

LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY REQUIREMENTS: CRITICAL TO AVIATION SAFETY

The Journal reviews ICAO's Language Proficiency Requirements (LPRs) and other recent initiatives developed to support language proficiency among Member States.

 In March 2013, ICAO held a Language Proficiency Requirements (LPRs) Technical Seminar designed to assist States and the industry with the implementation of the safety-critical language provisions.

In the last five years, licensing authorities, airlines and air navigation service providers, and language testing and training providers have done extensive work to pursue the implementation of the safety-critical language provisions as mandated by Assembly Resolution A32-16 in 1998 and embodied in Annexes 1, 6, 10 and 11, as well as Doc 4444 — PANS-ATM. The implementation of language provisions will once again be discussed at the upcoming 38th Session of the ICAO Assembly.

The Seminar brought together all stakeholders from the aviation industry, including civil aviation administrations, international organizations, aviation language training centers, aviation language test providers, airlines, and air navigation service providers.

Nicole Barrette, Technical Specialist (Training and Licensing standards) and Dawn Flanagan, AELTS Manager, outlined the occurrences that led up to the Seminar initiative: "In 1996, what was probably the worst mid-air collision in recent air accident industry occurred over the New Delhi area. Investigators in India concluded that one of the factors at play was the lack of English language proficiency between the two crews of the aircraft involved as they didn't share a common language." In 1998, Indian officials presented a working paper to the ICAO Assembly, leading to the establishment of the Organization's PRICE (Proficiency Requirements in Common English) Study Group. The Study Group began to analyze incidents and accidents, and considered the role of language proficiency in these. The results of their work were Standards and Recommended Practices (SARPs) that were introduced in four ICAO Annexes.

Annex 1, which addresses personnel licensing and Annex 10 Volume 2, which relates to English proficiency, are particularly important. Annex 1 stipulates that pilots and air traffic controllers speak and understand the language used on radiotelephony communications to the level specified, which is Level 4 — the operational level considered the safety threshold; level 6 is considered the expert speaker level. Annex 10, Volume 2, states that if a pilot and an air traffic controller don't speak a common language, the default language is English; additionally, the flight crew establishes the

language to be used. "The implication of this is that all pilots and controllers involved in international operations and that do not share a common language have to have stated on their license their level of English language proficiency," explained Barrette.

"Language is a component of communication and the ability to speak at a certain level of proficiency in order to communicate with each other if something unexpected occurs is essential," stated Flanagan.

ICAO adopted the SARPs which were developed by the PRICESG in 2003 and became applicable in March 2008. For many States, however, they have been difficult to implement due to a lack of personnel adequately skilled in developing appropriate tests, in addition to the fact that the training and testing industry in aviation English is unregulated. States are being encouraged to address and implement language proficiency measures with a degree of urgency due to the critical safety nature of the issue. These challenges notwithstanding, since the adoption of the SARPs in 2003, States and industry have made extensive progress towards implementation.

The LPR Technical Seminar in March of this year presented some of the tools available to continue to support the implementation of the LPRs, including a speech sample training aid by the International Civil Aviation English Association for ICAO. This tool provides examples of language proficiency at levels 3, 4 and 5. The Seminar was an opportunity for some of the test providers to discuss their experiences and challenges, and for participants to raise key issues relating to language, for example, the assessment of the language skills of Level 6 speakers.

"We learned in the Seminar that EUROCONTROL is developing a Level 6 test and that EASA is considering establishing a validity period of nine years for Level 6. We will be observing how this develops very closely. There is also a proposal to develop LPRs for maintenance personnel which will be considered carefully and in the light of whether or not the necessary resources are available," said Barrette.

Other initiatives include the revamping of the ICAO Language Proficiency Requirements website as a one-stop resource for everything related to language proficiency, accessible at www.icao.int/safety/lpr.

On the last day of the Seminar, an interactive workshop was held in which every participant listened and rated a speech sample from the rated speech sample tool. "The workshop was a lot of fun because participants were given the opportunity to compare and contrast their rating with that of the other participants, as well as against the rating of the speech sample tool. It opened the eyes of many people as to what is involved in rating and its potential consequence on licensing," commented Flanagan. ■