



Understanding IB languages and their college/university course equivalencies: A guide for US institutions of higher education

IB students in the Diploma Programme (DP) and Career-related Programme (CP) take language courses from the DP curriculum. This guide outlines **how these IB courses compare to university-level courses** and provides **guidance for setting IB language recognition policies** at your university.

This guide also is particularly helpful for determining

- freshman English Composition/Introduction to Literature placement and credit
- foreign language placement and credit
- proof of English proficiency for enrollment and admission.

Introduction to IB languages

IB **Language Ab Initio** and **Language Acquisition (Language B)** courses are intended for students learning a new language or developing an additional language beyond their first language. These courses emphasize communication, grammar, vocabulary and cultural awareness. The IB offers these courses in more than 20 different languages.

By contrast, **Studies in Language and Literature (Language A)** courses are designed for students who are already highly proficient in the language—often their first or best academic language. They focus on advanced skills in literary analysis, critical thinking and cultural/global contexts. The IB offers these courses in 80 different languages. In this guide, we will refer to English Language A courses. Note that IB World Schools often have students who are multilingual, and many of them may have taken additional Language A courses in languages other than English.

In short, Language Ab Initio and Language B are about acquiring and developing strong communicative competence in an additional language, while Language A is about mastering and analyzing language and literature at an academic level.

Language Acquisition courses

Assessment

In Language Ab Initio and Language Acquisition courses, students are assessed both externally and internally in reading, writing, speaking and listening. In the external assessment, students are required to write essays, read and analyze texts, and listen to recordings and respond to related questions. In the internal assessment, which accounts for 25% of the final grade, students are recorded responding to specific prompts.



1. Language Ab Initio – Standard Level (SL) Only

Who is it for: Beginners with very limited previous exposure or no prior experience in the language.

Focus: Near-intermediate skills. Reading, writing, listening and speaking; everyday situations (introductions, travel, school, daily life); simple grammar and vocabulary; cultural understanding.

2. Language B (Additional Language) – Standard Level (SL)

Who is it for: Students with 2–4 years of prior study in the language (capable of intermediate level study).

Focus: Near-advanced skills. Expanding vocabulary for practical and academic contexts; advanced grammatical structures; reading and understanding authentic texts; writing essays of varied length and responses; sustained conversations beyond everyday topics; deeper cultural understanding.

3. Language B (Additional Language) – Higher Level (HL)

Who is it for: Students with strong prior study (4+ years of school language or near-advanced proficiency).

Focus: Superior to distinguished skills. Advanced vocabulary and complex grammar; literary and non-literary texts; extended written responses (analytical essays, commentary); nuanced cultural and intercultural discussions.

Studies in Language and Literature courses

Assessment

In Studies in Language and Literature courses, students are assessed both externally and internally in writing, literary analysis, text interpretation and rhetorical strategies. The external assessment consists of text handling and essay writing. The internal assessment consists of an individual oral analysis of a text.

1. English A Literature – Standard Level (SL)

Who is it for: Students who have experience using the language in an academic context.

Focus: Critical and comparative analysis of novels, drama, poetry, non-fiction; close reading and interpretation; oral presentations and academic essay writing; cultural and contextual understanding.

2. English A Language and Literature – Standard Level (SL)

Who is it for: Students who have experience using the language in an academic context.

Focus: Practical, aesthetic and comparative analysis of texts, including multimodal texts; close reading and interpretation; oral presentations and academic essay writing; cultural and contextual understanding.

3. English Literature and Performance – Standard Level (SL) Only

Who is it for: Students interested in exploring the intersection between literature and the performing arts and have experience using the language in an academic context.

Focus: Combines literary analysis with dramatic performance; study of prose, poetry and drama with emphasis on interpretation through performance; development of both critical and creative expression.

4. English A Literature – Higher Level (HL)

Who is it for: Students who have experience using the language in an academic context.

Focus: In-depth literary critical and comparative analysis; sophisticated academic writing, oral presentations and commentary; independent study and research; emphasis on global contexts and cross-cultural perspectives.

5. English A Language and Literature – Higher Level (HL)

Who is it for: Students who have experience using the language in an academic context.

Focus: Practical, aesthetic, and comparative analysis of texts, including multimodal texts; close reading and interpretation; oral presentations and academic essay writing; independent study and research; emphasis on global contexts and cross-cultural perspectives.



Setting your IB language recognition policy

We encourage universities to regularly review their IB language recognition policies to ensure they are equitable for IB students—having fair IB policies also makes your institution even more attractive to IB applicants. Additionally, correct placement of these students encourages them to further explore language and literature courses on your campus. Use the resources below and visit ibo.org/university-admission/universities-collaborate-with-the-ib/.

ACE credit recommendations for IB languages

The American Council on Education (ACE) recommends awarding up to 12 university credits for certain scores on SL language exams: ibo.org/ACE-review

IB language courses and language proficiency

IB language courses may be used for determining English (as well as French, German and Spanish) language proficiency: ibo.org/university-admission/CEFR

Quick language course overviews

The IB provides brief outlines of all its subjects: ibo.org/programmes/diploma-programme/curriculum

Detailed teaching guides and sample exams

Universities can access in-depth subject materials, along with lists of all languages available: ibo.org/university-admission/IB-subject-guides

DP language courses and their college/university equivalents

IB course	Skills developed	US college/university equivalent
Ab Initio (SL)	Near-intermediate communication, essential vocabulary for everyday situations, basic grammar	Language 101–102
Language B (SL)	Intermediate communication, authentic texts, cultural themes	Language 201
Language B (HL)	Advanced communication, extended writing, literature	Language 202–300 level
Language A Literature (SL)	Critical and comparative literary analysis, speaking, essay writing, critical thinking	English Composition or Literature 101–102
Language A Language and Literature (SL)	Critical and comparative analysis of literature and multimodal texts, speaking, essay writing, critical thinking	English Composition or Literature 101–102
Literature and Performance (SL)	Literary study combined with dramatic performance, creative/critical expression	Introductory English Literature + Theatre/Performance Studies
Language A Literature (HL)	Advanced critical and comparative literary analysis, speaking, essay writing, critical thinking, independent research	Sophomore or higher English Composition or Literature (200–300 level)
Language A Language and Literature (HL)	Advanced critical and comparative analysis of literature and multimodal texts, speaking, essay writing, independent research, critical thinking	Sophomore or higher English Composition or Literature (200–300 level)

CONTACT US

To discuss setting language recognition policies at your university, contact recognition@ibo.org.