

# Issues in testing LSP revisited: The case of aviation English

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The ICAO language proficiency requirements (LPRs)

The English Test for Aviation (ETA)

Key questions in LSP testing

The criteria



# Key questions:

1. *“How specific is specific?”*
2. *“One is therefore faced with the problem of deciding what must be tested”*
3. *“Can one be relatively sure that one is not testing subject-matter knowledge rather than linguistic or communicative abilities?”*
4. *“How can one predict from one performance on a specific test to performances in real life?”*

*From Alderson, J.C. (1981) Report on the discussion of testing ESP in Issues in language testing, London, The British Council*





# The ICAO requirements

- a) stipulate the use of ICAO phraseology specifically;
- b) clarify that both phraseology and plain language proficiency are required;
- c) strengthen the provisions that English be made available; and
- d) should have been implemented worldwide 3½ years ago!



*‘Where the target LSP is formulaic (for example, the English of air traffic control), it must depend on a broader proficiency in order to deal with emergencies which no ritualised code can encompass’*

Davies, 2001, pp138





# The ICAO requirements

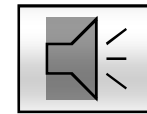
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# Standard RT Phraseology:

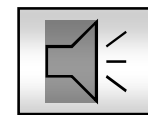
Fastair 345, cleared straight in ILS approach runway 28, descend to altitude 3000 feet QNH 1011, report established on the localiser.

Fastair 345, climb and maintain flight level 310.



# Plain language:

Approach, QA911. We are having problems with our hydraulic system. We are struggling to maintain level flight. Request immediate return.



# ETA

**English Test for Aviation**

The logo for the English Test for Aviation (ETA) features the letters 'ETA' in a large, bold, dark blue font. Below 'ETA' is the text 'English Test for Aviation' in a smaller, bold, dark blue font. A light blue swoosh starts under the 'E', loops around the 'A', and extends upwards and to the right, ending in a light blue airplane icon flying towards the top right.

**emeryroberts**

aviation English training

**Oxford**  
aviation academy



*Issues in Testing Language for Specific Purposes, Language Testing Forum, 2010*

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# The ETA:

measures English language proficiency for VFR and IFR radiotelephony communications;

assesses the skills of listening comprehension and speaking;

measures proficiency in plain English;

includes, but does not overtly measure, standard ICAO phraseology;

is designed for pilots operating aircraft on international flights;

measures language proficiency according to the ICAO rating scale and holistic descriptors at levels 2-5+; and

is not linked to and can be used independently of a particular course of study.



## **Approximately 35 minutes, 3 parts:**

- “ Part 1: Radiotelephony role play (18-20 minutes)
- “ Part 2: Monitor and report (7-9 minutes)
- “ Part 3: Describe and discuss (6-7 minutes)

## **Assessment:**

- “ Double rated . 1 SME, 1 ELE
- “ Third rating in the case of disagreement
- “ ICAO proficiency levels 2-5+



*1. How specific is specific?*

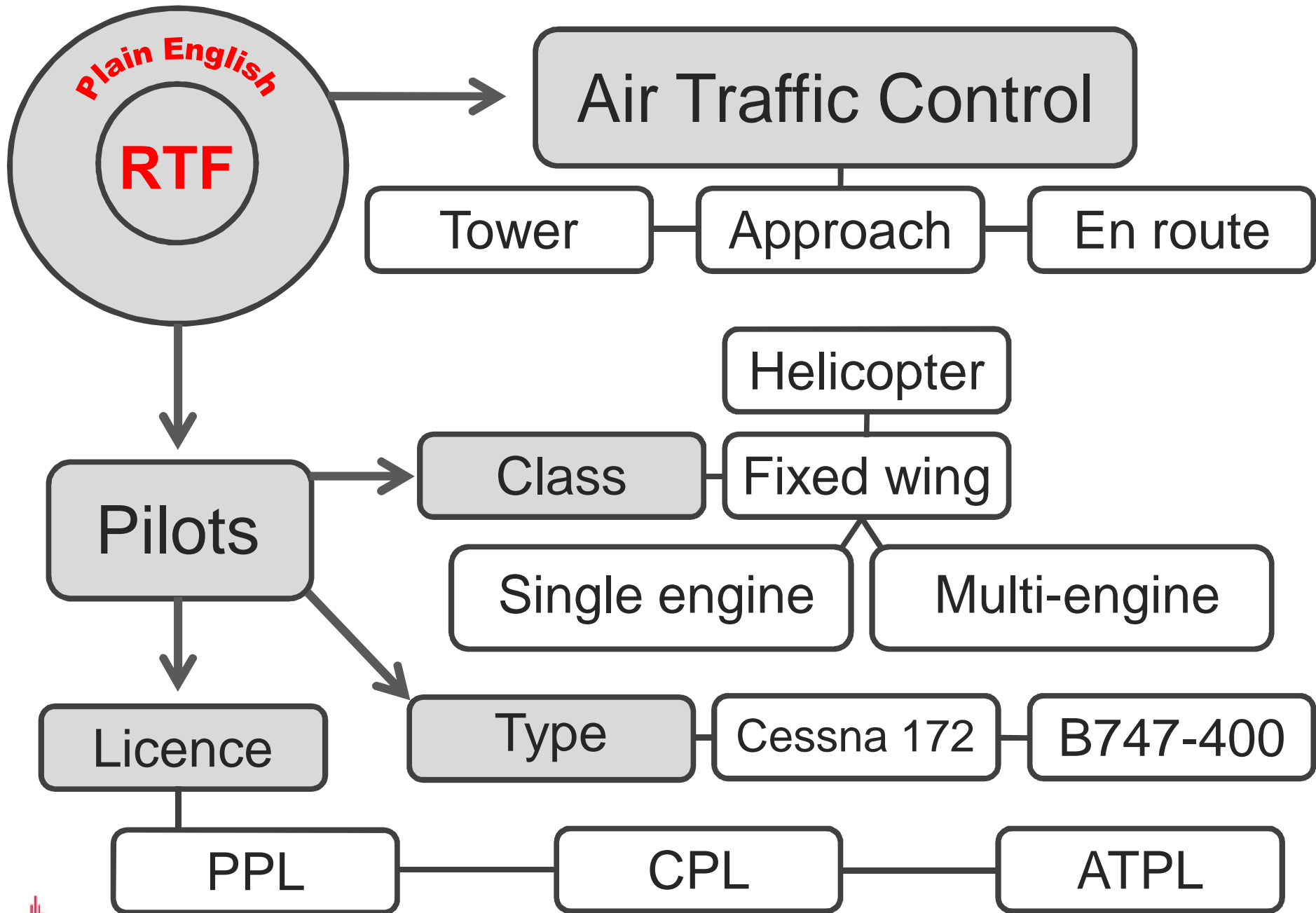
*2. One is therefore faced  
with the problem of deciding  
what must be tested*



*“A specific purpose language test is one in which ... test tasks allow for an interaction between the test taker’s language ability and specific purpose content knowledge on one hand, and the test tasks on the other.”*

Douglas, 2000 pp90





*“Although, at first sight, ‘waiter behaviour’ might seem to be a straightforward affair, we soon need to ask questions like: what range of customers needs to be dealt with? What range of food is to be served? Once one probes a little, the well defined and restricted language associated with any role is revealed to be variable, and requiring a range of language skills.”*

(Skehan, 1984, pp216).



*Although, at first sight, pilot behaviour might seem to be a straightforward affair, we soon need to ask questions like: What range of non-routine situations needs to be dealt with? What range of conditions (air traffic, weather, procedures) is the pilot likely to encounter?*



## Background knowledge

*“Can one be relatively sure that one is not testing subject-matter knowledge rather than linguistic or communicative abilities?”*

*“A related problem is that of lack of knowledge: a specific test might well assume or presuppose subject knowledge that the testees do not have”*





## Cir 318 AN-180 section 1.2

*“If the distinction between language proficiency and technical knowledge is not very clear to the rater ... it may be easy to confuse one with the other. Such confusion may lead to test-takers getting penalized unfairly for technical errors; or to other test-takers getting rewarded, also unfairly, for their technical expertise”*

*“Another potential problem if very specific technical items are included ... is that they may require technical knowledge beyond that of a test-taker”*



# ***Background knowledge in the ETA***

- “ Permeates each part of the test
- “ Target population is *professional* pilots
- “ Aviation safety requirement
- “ The test is not suitable for ab-initio pilots



# ***Some of the attractions of criterion referencing***

- “ Makes a clear statement of what a user can or cannot do
- “ Uninfluenced by the performance of other people
- “ Superior performance is irrelevant
- “ Well defined because the target range of behaviour is restricted



*“One immediately is led to ask here what the basis is for the grouping of such language features and whether there is any evidence for the claim that the different language features conjoin to define this level”*

Skehan, 1984, pp217



*“A weaker indigenous assessment hypothesis in which the indigenous criteria may be used to first supplement linguistically-oriented criteria in line with the construct definition, and secondly to help guide our interpretations of language performance in specific purpose tests”*

Douglas, 2001, 183



*“The discrepancy between the test performance and real-world performance can be accounted for in terms of the criteria used to judge the performance”*

Douglas, 2001, pp179



4. *“How can one predict from one performance on a specific test to performances in real life?”*

*“so many variables enter into a student’s ultimate performance, in addition to whatever the particular test is measuring”*



1. Context
2. Precision
3. Pragmatics:

*'If LSP has LSP testing has a beneficial impact on learners and teacher, on test candidates and on subject specialists... then the LSP test project remains worth pursuing'*

Davies, 2001, pp18



# References

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- “ Davies, A. (2001) *The logic of testing Languages for Specific Purposes* *Language Testing* Volume 18 (20), pp133-147
- “ Douglas, D. (2000) *Assessing languages for specific purposes* (CUP)
- “ Douglas, D. (2001) *Language for Specific Purposes assessment criteria: where do they come from?* *Language Testing* Volume 18 (20), pp171-185
- “ Knoch, U. (2009) *Collaborating with ESP Stakeholders in Rating Scale Validation: The Case of the ICAO Rating Scale* *Spain Fellow Working Papers in Second or Foreign Language Assessment* Volume 7 pp 21. 46
- “ Skehan, P. (1984) *Issues in the testing of English for specific purposes* *Language Testing* Volume 1 (2) pp202-220

