



WALL STREET INSTITUTE LEVELS: ALIGNMENT AND ACCREDITATION

A user's guide

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1. Executive summary

The recent alignment study between WSI levels, BULATS scores and Common European Framework is not only a breakthrough for Wall Street Institute, but for the ESL industry in general. This is the first time that any major English-teaching organization (private or public sector) has carried out a study on this scale, and we may well be the only ones who would even be able to.

The results of the alignment study were extremely encouraging: they showed (a) that our levels, and hence our assessments of our own students, are accurate discriminators, and (b) that they consistently matched up against the levels described in the Common European Framework (CEF) – the emerging world standard for defining English language capabilities in both workforce and academic contexts. This link to the CEF also allows us to index our levels to the principle Cambridge examinations, and, indirectly and with some reservations, also to TOEIC and TOEFL.

Wall Street Institute International has started to broadcast this message to the academic and training communities at large, and we intend to continue to do so as effectively and consistently as possible.

Some preliminary information about the study has already been circulated around the network, but there is still some uncertainty about how to communicate about it (both to our own staff and to our students) without going into excessive technical detail or making unsubstantiated claims. The present document sets out to clarify these issues, and to propose clear, appropriate and defensible messages for various different audiences.

In conclusion, the alignment study shows above all that Wall Street Institute is committed to achieving measurable educational value in its courses, and to demonstrating this fact to the world at large in a way which is academically irrefutable.

Please feel free to raise questions and request further information directly with me:
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2. Understanding the alignment study

2.1. What it is

The alignment study is a two-part survey of Wall Street Institute students and syllabus, aiming to demonstrate:

- a) that our various levels (Survival 1-3, Waystage 1-3, etc.) have a close correspondence to students' real English language abilities, and
- b) that our levels are aligned to (equivalent to) generally recognized standards of English.

The methodology used in the study, and hence its conclusions, have been publicly endorsed by Cambridge ESOL (Examinations for Speakers of Other Languages).

In Phase I of the alignment study we tested over 5000 WSI students in six different countries using Cambridge ESOL's BULATS exam¹. Most students were tested using the computer-based test, but a significant number were also tested using the spoken and written tests.

In Phase 2 of the alignment study we invited 150 experienced Wall Street Institute teachers to match the descriptions of various degrees of language ability in the Common European Framework² against their experience of what Wall Street Institute students are capable of producing at the different WSI levels.

The outcomes of both phases were subjected to rigorous statistical analysis by a leading expert on the mathematical aspects of language testing, so that the conclusions which were arrived at will stand up to the most rigorous academic critique.

¹ For a guide to the various different exams, see the final section of this document.

² The Common European Framework is described in more detail in the final section of this document.

2.2. Why it was carried out

It is becoming more and more essential to demonstrate that study at Wall Street Institute leads to recognizable and measurable results, in terms of language capability. This is for four main reasons:

- i) both companies and governmental organizations are increasingly benchmarking the level of English they require for potential employees. The mostly widely used benchmarks include the Common European Framework and well-known examinations such as TOEFL, TOEIC, Cambridge FCE etc.
- ii) this in turn drives a demand for measurable ROI (return on investment) on the part of private, and especially corporate customers. ROI can only be demonstrated through recognized and accredited learning outcomes.
- iii) Governments, education authorities and other regulatory bodies are taking an increasing interest in the commercial ESL sector, and they, too, want to see that students are getting measurable value for the time and money they are investing.
- iv) Another reason was the desire to enhance Wall Street Institute's credibility and visibility as an education provider. By carrying out the alignment study and communicating its results to the global training and ESL community, we build our reputation and image among opinion formers, as well as potential staff and customers.

2.3. The results

The alignment study successfully demonstrated what we hoped for when we first designed it, namely:

- i) that WSI levels are good discriminators. For instance, students in W3 have significantly higher BULATS scores than students in W2, and even the best W2 students score lower than the worst W3 students.
- ii) that WSI levels and BULATS scores are well correlated; in other words, someone's WSI level is a good predictor of their BULATS score.
- iii) most importantly of all, that WSI levels are well correlated to the level descriptions of the Common European Framework (CEFR); in other words, every WSI level above W1³ has an equivalent point on the ability scale of the Common European Framework.

The link between WSI levels and the Common European Framework was established in two complementary ways in Phases I and II of the study:

Phase I: Through the students' scores: the BULATS exam itself has been calibrated (indexed) against the Common European Framework by Cambridge ESOL.

Phase II: We demonstrated a statistically highly significant correlation between the Common European Framework descriptions of students' language abilities and our own students' abilities at different levels.

The two-phase approach was suggested by Cambridge ESOL, and by following this methodology we have not only secured their public endorsement, but also put the conclusions of the study on the firmest possible academic footing.

2.4. What it proves (and does not prove)

The alignment study proves, as just stated, that there is a clear and systematic correlation between WSI levels, BULATS scores and the Common European Framework. Here is a simple table of equivalences (for more detail see the final section of this document):

CEF	BULATS	WALL STREET INSTITUTE
A1 (Breakthrough)	0-19	Waystage 2
A2 (Waystage) ⁴	20-39	Upper Waystage 2
B1 (Threshold) ⁴	40-59	Threshold 2
B2 (Vantage)	60-74	Milestone 2
C1 (Operational Proficiency)	75-89	Mastery 2 and above ⁵

³ Students at the lowest levels have too little language knowledge to test accurately.

⁴ Waystage and Threshold levels have been revised upwards since the original Council of Europe documents on which our courses are based.

⁵ The mid-point of the C1 range coincides with the high end of our Mastery 2 students (who are very few in number anyway)

A few explanatory notes:

- i) The above equivalences are statistical generalizations, which may not apply to a specific individual student, or specific small group of students. That is why the BULATS scores are expressed as ranges.
NOTE that this does not constitute a guarantee that students at a given Wall Street Institute level will achieve any specific score in BULATS or any other exam. To reiterate, these are statistical generalizations, not predictions of individual importance.
- ii) Levels below W2 are regarded as not usable for communication purposes, so are not included in the CEF.
- iii) The main reason why our levels stop at C1 is that our advanced course (Premier English) has a mainly practical and business-oriented syllabus, reflecting our customers' needs and demands. In any case, C2 represents an extremely advanced level of English, which only a tiny minority of potential customers require.

By extension, the alignment study also demonstrates a correlation between WSI levels and any other levels or exams which are demonstrably linked to the Common European Framework – such as the Cambridge ESOL “Main Suite” exams (PET⁶, FCE⁶ etc.). Remember, though, that these exams place more emphasis on reading and writing than on listening and speaking, while Wall Street Institute courses do the exact opposite. This means that Wall Street Institute students intending to take a Main Suite exam will do better if they attend an exam preparation class first.

What about TOEFL⁶ and TOEIC⁶ – which are the exams of choice in many of our major markets? ETS (the publishers of the exams) have carried out a small-scale study to link them to the Common European Framework, which they have released as a “Research Paper”. We should handle this with care (especially as regards TOEFL), in view of the differences in methodology and syllabus, as well as the limitations of the ETS study; see the next section of this document for some suggestions on what to say to students and potential students.

Over and above the equivalences themselves, the alignment study says something very important about Wall Street Institute itself, (a) that we were willing to put the considerable resources needed behind this study, and (b) that we were able to demonstrate such consistent learning outcomes not only across different centers, but across continents, cultures and language backgrounds.

This is the message which everyone most needs to take home from the study, and the one which most clearly meets our customers' needs for measurable ROI.

2.5. Why it is unique in the ESL field

No other major international provider of English Language instruction – not even the British Council – has ever carried out a similar survey. In their endorsement of the study, Cambridge ESOL have also publicly acknowledged this fact⁷, which should be an additional source of pride for everyone working at Wall Street Institute.

This may seem strange, given the obvious commercial payoff from such a study. The main explanation is that no other provider has these specific Wall Street Institute features and advantages, the combination of which made the study possible:

- i) Our curriculum is based on the same Council of Europe Threshold Level syllabus which was used as the basis for the Common European Framework.
- ii) We have a global network with a high degree of integration, following exactly the same curriculum according to the same standards in every country.
- iii) We have a global online student database (SSDS) which enables us to view study records from any of our students at any time, and at any phase of their courses.

Without all these assets in place, such a large-scale study would either be impossible to carry out or would probably not lead to such consistently positive results.

⁶ Readers who are unfamiliar with these exams, and their scope, will find a summary in the final section of this document.

⁷ The exact phrase was: “the first such study from an English language school with a global presence of which University of Cambridge ESOL Examinations is aware”

2.6. What Wall Street Institute International is doing with it

Wall Street Institute International plans to spread awareness and understanding of the alignment study within the ESL and training communities. This is being achieved through three main channels:

- i) Through press releases (for example, on SmartBrief: <http://www.smartbrief.com/news/aaaa/industryPR-detail.jsp?id=7C90EF50-560E-49BE-BAE7-CF047E68F921>)
- ii) Through articles and advertisements in the specialist press, such as December's article in the EL Gazette in December 2007, and an interview in the same publication to appear in the March 2008 issue.
- iii) Through talks and presentations at specialist conferences and meetings, such as the forthcoming papers to be presented at the IATEFL⁸ and ALTE⁸ conferences in the UK in April 2008.

Wall Street Institute International will publish regular releases to the center network about all such initiatives.

⁸ IATEFL: International Association of Teachers of English as a Foreign Language. ALTE: Association of European Language Testers.

3. Using and talking about the alignment study

3.1. Different messages for different audiences

Although the alignment study is a highly significant development for Wall Street Institute, there are two problems when talking about it to outsiders, or even to our own staff:

- a) It is difficult to explain what it really means without going into technical details which either do not interest or do not concern the person one is talking to, and
- b) many of the more commercially exciting claims and guarantees which one might want to make need to be hedged about with qualifications.

The only sensible way to deal with this situation is to tailor the message to the intended audience, and the rest of this section contains some suggestions for how to do so.

3.2. Suggested guidelines for communication

3.2.1 Audience: Wall Street Institute academic staff (actual and potential)

This document is principally aimed at teachers, Service Managers and Personal Tutors, and it is reasonable to expect them to familiarize themselves with its contents. Academic staff need to be conversant with the Wall Street Institute equivalences, as well as understanding why they cannot be used to guarantee results for individual students.

They should also understand something of how the alignment study was carried out, and why it boosts Wall Street Institute's academic credibility – all of which information is contained in the present document.

3.2.2 Audience: Wall Street Institute commercial staff (actual and potential)

With commercial staff the main point to stress is how the alignment study boosts the credibility of the Wall Street Institute learning system, by linking students' learning outcomes to recognized international standards of language achievement. Depending on the types of conversation they are likely to be engaged in – see the discussion below – they generally should not need to refer to the exact details of the equivalences.

If the decision is taken to “arm” sales staff with tables of equivalences they need to understand very clearly that these are indications and generalizations, not guarantees of individual students' performance. Ensure that the message gets home: it is the study which lies behind these tables of equivalence, rather than the tables of equivalence themselves, which provides the guarantees which students are looking for.

3.2.3 Audience: Private customers (actual and potential)

This depends on their previous state of knowledge, and what they want to know:

- If they have never heard of the CEFR, and they are not asking about equivalences between WSI levels and exams such as TOEIC or IELTS, then the task is easy. Explain briefly and non-technically how we tested 5000 students, and proved that our levels are aligned to a well-known international standard (i.e. the CEFR).
- If they have heard of the CEFR, and want to know how our levels are aligned, then it is a good idea to show the restricted equivalence table to them (WESI/CEFR only). At the same time, it is useful to give them an idea what the different WSI and CEFR levels mean in terms of language ability – see the table at the end of this document.
- If they want to know the equivalences between WSI levels and exam scores – especially high-stakes exams such as TOEFL and IELTS – then it is reasonable, again, to share the relevant table of equivalences. However, this needs to be heavily hedged about – in particular, you should point out that at Wall Street Institute we teach the ability to communicate, while examinations often test different, more academic skills. This means that the match between exam scores and WSI levels is never going to be perfect, as it also depends on someone's ability to perform well in the artificial exam situation.

We strongly recommend against offering any kind of guarantee as to a specific exam score, even if a potential customer says that they need, for instance, a certain TOEIC score in order to get a job which they are seeking.

The way to frame this is to say that this score is roughly equivalent in language ability to such and such a level at Wall Street Institute, and that we can bring them up to the necessary level of English knowledge, but that they should do some kind of exam prep work before taking the exam, to maximize their chances of getting a good score.

The alignment study does not change the nature of the Wall Street Institute guarantee: this still only covers our own level checks, and does not include any external exams (such as BULATS, TOEIC, FCE or whatever). The alignments between Wall Street Institute levels and exam scores are statistical generalizations, and make no predictions about the performance of specific individuals or groups of individuals.

3.2.4 Audience: Corporate customers (actual and potential)

Corporate customers are much more likely than private ones to require some kind of evidence of measurable ROI, and the alignment study, together with the certificate which we have produced, provides just what is needed. You can and should stress the fact that the equivalences have been demonstrated objectively, and with Cambridge ESOL's endorsement.

Some corporate customers will want to relate WSI levels to the Common European Framework; of course, the table of equivalences is perfect for the purpose – you can take the opportunity to point out that our levels offer a finer degree of discrimination than the CEFR, reflecting the wide gap in abilities between one CEFR level and the next.

If corporate customers want to link our levels to exam scores, then, again, the table of equivalences can be shown, but with the same reservations already mentioned. You can also point out that the link between one of our levels and, for instance, a given TOEIC score, is via the level of English ability which they correspond to. This means that the corporation needs primarily to identify what level of ability it needs for different jobs – a task we can happily help with – rather than thinking in terms of exam scores as such.

Now that our levels are officially aligned, our own assessments can be taken as equivalent in reliability to public examinations – and, of course, they come with the courses, at no extra cost. If at all possible, try to use the exam score equivalences as a bridge to this larger discussion, rather than remaining fixated on specific (and not necessarily very meaningful) numbers.

Again, remember that the alignment study does not change the nature of the Wall Street Institute guarantee: the statements it makes are statistical generalizations, not predictions about individual performance.

3.2.5 Audience: Fellow ESL professionals

The point to stress here, over and above the alignments themselves, is the simple fact that the study was carried out, and what it says about the Wall Street Institute method and organization. To stress the point again: one of the goals of the study was to boost Wall Street Institute's academic credibility, and it more than succeeded in doing so.

Beyond that, the table of equivalences between WSI and CEFR levels and BULATS exam scores can be shared with anyone – because it is 100% defensible academically – but it is advisable not to get into discussions of equivalences with other exam scores, especially not TOEIC or TOEFL. To do so risks getting into academically dubious territory, and undoing the credibility boost which the alignment study provides.

4. Background information and tables

4.1. WSI level equivalences: various different versions

4.1.1. The basic table

CEF	BULATS	WALL STREET INSTITUTE
A1 (Breakthrough)	0-19	Waystage 2
A2 (Waystage) ⁹	20-39	Upper Waystage 2
B1 (Threshold) ⁹	40-59	Threshold 1-2
B2 (Vantage)	60-74	Milestone 2
<i>C1 (Operational Proficiency)</i>	<i>75-89</i>	<i>Mastery 2 and above</i>

4.1.2. The basic table expanded to show all WSI levels above S2

CEFR	BULATS	WALL STREET INSTITUTE
		Survival 3
		Waystage 1
A1 (Breakthrough)	0-19	Waystage 2
		Waystage 3
		Upper Waystage 1
A2 (Waystage)	20-39	Upper Waystage 2
		Upper Waystage 3
		Threshold 1
B1 (Threshold)	40-59	Threshold 2
		Threshold 3
		Milestone 1
B2 (Vantage)	60-74	Milestone 2
		Milestone 3
		Mastery 1
		Mastery 2
<i>C1 (Operational proficiency)</i>	<i>75-89</i>	<i>Mastery 2 and above</i>

4.1.3. The basic table, also including ALTE levels¹⁰

CEF	ALTE	BULATS	WALL STREET INSTITUTE
A1 (Breakthrough)	Breakthrough	0-19	Waystage 2
A2 (Waystage)	Level 1	20-39	Upper Waystage 2
B1 (Threshold)	Level 2	40-59	Threshold 2
B2 (Vantage)	Level 3	60-74	Milestone 2
<i>C1 (Operational Proficiency)</i>	<i>Level 4</i>	<i>75-89</i>	<i>Mastery 2 and above</i>

4.1.4. The basic table enhanced to include the main Cambridge exams

CEFR	BULATS	CAMBRIDGE EXAM	IELTS11	WALL STREET INSTITUTE
A1 (Breakthrough)	0-19	n/a	3.0	Waystage 2
A2 (Waystage)	20-39	KET	4.0	Upper Waystage 2
B1 (Threshold)	40-59	PET	5.5	Threshold 2
B2 (Vantage)	60-74	FCE	6.5	Milestone 2
<i>C1 (Effective proficiency)</i>	<i>75-89</i>	<i>CAE</i>	<i>7.0+</i>	<i>M2 and beyond</i>

4.1.5. The basic table with a rough¹² set of equivalences to TOEIC and TOEFL

CEF	WALL STREET INSTITUTE	TOEIC listening/ reading (average)	TOEIC speaking/ writing (average)	TOEFL ibt (computer)
A1	Waystage 2	60	40	n/a
A2	Upper Waystage 2	112	80	n/a
B1	Threshold 2	275	120	57-86
B2	Milestone 2	392	155	87-109
<i>C1</i>	<i>Mastery 2+</i>	<i>490 (listening)</i>	<i>200</i>	<i>110-120</i>

⁹ Waystage and Threshold levels have been revised upwards since the original Council of Europe documents on which our courses are based.

¹⁰ ALTE (The Association of Language Testers in Europe) developed the Can-Do statements which define the CEFR levels

¹¹ Speaking/listening levels only. The exam as a whole requires specific "academic" skills which are not taught at Wall Street Institute

¹² To be handled with great care, for reasons stated above

4.2. The Common European Framework: what the levels mean

For more information on the CEFR and its history and background, please visit the official website:
http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/CADRE_EN.asp.

The following table of Can-Do statements is part of the Common European Framework of Reference document. Approximate equivalent WSI levels are also included:

CEFR LEVELS	WSI LEVEL	CAN-DO STATEMENTS
C2	n/a	<p>Can understand with ease virtually everything heard or read.</p> <p>Can summarize information from different spoken and written sources, reconstructing arguments and accounts in a coherent presentation.</p> <p>Can express him/herself spontaneously, very fluently and precisely, differentiating finer shades of meaning even in more complex situations.</p>
C1	Ma2 and above	<p>Can understand a wide range of demanding, longer texts, and recognize implicit meaning.</p> <p>Can express him/herself fluently and spontaneously without much obvious searching for expressions.</p> <p>Can use language flexibly and effectively for social, academic and professional purposes.</p> <p>Can produce clear, well-structured, detailed text on complex subjects, showing controlled use of organizational patterns, connectors and cohesive devices.</p>
B2	Mi2	<p>Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialization.</p> <p>Can interact with a degree of fluency and spontaneity that makes regular interaction with native speakers quite possible without strain for either party.</p> <p>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.</p>
B1	T2	<p>Can understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure, etc.</p> <p>Can deal with most situations likely to arise whilst traveling in an area where the language is spoken.</p> <p>Can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest.</p> <p>Can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes & ambitions and briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.</p>
A2	UW2	<p>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).</p> <p>Can communicate in simple and routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar and routine matters.</p> <p>Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment and matters in areas of immediate need.</p>
A1	W2-3	<p>Can understand and use familiar everyday expressions and very basic phrases aimed at the satisfaction of needs of a concrete type.</p> <p>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.</p> <p>Can interact in a simple way provided the other person talks slowly and clearly and is prepared to help.</p>

4.3. Leading internationally recognized ESL exam authorities and exams

There are basically two ESL exam authorities worldwide with high visibility and credibility: Cambridge ESOL, from Cambridge, England, and ETS (Educational Testing Services), of Princeton, New Jersey, USA. The following table lists the principle exams produced by each body, together with a rough equivalent in terms of WSI levels where appropriate and possible:

CAMBRIDGE ESOL							
EXAM	TYPE OF EXAM	FORMAT	TYPE OF ENGLISH	PURPOSE	NOTES	CEFR =	WSI =
BULATS ¹³	Low stakes ¹⁴ , scored	Computer-based listening/reading, also paper-based, all 4 skills	Business and Professional	Workforce English; testing language competence in the workplace	BULATS is essentially CESOL's "answer" to TOEIC (see below)	Depends on score (see previous table)	Depends on score (see previous table)
KET ¹⁵	High stakes ¹⁶	Computer- or paper-based	General	Testing English at lower levels	Frequently taken by younger learners	A2	UW2
PET ¹⁷	High stakes	Computer- or paper-based	General	Testing English at intermediate level	Frequently taken by adolescent learners	B1	T2
FCE ¹⁸	High stakes	Paper-based only ¹⁹	General	General certification of English competence	The most widely used CESOL exam apart from IELTS	B2	Mi2
CAE ²⁰	High stakes	Paper-based only	General (academically-oriented, emphasis on reading and writing)	Certification of advanced English competence (e.g. for college admission)	A relatively recent addition, between FCE and CPE	C1	Ma2+
CPE ²¹	High stakes	Paper-based only	General (academically-oriented, emphasis on reading and writing)	Certification of high proficiency in English (e.g. for would-be interpreters and translators)	The first ever Cambridge ESL exam	C2	n/a
IELTS ²²	High stakes	Paper-based only	General/academic (EAP)	English for college admission (esp. UK and Australia)	"Shared" between Cambridge ESOL, the British Council, and IDP of Australia	Depends on score; between B2 and C1 usually required for college admission	Mi3 to Ma1 at this score level

¹³ Business Language Testing Service (it also exists in French and German versions)

¹⁴ In other words, used for guidance and indication rather than as separator of sheep from goats

¹⁵ Key English Test

¹⁶ In other words, a pass/fail exam, taken in a secure setting

¹⁷ Preliminary English Test

¹⁸ First Certificate in English

¹⁹ A computer-based version will be released soon

²⁰ Certificate of Advanced English

²¹ Certificate of Proficiency in English

²² International English Language Testing System

4.3 Leading internationally recognized ESL exam authorities and exams (cont.)

ETS							
EXAM	TYPE OF EXAM	FORMAT	TYPE OF ENGLISH	PURPOSE	NOTES	CEFR =	WSI =
TOEIC	High and low stakes versions ²³ , scored	Paper-based	Business and Professional	Workforce English; testing language competence in the workplace	TOEIC was the first exam of this sort, and leads the market world-wide	Depends on score (see previous table)	Depends on score (see previous table)
TOEFL	High stakes, typically	Computer- or paper-based	General/ academic (EAP)	English for college admission (esp. USA and Canada)	Was the world leader until recently, now IELTS has drawn equal in many markets ²⁴	Depends on score; between B2 and C1 usually required for college admission	Mi3 to Ma1 at this score level
TSE ²⁵	High stakes, but scored	Face to face	General	Assessment of speaking/ listening skills for employment and other purposes	Similar to the spoken component of FCE and CAE	No systematic relation has been published by ETS	To be determined

²³ May be administered by companies using past papers (low stakes), or in a secure setting under ETS auspices (high stakes)

²⁴ This is also related to the increasing difficulty of obtaining student visas for the USA

²⁵ Test of Spoken English