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Aviation Familiarity and Language Teaching in a Practical Context

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Abstract
It is difficult for most people to earn the credentials required for both aviation operations and qualified language teaching, with most earning one or the other. As a qualified language teacher tasked with teaching Aviation English, becoming familiar with aviation operations has been a difficult task. My presentation provides an overview of my personal experience as a language teacher working towards aviation familiarity. The goal of this presentation is to provide insights about the process and a rough roadmap for future teachers in this situation to follow.

Developing Aviation Familiarity

Most ESL teachers seeking to teaching Aviation English teachers often enter the field lacking not only an operational certification in an aviation context, but also with little prior knowledge of aviation or Aviation English. In my experience, ESL instructors can become adequate instructors of Aviation English for ab-initio flight training students in at least two areas: general aviation content knowledge; and visual flight rules radio communication. The former can be attained through self-study, mentorship, and opportunities to explore operational contexts, while the latter requires those three things and the help of subject-matter experts in the classroom.

Two years ago, I came to Embry-Riddle to teach at their Language Institute, with the notion that I would become an Aviation English Specialist at the department. To that point, I had

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had very little training in Aviation English, with my only exposure being through a research project that investigated language as a factor in civil aviation accidents. My journey towards specialization has required three key components that I feel are necessary for the development of any teacher in a situation such as my own: mentorship, opportunity, and initiative.

**Mentorship**

For me, mentorship came from three places: from ESL experts with knowledge of English for Specific Purposes; Aviation English experts with knowledge of implementing aviation content and language in an ESL curriculum; and aviation experts who served as subject-matter experts in the classroom. There are precious few people in the field of Aviation English itself who have the credentials and experience to call themselves experts in all of these areas, which is why it is necessary to get help from so many places. Each party helped guide me as I studied material that had already been created for the course, read the relevant literature on the subjects, implemented lessons in the classroom, and began to create new lesson plans and new materials. Mentorship received with other experts also helped keep me aware of trends and best practices in Aviation English, and helped me network with other professionals and experts so that I cultivated a larger group of people to call on when there was a gap in my knowledge on the subject.

**Opportunity**

While mentorship is crucial, I have also been given many opportunities to develop my knowledge as a staff teacher at ERAU. The school is an aviation-immersive environment, in the sense that almost everywhere you look on campus you will find signs and signals of aviation. For example, the flight line is just next to my office, and I cannot miss it on my way into work. As
aviation seems to be everywhere, so too are there many opportunities to reach out and take things
that help me grow. As our student population at our language institute is mostly interested in
aviation, and plan on matriculating to an aerospace major at the university, there is a group of
people ready-made for me to test lesson plans with an aviation focus. Furthermore, the circle of
people at the university who are interested in developing more Aviation English curricula offer
opportunities to work together on those sorts of projects, which has helped me better understand
the field beyond just how the information can be conveyed in a traditional ESL classroom.

Initiative

Finally, teachers in my situation must share a sense of initiative. Without this, mentorship
and opportunities are wasted. This field is not for the faint of heart – for people like me, who had
no prior aviation subject-matter knowledge, who lack friends and relatives working in the field,
and who do not have a great interest in attaining an operational certification in something such as
flight, maintenance, or air traffic management, initiative can be hard to come by. This may not be
due for everyone, but for people like me, initiative must come from somewhere. So, from
where? For me, initiative comes from a sense of duty and a sense of justice. Developing a
specialization in Aviation English is a duty because of my work environment. As a capable
language teacher surrounded by people who want to improve their English for the primary
purpose of using it to operate in an aviation context, it is my duty to do my best to help them
develop their skills in that regard. Justice forms part of my initiative because I see this task as
part of a larger safety issue. In my view, the idea that people might die in an air accident due
some circumstance arising from a lack of English proficiency is an injustice, given that there are
steps that can be taken to ameliorate those hazards. In short, it feels like the right thing to do, and
to simply ignore it would feel like some kind of negligence.
Conclusion

Through mentorship, opportunity, and initiative, aviation content knowledge by an ESL teacher without a background in the subject can be gained to the extent that they can at least teach general aviation topics courses and visual flight rules courses that focus on radio communications. In my personal experience, the going is slow, but I feel like it is the right thing to do.