

# Motivating controllers to 'learn' English

Photo: Mette



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With the new ICAO language proficiency requirements, learning English has become a priority for training in air traffic control. Few would argue that the requirements are not a good thing; the adherence to standard phraseology and proficiency in plain English language on the part of both pilots and controllers will undoubtedly improve pilot-controller communications, and therefore aviation safety. That said, the practical reality of implementing language training programmes presents a new set of challenges in air traffic control.

Managers are now having to find the budget and reorganise their operations to accommodate language training and testing. Controllers are now having to squeeze their language studies into their busy professional lives, or simply spending less time doing what they do best – controlling traffic. For these reasons and many more besides, learning English is no easy task. Despite these challenges, aviation language training has begun in earnest. It is now, more than ever before, that the aviation industry needs language courseware that will help controllers reach their objectives in a timely and efficient manner.

It is widely recognised that if positive learning is to occur,

then learners need to be motivated. Nowhere is this more true than in aviation. Controllers are already faced with a difficult learning scenario. Finishing a busy night shift only to be faced with a language class, several hours of self study and homework, and a potentially life-changing language test in the near future is a daunting prospect. There is a considerable need for the ELT industry to provide courses that are at once both effective and motivating. All the powerful external or 'extrinsic' motivation exists. To reach Operational level four, to pass their English proficiency test, to keep their licenses and keep controlling traffic, controllers simply have no choice but to learn English. Once Operational level four has been demonstrated, controllers need to continue with their language training and re-take a language test every three years. However powerful, this extrinsic motivation is not enough. Controllers must have what we call 'intrinsic' motivation - a desire to learn beyond the feeling that 'I have to do this for my job'.

English language teaching courseware has a vital role to play in creating intrinsic motivation among controllers. What follows is a checklist of 10 qualities of good language teaching material. The checklist is not exhaustive, but it does contain key elements that will help to motivate controllers, encourage expedient and effective language acquisition and foster a positive approach to language learning.

## Aviation English courseware should:

**Be job specific.** Although pilots and controllers occupy the two ends of the same communicative thread, it is essential that courseware is sufficiently flexible to allow controllers to engage in communication which is appropriate to their work position.

**Be contextualised.** In order for controllers to feel that their learning is relevant to their professional sphere, it is important that courseware is set firmly within the context of aviation. Controllers quickly lose interest when they are faced with topics and material that are unrelated to their working lives.

**Contain radio-telephony in non-routine situations.** It is crucial that courseware gives expo-

sure to authentic radio exchanges that feature deviations from the routine in aviation operations. It is very important to focus on how good communication plays a vital role in the resolution of non-routine and emergency situations.

**Be accurate.** Language teachers are not teaching controllers to manage traffic but to be effective communicators in the English language. However, it is important that the aviation content is technically accurate so that controllers will trust the courseware as a reliable learning resource.

**Be linguistically sound.** The target language should be transferable to the radio and include the relevant vocabulary, structures, functions and communicative strategies that will enable controllers to communicate effectively on the radio.

**Have clear learning objectives.** It is important that learners know *what* it is they are learning and *why*. They should have sufficient opportunities to practise and consolidate this language in order to successfully reach these learning objectives.

**Be appropriate to the learner's level.** Much aviation-related material in English is aimed at a native-speaker audience. Texts and listening scripts in courseware should be both accessible to pre-operational users of English and challenging at the same time.

**Have variety in methodology.** For courseware to appeal to a wide range of learning styles and differences in personality, it is important that there is variety in the training methodology employed. Learning is likely to be more successful when learners are faced with different exercise types and practice activities.

**Allow for learner creativity.** No-one knows the work environment better than the controllers themselves. Courseware should provide the opportunity for controllers to be creative and to explore and experiment with language use in a work-related context.

**Be engaging.** Above all, courseware should engage, stimulate and provoke, and encourage genuine interest in subject matter. Communication in the classroom should be meaningful; the most effective learning takes place when controllers forget they are learning.

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