

Introducing new language proficiency requirements in an operational environment

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Introduction

The human element is the most flexible but also the most vulnerable element of the ATM system. Air traffic controllers are equipped to do their job safely by training the aspects: knowledge, skills and experience. The new language proficiency requirements complements beautifully our routine training and testing schedule for operational air traffic controllers. Getting support for, and confidence in, these requirements might be the hardest part of the implementation.

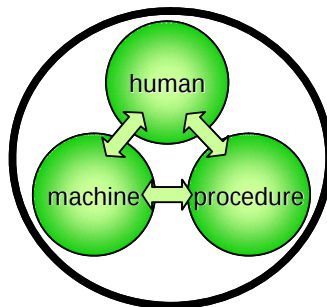
Air Traffic Control the Netherlands is the national Air Navigation Service Provider working in the Amsterdam Flight Information Region, based at Schiphol, Amsterdam. The new ICAO language proficiency requirements were introduced in 2003, but no attention was directed to these requirements before 2006. Early 2006 we formed a project team with a language expert, training specialists and operational experts (called PIEP).

During August 2006 the language requirements, and impact of these requirements to operations, became clear, but we noticed that only very few controllers were aware of these new requirements. We decided to focus on three aspects:

- implementing the new requirements in an existing, routine training scheme for air traffic controllers
- organising a test structure with examiners within our organisation
- gaining support for the new requirements and the accompanying test procedures

Implementing the new requirements in an existing, routine training scheme for air traffic controllers.

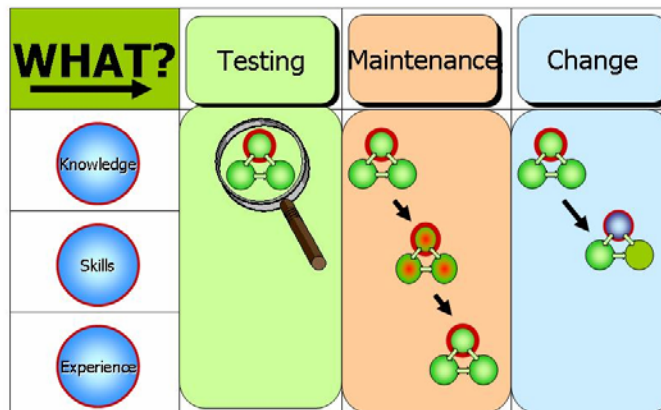
Air Traffic Control The Netherlands recognises three important elements that together form the Air Traffic Management system:



The human element is the most flexible element but also the most vulnerable element of this system. Air Traffic Control the Netherlands feels responsible for this human element and uses a routine training scheme for air traffic controllers to make sure they are well prepared to do their tasks. This training scheme is based on the following aspects:

- knowledge
- skills
- experience

The first step is to determine the current level of the knowledge, skills and experience by testing these aspects. Based on the outcome of these tests a tailor made training program will be designed to maintain or restore these aspects. Moreover, the changes in the Air Traffic Management system that have an effect on the human element in this system will be focussed upon.



Language is at this time *the* most important tool of an air traffic controller. Language is used to get the work done (coordination) and to obtain the desired response (instructions to and from pilots). Language is a skill that has a great effect on the quality of the performance of any air traffic controller. This skill will be subject to a routine testing and training program just as all the other needed skills.

Organising a test structure with examiners within our organisation.

Air Traffic Control the Netherlands feels responsible for the performance of its controllers and will do anything that is necessary to prepare the air traffic controllers for the test. Like most of the air navigation service providers, Air Traffic Control the Netherlands has very little capacity to be able to use operational controllers outside their rosters. With this in mind, and the conviction that language testing is a subject for professionals, we determined our criteria:

- Air Traffic Control The Netherlands takes care off *all* of its controllers and feels responsible for achieving a 100% success rate
- testing should be done with minimal operational resources and disturbance and should be stretched out over a longer period of time
- testing should start in time to enable adequate training for controllers with a result < level 4
- testing should be supported by a test service company responsible for test sustenance
- rating of the proficiency level should be done by external raters with professional experience

For the implementation of the test we not only had to find and buy a suitable test but also buy the necessary equipment, such as voice recorders, headsets, microphones, laptops and a lot of plugs and cables.

Another important task was to find people who could qualify as examiner. They not only had to be proficient in English but also have an adequate knowledge of Radiotelephony.

The test will be scheduled in the rosters and include a certain preparation time to make sure the air traffic controllers will have enough time to prepare themselves.

Every individual air traffic controller will receive a personal invitation by mail at their home address, six weeks in advance of the test. They can prepare themselves by trying out the sample test on the internet. Should they have any questions or even doubts about their own language proficiency they can contact the test administrator or the English language instructors. We strongly advise them to do the sample test again shortly before the real test and emphasise on the use of standard RT.

The challenge for the examiners is to get test dates incorporated into the operational duty rosters. The examiners are language experts and training specialists with a background in operational air traffic control or with a background as pilot.

A very important issue for Air Traffic Control the Netherlands was the rating of the test results. Our air traffic controllers weren't happy with the idea that they would be "judged" by their own colleagues.

The rating of the test results is done by external, well trained professional raters. We have an agreement on how long it may take to send back the results, specified per criterion.

The air traffic controllers receive a certificate with the test results. A copy will be sent to our regulator and the regulator will issue a license with the language endorsement. By validating the test we use, the regulator simultaneously accepted the certificate as proof of the language test.

Gaining support for the new requirements and the accompanying test procedures.

Looking back at implementing the ICAO requirements it was apparent that at first the air traffic controllers did not recognise the need for these new requirements and simply ignored them. Gradually they are getting used to it, due to the information we provide them with, and of course the fact that 5 March 2008 is coming closer and closer.

It is a "human factor" to become more confident, be able to take the test and get a good result. The human factor is more important than just implementing a new requirement.

We highlighted the following issues before implementing the language proficiency requirements:

- everyone must become aware of the fact that you are working to create a program to ensure and maintain the language proficiency level, because air traffic controllers could feel that "office" staff are introducing new rules affecting their licences and careers
- make sure management is committed to the new requirements
- make sure operational air traffic controllers are involved in selecting a suitable method to test proficiency levels
- make sure that you have prepared a training program for air traffic controllers not achieving level 4 and allocate resources to train these air traffic controllers
- think about the consequences of someone (temporarily) losing his/her licence

An air traffic controller has to deal with a lot of things he or she can not control, like Law, ICAO, the regulator and language proficiency requirements. However it is daily practice. Then there are things such as development of the ATM system, procedures, prof checks and refresher training; on these he or she can have an influence to a certain extent.

After all, air traffic controllers must be equipped to do their jobs at a high level in a safe environment, confident that they *can* do it safely. The language proficiency requirements will certainly contribute to that.

