

## Cambridge ESOL qualifications as evidence of language ability over time

Over the years we have received regular enquiries from centres, schools, receiving institutions, etc about whether confidence can be placed in Cambridge ESOL certificates awarded some years previously.

The following notes have been produced in response to enquiries about whether Cambridge ESOL certificates have an expiry date.

Cambridge ESOL certificates, like certificates for other skills and abilities, do not expire. Their primary function is to certify that a candidate showed evidence of a particular level and range of language proficiency on a given date, but we know from UCLES Candidate Information Sheet data that most candidates who are entered for a Cambridge ESOL examination have followed a specific preparation course, and for many successful candidates their certificates serve as a mark of achievement in completing their course successfully.

Certificates are only awarded to candidates who reach a certain standard in the examination, i.e. to “passing” candidates. In this respect, they are different from test reports such as those offered by the International English Language Testing System (IELTS). Such tests provide information about what level of proficiency a candidate has demonstrated in the test and its components, not whether the candidate has reached a particular level or levels which correspond to a “pass”. Hence, unlike certificates, test reports are issued to all those who complete a test. It is standard practice for users to accept test reports (of the kind offered by IELTS) as fulfilling specified language requirements for a period of **two years** since the date of the test, after which a re-test is usually required.

Possession of a certificate does not, of course, guarantee that a candidate is still at the certified level of ability many years after sitting for the examination. However, users can be reasonably confident that a candidate’s language ability corresponds to the grade or level indicated on his or her certificate for a period of **two years** since the date of the examination.

The question will sometimes arise for users as to whether a candidate who was awarded a certificate **more than two years** previously needs to provide up-to-date evidence of his/her language ability. The answer to this question will vary according to circumstances:

Firstly, it will depend on a comparison of the English language requirements with the level of the certificate. If, for example, the language requirements are at Cambridge/ALTE level three (FCE level), and the certificate is at Cambridge/ALTE level five (CPE level), then it may reasonable be expected that the language ability of the candidate, even without any special effort to keep up his/her English, would be sufficient to fulfil the lower level requirements for a considerably longer period than two years.

Secondly, in cases where the language requirements and the candidate’s certificate grade are approximately at the same level, then the issue is whether the candidate still has at least the same level of language ability as that indicated on the certificate after more than two years. This will depend on the extent to which the candidate has either had opportunities to use the language, or continued to study the language, or both. The user may wish to satisfy him/herself of this through a series of questions to the candidate or evidence from the candidate based, for example, on can-do statements at the relevant level. If the user still has doubts about whether the candidate’s level of ability indicated on the certificate matches the language requirement, then it may be advisable for the user to request the candidate to re-sit the relevant examination or take an appropriate non-certificated test (e.g. for academic purposes, IELTS).

### Summary:

- Cambridge ESOL certificates have no expiry date.
- A certificate provides a reasonable estimate of a candidate’s language ability for two years after the date of the examination.
- Beyond two years since the date of the examination, a certificate may need to be supplemented by further information about the candidate’s uses of English or further study of the language in the intervening period.
- A certificate which is above the level of the language requirement may be assumed to provide the necessary evidence of meeting the language requirement for a considerably longer period than two years.
- Where a certificate was awarded more than two years previously and there is some doubt about a candidate’s continued use or study of the language, he/she may be required to provide up-to-date evidence of his/her language ability, either by re-sitting the relevant examination or taking a suitable test (e.g. (IELTS)).
- With test reports of the kind provided by IELTS, it is standard practice for these to be accepted as fulfilling language requirements for a maximum period of two years since the date of the test.