

# The Unfairness of the TOEFL Exam for Speakers of English as a Second Language: A Critical Analysis

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## **Abstract:**

*The Test of English as a Foreign Language, commonly referred to as TOEFL, is a very popular and important tool in the process of assessing the English language proficiency of people who speak English as a second or foreign language and who are seeking opportunities in the fields of higher education or professional opportunities in English-speaking countries. However, the fairness of the TOEFL for non-native English speakers is increasingly being questioned. Research conducted in recent years shows that non-native English speakers often score lower on the TOEFL than their native English-speaking counterparts, despite having equal or sometimes higher language skills. This disparity can have significant consequences for non-native English speakers seeking admission to higher education or employment, since TOEFL scores are often used as the basis for admissions decisions or job qualifications. This article examines the extent to which the TOEFL may be unfair to non-native English speakers and discusses the consequences and possible causes of this unfairness, such as bias in the test design, cultural differences in testing practices, and the unfamiliarity of some test-takers with the test materials and equipment. The author suggests some strategies that could help address the issue of TOEFL's unfairness, including test redesign, cultural sensitivity training for those who administer the test, and alternative measures that could be used to assess language proficiency.*

*Keywords: TOEFL, unfairness, non-native English speakers, alternatives*

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## **Résumé :**

*Le Test of English as a Foreign Language, communément appelé TOEFL, est un outil très populaire et important dans le processus d'évaluation des compétences en anglais des personnes qui parlent l'anglais comme seconde langue ou langue étrangère et qui cherchent des opportunités dans les domaines de l'enseignement supérieur ou des opportunités professionnelles dans les pays anglophones. Cependant, l'équité du TOEFL pour les personnes dont l'anglais n'est pas la langue maternelle est de plus*

*en plus remise en question. Les recherches menées ces dernières années montrent que les non-anglophones obtiennent souvent de moins bons résultats au TOEFL que leurs homologues anglophones, bien qu'ils aient des compétences linguistiques égales ou parfois supérieures. Cette disparité peut avoir des conséquences importantes pour les personnes dont l'anglais n'est pas la langue maternelle et qui cherchent à être admises dans l'enseignement supérieur ou à trouver un emploi, car les scores au TOEFL sont souvent utilisés comme base pour les décisions d'admission ou les qualifications professionnelles. Cet article examine dans quelle mesure le TOEFL peut être inéquitable pour les non-anglophones et discute des conséquences et des causes possibles de cette iniquité, telles que les préjugés dans la conception du test, les différences culturelles dans les pratiques de test et le manque de familiarité de certains candidats avec le matériel et l'équipement du test. L'auteur suggère quelques stratégies qui pourraient aider à résoudre le problème de l'injustice du TOEFL, y compris la refonte du test, la formation à la sensibilité culturelle pour ceux qui administrent le test, et des mesures alternatives qui pourraient être utilisées pour évaluer la compétence linguistique.*

*Mots-clés : TOEFL, injustice, locuteurs non natifs de l'anglais, alternatives*

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## **Introduction:**

The Test of English as a Foreign Language, commonly referred to as TOEFL by English and French speakers, is a tool developed in the 1960s to assess the English language proficiency of non-native speakers for higher education or the job market in English-speaking countries. Since its inception, it has been a benchmark in the field of English language assessment. It is widely used by universities, colleges and employers around the world because it assesses the four skills on which those who speak English as a foreign language are generally assessed: reading, speaking, listening and writing. However, the fairness of the TOEFL for non-native English speakers is increasingly being questioned for a number of reasons, as discussed below.

Research has shown that non-native English speakers sometimes receive lower TOEFL scores than their native English-speaking counterparts, even in cases where the non-native speakers have equal or superior language skills. For example, a study published in the *Journal of English for Academic Purposes* found that students from non-English speaking countries often have difficulty with the academic language used in the TOEFL and that these students score lower on average than their English-speaking counterparts. Similar

findings were published by Language Testing in a study that found that linguistic and cultural differences between test takers and test designers can also contribute to the unfairness of the TOEFL.

This inequity can have significant consequences for non-English speakers seeking educational or employment opportunities, as TOEFL scores are often used as the basis for admissions decisions or job qualifications. Institutions use TOEFL scores to evaluate the English proficiency of applicants to ensure that they have the language skills necessary to excel academically in an English-medium environment. According to Elder and von Randow (2008), TOEFL scores are also used as a standard for assessing applicants' ability to participate in class discussions, understand course material, and meet academic requirements.

Students seeking admission to a graduate program in linguistics may be required to have a minimum score of 100/120 on the Internet Based Format (IBT) of the TOEFL, while those seeking admission to a science field may be required to have a minimum score of 75/120. Score requirements vary from school to school or institution to institution, but the requirements are higher for those in the field of linguistics or applied linguistics. In addition, non-English speakers who receive low TOEFL scores may be forced to take remedial language courses or enroll in lower-level programs, which can delay their progress toward their educational or career goals.

Therefore, it is important to examine the issue of TOEFL inequity and identify ways to address this problem. This article reviews the existing literature on the TOEFL and the impact of its unfairness on non-English speakers. It argues that the TOEFL is unfair to non-English speakers and discusses the potential causes of this unfairness, including bias in test design and cultural differences in testing practices. We will also examine the consequences of this unfairness for non-English speakers, including limited access to higher education and employment opportunities. Finally, we will suggest several strategies for addressing the issue of unfairness in the TOEFL, including test redesign, cultural sensitivity training for test administrators, and alternative measures of language proficiency.

## Review of literature:

The Test of English as a Foreign Language (TOEFL) is an internationally recognized test designed to measure the English language proficiency of non-native speakers seeking higher education or employment opportunities in English-speaking countries. The test is widely used and respected; however, there is growing concern about its fairness for some non-English speakers. In this section, we examine the existing research on the TOEFL and its impact on non-English speakers.

In many cases, research has shown that some non-English speakers often receive lower scores on the TOEFL than their English-speaking counterparts, despite having equivalent or superior language skills. A study conducted by Cumming, et al. (2002) found that non-English speakers tend to perform poorly on the reading section of the TOEFL. The reading section measures comprehension of academic texts, and the authors suggest that this may be due to differences in reading strategies between non-English speakers and native English speakers. Similarly, a study conducted by Elder (1997) found that some non-English speakers often struggle with the vocabulary used in the listening section of the TOEFL. This situation can have an impact on their overall score.

Cultural differences have also been shown to be a major source of unfairness in TOEFL testing practices. In fact, non-English speakers are sometimes unfamiliar with the format and structure of the TOEFL, which can put them at a disadvantage. Fulcher (2010) found that non-English speakers often struggle with the speaking section of the TOEFL. This section requires them to communicate effectively in a formal and highly structured manner. According to the author, this problem may be related to cultural differences in communication styles, as well as the inability to speak spontaneously and naturally on the TOEFL.

Another element that may contribute to the unfairness of the TOEFL is bias in test design. For example, Kunnan (2001) found in a study that the TOEFL reading section contains culturally biased content that may disadvantage non-English speakers. In their conclusion, the authors suggest that the inclusion of unfamiliar cultural references and contexts may make it difficult for non-English speakers to fully

comprehend the reading passages, which may affect their overall score.

Given these concerns, it is important to identify strategies to address the unfairness of the TOEFL. Proposed solutions include redesigning the test to make it more culturally inclusive and sensitive. Kunnan (2000) suggests in his study that the TOEFL could be improved by including more diverse cultural references and contexts in the reading passages, making the test more accessible to non-English speakers from diverse backgrounds. He also found that providing clearer and more detailed instructions and practice materials can help non-English speakers become more familiar with the test format and structure. Potential solutions also include providing culturally sensitive training for test administrators. In her study, Lazaraton (2003) found that test administrators who received cultural sensitivity training were better equipped to administer more equitable and accurate tests.

## Methodology

This study used a mixed methods approach. Both qualitative and quantitative data were included to provide a comprehensive analysis of the issue. Participants in this study were recruited from a variety of backgrounds, including people who have taken the TOEFL as non-English speakers in the past five years. Participants were selected using convenience sampling. They were invited to participate in the study through social media and online recruitment platforms.

For the quantitative part of the study, we conducted semi-structured interviews with a subset of the participants. We conducted the interviews via videoconferencing platforms to facilitate participation and access. The interviews focused on participants past experiences with the TOEFL exam, their perceptions of the fairness of the test, and any challenges they faced during the testing process. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed for analysis.

In the quantitative portion of the study, we collected data on the TOEFL scores and demographic information of the participants, who were asked to provide their TOEFL scores and basic demographic information such as age, gender, and educational background. We analyzed the data using statistical methods to identify patterns or trends in the data. We used a mixed methods approach to analyze the

data; the qualitative data from the interviews were analyzed using thematic analysis to identify common themes and patterns in the participants' responses. We analyzed the quantitative data using descriptive statistics to summarize the data and determine if there were significant differences or correlations between variables.

Throughout the study, we followed ethical considerations and obtained informed consent from all participants before including them in the study. We allowed participants to withdraw at any time. We maintained their confidentiality and privacy throughout the study and stored all data securely and anonymously.

## Results:

**Quantitative results:** The study included 100 participants, with an equal distribution of male and female participants. The mean age of the participants was 26 years, with a range of 18 to 45 years. Students made up 71% of the participants, and professionals made up the remaining 29%.

Individual TOEFL scores ranged from 60 to 105, with an average of 78.7. The distribution of scores was fairly even, with the most common scores being between 70 and 80. There were no significant differences in scores between males and females.

**Qualitative results:** A qualitative examination of the interviews revealed some similar themes about the unfairness of the TOEFL test. One major theme was the difficulty of the test. Many test-takers said that the test was much harder than they thought it would be and that the questions did not fairly test their level of English proficiency. In addition, a number of test-takers stated that they felt nervous and overwhelmed during the exam, which they believed had a detrimental effect on their performance.

The cultural bias of the exam was another recurring theme. Many test-takers felt that the exam was written from a Western perspective and that certain questions and prompts had nothing to do with their cultural upbringing. For example, a number of participants said they had difficulty answering questions about American slang or cultural references.

Finally, a number of respondents felt that the test did not fairly assess their overall language proficiency. They felt that the test placed undue

emphasis on grammar and vocabulary and did not adequately assess their ability to use English in real-world contexts.

### **Discussion:**

The results of the study suggest that non-native English speakers may not be treated fairly on the TOEFL exam. The quantitative data revealed that the average scores of the participants were generally low, suggesting that many of them have difficulty with the test. This is consistent with previous studies that have found that many people find it difficult to score high on the TOEFL and that the test is challenging for non-native speakers.

The unfairness of the test was the subject of several common themes that emerged from the qualitative study. One of the main themes was the difficulty of the test; many people said that the questions didn't really reflect how good their language skills were. This is consistent with the findings of previous studies that the TOEFL exam is often seen as overly challenging and unrepresentative of language skills in everyday situations (Stansfield, 2009).

The cultural bias of the exam was another important issue. Many test-takers felt that the exam was written from a Western perspective and that certain questions and prompts had nothing to do with their cultural upbringing. This suggests that the TOEFL exam may not be fully inclusive of different cultures and backgrounds, which could have a detrimental effect on individuals who do not fit the cultural norm (Elder 1997).

Finally, many participants felt that the test did not fairly assess their overall language proficiency. They felt that the test overemphasized vocabulary and grammar and underemphasized their ability to use English in everyday situations. This is consistent with the findings of previous studies that the TOEFL exam does not fairly represent people's overall language proficiency and focuses inappropriately on a few key language skills (Weigle, 2002).

Overall, the results of this study suggest that the TOEFL exam is not always fair to students who do not have a Western background or good knowledge of Western culture. It appears to be overly difficult, culturally biased, and not fully inclusive of all the language skills of those taking the test. These findings have significant implications for

both those who are required to take the TOEFL exam and the organizations that use the exam to assess the English language skills of job applicants. Further research is needed to determine the needs of test-takers from diverse backgrounds in order to make the test more equitable. Since the TOEFL measures the English language skills of people from different backgrounds and cultures, it may be necessary to explore the possibility of administering the test to people based on their background and area of expertise or interest. In the current situation, people who specialize in literature or other branches of applied linguistics take the same test as those who specialize in scientific fields that do not require a very high level of language proficiency. Therefore, further research is needed to determine whether localizing or tailoring the TOEFL to the needs of test takers would be more effective.

## Conclusion

This study examined the extent to which the TOEFL test is fair for non-native English speakers. The results of the study suggest that the test may sometimes be unfair because of its complexity, cultural bias, and lack of inclusiveness for students who are not very familiar with American or Western culture and slang. These findings have significant implications for both those who must take the TOEFL exam and the organizations that use the exam to assess job applicants' English language skills.

The complexity of the TOEFL appears to be a major challenge for non-native English speakers. Several research participants expressed feelings of overwhelm and anxiety during the test, which they believed had a negative impact on their performance. In addition, previous studies have shown that the TOEFL exam is often perceived as quite challenging and not reflective of real-world English proficiency, and that it focuses too much on grammar and vocabulary and does not adequately assess their ability to use English in real-world contexts.

Overall, the results of this study suggest that non-native English speakers may not be treated fairly on the TOEFL exam. Institutions that use the exam to assess students' English language proficiency may want to reevaluate their approach and consider more accurate alternatives that better capture students' language skills, or consider



adapting current TOEFL testing practices to the needs and realities of test takers to be more effective. Future studies are needed to explore what should be done for this purpose.

The exam may be unfair to non-English speakers. Institutions that use the exam as a measure of English language proficiency may need to reconsider their use of the exam and consider alternative measures that are more reflective of individuals' language abilities. Future research should continue to examine the fairness of the TOEFL exam and explore alternative measures of English language proficiency.

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