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The ICAO LPRs – Where We are Now

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OVERVIEW OF THE ICAO REQUIREMENTS FOR ENGLISH PROFICIENCY – IMPACT ON AVIATION SAFETY

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Introduction

Aviation remains a key factor in the globalization process and is the major mean of transport, with a significant impact on economic growth and sustainable development. The air transport network has a strong impact on people's life, bringing the world closer, allowing business development across nations, creating travelling opportunities and generating a one world environment.

With 3.5 billion passengers, 50 million tons of freight, some 1 400 commercial airlines, 26 700 aircraft in service, 4 130 airports, 173 air navigation services providers, and 100 000 daily flights around the world, aviation affects all sectors of the world economy.¹

Aviation Safety is one of the major concerns of the industry. For ICAO, safety is one of the strategic objectives, as ICAO serves “as a global forum of States for international civil aviation. ICAO develops policies and Standards, undertakes compliance audits, performs studies and analysis, provides assistance and builds aviation capacity through many activities and the cooperation of its Member States and stakeholders”².

Through this objective, ICAO aims to enhance global civil aviation safety, with a focus on the regulatory oversight capabilities of States. One of the main expected results is increasing the level of implementation of ICAO SARPs, including the ICAO standards dealing with language proficiency.

Language Proficiency Requirements – General overview

The decision to address the language proficiency for pilots and air traffic controllers was first made during the 32nd session of the ICAO Assembly in September 1998 as a direct response to the fatal accidents in which the contributing factor was lack of English proficiency.

In March 2003, the ICAO Council adopted a comprehensive set of amendments to the Standards and Recommended Practices (SARPs) concerning Language Proficiency Requirements (LPRs). Amendments to Annex 1 – Personnel Licensing, Annex 6 – Operations of Aircraft, Annex 10 –

¹ ICAO Business Plan 2017 – 2019, First Edition – 2016, pag. 1.

² ICAO Mission, in line with the provisions of the 1944 Convention on International Civil Aviation (Chicago Convention), see <https://www.icao.int/about-icao/Pages/default.aspx>.

Aeronautical Telecommunications, Annex 11 – Air Traffic Services, and ICAO Doc 4444 – PANS-ATM, to ensure the flight crew, air traffic controllers and aeronautical station operators comply with language proficiency rating scale were expected to be implemented by Member States into their national legislation by 5 March 2008.

The contribution of the work of ICAO in the language proficiency area is so far identified in the implementation, understanding, and the standardization of all the elements leading to the achievement of a minimum operational level, equally valid within all Member States. The main objective of a uniform approach in language proficiency is to ensure that English Language Proficiency Level 4, once achieved, it is a 100 % at the same quality level, standardized, for all Member States. The goal is extended as well as for the other levels of proficiency and qualifications (tests builders, raters, examiners, etc).

The obligation for language proficiency has its root in the Chicago Convention, article 33, requesting to the flight crew to prove language proficiency. Furthermore, the ICAO provisions covering LPRs are divided into two categories, standards and recommended practices. As standards, ICAO has adopted:

- Annex 1 – *Personnel Licensing* - which specifies the applicable language proficiency requirements and the level of proficiency for the language used in radiotelephony communications. The requirements apply to pilots, air traffic controllers and aeronautical operators operating in international operations.
- Annex 6 – *Operation of Aircraft*, Part I – International Commercial Air Transport – Aeroplanes and Part III – International Operations – Helicopters – specifying the role of operators in ensuring that the flight crew demonstrates the ability to speak and understand the languages used in RT communication to the level specified in Annex 1.
- Annex 10 – *Aeronautical Telecommunications* (Volume II - Communication Procedures including those with PANS status) - containing specifications regarding the use of the English language (Chapter 5.2.1.2);
- Annex 11 – *Air Traffic Services*– a similar statement for air traffic service providers, containing specifications regarding the use of the English language (Chapter 2 / para. 2.30).

When it comes to means and processes on how to achieve the desired level of implementation of standards, ICAO has developed support materials:

- Doc. 9835 – *Manual on the Implementation of ICAO Language Proficiency Requirements* (first edition in 2004);
- ICAO Circular 318 - *Language Testing Criteria for Global Harmonization*;
- ICAO Circular 323 - *Guidelines for Aviation English Training Programmes*.

The emphasis of the work of ICAO is on the correct use of ICAO standard phraseology in all situations. Clarity, timely response and accuracy are key elements in achieving the desired level

of English proficiency. Both native and non-native English speakers need to be able to communicate and understand clearly what is being communicated; therefore, a common standard is needed.

In support of the LPRs standards and recommended practices, the Organization conducted lots of efforts in the promotion and explanation of the provisions. ICAO has organized two symposia, one technical seminar, and numerous workshops, released several State Letters related to LPRs developments, as well as several journal articles. ICAO has also published an electronic support (CD) with the ICAO Rated Speech Samples CD and, together with the International Civil Aviation English Association (ICAEA), it has made available the “rated speech samples training aid” (RSSTA).

Oversight of the LPRs

Within the ICAO Universal Safety Oversight and Audit Programme (USOAP), some Protocol Questions (PQs) were developed to assess, for each of the Member State, the level of LPR’s implementation. At first glance, looking to the general result, it is shown that ICAO’s work is done, effective implementation being overall above 70% and, in particular cases, over 90% or even 100%. And yet the question, if the overall objective has been met in this respect, has not received an answer yet.

In a logical development, ICAO is finding itself now in the position to change hats and further address the issue beyond standards. What and how is to be done to achieve not only the quantity but the quality of the implementation of the LPRs needs to be further analyzed.

In order to address this question efficiently, thinking outside the box approach needs to be embraced by ICAO. Therefore, seeking what the users are looking for in order to cover the requirements and contribute to the increase of the level of safety through the common use of English language at a professional level by the whole aviation community might be an appropriate action.

Future work

Having this in our mind, the general opinion is that the establishment of the core legal framework is finalized. ICAO finds itself at the stage where quality, effectiveness and better implementation are priorities. At this point, one option might be listening to the feedback and proposals made by the industry as well, seeking the appropriate and widely accepted and applicable solutions.

Towards this achievement, ICAO was and is still fully aware of the situation that the quality of the implementation for LPRs may be a challenge for some of the Member States due to:

- lack of testing expertise;
- unregulated testing industry;

- in some cases, limited resources at the state level.

Consequentially, ICAO develops projects and tools like the Aviation English Language Testing Service (AELTS) or the ICAO Homepage for the English Language Proficiency Programme (I-HELPP). In order for such programs and tools to properly work and the objectives be achieved, they need to be populated with data and information, and active contribution is widely encouraged. Unfortunately, the participation from the industry or the Member States is not at the expected level today, affecting the usefulness of these tools and leading to questioning the validity of such instruments in the support for LPRs. Furthermore, some answers to the above issue triggered new issues about what is needed to be done and how it should be done to reach the desired objectives.

In conclusion, the way forward is close cooperation between ICAO, its Member States and the industry. In such way the language proficiency issues will all be addressed properly, gaps identified as well as best practices, with the objective to develop new tools or improve the existing ones, for quality and efficiency of LPRs be obtained, as a significant contribution to aviation safety enhancement.