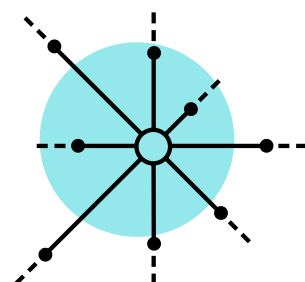## Learning Design Principles
Learn Anywhere

English Performance Standards

Summary

What are Pearson's Learning Design Principles?

Our Learning Foundations describe the optimal conditions for learning and reflect the learner experience we hope our products will create. We do this by incorporating our Learning Design Principles.

Each of our Learning Design Principles goes into detail about a key principle, supporting product design and marketing by describing:
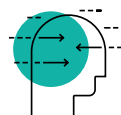
- the research that informs the principle
- why it matters in learning
- how we can apply it in practice

Our portfolio of Learning Design Principles will continue to grow over time.

Welcoming Experience
- Motivation & Mindset
- Social & Collaborative Learning

Minds in Mind
- Developing Understanding
- Attention & Cognitive Load
- Active Learning, Memory & Practice
- Desirable Difficulty & Scaffolding
- Feedback for Learning

Learning Behavior
- Self-Regulated Learning & Metacognition

Purposeful Design
- Objective Design
- Assessment & Evidence-Centered Design
- Personalized Learning & Adaptive Systems
- Authentic Learning

Learn Anywhere
- English Performance Standards
- Digital & Virtual Learning

English Performance Standards

How can we make sure language learners focus on the right things to increase their confidence and achieve their learning goals?

We need to be able to describe learner performance based on an internationally recognized standard so we can say where a learner is in their learning journey, set achievable short-term goals, and measure progress against this standard.

Performance Standards are authoritative, internationally recognized documents that guide the language curriculum, syllabus and assessment specifications. They define what skills students need at a given proficiency level.

The core component of a performance standard is the performance-level descriptor — a description of the competencies associated with levels of achievement when performing language activities (e.g., reception, production, interaction).

Some internationally recognized standards:

- China's standards of English language ability (CSE) by the National Education Examinations Authority (NEEA), Ministry of Education, China
- Australian Second Language Proficiency Ratings (ASLPR or ISLPR) by David Ingram
- Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) by the Council of Europe

The Global Scale of English (GSE) is a CEFR-derived standard used at Pearson. It is both a proficiency scale and a framework of thousands of objectives describing what learners can do at each proficiency level.

Why it matters

Performance standards guide curriculum development, ensure that what is taught matches what is assessed, inform learners about their learning goals, and inform what assessments should measure, which helps create test specifications.

Reference to common standards means useful comparisons can be made between learning goals, performance outcomes, and exams across different contexts. Standards are an important instrument for accountability and recognition of language benchmarks.

Standards have an authoritative power that can lead to unintended consequences. Take, for example, a high-stakes test used for immigration purposes. It is vitally important that the standard accurately measures what it intends to measure and is chosen for the right decision-making process.

Impact

When we successfully incorporate this principle into learning experiences, we can have an impact on these learner outcomes:

- learners persist because they can understand their progress across multiple skills, and what they need to successfully function in English at increasing levels of complexity
- learners can set goals and monitor their understanding, because they can evaluate their progress against meaningful performance descriptors
- learners are confident and motivated because they are optimally challenged by appropriate learning content
- learners master relevant learning objectives because learning content is aligned to objectives
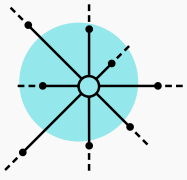
English Performance Standards
The big ideas

1

English performance standards are a **tool for identifying** the language that learners are **expected to demonstrate/achieve** at increasing levels of proficiency.

I know what level I'm at now and what I need to do to make it to the next level.

2

Performance-level descriptors are **high-level categories** that need to be **further specified** into more detailed descriptions of language subskill, such as grammar and vocabulary.

I know what specific language lessons I should be learning to get to the level I want to reach.

3

Reaching a given proficiency level means having a **50% probability** of succeeding at a language task pitched at learners at that level. A **probabilistic definition of language achievement** is needed to define the curriculum and identify cut-scores for assessment.

I should aim to master 50% of the objectives for a given level to be considered to be at that level.

Standards as goals and measures

English performance standards are a tool for identifying the language that learners are expected to demonstrate/ achieve at increasing levels of proficiency.

What it feels like for learners

I know what level I'm at now and what I need to do to make it to the next level.

A standard is both something established as a model or example by authority, custom, or general consent, and something set up as a rule for measuring quantity, weight, extent, value, or quality. Therefore a standard is both a **goal** (what should be done) and a **measure** of progress toward that goal (how well it was done).

A language proficiency standard is based on some reference model of competence that describes the activities, strategies, and competences needed to perform increasingly complex tasks. It defines increasing levels of achievement using a given scale.

- The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) is a ten-level framework that describes proficiency in a language and context.

- Pearson's Global Scale of English (GSE) defines proficiency on a more detailed and precise scale.

What it means for designing learning experiences

Align intended outcomes to the performance-level descriptors (e.g., the GSE learning objectives) and associated resources.

- **Analyse needs** by consulting all relevant stakeholders, including teachers and learners. Identify the target level of performance in relation to learner type, focus skill, learner needs, language context of use, target proficiency, etc.
- **Select descriptors** according to the target learner, communicative goals, and proficiency level. Select all relevant scales and subscales (listening and reading comprehension, spoken and written interaction, spoken and written production, mediation)
- **Refine descriptors** to make the list relevant to the particular goal and context of the course — descriptors can be adopted, shortened, simplified, merged, and supplemented

See this Learning Design Principle:
Objective Design

Standards as a starting point

Performance-level descriptors (e.g. the GSE objectives) are descriptions of functional language performance that need to be further specified into more detailed language subskills, such as grammar and vocabulary.

What it feels like for learners

> *I know what specific language points I should be learning to get to the level I want to reach.*

Performance level descriptors like the GSE objectives are useful for **describing intended outcomes**. But outcomes are just the starting point for learning experience design.

A standard typically describes what learners can do (activities and strategies) and how well (competences). However, it typically doesn't provide the specifics around operational language and tasks.

This means a standard and a set of objectives, however robust they are, are not enough by themselves. The GSE framework specifies the skills (such as grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation) that learners need to meet each objective, and the targets learners should meet as they develop those skills.

"A key ongoing challenge facing teachers [...] is the relating of lesson tasks and corresponding materials to a core list of can-do statements as learning outcomes, which by necessity describe communicative competences in a broad way, rather than as sequential teaching items"
Goodier, 2018

What it means for designing learning experiences

Turn performance-level descriptors (e.g., the GSE objectives) into achievable and identifiable targets. This involves identifying the specific language that needs to be learned as well as the materials and tasks appropriate at a given proficiency level.

- **Identify language targets:** starting from your scope and sequence or test construct, identify targets for each performance descriptor (e.g., being able to correctly use "Why don't you...?" as a target for the objective "Can give advice...")
  - Be sure to at least identify target grammar and vocabulary
- **Identify tasks:** what tasks will prompt the performance being targeted? How should tasks be sequenced in a course? What should be included in the test specifications?
- **Use standards as intended:** as non-

prescriptive tools to help develop curricula, courses, and exams, and to outline goals, inform learners of their achievements, and align assessment and instruction

- Do not use a standard as a syllabus or to test things it is not designed to test

The GSE vocabulary and grammar databases and associated resources offer a basis for level-appropriate content and test specifications. See the GSE Teacher Toolkit for guidance.

See this Learning Design Principle:
Objective Design

Standards are probabilistic

Achieving a given level means having a 50% probability of succeeding at a language task set at an appropriate difficulty for a learner at that level. A probabilistic definition of language achievement is needed to define the curriculum and identify cut-scores for assessment.
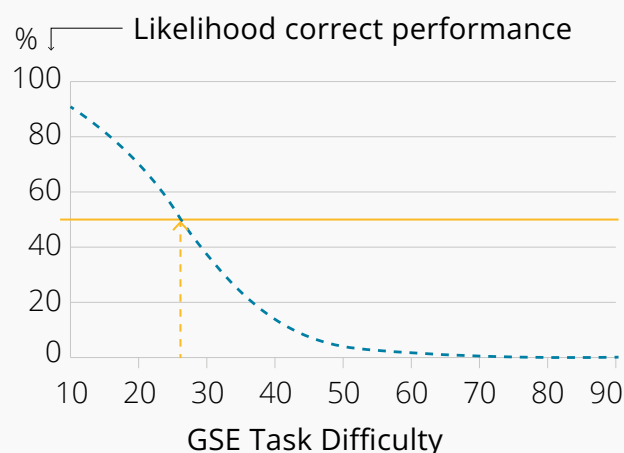
What it feels like for learners

> *I know that I should aim to be able to master 50% of the objectives for a given level to be considered being at that level.*

50% is the threshold used by many assessment providers to confidently assign students to a given level of achievement.

This probabilistic model shows that a learner at level 25 on the GSE has an above-50% likelihood of success at tasks below that level, and a below-50% chance in more complex tasks.

When defining a curriculum aligned to the GSE, the activities used to assess learners' proficiency are assigned an indicative estimate corresponding to the GSE value of the related objectives.

Likelihood correct performance

[Chart showing % on vertical axis (0 to 100) and GSE Task Difficulty on horizontal axis (10 to 90), with a dashed curve declining from upper left and a horizontal line at 50%, intersecting near GSE level 25.]

GSE Task Difficulty

The chosen objectives can cover a range of points on the GSE scale, typically aiming to provide most of the content at the targeted level of the course and complementing this with below-level and above-level content as needed.

Successfully completing activities assigned to a given level is a good indicator that a learner may be proficient at that level, but not a guarantee, because standards are probabilistic. Their proficiency needs to be confirmed by a calibrated assessment.

What it means for designing learning experiences

- Align level-appropriate content to GSE learning objectives within the intended ability range — and to objectives from adjacent ranges below and above the level
- When choosing GSE learning objectives to represent the intended content, make sure they are authentic to the relevant ability level and aligned to real-life tasks

- Allow for probabilistic variations in performance by creating multiple assessment items for each learning objective
- If comparing across assessments, ensure thresholds are the same. A discrepancy in 'being at a level' can lead to misclassifications across different testing contexts (Harsch, 2019)

See this Learning Design Principle:
Assessment & Evidence-Centered Design

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Veronica is Doctor Europaeus in Applied Linguistics and Didactics. Her areas of expertise and current areas of work are SLA, vocabulary studies, language assessment, digital learning, and corpus linguistics. At Pearson, she works as Principal Research Scientist in the English Efficacy & Research team, carrying out and synthesizing research to inform product design. In the past she worked as a teacher of Italian, English, and French, as a lexicographer, and in the field of Natural Language Processing.

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On leaving university, Mike worked as a teacher of English in France before entering publishing as a lexicographer. Mike joined Pearson in 2003 and moved to the Global Scale of English (GSE) in 2013. In this role, Mike works with coursebook and assessment teams to make sure the GSE underpins all elements of the Pearson Connected English Learning Programme. Mike has a BA (Hons) in French Language and Literature and a Masters in English and Applied Linguistics from Cambridge University.

Katherine McEldoon, Ph.D.

Katherine McEldoon is a research-to-practice connector. After earning her Ph.D. in cognitive and learning sciences at Vanderbilt University and a post at Arizona State University's Learning Sciences Institute, she has worked in academia, government, and industry to ensure the best scientific insights support student learning, no matter the context. Katherine has most recently worked as Lead Learning Scientist on Pearson's Efficacy & Learning team, bringing evidence-based insights to Pearson's world of learners.

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