

## **AVIATION ENGLISH TRAINING: A 'PROGRAM' VERSUS 'INSTITUTE' APPROACH**

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### **AVIATION ENGLISH SERVICES 2008**

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This paper briefly outlines possible directions for aviation English training, and presents a rationale for a move towards Aviation English Institutes, rather than simply single-sourced programs.

#### **A YOUNG FIELD**

Aviation English training is a very young field. Although some aviation English specialists have been working in the field for a couple of decades, and a number of aviation English programs have existed, the lack of an ICAO Standard requiring a specific level of aviation English training has meant that the industry has been unable to invest adequate resources into full fledged development efforts.

#### **ICAO SARPS CHANGE LANDSCAPE**

The 2008 ICAO language testing Standards and Recommended Practices completely change the context of how English language training will occur in the aviation industry. Prior to the adoption of strengthened Language Proficiency Standards and Recommended Practices by the ICAO Council in 2003, English language training for pilots or air traffic controllers had, to a large extent, been seen as important item to include in a budget—when possible. The length and quality of aviation English training, when conducted, was driven largely by time and budgetary constraints, and—equally important—there was no target proficiency level towards which to aim.

#### **PROFICIENCY REQUIREMENT**

Having to demonstrate ICAO Operational Level 4 English language proficiency in order to earn a license to operate internationally will require that pilots and air traffic controllers remain in English language training until the target level is obtained. That is, aviation English training will be driven by the target—Operational Level 4—rather than solely by time and/or economic constraints.

## **MARKET RESPONSE**

The market is responding to the new training requirements; any number of aviation English programs are coming to them market.

The aviation English training industry, however, is still in a state where all programs are pursuing individual, single-sourced solutions. This is understandable, perhaps inevitable, at this still-early stage, but it should be understood that ‘best practice’ in aviation English training will be to provide as much opportunity for ‘comprehensible input’ as is possible. Language training is not a case in which ‘less is more.’ The more successful language training programs will make more materials available to the learners. The ‘richer’ that the language learning environment is, the more successful the language training is likely to be.

## **ACADEMIC /GENERAL ENGLISH VERSUS AVIATION ENGLISH**

We can illustrate the need for robust, rich learning environments by considering academic and general English teaching.

There are, of course, some key differences between professional Aviation English training and the more mature and robust academic and general English training field. For one, professional pilots or controllers have many more time limits than the typically younger learners who enter academic or general English programs. That fact drives much of the way we, in the aviation language training field, are—or should be—approaching program and materials development.

In addition, aviation English training is much, much "younger" and less mature than academic/general English industry.

## **50 YEARS AND HOOPS**

As a point in fact, the academic/general English industry has had external gate-keeping standards for decades:

- the TOEFL test required prior to admission by universities in the US, and
- the IELTS in Europe/Australia).

Having to jump through that 'hoop'--passing the TOEFL<sup>1</sup> or IELTS<sup>2</sup> in order to earn admission to the university—has over time created an enormous appetite for academic and general—purpose English materials and programs. Consequently, thousands of classroom, CBT, video, and self-learning materials and programs are available.

### **A Language Institute**

Typically, a learner joins an academic or general-purpose language 'institute,' often attached to the university in which they wish to enroll. The learner will attend classes in the institute until he or she passes the TOEFL or IELTS, always requiring at least four months of study (approximately 480 hours of classroom time, with additional self-study, lab work, and home work.)

In these programs, the institute typically will draw on and incorporate materials from multiple sources. A key difference between the academic world and the current state of aviation English training is that in the academic/general English training, programs always have available, and make use of, lots of differently sourced materials and training aids.

Additionally, in academic programs there are frequent internal progress checks. Policies and plans for 're-training are clear to those who do not achieve their required TOEFL/IELTS score in the expected time. They usually can repeat the course, or there will be additional courses available. If they repeat, because the program is not 'single-source material bound,' because good programs make rich resources available, the learner doesn't simply rehash familiar material.

### **Program approach**

One effect of the 'program approach' to aviation English is that many programs have not adequately accounted for the *fact* that not all learners will achieve their learning goals within the time allotted. That is, not all pilots or controllers will achieve ICAO Operational Level 4 in the...say...200 hours provided by the program, even when we account for beginning level of

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<sup>1</sup> TOEFL: Test of English as a Foreign Language, published by the Educational Testing Service (ETS.)

<sup>2</sup> International English Language Testing System: published by the University of Cambridge.

proficiency and screen the learners into levels beforehand.

On the one hand, that is a normal aspect of language learning. It is usual in academic English programs that the rate of progress varies quite a lot between individual learners.

Two **key differences**, however, exist between academic English training and aviation English training.

- (1) In academic English institutes, there are plans and ‘safety nets’ to account for the fact of different learner progress.
- (2) In academic settings, learners are typically younger and more flexible.

When the industry does not account for these language learning facts, the consequences can be damaging, to the learners, to their employers, and to the aviation English training provider.

#### **TIME CONSTRAINTS VERSUS *PROFICIENCY* REQUIREMENTS**

Whereas in academic English programs, the ‘gate-keeping’ function of the standardized tests is well understood. Stake holders understand that the burden is on learners to continue in English study until they achieve the required results.

In contrast, historically, in the aviation industry, the length of English training was determined solely by budget and/or time available. Requests for proposals were typically made thusly: “We have 100 pilots, and we want you to give them a two-week (or four-week, or six-week) English program.”

This shift in the requirements for English training, brought on by ICAO ***proficiency*** requirements, in the industry necessitates a significant investment of time and financial resources, for individuals, airlines, air traffic service providers, training organizations, and national economies. The safety and economic impact of the ICAO language Standards obligate aviation English training providers to provide the most economical, efficient, and effective programs possible.

It also requires Aviation English training providers to help educate the industry on the nature of language learning and the time it can take.

## **PROFESSIONAL LEARNING**

For professional controllers and pilots, intensive institute approaches will be difficult, at best. For these learners, we must provide ‘lots of comprehensible input,’ via the internet, on-line learning, CBT, in addition to classroom training.

As a an aviation English specialist for 15 years, as an English language teacher for 30 years, as a member of the PRICESG, it is my strongly held belief that achieving ICAO Operational Level 4 will require some classroom learning, or tutoring, for most learners.

For these professional, working pilots and controllers, a ‘blended’ learning approach is the best approach.

### **Best Practice**

Best practice blended learning is organized so that the classroom learning closely corresponds to and builds on the CBT. That is, the CBT or WBT prepares the learner for the classroom sessions.

## **AB INITIO LEARNERS**

However, for the typically younger, more flexible ab initio market, bringing the ‘language institute’ concept into the aviation English industry makes sense.

These learners, at the start of an aviation career, have more time for classroom learning. An intensive, possibly immersion, approach is more feasible and practical. In this case, CBT and WBT can, again, prepare learners for the longer-term intensive program, and/or it can supplement learning after classroom sessions are completed.

### **Summary**

The ICAO Language Proficiency Requirements signal an enormous shift in the industry—language training organizations must work closely with the industry *not only* to provide high quality effective programs representing best practice, but we must also work together to educate the industry on the fundamental nature of language learning.

In the long term, failing to educate our customers, or softening the truth about how long it may take, hurts the entire industry. //end