

Who's really in control?

Henry Emery takes a look at the importance of English language assessment in the field of aviation

It is difficult to think of a domain of language use more safety-critical than aeronautical communication. Pilots are in command of multi-million-pound flying machines flying at breakneck speed carrying precious human cargo. Air traffic controllers (ATCs) keep these aircraft separate while they climb, descend, turn, speed up and slow down, often managing dozens of aircraft at once. A crucial tool for the safe movement of air traffic is language. With the introduction of the Icao language proficiency requirements (LPRs), that language is increasingly English.

Every time we board an aircraft we put our faith in this system. We assume that aviation personnel are well qualified, trained and fit for the job, and have up-to-date licences to prove it. After all, when was the last time you saw a passenger ask, 'Are you sure the pilots can fly this plane?'

One of the reasons aviation is so safe is that there are thorough and closely regulated systems of recurrent training and assessment. The effectiveness of these systems clearly has major consequences: if a pilot or ATC passes an assessment where they shouldn't, there are safety implications. On the flip side, where a pilot or ATC fails an assessment, they lose their licence.

With the Icao language proficiency requirements the same is now true for English-language assessment and therefore, in terms of language testing, the stakes couldn't be much higher. So what makes a good rater of English language proficiency for pilots and ATCs? In a formal test of language proficiency, should the rater be a language teacher, a pilot or ATC, or both?

Traditionally, testing has been

the preserve of teachers and although there has been a lot of growth in the area of language assessment in occupational settings, using raters who are not language teachers is still not the norm. However, given the high stakes nature of testing in the aviation context, there are a number of reasons why the involvement of industry professionals is crucial.

Firstly, knowledge of radio-telephony communications is vital. The majority of radio communication is conducted in standard radio-telephony (RT) phraseology, a specialised and very restricted code relating to routine aircraft procedures. The drive of the LPRs is accurate phraseology and proficiency in plain English, the language that is used in non-routine or emergency situations. In aviation English language tests, RT phraseology is not explicitly assessed¹ (separate tests of phraseology have existed for many years), rather it is plain English used in a job-specific context and the skill of code-switching – switching between phraseology and plain English – that is the target of assessment. It follows that any useful test of English in this context includes authentic tasks which engage test takers in simulated radio-telephony exchanges. In order to administer this type of test task, accurate RT phraseology is crucial on the part of the interlocutor and this takes subject matter expertise. Similarly, for those rating language it takes much more than basic familiarity with radio communications to assess how well a test taker can move between phraseology and plain English.

Secondly, there is the question of language accuracy. As with other ESP tests, candidates' knowledge of the subject matter is not assessed. However, judging how appropriate and accurate a

pilot or ATC's language is when dealing with work-related topics is an important aspect of rating language performance. Involving subject matter experts in rating can add vital integrity to the language assessment process.

Interestingly, there is very little evidence to suggest that trained industry raters are any less able to rate effectively than trained teacher raters. One study showed that occupational background had no significant effect on rater consistency. However, industry and teacher raters tend to approach rating differently. Industry raters tend to be more lenient on grammar, vocabulary and fluency while harsher on pronunciation, suggesting that they perhaps focus more on meaning.² Given how important the quick and effective transmission of meaning is in radio communications, this is no bad thing.

Perhaps the most effective approach to aviation language assessment is to combine the skills of both industry and teacher raters and capitalise on the complementary skill sets. Pilots and controllers are used to being assessed by their peers, and the presence of industry raters certainly adds face validity to the testing process.

Icao recommends that 'the participation of operational experts, pilots and controllers or trainers in the rating process can add operational integrity to the process, as well as provide technical accuracy'.³ It also states that 'ideally, an aviation language test will have two "primary" raters – one language expert and one operational expert'.⁴

Language tests, however, are not obliged to follow Icao recommendations and worryingly the current state of aviation language testing leaves a lot to be desired. A recent report by Professor J Charles Alderson of Lancaster University concluded that 'we

can have little confidence in the meaningfulness, reliability and validity of several of the aviation language tests currently available for licensure'.⁵

Of course, the ultimate judgement of the language proficiency of pilots and ATC will be made by the peers they communicate with on the radio. However, like every other aspect of assessment in aviation, we would expect language assessment to be conducted by competent professionals who know their subject. Despite the rapid and unregulated growth in aviation language testing, we would hope that in the years to come, the expert judgements of language testers will lead to safer radio communications.

Henry Emery is co-author of Macmillan Education's award-winning Aviation English. He is also co-director of Emery-Roberts, an aviation language training company working in partnership with Oxford Aviation Academy.

¹ Two exceptions are the Eurocontrol English Language Proficiency for Aeronautical Communication (www.elpac.info) and Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology's English Language Test for Aviation (www.relta.org).

² Brown, A. (1995) 'The effect of rater variables in the development of an occupation-specific language performance test' *Language Testing Volume 12* pp1-15

³ Icao (2004) Document 9835: 'Manual on the Implementation of the Icao Language Proficiency Requirements', Section 6.5.5.

⁴ Icao (2008) Cir 318-An/180: 'Language Testing Criteria for Global Harmonization', Section 3.2.

⁵ Alderson, JC (2008) *Final Report on a Survey of Aviation English Tests* www.ealta.eu.org/documents/archive/alderson_2008.pdf