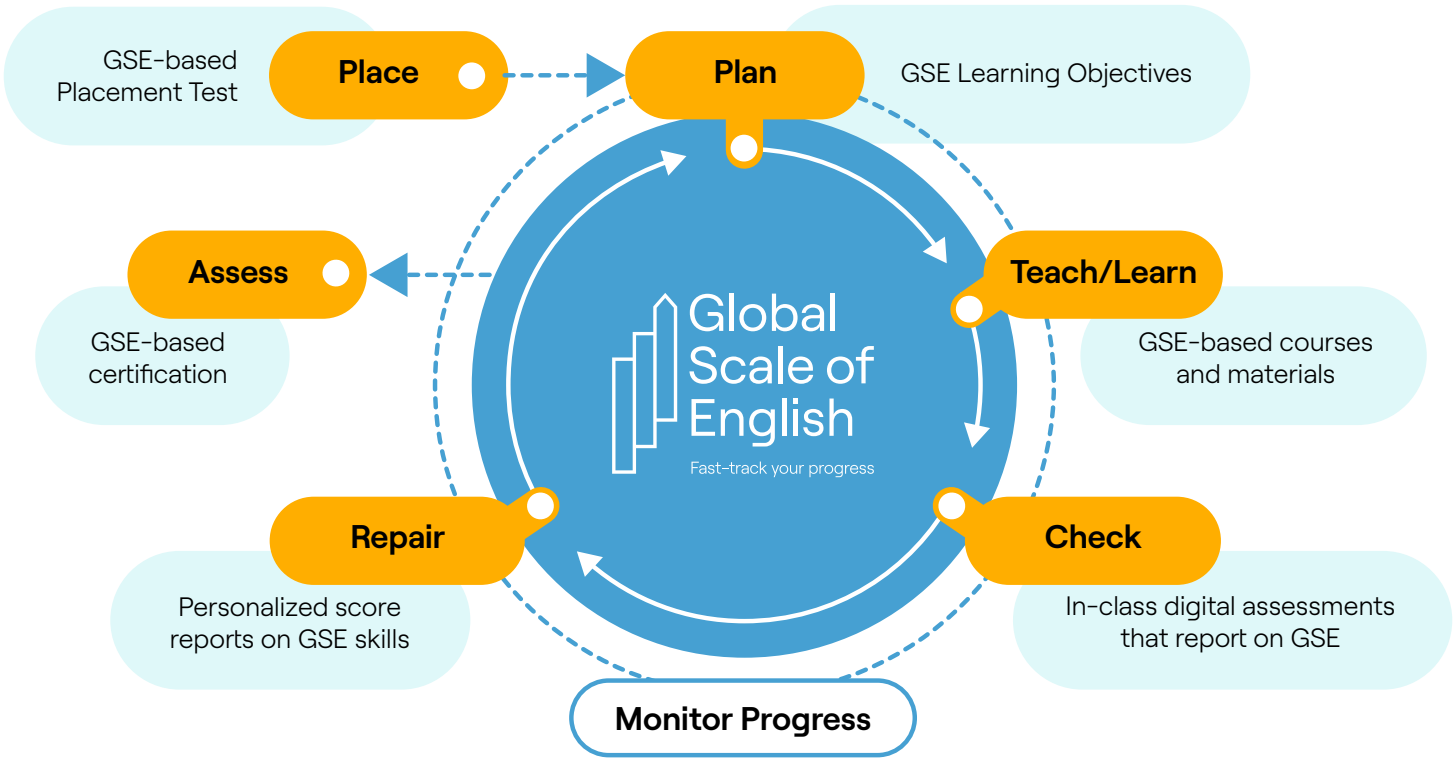


Figure 1: Pearson English Journey

> "The GSE defines the language functions that learners need to master to be considered at a certain level of proficiency."

Placement

Correct placement at the start of any learning journey is key to ensuring that learners set off on the right track. Language placement tests should ideally measure the skills that will be taught on the course – speaking, listening, reading and writing – and not just grammar and vocabulary. This has not always been possible given the amount of time that is needed to administer and grade such tests but new technologies mean that today, 4-skills tests can be given quickly, with few resources, and results delivered the same day.

Placement tests establish the starting level of the learner and enable institutions to group learners with similar levels. Whilst it is inevitable that there will be learners of differing levels within the same class, there is value in keeping these differences to a minimum. Most skills placement tests place learners according to CEFR levels. These are quite broad, especially at the B levels, so by using the GSE, we are able to place learners more precisely into smaller GSE ranges (eg. 43-50, 51-58).

> "The GSE Learning Objectives provide guidance to content creators (when developing coursebooks) and teachers (when planning lessons and courses) on identifying learning objectives at that right level of challenge."

Working at the right level of challenge

Once we know the current level of a learner, we can plan the course of study to take them to the next level. In order to do this, we need to ensure that learners are working at the right level of challenge. Too easy and progress will not be made. Too difficult and the learner will constantly fail. The "zone of proximal development" describes the learning zone in which learners have a reasonable chance of mastering a particular language function, first with support and guidance from the teacher and then independently. The GSE Learning Objectives provide guidance to content creators (when developing coursebooks) and teachers (when planning lessons and courses) on identifying learning objectives at that right level of challenge.

Working towards SMART objectives

GSE Learning Objectives are SMART: Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound. By working towards short-term SMART goals, we are able to provide learners with tangible evidence of progress on a regular basis.

Working with SMART learning goals has been proven to fast-track learner progress[15]. Short-term goals can be regularly achieved, giving learners a sense of progress. Whilst CEFR learning objectives are often quite high level and need to be broken down into smaller steps, the GSE learning objectives are already at the detailed level needed to plan course units and lessons. For example, compare coverage of learning objectives in the CEFR with GSE Learning Objectives for Academic English related to essay writing at a B1 level:

CEFR Can Do statement	SMART GSE Learning Objectives
Can write short simple essays on topics of interest. (B1)	→ Can write an introduction to a simple essay, if provided with a model. (B1: 50) → Can write a conclusion to a simple essay, if provided with a model. (B1+: 52) → Can write a simple descriptive essay, if provided with a model. (B1+: 53) → Can write a simple essay in response to a specific question. (B1+: 54) → Can write a simple discursive essay, if provided with a model. (B1+: 55) → Can write a short, simple academic essay on a familiar topic, if provided with a model. (B1+: 56) → Can write an essay in response to a specific question, if provided with a model. (B1+: 57) → Can write a conclusion to a simple academic essay. (B1+: 58) → Can write an introduction to a simple academic essay. (B1+: 59) → Can write a simple discursive essay. (B1+: 59)

The CEFR has only one Can Do statement that mentions essay writing at the B1 level. The GSE breaks the goal of academic essay writing down into SMART objectives that support the development of the sub-skills required in achieving this goal. Scaffolding is also built into many GSE Learning Objectives (eg. "if provided with a model"). Support and scaffolding is a key part of learning new content and concepts. Learners will ultimately be able to perform a particular language function without support or scaffolding but by including these conditions in the GSE Learning Objectives, success can be celebrated on the way to full mastery of the language function.

> "...the GSE is used to link in-class assessment and coursebooks so that each skill can be measured in detail and the score explained with reference to the GSE Learning Objectives and Assessment criteria."

Monitoring progress on a regular basis

Key to good learning and teaching is the practice of monitoring progress on a regular basis – and then adapting future learning and instruction based on this progress data. If a learner has not understood a particular concept, that concept needs to be revisited, re-taught, re-practised. Teachers monitor progress informally on a daily basis, in class, but this is challenging for even the most experienced teacher when faced with a class of 30+ students. Advances in technology have enabled the development of in-class digital progress testing that can measure the proficiency levels of students in a highly detailed way, breaking down proficiency into each of the different language skills and providing personalized feedback based on the performance of each individual student. At Pearson, the GSE is used to link in-class assessment and coursebooks so that each skill can be measured in detail and the score explained with reference to the GSE Learning Objectives and Assessment criteria. Where necessary, suggestions for remediation activities in the class coursebook are provided.

As well as monitoring understanding of what has been taught, progress monitoring also provides evidence of the learning that has happened and nothing is more motivating for a learner than to have tangible evidence of progress being made. Teachers using the CEFR know that learners can spend many years at the same level – giving the impression that learning has plateaued. For example, we know from research[16] that moving from B1 to B2 level takes anywhere between 380 to 1100 hours of study. By using the 10-90 scale, the GSE enables us to demonstrate progress on a more regular basis. Moving from 43 to 46 on the GSE, for example, takes between 70-210 hours, making it possible to demonstrate progress within an academic year.

Certifying success

The final step in any learning journey is often certification; proof of a learner's level of proficiency that can be used to achieve life goals such as access to higher education, study abroad or employment. These high-stakes assessments usually involve travel to a test centre and can be quite expensive. Learners working with the Pearson English Journey and monitoring their progress on a regular basis can be confident that they are ready to take and be successful in a certification assessment.

GSE in courseware

One of our initial goals when developing the GSE was to support our authors and content teams who found that the CEFR was challenging to use as a practical tool for content development. As we have seen, many of the CEFR Can Do statements are high level (not lesson-level SMART objectives), they were created for Adults learning general English and some language skills had little information (especially at the lower and higher levels of proficiency). By using GSE as the building blocks for content development, we are able to bring a level of scientific rigour to the way in which we develop our courseware and ensure smooth skills progression throughout and across coursebook levels.

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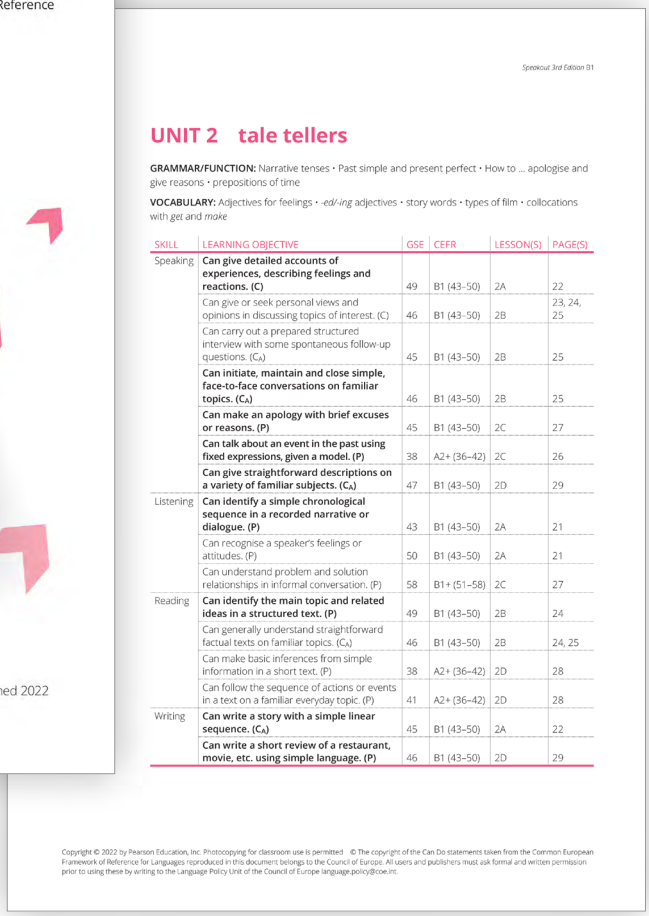
Users of Pearson coursebooks will see the GSE surfaced in a number of ways throughout:

- **On front and back covers:** charts describing the GSE level of the coursebook so that teachers can decide if it's at the right level of challenge for their students

- **In the Student Book:** GSE Learning Objectives used to set unit goals and reflection activities to fast-track progress
- **In the Teacher Book:** full list of GSE Learning Objectives for each unit, explanations of the benefits of the GSE and help on how to evaluate students (using GSE Assessment Frameworks)
- **In the Teacher Mapping booklets:** lists of all the GSE Learning Objectives covered in each unit of a coursebook



Speakout 3rd Edition B1

UNIT 2 tale tellers

GRAMMAR/FUNCTION: Narrative tenses • Past simple and present perfect • How to … apologise and give reasons • prepositions of time

VOCABULARY: Adjectives for feelings • *-ed/-ing* adjectives • story words • types of film • collocations with *get* and *make*

SKILL	LEARNING OBJECTIVE	GSE	CEFR	LESSON(S)	PAGE(S)
Speaking	**Can give detailed accounts of experiences, describing feelings and reactions. (C)**	49	B1 (43–50)	2A	22
	Can give or seek personal views and opinions in discussing topics of interest. (C)	46	B1 (43–50)	2B	23, 24, 25
	Can carry out a prepared structured interview with some spontaneous follow-up questions. (C_A)	45	B1 (43–50)	2B	25
	Can initiate, maintain and close simple, face-to-face conversations on familiar topics. (C_A)	46	B1 (43–50)	2B	25
	Can make an apology with brief excuses or reasons. (P)	45	B1 (43–50)	2C	27
	Can talk about an event in the past using fixed expressions, given a model. (P)	38	A2+ (36–42)	2C	26
	Can give straightforward descriptions on a variety of familiar subjects. (C_A)	47	B1 (43–50)	2D	29
Listening	**Can identify a simple chronological sequence in a recorded narrative or dialogue. (P)**	43	B1 (43–50)	2A	21
	Can recognise a speaker's feelings or attitudes. (P)	50	B1 (43–50)	2A	21
	Can understand problem and solution relationships in informal conversation. (P)	58	B1+ (51–58)	2C	27
Reading	**Can identify the main topic and related ideas in a structured text. (P)**	49	B1 (43–50)	2B	24
	Can generally understand straightforward factual texts on familiar topics. (C_A)	46	B1 (43–50)	2B	24, 25
	Can make basic inferences from simple information in a short text. (P)	38	A2+ (36–42)	2D	28
	Can follow the sequence of actions or events in a text on a familiar everyday topic. (P)	41	A2+ (36–42)	2D	28
Writing	**Can write a story with a simple linear sequence. (C_A)**	45	B1 (43–50)	2A	22
	Can write a short review of a restaurant, movie, etc. using simple language. (P)	46	B1 (43–50)	2D	29

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Endorsement for the GSE

At Pearson, we believe deeply in the value of research and innovation, accountability and transparency. As a commercial organization, we are under additional pressure to demonstrate the accuracy and validity of our research. Which is why we work in partnership with non-Pearson organizations and experts from around the world who monitor our work and provide guidance and feedback:

- The GSE was developed in collaboration with over 6000 teachers from more than 50 countries. The data collection and analysis was overseen by an advisory board consisting of language experts from around the world, including representatives from the Council of Europe (creators of the CEFR) and the British Council along with experts from the fields of psychometrics and language acquisition. These language experts and educators have also reviewed our research[17] and contributed case studies[18] on practical applications of the GSE.
- In 2018, the Council of Europe published a Companion Volume to the CEFR[19] and requested our support in validating some of their new learning objectives. Additionally, they added 50 GSE Learning Objectives to the existing 2001 CEFR framework.
- Around the world, language schools and institutions are accredited by quality assurance organizations. Three key organizations are: EAQUALS[20] (mainly Europe), NEAS[21] (mainly Australia and Asia-Pacific) and ACCET[22] (mainly the US). All three of these organizations include the GSE in their list of quality criteria as a recognized standard against which a school should align its curriculum and courses.
- A number of ministries of education (Panama, Mongolia, Ukraine) have entrusted Pearson with the development of their national curriculum based on GSE.
- Our academic expertise in aligning standards and curricula to GSE has led to us being asked to independently validate a number of university programs (e.g. Macquarie University Foundation Courses, Australia; Anadolou University English Program, Turkey).
- In 2023, we launched the GSE Ambassador programme[23], partnering with influential educators from around the world to introduce the GSE and its benefits to the wider language learning community.

The GSE is a "live" project. We are continuously updating, innovating and carrying out new research to ensure that we stay cutting edge and relevant. We value our collaborations enormously and look forward to growing our partner networks further over the coming months and years.

> "Personalization of the learning experience has always been a key objective for us and the combination of AI and GSE is accelerating our ability to deliver on this vision."

GSE: Future state

We have come a long way in the past ten or so years, but the development and innovation doesn't stop here. As the world grapples with the growing impact of generative AI and large language models (LLMs), we at Pearson are in a strong position to draw on the academic rigour of the GSE frameworks to act as a quality filter and ensure that any use of AI by Pearson English Language Learning is robust and in line with best-practice learning, teaching and assessment. Personalization of the learning experience has always been a key objective for us and the combination of AI and GSE is accelerating our ability to deliver on this vision.

Pearson has been an advocate for life-long learning for many years and we know that language learning can have both personal and professional benefits at any age. Whilst language learning in schools and colleges has been a key focus for us, we developed the GSE Learning Objectives for Professional English in the knowledge that employees needed English in their work, as well as language skills that they did not necessarily master as part of formal education[24]. We will see exciting GSE developments around the recruitment and retention of English-speaking talent in the near future with GSE Job Profiles[25].

Since the pandemic, there has also been exponential growth in the number of people learning languages via apps. Mondly by Pearson is one such app and all of the English content is now fully aligned to the GSE. Further development of the Global Scale of Languages will support the other languages covered by Mondly by Pearson and, as you might imagine, there is much more to come in this direct-to-learner space.

To keep up-to-date with all the latest GSE developments, please visit our website[26].

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About the author

Mike Mayor is Senior Director, Global Scale of English at Pearson. On leaving university, Mike worked as a teacher of English in France before entering the world of publishing as a lexicographer. Mike joined Pearson in 2003 and headed up the Longman dictionaries list until his move to the Global Scale of English in 2013. In this role, Mike works with coursebook and assessment teams to ensure that the Global Scale of English underpins all elements of the Pearson English Journey. He is a frequent speaker at international conferences and teacher training events. Mike has a BA in French and a Masters in English and Applied Linguistics from Cambridge University.

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