

BILC POLICY RECOMMENDATION

on

the Issuance and Recognition of Language Certificates

Introduction

Language certificates serve as formal documentation of an individual's language proficiency and are used for a range of purposes, including operational deployment, personnel selection, and training admission. To ensure the consistent, reliable, and appropriate use of language certificates across defence contexts, it is essential that they be issued by competent authorities, contain standardised information, and reflect current and verifiable language competence. This policy recommendation outlines key principles for the issuance, recognition, and continued validity of language certificates, aiming to support their effective and responsible use.

Issuance and Format of STANAG 6001 Language Certificates

STANAG 6001 language certificates must be issued only by officially recognised defence authorities, typically the national Defence Language Testing Organisation. While civilian institutions may be contracted to administer tests, responsibility for quality assurance, standardisation, and certification must remain with the designated defence body. To ensure the integrity, comparability, and operational relevance of STANAG 6001 certificates across NATO and partner nations, their issuance must be overseen exclusively by authorised defence authorities. Allowing unauthorised or non-defence entities – such as academic institutions, private companies, or language schools – to issue STANAG 6001 certificates would undermine quality assurance and mutual trust in certified proficiency levels.

For the purpose of uniformity and mutual recognition within NATO and among NATO member nations, STANAG 6001 language certificates should contain consistent core elements. They should therefore include the following essential information:

- name of the issuing organisation;
- statement that the certified proficiency levels (L, S, R, W) are based on the descriptors published in ATrainP-5/STANAG 6001 Edition 5;
- language tested;
- candidate's name, surname, and, where appropriate, date of birth, ID number and rank;
- date of the test;
- date of certificate issuance;
- signature(s) of the approving authority (digital or handwritten).

At the discretion of the issuing authority, certificates may include optional elements such as a unique reference number to support verification, tracking, and record-keeping; the certificate's validity period (see below for guidance). They may also include either a summary of the STANAG 6001 levels or the complete proficiency descriptors for the level attained on

the reverse side. If included, these descriptors must correspond to the official ATrainP-5/STANAG 6001 version as published on the BILC website.

To safeguard the integrity of language certificates, their layout and format should be designed to deter fraudulent changes. Whether issued as hard copies or digital files (e.g., PDFs), certificates should use formatting features that make tampering evident, such as official logos, consistent formatting, background marks or watermarks, official stamps, QR codes, or verification statements. When issued electronically, certificates should ideally be protected against editing and, where feasible, include a mechanism for authentication by the issuing authority.

Recognition and Acceptance of Language Certificates

NATO requires national certification of Standardised Language Profiles (SLPs) for military purposes. As such, only certificates based on official STANAG 6001 tests administered by or on behalf of nationally designated authorities are recognised for NATO purposes. NATO does **not** accept commercial or non-defence language certificates – even if they refer to STANAG 6001 levels – as the quality and validity of the underlying tests, especially their relevance to operational military contexts, cannot be guaranteed. Accepting such certificates would compromise the integrity of NATO’s standardised language qualification system.

Certificates based on other proficiency scales, such as the CEFR, may still be useful for national purposes (e.g., education or employment), but are not valid for NATO language qualification or deployment decisions.

On a bilateral basis, nations may accept STANAG 6001 certificates issued by another country’s officially designated Defence Language Testing Organisation.

Validity Period and Extension of STANAG 6001 Language Certificates

Language skills are known to decline over time if not regularly used or maintained. The rate of deterioration varies significantly between individuals and across languages. Research findings and practical experience suggest that, in general:

- the more distant the foreign language is from the individual’s first language, the faster the deterioration of proficiency;
- productive skills (speaking and writing) tend to decline more rapidly than receptive skills (listening and reading);
- the higher the attained level of language proficiency, the slower the decline;
- extensive time spent learning the language generally results in slower loss;
- relearning lost language skills typically requires less time than learning them for the first time.

Given these variables, it is difficult to define a universally valid expiration period for language certificates. A STANAG 6001 certificate reflects the language proficiency demonstrated by an individual at the time of testing; it does not guarantee that proficiency remains at the same

level over time. For this reason, the date of testing, rather than the date of issuance, should serve as the reference point for determining certificate validity.

BILC recommends that users of STANAG 6001 certificates – such as employers, government bodies, and educational institutions – set their own acceptable validity periods based on operational needs. However, in high-stakes or critical operational contexts, it is advisable to accept only certificates not older than 3 years. Certificates older than 3 years should generally be accompanied by evidence of continued language use or maintenance. Certificates older than 5 years should not be accepted without substantial proof of maintained proficiency.

In addition, users should be aware that NATO, for certain positions where inadequate language skills may pose serious operational risks, recognises only STANAG 6001 certificates that are not older than 3 years.

To reduce the administrative burden of routine retesting for recertification, designated issuing authorities may extend the validity of a STANAG 6001 certificate under clearly defined conditions, provided there is credible evidence that the certified proficiency has been maintained. Such extensions may be granted, for example, when the certificate has expired but the individual continues to serve in the same function or in a role with equivalent language demands. Extensions should generally not exceed the period the individual has continuously been engaged in that function or position. All extensions must be properly documented in the certification records.