Commercial aviation language testing: barriers to success?
A case study

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I will cover:

- How the ETA was developed
- The business model
- An overview of the challenges
- The state of the art today – where are we going?
Approximately 35 minutes, 3 parts:

Part 1: Radiotelephony role play

Part 2: Monitor and report (7-9 minutes)

Part 3: Describe and discuss (6-7 minutes)
6.3.3.1 A statement of evidence for test validity and reliability should be accessible to all decision-makers, in plain, layperson language.

6.3.3.2 A description of the development process … should be accessible to all decision-makers.
2008 - 2009

OAA & ER with consultancy from Dr Rita Green:

- Test specifications
- Test task specifications
- Task creation and piloting
- Test ‘blueprint’ (a complete test battery)
2010

- UK CAA approval

- OAA & ER with Dr Ute Knoch (University of Melbourne):
  - Test trials and candidate feedback (n=30)
  - 6 week standard setting session – SMEs and ELEs (n=10)
  - Analysis of rating and candidate feedback data

- ILTA Language Testing Research Colloquium, Cambridge
2010

- Expert judgement: independent SMEs and ELEs (n=32)
- Analysis of expert judgement data
- Publication of Report on test development and initial investigations into test quality
- November: Peer-reviewed presentation at the Language Testing Forum, Lancaster University

2010-2011

- Test centres:
  - OAA, Oxford Airport (EGTK)
  - Aeroclub Barcelona Sabadell (LELL)
  - CAE Global Academy, Douala, Cameroon
  - OAA, Hong Kong (VHHH)

- November: after 3 years and €144,000 ...

... submission to ICAO AELTS
March 2012: Conditional ICAO endorsement:

“ICAO would be pleased to identify your test as conditionally endorsed on its website and later as fully endorsed when changes are made.”
"One of the main concerns with the test evaluated is the limited trialling used to confirm it meets key criteria for validity and reliability"

We agreed to:

"Prepare and submit a test improvement plan to ICAO and work with ICAO, as needed, to make the necessary changes … [addressing] all issues noted in the evaluation report and propose specific corrective actions leading to measurable outcomes"

July: ICAO accepts ER’s improvement plan developed with Dr Luke Harding, (Lancaster University)
Khadijah Jilani, MA Language Testing:

Here is the picture. Describe everything you can see:
A Comparison of Intended and Observed Production of Language Functions in Part Three
Test specifications and piloting
Trials
Standard setting
Analysis
Public reporting
Expert judgement
UK CAA approval
Conditional ICAO endorsement
Testing conferences
Further R&D
Full recognition?

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Price of an aviation English test:

Average: €100 - 160

ETA test fees:

Licence fee: €85 - 110 per candidate
Candidature

- Australia: 23,000+
- Belgium: 10,000+
- UK: 8,000+

ETA cost recovery:

3,571 candidates
- Test with published evidence for quality
- The only ICAO endorsed test
- Access to market
- Realistic commercial targets
- Great potential customers
Regulatory obstacles

“Approval will cost £10,000”
Regulatory obstacles

“Existing monopoly”
Regulatory obstacles

“We have our own test”
Regulatory obstacles

“Well done, but ...”
Regulatory obstacles

“ICAO does not endorse tests”
Regulatory obstacles

“Only conditional? What's wrong with it?”
Regulatory obstacles

“We don’t have the expertise”
Regulatory obstacles

“Our FEs will do it”
Regulatory obstacles

“Send us your licence in the mail”
Commercial barriers

“We're scared of your test”
Commercial barriers

“Why two examiners?”

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Commercial barriers

“Your competitor is half the price”
Commercial barriers

“The aeroclub does it for 10 Euros”
Maintenance issues

What about maintaining the battery?
Maintenance issues

What about specificity?
Maintenance issues

What about trial candidates?

Latitude

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Maintenance issues

What about regulatory costs?
2012: ETA closes for business
2016: RELTA announces closure
The assessment documentation should include at least documentation demonstrating the assessment validity, relevance and reliability.

AMC AND GM TO PART-FCL, SECTION N, 4, IV (P28)

TSPs should supply documented evidence of the validity and reliability of their testing methods.

DOCUMENT 9835, SECTION 6.3.3.1
“The issue of accountability is important, and we would argue that certain minimum information ought to be made publicly available for all interested parties”.

ALDERSON, CLAPHAM AND WALL, 1995, PP207

“The need to estimate and report information about reliability and measurement error ... is explicitly stated in the professional standards for language testers. The appropriate estimation of reliability is not only a matter of good testing practice; it is also a professional responsibility of all who use language tests”.

BACHMAN, 2004, PP154
What do the TSPs claim?

[TEST] is supported by extensive experience and expertise (both linguistic and operational), by a substantial programme of research, and by strict procedures in item design, test delivery, administration and security, examiner training and continuous monitoring of performance.

Data collection and analysis of test items and test tasks and the system of on-going, test-by-test monitoring of the [TEST] examiners and assessors continue to ensure the integrity, validity and reliability of the Testing System and its component parts.

Test [sic] is reliable, valid and practical.

Language specialists and seasoned pilots have combined their expertise to design an exam that is fair, reliable, relevant and personal.

It is a valid and reliable qualification proficiency test for pilots, controllers and aviation cadets in their last year of training.

The [test] is a high quality language test for private, commercial and airline transport pilots. Developed by [TSP], the [test] provides both trainee and licensed pilots with an innovative and highly effective means of determining English language proficiency for international radiotelephony communications.
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Commercial ICAO TSPs: 3

TSPs that have ICAO recognition: 1

TSPs that publish evidence for quality: 0
[Aviation] language proficiency testing ... [is] a case of exceptionally high-stakes testing. Inadequate aviation language testing can result in either serious safety gaps or have highly negative social and economic consequences.

ICAO Document 9835, Section 6.2.2.1
Is quality aviation language testing commercially viable?

What are the challenges?

What are the solutions?