

Universidad Nacional  
Sistema de Estudios de Posgrado  
Centro de Investigación y Docencia en Educación  
División de Educología

Pertinence of the Standardized TOEIC Testing for Costa Rican Teachers: Boost or  
Hurdle for Professional Development

Trabajo final de graduación para optar al grado de Magíster en Educación con  
énfasis en Aprendizaje del Inglés

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Campus Omar Dengo, Costa Rica

2022

# **Pertinence of the Standardized TOEIC Testing for Costa Rican Teachers: Boost or Hurdle for Professional Development**

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## **Abstract**

In different countries around the world, private and governmental institutions require pre-service language teachers to be certified in order to work. In Costa Rica, teachers must obtain a B2 or C1 level of English to apply for a job in the *Ministerio de Educacion Publica* (MEP in Spanish) in any of the following international tests: TOEFL, TOEIC, IELTS, CAE, or CPE. This paper explores the need for Costa Rica to provide a more pertinent certification that evaluates not only the capacity of using the language but also to teach it, the capacity of responding to students' behavior and climate, the creativity to plan and design classes, and the quality of instruction, classroom management, planning, assessment and evaluation. To accomplish this task, some teaching certifications around the world for English teachers are analyzed. In addition, the reality of Costa Rica in terms of teacher certification is explored along with the reliability of standardized tests. Finally, the need for a specific language teaching certification for teachers in Costa Rica is explained and supported. This paper

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concludes with the idea that a certification that evaluates the language in teaching contexts, the capacity of responding to students' behavior and climate, the creativity to plan and design classes, quality of instruction, classroom management, planning, assessment, and evaluation is needed.

**Keywords:** Standardized, testing, teaching, proficiency, evaluation

## **Resumen**

En diferentes países del mundo, las instituciones privadas y gubernamentales requieren que los profesores de idiomas estén certificados para poder trabajar. En Costa Rica, los docentes deben obtener un nivel B2 o C1 de inglés para postularse a un puesto en el Ministerio de Educación Pública (MEP) en cualquiera de las siguientes pruebas internacionales: TOEFL, TOEIC, IELTS, CAE o CPE. Este ensayo explora la necesidad de que Costa Rica brinde una certificación pertinente que evalúe no solo la capacidad de usar el idioma sino también de enseñarlo, la capacidad de responder al comportamiento de los estudiantes y al clima del aula, la creatividad para planificar y diseñar clases, la calidad de instrucción, gestión del aula, planificación, valoración y evaluación. Para llevar a cabo esta tarea, se analizan algunas certificaciones de enseñanza alrededor del mundo para profesores de inglés. Además, se explora la realidad de Costa Rica en cuanto a la certificación docente y la confiabilidad de las pruebas estandarizadas. Finalmente, se explica y sustenta la necesidad de una certificación específica de enseñanza de idiomas para docentes en Costa Rica. Este trabajo concluye con la idea de que se necesita una certificación que evalúe el idioma en los contextos de enseñanza, la capacidad de responder al comportamiento y clima de los estudiantes, la creatividad para planificar y diseñar clases, la calidad de la instrucción, el manejo del aula, la planificación, la valoración y la evaluación.

**Palabras clave:** Estandarizado, exámenes, enseñanza, dominio, evaluación

## Introduction

Many countries have developed different ways to improve the quality of education. The most common one is teacher certification. For instance, Valeriana and Fatimah (2020) declared that in Indonesia, the government developed a Teacher Certification Program (PPG) that prepares pre-service and in-service teachers to develop their teaching skills and knowledge of the content. In Turkey, there is also a teacher certification program named Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages (CELTA) that is not recognized as the official certification program; still, private institutions require it to employ teachers (Birgün, 2020).

These kinds of teacher certifications are employed both to guarantee the best teachers' performance and as a requirement for working. For example, in the state of New York, there is the edTPA that evaluates teachers' planning, instructions, and assessment (Greenblatt, 2018). The edTPA was created to ensure that teachers have the necessary skills for the classroom (About edTPA, 2021). Another example can be seen in the Jiaying University of China where the Ministry of Education in China adopted an annual teacher certification test. This is done to become licensed to teach (Ping, 2013). In the case of Costa Rica, there are no certifications other than teachers' university degrees. Yet, to apply for a job in the *Ministerio de Educacion Publica*<sup>2</sup> (MEP in Spanish), English teachers are requested to have a B2 or C1 level of English proficiency in any of the following international tests: TOEFL, TOEIC, IELTS, CAE, or CPE as stated in a 2020 resolution of the *Dirección General del Servicio Civil*<sup>3</sup> (DGSC in Spanish), the institution in charge of recruiting teachers in Costa Rica. It is worth mentioning that the TOEFL, TOEIC, and IELTS have validation of two years while the CAE and CPE do not have an expiration date.

Despite the numerous certifications, the TOEIC test is the one preferred by most

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<sup>2</sup> The *Ministerio de Educación Pública* is the governing body that guarantees the inhabitants the fundamental right to quality education.

<sup>3</sup> The *Dirección General del Servicio Civil* is a Costa Rican institution in charge of recruiting workers from the different governmental institutions.

teachers to get jobs. The *Centro Cultural Costarricense Norteamericano*<sup>4</sup> is the only institution where people can take the *TOEIC Listening-Reading-Speaking para Dirección General de Servicio Civil* which is the one required for the MEP. Moreover, people can opt to take the test as many times as they want while others find it impossible due to the price, which is \$96. Two aspects that must be taken into account are that because of the same reason of the price, some people have had it expired for years and MEP does not know about it and some teachers have jobs with A2 or B1 levels without any trouble.

The proficiency tests that Costa Ricans can apply to determine their English proficiency can vary according to the purpose. In'nami and Koizumi (2012) explained that the TOEIC test is commonly used to measure the speaking ability to understand English in a work context. Moreover, Fernandez (2018) said that decisions about admitting a student to a university program are made based on the IELTS test. Similarly, the TOEFL is used by students who need to demonstrate language proficiency to apply for a college or university program (Cho & Bridgeman, 2012).

Therefore, this paper aims to explore the pertinence of the *Dirección General del Servicio Civil* (DGSC) statement that every English teacher must have a B2 or a C1 level of English proficiency in any standardized test to work for the *Ministerio de Educación Pública* or only a C1 for those reaching for a tenure position (MEP). Even though these tests are not designed for teachers in the Costa Rican context, they determine the language proficiency of teachers to be able to teach the language but not their abilities to teach and to be part of the educational system. Thus, this paper aims to explore the pertinence of the TOEIC standardized test to certify and guarantee the quality of Costa Rican teachers in terms of language and pedagogy to promote professional development. To determine the pertinence of these tests in the Costa Rican reality, the author analyzed similar certifications or standardized tests around the world as a means to guarantee quality.

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<sup>4</sup> The *Centro Cultural Costarricense Norteamericano* is a language institution that is in charge of international certification.

## Teacher Certification

In different countries around the world, private and governmental institutions require pre-service language teachers to be certified to work. In Turkey, there is a certification named CELTA (Certificate in Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages) that can be considered an introductory course for people who have little experience in teaching. It consists of a course that lasts between 4 to 6 weeks in which the necessary skills are promoted. People who complete the course obtain the certificate. Gulcan and Dollar's research findings suggest that CELTA helps teachers with classroom management skills, lesson planning, assessments, self-confidence, and teaching methods, among others. Notwithstanding, some of the negative findings from the research state that CELTA pictured the perfect classroom environment and that only some techniques learned in CELTA can be applied in class due to the reality of a classroom as the number of students, administrative paperwork, and miscellanea. In addition, this research points out that CELTA contributes to future and current English of Foreign Language (EFL) teachers in their professional praxis (Gulcan & Dollar, 2016).

In Indonesia, the Ministry of National Education implemented a teacher certification program in 2007 in a public high school in Jambi, Indonesia. It was designed for in-service teachers with an undergraduate degree or the four-year professional certificate that this country provides to determine teacher quality. Teachers who completed the program received a teaching certificate along with a registration number and an allowance of the wage of one month. In their research, Mukminin *et al.* (2016) determined that most of the teachers reacted positively to the personal, pedagogical, social, and professional competencies program and certification learning factor and the opportunities it encompasses such as professional salaries, incentives, and chances for career promotion. Moreover, it is recommended for educational policymakers to monitor and evaluate teachers' performance through certification implementation in a periodical way to increase the quality of teachers and education in general (Mukminin *et al.*, 2016).

Moreover, Greenblatt's research studied the impact of teacher assessment of New

York teachers and teacher educators with the standardized teacher performance assessment (edTPA). The edTPA evaluates teachers' planning, instructions, and assessments and how they meet the learning goals (Greenblatt, 2018). After applying the edTPA, teacher candidates must use the data to evaluate the effectiveness of their teaching. To get certified, teachers had to design, execute and evaluate lesson plans and submit a portfolio (Greenblatt, 2018).

These are only a few examples of teacher certification programs, yet they support the idea of this paper which is a necessity for Costa Rica to provide a more pertinent certification program for EFL teachers. Turkey's and Indonesia's certifications deal with teaching skills such as communication, time management, and essential aspects such as lesson planning, methods, and techniques. Indeed, they evaluate teachers' performance and development rather than teachers' language proficiency.

### **Costa Rica's Reality**

Instead of providing a teacher-related certification as in the cases of Turkey and Indonesia, Costa Rican governmental institutions request EFL teachers to take a standardized English test. These standardized tests evaluate the four language skills needed in a workplace: listening, reading, speaking, and writing. It is of utmost importance to mention that most of these tests are focused on the language with a vocabulary of business and communication, not teaching. In the case of private institutions, teachers can be asked to provide a language proficiency certificate or not.

Notwithstanding, there are some attempts to measure Costa Rican teachers' development. For instance, in 2008, MEP established these three objectives to improve the teaching processes of the country: diagnosis and teacher training, revision and design of the curriculum, and improvement of technology and infrastructure. The diagnosis was performed along with the *Centro Cultural Costarricense Norteamericano* with a total of 3193 teachers around the country. The results suggested that most of the teachers are between the A2 and the B1 rank according to the CEFR. After several hours of training courses in terms of

language and pedagogy, the results of the TOEIC test changed. In 2011, only nine teachers were A1 and most of them were B1, B2, and C1 (Calderón & Mora, 2012). Based on these results, Calderón and Mora (2012) concluded that teacher permanent training is essential and must be obligatory as a means to guarantee a quality education system.

### **Reliability in Standardized Testing**

Standardized tests such as TOEIC and TOEFL, among others, are used for a variety of reasons. Indeed, in the US, standardized tests are used to evaluate teachers in order to make decisions about school closures or reconstitutions (Youn, 2018). Also, lawmakers use the results of these tests to assure that all students start at the same level, go at the same pace, and have the same opportunities; thus, the achievements must be the same (Tienken & Zhao, 2013). Tienken and Zhao even mentioned that some laws prescribe penalties for students and teachers that fail to raise or get the mandated level which has caused teachers to cheat on the results of the test to achieve the minimum required score (2013). The main issue with standardized testing is that it usually relies on the result rather than on the process. Costa Rican teachers take the TOEIC test looking forward to scoring a B2 or C1 on the level of English proficiency no matter their pedagogical skills. Still, just as students may perform differently in a morning class and an afternoon class, teachers do so, too.

Hughes (2003) said that a group of students will not have the same result of a 100-item test applied on a Thursday afternoon as if it were applied on the previous afternoon. The explanation for this is that humans do not behave the same way on every occasion. According to Hughes (2003), for a test to be reliable, it must have the same score applied at different times with methods such as the *split-half method* where students are given two sets of scores. Moreover, the concept of the true score is detailed as the close estimation of a person's *actual score* (Hughes, 2003). In other words, for a standardized test to be reliable, it should be applied twice under different circumstances and moments.

Even though adults have more control over the circumstances, a person will not



perform the same on the test applied on a Friday afternoon arriving late due to a terrible traffic jam than on a Tuesday morning. The same will occur if a person must complete the test being sick because it was registered weeks ago not knowing that one would be sick. In addition to the circumstances in which the test can be applied, there is the economic aspect as these kinds of tests are expensive and must be taken periodically for them to be valid.

### **The Need for a Specific Language Teaching Certification for Teachers in Costa Rica**

Calderón and Mora's (2012) paper claims that it is necessary to be in constant training and evaluation to guarantee that students are receiving the best possible teaching and learning. One attempt the country has tried to do, according to Recio's article published in *La Nación*, is to elevate the minimum score required, that is from B2 to only C1 English speakers. This was done as a measurement to increase the level of students that become English speakers in the country (Recio, 2019). However, this is a topic of conversation as there are English speakers with a high level of proficiency who obtained a lower rank due to the stress the test may provoke, the date of application, and the type of questions related to business and communication whose score in the TOEIC test results as not eligible for the MEP. Unfortunately, the TOEIC test does not evaluate teachers' performance or the pedagogical aspect of the profession, it only evaluates the capacity of English speakers to respond to certain business situations.

To guarantee good teachers, a pertinent teacher certification must exist, especially because of the variety of preparation programs and majors that teachers-to-be can apply to and the differences in the requirements to get a job. For instance, there are universities in Costa Rica where students can obtain their degrees after two years of studying, while in other universities, students obtain the same degree in four years. Moreover, to work in a private institution, one may be asked to submit a language proficiency certificate or not, while to work in a state institution, it is mandatory to take one certification along with the recruitment process. It is worth mentioning that this recruitment process made by DGSC requires updating the English proficiency test to guarantee that teachers are in constant

learning. These reasons support the need for a specific language teaching certification for teachers in Costa Rica.

### **Conclusions**

This paper reflected on the need for the Costa Rican government to provide a teacher certification based not only on the knowledge of the language but also on teaching aspects related to everyday situations and tasks such as planning, assessment, evaluation, and students' differences, and socio-economic conditions. Examples of these certifications are found in the TESOL CELTA test (Birgün, 2020) and the edTPA test (Greenblatt, 2018) which consider aspects like planning and assessment. Thus, the corresponding institutions guarantee the teachers have an appropriate level of the language and are prepared for the classroom environment before employing them.

The Costa Rican government requires teachers to be certified as B2 or C1 English speakers as evaluated in any international test like TOEFL, TOEIC, IELTS, CAE, or CPE so that they can be recruited by the DGSC. It is worth mentioning that it is mandatory only for teachers who want to work for governmental institutions as the private sector has its regulations. The aspect of improvement here is that those international tests only evaluate one's English proficiency and capacity to answer to certain business and language-related situations, instead of evaluating language teaching skills or other aspects of teaching. This certification is of utmost importance as there is a significant difference in degrees future teachers can opt for as there are professionals who obtained the teaching degree in two years while there are others that obtained the same degree in 4 years. Yet, decisions should not be made based on the university they went to, the number of years they lasted studying, or the result of a standardized English test. On the contrary, decisions should be made based on the result of a pertinent test that evaluates the ability to plan and design activities for different types of institutions, socio-economic contexts, and types of students, a test that evaluates the capacity of explaining how to use the language in a variety of forms rather than knowing how to use it and that measures not only teachers' capacity of reaction

towards situations that may arise during classes such as physical and verbal fight, bullying, among others but also the knowledge on how to react to these situations, specifically the legal procedures behind it.

After analyzing what other countries are doing to guarantee the best possible education to their students, one can conclude that the Costa Rican government needs a specific language teaching certification. This certification must evaluate the language in teaching contexts, the capacity of responding to students' behavior and classroom climate, the creativity to plan and design classes, and the quality of instruction, classroom management, planning, assessment, and evaluation. Yet, these are just a few aspects related to teaching that must be taken into account as a priority rather than only the language. By implementing certification of this kind, the country would be able to determine who is the best candidate for the classroom environment guaranteeing the best education to the students.

### **Recommendations**

To guarantee the best bilingual education, teachers must know not only the language but also how to teach it. Currently, the government evaluates the knowledge of the language. To avoid this, a pertinent teacher certification should be employed before hiring them. Also, constant teacher evaluation and training should be carried out as a way to reassure teachers' proficiency and to update them on the latest pedagogies.

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## DECLARACIÓN JURADA

Yo, María José Gutiérrez Fuentes, cédula de identidad 117200187, estudiante de la Universidad Nacional, declaro bajo fe de juramento y consciente de las responsabilidades penales de este acto, que soy autor intelectual del Trabajo Final de Graduación Titulado "Pertinence of the Standardized TOEIC Testing for Costa Rican Teachers: Boost or Hurdle for Professional Development", para optar por el grado de Maestría en Educación con énfasis en Aprendizaje del Inglés.



Heredia, a los 07 días del mes de Setiembre del año 2022.

Refrendo

Los abajo firmantes avalamos el Trabajo de Graduación de la estudiante María José Gutiérrez Fuentes, cédula 117200187, que lleva como título **Pertinence of the Standardized TOEIC Testing for Costa Rican Teachers: Boost or Hurdle for Professional Development**, dado que cumple con las disposiciones vigentes y la calidad académica requerida por el posgrado.

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