

# Meeting the Global Standards: Teacher Education Students' English Language Proficiency

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**Abstract:** *The rise of globalization and the reality of English as a lingua franca in international business and academic imply the need for a practical proficiency test in favor of effective international communication in varied workplaces. Hence, the extensive use of the Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC). This study which is entirely descriptive attempted to determine the Teacher Education students' level of English proficiency specifically in listening and reading in a Philippine State University using TOEIC and compare scores to the minimum standard scores in different countries. The results showed that about half the number of test takers have basic to advanced working proficiency while the other half have elementary to intermediate level of proficiency. The scores in listening and reading tests are complementary. Overall, the individual scores of the test takers are comparable to the Philippine Education benchmark scores and that of the ASEAN countries specifically Thailand and Vietnam. The scores also surpassed the minimum scores required by the UK Border Agency for middle school students and skilled workers but not that of the professional level. The study concludes that there is a pressing need to continually increase the English proficiency of the test takers who obtained scores lower than the US Common Core.*

**Keywords:** English language proficiency, TOEIC, Reading Skills, Listening Skills

## 1. Introduction

The rise of globalization and the reality of English as a lingua franca in international business and academic imply the need for a practical proficiency test in favor of effective international communication in varied workplaces. As such, English language assessments and certifications for English language learners are seen as important milestones.

The Test of English for International Communication (TOEIC) measures the everyday English skills of people working in an international environment and describes how people communicate in English with others in the global workplace. Likewise, it is used by many countries across the globe as a criterion in the recruitment and promotion of employees. Furthermore, TOEIC is considered high stakes test as it serves as the largest gatekeeper to professional employment (Nicholson, 2015).

In 2015, 46 countries including those from Asia, North America, South America, Africa and Europe used TOEIC to assess the test-takers listening and reading skills, either through the public testing program or the institutional testing program which provided the following general descriptions: 40% of the test takers were between 21-25 years old; 56% were male; 55% had baccalaureate degree or were pursuing one; 24 % were in the field of engineering and 20% in business; 35% were full-time employees and 53% were full-time students; 32% hold scientific/technical professional positions and 15% had clerical or administrative positions; 80% had spent more than 6 years studying English; 25% indicated Listening and Speaking as their most emphasized skills when studying English; 44% used English 1 to 10% of their daily life; 17% said that Listening is their most used English language skill and 32% said it was Reading; 33% disclosed that they sometimes had difficulty with English communication; only 12% had spent 6 months or more in countries where English is the first language (2017 TOEIC

Report on Test Takers Worldwide); 32% of those who spent time in English-speaking countries indicated travel as their purpose; 45% of the test-takers had previously taken the same test three or more times; and 31% had taken the test for learning while 27% for job application purpose (TOEIC Worldwide Report 2015).

The ASEAN Economic Community composed of 10 ASEAN countries have agreed to use English as the language for business. As such, each of the ASEAN member countries has set their standards. Vietnam, on track with National Foreign Languages Project 2020 requires the TOEIC score of 550 for university graduates, 785 for secondary teachers and 945 for college teachers, respectively. Thailand's Ministry of Education also requires all foreign teachers who teach using English as a medium of instruction to have a TOEIC score of 550. The Ministries of Education in Taiwan (Li and Haggard, 2011), Indonesia (Octavia, 2014), Japan and South Korea (Powers, Yu, and Yan, 2013) also advocate for college students' increased English proficiency and require teachers and students either TOEFL or TOEIC testing.

Significantly, the Philippines, which has become the world's low-cost English language teacher where students come to learn or study English in English-speaking universities (McGeown, 2012), had 42% of the total TOEIC test takers in 2013, most them college freshmen and graduating students. In such case, there is an incontestable need to continuously increase the English language proficiency of Filipinos specifically those who are in educational institutions to ensure that the demands for language instruction are being met.

The Laguna State Polytechnic University, in partnership with a reputable TOEIC provider, pilot-tested the TOEIC Listening and Reading Tests among teacher education students who are majoring in English in September 2015 to

determine whether the Teacher Education students are able to meet the minimum standard score set by ASEAN countries.

This paper is anchored on the following premises: (1) English language proficiency is extremely necessary when globalizing operations to other countries (Yamao and Sekuguchi, 2015); (2) It has significant effects on college graduates' starting salaries, their probability of changing permanent residence status from rural to urban, and their future earning potential (Qian Guo & Wenkai Sun, 2014) considering that individuals with considerable English proficiency have better chances of working in the employment sector where the average income was higher than in the other sectors and improved opportunities for landing job interviews (Guo and Sun, 2014); However, (3) many graduates are unemployed due to a lack of experience, poor English, poor communication skills (Singh and Singh, 2008; Hsu, 2010). Hence, the need to determine the English language proficiency of students to ensure better communication skills and better employment opportunities.

## 2. Methodology

This study on teacher education student's English language proficiency specifically in terms of their listening and reading skills utilized the descriptive method of research. In particular, 49 students enrolled in Bachelor of Secondary Education major in English who were chosen using the purposive quota sampling took the TOEIC pilot test which was administered by a reputable TOEIC provider.

For the listening section, the test takers were asked to listen to a variety of questions and short conversations recorded in English and then, answered multiple choice questions based on what they have heard. Stimuli included photographs, question-responses, conversations, and short talks.

The reading section required the test takers to read a variety of materials and answer multiple choice questions based on incomplete sentences, error recognition, text completion, and reading passages.

All data in this paper are taken from the actual management report of the TOEIC provider used with permission and usual acknowledgment.

## 3. Results and Discussion

### 3.1 Average TOEIC Scores

The average TOEIC score of the BSED English majors is 607 equivalent to B<sub>1</sub> of the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR Level). This means that the BSED English majors are categorized as independent users of English who can typically understand the main points of clear standard input on familiar matters regularly encountered in work, school, leisure and the like. They can deal with most situations likely to arise while in an area where the language is spoken. They can produce simple connected text on topics which are familiar or of personal interest. They can describe experiences and events, dreams, hopes, and ambitions and

briefly give reasons and explanations for opinions and plans.

The individual scores of the Teacher Education students, when compared to international standard scores, revealed that 3 (6%) of the test takers had advanced working proficiency, 25 (51%) have basic working proficiency, 18 (37%) have intermediate proficiency, and only 3 (6%) have elementary proficiency.

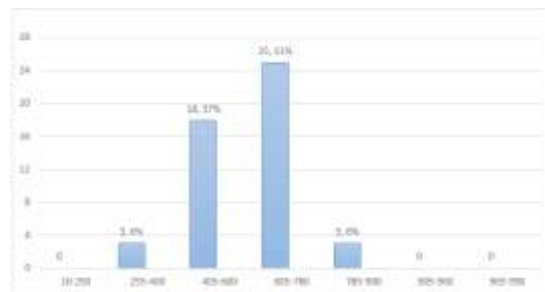


Figure 1: Average TOEIC Scores of Teacher Education Students

### 3.2 Listening and Reading Scores

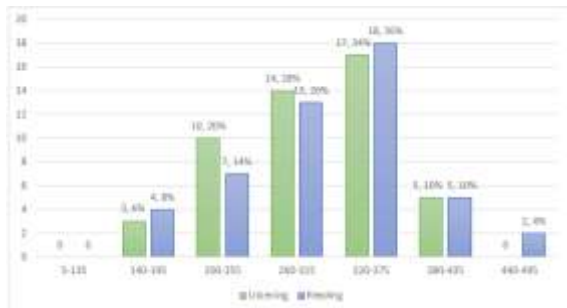
The average listening score of the BSED English students is 300. This means that they can infer the central idea and basic context of shortly spoken exchanges and extended spoken texts when the medium-level vocabulary is used. On the other hand, the average reading score of 307 suggests that the Teacher Education students can infer the central idea and purpose of a written text. They can read for meaning, understand factual information and can make connections across a small area within a text when the medium-level vocabulary is used.

Conversely, the students who scored lower than 300 in listening and lower than 307 in reading should be given the much-needed attention to help them increase their proficiency.

The listening and reading scores when analyzed using specific task descriptions revealed that the Teacher Education students are most proficient in reading and understanding simple postcards (75%). They can adequately perform tasks such as reading office memoranda in which simple words are used (72%), reading storefronts and the services they provide (72%), reading and understanding traffic signs (68%), and reading tables, graphs, and charts (64%).

On the other hand, the students need to be reviewed to master tasks such as listening to some memorized words and phrases (59%), understanding a person's name when it is given over the phone (57%), and understanding details of a meeting (55%). Also, the students need to practice reading and understanding directions and explanations presented in technical terms (58%) understanding simple, step-by-step directions (55%), understanding letter of thanks (53%) and finding information in a telephone directory (52%) to ensure ease of task completion.

Also, there are suitable tasks that may be taught to the students to improve proficiency. This includes understanding a salesperson when he or she tells prices of various items (49%) and understanding a person's utterances in social situations (31%). They also need to be taught how to read entertainment-related (45%), product-related (40%) and travel-related (38%) information, and agenda for a meeting (34%).



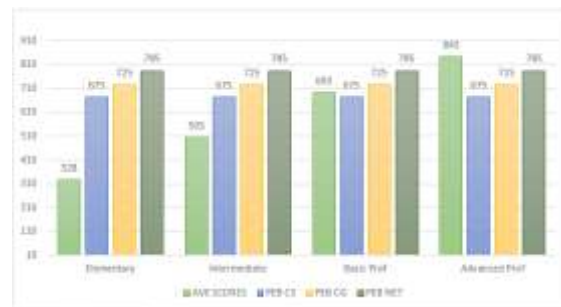
**Figure 2:** Average Listening and Reading Scores of Teacher Education Students

Likewise, advanced tasks must be given greater attention. Activities that focus on listening to broadcast public announcement (28%), headline news (10%) and fast-break news (8%), explanations on how to perform routine tasks (21%), taking telephone messages (21%), understanding play-by-play descriptions of sports events on the radio (19%), understanding a co-worker's work-related problem (15%) should be provided to students as study tasks. More opportunities for translating English text to native language (23%) shall also be provided to them.

Moreover, reading that requires critical thinking should neither be overlooked. Students should be exposed to reading to get the main points of an article in an academic or professional journal (30%), understanding a popular novel (23%), identifying inconsistencies or differences in viewpoints (20%), reading highly technical materials in the field (19%), understanding a proposal or contract (17%), reading newspaper editorial (17%), understanding magazine articles (11%).

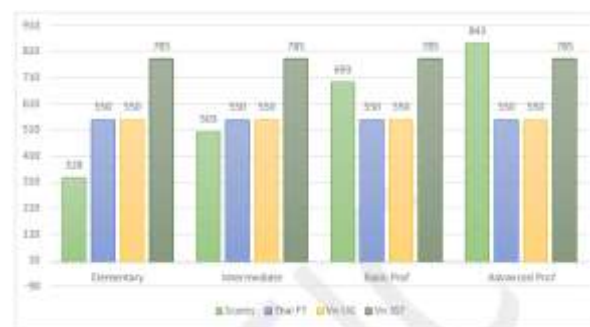
### 3.3 Comparison of Teacher Education Students' TOEIC Scores to Local and International Standard Scores

When the scores obtained by the BSEd English students were compared to the Philippine Education benchmark scores, it appeared that the scores of the 3 (6%) students who reached advanced working proficiency surpassed the Philippine benchmark score for college sophomores, graduating college students and non-English teachers; 25 (51%) have scores that fall within the basic proficiency level and is higher than the required scores for college sophomores but definitely lower than the scores required for graduating college students and non-English teachers. However, the students whose scores are within the elementary (3, 6%) and intermediate level (18, 37%) fall short of the required Philippine Education benchmark scores for all levels.



**Figure 3:** Comparison of Teacher Education Students' TOEIC Scores and Philippine Education Benchmark Scores

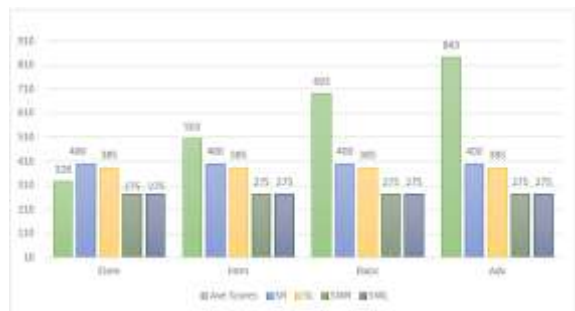
The comparison of the BSEd English students TOEIC scores when compared to the minimum standard score set by ASEAN countries other than the Philippines generated the following results: The scores of the 3 (6%) students at the advanced working proficiency level surpassed the required standard scores for foreign teachers in Thailand and university graduates and secondary school teachers in Vietnam. The scores of the 25 (51%) students who have basic working proficiency are much higher than the minimum requirement for foreign teachers in Thailand and university graduates in Vietnam but lower than the standard score for secondary school teachers in Vietnam. The scores of the students with elementary and intermediate proficiency are undeniably unable to meet the required TOEIC scores in various sectors in both countries. Though, the scores of those with intermediate proficiency are seen very close to the required scores.



**Figure 4:** Comparison of Teacher Education Students' TOEIC Scores and ASEAN Countries Benchmark Scores

In addition, when compared to the UK Border Agency standard scores, it was found out that the 3 (6%) BSEd English students who obtained advanced working proficiency have listening and reading scores much higher than the required scores for students in the UK middle schools and skilled workers. The 25 (51%) students who have basic working proficiency and the 18 (37%) who have intermediate proficiency have scores higher than the required scores for students in the UK middle schools and skilled workers. The 3 (6%) students whose scores are within the elementary level have scores higher than what is required for skilled workers but lower than the scores required by middle schools.





**Figure 5:** Comparison of Teacher Education Students' TOEIC Scores and UK Agency Border Standard Scores for Students and Skilled Workers

Furthermore, the Common European Framework of Reference (CEFR) classifies the 3 (6%) students with advanced working proficiency under B<sub>2</sub>, the 25 (51%) students with basic working proficiency under B<sub>1</sub>, 6 (12%) students with intermediate proficiency are likewise classified under B<sub>1</sub> except the 12 (24%) students whose scores are 550 or lower who are classified under A<sub>2</sub> similar to the 3 (6%) students whose proficiency is elementary level.

Based on the US Common Core, the four students who scored 165-190 in the Reading Test are classified as Grade 4; those who scored 215-230 are Grade 5; those who scored 235-275 are Grade 6; those who scored 285-325 are Grade 7; those who scored 330-335 are Grade 8, and those who scored 340-385 are Grade 9.

The students who obtained a score of 400 are classified as Grade 11, and those who scored 445 are classified as Grade 12.

## 4. Conclusions

This study concludes that the Teacher Education students' level of proficiency in listening and reading are complementary. While the individual TOEIC scores of about half of the test takers showed that they are meeting the Philippine Education Benchmark scores and the minimum required scores in the ASEAN countries specifically Thailand and Vietnam, there is still an urgent need to give emphasis on language tasks that would enable the other half of the test takers who obtained scores that reflected elementary and intermediate level of English proficiency in such a way that they will be able to develop further specific competencies practically, those that require comprehension and critical thinking. Such that, the TOEIC scores of the test takers can be increased to meet the minimum requirement reflected in the US Common Core and the that of the professional level of the UK Border Agency standard.

The necessity of TOEIC as an exit requirement in college may be looked upon though it does not guarantee any relationship with how English is taught as an integral part of the Teacher Education curriculum. Nevertheless, TOEIC scores may be used as additional proof of effective English language skills considering that it is recognized worldwide as the most used language assessment to qualify for employment.

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## Author Profile



**Elaine Rose Gordula Nachon** received the Bachelor of Secondary Education major in English and Master of Arts in Teaching English from Laguna State Polytechnic University in 2000 and 2004, and the Doctor of Philosophy in Education major in Educational Management in 2011 from the University of Rizal System, Philippines. She was a Visiting Professor of English at Changwon Moonsung University, South Korea in 2012. She is now with the Laguna State Polytechnic University as Assistant Professor in the graduate and undergraduate levels of the College of Teacher Education.