

AVIATION ENGLISH AS LANGUAGE FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES CHALLENGES

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Aviation English can be defined as a comprehensive but specialized subset of English related broadly to aviation, including the “plain” language used for radiotelephony communications when phraseologies do not suffice. Not restricted to controller and pilot communications, Aviation English can also include the use of English relating to any other aspect of aviation: the language needed by pilots for briefings, announcements, and flight deck communication, and the language used by maintenance technicians, flight attendants, dispatchers, managers and officials within the aviation industry or even the English language studied by students in aeronautical and/or aviation universities. Used in radiotelephony communications between air traffic controllers (ATC) and pilots, radiotelephony English (RTFE) is the core of Aviation English. It includes (but must not be limited to) the phraseology set by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) and can require the use of general English at times.

Being a part of globalization in nature, aviation industry requires pilots, ATC, cabin attendants, crewmembers, engineers, and service staff to be able to communicate with their counterparts in the world on work-related issues. Such communication has two implications: on the one hand, it means the correct and standard use of terminologies or phraseologies in air/ground communication, aircraft manufacturing and its specification, even legal terms in aviation law; on the other hand, it refers to the general use of the English language among aviation staff in daily communication, regardless of its nationality, race, and different cultural backgrounds.

The beautiful literary traits for which English is praised, such as a wealth of words, are exactly the opposite of the needs for aviation language. Conversation between pilots and controllers needs to be terse and clear, but English now has 38 dialects. Misunderstandings of English are responsible for many crashes and near crashes. The Federal Aviation Administration’s glossary for pilots and controllers contains 44 deviations from the terms recommended by the world aviation organization, the International Civil Aviation Organization. The FAA also uses many entire phrases which are different, such as TAXI BACK instead of BACK TRACK, REMAIN IN

CLOSED TRAFFIC instead of MAKE ANOTHER CIRCUIT etc. Furthermore, the meaning of the words is cued or restricted by contents and contexts. This is particularly true in Aviation English discourse. This is illustrated by the following discourse:

A: Boryspil Ground, CA981, radio check 129.0.

B: CA981, Boryspil Ground, **read** you 5.

The content of communication is a radio check. The word “read” which has a meaning shift would puzzle anyone who does not have the knowledge of radio telephony: “I read you 5” means “I hear your voice loud and clear”. Thus contents and background knowledge contribute greatly to meaning comprehension in Aviation English. The book FATAL WORDS: Communication clashes and Aircraft Crashes (Steven Cushing, 1994) describes several accidents traceable to ambiguities and other defects of English. The homophones, TO and TWO accounted for a crash, and there are 7,781 homophones in English. There are also 1,400 homographs (CLOSE, CLOSE) and more than 50,000 homonyms - words with more than one meaning.

Today about 65% of aviation accidents and incidents are blamed on pilot error, many due to English language failure. If the existing patchwork of phrases were made into a coherent entity, the figure for accidents due to miscommunication might drop by 5% or so. This improvement in safety can be achieved by following the method of the International Standards Organization for systemizing technical vocabularies. The ISO method consists of carefully defining the overall field of interest. Subdividing it repeatedly produces cells small enough for specific attention. Each of the concepts within each cell is defined. The last step is assigning words to the concepts. The resulting vocabulary has neither gaps nor overlaps. The production of this kind of vocabulary would result in elimination of many confusing items, and minimization of others. It is my belief that a rationally planned system of language can reduce accidents due to miscommunication in the future.

References

1. Cushing, S. (1994). ‘Fatal Words: Communication Clashes and Aircraft Crashes’ (U. of Chicago Press)
2. Manual of Radio Telephony (2007). International Civil Aviation Organization.
<http://www.icao.int/icao/en/manual.htm>