ELPAC Level 6

English Language Proficiency for Aeronautical Communication

Presentation to ICAO
Montreal, 25 March 2013
• The status of native speakers
• Developing the test construct
• Instituto Cervantes
• Cambridge University ESOL
• Goethe Institut
• DELF / DALF

These tests assess a candidate’s ability to approximate the language proficiency of a native speaker.

Native speakers are excluded from taking such tests.
The challenge in developing a test to meet the ICAO Language Proficiency Requirements is that they apply to non-native speakers as well as native speakers of English.
What to do?
The test construct defines the specific aspects of language a test should assess.
In our particular case, the test construct is defined – up to a point – by the rating scale in ICAO Annex I.

- Pronunciation
- Structure
- Vocabulary
- Fluency
- Comprehension
- interaction
First, we compared the descriptors for ICAO levels 5 and 6 of the rating scale.
Proficiency in speaking English in an aeronautical communication context is demonstrated by achieving ICAO level 5.
“Expert Level 6 exceed(s) the demands of aeronautical radiotelephony communications. Level 6 has a very wide coverage since it is intended to account for most first-language speakers with native or native-like proficiency as well as second- or foreign-language speakers with a high level of proficiency. Attainment of Level 6 should be considered as being beyond the realistic expectations of most second- or foreign-language learners.”

ICAO Doc. 9835, 4.5.9
"Research also points to the need, especially for highly proficient speakers, to focus on skills of accommodation in speaking. Accommodation is a natural process of adapting speech habits to the constraints of the context and the perceived ability of the hearer to understand. This involves:

• The perception of an interlocutor’s linguistic difficulties; and
• The replacement of high-risk (possibly unclear or ambiguous) features of the language to increase communicative efficiency."

• ICAO Doc. 9835, 2.5.4
So what does it all mean?

- ICAO levels 1 – 5 assess a candidate’s proficiency in speaking English in an aeronautical communication context.
- ICAO level 6 however, assesses a candidate’s ability to communicate effectively in an aeronautical communication context.
So where does this leave the native speakers?

- At ICAO level 6 it is a level playing field for non-native and native speakers.
- ICAO level 6 is about communicative ability and not so much about language command.
Test construct for ELPAC level 6

A level 6 speaker should demonstrate the ability to:

• use clear and concise English
• negotiate meaning by accommodating a weaker speaker
• clarify potential misunderstandings
• recognise and avoid ambiguity
• understand and avoid idiomatic English
For pronunciation, level 6 means the ability to
• neutralise one’s own accent to make it more comprehensible.
Pronunciation

- Kiwi vowel shift
For structure, level 6 means the ability to

- understand the difference between a complex structure and a simple structure,
- accommodate a weaker speaker by avoiding complex structures,
- recognise and avoid structures that are potentially unclear or ambiguous.
Structure

Flying planes can be dangerous
For vocabulary, level 6 means the ability to

- understand idiomatic language,
- avoid the use of idiomatic language to accommodate a weaker speaker.
Vocabulary

- Once the crew managed to get the toilet door open again, they were surprised by *how high* the man was.

- Once the crew managed to get the toilet door open again, they were surprised by *how tall* the man was.
Vocabulary

• The Ethiopian freighter only operates to Amsterdam once every fortnight / in a blue moon.

✓ The Ethiopian freighter only operates to Amsterdam once every two weeks.
For comprehension, level 6 means the ability to

• understand the difference between literal meaning and intended meaning,
• understand a variety of unfamiliar or unusual accents,
• be aware of cultural differences in meaning.
Comprehension

- ‘I’ll have a Coke’
- ‘May I have a Coke please’
For interaction, level 6 means the ability to

- achieve and maintain successful communication even when speaking to a weak speaker of English,
- clarify apparent misunderstandings by successfully negotiating meaning.