

Benchmarking selected International Baccalaureate Diploma Programme English, French, German and Spanish subjects to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages

December 2023



INTRODUCTION

Most universities around the world have language proficiency requirements for international students, and many of these universities accept grades in International Baccalaureate (IB) Diploma Programme (DP) language courses as evidence of language proficiency. These policies, in turn, support IB students by removing the need to take additional language proficiency tests, such as IELTS (International English Language Testing System), TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) and DELF (Diplôme d'études en langue française), which come at additional cost and preparation time.

To support continued and expanded up-take of this policy disposition with clear, impartial evidence, the IB commissioned Ecctis, the internationally renowned provider of education solutions, to undertake an independent comparative study of selected IB language courses and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR). The research by Ecctis provides universities with useful benchmarks to compare the grades achieved by students in IB language, language and literature, and literature courses, in English, French, German and Spanish, to CEFR proficiency levels.

ABOUT THE IB DIPLOMA PROGRAMME

The DP is a two-year baccalaureate-style programme, offered internationally to students aged 16 to 19, and it is widely accepted for undergraduate admission. The curriculum comprises a compulsory DP core and six subject groups: studies in language and literature, language acquisition, individuals and societies, sciences, mathematics and arts. Most courses are offered at either standard level (SL) or higher level (HL), providing differing scope and depth.

Students undertaking the full diploma must take a course from the studies in language and literature group and, in most cases, the language acquisition group. Each of these courses offers comprehensive formal assessment of linguistic proficiency.

IB language subjects reviewed in this study

English, French, Spanish, German	
Studies in language and literature	Language acquisition
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Language A: literature (SL and HL) Language A: language and literature (SL and HL) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Language B (SL and HL)

All languages in these subjects share the same broad curriculums and assessment models, and are assessed according to common marking criteria and grade descriptors. However, examination content differs to reflect the linguistic and cultural context of each individual language. For each course, students receive a final criterion-related subject grade from 1–7 (lowest to highest), which is derived from a combination of external and internal assessment tasks.

ABOUT CEFR

The CEFR is widely used in the development and referencing of language syllabuses, qualifications, assessment and other learning materials; it is also often used by universities to express 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. The most common CEFR level used by post-secondary institutions for an indication of academic readiness is B2, as shown in Figure 1.



INDEPENDENT USER

B2

Can understand the main ideas of complex text on both concrete and abstract topics, including technical discussions in his/her field of specialisation. 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.

AIMS OF THE STUDY

To enable higher education admission staff and other stakeholders to set appropriate policies for applicants completing study in selected IB language subjects, Ecctis established how the different grades (1–7) for the selected DP language courses 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. Ecctis employed a five-stage methodology that is detailed in the [full report](#).

FINDINGS

Language A: Studies in language and literature (SL and HL)

The results show that B2 CEFR level in language A: language and literature and language A: literature is reported at the threshold of IB grade 4 at both SL and HL.

Figure 1: The B2 level of the CEFR

Source: Council of Europe. (n.d.). *Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR)*. Retrieved November 17, 2023 <https://www.coe.int/en/web/common-european-framework-reference-languages/table-1-cefr-3.3-common-reference-levels-global-scale>

CEFR level	English A				French A				Spanish A				German A			
	Language and literature		Literature		Language and literature		Literature		Language and literature		Literature		Language and literature		Literature	
	HL	SL	HL	SL	HL	SL	HL	SL	HL	SL	HL	SL	HL	SL	HL	SL
C2	7	*	7	*	7	*	7	*	7	*	7	*	7	*	7	*
C1	6	7	6	7	6	7	6	7	6	7	6	7	6	7	6	7
		6		6		6		6		6		6		6		6
B2	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5	5
	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4	4
B1	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3	3

*CEFR level not reported as corresponding to any IB grade in this subject.

Figure 2: Diploma Programme language A courses mapped to CEFR levels

Language B: Language acquisition (SL and HL)

The results for language B show that students achieving a grade 5 in HL or grade 6 (English, French, Spanish) and 7 (German) in SL will have attained CEFR B2 proficiency.

CEFR level	English B		French B		Spanish B		German B	
	HL	SL	HL	SL	HL	SL	HL	SL
C1	7	*	7	*	7	*	7	*
B2+	6	7	6	7	6	7	6	*
B2	5		5		6		5	6
B1+	3 and 4	5	3 and 4	5	3 and 4	5	4	5 and 6
B1	2	4	2	4	2	4	3	4
A2+		3		3		3	3	
A2	*	2	*	2	*	2	2	2

* CEFR level not reported as corresponding to any IB grade in this subject.

Figure 3: Diploma Programme language B courses mapped to CEFR levels



DISCUSSION

The summary of the research presented here shows that the studied IB language courses assess the key language skills expected by universities. As illustrated in the study's findings, all courses have grades that are comparable to CEFR B2, the level most commonly required by university admissions departments.

Regarding language A courses, the analysis identified that all subjects, levels and languages studied produced consistent benchmarks at the designated CEFR scale levels in both SL and HL. These results suggest that other languages not included in the study are likely to produce a similar pattern of grade to CEFR level correlations.

Regarding language B at HL, the interaction between grades and CEFR levels was fairly uniform across the four languages analysed and reported as part of the study. While there was

some variation found in the low to middle grades, the key grade threshold to report B2 level of language proficiency (5) was stable across all languages. At HL, this is an indication that other languages are likely to align with CEFR benchmarking in the same way.

For language B at SL, there was slightly more variation noted between languages, particularly in relation to receptive skills and the B2 grade threshold. Although some variation between languages at specific grades was reported in language B, Ecctis found that all language B languages reported a CEFR proficiency range between A2 and B2+ at SL.

The general consistency across the four languages analysed in each of the three subjects, and the language-agnostic nature of the syllabuses, indicate that these benchmarks can be generally predictive for the other languages in which these subjects are offered.



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