

The state of Language Testing in Italy and New Perspectives in Latin America

El estado de la evaluación y certificación lingüística en Italia y nuevas
perspectivas en América Latina

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Abstract

Language Testing is a rather new field in the Italian context. The reasons are varied and range from cultural to linguistic ones. Interest in the field sparked in the 90s when institutions began to provide an official answer to the needs of learners who were not approaching the Italian language only for cultural or personal reasons, but for specific needs of various kinds. The official L2 Italian qualifications are now 4 (CILS, CELI, CERT.IT, PLIDA) and show different trends in different areas of the world. This diversification is mainly linked to individual agreements and individual projects. The presence of many Italian emigrant descendants confirms Latin America as one of the geographic areas where strong personal motivation in the study of the Italian language persists.

In Language Testing and Assessment, there is a potentially growing catchment area based on the need to create agreements at the local level. This study aims to report on the state of the art of Language Testing and Assessment in Italy and the diffusion of Italian language certifications in Latin America administering CILS exams from 1993 to date to reflect on the profile of the target audiences.

Keywords: assessment literacy, Italian as a second language, language assessment, language learning, language teaching, language testing.

Resumen

La Evaluación Lingüística es un campo relativamente nuevo en el contexto italiano. Las razones varían desde culturales hasta lingüísticas. El interés en este campo surgió en los 90 cuando las instituciones comenzaron a proporcionar una respuesta oficial a las necesidades de los aprendices que no se acercaban al idioma italiano solo por razones culturales o personales, sino por necesidades específicas de varios tipos. Actualmente, hay cuatro instituciones que emiten calificaciones de italiano L2 (CILS, CELI, cert.it, PLIDA). Las calificaciones del idioma italiano muestran diferentes tendencias en diferentes áreas del mundo. Esta diversificación está principalmente vinculada a acuerdos individuales y proyectos individuales. La presencia de muchos descendientes de emigrantes italianos confirma que América Latina es una de las áreas geográficas donde persiste una fuerte motivación personal en el estudio del idioma italiano. En la Evaluación Lingüística, existe una área de captación potencialmente creciente basada en la necesidad de crear acuerdos a nivel local. Este estudio tiene como objetivo informar sobre el estado del arte de la Evaluación Lingüística en Italia y la difusión de las certificaciones del idioma italiano en América Latina, administrando exámenes CILS desde 1993 hasta la fecha para reflexionar sobre el perfil de las audiencias objetivo.

Palabras clave: alfabetización en evaluación, italiano como segunda lengua, evaluación de idiomas, aprendizaje de idiomas, enseñanza de idiomas, pruebas de idiomas

Introduction

In this study, we will report on the state of the art of Language Testing in Italy and the spread of Italian language qualifications in the Latin American context.

Specifically, the study focuses on Certification of Italian as a Foreign Language (*Certificazione di Italiano come Lingua Straniera* or CILS¹, issued by the University for Foreigners of Siena) qualifications from 1993 to 2023 to reflect on the profile of the target population (age, gender, country of origin, exam level).

The study is grounded on the assumption that understanding the characteristics of the CILS exam population is not only a necessary step but also a very important one for continuously and consistently supporting the validation of CILS exams themselves; in short, it is an operation aimed at supporting the statements that the CILS Center makes through the exams.

Therefore, this study seeks to explore how the current state of language testing in Latin America influences language qualifications, and in turn, examines the potential for language qualifications to affect language assessment practices in the region positively.

Research Background

Language Testing is a rather new field in the Italian context. Until only a few years ago, there was no established academic discipline dedicated to the assessment of Italian as either a first or foreign language. The reasons are varied and range from cultural to linguistic ones (see Grego Bolli, 2014

for the first category; De Mauro, 1963 and Vedovelli, 2011 for the second).

Real interest in the field sparked in the 90s (Vedovelli et al., 2009), when institutions officially began to provide a clear answer to the needs of learners who were not approaching the Italian language only for cultural or personal reasons, but rather for specific needs of various kinds. Starting from those years the social, linguistic, and historical conditions in general allowed for a first spread of the study of Language Testing and Assessment and the consequent birth of language qualifications of L2 Italian (Machetti & Vedovelli, 2024). As a consequence, knowledge of Italian began to be linked to social integration, professional or academic purposes (Vedovelli, 2024). This led to the definition of two known distinctions (see Diadori et al., 2009):

- a. Assessment of Italian as a Second Language (L2): the Italian language is learned where it is used for everyday communication and social interaction. The assessment of Italian as a second language is, nowadays, mainly linked to the immigration context. For example, the Common European Framework of Reference (or CEFR; Council of Europe, 2001) A2 level is required for obtaining a long-term residence permit, while the CEFR B1 level is necessary for citizenship;
- b. Assessment of Italian as a Foreign Language (SL): the Italian language is learned abroad for the most various reasons - from culture appreciation, heritage, planning of academic experiences. Italian is also learned abroad because it is a language included in many school curricula, such as in Türkiye, France, and China.

Nonetheless, it is important to clarify that while this distinction between second language and foreign language contexts can be useful for research and explanatory purposes, it is not particularly relevant to the CILS exams discussed in this study. For instance, test-takers may take the A2-level Italian exam in a foreign language context and later, after moving to Italy, take the B1-level exam in a second language context. Furthermore, as Vedovelli frequently notes, the term ‘L2’ broadly encompasses both ‘second language’ and ‘foreign language’, and this distinction is sometimes considered outdated.

These new learners’ needs were registered in the same years by the Council of Europe, which has always and notably promoted the spread of European languages (both official and minority languages), their teaching, learning and assessment. Italian language qualifications are in fact linked to the CEFR (Council of Europe, 2001). In this context, “over the last 20 years [now 30] the most important and significant event in the area of the assessment of Italian as a foreign language has been, without doubt, that related to the work on language certification carried out by the four Italian institutions” (Grego Bolli, 2014, p. 7).

The institutions issuing language qualifications (or “certifications” in the Italian context) of L2 Italian are now four: University for Foreigners of Siena, with the CILS – Certification of Italian as a Foreign Language; the University for Foreigners of Perugia, with the CELI – *Certificati di Lingua Italiana*; the Università degli Studi Roma Tre, with the CERT. IT; the Società Dante Alighieri, with the PLIDA - *Progetto Lingua Italiana*

Dante Alighieri. These institutions collaborate with a shared goal of fostering a culture of assessment for Italian as a foreign and second language. They achieve this by implementing a standardized certification system aligned with established standards within the language testing field, as endorsed by the relevant scientific community and literature. This is possible because in 2011, these four institutions signed the founding act of the CLIQ Association, *Certificazione Lingua Italiana di Qualità* (CLIQ Association, n.d.). According to CLIQ, the promotion of a culture of assessment is achieved within a framework that grants each organization the autonomy to develop their respective examinations, such as CELI, CILS, Cert-IT, and PLIDA. This approach underscores the importance of embracing diversity and values the multitude of perspectives. Therefore, the term ‘plurality’ is central to CLIQ’s philosophy. CLIQ aims to be an inclusive system, guided by the principle of constructive collaboration among institutions, each with its distinct institutional mandate to operate professionally in the language testing field.

Interestingly, Italian language qualifications show different trends in different areas of the world. Masillo (2021), grounding on the research investigation “Italiano2020” (Coccia et al., 2021 reported on the distribution of Italian language qualifications. She noted their “scattered” global presence, an aspect already noted by Vedovelli (2006b) in relation to the spread of the Italian language in the world. This term implies an irregular and inconsistent pattern in the dissemination or achievement of these qualifications. For instance, in certain scenarios,

educational institutions may establish agreements with one or more certifying bodies. Such partnerships facilitate the process of obtaining Italian language qualifications.

Therefore, despite the fact that “there has long been a lack of systematic intervention in terms of [an Italian] language dissemination policy” (Vedovelli, 2006a, p. 313) Italian language qualifications (we will see the case of CILS in the following paragraphs) seem to demonstrate the ability to overcome these and other limits of inter-state policies through agreements with institutions that are interested in promoting Italian language and culture around the world (Machetti, 2022). For instance, as reported by Gelo (2020) the Universidad Iberoamericana (UNIBE) in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic, which offers numerous Italian courses, has been a CILS Test Centre for more than ten years, thanks to an agreement with the University for Foreigners of Siena. Conversely, there are instances where, despite the presence of potential test-takers (people interested in learning Italian or getting an Italian language qualification), an institution remains outside the necessary cooperative framework, for various reasons (see also Patat, 2004). Acting locally is therefore pivotal.

Methodology

As anticipated in the Introduction, the central research question guiding this study is the following: how does the state of language testing in Latin America impact language qualifications, and how can language qualifications have a positive impact on it?

To respond to this question, the study discusses both qualitative and quantitative analyses. Data were gathered from various studies concerning the dissemination of Italian language teaching, learning, and assessment across Latin America, with a particular focus on Costa Rica. This data was then compared with information from CILS qualification exams spanning from 1993 to 2023. The analysis aimed to elucidate the demographic and educational characteristics of the test-takers, including age, gender, country of origin and exam level. The study utilizes graphs and tables to effectively visualize and interpret the data.

Italian language in Latin America

Latin America has long been associated with the Italian language and culture and its teaching and learning (e.g., Italian as a heritage language, Italian as the language of fashion, culture etc.).

The investigations ‘Italiano2010’ and ‘Italiano2020’ played crucial roles in understanding the global spread and evolving dynamics of Italian language learning. ‘Italiano 2010’, promoted by the Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs, was designed to assess the worldwide interest in the Italian language outside Italy (see Giovanardi & Trifone, 2010). Following this, ‘Italiano2020’ continued this examination but focused on shifts in learning motivations and demographic changes over the decade.

Building on this foundation, ‘Italiano2020’ (Coccia et al., 2021 p. 305) offered intriguing new insights, presenting data that marked a departure from the findings of ‘Italiano 2010’. Notably, in Latin America, ‘Italiano 2020’ highlighted that a substantial 37% of

learners study Italian for personal and family reasons, underscoring a sustained interest in the language despite the changing educational landscape and methodologies employed in these successive studies.

To better contextualize our research, we took a closer look at the

teaching/learning context of Italian as a foreign language in Latin America. The data presented in Table 1 and Table 2 have been adapted from the investigation that led to the creation of the booklet “*L’italiano nel mondo che cambia – 2018*” (MAECI², 2018).

Table 1

Italian students abroad. General overview – Latin America only (adapted from MAECI, 2018, p. 15)³

Country	Total Students	(a) (1)	(b)	(c)	(d) (2)	(e)	(f)	(g) ^{***} (3)	(h)
Argentina	71 562	187	2 854	4 927	10 836	2 144	41 028	20 514	4 002
Brazil	78 628	378	5 187	1 340	23 596	3 699	21 157	891	22 758
Bolivia	5 633	—	130	—	309	—	—	5 194	—
Chile	5 964	—	551	2 085	910	601	1 614	203	—
Colombia	4 330	—	710	1 477	—	640	—	1 371	132
Costa Rica	4 986	—	294	—	1 510	—	—	3 182	—
Cuba	1 925	43	156	—	—	—	—	840	929
Dominican Republic	2 018	—	1 630	—	28	—	—	—	360
Ecuador	4 160	—	1 491	—	1 454	—	—	1 215	—
El Salvador	377	—	—	—	—	—	—	152	225
Guatemala	2 672	—	1 222	—	48	923	—	479	—
Mexico	9 506	915	2 336	—	3 552	1 212	138	2 268	—
Nicaragua	344	—	—	—	221	—	—	—	123
Panama	1 104	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	1 104
Paraguay	3 663	—	149	—	1 030	—	—	861	1 623
Peru	17 137	—	4 977	1 584	2 067	7 407	—	160	942
Uruguay	19 908	—	259	706	13 675	378	3 491	—	1 399
Venezuela*	8 412	—	840	137	4 773	2 202	—	358	102
Total	241 608	1 523	21 007	12 256	63 788	19 206	67 428	37 528	32 634

Note. a) = Students attending courses by *Lettori di ruolo*; b) = University students; c) = Students of state-equivalent, non-state-equivalent schools, European School sections; d) = Students of local schools; e) = Students enrolled in IIC courses; f) = Students of courses by *Enti Gestori*; g) = Students of Dante Alighieri Society; h) = Students in other contexts;

* Partial data; *** The data communicated by the Dante Alighieri Society concerns approximately 270 Committees out of 400; (1) Students attending MAECI lecturers' courses are included in column (b); (2) Students in local schools also include those in which ministerial lecturers work; (3) In some countries the Società Dante Alighieri also provides courses as a *Ente Gestore*, students on such courses are already included in column (f).

The examination of Table 1 reveals distinct categories of students based on the context in which they pursue their studies (a to h), specifically those learning Italian across various Latin American countries. A particular focus on the "Total Students" column highlights that the highest numbers of students are enrolled in Argentina and Brazil. Beyond the specific structures

or educational contexts in which Italian is studied, this general data allows for a broader consideration of an additional significant factor: the support provided by the MAECI's for the promotion of Italian language education in Latin America. The relevant data on this aspect are presented in Table 2 below.

Table 2

Italian teaching supported by MAECI. Americas (adapted from MAECI, 2018, p. 18)⁴

Country	Total Students	(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)	(g)	(h)
Argentina	48 459	360	—	4 927	—	—	—	41 028	2 144
Brazil	26 574	378	—	1 340	—	—	—	21 157	3 699
Chile	4 614	314	—	2 085	—	—	—	1 614	601
Colombia	2 117	—	—	1 477	—	—	—	—	640
Costa Rica	120	120	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Cuba	43	43	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Ecuador	150	150	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Guatemala	923	—	—	—	—	—	—	—	923
Mexico	2 570	1 220	—	—	—	—	—	138	1 212
Paraguay	95	95	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
Peru	10 211	1 220	—	1 584	—	—	—	—	7 407

Uruguay	4 575	—	—	706	—	—	—	3 491	378
Venezuela	2 339	—	—	137	—	—	—	—	2 202
Total	102 790	3 900	—	12 256	—	—	—	67 428	19 206

Note. a) = University Students (MAECI lecturers and “*contributi cattedere*”); b) = Students of Italian State Schools Abroad; c) = Students of Equivalent and Non-equivalent Italian Schools Abroad; d) = Students of Bilingual Int. Sections in Foreign Schools; e) = Students of European Schools; f) = Students of Ministerial Teachers in Foreign Schools; g) = Students of *Enti Gestori* Courses; h) = Students enrolled in IIC Courses.

As illustrated in Table 2, financial support for Italian language instruction is primarily allocated to regions and educational contexts with the highest student enrollment. However, these data do not account for the potential needs or presence of prospective students in countries where demand for Italian language learning is increasing. This limitation suggests the need for further analysis to assess emerging trends and ensure a more equitable distribution of resources.

Italian Language in Costa Rica

According to the census of Italian language students in Costa Rica, as reported on the website of the Italian Embassy in Costa Rica (*Ambasciata d'Italia a San José*, 2022), approximately 1,900 students were enrolled in Italian language courses across 13 Costa Rican schools and two universities in 2021. Additionally, around 500 students attended Italian courses offered by the local branch of the Dante Alighieri Society. Furthermore, the Italian Embassy in Costa Rica reports that, in general, both younger and older learners pursue Italian not primarily for professional advancements - as is

often the case with English - but rather out of personal interest and enjoyment, with many regularly traveling to Italy.

When analyzed in conjunction with the data presented in Tables 1 and 2, these statements contribute to a broader understanding of the complex and multi-layered challenges faced by those involved in teaching Italian in the regions under consideration. This issue will be explored further in this section. However, it is important to acknowledge that the following data, drawn from Coccia et al. (2021, p. 315), may not reflect any subsequent developments that have occurred since its publication.

One of the key challenges in Italian language education in Latin America relates to teacher training. As highlighted by Coccia et al. (2021), prospective teachers often encounter difficulties during their university education in securing classrooms for their required teaching internships (Inf.⁵ 30). Even after obtaining their qualifications, many Italian language teachers face prolonged job insecurity, often needing to work multiple jobs simultaneously to sustain themselves (Inf. 7). Even at the university level, the Italian teaching context appears complex:

in Argentina, for example, prospective teachers not only struggle with employment stability but also face the additional obstacle of being unable to obtain official certification as a foreign language teachers (*Master del Professore*) outside Buenos Aires (Inf. 93). This issue contributes to making the teaching of Italian a less attractive career path. A particular problem is the widespread shortage of qualified university lecturers specialized in teaching Italian. More broadly, professionals in the field perceive a persistent lack of resources, which hinders the resolution of key structural and educational challenges. These include:

- the inability to secure new teaching contracts (Inf. 59);
- the persistent precariousness of employment and the lack of generational turnover among university teaching staff.

CILS exams

Having established a general overview of the current state of the Italian language teaching and learning in Latin America, we can now shift our focus to the CILS exams. First, we introduce the CILS exam system and then we

delve into their spread in Latin America and Costa Rica specifically.

CILS exams are standardized tests of Italian measuring general language proficiency. The CILS exams are staged on six levels: CILS A1, CILS A2, CILS UNO-B1, CILS DUE-B2, CILS TRE-C1 and CILS QUATTRO-C2 and are aimed at a general adult population considering an average cultural level of Italian language users studying for educational, professional, or general cultural purposes. However, CILS is also available for specific publics: for young learners at A1 and A2 level; for teenagers from A1 to B1 level; for migration purposes at A1 and A2; for citizenship at B1 level.

CILS exams are recognized by universities, employers, and institutions in Italy and worldwide. CILS exams were launched in 1993 at levels B1, B2, C1 and C2 with only 152 test-takers. In 2002 all the six levels (A1-C2) were included in the examination set. In more than 30 years of operation, the CILS exams have been taken by 400,000 test-takers in Italy and in 87 foreign countries. From 2018 to 2022, the data on the number of test-takers who took the A1-C2 CILS exams all over the world and for these five levels are presented in the following table (Table 3).

Table 3
CILS exams (A1 - C2) test-takers from 2018 to 2022

Level	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022	Total
A1	176	238	51	107	260	832
A2	1 971	2 412	1 071	1 538	1 309	8 301
B1	4 175	5 586	2 602	4 107	4 379	20 849
B2	7 999	8 132	5 081	7 110	7 614	35 936
C1	1 477	1 687	948	1 486	1 415	7 013
C2	510	491	272	469	467	2 209
Total	16 308	18 546	10 025	14 817	15 444	75 140

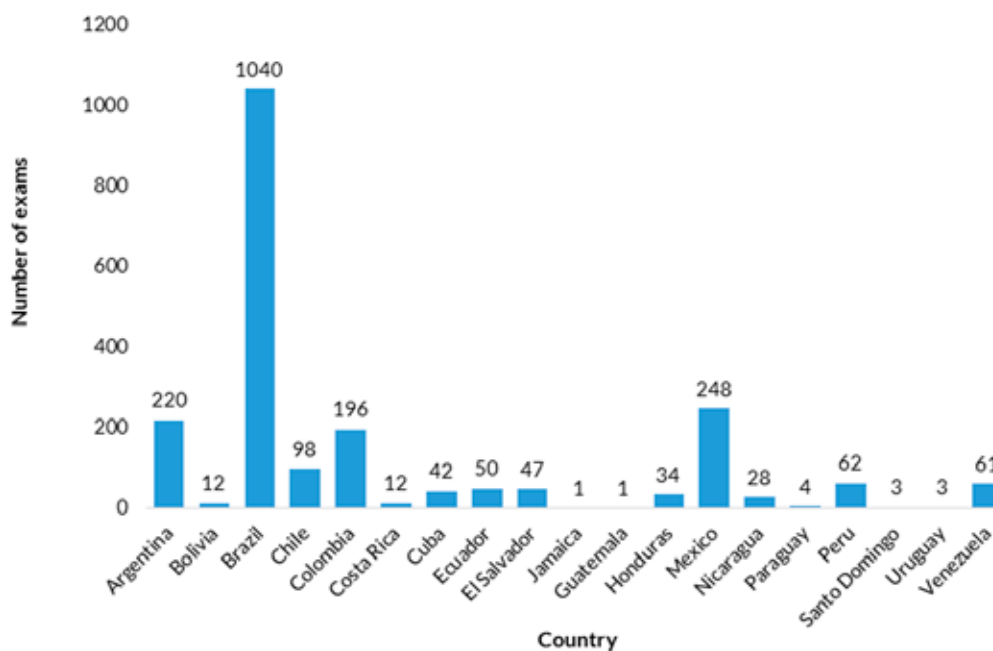
As can be seen from Table 3, the highest number of test-takers per year is recorded at the B2 level. This is an attended datum, considering the social value attributed to the B2 level, as it grants access to the Italian university system. Consequently, this finding is particularly relevant to the discussion we that will follow.

CILS exams in Latin America - an overview

Within this context, we now turn to the data on Latin America from 2021

and 2022. Before examining the relationship between Latin America and Italian language qualifications - specifically CILS exams - it is essential to clarify that the data presented here pertain to the country of origin of the test-takers. This dataset is notably diverse, as it includes both individuals who took the exam abroad and those who took it in Italy. This diversity adds particular relevance to the analysis, as it underscores the significance of the “area of interest” associated with this part of the world. The data for CILS exams in 2021 are illustrated in Figure 1.

Figure 1
CILS exams in 2021

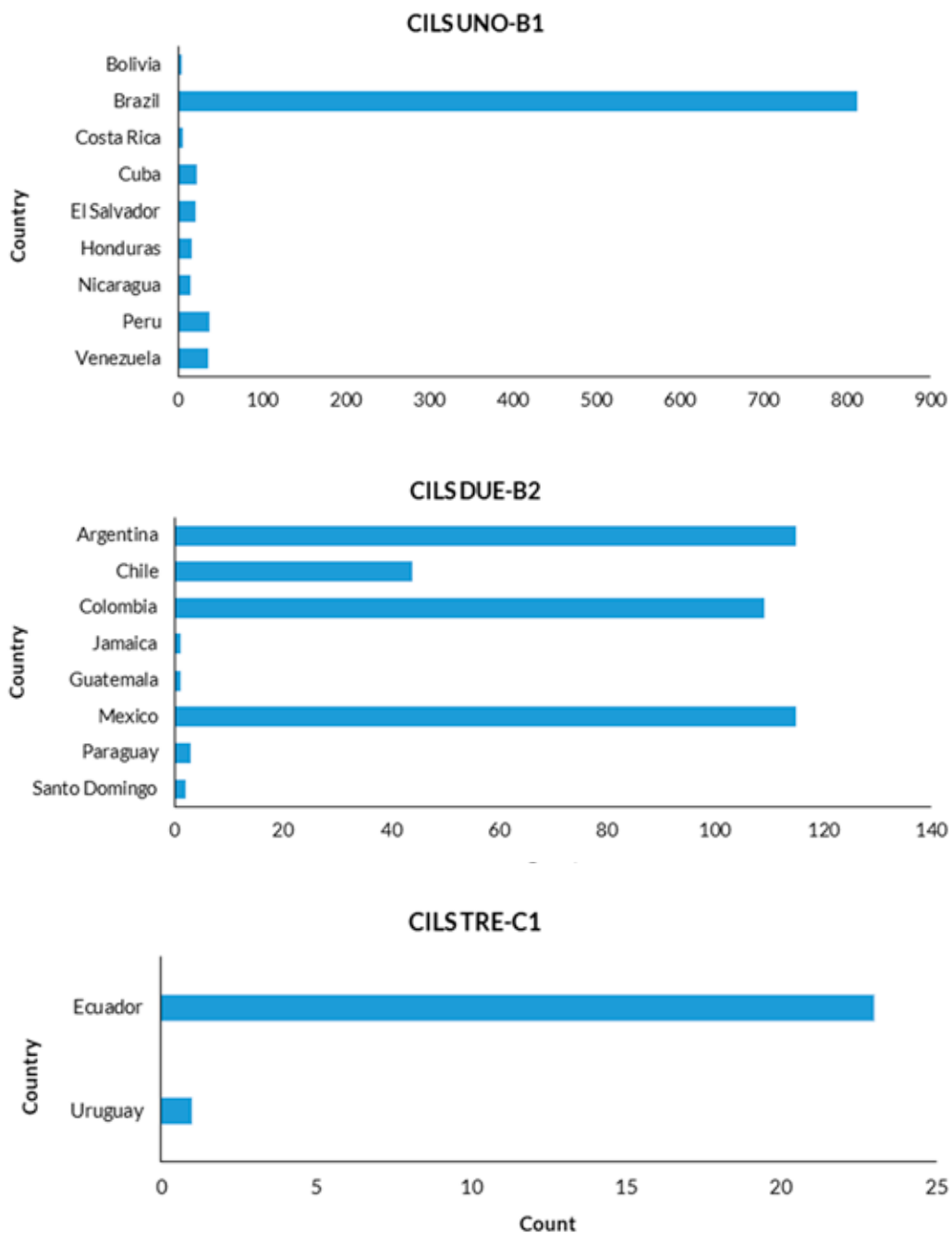


As can be seen from Figure 1, in 2021, the majority of CILS exams test-takers were from Brazil, Mexico, Argentina and Colombia. Brazil represents a particularly significant case, as the data regarding the high number of test-takers could be largely attributed to the formal recognition of the B1 level exam as a prerequisite for career advancement within the country's military sector. This recognition suggests that members of the military sector view obtaining the certification not only as a means of improving their language skills but also as a strategic step toward professional growth and career progression. This trend underscores the broader impact of language policies

on language testing and assessment, and on professional development (see also McNamara, 1998).

The average (mean) age of the test-takers was approximately 35 years, and the most occurring age (mode) was approximately 45 years. In terms of gender distribution, approximately 47% of the test-takers were female (F), while 53% were male (M).

A key question that arises concerns the most commonly chosen CILS exam levels among test-takers from Latin American countries. Figure 2 below presents an overview of the most popular CILS exam levels across different countries for 2021.

Figure 2*Distribution of the most frequent CILS exams per country in 2021 - Latin America*

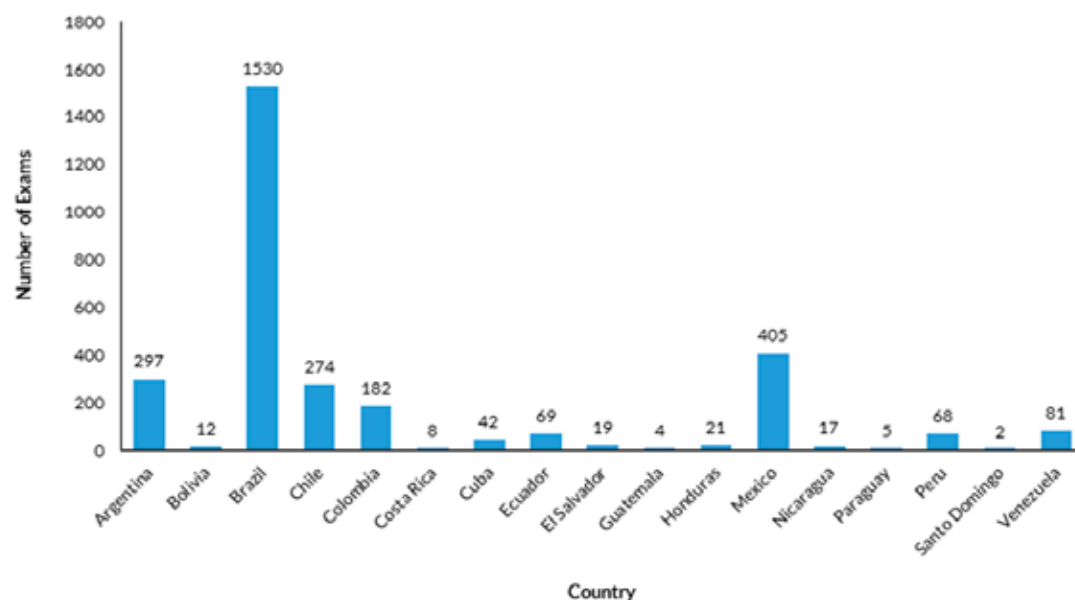
As illustrated in Figure 2, the most commonly taken CILS exams levels were CILS UNO-B1, CILS DUE-B2, and CILS TRE-C1. Each horizontal bar represents a country, with the length of the bar indicating the number of test-takers from that country who took the most popular exam level. Among these, the most popular level across all the countries in 2021 was CILS UNO-B1, with a total count of 972 test-takers. CILS DUE-B2 followed, with a total count of 390 test-takers. CILS TRE-C1 has the lowest total count, with only 24 test-takers.

In 2022, the majority of test-takers once again came from Brazil, Mexico, and Argentina, indicating a consistent

demand for Italian language qualifications among test-takers from these countries. However, in contrast with to the previous year, Chile ranked fourth, replacing Colombia, which closely followed. While this shift may indicate a changing demand for Italian language qualifications, further analysis is required to identify underlying factors. Potential explanations include evolving educational policies, increasing cultural interest, or expanding professional opportunities that favor the acquisition of Italian proficiency. The data for CILS exams in 2022 are presented in Figure 3.

Figure 3

CILS exams in 2022 - Latin America



In 2022, the average (mean) age of the test-takers was approximately 36 years, indicating a relatively stable age demographic among test-takers. However, a significant change was observed in the most frequently occurring age (mode). In 2021, the most occurring age was 45 years, whereas in 2022 (Fig. 3) it declined to approximately 18 years. This trend suggests that younger individuals, possibly high school or university students, increasingly participated in CILS exams in 2022. However, a more in-depth analysis is required to fully understand the factors driving this shift including potential academic initiatives, scholarship opportunities, or similar incentives that may have fully influenced participation.

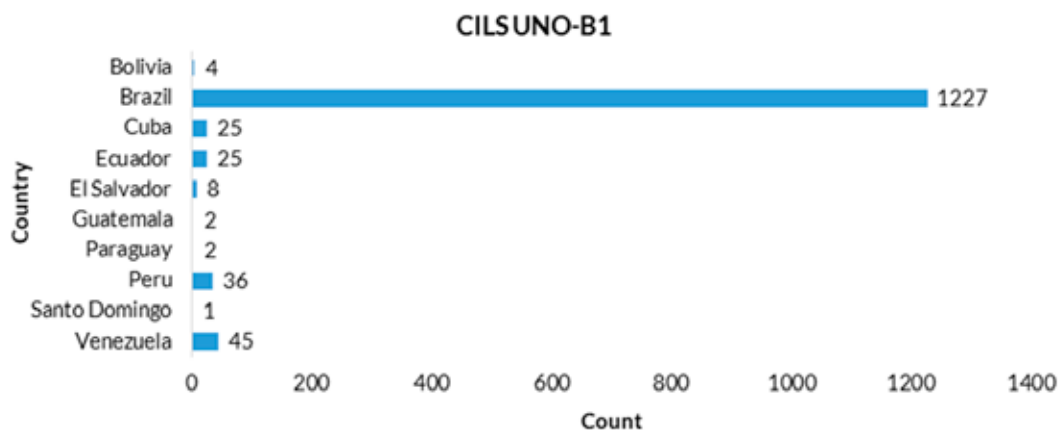
Regarding gender distribution, in 2022, approximately 56% of the test-takers were male (M), while 44% were

female (F). Additionally, the general percentage growth from 2021 to 2022 in the number of test-takers from Latin America is approximately 40.4%, suggesting a growing interest in Italian language qualifications in the area.

Building on the data presented for 2021, it is essential to examine whether similar patterns persisted in 2022 or if notable shifts occurred in the preference for CILS exam levels among test-takers from Latin American countries. Figure 4 below provides an overview of the most frequently chosen CILS exam levels across different countries for 2022, allowing for a comparative analysis with the trends observed in the previous year.

Figure 4

Distribution of the most frequent CILS exams per country in 2022 - Latin America



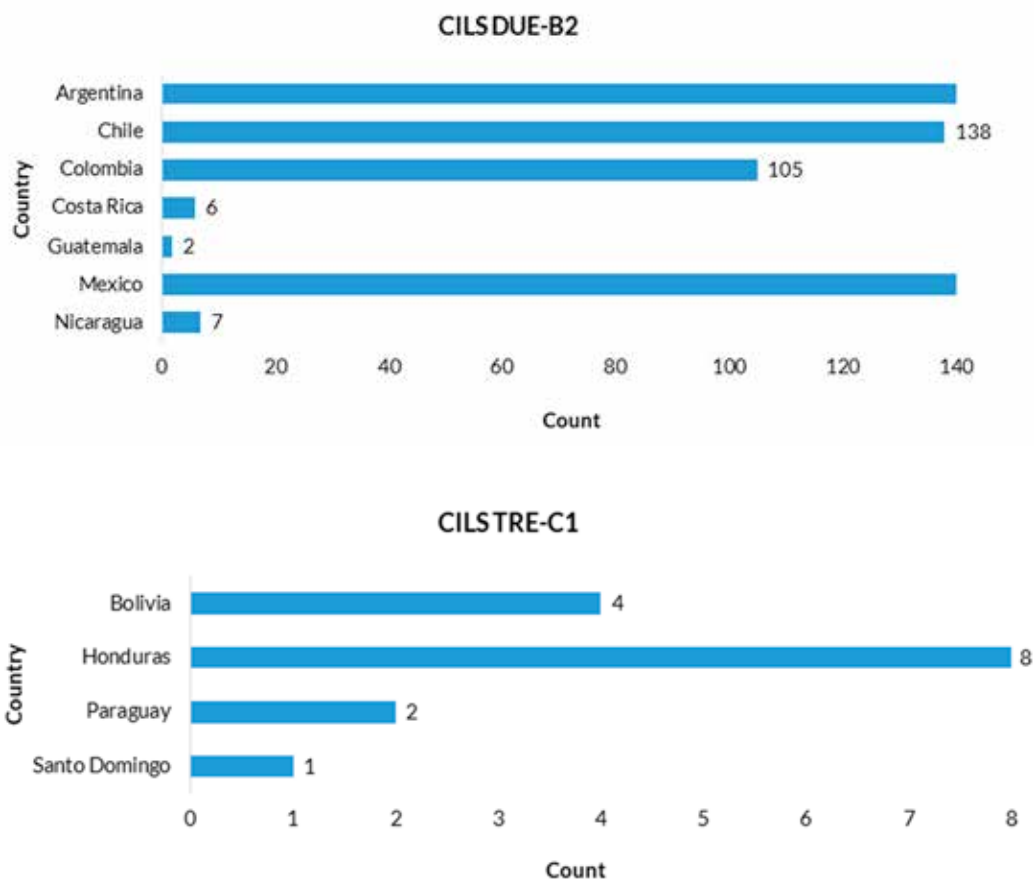


Figure 4 illustrates the most frequently chosen CILS exam levels among different Latin American countries for 2022. As in the previous year (Fig. 2), the most popular levels remain CILS UNO-B1, CILS DUE-B2, and CILS TRE-C1. Among these, the most popular level across all the test-takers' countries of origin in 2022 is CILS UNO-B1, with a total count of 1,704 test-takers. CILS DUE-B2 follows, with a total count of 801 test-takers. CILS TRE-C1 records the lowest total count of 228 test-takers. These figures indicated a continued preference for intermediate-level certification

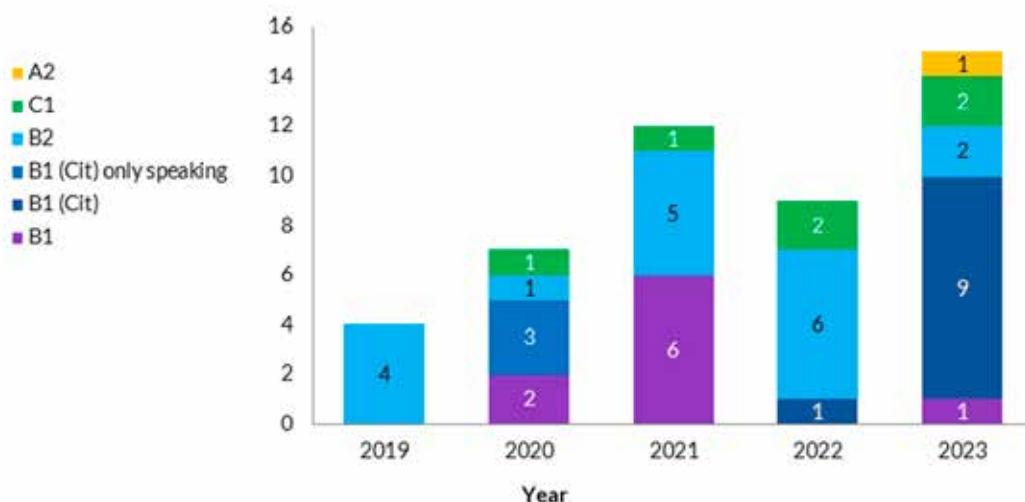
(CILS B levels), potentially suggesting its relevance for academic and professional purposes within the area.

CILS exams in Costa Rica

After examining the broader trends in Latin America, we now shift our focus to Costa Rica. The following Figure (Fig. 5) presents the data on CILS exams test-takers from Costa Rica between 2019 and 2023. Figure 5 provides an overview of participation trends in CILS exams and highlights any shifts in interest and demand for Italian language certification in this specific country.

Figure 5

CILS exams - Costa Rica from 2019 to 2023



Note. B1 (Cit) = B1 *Cittadinanza*

Figure 5 presents the following data on CILS exam participation in Costa Rica from 2019 to 2023. In 2019, a total of 4 people took a CILS exam, all of whom took the CILS DUE-B2. In 2020, the number of test-takers increased to 7, with 2 test-takers taking the CILS UNO-B1, 3 opting for the *B1 Cittadinanza* (only speaking), 1 taking the CILS DUE-B2, and 1 taking the CILS TRE-C1. Exam participation continued to rise in 2021, with a total of 12 test-takers. Among them, 7 took the CILS UNO-B1, while 5 sat for the CILS DUE-B2. In 2022, the number of test-takers declined slightly to 9, with 1 test-taker taking the CILS *B1 Cittadinanza* (only speaking), 6 the CILS DUE-B2, and 2 taking the CILS TRE-C1.

Finally, in 2023, the number of test-takers increased to 15, marking the highest figure since 2019. Specifically, in 2023, 1 test-taker took the CILS A2 exam, another person took the CILS UNO-B1 exam, 9 test-takers sat for the CILS exam *CILS B1 Cittadinanza*, 2 people took the CILS DUE-B2 exam, and 2 test-takers took the CILS TRE-C1.

Evidently, while Latin America as a whole saw a constant increase in CILS test-takers from 2021 to 2022 (Fig. 3), Costa Rica displayed a more fluctuating trend (Fig. 5) yet still recorded a significant surge in exam participation in 2023. As we will see in the next paragraph, the preference for CILS UNO-B1 and CILS-DUE B2 remained consistent with broader Latin American trends.

Discussion

The data presented in the preceding paragraphs are particularly insightful, as they reflect global trends on a smaller scale across all CILS levels. Specifically, Machetti (2022) noted a significant increase in the number of CILS exam test-takers from 2018 to 2019, culminating in a peak in 2021 with over 40 test-takers. The underlying causes of this growth, as identified by Machetti (2022), are to be interpreted in relation to two key issues:

- for 2019, the launch of the CILS B1 *Cittadinanza* examinations, which were requested by 9,729 test-takers in this year alone;
- for 2021, the year in which the number of test-takers reached the historical CILS maximum of 40,888 test-takers. This surge in 2021 was also influenced by the displacement of a substantial number of test-takers from the 2020 sessions due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which had blocked teaching and certification activities at numerous CILS Test Centers worldwide.

Despite the extraordinary circumstances of 2021, Machetti (2022) and the data presented for 2022, confirm that the interest in CILS exams remains strong.

Moreover, the highest numbers are recorded for the CILS UNO-B1 and CILS-DUE B2 levels both when considering test-takers from Latin America as a whole and those from Costa Rica specifically. The strong preference for B-level exams, particularly B2, is noteworthy, as it may be linked to several factors:

many CILS test-takers are around 30 years of age; getting a language qualification is useful for those seeking to pursue academic opportunities abroad or for professional development; and the B2 level represents the language requirement (established by law) needed to access Italian universities or higher education institutions for students from non-European countries.

These trends reinforce the idea that language qualifications play a crucial role in mobility and educational opportunities while also highlighting the need for improving testing and assessment practices in general to support this growing demand effectively.

Conclusions

While language testing poses challenges, language qualifications - if properly leveraged - can strengthen language education and improve testing and assessment practices in Latin America. One crucial factor shaping the demand for Italian language learning and assessment in the area is the presence of many Italian emigrant descendants. This confirms Latin America as one of the geographic areas where strong personal motivation in the study of the Italian language persists (Bagna, 2011; Coccia et al., 2021). In the data presented in this study, this is particularly evident in relation to Brazil, Mexico and Argentina, which consistently ranked among the top countries of origin of CILS test-takers from Latin America.

However, as Coccia et al. (2021) stated, the traditional assumption that

Italian language learners are primarily descendants of Italian emigrants is proving to be a myth lacking any real evidence nowadays. Even in countries with historically high Italian migration, such as Argentina, Brazil, Australia, Canada - despite the recorded high numbers in comparison to other countries - attendance at Italian courses has seen a drastic decrease in the percentage of those with relatives born in Italy. As a matter of fact, "Italiano 2020" survey further emphasized the central role of the migratory identity in the processes of diffusion of the Italian language and culture (taking also society and economy into consideration) and at the same time pushed towards the acknowledgement of the changes that have gone through the identity of the migrant communities of Italian origin. Latin America's historical ties to Italian culture, now combined with economic, cultural, professional and educational factors, make it an area where there are opportunities for institutions and educators to successfully meet the demand for Italian language education. However, to effectively meet this demand, it is crucial to establish strategic local agreements, for instance, with schools but also with universities. Such collaborative efforts would enhance the capacity to disseminate information about Italian linguistic qualification, supporting their visibility and ensuring that needs of Italian learners all over the world are met, while also attracting a broader audience towards the Italian language and culture (Coccia et al., 2021, pp. 266-267).

At the same time, it is essential for those involved in research and training, such as the CILS Centre, to acknowledge and respond to evolving trends in language education and assessment. As the data presented in this study indicates, Latin America is experiencing significant growth and transformation in Italian language education and assessment. This necessitates the continuous updating and enhancement of training processes of the professional figures involved in teaching/learning and assessment. To support this progress, fostering international collaborations and strengthening institutional partnerships is crucial for creating a more effective and dynamic approach to language qualification frameworks. Ultimately, central to this perspective, is the pivotal role of educators and ensuring they have access to the necessary resources and professional development opportunities.

Notas

1. The CILS Centre website: <https://cils.unistrasi.it/home.asp>.
2. MAECI = Italian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and International Cooperation.
3. Translation from Italian to English is by the authors of this contribution.
4. Translation from Italian to English is by the authors of this contribution.
5. Inf. stands for Informant, since the study (Coccia et al., 2021) reported what was said by some informants, identified by a number.

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