

Do English certifications expire?

(es) ¿Los certificados de inglés tienen fecha de caducidad?

(port) Certificados de inglês têm data de validade?

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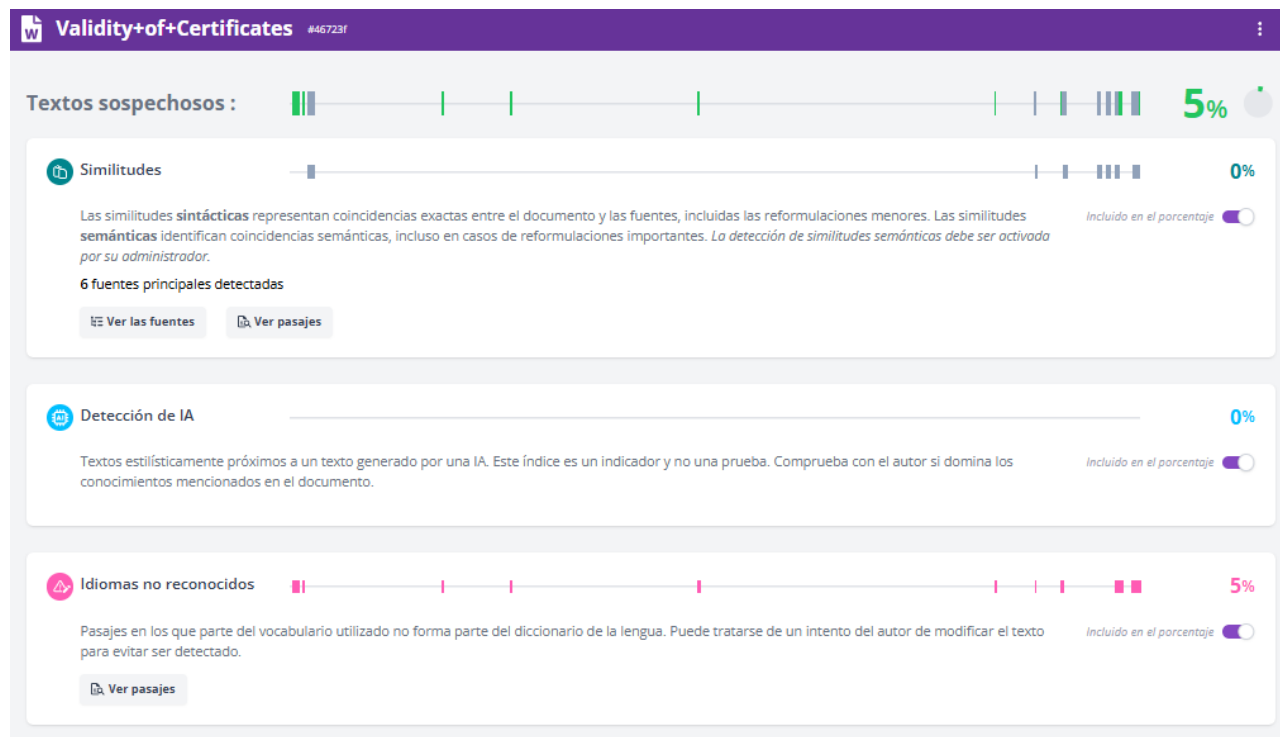
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Abstract

There is a discussion among staff that receive students' English certification related to their time of expiration and if they reflect the proficiency of students for life. In this regard, this essay summarizes the information shared by some international organizations that are well-known for their tests. This essay also introduces the concept of attrition which refers to the language loss due to not using it. Findings disclosed two main issues. From the point of view of the organizations, they have specific time of expiration and if they do not, they recommend testing the candidates to validate their knowledge especially if the test was taken three or more years ago. Secondly, findings of previous research support that the longer the period of retrieval affects the recall of content. Thus, there is evidence that there is loss of language if not used. This means that officials at any institution should consider interviewing the candidates if they hold a certificate that was taken three or more years to validate the current proficiency. Implications of this study address the EFL community and the government.

Keywords: *attrition; assessment methods; language policy; higher education.*

Resumen

Existe una discusión entre los oficiales que reciben los certificados de inglés de los estudiantes. La discusión radica en el tiempo de expiración de los certificados y si éstos reflejan el nivel de inglés de los alumnos de por vida. En este tema, este ensayo resume la información compartida por cinco organizaciones internacionales que son reconocidas por sus exámenes. Este ensayo también presenta el concepto de atrición, es mismo que se refiere a la pérdida del lenguaje por no usarlo. Los hallazgos reflejan dos grandes temas. Desde el punto de vista de las organizaciones, los certificados tienen un tiempo de expiración y en caso de no tenerlo, ellos recomiendan que se examine a los candidatos para validar su conocimiento especialmente si el examen fue tomado hace tres o más años. En segundo lugar, investigaciones previas sostienen que periodos largos sin uso del idioma afectan el recordar el contenido aprendido. Consecuentemente, existe evidencia sobre la pérdida del idioma si no se lo utiliza. Esto significa que los oficiales de cualquier institución deberían considerar realizar una entrevista a los candidatos en el caso de que presenten certificaciones tomadas hace tres o más años. mientras más largo es el periodo de uso del idioma para validar el nivel de inglés actual. Las implicaciones de este ensayo están dirigidas a la comunidad relacionada a inglés como lengua extranjera así como también a representantes del gobierno.

Palabras clave: *atrición; métodos de evaluación; política de idiomas; educación superior.*

Resumo

Há uma discussão entre os oficiais que recebem os certificados de inglês dos estudantes. A discussão está relacionada ao prazo de validade dos certificados e se eles refletem o nível de inglês dos estudantes ao longo da vida. Sobre esse tema, este ensaio resume as informações compartilhadas por cinco organizações internacionais reconhecidas por seus exames. Este ensaio também introduz o conceito de atrito, que se refere à perda de idioma devido ao não uso do idioma. Os resultados refletem dois temas principais. Do ponto de vista das organizações, certificados têm prazo de validade e, caso não tenham, recomendam que os candidatos sejam avaliados para validar seu conhecimento, especialmente se o exame foi feito há três ou mais anos. Em segundo lugar, pesquisas anteriores sustentam que longos períodos sem uso de língua afetam a memória do conteúdo aprendido. Consequentemente, há evidências de perda de idioma se ele não for utilizado. Isso significa que autoridades de qualquer instituição devem considerar realizar uma entrevista com candidatos caso apresentem certificações feitas há três ou mais anos. Quanto maior for o período de uso da língua para validar o nível atual de inglês. As implicações deste ensaio são direcionadas à comunidade relacionada ao inglês como língua estrangeira, bem como a representantes do governo.

Palavras-chave: *Atrito; métodos de avaliação; política lingüística; ensino superior.*

Do English certifications expire?

In a last academic meeting, Coordinators and Directors of Language Centers argued how long the certifications that determine students' foreign language proficiency are valid. In this essay, I will summarize the standpoint of well-known institutions that certify the English level of test-takers as well as the requirements in other countries. Lastly, I will cover the concept of attrition or loss of the language for not being immersed in it.

In Ecuador, the Ministry of Education has a list of institutions that provide English certifications. For word limitations in this essay, I will focus on five of them: Educational Testing Service, International English Language Testing System, Cambridge University Press and Assessment, Oxford Test of English, and Michigan Language Assessment. I will compare and contrast them in terms of acceptance of the tests, their security protocols and verification results.

The first certification is provided by Educational Testing Service (ETS, 2024). They offer the TOEFL test and claim that they test academic content through integrated tasks, they have a precise rating scale and blind assessment with multiple raters who are actually from around the world. Through this assessment process, they guarantee that the test-takers are prepared for the classroom because the tests require students' actual abilities. They highlight the advantages of the speaking section by stating that it is done in front of the computer and this reduces the bias of in-person tests and geographical bias. Having students' recording their own voice demonstrates how they actually perform orally. This certification is accepted in more than 200 countries and by more than 13,000 universities and other institutions around the world.

In the same line, the International English Language Testing System (IELTS, 2024) guarantees test-takers to achieve their goal of a position either professional or academical in an English-speaking country. They highlight that their test is accepted in the United Kingdom, Canada, the United States, Australia and New Zealand. The statistics report that last year they had four million test-takers. They claim that the test is accepted by employers, associations, governments, and academic institutions worldwide.

For Michigan Language Assessment (MLA, 2024), test-takers gain a certification that is supported by the University of Michigan and Cambridge Assessment English. Same as Cambridge tests, and Oxford Tests, MLA offers tests for every age and level. Tests are specific and research-based. There are tests for young learners, teenagers, and adults. This helps students to monitor their learning if they take the tests according to their age.

The Oxford Test of English and Cambridge tests are backed up by prestigious and recognized universities which have a reputation of high academic standards. They point out that their tests are research-based and meet high quality standards which in return make them fair, valid and reliable examinations to determine the proficiency level of English of their test-takers (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2024; Oxford University Press, 2024).

All tests are presented in band scores and are aligned to the Common European Framework of Reference. Besides, they are all accepted for study, migration and work. Regarding the security policies of these tests, all of them ensure fair and secure administration of the exams, they establish test security measures and provide accommodation to test-takers if needed. They provide strict measures and protocols to be observed before, during and after the test. Some of these activities are: security protocols to keep the papers, biometric registration, training to administration centers, and monitoring of test results prior to disclosure, among others. They also provide an online verification service (Cambridge University Press & Assessment, 2024; ETS, 2024; IELTS, 2024; MLA, 2024; OUP, 2024). In their webpage, they even warn the test-takers to refrain from cheating; otherwise, they will lose time and money (IELTS, 2024).

About the extent of time that the results are valid, these tests can be classified in two groups. The first group corresponds to the ones that are valid for life (Cambridge, Michigan and Oxford) and the second group of tests that expire in two or three years (TOEFL and IELTS). For IELTS, the validity is given according to the country or institution where it is accepted. In Australia, the United Kingdom, New Zealand, USA and Canada, the validity is two years for study but for work it can be accepted for three years (IELTS, 2024). On the other hand, Cambridge, Michigan and Oxford tests are valid for life (MLA, 2024; OUP, 2024; West, 2023). However, West (2023) stated that institutions that receive a Cambridge certificate can decide if they accept certificates from the past 2 or 3 years. She also pointed out that some institutions, in addition to the certification, may require evidence of the candidate's current contact and usage of the language. She even recommended that employers or educational institutions should ask for evidence of a candidate's level of English on an exam that was discontinued in 2019.

Having investigated differences and similarities of the certifications accepted in Ecuador, it is time to consider the theory that can support a decision of the years of validity of a certificate. In language teaching, the scope of this paper will refer to the loss of the language in a natural way, aging, and not due to any pathology like aphasia. In this regard, attrition is referred to as the natural loss of the knowledge of a language that was learnt in regular educational studies. This may be due to a lack of further exposition or changes of linguistics contexts (Kopke, 2004).

In this topic, Schmid (2023) shared that experts believe the cost of learning a second language is high and if learners do not use it they will lose it. She found most graduates did not continue using the language. About the loss of the knowledge of a foreign or second language, there are studies but not enough to generalize results in this issue (Schmid, 2023). They have been conducted in several contexts different from the local one and in other circumstances. For example, Schmid's study measured the loss of French as a second language in an English-speaking country.

In addition, Murtagh (2003) studied the retention and attrition of Irish as a second language in a longitudinal study. Participants were 59 high school students, most of them (98.3%) were studying at the

university when she conducted the follow up interview. Her results rejected the idea of loss of the language and favored retention. About EFL, the attrition rate was explored in Iran (Asgari & Mustapha, 2012). The researchers found that if students are in contact with the language, there is no attrition and the opposite happens in all levels of proficiency.

Lastly, Weltens and Grendel (1993) pointed out that if users take long periods of time to retrieve vocabulary, there will be occasions when they will or not be able to retrieve the words from their brains. They added that users may recognize some words but cannot actively use them. Hansen (2001) agreed that the time of retrieval is important to avoid loss of vocabulary. There is a discussion about what impacts attrition. Some researchers reported that it depends on the students' attitudes and motivations as well as on teachers' methodology (Oxford, 1982).

Conclusions

This essay focuses on the validity of the certificates issued by internationally recognized institutions. They provide high quality standards for their test-takers. Their exams have undergone a process of validation and reliability. Their processes are clear and transparent. As stated before, there are two groups: one that states the time of validity of their certificates and the other that claim that their certificates do not expire. However, they also mentioned that to test the current knowledge of test-takers the officials should undergo a brief interview or written test to verify the results if the certification was taken three years or more ago.

In this same topic, the concept of attrition was introduced since it introduces the loss of language due to several circumstances. One of those is the time of retrieval. Findings have reported that the longer time of retrieval, the more content will be lost. Even though there is a lack of research in this regard in Ecuador, it can be inferred that there is attrition due to previous research conducted in similar contexts in which L2 is not commonly practiced by students outside educational institutions. This also explains why when students are tested after their vacation, the results show their knowledge of language is the same or lower.

Thus, to answer the question, do English certifications expire? Authors and institutions included in this essay amply confirm they do, especially after a period of three years. So, officers at higher education institutions should test students to determine their current proficiency level if they receive a certificate that was taken three or more years ago.

Implications of this study are addressed to Coordinators and Directors of language programs. Besides, government staff who are responsible for English as a foreign language teaching must consider that if students do not use the language they may lose it and with that also the investment done. Hence, programs should be coordinated to keep the second or foreign language learning after students finish their high school or university studies.

This essay also sheds light on future directions in this topic. There should be longitudinal studies to determine how much attrition there is after months or years of not practicing the language, the difference of loss of language between participants that continue their studies against the ones that do not, the results of the English tests when students finish their school year compared to the ones in the diagnostic test of the next year of study, compare the type of words that are more likely to be lost within a period of time, and if factors like teacher's methodology, students' attitude, motivation and/or interests increase or decrease the language lost.

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