



A Comprehensive Analysis of Trinity College London's ISE Exams: History, Structure, Implementation and Scoring

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Abstract

This paper presents an extensive analysis of the Integrated Skills of English (ISE) exam conducted in Trinity College, London. This is done through providing a detailed investigation of its history, structure, implementation and discussing its advantages and limitations by referring to current literature and testing principles. Initially, a brief historical background of the college is introduced with the development of the ISE exam. Then, a comprehensive analysis of the exam's modular system from A1 to C2 is given along with detailed task descriptions for both digital and paper-based formats. In the next part, the evaluation and scoring process is explained thoroughly with a specific emphasis on CEFR alignment. Lastly, the exam's negative and positive aspects are discussed objectively which is followed by suggesting an enhanced involvement of test-takers, teachers, exam designers and researchers.

Keywords: Trinity College London; ISE Exam; Integrated Skills Assessment; CEFR alignment

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1. Introduction

1.1. Background and History

The history of Trinity College London dates back to the foundation of the Church Choral Society and College of Church Music in 1872. Trinity College London was established in 1877 as the external exams board for Trinity College of Music, and it became popular for being the first music exam board. Only two years after that, these exams were conducted by 200 local test centers. In almost two decades, both types of exams have started to be administered in different countries.

In 1904, it changed its name to Trinity College of Music London. Over time, the institution made a mark in both theoretical and practical music exams and became recognized throughout the UK and the Commonwealth. The application of English language assessments started in 1938. The establishment of Trinity College London Ltd (TCL) as a separate company in 1992 also separated the exam business of TCL from Trinity College Music.

TCL started to practice the first ten Secure English Language Test (SELT) centers in the UK in 2015. The term SELT is used by the UK Home Office to describe the approved tests which are operated in approved test centers to assess four language skills: reading, writing, listening, and speaking, guided by the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR). One must successfully complete a SELT in order to:

- work in the UK
- study in the UK
- live in the UK
- receive a UK visa
- acquire British citizenship

Today, TCL operates two types of SELTs, which are both approved by the UK Home Office:

1. Graded Examinations in Spoken English (GESE): It focuses on speaking and listening skills
2. Integrated Skills in English (ISE): It tests all four language skills.

In addition to being accepted in the aforementioned situations, these exams have been the subject of various studies. Investigating how both GESE and ISE exams are consistent with the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR),

Papageorgiou (2007) revealed that the exams demonstrated a good command of the framework in a variety of aspects. Also, in the scope of a book chapter by Boyd and Taylor (2016), the validity of GESE exams was analyzed via a socio-cognitive framework and from many different angles, which emphasizes the need for further research in various contexts.

Furthermore, Trinity Lancaster Corpus (TLC) was utilized in a book chapter by Gablasova and Brezina (2015) to uncover the differences between examiners and candidates in terms of their use of certain epistemic adverbial markers in their speech production. The same corpus was used to compare native speakers and learners' data in another study conducted by Gablasova et al. (2017). The part of TLC used in this study is based on the data gathered from GESE's advanced speaking section. The data from the ISE's writing parts, including both paper-based and online tasks, were also used in line with an examiner perception survey examining both task types in a study by Brunfaut, Harding, and Batty (2018).

To frame the testing dimension of the ISE exam within broader assessment principles, Aydoğan Koral and Mirici (2021) emphasize that "Teachers are supposed to focus more on communicative activities by assigning students with meaningful tasks rather than asking them to memorize separate items without context." This perspective supports interpreting language assessment tasks as meaning-oriented performance rather than isolated from practice. In addition, Aydoğan Koral and Mirici (2021) argue that English should be presented "as a means of communication," which supports viewing ISE tasks as performance-based measures rather than primarily form-focused items. In line with this integrated approach, the exam assesses four skills through a range of task types.

In another study conducted in the GESE context, whether the tasks of this exam are in line with CLT principles was questioned (Wall and Taylor, 2014). Despite certain practical issues, the researchers demonstrated that, as a communicative test, GESE possesses construct validity. Utilizing a Writing Process Questionnaire regarding ISE's writing and reading parts to understand students' writing processes, Chan et al. (2015) provided evidence for the test's cognitive validity. With a similar standpoint, Exploring L2 learners' reading-into-writing process via ISE exam tasks, Chan (2018) indicated that the examiners had to perform tasks requiring different cognitive abilities, which supports that the exam has construct validity despite the need for generalizability among learners from different backgrounds. With a specific emphasis on writing tasks, ISE's alignment with CEFR was investigated by Harsch and Kanistra (2020), which revealed a high level of consistency via task judgements.

2. The Content and Examples of the ISE Exam

The ISE exam includes two modules. The first one is Reading and Writing, the other one is Speaking & Listening. Examinees can take the modules together or at different times depending on their readiness. Examinees can take the exam in five different levels for each module. The levels are categorized as ISE A1 (A1), ISE Foundation (A2), ISE I (B1), ISE II (B2), ISE III (C1), and ISE IV (C2), which have a different format from the other five exams. The Reading & Writing module has two reading tasks, one reading into writing task, and one writing task, which take approximately 1,5 – 2 hours. On the other hand, in the Speaking & Listening module, the duration and number of tasks vary at each level. For instance, the ISE A1 (A1) exam has one speaking and listening task and two listening tasks, which take 14 minutes in total. The ISE Foundation (A2) and ISE I (B1) have two speaking and two listening tasks, completed in 16 and 18 minutes, respectively. Finally, ISE II (B2) and ISE III (C1) have three speaking and one listening tasks; their timings are 20 and 25 minutes, respectively (Trinity College London, 2023, 2023, 2023, 2024, 2025).

Table 1. ISE Exam Categorization (Trinity College London, 2023, 2023, 2023, 2024, 2025)

	ISE A1	ISE Foundation	ISE I	ISE II	ISE III
CEFR level	A1	A2	B1	B2	C1
Time	1 hour 30 minutes	2 hours	2 hours	2 hours	2 hours
Task 1	Long reading ▶ 200 words ▶ 10 questions	Long reading ▶ 300 words ▶ 15 questions	Long reading ▶ 400 words ▶ 15 questions	Long reading ▶ 500 words ▶ 15 questions	Long reading ▶ 700 words ▶ 15 questions
Task 2	Multi-text reading ▶ 3 texts ▶ 200 words ▶ 10 questions	Multi-text reading ▶ 3 texts ▶ 300 words ▶ 15 questions	Multi-text reading ▶ 4 texts ▶ 400 words ▶ 15 questions	Multi-text reading ▶ 4 texts ▶ 500 words ▶ 15 questions	Multi-text reading ▶ 4 texts ▶ 700 words ▶ 15 questions
Task 3	Reading into writing ▶ 40-50 words	Reading into writing ▶ 70-100 words	Reading into writing ▶ 100-130 words	Reading into writing ▶ 150-180 words	Reading into writing ▶ 200-230 words
Task 4	Extended writing ▶ 40-50 words	Extended writing ▶ 70-100 words	Extended writing ▶ 100-130 words	Extended writing ▶ 150-180 words	Extended writing ▶ 200-230 words

The table presented in every ISE handbook published by Trinity College London (Trinity College London, 2023, 2023, 2023, 2024, 2025) demonstrates how the

reading and writing parts of the Trinity College London Integrated Skills in English (ISE) exam are set up for five levels of proficiency, from ISE A1 (CEFR A1) to ISE III (CEFR C1). There are four tasks at each level: Long Reading, Multi-text Reading, Reading into Writing, and Extended Writing. The texts get longer and harder as the levels go up, and so do the word count requirements for writing tasks. For instance, people taking the ISE A1 level read 200-word texts and write short answers of 40 to 50 words. Candidates taking the ISE III level read 700-word texts and write longer essays of up to 230 words.

In addition to the A1 to C1 ISE exams, there is also the ISE IV - C2 Exam, using portfolios instead of reading and writing exercises (Trinity College, 2023). Unlike earlier levels, ISE IV is assessed entirely through a structured interview and portfolio. It does not include a separate Reading & Writing exam module. Test-takers must choose three tasks from three sections (A, B, C) from the official Trinity College London task-list published for the exam year. There are 15 tasks total, five tasks for each section, and candidates must only submit one task for each of them, three tasks in total. Candidates are spurred to use dictionaries, online tools, and grammar books. 6-12 weeks are recommended for test-takers to prepare the portfolios. The final portfolio must be submitted “no later than one day before” the exam day. Then the candidates are given a controlled written exam for 3 hours involving two reading into writing tasks and one writing task. After that, they are given 25 minutes for four speaking tasks and one listening task.

Table 2. ISE IV Exam Format (Trinity College London, 2023)

Component	Number of tasks	Range of skills involved	Skills assessed
The Portfolio: A portfolio of a candidate's written work put together during class time or individual study.	3 tasks	Writing with reading	Writing
The Controlled Written exam: A reading and writing exam taken under controlled conditions.	3 tasks	Writing with reading	Reading and writing
The Interview: An oral interview (including a discussion of the portfolio) between a candidate and an examiner.	5 tasks	Writing with reading with speaking and listening	Speaking and listening

This part presents exam examples from ISE A1. The first section includes three short texts and ten questions (11-15 and 16-20).

2.1. ISE A1 - Reading & Writing and Listening & Speaking Tasks

At the A1 level, candidates work with short, simple texts and tasks designed to test their basic reading comprehension and ability to produce short, guided written responses.

2.1.1. ISE A1-Reading Task 1: Long Reading

The first reading task starts with a text consisting of five paragraphs and ten questions in total. This task mainly focuses on a general understanding of the text. In this long reading task, examinees are expected to read the text and answer the questions in two different parts. Each part of the task involves 5 questions. The first part includes a matching activity which requires examinees to choose the related topics from the given box for each part of the text. There is also one extra given topic in the box that they need to identify and eliminate. In the second part, examinees are also supposed to complete the sentences with an appropriate word or number in line with the given text.

Task 1 – Long reading

Read the text about Northfield. Answer the 10 questions on page 3.

<p>Part 1</p> <p>In Northfield, you can find a lot of different restaurants. You can try pasta, fish and other things. You can eat outside too. You can sit in the sun and enjoy a picnic. There is a new café too. You can buy an ice cream there.</p> <p>Part 2</p> <p>Northfield has an old football club. It is not very big. It is called 'Northfield Town'. People also call it 'The Blues'. The club has a new famous player! Go and watch him! You can enjoy other sports too. We have a basketball club or you can play tennis.</p> <p>Part 3</p> <p>There are a lot of different people in Northfield. People speak many languages. Everyone is very nice and likes to help. All the young people who live in Northfield enjoy having fun. You can have a great time here!</p> <p>Part 4</p> <p>Northfield has many old factories and some new places too. They are all very interesting. The library has photos of the old city. There are also photos of local people.</p> <p>Part 5</p> <p>In spring, Northfield has many flowers. They have different colours and the town is beautiful. The best time to visit is in June because it is sunny and nice. You can meet people and there are lots of interesting things to do.</p>	<p>Questions 1-5</p> <p>The text on page 2 has five parts (1-5). Choose what each part tells you about (A-F). There is one letter you don't need.</p> <p>1. Part 1 _____</p> <p>2. Part 2 _____</p> <p>3. Part 3 _____</p> <p>4. Part 4 _____</p> <p>5. Part 5 _____</p> <div style="border: 1px solid black; padding: 5px; width: fit-content; margin-left: 20px;"> <p>A. Weather</p> <p>B. People</p> <p>C. Buildings</p> <p>D. Sports</p> <p>E. Shopping</p> <p>F. Eating</p> </div> <p>Questions 6-10</p> <p>Read the sentences. Write only <u>ONE</u> word or a number from the text in each sentence.</p> <p>6. You can get an ice cream in the _____</p> <p>7. Northfield's football club is _____</p> <p>8. Young people in Northfield like to have _____</p> <p>9. There are old _____ in Northfield.</p> <p>10. Northfield is beautiful in the _____</p>
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Figure 1. ISE A1 – Long Reading Example (Trinity College London, 2023)

2.1.2. ISE A1 – Reading Task 2: Multi-text Reading

In this example, examinees are required to read three short texts and respond to two sets of questions. To demonstrate, in the first part of Task 2, they are expected to read 5 different questions at first and then match them with the appropriate text (A, B, or C) where they can find the answer. The second part of Task 2 focuses on vocabulary knowledge and requires examinees to read the sentences and fill in the blanks with the appropriate given words or numbers from the Word bank box.

2.1.3. ISE A1 – Reading Tasks 3 and 4: Reading into Writing and Reading & Extended Writing

In task 3 (Reading into Writing Task), examinees are provided with a short scenario. Considering the scenario, they are expected to write four sentences using the given words in the box. In this example task, they are supposed to write sentences about their school for a friend who wants to come to their school. Similarly, task 4 (Extended Writing Task) requires examinees to write five sentences about their best friend regarding the guiding points. Different from Task 3, there is also a part for taking notes in Task 4 which is not marked. Both of the tasks can be completed in 40-50 words.

2.1.4. ISE A1 - Listening & Speaking Tasks

ISE A1 Listening and Speaking Tasks take 12 minutes, and 2 minutes are also allocated for examiner administration time. Hence, these tasks are completed in 14 minutes in total.

2.1.4.1 ISE A1 - Conversation Task

The Conversation Task lasts 4 minutes, and listening and speaking skills are tested in an integrated way. In this task, the examiner starts the task by using simple greetings like ‘What’s your name?’ and ‘How are you today?’ (Trinity College London, 2023). When the examinee has responded, the examiner chooses one of the subject areas such as (1) personal details: family and friends; (2) days of the week and months of the year, numbers to 100; (3) rooms in the home; (4) locations: places in local area; (5) everyday activities: home life and routine, (6) objects in household, classroom, bedroom, including color and locations (Trinity College London, 2023, p.29). The examiner asks questions to start the conversation and elicit various functions of the ISE A1 level. The examiner finishes the task by saying, ‘Thank you. Now we’re going to move on to the Listening task.’ (Trinity College London, 2023, p.29).

2.1.4.2 Independent Listening Tasks 1 & 2

In these independent listening tasks, examinees listen to two recordings, but they are expected to respond orally. These tasks last 8 minutes in total. At the beginning of Task 1, the examiner reads some instructions and may repeat them once if needed: ‘You hear four conversations. For each conversation, choose the correct answer: A, B, or C. You can write the correct letter A, B, or C on your paper. You hear the conversation twice. You have ten seconds to look at the pictures. [After 10 seconds] Are you ready?’ (Trinity College London, 2023, p.29). To demonstrate, in this example task, examinees listen to the recording and choose the correct option among A, B, or C.

In Task 2, examinees listen to the recordings twice and answer three questions with a word or a number. Examinees are allowed to take notes while listening. In this task, the examinee is expected to tell three facts about the recording to the examiner. The examples are shown below:

2.2 ISE Foundation (A2) - Reading & Writing and Listening & Speaking Tasks

The A2 level focuses on expanding reading comprehension and writing skills through slightly longer texts and structured paragraph-length responses.

2.2.1. ISE Foundation (A2) - Reading Task 1: Long Reading

For ISE Foundation (A2 level), the Long Reading Task also includes a text consisting of five paragraphs and focuses on the general understanding of the text. However, different from the A1 level, it has three different parts and fifteen questions in total. Each part has 5 questions. While the first part of the task requires examinees to choose the best title for each paragraph of the text, the second part of the task involves eight different statements and examinees are supposed to choose five of them that are true according to the information given in the text. In the third part of the task, examinees read five sentences and complete them appropriately with a word, phrase (maximum three words) or number in line with the given text.

2.2.2. ISE Foundation (A2) - Reading Task 2: Multi-Text Reading

Similar to the A1 level, examinees read three short texts in this multi-text reading task, but they answer three sets of questions. The texts may include some graphs, dialogues or small pictures. Each part has five questions, and the section has fifteen questions in total. In the first part of the task, examinees read each paragraph (A, B, and C) and decide which text each question refers to. Accordingly, they choose the letter (A, B, or C) and write it on the lines near the

questions. They can use any letter multiple times. The second part of the task requires examinees to read eight different statements and choose five of them that are true according to the given text. Examinees can write the letters of true statements in the provided lines in any order. The third part of the task includes some notes containing information from each text. At the bottom, there is also a word bank to complete missing information in the gaps. Examinees are expected to choose the appropriate words and phrases from the Word Bank and eliminate the unnecessary ones. They can look back at the texts to decide on the missing information if needed.

2.2.3. ISE Foundation (A2) – Reading Tasks 3 and 4: Reading into Writing and Reading & Extended Writing

Both Task 3 (Reading into Writing) and Task 4 (Extended Writing) require examinees to write an article in 70-100 words. In the Reading into Writing Task, examinees use the information that they read in the previous task (Text A, B, and C) to answer the guiding questions while writing their article. Similar to the A1 level, in the Extended Reading Task, examinees are provided with a short scenario and expected to write about it in line with the guiding points. This task may include scenarios such as writing an email to a friend or writing an essay for a school magazine. Both Task 3 and Task 4 have a part for pre-planning notes, which is not marked.

2.2.4. ISE Foundation (A2) - Listening & Speaking Tasks

The A2 level focuses on expanding reading comprehension and writing skills through slightly longer texts and structured paragraph-length responses.

2.2.4.1 ISE Foundation (A2) Topic Task

The examinee chooses a topic and prepares it for discussion. S/he also fills out a topic form with four points and brings it to the exam. The examiner uses this topic to ask questions with the aim of eliciting the functions of the ISE Foundation. The examinee is expected to use various language functions such as (1) describing routines, (2) expressing ability and inability, describing future plans, (3) expressing likes and dislikes, describing people/objects/places, (4) expressing simple comparisons, (5) asking for information (e.g. simple questions about everyday life), (6) asking for clarification, and (7) responding to requests for clarification (Trinity College London, 2025, p.19). The Topic Task takes 4 minutes.

2.2.4.2 ISE Foundation (A2) - Conversation Task

Rather than a formal question-answer interview, this task aims a meaningful and authentic exchange of information, ideas, and opinions. This task lasts 2 minutes. The examiner selects a subject area, such as holiday, shopping, or food and asks questions to elicit various functions of the ISE Foundation (A2 level). The examinee is expected to use various language functions. To illustrate, it might be about (1) giving personal information about present and past circumstances/activities; (2) describing routines; (3) expressing ability and inability; (4) describing future plans, (5) expressing likes and dislikes, (6) describing people, objects and places; (7) expressing simple comparisons; (8) asking for information (eg simple questions about everyday life); (9) asking for clarification; (10) responding to requests for clarification (Trinity College London, 2025, p.20).

2.2.4.3 ISE Foundation (A2) - Independent Listening Tasks

This task approximately takes 8 minutes and includes two different tasks. In Task 1, the examinee listens to the short recording twice, which includes basic information and takes about 45 seconds. S/he is expected to match the letters (B to G) with the exact locations shown in a picture or diagram. The information is presented as a visual or graphic in this task, and the examinee writes the answers on paper.

In Task 2, the examinee listens to a factual text twice, which approximately takes one minute. The recording might include a radio programme, educational podcast, lecture, or teacher talk. The examinee is allowed to take notes and is expected to tell five facts about the recording orally. Finally, the examiner asks three questions about the recording to the examinee.

2.3. ISE I (B1) - Reading & Writing and Listening & Speaking Tasks

At the B1 level, candidates encounter more detailed texts and are expected to demonstrate the ability to organize and communicate ideas clearly in writing.

2.3.1. ISE I (B1) - Reading Task 1: Long Reading

For the B1 Level, the Long Reading Task also includes a text consisting of five paragraphs and focuses on the general understanding of the text. This task has the same parts as in the A2 level exam and includes parts for choosing the best title for each paragraph (5 questions), choosing the five statements that are true (5 questions) and completing the sentences with an exact number, word, or phrase (5 questions).

2.3.2. ISE I (B1) - Multi-Text Reading Task

Different from the A1 level, the multi-text reading task has four short reading texts. This task also has three parts. In the first part, examinees read each paragraph (A, B, C, and D) and decide which text each question refers to. They write the letter (A, B, C, or D) and write it on the lines near the questions. In the second part, they try to find the five true statements among eight statements about the texts. In the third part, they complete the notes with an exact number, word or phrase (maximum three words) in line with the texts as in the A1 level exam.

2.3.3. ISE I (B1) - Reading Tasks 3 and 4: Reading into Writing and Reading & Extended Writing

In Task 3 (Reading into Writing), examinees are expected to write an article in 100-130 words in line with the texts they read in the previous task (Texts A, B, C, and D) and considering the given guiding points. On the other hand, in Task 4 (Extended Writing Task), they are required to write about the given scenario in 100-130 words. To illustrate, in this example task, they will write a letter to a friend about the rules at your college by describing some of the rules at their college and explaining what they think of these rules. Both of the tasks have a part for planning notes that is not marked.

2.3.4. ISE I (B1) - Listening & Speaking Tasks

Listening and Speaking Tasks for B1 level take 16 minutes and 2 minutes are also allocated for examiner administration time. Hence, these tasks are completed in 18 minutes in total.

2.3.4.1 ISE I (B1) - Topic Task

Similar to ISE Foundation, the examinee prepares a topic for discussion and a topic form with four points and brings it to the exam. The examiner uses this topic form during the discussion to ask questions. The examinee is allowed to bring a small item to the exam such as an event ticket or a picture. This task takes 4 minutes and the examinee is expected to use the language functions such as (1) describing past actions in the indefinite and recent past; (2) describing the future, informing and expressing intention; (3) predicting and expressing certainty and uncertainty, (4) giving reasons, opinions and preference; (5) Expressing obligation; (6) asking for information and opinions (Trinity College London, 2023, p.19).

2.3.4.2 ISE I (B1) - Conversation Task

In this task, the examiner chooses a subject area from the list, such as travel, money, fashion, rules and regulations, health and fitness, and learning a foreign language (Trinity College London, 2023, p.20). This task takes two minutes. The expected language functions might include (1) giving personal information about present and past circumstances/activities; (2) describing routines; (3) expressing ability and inability; (4) describing future plans; (5) expressing likes and dislikes; (6) describing people, objects and places; (7) expressing simple comparisons; (8) asking for information (e.g., simple questions about everyday life); (9) asking for clarification; (10) responding to requests for clarification.

2.3.4.3 ISE I (B1) - Independent Listening Tasks

This part of the exam includes two different tasks and takes approximately 10 minutes in total. In Task 1, the examinee listens to a recording of basic information that takes about 1 minute. The examinee is allowed to take notes and is expected to respond to six questions asked by the examiner in one or two words. This task takes about 4 minutes and 30 seconds.

On the other hand, in Task 2, the examinee listens to a factual text twice, which takes approximately 1 minute and 15 seconds long and focuses on the gist of the recording. When the examinee listens to the recording for the second time, s/he is expected to tell six facts about the recording and respond to four oral questions asked by the examiner. This task takes about 5 minutes and 30 seconds.

2.4. ISE II - B2 Reading & Writing and Listening & Speaking Tasks

At the B2 level, tasks aim to assess learners' ability to comprehend more complex texts, extract key information, and produce structured, cohesive writing using an appropriate register.

2.4.1 ISE II (B2) Reading Task 1: Long Reading

Examinees read an intense five-paragraph text (approximately 600 words) and answer three sets of questions in the ISE II (B2) Long Reading Task 1. They are asked to select the best heading for each paragraph in the first section (5 questions). Finding five true statements from a list of eight is the second task (5 questions). The last task is to finish sentences using exact words, phrases (no more than three words), or textual numbers (5 questions). The texts' vocabulary and level of complexity demonstrate B2 proficiency.

2.4.2. ISE II (B2) Reading Task 2: Multi-text Reading Task

Four distinct short texts, such as articles, blogs, dialogues, or reports, on a common theme are presented in this task. Three sets of questions are asked of examinees. They start by matching the right text (A–D) with the questions. They then determine that five of the eight statements are true. Lastly, they use words or brief phrases from the word bank to finish their notes that summarize the texts. These exercises assess vocabulary, synthesis, and reading comprehension.

2.4.3. ISE II (B2) - Reading Tasks 3 and 4: Reading into Writing and Reading & Extended Writing

Candidates use the information from the prior multi-text readings to write a 150–180-word article for Task 3 (Reading into Writing). They must arrange their thoughts on the texts provided and react to directives. Task 4 (Extended Writing) calls for creating a stand-alone written piece of the same length, usually based on a prompt scenario and taking the form of an opinion essay, report, or formal or informal letter. There is an unmarked planning section in both tasks.

2.4.4. ISE II (B2) – Listening & Speaking Tasks

Listening and Speaking Tasks for the B2 level take 18 minutes, and 2 minutes are also allocated for examiner administration time. Hence, these tasks are completed in 20 minutes in total.

2.4.4.1 ISE II (B2) - Topic Task

This task takes about 4 minutes. The examinee prepares a topic for discussion and may also bring some notes for the examiner. The examinee is expected to show his/her ability for: (1) initiating and maintaining the conversation; (2) expressing and expanding ideas and opinions; (3) highlighting advantages and disadvantages; (4) speculating; (5) giving advice; (6) expressing agreement and disagreement; (7) eliciting further information and (8) establishing common ground.

2.4.4.2 ISE II (B2) - Collaborative Task

In this task, the examiner reads a prompt including a dilemma or an opinion. Accordingly, the examinee is expected to ask questions to have a deeper understanding, get more information and keep the conversation going. This task takes about 4 minutes. The expected language functions involve: (1) initiating and maintaining the conversation; (2) expressing and expanding ideas and opinions; (3) highlighting advantages and disadvantages; (4) speculating; (5) giving advice; (6) expressing agreement and disagreement; (7) eliciting further information; and (8) establishing common ground.

2.4.4.3 ISE II (B2) - Conversation Task

The examiner chooses a subject area related to society and living standards, personal values and ideals, the world of work, national environmental concerns, and public figures, past and present. The examiner starts the conversation by asking a question or making a comment. This task takes about 2 minutes.

2.4.4.4 ISE II (B2) - Independent Listening Tasks

In this task, the examinee listens to a recorded monologue twice: first time for the gist of the recording and second time for details. The examinee is allowed to take notes. The examiner asks questions as a gist question and a more detailed question. The examinee is required to respond orally. This task lasts about 8 minutes.

Conversation task		Independent listening task	
Task	The Conversation task is an integrated speaking and listening task. The examiner selects one conversation subject area from the list given below and asks the candidate a question or makes a comment to start the conversation.	Task	During this task, the candidate listens to a recorded monologue twice. The first time, the examiner asks for the gist of the recording. The second time, the examiner asks a question that requires listening for detail. The examiner asks the question both before and after playing the audio recording, and the candidate responds orally after listening. The candidate may take notes while he or she is listening for the second time. Notes are optional and are not assessed.
Timing	2 minutes.	Timing	8 minutes.
Language functions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Initiating and maintaining the conversation › Expressing and expanding ideas and opinions › Highlighting advantages and disadvantages › Speculating › Giving advice › Expressing agreement and disagreement › Eliciting further information › Establishing common ground. 	Task focus	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Showing ability to process and report information, including main points and supporting detail › Placing information in a wider context › Inferring information not expressed explicitly › Reporting speaker's intentions › Inferring word meaning.
Examiner role	The examiner uses the list of subject areas and his or her own test plans to ask questions and elicit the target language functions of the level.	Examiner role	The examiner plays the recording, reads the instructions and asks questions, including a gist question and a more detailed question (see text of sample exam in appendix 2). Neither the instructions nor the question can be repeated.
Subject area for the conversation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Society and living standards › Personal values and ideals › The world of work › National environmental concerns › Public figures past and present. 	Assessment	This task is assessed using a rating scale of 0-4. The number of relevant points reported correctly is taken into account as well as the promptness with which the candidate responds. Please see the Independent listening rating scale (appendix 7) for more detail.
Assessment	<p>The Conversation task, Collaborative task and Topic task are given one score using four criteria:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> › Communicative effectiveness › Interactive listening › Language control › Delivery. <p>Please see the Speaking and listening rating scale (appendix 6) for the full performance descriptors for each criterion and level of performance.</p>		

Figure 2. ISE II (B2) – Listening & Speaking Tasks – Conversation & Independent Listening Tasks (Trinity College London, 2023)

2.5. ISE III (C1) – Reading & Writing and Listening & Speaking Tasks

At the C1 level, candidates are expected to demonstrate advanced reading comprehension, critical thinking, and the ability to construct complex written arguments.

2.5.1. ISE III (C1) – Reading Task 1: Long Reading

The extensive reading assignment at the C1 level requires higher-level comprehension and consists of a more complex five-paragraph text (roughly 700 words). Examinees finish three sections: choosing five true statements from eight, completing sentences with precise words or phrases, and determining the proper headings for each paragraph. The exercises are intended to evaluate inference and critical reading.

2.5.2. ISE III (C1) – Reading Task 2: Multi-text Reading

Four thematically related texts, such as dialogues, infographics, or opinion pieces, are included in this task. Three tasks are completed by examinees: completing note-based summaries using a word bank, recognizing true statements, and matching questions to the appropriate text. This level of texts necessitates comprehension of comparison, implied meaning, and nuance.

2.5.3. ISE III (C1) – Reading into Writing & Extended Writing Tasks

Task 3 requires writing a well-structured article (180–210 words) incorporating information from the multi-text readings. Task 4 (Extended Writing) asks for a written response to a scenario, such as an essay or formal letter, also around 180–210 words. Planning notes are included for each task. Writing tasks assess argumentation, cohesion, and register.

Task 3 – Reading into writing

Use the information you read in Texts A, B, C and D (pages 4 and 5) to write an essay (200-230 words) for your teacher summarising how consumers are predicted to interact with their homes in the future and the advantages and disadvantages of predicted smart home technologies.

Do not copy from the texts. Use your own words as far as possible.

You should plan your essay before you start writing. Think about what you are going to write and make some notes to help you in this box:

Planning notes

(No marks are given for these planning notes)

Now write your essay of 200-230 words on the lines below.

Task 4 – Extended writing

Write a report (200-230 words) for a business magazine about employee training. Evaluate the importance of professional development training in the workplace and justify why such training might be beneficial to both the employer and employees.

You should plan your report before you start writing. Think about what you are going to write and make some notes to help you in this box:

Planning notes

(No marks are given for these planning notes)

Now write your report of 200-230 words on the lines below.

Figure 3. ISE III (C1) – Multi-text Reading Tasks (Trinity College London, 2024)

2.5.4. ISE III (C1) – Reading & Writing and Listening & Speaking Tasks

This module consists of four parts: A Topic Presentation, a Topic Discussion, a Collaborative Task, and a Conversation Task. The Speaking & Listening section lasts approximately 25 minutes. The Independent Listening task features a more advanced audio recording and questions requiring inference and detail recognition. The speaking section focuses on extended interaction and expressing complex ideas clearly.

2.6. ISE IV (C2) Reading & Writing and Listening & Speaking Tasks

At the ISE IV (C2) level, tasks aim to assess learners' ability to interpret and synthesize abstract concepts from structurally complex texts, transforming this information into sophisticated, logically sequenced written arguments. Furthermore, the Listening & Speaking components demand that candidates demonstrate a mastery of nuance and implication, evaluating their capacity to sustain extended, in-depth discourse on high-level themes with near-native precision and flexibility.

2.6.1 ISE IV (C2) - Portfolio Tasks

Unlike other ISE levels, ISE IV does not have a traditional Reading & Writing module. Instead, it uses a Portfolio system. From the published Trinity task list, candidates choose one writing task from each of the three sections (A, B, and C), for a total of three tasks. Candidates should only submit one task per section, with a total of 15 tasks (5 tasks per section). The use of dictionaries, internet resources, and grammar references is encouraged. The portfolio must be finished within six to twelve weeks and turned in at least one day prior to the test. Section 1 consists of correspondence; Section 2 includes factual writing, and Section 3 focuses on critical and analytical writing (Trinity College London, 2025). Each section requires 300 to 350 words for the portfolios.

2.6.2. ISE IV (C2) - Controlled Written Exam

The three-hour controlled written exam that candidates take includes:

- Task 1: Reading into Writing (using multiple texts to respond to a prompt).
- Task 2: Writing task (e.g., an opinion essay).
- Task 3: Another extended writing task (e.g., report, article).

Each task is designed to test C2-level skills in synthesis, argumentation, and clarity of expression under time constraints.

2.6.3. ISE IV (C2) - The Interview

The ISE IV speaking test lasts about 25 minutes and is conducted as a structured interview: Topic Discussion, Topic Presentation, Interactive Task and Listening Task.

Unlike lower levels, the ISE IV interview assesses near-native fluency, precision, and the ability to handle abstract, academic, or professional topics. Listening involves comprehension of a recorded input followed by discussion.

The Listening task

The purpose of the Listening task is for candidates to demonstrate high level listening skills such as prediction, deduction and inference. The candidate needs to show recognition of the context, participants and register.

There are two types of listening tasks which require different responses from the candidate:

- ▶ **Type 1** – require the candidate to provide a suitable ending
- ▶ **Type 2** – require the candidate to identify participants, contexts or settings.

- ▶ Candidates are presented with three listening tasks – two of Type 1 and one of Type 2.
- ▶ Candidates are expected to respond with very short, precise responses and should not give lengthy replies.
- ▶ The listening tasks are not related to any of the given subject areas for the Conversation task. This is to provide an unknown element which candidates at this level are expected to be able to handle.
- ▶ Candidates are not required to read or write anything in this task, and the taking of notes is unnecessary given the nature of the task.
- ▶ Please note the examiner will not repeat the listening texts even if they are requested to do so.

The Conversation task

The purpose of the Conversation task is to give candidates the opportunity to discuss their portfolio and to participate in a genuine and interesting exchange of information, ideas and opinions while demonstrating their ability to use the language of the level.

- ▶ In the **discussion of the Portfolio** candidates must be ready to discuss points of detail arising out of their portfolio and to explain why they chose to do particular tasks and how they completed them. Candidates may, if they wish, bring to the Interview other material that has contributed to the Portfolio, particularly if this helps to illustrate how the portfolio tasks were completed. The Portfolio itself will be in the possession of the examiner, who will have already studied it for assessment purposes, and thus it will be available for reference by both examiner and candidate. The candidate must ask the examiner at least one question about their portfolio. This must relate to the content of the Portfolio and must not include questions designed to find out the examiner's opinion of the work.
- ▶ The next section of this task consists of a **discussion on one subject area** that the examiner deems appropriate for the individual candidate. The candidate is responsible for the content, coherence and direction of the conversation.

Figure 4. ISE IV (C2) - Interview: Listening & Conversation Task Example Guide (Trinity College London, 2023)

3. Application and Scoring of the Exam

ISE has two different editions: paper-based and digital versions; therefore, the dates for these two versions change. Paper-based ISE takes place on fixed dates, and the interval between the dates is approximately one month. For example, the first exam of the year 2025 was held on 15th January, the second one was on 12th February, and the third one was on 12th March. One of the essential points for the dates of the exam is that it is usually held on Wednesday and Saturday. When it comes to ISE Digital, it offers flexible dates for the exam takers according to their convenience. The exam also provides frequent dates by announcing the results within 3-5 days (Trinity College London, 2025).

In addition, ISE Digital offers more flexibility in administration and location, as it is delivered entirely on a computer under secure conditions in certified centres. This digital option is especially beneficial for candidates in remote areas or those with tight schedules, making it an accessible alternative to the paper-based format. Candidates who are dissatisfied with their score can also resit a single module within 90 days, allowing them to improve specific skills without repeating the entire exam (Trinity College London, 2025).

Moreover, the length of the exam is 105 minutes, including 5 minutes of instructions, 10 min. leveling test, and 90 min. for the exam modules. The modules of the exam can be omitted if the exam taker wants. The reason why the exam takers can omit the modules is to increase the average grade. Although the modules can be omitted, the certificates are not given separately for each module. In addition, the questions in the modules are adjusted to the level of exam takers in the digital version of ISE. On the other hand, the reading and writing module together can be taken in the exam centers in paper-based ISE while the speaking and listening module together can be taken either in person or via video-conference in the exam centers (Trinity College London, 2025).

It is also noteworthy that each module focuses on real-life language use, especially in educational, occupational, and social contexts. In the ISE Digital format, for instance, tasks are designed to reflect common communicative situations such as summarizing a podcast, writing from multiple sources, or giving a prepared talk. This ensures a strong alignment with the communicative aims of the CEFR and provides a meaningful assessment experience, as Figure 7 (Trinity College London, 2025) illustrates.

CEFR level	ISE Digital scaled score (beginning of level)
C2	130
C1	105
B2	80
B1	55
A2	30
A1	5
Not yet A1	</= 4

Figure 5. Corresponding CEFR levels (Trinity College London, 2025)

Although the paper and digital edition align with the CEFR, the scoring of the paper edition and digital edition is assessed differently. The paper edition assesses four skills, but as its name suggests, these skills are integrated. Speaking and listening are assessed together, and reading and writing are evaluated integratively. On the other hand, the exam takers have to achieve a minimum score for each skill to pass the module, such as the Reading & Writing module. After they complete the exam, the exam takers are given a certificate, which involves the ISE level, the level corresponding with the CEFR, the achievement level for each skill, and lastly a scaled score between 0 and 150 for both each skill and overall score. Additionally, “not yet A1” is also possible for this level (Figure 7).

Overall scores are calculated with the average of scores in the four skills. ISE A1 corresponds with A1 in the CEFR, and the pass score is 5, while the merit score is 15 and the distinction score is 21. ISE Foundation aligns with A2 in the CEFR. Its pass score is 30, merit score is 40, and lastly, distinction score is 46. When it comes to ISE I, its CEFR level is B1. The pass score of ISE I is 55, and the merit score of it is 65, while the distinction score of it is 71. As for ISE II, it corresponds with B2 in the CEFR. The pass, merit, and distinction scores are 80, 90, and 96 sequentially. Lastly, ISE III aligns with C1 in the CEFR. The pass, merit, and distinction scores are 105, 115, and 121 sequentially.

Moreover, some tasks in the exam are objectively assessed with an answer key as correct or incorrect. On the other hand, some other tasks are more subjective, but Trinity College London (2023, 2024, 2025) states that they train their markers to ensure the standardization, they use specific rating scales for skills, which align with the CEFR.

In the paper-based version, the Reading and Listening sections are scored objectively, using answer keys and clerical marking procedures. Tasks with a single correct answer are marked objectively (e.g., multiple choice, sentence completion), while constructed response items (e.g., gap-fills) are clerically marked by trained raters who determine if a given answer is acceptable based on a range of correct options.

The Writing and Speaking components, on the other hand, are assessed subjectively using detailed analytic rating scales. For Writing, raters evaluate aspects such as: Reading for writing (in integrated tasks), task fulfilment, organisation & structure, and language control. For speaking, candidates are evaluated across four main criteria: Communicative effectiveness, interactive listening, language control, and delivery

Each criterion is rated on a scale from 0 to 4, with:

- 4 = excellent achievement (upper end of the CEFR level),
- 3 = appropriate achievement (solid performance at the CEFR level),
- 2 = borderline achievement (newly qualified at that level),
- 1 = below level,
- 0 = no performance to rate.

Each raw score is then converted into a scaled score (0–150). To pass a module, candidates need to achieve at least the minimum pass scaled score in each skill area. The performance levels are divided into: Pass, Merit, Distinction, and Fail.

To ensure fairness and reliability, Trinity College London implements a number of quality assurance measures. First, all markers undergo regular training and standardisation sessions. Then, at least 10% of all written papers are double marked to maintain consistency. Lastly, all speaking exams are audio recorded, and examiners are monitored to ensure accurate application of the rating scales.

In the ISE Digital version, all four language skills (Reading, writing, listening, and speaking) are assessed individually, yet within an integrated and adaptive digital format. The exam begins with a 10-minute levelling test that helps calibrate the difficulty of the upcoming tasks based on the candidate's language proficiency. This test includes 15–25 multiple-choice vocabulary questions that assess the candidate's general language proficiency across personal, educational, social, and occupational domains. The results are used to determine the difficulty level of the tasks in the Reading and Listening modules, ensuring that each candidate receives questions appropriate to their CEFR level. The Levelling Test is scored automatically, and all questions carry equal weight.

The Reading and Listening modules are computer-adaptive, which means that the difficulty of questions adjusts dynamically in real time, depending on the candidate's previous responses. Reading tasks include reading a visual text, reading a single text, and reading paired texts. Listening tasks include listening to a description (1 speaker), listening to a conversation (2 speakers), listening to a discussion (3 speakers), and listening to a talk and its retelling. Since all items are multiple-choice, all questions are scored automatically and each correct answer equals 1 point.

In contrast, the Writing and Speaking modules are evaluated by trained human assessors using detailed analytic rating scales. In Writing, candidates complete two tasks: a short informal response (such as online communication) and a longer source-based task requiring synthesis and argumentation. These are rated for task fulfilment, coherence and cohesion, language range and accuracy, and appropriate style.

The Speaking module includes four tasks: responding to questions, delivering a prepared talk, interacting in a scenario, and summarising a talk or conversation. There are two rubrics to be used by trained and experienced assessors. For the first three tasks mentioned above, the first scale is used to gauge the following criteria: task fulfilment, language, and delivery. The other scale adopted to measure the performance in summarising a talk or conversation includes the following aspects: task fulfilment, mediation of the source text, and delivery. Furthermore, the tasks are weighted differently when calculating the final speaking score—summary and interaction tasks carry more weight (x1.5) due to their complexity.

4. Advantages and Limitations

Being one of the secure exams, ISE is used to evaluate English language skills via different tasks. Some features of these exams, such as being accepted in the UK visa application, residential permit, and education processes, make them worthy of scholarly attention. However, the application and evaluation processes also possess certain drawbacks. In the following chapter, both negative and positive aspects of these exams will be discussed briefly.

To begin with, the exam includes authentic tasks. Several scholars mentioned the role of authentic materials in increasing student motivation (Guariento & Morley, 2001; Peacock, 1997). Therefore, the integration of authentic tasks in the evaluation process might be advantageous for learners. Besides, the importance of learner autonomy is emphasized in the scope of many different research studies (Han, 2022; Chong & Reinders, 2025). The ‘independent language use’ parts of ISE support learner autonomy, which can be clearly understood by the instruction of the related part.

Additionally, as mentioned in the scope of several studies in which ISE tasks were used, the exam’s alignment with the Common European Framework (CEFR) was found to be relatively high (Harsch and Kanistra, 2020; Papageorgiou, 2007). Another positive future of the exams is the inclusion of tasks requiring the integration of different skills via tasks such as “Reading into Writing”. The ‘Integrated Skills Approach’ was found to be effective in language teaching in the scope of different studies (Neupane, 2024; Hipo *et al.*, 2022). Therefore, its use in the exam tasks poses significance.

Moreover, the exam score is recognized both for visa applications and studies in the UK and approximately 4000 programs all over the world, and the exam offers great flexibility and modularity, with both paper-based and digital formats. Also, the certificates with the exam result have lifelong validity. Lastly, for C2 level learners, the portfolio task offers support for real-life language use, a chance to show more proficient language use and evaluate the writing process. On the other hand, the TCL ISE Tests have drawbacks on two main issues that both test administrators and candidates should consider: availability and format.

First of all, these tests have lower recognition and acceptance, specifically outside the UK, when compared to IELTS, TOEFL, and Cambridge examinations. Therefore, those who are required to prove their English language proficiency for academic or professional purposes outside the UK may not find the ISE qualification beneficial. This limited recognition and acceptance have a direct effect on the availability of the tests across the world. The authorized test centers for TCL ISE are far fewer than its more widely-accepted counterparts. As a

result, candidates may be required to travel to access a test center and it may not be affordable for everybody. Also, the infrequency of test dates can be risky for candidates. They may have to postpone their applications to academic institutions, workplaces, visa, etc, which can result in missing opportunities. Due to this limited availability, candidates may encounter a lack of readily-available preparation materials and resources (e.g., textbooks, courses, tests, tutoring, etc.). This can hinder the process of getting prepared for the test because candidates usually rely on these resources to become familiar with the test format.

Other significant challenges of the TCL ISE Tests are related to their format. The assessment of integrated language skills is aligned well with the CEFR descriptors and it reflects real-life language use. However, this can bring anxiety to test-takers to some extent. The ISE tests consist of separated modules of these integrated skills. Candidates may have a perception of weaknesses in one module, even if they are strong in the other module. For example, a test-taker who is successful in the speaking task, but who has difficulties in writing tasks might feel anxious, assuming that this unbalanced performance can have a negative impact on the overall score. Therefore, the sense of weakness in one module may hinder candidates' actual capacity in the other module due to pressure. On the other hand, the portfolio task implemented in the TCL ISE IV tests has some limitations. Since the candidates have to prepare their portfolios within 6 to 12 weeks, it may be challenging, time-consuming, and exhausting for them to get prepared. Again, this may impact their test preferences. They are allowed to benefit from research materials, but they cannot plagiarize others' work. There are also strict rules for the teachers who evaluate the portfolios. They are forbidden to add, delete, and/or correct any piece of the work. They can only give written and one-shot feedback according to the feedback form they are provided with for evaluation. Candidates cannot revise their portfolios. Besides, the over-reliance on writing skills may overlook other skills such as speaking and listening. As a language proficiency test that assesses integrated skills, this attachment to extended writing may hinder the reliability of the test results.

In conclusion, these exams are in line with current approaches and principles of testing in the field of ELT. A high level of CEFR alignment means that it is also internationally acceptable. Modularity, flexibility, and lifelong certificate validity also address different test-taker needs. On the other hand, limited recognition and an inadequate number of test centers may present an obstacle for future examinees. Moreover, the lack of sufficient preparation materials, the challenge posed by integrated modules, and the heavy workload regarding portfolio tasks have the potential to prevent language learners from demonstrating their actual performance and the level of language proficiency. In order to overcome these challenges and highlight the strengths of the exam, both negative and positive

aspects of ISE must be evaluated by all the parties involved, namely, test-takers, teachers, and exam creators.

5. Conclusion

The current study examines the history, structural features, application process, evaluation methods, and pedagogical reflections regarding ISE exams. Different conclusions were drawn for each aspect. First, the institutional transformation of Trinity College and an overview of the exam's evolution were presented, with studies referring to the exam tasks. Considering the institution's experience in the field, it is possible to say that ISE is a secure exam that is internationally accepted. Second, the ISE exam content is constructed in six different language levels according to the CEFR. As text lengths, task types, and production expectations gradually increase from A1 to C2, the exam format also varies in a way that evaluates the candidate's language development. In particular, more guided and structured tasks are emphasized at the A1, A2, and B1 levels, while at the B2 and C1 levels, candidates are expected to use language more independently, analytically, and coherently. ISE IV (C2) goes beyond the traditional exam structure to assess the candidate's advanced production skills through a portfolio by submitting before the exam. Each level ensures the integrated assessment of the four core skills while offering an authentic assessment structure that supports skill transitions through tasks such as "reading into writing." The application of paper and digital editions of ISE offers flexibility and accessibility for exam takers. Also, the digital edition of ISE is an adaptive exam, which may provide compatibility with the levels of exam takers. In addition, the validity of the exam is ensured by the structuring of objective and subjective scoring in line with the CEFR, the standardization between the markers, and the scales that they use. As a reflection on the exam format and application, this review has highlighted several advantages and limitations. The evaluation of integrated skills and the alignment with CEFR descriptors enhance the reliability and validity of the exam. However, its limited recognition and availability across the world make it difficult for test-takers to access resources for preparation. Also, the portfolio task in the ISE IV (C2) exam may be time-consuming and challenging due to the strict rules and the length of the process. Therefore, this current paper suggests that both test-takers and administrators should consider this exam from a holistic perspective. All in all, ISE exams are in line with the current testing principles in the literature, but need wider recognition and improvements in material support and practicality. It is suggested that all the stakeholders, namely candidates, teachers, exam designers, and researchers, should contribute to more effective evaluation processes by reviewing both positive and negative aspects of these exams.

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