Proficiency in English for Pilots, Air Traffic Controllers, et al.

M. S. Thirumalai, Ph.D.

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A Government of India Notification

Recently the Government of India issued a notification prescribing standards of English proficiency for all those who seek or already perform the duties of pilots, air traffic controllers, et al., employed by various airlines. It is certainly a welcome step. This step is in compliance of the International Civil Aviation Organization. In India, proficiency in English was made mandatory since 1996 when there was a mid-air collision in the country.

Why This Proposal, and Why This Urgency?

According to a PTI report, "A major cause of the collision was that the pilot of one of the aircraft could not understand the English directives of the ATC and brought the aircraft down to the same height as that of the other plane, instead of gaining height. This had led to the collision." The report said that although proficiency was made mandatory, no standards were specifically set until this new order, which stipulates that all personnel should have the International Civil Aviation Organization language proficiency. This, certainly, is a very welcome step.

Indian Accents

While it is possible for us all to figure out what lies behind our thick accent, which varies from one region to another, and from one educational level to another, international pilots may not have our instinctive skill to wade through a variety of Indian accents.

The Holistic Descriptors

The Holistic descriptors of proficiency given in the ICAO documents are as follows:

"Holistic descriptors

Proficient speakers shall:
     a) communicate effectively in voice-only (telephone/radiotelephone) and in face-to-face situations;
     b) communicate on common, concrete and work-related topics with accuracy and clarity;
     c) use appropriate communicative strategies to exchange messages and to recognize and resolve misunderstandings (e.g. to check, confirm, or clarify information) in a general or work-related context;

       d) handle successfully and with relative ease the linguistic challenges presented by a complication or unexpected turn of events that occurs within the context of a routine work situation or communicative task with which they are otherwise familiar; and
       e) use a dialect or accent which is intelligible to the aeronautical community."

Please read the extract given below. This extract is taken from
http://www.caa.co.uk/docs/43/ICAO%20LPRs.pdf

What Can Our Engineering Colleges Do About It?

Aeronautical Engineering colleges and departments in India need to set their curriculum in English taking into account the requirements specified in the document presented below. Hopefully some enterprising English teacher will come up with both written and audio materials to help young students to focus their linguistic training on the goals and requirements set in this document.

A Two-Pronged Approach

We need to train our prospective air personnel to overcome our thick accent and master efficient grammatical structures and expressions. But we also need to impart an ability to figure out content that lies behind the thick accents of other nationalities! So, our curriculum in this regard is to be two-pronged: taking care of our own weaknesses in English communication and making it so efficient that communication with others is greatly facilitated; in addition, we also need to impart skills in understanding the accents of other nationalities from around the world and then communicate with them modulating our own oral and auditory skills. The list of objectives presented in the document below will help us well in formulating our own curriculum.

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ICAO Language Proficiency Requirements – UK implementation for existing air traffic controller licence-holders

Appendix 1

ICAO Annex 1 – Personnel Licensing

(Incorporating amendments up to and including Amendment 166)

Attachment - ICAO Language Proficiency Rating Scale

1.1 Expert, Extended and Operational Levels

LEVEL	PRONUNCIATION USES A DIALECT AND/OR ACCENT INTELLIGIBLE TO THE AERONAUTICAL COMMUNITY.	STRUCTURE RELEVANT GRAMMATICAL STRUCTURES AND SENTENCE PATTERNS ARE DETERMINED BY LANGUAGE FUNCTIONS APPROPRIATE TO THE TASK.	VOCABULARY	FLUENCY	COMPREHENSION	INTERACTIONS
EXPERT 6	Pronunciation, stress, rhythm and intonation, though possibly influenced by the first language or regional variation, almost never interfere with ease of understanding.	Both basic and complex grammatical structures and sentence patterns are consistently well controlled.	Vocabulary range and accuracy are sufficient to communicate effectively on a wide variety of familiar and unfamiliar topics. Vocabulary is idiomatic, nuanced, and sensitive to register.	Able to speak at length with a natural, effortless flow. Varies speech flow for stylistic effect, e.g. to emphasise a point. Uses appropriate discourse markers and connectors spontaneously.	Comprehension is consistently accurate in nearly all contexts and includes comprehension of linguistic and cultural subtleties.	Interacts with ease in nearly all situations. Is sensitive to verbal and non-verbal cues, and responds to them appropriately.
EXTENDED 5	Pronunciation, stress, rhythm and intonation, though influenced by the first language or regional variation, rarely interfere with ease of understanding.	Basic grammatical structures and sentence patterns are consistently well controlled. Complex structures are attempted but with errors which sometimes interfere with meaning.	Vocabulary range and accuracy are sufficient to communicate effectively on common, concrete, and work-related topics. Paraphrases consistently and successfully. Vocabulary is sometimes idiomatic.	Able to speak at length with relative ease on familiar topics, but may not vary speech flow as a stylistic device. Can make use of appropriate discourse markers or connectors.	Comprehension is accurate on common, concrete, and work-related topics and mostly accurate when the speaker is confronted with a linguistic or situational complication or an unexpected turn of events. Is able to comprehend a range of speech varieties (dialect and/or accent) or registers.	Responses are immediate, appropriate, and informative. Manages the speaker/listener relationship effectively.
OPERATIONAL 4	Pronunciation, stress, rhythm and intonation are influenced by the first language or regional variation but only sometimes interfere with ease of understanding.	Basic grammatical structures and sentence patterns are used creatively and are usually well controlled. Errors may occur, particularly in unusual or unexpected circumstances, but rarely interfere with meaning.	Vocabulary range and accuracy are usually sufficient to communicate effectively on common, concrete, and work-related topics. Can often paraphrase successfully when lacking vocabulary in unusual or unexpected circumstances.	Produces stretches of language at an appropriate tempo. There may be occasional loss of fluency on transition from rehearsed or formulaic speech to spontaneous interaction, but this does not prevent effective communication. Can make limited use of discourse markers or connectors. Fillers are not distracting.	Comprehension is mostly accurate on common, concrete, and work-related topics when the accent or variety used is sufficiently intelligible for an international community of users. When the speaker is confronted with a linguistic or situational complication or an unexpected turn of events, comprehension may be slower or require clarification strategies.	Responses are usually immediate, appropriate, and informative. Initiates and maintains exchanges even when dealing with an unexpected turn of events. Deals adequately with apparent misunderstandings by checking, confirming, or clarifying.

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1.2 Pre-Operational, Elementary and Pre-Elementary Levels.

LEVEL	PRONUNCIATION USES A DIALECT AND/OR ACCENT INTELLIGIBLE TO THE AERONAUTICAL COMMUNITY.	STRUCTURE RELEVANT GRAMMATICAL STRUCTURES AND SENTENCE PATTERNS ARE DETERMINED BY LANGUAGE FUNCTIONS APPROPRIATE TO THE TASK.	VOCABULARY	FLUENCY	COMPREHENSION	INTERACTIONS
PRE-OPERATIONAL 3	Pronunciation, stress, rhythm and intonation are influenced by the first language or regional variation and frequently interfere with ease of understanding.	Basic grammatical structures and sentence patterns associated with predictable situations are not always well controlled. Errors frequently interfere with meaning.	Vocabulary range and accuracy are often sufficient to communicate on common, concrete, or work-related topics but range is limited and the word choice often inappropriate. Is often unable to paraphrase successfully when lacking vocabulary.	Produces stretches of language, but phrasing and pausing are often inappropriate. Hesitations or slowness in language processing may prevent effective communication. Fillers are sometimes distracting.	Comprehension is often accurate on common, concrete, and work-related topics when the accent or variety used is sufficiently intelligible for an international community of users. May fail to understand a linguistic or situational complication or an unexpected turn of events.	Responses are sometimes immediate, appropriate, and informative. Can initiate and maintain exchanges with reasonable ease on familiar topics and in predictable situations. Generally inadequate when dealing with an unexpected turn of events.
ELEMENTARY 2	Pronunciation, stress, rhythm and intonation are heavily influenced by the first language or regional variation and usually interfere with ease of understanding.	Shows only limited control of a few simple memorized grammatical structures and sentence patterns.	Limited vocabulary range consisting only of isolated words and memorized phrases.	Can produce very short, isolated, memorized utterances with frequent pausing and a distracting use of fillers to search for expressions and to articulate less familiar words.	Comprehension is limited to isolated, memorized phrases when they are carefully and slowly articulated.	Response time is slow, and often inappropriate. Interaction is limited to simple routine exchanges.
PRE-ELEMENTARY 1	Performs at a level below the Elementary level.	Performs at a level below the Elementary level.	Performs at a level below the Elementary level.	Performs at a level below the Elementary level.	Performs at a level below the Elementary level.	Performs at a level below the Elementary level.

Note. — The Operational Level (Level 4) is the minimum required proficiency level for radiotelephony communication. Levels 1 through 3 describe Pre-elementary, Elementary, and Pre-operational levels of language proficiency, respectively, all of which describe a level of proficiency below the ICAO language proficiency requirement. Levels 5 and 6 describe Extended and Expert levels, at levels of proficiency more advanced than the minimum required Standard. As a whole, the scale will serve as benchmarks for training and testing, and in assisting candidates to attain the ICAO Operational Level (Level 4).

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