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Is getting an IELTS or CEFR certificate the same as knowing English?

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ABSTRACT

This article is devoted to the question of whether a certificate of knowledge of the English language is a guarantee that a person really knows the language. The article will also describe the positive properties of acquiring a certificate, some features of obtaining it and reliability of test takers' results.

Keywords:

English language, IELTS certificate, CEFR certificate, test, knowledge, .

Introduction

Knowledge of English in the modern world is difficult to overestimate: it is a kind of window into the world. This language has covered all spheres of life: science, sports, travel, education, work. To evaluate the level of English language proficiency, the first IELTS (International English Language Testing System) - an exam to assess the language abilities of people who want to study or work in countries where English is a means of communication, was developed in 1989, which was later modified and became more objective and accessible to candidates.¹ The IELTS is now taken by more than 2.5 students in over 140 countries annually, making it one of the world's most popular standardized assessments. It is available at over 1,100 test centers. ²Another test that evaluates knowledge of English is CEFR (Common European Framework of

Reference), which is a system of foreign language proficiency levels that is used in the European Union.³ To this day, millions of people obtain this certificate. The question arises: why are these exams so popular and is getting IELTS or CEFR certificates a guarantee that a person knows English perfectly?

Main body

There are two types of IELTS test: General and Academic. The first one is intended for those who want to migrate to English-speaking countries such as Australia, England, Canada. The second type, Academic, is intended for those who want to get a job or go to university. Both types consist of 4 tasks: listening, speaking, writing and reading. [6, 66]. Speaking and listening are the same for the two types, but writing and reading are different.

¹ <https://takeielts.britishcouncil.org>

² www.ielts.org: "IELTS grows to 3.5 million a year."-2019.

³ Council of Europe (2001). Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, Teaching, Assessment.

The duration of the test is approximately 3 hours: listening - 40 minutes, reading and writing - 1 hour each and speaking - from 10 to 15 minutes. The CEFR has three principal dimensions: language activities, the domains in which the language activities occur, and the competencies on which a person draws when they engage in them. The CEFR distinguishes among four kinds of language activities: reception (listening and reading), production (spoken and written), interaction (spoken and written) and mediation (translating and interpreting).⁴ Communicative competences are developed by producing or receiving texts in various contexts under various conditions and constraints. These contexts correspond to various sectors of social life that the CEFR calls domains. Four broad domains are distinguished: educational, occupational, public and personal. A language user can develop various degrees of competence in each of these domains and to help describe them, the CEFR has provided a set of six Common Reference Levels (A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, C2) [7, 10].

Nowadays, the demand for English language exams and obtaining an IELTS or CEFR certificate is more relevant than ever: these documents confirming knowledge of the English language literally decide the fate of people, since a good exam result guarantees admission to prestigious universities and obtaining a well-paid job both abroad and in their native country. One of the main advantages of this exam is that it is available to all people, regardless of age, gender and nationality. The exam can be taken an unlimited number of times until the person is satisfied with his or her results.

Many people wonder: are the results reliable and objective? As reported on the IELTS homepage a rigorous process of test production has produced Reading and Listening versions with an average Cronbach Alpha of 0.88, estimated from the performance of over 90,000 applicants on thirteen reading and listening versions acceptable as a

measurement of the consistency and reliability of a test (UCLES, 2007). According to the official website of IELTS, cases of fraud and deception occur extremely rarely, and all attempts at identity substitution are immediately suppressed.⁵ Indeed: for the most serious case of fraud, which occurred in 2011 and was called the "Kurtin incident", several people were imprisoned for several years. In order to exclude all attempts to commit fraud, an automatic system was organized to search for inconsistencies in the candidates' results. If an abnormal trend is detected, the candidate, the test center and the organization under whose license the test center operates are notified. In such cases, a decision is made that entails the cancellation of the results or more serious penalties.

The proof that the certificate confirms a person's knowledge of English, in addition to the reliability of checking the results, is the process of passing the exam. There are many template phrases that guarantee success in the speaking and writing sections mainly, which can be applied to any topic [9, 25]. Undoubtedly, it is impossible to fill the entire speech with templates only, and if the speaker tries to do this to increase the score, the examiner will notice it and the score will be lowered. Or, it is impossible to compose an essay only from templates of phrases, the test taker needs to understand the topic and be able to reveal it, which requires knowledge of the language. In the Writing section, special attention is paid to coherence and cohesion. They are the main foundation for building a competent and correct composition. Robert de Beaugrande and Wolfgang Dressler (1996) define coherence as a "continuity of senses" and "the mutual access and relevance within a configuration of concepts and relations." ⁶In other words, coherence is what makes an essay semantically meaningful. Cohesion is the grammatical and lexical linking within a text or sentence that holds a text together and gives it meaning. In order to build a sentence correctly

⁴ "The Common European Framework of Reference for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment (CEFR)". Council of Europe. Retrieved 18 September 2015.

⁵ Official website IELTS.org: "Information about the quality and objectivity of IELTS. Fraud Protection", page 9.

⁶ De Beaugrande, Robert /Dressler, Wolfgang: Introduction to Text Linguistics. New York, 1996. P. 84 – 112.

and link it to another sentence, to formulate a thought correctly in an essay, knowledge of the language is required.

Despite the numerous proofs that IELTS is a guarantee of a person's proficiency in English, there are a number of human factors that are an obstacle to determining the real knowledge of a particular language [8, 12]. So, such factors include psychological and physiological conditions. One of the psychological factors is stress. According to Aherne (2001), there are many reasons why a person experiences stress. These may be problems related to work or family, as well as the loss of a loved one or financial difficulties.⁷ Lee & Larson and Lu & Chi (2000) noted that stress during the exam is a special kind of psychological pressure and the main cause of numerous emotional disorders.⁸ Stress interferes with concentration and concentration on certain tasks, which can reduce the result of the exam and give the wrong level of knowledge of the English language. As a result of psychological factors, physiological ones appear: anxiety and worries increase blood pressure, which causes hypertension and headaches. (Spruill, 2007). Thus, the main human factor, such as stress, is an obstacle to obtaining real results of a person's knowledge of English.

A kind of "luck" plays a huge role in getting a high score rather than in knowing English. As defined by Rescher N. (2021), "luck is the result of chance."⁹ As for the exam to determine the knowledge of a particular language, the degree of complexity of the questions plays an important role. One person may get a question about something that few people understand anything about, another person may get a question about a topic that

almost everyone knows about and can give strong arguments. Therefore, it is easier to answer a question that a person understands than to talk or write about something that a person does not even understand.

Conclusion

Having considered all the advantages, reliability of the results of the IELTS and CEFR tests, as well as human factors affecting the passing of these exams, it was found that obtaining these certificates does not guarantee full knowledge of English language. In order to confirm knowledge of the English language by giving IELTS or CEFR certificates, it is necessary to create tasks whose complexity would be equal for all test takers, and also allow test takers to take exams in comfortable conditions for them, so that stress does not interfere with determining the real knowledge of a person.

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⁹ Rescher, N., Luck: the brilliant randomness of everyday life (2021) p. 32.

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