

APIEL - an alternative to TOEFL

by Kaja Schiötz

Background

The Advanced Placement International English Language examination (APIEL) was originally developed at the request of European educators in 1994. The examination is produced under the aegis of The College Board (New York) in cooperation with Educational Testing Service (Princeton) by a committee of international teachers of English from several countries in Europe, Asia, and North America.

Its aim is twofold: (a) to provide students who are non-native speakers of English with an entrance qualification allowing them to participate in academic courses at American colleges and universities and exempting them from English language proficiency tests and from further courses in English for international students (b) to provide such students with a standardised international diploma in English as a 'value added' credential beyond any national qualification.

As a pilot project the AP International English Language examination (APIEL) was taken by more than 2500 candidates in Germany and France in 1997 and 5000 in 1998. On the basis of the positive response to APIEL by students, parents and teachers a Task Force Meeting took place at the University of Salzburg in 1998. The aim was to give information on APIEL, exchange experiences and also to discuss the possibilities of offering APIEL throughout Europe and beyond.

What is APIEL?

= The APIEL examination is developed each year by an international team of English teachers. The present APIEL committee is made up of high school and university English teachers from Canada, China, France, Germany, Spain, and the United States. Over the years, the make-up of this committee will change as new members join the group and current members leave. In this way, APIEL will continue to reflect the ideas of many international educators and keep abreast of the latest and most effective methods in language teaching.

Like other offerings of the Advanced Placement Program, APIEL maintains close ties with educators at both secondary schools and universities, not only through its Development Committee but also through the many high school and university teachers who assemble to mark student essays and speaking tapes each year. In addition, the AP Program sponsors workshops at which high school and university teachers share their views about the teaching of English in an international academic context. Such workshops foster a mutually beneficial exchange of ideas between those who prepare the students and those who develop the examination.

APIEL is open to any students in the final stage of secondary school or at universities/colleges who already have a good command of English grammar and vocabulary and have achieved competence in the four essential language skills: listening, reading, speaking, and writing. They should have completed a substantial course of English language study, including practice in learning to think in English, to comprehend prose texts and spoken discourse, and to explain ideas and opinions orally and in writing.

How should students prepare?

APIEL is designed for non-native speakers who can use English well enough to participate in regular classes at an English-speaking university. In preparation, students should develop their ability to speak and understand English in both formal and informal academic contexts, to comprehend texts frequently taught in the first year of university study, and to use the language successfully in various academic contexts. APIEL emphasises the development of language proficiency rather than the coverage of a specific list of readings or a narrowly defined curriculum. Therefore no additional courses outside the secondary school programme have to be taken and no extra material has to be acquired.

APIEL responds to the interests and needs of a diverse population of international students. Materials for English language study may be selected from a wide range of subjects, including literature and the arts, history and current events, science and technology, and topics of general interest. Most of the texts are 'authentic materials' drawn from books, journals, or magazines intended for native speakers of English and have been written in the 20th century.

APIEL requires students to demonstrate the following skills:

- Comprehension of spoken English, particularly in academic contexts.
- A critical understanding of written English, including excerpts from books and articles on academic subjects.
- Ability to express ideas and opinions in writing with clarity and fluency.
- Ability to express ideas and opinions orally with accuracy and resourcefulness.

What will be tested?

The APIEL examination is designed to measure a non-native speaker's readiness to do university-level work conducted in English. Successful performance in the exam will provide candidates with a language proficiency credential that testifies to their ability to use English successfully in their academic work. Thus, able and motivated students may enter the academic mainstream along with their English-speaking counterparts without being required to take additional coursework expressly designed for non-native speakers of English.

Unlike English language proficiency tests that certify only linguistic competence in English, the APIEL exam is designed to allow students to demonstrate their readiness to participate in an English-speaking academic community on an equal footing with native speakers of English.

Like the AP language exams in French, German, and Spanish, the three-hour APIEL exam tests all four language skills. Listening and reading are tested with multiple-choice questions: listening by means of dialogues and short talks; reading by means of prose texts of varying degrees of complexity drawn from a wide range of subjects. Writing and speaking are evaluated by means of essays and other extended free-response questions that require critical thinking about ideas. Each of the four skills tested counts for 25% of the total examination grade.

The exam draws on texts from various types of discourse, including writings from the sciences, social sciences, arts, and humanities addressed to a non-specialist audience. It includes essay questions and speaking tasks that allow students to narrate, describe, and

analyse. The examination also includes multiple-choice questions based on dialogues, short talks, and reading passages.

How is APIEL used?

The APIEL exam is designed for use by English-speaking colleges and universities in helping to make undergraduate and graduate admission decisions. Some institutions also use the scores for placement and/or credit decisions.

When and where is the APIEL exam offered?

It has been suggested that the test date for Europe in 1999 be 17 March, thus trying to avoid conflicts with local examinations and national vacations. The exam lasts for three hours plus a break and can be taken at secondary schools or elsewhere. Central bodies should administer the exam in their country. APIEL Grade Reports are sent to each student and also directly to universities of the students choice.

How is the APIEL exam marked?

APIEL grades (like other AP exams) are reported on a five point scale (1-5) with grades of 3 or higher considered 'qualifying'. The multiple choice section is marked by computer while the essays and audiotaped responses are marked by an international faculty of secondary school, college and university English teachers gathered especially for this purpose. The grades along with a diploma are released to students at the beginning of August.

How much does the APIEL exam cost?

The 1998 exam fee was DM 140 (ca ECU 71 or US\$ 78). The fee can be paid in the national currency (or the upcoming Euro) to an account of the College Board in each country.

More information?

To learn more about the APIEL examination you can ask for the APIEL Description Booklet. This publication outlines the content of the examination and provides sample test questions. You should contact: Prof Dr Diether Raff, Ruprecht-Karls-Universität, Häusserstrasse 23, 69115 Heidelberg, Germany, tel +49-6221-26770, fax +49-6221-457430 or Dr Charlotte Gill, Associate Director, College Board, 45 Columbus Avenue, New York, NY 10023-6992 USA, tel +1-212-713 8058, fax +1-212-713 8304, cgill@collegeboard.org. You can also find more information on the College Board web-site: <http://www.collegeboard.org/>

Personal comments

Having participated in the Task Force Meeting in Salzburg, I am very enthusiastic about the APIEL examination. From a European point of view I would like to highlight certain aspects of the examination that I find of special interest:

- The APIEL exam is developed and evaluated by an international group of professors and teachers, not only Americans.
- AP exams have long traditions (established in 1957) and are widely accepted.
- APIEL is widely recognised in the US and will probably be accepted by most universities throughout the world offering academic programmes in English.
- A number of US colleges and universities grant credit or placement on the basis of the APIEL exam.
- APIEL, being an examination and not a test, is valid for an unlimited period of time.
- All four language skills are tested thoroughly.
- Little organisational input is required in the running of the examination.

- APIEL is highly decentralised and can be taken at secondary schools, students save time and money by not having to travel far in order to take the exam.
- APIEL can be paid in local currency
- APIEL is cheaper than tests like TOEFL and IELTS
- APIEL, being a standardised international diploma in English, can be a useful addition to the curriculum vitae, as a 'value added' credential beyond any national qualification.

It is my hope that this information has evoked some interest amongst EAIE members, both admission staff, credential evaluators and others, and that most countries over the next few years (some already in 1999) will be able to offer APIEL examinations to all students interested in documenting their English language proficiency, whether it be for educational or professional purposes.

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