

# Benchmarking selected International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme language courses to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

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## INTRODUCTION

Most English-taught universities and programmes around the world have English proficiency requirements for incoming international students. Many universities accept scores in International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme (DP) language courses as evidence of language proficiency. However, these requirements are often uneven across institutions, and there are still many institutions that require DP students to submit language proficiency exam scores in addition to their DP grades.

As such, the IB commissioned the National Recognition Information Centre for the United Kingdom (UK NARIC) to undertake an independent comparative study of DP English language courses and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR). The purpose of the study was to establish how the level of English language competency of non-native English speakers demonstrated by different DP course grades compares to levels on the CEFR.

## ABOUT THE IB DIPLOMA PROGRAMME

The DP is a two-year baccalaureate-style programme, offered internationally to students aged 16 to 19 and is widely accepted for undergraduate admission. The curriculum comprises a compulsory DP core and six subject groups. Students must undertake courses in both language and literature and in language acquisition, both offered in a range of languages including English. In total, the DP offers eight English language courses (seven of which are reviewed in this study).



## DP language courses

Studies in language and literature	Language acquisition
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>English A: Literature HL</li> <li>English A: Literature SL</li> <li>English A: Language and literature HL</li> <li>English A: Language and literature SL</li> <li>Literature and performance SL</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>English B HL</li> <li>English B SL</li> <li>English ab initio (not reviewed as part of this study as it is meant as an introductory course)</li> </ul>

For each course, students receive a final criteria-related subject grade from 1–7 (lowest to highest), which is derived from a combination of external and internal assessment tasks. Courses are offered at either higher level (HL) or standard level (SL), providing differing scope and depth.

## ABOUT CEFR

The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment (CEFR) is widely used in the development and referencing of language syllabi, qualifications, assessment and other learning materials; it is also often used by universities to express English or other language proficiency requirements for admission. The framework consists of language related competency descriptors, referred to as “can do” statements. There are six proficiency levels (A1 - C2; lowest to highest) in the framework (see appendix).

## METHODOLOGY

This report seeks to establish how the varying grades (1–7) available for each DP course compare to CEFR proficiency levels by investigating the overall level of linguistic competence that can be associated with these grades in relation to the CEFR. The review involved an objective, desk-based review of the DP language guides, along with past papers and associated markschemes. By comparing the question types, markschemes and associated level descriptors, and cross-referencing with grade boundaries over three to four exam sittings, individual assessments were compared with CEFR.



## FINDINGS

Overall, the study found DP English language courses to develop all four key language skills (reading, writing, speaking and listening) with sound assessment in place to assess students' reading comprehension, written production and speaking interaction and production skills. As illustrated in the chart below, all courses have at least one grade that can be considered comparable to CEFR B2, the level most commonly required for admissions by universities.

CEFR Level	English B		English A: Language and Literature		English A: Literature		English Literature and Performance
	SL	HL	SL	HL	SL	HL	SL
C2							
C1		7	7	7	7	7	
B2+	7	6	6	6	6	6	
B2	6	5	5	5	5	5	5
	5	4		4	4		
B1	4	3		4			
A2	3	2					
A1	2						

## DISCUSSION

### Thresholds

As can be seen, there are instances where DP course grades may not align exactly with a single level, such as a grade 4 for English B higher level (HL).

### Grades not shown

In some instances, it is not possible to draw comparisons between lower grades and CEFR. Certain courses were difficult to link lower IB marks to CEFR since a low score could reflect a low level of subject knowledge or other assessed criteria, rather than language proficiency. By contrast, to achieve the higher grades in most assessments would not be possible without a sufficient level of reading comprehension and ability to infer meaning, indicative of a CEFR C1. In such cases, wherever possible, emphasis was placed on determining the DP marks which demonstrated a CEFR B2 and above, as that is the level most often required for university admissions.

### English A courses

While all IB language courses develop and require a certain level of English language proficiency, some assessment criteria evaluate subject knowledge or skills rather than linguistic ability. Despite these limitations, it was noted that the English A courses seek to “provide an opportunity for students to develop and refine their [English] language skills”<sup>1</sup> and that the assessment criteria and related level descriptors include several aspects of language competence that can be found on the CEFR, such as grammatical accuracy, vocabulary range, register, sentence construction, and coherence of spoken and written responses.

### English literature and performance

Literature and performance undoubtedly requires and supports a strong level of English across the four key skills areas, but assessment criteria related to performance and dramatization cannot be linked to CEFR. Thus, the analysis focused on identifying an appropriate threshold to reflect CEFR B2. Those scoring a grade of 5 and above can be considered to have achieved at least a CEFR B2.

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<sup>1</sup>International Baccalaureate Organization, 2013. *Diploma Programme Language A: language and literature guide—First examinations 2015*. Internal International Baccalaureate Organization document. p.16.



## APPENDIX

### CEFR global scale descriptors<sup>2</sup>

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

<sup>2</sup>Council of Europe – Modern Languages Division, 2001. *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment*. [pdf] Published by: Cambridge University Press. Available at: <[http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/source/framework\\_en.pdf](http://www.coe.int/t/dg4/linguistic/source/framework_en.pdf)>.

