

ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

Plane English, plain English

Henry Emery charts the upward rise of a very specific type of teaching.

The International Civil Aviation Organisation's (ICAO) language proficiency requirements came into effect on March 5th of this year. These requirements were developed in response to a series of catastrophic aviation accidents in which poor language proficiency was identified as a contributory factor. Although English has always been the official language of aviation, the new and strengthened requirements state that every pilot flying internationally and every air traffic control officer (ATCO) managing international traffic must demonstrate a minimum 'operational' level of proficiency in English language. For the benefit of aviation safety, a truly global industry has adopted a truly global language.

Defying gravity

These requirements have created a huge demand for language teaching and testing services and 'aviation' has become a buzzword in the ELT profession worldwide. Aviation English language teaching has been around for a long time, albeit with a very low profile compared to other areas of ESP. The real milestone for aviation English language teaching came in 2003 with the adoption of the ICAO language proficiency requirements. We are certainly witnessing burgeoning growth in this sector and a flurry of activity in publishing, research and language testing as the ELT industry gets to grips with aviation English.

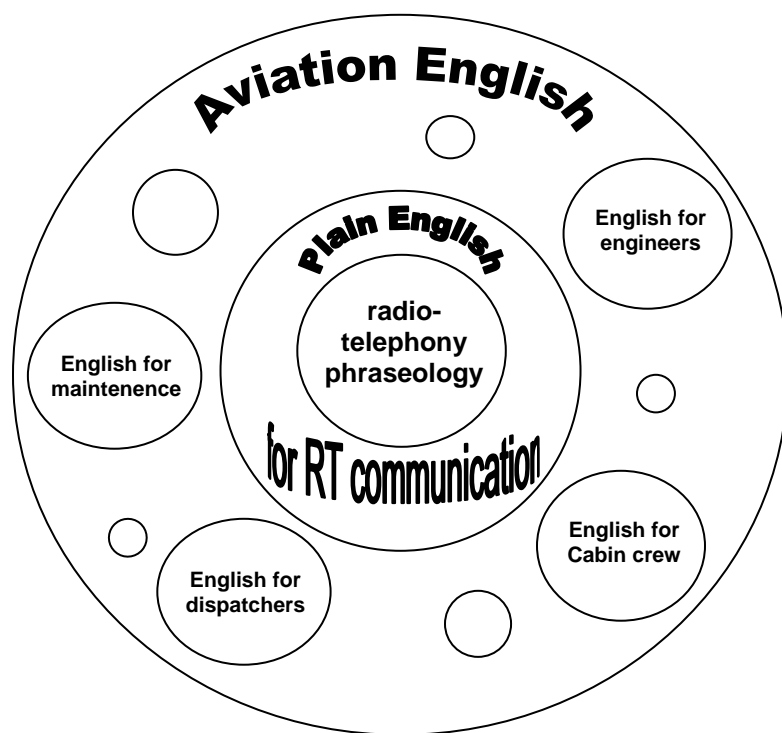
Much greater, however, is the impact on the aviation industry. Airline and air traffic control managers have to find budgets for language training and testing. They then have to make difficult decisions when investing in a completely unregulated language training and testing industry and, at the same time, try to maintain services while their personnel are away studying English. The language learners themselves, the pilots and ATCOs, are all too aware that if they are unable to make the grade, they will simply not be able to continue working. Add to this the safety-critical nature of communications between pilots and ATCOs, and we can begin to understand the gravity of the project. It is for these reasons, and many more, that aviation English training has been labelled as 'high stakes'.

For the language teacher, aviation English is a challenging, fascinating and very rewarding area of ESP to work in. It is still very much in its infancy and is full of potential as much work is yet to be done. As the global aviation industry looks to ELT professionals for language training and testing solutions, a world of opportunity opens up to the teacher willing to invest time and effort in professional development and training. For those willing to commit to this unique area of ESP, there are two important steps.

Checking in

The first step is linguistic awareness. As shown in the diagram below, 'Aviation English' in its broadest sense covers language use in a wide variety of aviation-related contexts, from

maintenance to cabin crew, customs to security, dispatchers to pilots and ATCOs. The ICAO language proficiency requirements specifically address ground–air communications between ATCOs and pilots.



Aviation English

As illustrated in the diagram, the core language of aeronautical communication between pilots and ATCOs is known as *standard radio-telephony phraseology*, a set of phrases or a ‘code’ which is used in routine and most emergency situations. The vast majority of ground–air communications are conducted in phraseology. Phraseologies are designed to be:

‘as clear and concise as possible and designed to avoid possible confusion by those persons using a language other than one of their national languages’ (ICAO Doc. 4444, 12.2.1)

An example of phraseology is:

‘Fastair 345 cleared straight in ILS approach runway 28, descend to altitude 3000 feet QNH 1011, report established on the localizer’

Phraseology is usually taught by operational subject matter experts during pilot and air traffic control training. One aspect of the ICAO language proficiency requirements is that pilots and ATCOs adhere to ICAO standard phraseology at all times. However, it is recognised that although phraseology is an incredibly safe and efficient means of

communicating, there are situations in which phraseology cannot bridge the communicative gap. The thrust of the ICAO requirements are for proficiency in 'plain' English and the ability to move beyond phraseology in times of need.

Plain English proficiency, then, is the ability to communicate in non-routine and emergency situations during flight – for example, when a passenger suffers a medical problem on board. It is crucial that pilots can convey these sorts of messages clearly and effectively and that they are received and understood by air traffic control so the appropriate actions can be taken. Therefore, plain English in aeronautical communications needs to be clear, unambiguous, free of colloquialisms, slang and idiomatic speech, and accessible to the international community of users. Below are two examples of non-routine messages in plain English:

'There is metal debris at the runway threshold.'

'We are having problems with the hydraulic systems.'

In terms of language content, the teaching of plain English needs to focus on the language functions specific to aviation communications, for example, orders, requests and advice. Although pilots and ATCOs occupy two ends of the same communicative thread, they do have differing communicative roles and therefore different language needs. Language training in aviation needs to focus on what Jeremy Mell terms 'job-specific competencies' and teachers need to identify whether exposure to language is for the purpose of developing comprehension, for language production, or for both.

As for a lexical syllabus, there is a need for a vocabulary range which allows for communication on common, concrete and work-related topics. Lexical domains should be both aviation-specific (eg terminology related to aircraft) and should cover more general aspects of human or natural activity (eg human behaviour).

Teaching plain English to pilots and ATCOs represents a departure from other areas of ESP in a number of ways. Firstly, as pilot-controller communications are voice-only, 'operational' proficiency means competence in speaking and listening. Thus, the focus of any language training should be on oral/aural skills development. Secondly, there is a heavy emphasis on pronunciation for international intelligibility. In the international environment of aviation operations, it is essential that pilots and ATCOs understand one another, and that pronunciation doesn't impede the effective transmission of messages. Thirdly, language teachers need to be aware that 'operational' language proficiency does not mean linguistic accuracy. The focus is on effective communication and, as such, teachers need to pay closer attention to where error can lead to misunderstanding.

Getting on board

The second step in becoming an aviation English teacher is familiarisation with the domain of aviation. As with any area of ESP, approaching the subject matter can be a daunting prospect and nowhere is this truer than with aviation. It is an industry whose operations and procedures are complex, equipment highly sophisticated and technologically advanced and personnel highly skilled. To the uninitiated, it seems a rather impenetrable world, but

familiarisation with aviation is fundamental. It will not only help the teacher understand the context in which language is used, but will equip them with the background necessary to deliver stimulating and thought-provoking language lessons which are, most importantly, relevant to the learner's needs.

By far the best way to learn about flying an aircraft is to try it. Teachers may consider booking some time with an instructor at the local flying school or even better, studying for the private pilot's licence. Another invaluable (and less expensive!) way to learn about aviation operations is by spending time in the jump-seat of a cockpit or in the air traffic control tower or operations room. There is no substitute for witnessing a pilot perform a landing from the cockpit or watching an air traffic controller skilfully sequence traffic on the approach path to a busy international airport. Unfortunately, in the post 9/11 era of heightened security, gaining access to these environments is no easy task, though access can be made possible under the right conditions. There are many alternative methods for teachers to immerse themselves in the aviation environment. Visiting flight or ATC simulators, taking a ground school course or listening to live air traffic control and reading authentic transcripts of cockpit voice recorders, or simply taking a specialised teacher training course are all extremely worthwhile.

In today's global society, many of us are experienced air travellers and are well versed in the art of check-in, the rigours of airport security and the hassle and inconvenience of delays. Next time you are sitting on board an aircraft waiting for departure, imagine the communication that is taking place between your pilot and the ATCO and think to yourself, 'Could I contribute to aviation safety?'

References

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- ICAO *Manual on the Implementation of ICAO Language Proficiency Requirements* (Doc 9835 AN/42) 2004
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About the author:

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