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A certificate from ETS is just so important for students. ... We're talking about the most important institution in the world that creates tests. That says a lot — I have an ETS paper that says my level. That's very important. ”

Álvaro Del Castillo, CBA–Santa Cruz
academic coordinator



The TOEFL ITP® Assessment Series performance data help Centro Boliviano Americano keep pace with its students' changing needs

About 12 years ago, Álvaro Del Castillo, an academic coordinator at Centro Boliviano Americano (CBA), took a close, methodical look at the students attending his English-language school in Santa Cruz de la Sierra, Bolivia, with a goal of better aligning the academic programme with their needs.

He discovered for the majority of CBA's students, the end goal of their English studies was the pursuit of higher education in the United States. So, Del Castillo investigated the English-proficiency requirements of American colleges. In most cases, he found his students would be required to attain a specific score on the TOEFL iBT® test to achieve their academic goals.

The TOEFL iBT® test is the most widely respected English-language test for higher education admissions worldwide.

"I thought if students come to the CBA and want to be in schools in the U.S., then we should take the whole programme toward the goal of taking the TOEFL® test," he said.

CBA was already using an exit test at the time, but switched to the TOEFL ITP® Assessment Series based on Del Castillo's findings. "We believed that the only number, the only grade, the only tool that gives us the reality of a student in an international scenario would be the TOEFL ITP test."

Besides enhancing the alignment between CBA's academic programme and its students' goals, the shift provided additional benefits. On a practical level, the one-week scoring turnaround of the test suits the school's rapid, six-week learning cycle. Also, CBA's adoption of the TOEFL ITP test has enhanced its reputation as a facilitator of serious learning.

"People trust the CBA because of that," Del Castillo said. "That's what parents want. Most people have heard that it doesn't matter where you're from, you need to take a TOEFL test. That's the idea they have. And students, they're waiting to take the official test, not the ones that we administer in the classroom. They want to know what their real level is at an international level."

Del Castillo and other CBA faculty trust the TOEFL ITP test, too. “The tool is very accurate,” he said. For this reason, CBA staff mine data from TOEFL ITP performance reports to glean as much as they can about the English proficiency their students attain by the end of the three-year programme.

“Our academic director is a fan of spreadsheets, so we try to get a lot of statistics from them, as much as we can,” he said. “We try to generate charts to see how our students are doing and if we need to make changes.”

Early on, CBA began enriching this TOEFL ITP performance profile with student demographic data, which allowed the school to observe, almost in real time, a gradual transformation in its student body. When TOEFL ITP performance signaled the change, CBA staff leveraged the demographic components of the profile to explain it, ultimately concluding that their students’ changing needs reflected a national trend.

Here’s a closer look at how CBA’s use of TOEFL ITP performance data guides programmatic decision making and provides insight into students’ changing needs:

TOEFL ITP performance data drive programme improvement

CBA uses TOEFL ITP performance data to inform ongoing and cyclical programme improvements. “Every three years, we use it to try to improve the programme — to innovate —

but if there’s something we need to change right away, we try to do so,” Del Castillo said.

Because students exit the CBA programme at three different points during the year, faculty can respond to TOEFL data reasonably quickly, Del Castillo explained. “Let’s say that on the last two proficiency tests, students didn’t do well in listening. What we [would] do is organise workshops for teachers to give them ideas on how to use our books or adapt materials to help students improve in that particular skill.”

Overall, CBA leaders use the profile they develop from TOEFL ITP performance data to:

- Identify strengths and opportunities in the academic programme
- Introduce new instructional strategies that enhance English language learning
- Choose and/or develop in-house learning materials that target specific language skills
- Select and create classroom assessments that help teachers monitor students’ increasing English proficiency and readiness for the TOEFL ITP Assessment Series
- Establish the direction of the school’s three-year curriculum improvement cycle
- Formulate professional development for CBA teachers

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We prepare them for the whole situation — that we have to follow the rules that come in the TOEFL ITP handbook for the administration. That gives them another world. We tell them it’s going to be the way you take it in the U.S. There are many requirements. We’ve got to be very strict with this. Somehow, I think they get a little immersion into what the U.S. is like, and that’s part of the target culture we want to show them. It’s a motivator. ”

Álvaro Del Castillo, CBA–Santa Cruz academic coordinator

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CBA-Santa Cruz has been getting bigger, bigger and bigger, so the things we do are sometimes emulated by other binational centers that are a little smaller. They try to see what we do first and get to know the experience we have with it. We share that experience, and they make their decision if they want to follow us or not. That's just what happened with the TOEFL ITP. ”

Álvaro Del Castillo, CBA–Santa Cruz academic coordinator

TOEFL ITP performance data signal changes that reflect a national trend

Historically, a small percentage of students have enrolled in CBA for reasons other than admission to American colleges. These reasons include supporting their elementary or secondary school-based English language learning, enrolling for the sheer joy of acquiring a second language or doing it for work. “We have petroleum companies here,” Del Castillo explained, “and they demand that their employees have some sort of knowledge in English.”

However, over time, CBA's ongoing extended analysis of its students and their TOEFL ITP performance pointed to steady growth in the latter subgroup of students — older students seeking to learn English to support careers. An early signal was a decrease in students' overall TOEFL ITP scores. “We would see the numbers falling and we would say, ‘What's going on? Why are the numbers dropping?’” Del Castillo said. “The numbers led us to think of the variables that were involved in this situation.”

Looking to student demographics for an explanation, CBA leaders noticed a change in the schools from which it draws students. “Our students were not coming from the schools they used to come from,” Del Castillo said. “Instead of having students that were middle class and above, we now had more students that were just middle class or lower middle class.”

Upon reflection, CBA faculty concluded that the socioeconomic circumstances and prior education of these older students likely impacted how readily they learned English at CBA. They then connected that finding to a larger

societal shift. “There was a time when many parents, because of economic problems in Bolivia, had to go to Europe for work,” Del Castillo said. “Many of these kids did not live with their parents anymore, only with their grandparents.”

To better support these students academically, CBA initially invested in new textbooks that use careers as the basis of examples and vocabulary; now the school is considering dividing its programme into two separate tracks.

A new path to English proficiency would support adult learners, age 16 and older, who are focused on using English for work rather than college. Instead of taking the TOEFL ITP test to qualify for graduation, CBA may require these students to complete a *TOEIC*® test*, due to that assessment's focus on everyday English and the international workplace.

“We're making that decision. It's like an experiment for us. Most students in this group want to learn English for their jobs, and we are trying to use the assessment tool that is fairer to them,” Del Castillo said. “The books that we are using this year suggest to us that we should also use the TOEIC [test] for them.”

CBA expects that a second track — its existing college-oriented programme for children and teenagers — would continue to draw the most students. The school will continue supporting this younger group with textbooks that use higher education as the context for examples and vocabulary. And these students will continue to qualify for graduation by taking the TOEFL ITP test. “Our reputation as an institution is that we are academic, so that's something we're going to keep,” Del Castillo said.

*The TOEIC test has been the global standard for assessing English-language skills in the workplace for more than 30 years.

Programme Snapshot

- Website: **www.cba.com.bo**
- Facebook®: **www.facebook.com/CBA.SC/**
- Established about 60 years ago
- First English-language school and first binational school in Bolivia
- Originally sponsored by U.S. Embassy in Bolivia (today's relationship is cooperative)
- About 90% of students come from Bolivia
- Provides English-language instruction from age 3 and up
- Offers special courses for advanced speakers, businesspeople and TOEFL iBT test takers
- Draws 95% of the Bolivian market for English- language instruction
- Maintains cooperative relationships with other, unaffiliated CBAs in Bolivia
- Uses the TOEFL ITP Assessment Series (minimum score: 500), a 30-minute essay and a six-question interview to gauge completion of the programme
- Administers a placement test to nonstudents who want to know their level of English
- Uses an interview and sometimes a written test (for higher levels of ability) for placement

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