



University Pathways Length of Study

How long does it take to achieve proficiency in English? With more and more international students pursuing graduate and undergraduate degrees in English-speaking countries, this question has become more pressing.

Again and again, ESOL students ask, “When will I be ready for college?”

The answer is not simple. Many factors affect the rate of a learner’s progress in English, such as:

- The student’s English level at the beginning of their studies.
- The number of weekly hours in class.
- The degree of immersion in English outside of school.
- The degree of short-term and long-term culture shock experienced by the individual.
- The individual’s own learning pace.
- The student’s commitment to homework, self-study, and using English outside of school.
- The methodology and quality of student-centered, English-only instruction in the classroom.
- The student’s native language. (That is, students who speak languages that are relatively similar to English, such as Spanish or French, may progress more quickly than those who speak languages that are relatively different, such as Arabic or Chinese.)
- The student’s comfort level with the active, self-directed, and student-centered learning typical in U.S. classrooms.

What can hinder a student’s progress? Students may attend an English program for months or even years and find that their English is improving very slowly. Furthermore, students may achieve a minimum cut score on the IELTS or TOEFL iBT, gain admission to a university program, and then struggle as they discover that they were not prepared to succeed. Obstacles to success include:

- Academic culture shock, i.e., lack of preparedness for the differences between expectations and norms in U.S. universities and universities in their country.
- Speaking English only in class and not speaking English outside of class, at home, and among peers.
- Passivity, rote learning, and plagiarism.
- Isolation from peers, administration, and community.
- Lack of attendance, homework, time management, and self-direction.
- Focusing on learning grammar rules rather than speaking, reading, and writing in English.
- Translating into native language rather than using an English-to-English dictionary.

What can help? Students can prepare themselves more effectively, meaningfully, and, yes, quickly by immersing themselves in not only the English language but also the U.S. academic culture of active participation, independent self-direction, and critical thinking.

- 24/7 immersion in the language and culture.

- Speaking English every day before, during, and after school.
- Reading widely and extensively.
- Collaborating with peers and joining community events.
- Participating actively in all speaking, listening, reading, and writing opportunities in and out of class.
- Focusing on written and oral production rather than memorizing rules or translating vocabulary.
- Editing and proofreading own written work before submitting for instructor feedback.
- Seeking administrative help and following through pro-actively.
- Reflecting independently on progress and taking full ownership of learning process.
- Setting realistic goals and time frames.

So, how long? Keeping the above pitfalls and pointers in mind, a student would typically expect to improve according to the following time frame, mapped out by CEFR level and approximate correlated IELTS and iBT scores. The best universities seek candidates with test scores and an academic record that indicate a high B2 or C1 level of proficiency. By way of a common example, a student who arrives at an A2 level will need at least a year and a half of English immersion to reach the minimum college entrance requirements and at least two years to succeed in the best programs. By way of contrast, a B1 candidate may be ready in less than a year. B2 students coming from countries whose educational system differ greatly from that in the U.S. may need a few months of immersion to acclimate to U.S. academic culture and improve skills in active classroom participation, analytical essay writing, academic originality, peer collaboration, workload management, and other college survival skills.

IEP/CEFR Level	TOEFL iBT Score	IELTS Score	Estimated length of study from the beginning to the end of a level
A1 (Elementary)	0-15	0-1.5	2-3 months
A2 (Upper Elementary)	15-40	1.5-3	3-4 months
B1 (Intermediate)	40-70	3-5	5-6 months
B2 (Upper Intermediate)	70-95	5-6.5	8-9 months
C1 (Advanced)	95-110	6.5-8.5	12-14 months
C2 (Proficiency)	110-120	8.5-9	Not applicable
From A1 to B2			2+ years
From A2 to B2			1 1/2 to 2 years
From B1 to B2			10-12 months
From B2 to ready for university			1-3 months