

# TEACHING AND TESTING

## NCEA and Cambridge – A comparison

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After a trial in 2003 with IGCSE maths, Saint Peter's College introduced the CIE exams in 2004 with IGCSE being offered to French, Japanese, English, Science, History and Maths. Since then the subject base has been expanded and our first cohort of full A level students left last year.

For those who don't know the system, IGCSE is roughly equivalent to year 11, AS to year 12 and A level (also known familiarly as A2) to year 13. I say roughly because the standard is a little different, particularly at AS/A level where it is significantly harder than NCEA 2 for year 12 students in many subjects. This is particularly true for languages because their exams are based on an inherent assumption that students will have had more hours target language tuition prior to IGCSE than is commonly allocated in NZ schools.

IGCSE has 4 exams: Listening -45 mins; Reading and Directed writing (includes a postcard style essay and a longer personal experience essay) – 1h30; Oral – 15 mins (role plays, speech and discussion); and Continuous Writing – 1h15

AS has 3 exams - oral –20 mins Reading and Directed Writing – 1 h45 and Essay – 1h15. Full A level has exactly the same exams but with an additional literature exam (Texts- 2h30) and a change in weighting towards the final mark. The topics are prescribed and change each year. Literature texts may be chosen from a selection of set works. Not all languages are offered in the November exam; some follow the European exam calendar and so these subjects can be combined with NCEA as appropriate.

By the time students sit IGCSE French at Saint Peter's College, they have had approximately 290 hours of French, which I feel is barely enough. When I first considered including French I must admit to some trepidation – it looked just too hard. However I was concerned that if I didn't French would go on the back burner as a second tier subject and the struggle to attract students would be made even more difficult. So we went ahead. I am immensely grateful to Helen Selaries from Corrin who gave me a lot of encouragement and guidance, particularly later with AS.

I have heard criticisms that the CIE exams are old fashioned, that they depend too much on grammar. This is certainly true of the essay IGCSE paper – it does have

a large grammar accuracy component. AS also has generous marks allocated to language and language accuracy, much as Bursary did.

Everything, including the rubrics, is in the target language. This also means all questions are answered in the target language. For the listening and reading exams at IGCSE level there is a wide degree of latitude as regards spelling so the writing is not being tested at the same time.

Marking is based on points allowances ( content/accuracy/language) or on a straight right or wrong basis that are easy to work with. Final Marks are awarded both as percentages and broader grades bands based on 10 mark groups.

AS is difficult, requiring a sophisticated level of thinking, a high level of French and the ability to write logical expository essays. Students must work hard if they are to achieve even a middling grade in one year. You have to cover year 12 and year 13 structures in one year. But it can be done. My students have proved it. For less motivated and less able students two years is better with maybe NCEA 2 in the middle.

The A level exam is the same language and essay papers as for AS but they are marked harder and the literature paper is included. This involves three texts over the year. It should be remembered that there is no distinction made between Francophones who may be doing the exam (from Mauritius for example) and FLE students like ours. Yet our students rate along side these students because as well as the French being tested so is their ability to think, to develop an argument and to discuss the novel/play. New Zealand students at year 13 can write 3 x 600 word essays in French on French texts we normally associate with university. The schools doing CIE have proved it. On a personal level I have discovered a new love – teaching literature at a high level.

15 minute or 20 minute orals appear overwhelming at first but are readily achievable. If you consider the orals you do now (and who confines themselves to the suggested minimum) and imagine doing them both at one time, the extra minutes are not much of a stretch. AS/A levels require the level of ability that you would expect of a good merit/excellence student, You have to

develop the discussion topics through the year so students have something to talk about at the end.

So what are the downsides? With the limited number of contact hours it is difficult getting students up to the required levels. Year 12 students often don't have the maturity of thought to cope with developing arguments and logically sequenced essays – in English much less in French. I find myself cutting corners to try to fit everything in and I get very tetchy with senior students who don't do the required work. Sometimes I become so content focused I forget to have fun with the language and with the students. The year 12 students then pass on the word that French is hard.

Because of numbers we only have one senior class for years 12 and 13. Managing NCEA level 2, level 3 AS and A levels in one class is a bit of a multilevel teaching challenge that I wouldn't recommend – and I have not done it well this year. I run my literature classes for the A level students before school just to fit it in.

The AS/A level reading paper seems to be marked in an arbitrary way – this is the impression I get from the supplied marking scheme; it may be that the actual marking panel is more generous at the time.

Unlike NCEA you cannot gain credit in individual papers. So students who have learning difficulties, (particularly

with writing/spelling) would be disadvantaged. I have been told it is easier to get qualified for reader/writer assistance than it is under NCEA but this creates its own problems and demands a whole set of other skills.

The professional development training is great – worth every cent. But you have to wait for it. It doesn't happen all that often for languages.

Some of the leading proponents of CIE seem so darn smug – 'us' against 'them' (NCEA schools) and 'we' have seen the light, hallelujah. They seem to have to justify themselves to themselves – like of a political party beat up. However I am pleased to say that the language teachers tend to ignore this sort of thing and just concentrate on the job in hand.

After 4 years I find I prefer the CIE papers to the NCEA system, principally because everything is done in the target language – there is no English. NCEA frustrates me immensely because every year I have good students who are penalized because they are being tested on their English as well on the target language. Certainly CIE is difficult in comparison to NCEA but I find most pupils rise to the challenge and seem to enjoy the fact that they are doing so. I do also. I find it very challenging but rewarding.

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