



2019

# EF EPI-s

EF English Proficiency Index for Schools

## EF SET

**EF Standard English Test**

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# Executive Summary

The EF English Proficiency Index for Schools (EF EPI-s) examines the acquisition of English skills by full-time students aged 13 to 22.

This third edition of the EF EPI-s includes test data from more than 350,000 students at thousands of partner schools and universities in 43 countries.

Although most school systems in the world teach English, student assessment tools vary widely from country to country, and international testing initiatives such as PISA and TIMSS do not cover English language skills. As a result, there is no standardized way to compare English skill acquisition internationally. EF aims to bridge that gap by providing a free English language assessment platform for school systems, universities, and individual teachers, and by producing this biennial analysis of global English learning trends. The EF EPI-s tracks student English skills and provides benchmarks for comparison. It is a companion to our annual EF EPI report, which evaluates adult English proficiency levels around the world.

All the test data included in this report was collected using the EF Standard English Test (EF SET), designed to the same exacting standards as TOEFL, IELTS, and other leading standardized tests. Because the EF SET is free and online, entire cities, regions, and countries can evaluate their students every year using the test, for only the cost of coordinating the effort.

## Key Findings

The EF EPI-s does not rank countries by English proficiency, as the primary EF EPI report does. The participants in this study are in the process of learning English, and they have been tested at different ages and stages of skill acquisition, making country rankings less informative. Instead, our analysis focuses on students' rates of progress, as well as regional, gender, and skill differences.

Some of our key findings include:

- More than a quarter of students reach the end of secondary school without progressing past a beginner (A1) level of English. Our data suggests that students who enter upper secondary school with only beginner-level English often remain stuck, unable to proceed past the lowest proficiency level. Those who reach an elementary (A2) level by age 15 are far more likely to reach an even higher level before graduation.
- Girls outpace boys in English learning. This finding holds true for every age group and in most countries. Digging into the data, though, presents a more nuanced picture, with weaker reading comprehension skills among boys aged 17 to 21 accounting for much of the gap among older students, while the gap among younger students is primarily in listening skills.
- Listening skills develop faster than reading skills. By age 13, most students have stronger listening skills than reading skills, and the gap becomes even more pronounced with age. Widespread exposure to spoken English in the media may be driving this disparity. While strong listening skills are encouraging, the lag in reading comprehension should raise concerns about students' preparation for the workplace, where understanding documentation in English is at least as important as oral communication.
- Younger students learn English faster. It is easier to learn the basics of a language than to master more difficult concepts. However, students of the same age also progress at markedly different rates depending on the school system, indicating that age alone is not predictive of the rate of English language learning. Many school systems are managing to teach the rudiments of English, but there are far fewer that are able to build upon these foundations to develop higher levels of proficiency.
- European education systems are unique in supporting English learning through the end of university. European adults have the highest level of English proficiency in the world. Our data demonstrates that their success is largely due to the number of years in which Europeans are improving their English, rather than a particularly fast rate of acquisition.
- Broad testing initiatives can gather valuable data. In 2017 and 2018, we ran large-scale testing initiatives in Ecuador, Italy, and Kazakhstan. There, in collaboration with local partners, we tested thousands of students and collected information about student grade level, school type, and location, offering our partners detailed datasets about student performance. Because of the flexibility of the EF SET platform, we were able to tailor this data collection to the information that each partner considered most relevant. This report shares top-level findings from these initiatives.

## Methodology

All students included in this study took the 50-minute EF SET test in 2017 or 2018. Their data was anonymized and pooled to create the dataset that informs this analysis. Student data is strictly protected in accordance with all applicable legislation and never shared with or sold to third parties. Any school wishing to participate in our research is encouraged to do so. There is no cost associated with participation, and schools receive detailed reports of their students' results.

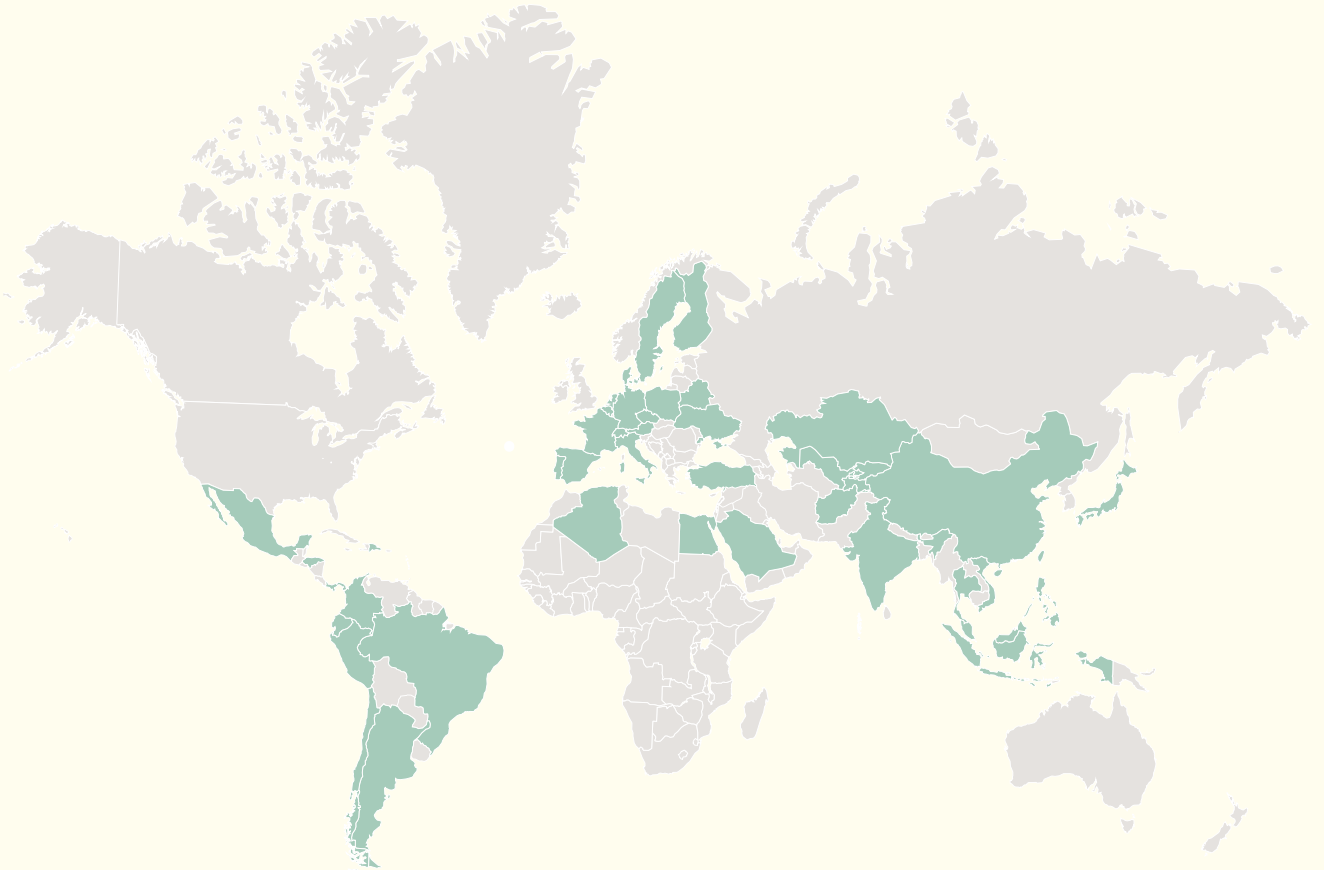
Some schools tested all their students, others only a single class. In some countries, we had participating institutions from lower secondary through tertiary education, while in others we only tested students from one education level or one age group. Examples of some of the largest national testing initiatives are discussed at the end of the report, but many individual teachers, professors, private schools, and public institutions also participated.

## About EF Education First

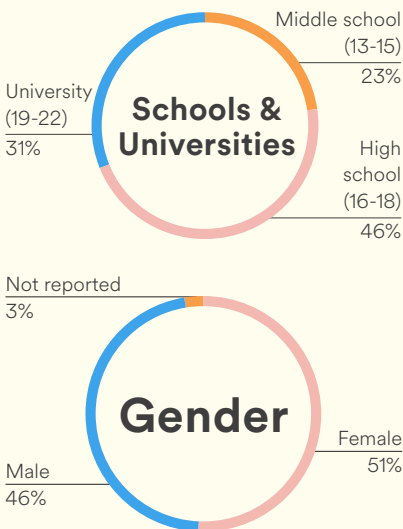
EF Education First ([www.ef.com](http://www.ef.com)) is an international education company that focuses on language, academics, cultural exchange, and educational travel, with the mission of "opening the world through education." Founded in 1965, EF now has more than 600 schools and offices in more than 50 countries, and it is the Official Language Training Partner for the Tokyo 2020 Olympic and Paralympic Games. The EF English Proficiency Index series is published by Signum International AG.

# EF EPI-s Facts and Figures

## Who are the test takers?



This report reflects test data from 350,000 students between the ages of 13 and 22, representing more than 5,000 schools and universities in 43 countries. The median age of test takers is 17.



- |                |                    |             |              |
|----------------|--------------------|-------------|--------------|
| Afghanistan    | Denmark            | Japan       | Saudi Arabia |
| Algeria        | Dominican Republic | Kazakhstan  | Spain        |
| Argentina      | Ecuador            | Kyrgyzstan  | Sweden       |
| Austria        | Egypt              | Malaysia    | Switzerland  |
| Belarus        | Finland            | Mexico      | Tajikistan   |
| Belgium        | France             | Netherlands | Thailand     |
| Brazil         | Germany            | Panama      | Turkey       |
| Chile          | Honduras           | Peru        | Ukraine      |
| China          | India              | Philippines | Uzbekistan   |
| Colombia       | Indonesia          | Poland      | Vietnam      |
| Czech Republic | Italy              | Portugal    |              |

# Age

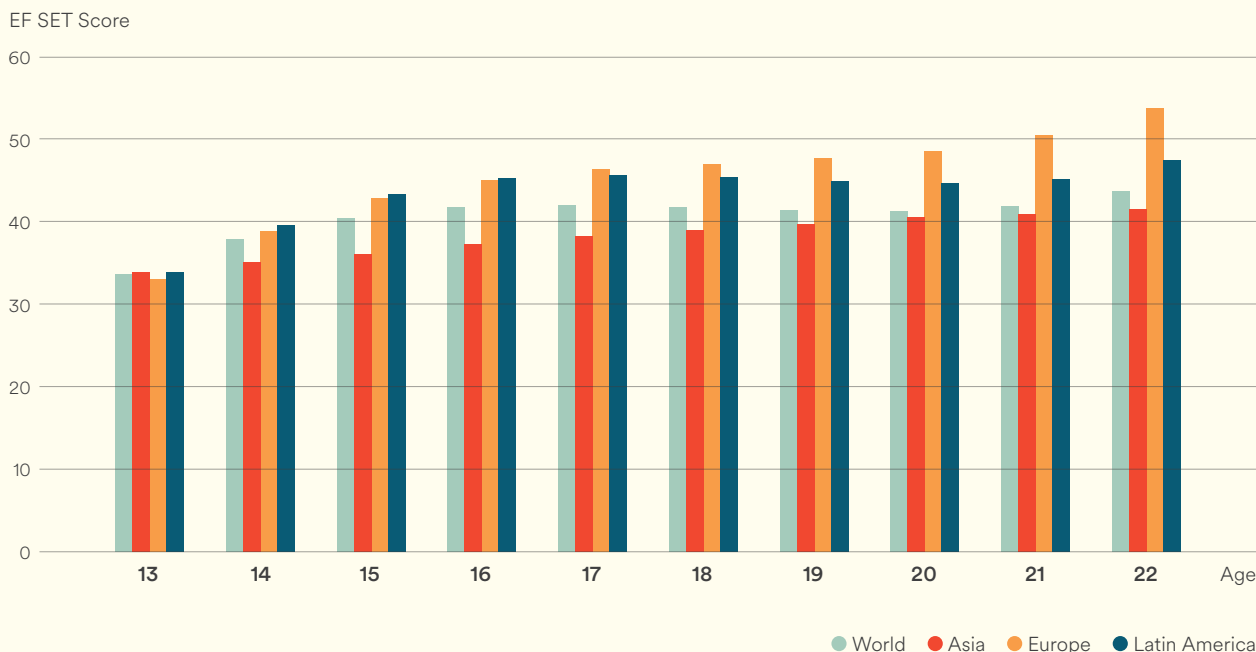
Hundreds of millions of children around the world learn English at school. In the majority of countries, English instruction begins in primary school and continues at least until the end of secondary education. Many countries include an English language assessment on their standardized secondary school exit exam or university entrance test. These assessments are generally written by educators in the country and calibrated to test the knowledge and skills included on that country's curriculum. While these test results are helpful to educators who are studying English proficiency trends within a specific country, their relevance as international assessments is limited.

English proficiency among older students and adults varies widely from country to country and region to region. But few of those differences are visible among younger students: one striking feature of the EF EPI-s dataset is how similar students' English skills are at age 13 around the world.

In part, this parity reflects efforts to improve English education—efforts that are starting to show results. For example, in the last decade, a large number of Asian and Latin American school systems have directed resources toward improving English language instruction, launching initiatives that retrain teachers, offer scholarships for international study, bring educational technology into the classroom, and recruit

native English-speaking teachers. The impacts of these investments are evident in the results at age 13, when Asian and Latin students perform on par with their European peers. In fact, Latin students' results are in line with their European peers' up until age 16, and it is only among older secondary students and university students that a gap between the two regions appears. The gap between Latin America and Asia opens much earlier, with Latin American students beginning to outpace their Asian peers by age 14. Because Asian students continue to improve their English proficiency beyond age 16, while progress in Latin America stalls, the proficiency difference between these two regions is about the same at age 20 as it was at age 14.

## EF SET Score by Age and Region

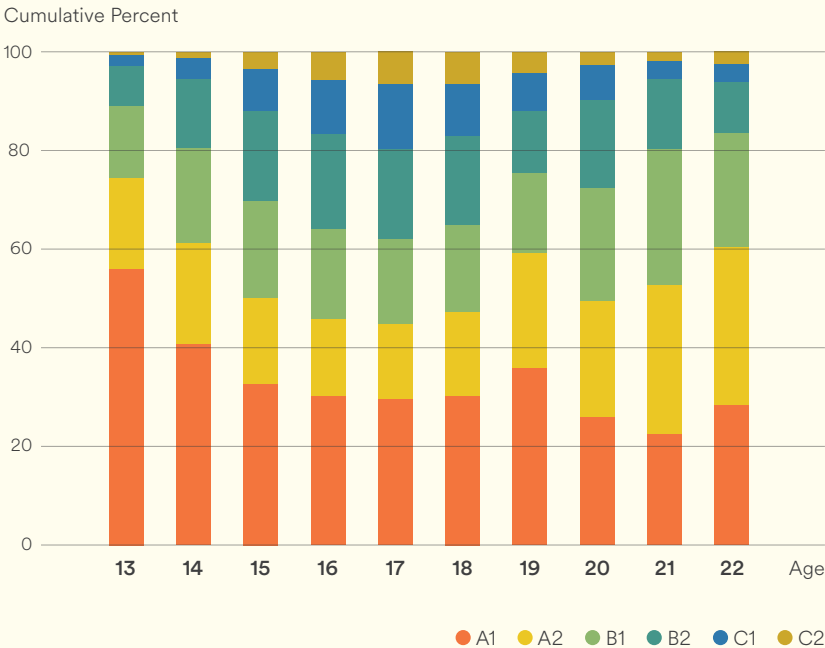


At age 13, over 70% of students worldwide have a beginner (A1) or elementary (A2) level of English. Gains in English proficiency over the subsequent two years show a rapid migration of students out of these lower bands, in particular level A1. However, through the end of secondary school, most students in the lowest proficiency bands no longer migrate up. These students appear to be stuck. Growth for many higher-level students, though, continues as they move from the intermediate bands (B1 and B2) into more advanced levels (C1 and C2).

Trends at the university level are less clear. On the one hand, students at age 21 have the lowest proportion of A1-level English speakers of any age group. On the other hand, 21 and 22-year-olds have lower proportions of advanced C2 students than 17 and 18-year-olds. In other words, by the end of university, students are more concentrated in the middle of the proficiency spectrum. One worrying finding here is that most students are not reaching the skill level they need for professional-level English; the minimum proficiency level required for an international workplace is upper intermediate (B2), a level attained by less than 20% of the university-aged students we tested.

When studying this data, it is important to keep in mind that it represents a snapshot rather than a time lapse. Students were tested once in 2017 or 2018, not followed year by year. Still, the lack of a coherent trend at the university level is indicative of a broader lack of coordination in English instruction in tertiary education worldwide. Some universities may be teaching English, or even offering English-medium instruction for some majors and in some courses. Others have abandoned English instruction entirely. Student progress in acquiring higher-level professional English skills is haphazard as a result.

### Distribution of Students by CEFR Level



# Learning Speed

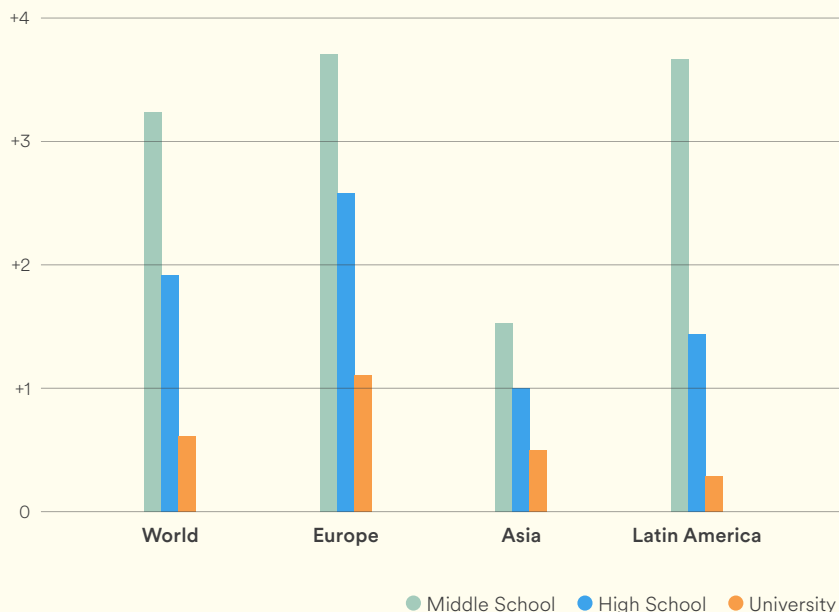
Looking at a typical curriculum, it might seem that students' English skills should improve steadily from year to year during secondary school. After all, in any given school system, students receive similar amounts of instruction each year, learn from teachers with similar qualifications, and follow a curriculum designed to produce steady progress. The data, however, tells a different story. On average worldwide, students experience disproportionately large gains in lower secondary school and only moderate gains in upper secondary school. At the university level, as previously discussed, English instruction is more haphazard, the results of which are borne out by the data.

Why is progress slower in high school than in middle school? One reason has to do with the nature of language learning itself: as a rule, it is easier to acquire lower-level language skills than higher-level ones. Simply put, beginners learn faster. But that observation alone does not offer a full explanation for the erratic progress we see in our data. In particular, we find that regions experience this slowdown at different points in schooling and to different degrees, indicating that a natural drop-off in learning rate is not the only factor. In some places, we find many students' progress stalling completely—even though the curriculum indicates that they are still receiving the same number of hours of English instruction.

Adult English proficiency is highest in Europe, so it is helpful to explore how the continent's school systems manage to teach English so well. Our most striking finding is that, although European students' learning speed also slows down as they age, they continue to improve their English proficiency steadily, gaining, on average, more than one point per year throughout their education. A CEFR band on this scale corresponds to about 10 points. In Latin America, students' improvement slows earlier and more markedly. In Asia, learning speed is slower throughout, perhaps because many students struggle with the added difficulties of mastering a new alphabet and a very different type of language. Even then,

## Average Annual Progress by Region

EF SET Score Change per Year





Asian students also show a decline in learning rate as they get older, progressing by only half a point per year, on average, by the time they reach university.

These patterns suggest that European adults speak better English not so much because they learn the language more quickly in the early years of schooling, but because they keep learning it steadily, even after they have arrived at university.

It is important to note, though, that these trajectories vary substantially from country to country. Students in Brazil, for example, improve quickly in middle school but hardly at all in the years afterwards. Students in Spain learn more English in upper secondary

school than in lower secondary, but their progress during university is minimal. In Switzerland, the learning trajectory follows the Europe-wide trend, but students make more annual progress than the regional average every year and continue to make substantial gains even as they reach the end of their formal education. Indeed, Swiss university students improve by nearly three points per year—much higher than the European average.

This data suggests that many school systems, although successful in introducing students to the basics of the English language, are struggling to build competency beyond that level. From a teaching perspective, sustaining momentum

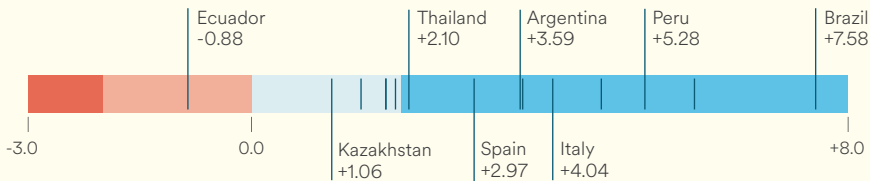
at higher proficiency levels requires a substantially different toolkit. In many countries, English teachers themselves have only intermediate proficiency in English.

Unfortunately, beginner English is of little use in the workplace. Most jobs that use English at all require a B1 or B2 level. University systems and technical schools may be best-equipped to build proficiency at the intermediate and advanced levels, particularly in regards to sector-specific vocabulary. Clearer definition of tertiary English language requirements and curricula would improve results.

## Average Annual Progress by Country

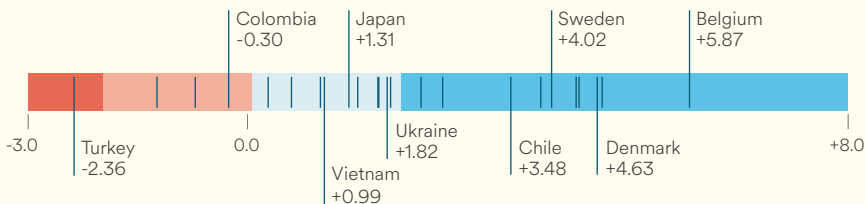
### Middle School Students

EF SET Score Change per Year



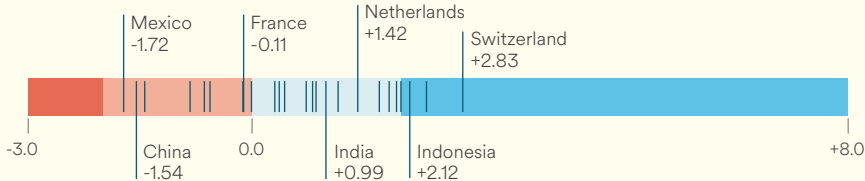
### High School Students

EF SET Score Change per Year



### College Students

EF SET Score Change per Year



● Trending Down ● Slight Decrease ● Slight Increase ● Trending Up

# Gender

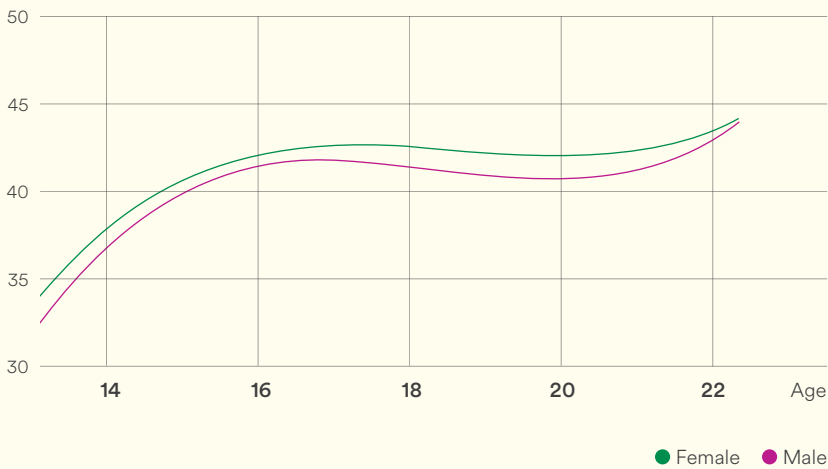
In all age groups, female students outpace male students in English learning. This finding parallels findings among adults, where we consistently find that women have stronger English than men. A more striking trend emerges when we examine listening and reading skills separately. Listening skills follow the overall trend, with a slight female advantage that narrows with age. Reading skills, however, are equivalent among younger students. The gender divide only

appears at age 17, with boys trailing girls in English reading comprehension from upper secondary school throughout university. This disparity places boys at a particular disadvantage in courses that use English-language textbooks and reading material. Instructors at these educational levels would do well to take this deficit into account when considering how best to support individual students.

## EF SET Scores by Age and Gender

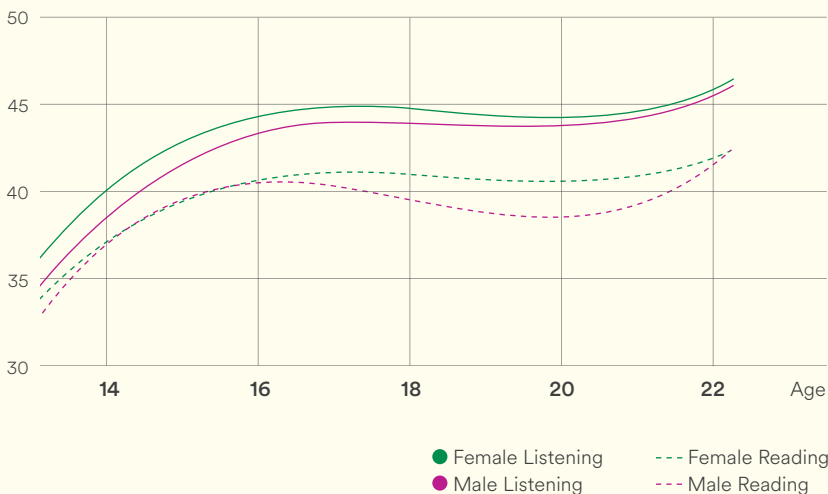
### Worldwide Average

EF SET Score



### Worldwide Listening and Reading Average

EF SET Score



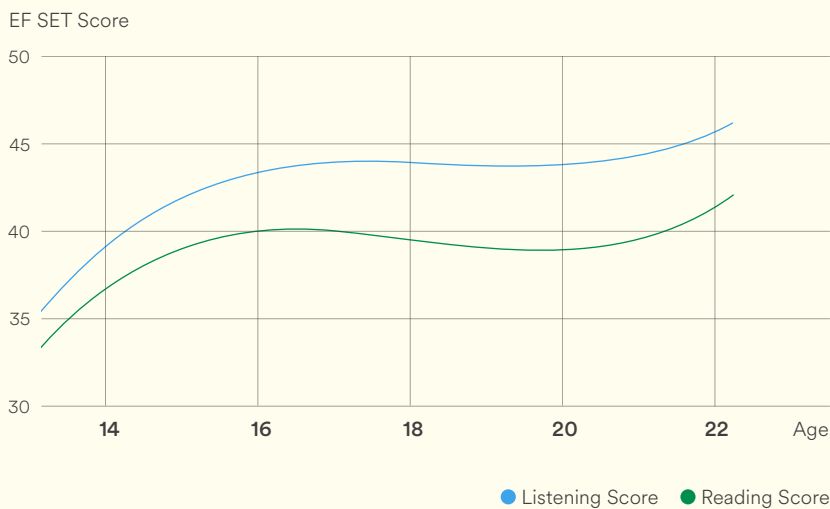
# Skill Type

English listening comprehension skills develop more quickly than reading comprehension skills, and the gap between the two competencies widens every year up to age 20. This gap is much larger than the gender gap. Zooming in to look at students of a single age cohort, we find a wider range of English listening skills, whereas reading skills are clustered more tightly at lower levels. These findings pose concerns for educators trying to train students for a digital-focused, 21st century workforce, in which English text skills are essential.

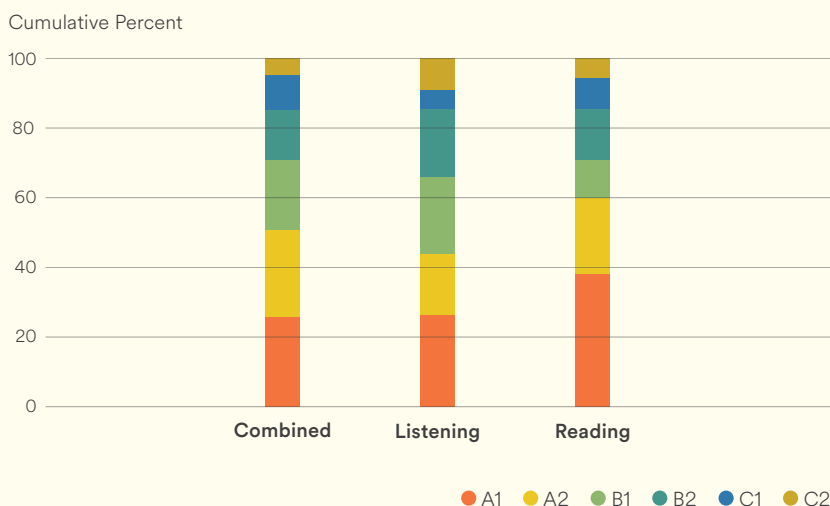
One reason for this skills gap is that many education systems are placing increased emphasis on oral communication, as they move away from rote grammar and translation exercises and toward communicative instruction. Another factor may be media consumption. Students today have more frequent exposure to spoken English outside the classroom, through English-language movies, TV, and music.

To be clear, communication-centered instruction and English-language media consumption are positive developments for English learners, but educators clearly need to do more to develop reading skills. Written English uses a much wider range of vocabulary and more complex sentence structures than spoken English, and it requires dedicated instruction and practice. The skill is particularly important in the workplace, where professionals need to understand documentation, emails, news, and research.

## EF SET Scores by Age and Skill Type



## Score Distribution by Skill Type (Age 16)



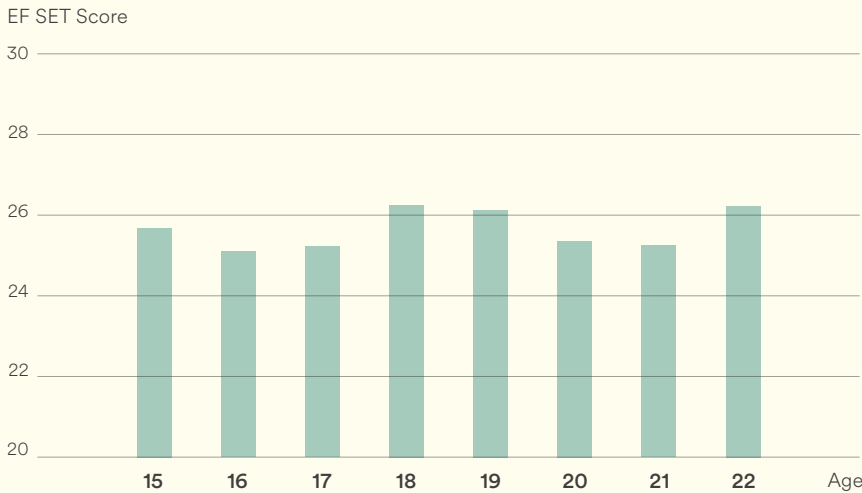
# In Focus: Ecuador

In 2017, the Ecuadorian Ministry of Education approached EF with concerns about the level of English instruction in schools. Together, we evaluated a sample of students in all regions of the country—the coastal provinces, the highlands, and the Galapagos—at year 10 of primary education (age 15) and year 3 of secondary education (age 18). The Ministry is now using these results to implement changes in the curriculum, with the aim of instructing all students to at least a B1 level of English by the end of high school.

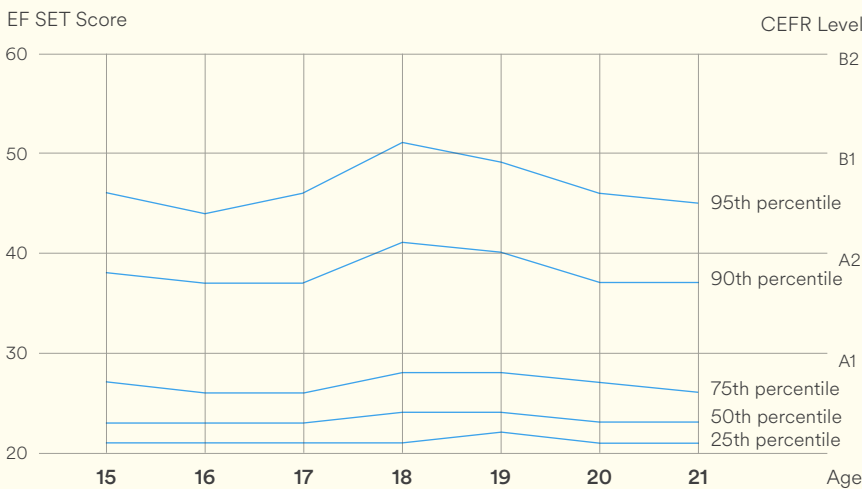
Individual schools and universities in Ecuador also used the EF SET to evaluate their students in 2017 and 2018 outside of this testing initiative, giving us a sample of over 100,000 Ecuadorian students of different ages for analysis. The vast majority, at all age levels, performed at the A1 or pre-A1 level in English, and we found no evidence of progress in English proficiency from one year to the next, even though English is a required subject in all levels of secondary school.

However, a small number of students in Ecuador did reach high levels of English proficiency. These students started from a higher baseline at age 15, and they showed steady improvement through the end of secondary school, although, even among this high-performing population, there was no evidence of consistent progress at the university level. Still, understanding how high-performing students differ from the rest of the student population could provide models for broader success.

## English Proficiency by Age (Ecuador)



## English Proficiency by Percentile (Ecuador)



# In Focus: Italy

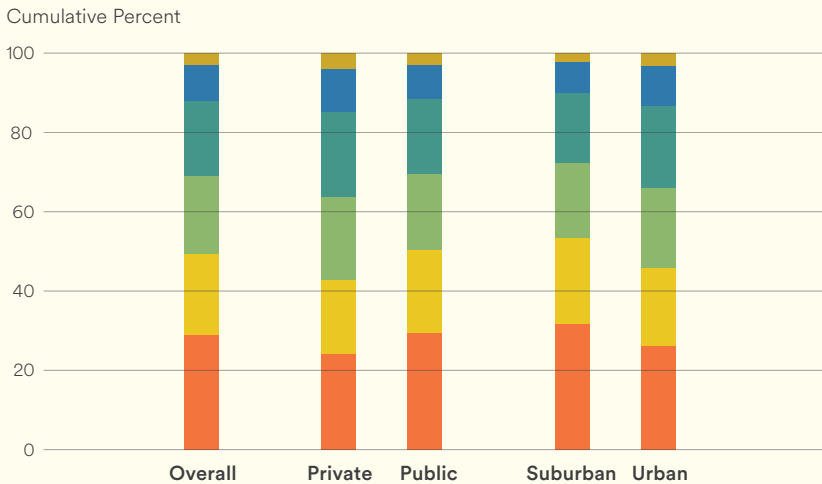
At the initiative of the Italian Ministry of Education, more than 30,000 secondary school students across the country took the EF SET between March and June 2017. Eighty-eight percent of the students were 16 or 17 years old when tested. This was the second year in which the Italian government used the EF SET to assess students, and the initiative is the first step in a broader plan to evaluate and improve English teaching across the Italian school system.

On the whole, students in urban schools demonstrated higher English proficiency than those in suburban schools, and students in general secondary schools (lyceums) had much higher English proficiency than those in technical and vocational schools. The data also suggested that private school students

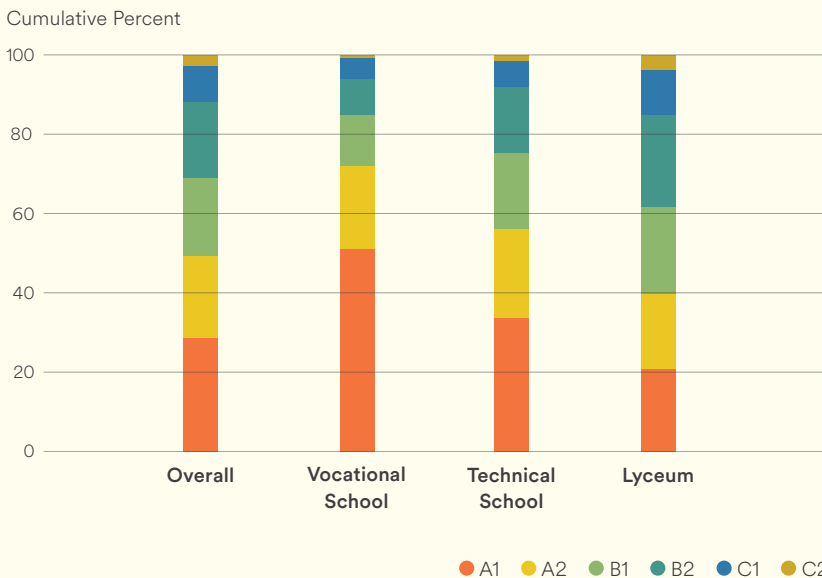
had better English skills, but there were too few participating private schools to be conclusive. There is a clear need for Italian policymakers to examine English skill acquisition; according to the EF EPI 2019, Italian adults have the lowest level of English proficiency in the EU.

## Distribution of Students by CEFR Level

### Breakdown by School Characteristics (Italy)



### Breakdown by School Specialization (Italy)



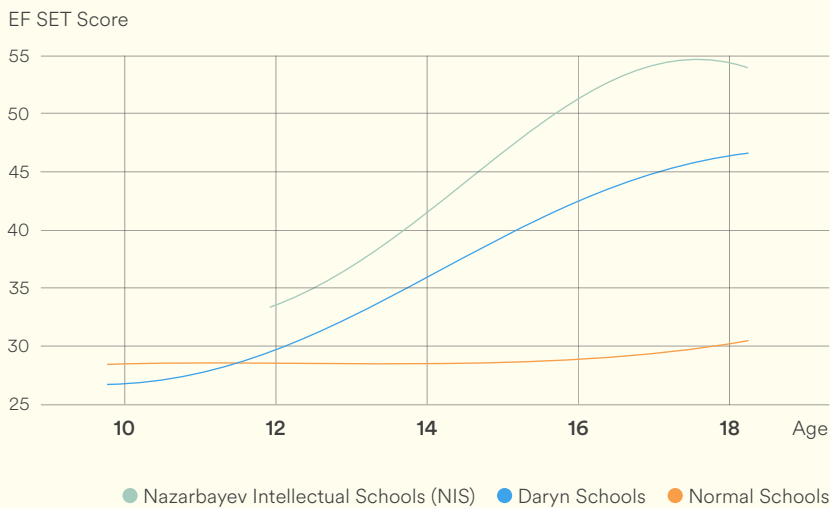
# In Focus: Kazakhstan

At the initiative of the government of Nur-Sultan (until recently Astana), the capital of Kazakhstan and its second-largest city, secondary school students at 50 schools took the EF SET in the final months of 2018. During the same period, students at 250 secondary schools in the Almaty region were tested under the guidance of the regional government. A further 4,000 students from the elite, trilingual Daryn and Nazarbayev Intellectual School networks across the country took the EF SET, also in late 2018. All student participants received English level certification.

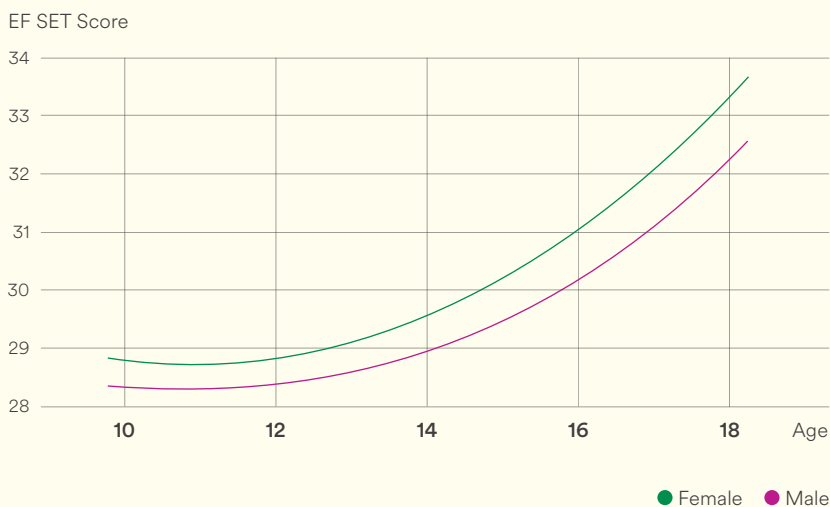
The skill gap between the selective public schools and normal public schools demonstrates the impact of selectivity and differentiated instruction. At age 11, when students are divided between selective and normal public schools, the English skill gap is tiny. By age 18, students who continued in normal schools have barely improved their English while those who received a trilingual education have made enormous progress.

The gender gap in Kazakhstan broadly follows the worldwide trend, but it is wider than average, and it tends to widen with age until the end of secondary school. However, there is almost no gender gap in the adult population, so this is either a new trend, visible only among the younger population, or it is a trend that corrects itself after age 18 through university education, study abroad, or workplace exposure to English.

## EF SET Scores by Age: Almaty Traditional vs. Trilingual Schools



## EF SET Scores by Age and Gender (Kazakhstan)



# In Focus: Indonesia

Several hundred school principals, individual English teachers, and university professors in Indonesia tested their students using the EF SET in 2017 and 2018. More than 8,500 students from across the country completed the test. This testing was not the result of a coordinated project led by the Ministry of Education and Culture, but emerged from a groundswell of interest among educators and institutional leaders.

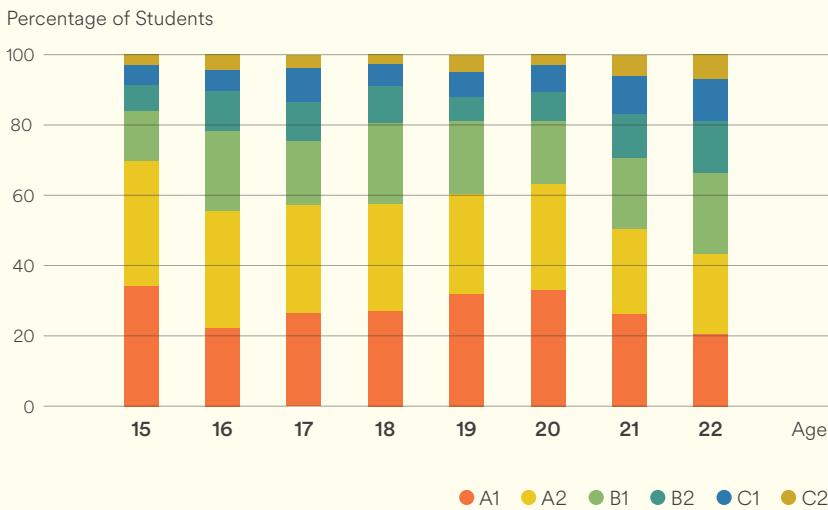
At age 15, 70% of students tested in Indonesia were at the A1 or A2 proficiency band. By the age of 22, 43% of students remained in these lowest proficiency bands,

but a third reached level B2 or higher, the level of English recommended for international workplaces. Our data suggests that many students progress even in the last two years of university. That is a striking finding, although it may largely be a result of selectivity; not everyone is able to continue their studies at such a high level, and those who do so may already speak better English.

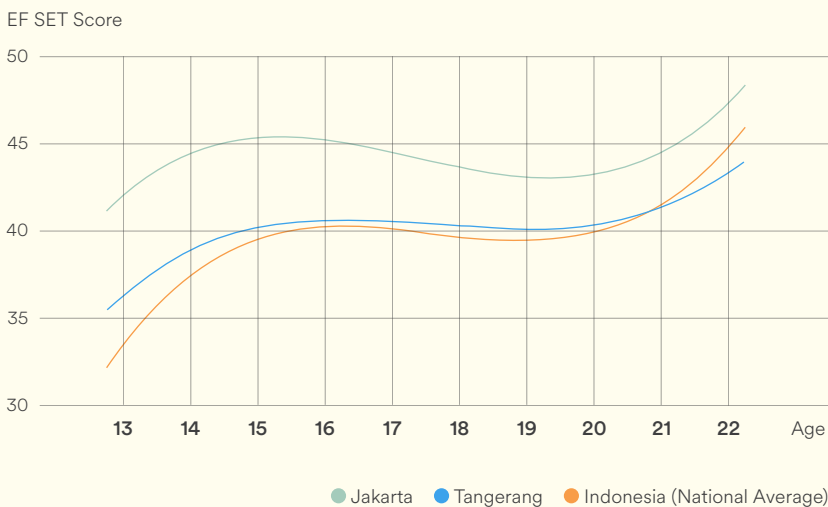
Using information about students' cities of residence, we were able to perform geographic analysis of English skill distribution. This type of data collection is particularly useful when cities or regions

have autonomy in teacher recruitment and training or in curriculum design and class scheduling, allowing comparisons between different educational approaches. The disparities in Indonesia can be striking. For example, Tangerang and Jakarta are neighboring cities—indeed, the Jakarta airport is actually located in Tangerang—but, despite their proximity, student English proficiency is markedly higher in Jakarta. Differences in wealth and demographics in the two cities are likely contributing factors.

## Distribution of Students by CEFR Level



## EF SET Scores: Jakarta vs. Tangerang (Indonesia)



# Conclusions

Policymakers, teachers, parents, and students all want educational systems that equip young people with the skills they need to find work.

The transition to the workforce increasingly requires at least some English skills. Recognizing the realities of the global marketplace, education policymakers around the world have made English a core part of their curricula. Whether their school systems can actually deliver on those goals, though, is another story.

One problem is that education systems do not do enough to track how students develop English skills over time. Periodic, standardized evaluations for math or literacy development are far more common than assessments of English progress. Often, standardized English testing only comes at the end of a student's public education, in some kind of exit exam or university admission test. For many students, that is too late. If English is truly a core skill for the modern workplace, as so many employers insist, then it should be treated as such, not only through timely, accurate assessment but also through rigorous teacher training and certification programs.

Based on our research, we have the following recommendations for educators and policymakers:

- **Adopt comparable assessment standards that track English learning progress across grade levels.** Regular, accessible, standardized assessments help students and their parents track progress year by year. These assessments also give educators and policymakers the data they need to see how students are learning, identify problems, and adjust the curriculum accordingly.

- **Establish English proficiency as a core competency.** When students are required to reach a specific level of English proficiency in order to move to a new phase of formal education, everyone takes English more seriously. School systems need to make it clear to teachers, students, and parents that English proficiency is an essential component of academic success.

- **Align English instruction to ensure smooth transitions between stages of learning.** Students benefit from a coherent teaching regime that is clear and consistent. At different ages and stages, students may need more speaking practice, more focus on writing skills, or more attention to critical reading. From primary schools to universities, professional training and beyond, better coordination helps educators design curricula that build on acquired skills and avoid repetition.

- **Promote balance between different English skills.** There is a marked disparity between many students' reading and listening proficiency. All-around competence in English is more powerful than skills developed in isolation. A balanced curriculum builds oral English skills early, while children are still developing their own native language proficiency, and then emphasizes written English skills and vocabulary to support the transition to advanced university studies and the professional world.

- **Teach English systematically at the university level.** Students need to develop English skills for specific professional purposes as part of their career training, and they need to learn these skills through a structured curriculum. When students acquire targeted skills and vocabulary during tertiary education, they gain tools that are essential to operational readiness in the workforce.

- **Include English instruction in technical and vocational schools.** Students who choose a vocational or technical track in secondary school need English skills just as much as students who opt for a literary or scientific track. Careers last for decades, and no one can predict how the demands of the workplace will change. Today, English is a core skill, like reading and math. Every student deserves to master it to a level sufficient for professional success.

- **Compare students to peers in other countries.** Individual school systems have their own strengths and weaknesses. By comparing their students' English proficiency development to peers around the world, school systems can better understand their strengths and shortcomings, and they can evaluate their ability to prepare students for a competitive global workforce.

Our research team encourages education authorities and school administrators to leverage the full potential of the English testing suite developed for this research to improve outcomes in English language instruction. We are ready to support schools, regions, and countries that want to use the EF Standard English Test (EF SET) to assess their students.



## CEFR Levels and Can-Do Statements

### Proficient User

- 
- C2**
- 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.
- C1**
- 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.

### 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 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.
- B1**
- 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 while traveling in an area where the language is spoken.
  - Can produce simple connected text on topics that 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.

### Basic User

- 
- A2**
- Can understand sentences and frequently used expressions related to most relevant areas (e.g., very basic personal and family information, shopping, local geography, employment).
  - Can communicate during routine tasks requiring a simple and direct exchange of information on familiar matters.
  - Can describe in simple terms aspects of his/her background, immediate environment, and matters in areas of immediate need.
- A1**
- 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.

## Testing Your Students

Through continuous, standardized assessment of English language skills, educators can pinpoint areas for improvement and identify successful strategies at the institutional, national, and international levels. The EF Standard English Test (EF SET) was designed for that purpose.

Offered at no cost and built with the same methods as other standardized English tests, the EF SET rests on a foundation of evidence-based research and years of continuous investment. Test items are created by experienced examiners, carefully reviewed by a panel of experts, and piloted on more than 150,000 learners from 80 countries. A third-party review in 2014 showed that EF SET results correlate highly with TOEFL iBT and IELTS results for the same test takers. This means all three exams measure a common set of reading and listening comprehension traits. For further information on the EF SET and the research behind it, visit [efset.org/research](http://efset.org/research).

Education systems use the EF SET to evaluate their students on their own timetables, with whatever frequency they deem appropriate. Because the test is completely free, it is possible to evaluate a large population of students in different school types and education levels for only the cost of coordinating the effort. Education ministries have also successfully used the EF SET to evaluate teachers in contexts where further training will be made available to those who need it.

Upon completion of testing, participating schools receive customized reports with their students' EF SET scores and CEFR levels, as well as comparisons between the groups of students determined by the organizers of the evaluation project, whether that is within an individual school or a broader education system. In addition, each student can receive an EF SET level certificate corresponding to the CEFR, provided that the test is administered in a proctored environment. All student test data from around the world is anonymized and used to produce international benchmarks for English learning as well as this biennial report. We invite all schools, universities, and ministries of education to participate in our ongoing research.



Interested in implementing standardized testing?  
Test your students for free at [www.efset.org/schools](http://www.efset.org/schools).

