

Language Proficiency Certification System in Japan

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Summary

Japan has developed the Japanese Language Proficiency Certification System for Pilots according to ICAO Annex 1. Included in the System is a designation system, in which a qualified airline can both make the examination, and judge the language proficiency level of their pilots. The System was developed by and will continue to be implemented under the supervision of an ad-hoc committee composed of experts in language, and Air Traffic Control, etc.

Background (Introduction of ICAO Language Proficiency Requirement)

During the 1990s, there were several accidents caused by lack of communication between pilots and air traffic controllers. So ICAO decided to introduce the Language Proficiency Requirements and established the Proficiency Requirements In Common English Study Group (PRICESG) to progress the task of developing provisions related to standardized language testing requirements and minimum skill level requirements in the common use of language. In March 2003 ICAO adopted Annex 1 amendment 164 in which the Language Proficiency Requirements were included. As a result pilots who operate the international flight shall demonstrate that their ability to speak and understand the language used for radiotelephony communications is at least ICAO Language Proficiency Rating Scale Level 4 (Operational Level) after March 5, 2008.

Japanese Language Proficiency Certification System for Pilots

Outline of the System

Japan amended the Civil Aeronautics Laws and Regulations and developed the Japanese Language Proficiency Certification System for Pilots in April, 2006, according to ICAO Annex 1 amendment 164. Therefore the pilots who do not demonstrate the level 4 Language Proficiency may not operate the international flight after March 5, 2008. Japan will issue a certificate to pilots who have passed both the listening and interview examinations. In addition because there are a lot of pilots who belong to the airlines, Japan has developed a designation system, in

which a qualified airline can both make the examination and judge the language proficiency level of their pilots. The pilots who are judged to be not less than level 4 by the designated airlines are exempted from the tests by the government. The designated airlines may judge not only their own pilots but also pilots who belong to other aircraft operators because they are qualified to have the ability to judge in general whether the pilots have the common English Proficiency or not.

Moreover Japan has developed a system in which pilots who have graduated from the authorized (ATO) training organization or Civil Aviation College will be exempted from all or part of the examinations. In the Civil Aviation College, new training program for English proficiency was started last year. However unfortunately there is no ATO for English proficiency nor movement to file an application for ATO designation.

The Language Proficiency Level of Japan is the same as that of ICAO except for a change that even the Language Proficiency Level 5 pilots shall be re-evaluated every 3 years, not 6 years, because it is hard to distinguish the level 4 and level 5 clearly by using present judgment basis. Japan may establish the re-evaluation period of 6 years when the pilots of level 4 and level 5 are clearly distinguished. When the pilots are re-evaluated, they will be exempted from the listening examinations.

Designation of qualified airlines

Japan has established new requirements for designation of qualified airline in Civil Aeronautics Regulations. The requirements for designation are as follows.

- (1) the airline has an appropriate administrator.
- (2) the airline has appropriate standards to judge their pilots.
- (3) the airline has an evaluation officer designated by Minister of Land, Infrastructure, and Transport to judge their pilots.

At this time the designated airlines in Japan are: Japan Airlines (JAL) and All Nippon Airways (ANA). At present both of these airlines have their language proficiency examination program in full operation.

Examinations by the government

For Listening test there are 17 ATC dialogs and each dialog has 3 questions (Total of 51 questions). The pilots must choose the correct answer among 4 choices. Pilots who gain more than 70 % on the score will pass the examination. The pilots who have passed the listening examinations may take the interview examination. The interview examination consists of (1)warm up, (2)single picture card description, (3)ATC role play and its description, (4)sequence picture card description, and (5)wind down. Warm up and wind down do not affect the evaluation of the pilots language proficiency. The interview examination will take around 20 minutes. The pilots are evaluated from the aspect of (1)pronunciation, (2)structure, (3)vocabulary, (4)fluency, (5)comprehension, and (6)interaction in accordance with ICAO Annex 1 Attachment A. The Language Proficiency level in each item is evaluated and the least number leads to the pilot's conclusive Language Proficiency Level.

Ad-hoc Committee

The Japanese Language Proficiency Certification System was developed by, and will continue to be implemented, under the supervision of an ad-hoc committee composed of experts in language, and Air Transport Control, etc. The ad-hoc committee makes verification of examinations used in the designated airlines, gives advice to the Inspector of Airmen Licensing of Civil Aviation Bureau for testing and evaluation of the pilots, and other related items for Language Proficiency Certification in Japan.

Present Situation and Future Challenge

The first listening examination was carried out at the end of March, 2007, and first interview examination is planned to be carried out at the end of this May. The designated airlines (JAL and ANA) will continue to implement their Language Proficiency Certification program and judge around 5500 pilots by March 5, 2008, the effective date of Language Proficiency Requirement. Japan will review its system as necessary in the future as well.

Japan Airlines as Designated Airline

A Proactive Approach

In order to meet the requirements of the new English language proficiency regulation for international pilots, Japan Airlines has taken a proactive approach towards the implementation of an effective testing and training program. As an international airline company with a staff of more than 2,200 pilots, we could not afford to jeopardize our operations with a 'wait and see' approach. To be approved as a designated airline, we needed to demonstrate to the JCAB (Civil Aviation Bureau Japan) that we could administer the official test and train our staff to accurately evaluate the test results.

Under these circumstances and under the direction and guidance of the JCAB, Japan Airlines formed the ICAO Language Requirement Project Team in the spring of 2005 to implement a new testing and training program for our pilots.

One of the first tasks of the Project Team was to identify the components that would be needed to implement our own testing and training program. We soon decided that before we could begin to administer an official test we needed to 1) have the means to make a test, 2) train a staff of interviewers and evaluators, and 3) provide training for our pilots. Most importantly, we decided that it was necessary to have all our pilots take a Pre-Test.

The Need for Pre-Testing

The JAL Pre-Testing Program was a very important first step towards implementing our testing and training

program. In order to study and prepare for the official test, pilots needed to know what was being tested and how they were going to be tested. Pre-Testing also gave our interviewers and evaluators the opportunity to learn how to conduct an effective interview and how to accurately evaluate the six levels of English proficiency established by ICAO.

More importantly, the Pre-Test allowed us to evaluate our pilots before the official test. With more than 2,200 pilots to test, we needed to know how many of our pilots would be evaluated below Level 4. As any aviation language specialist will tell you, improving a pilot's English language proficiency does not occur overnight. The sooner we could evaluate our pilots, the sooner we could inform them of their level of proficiency and get them started on a training program.

JAL started its Pre-Testing Program in December, 2005. The scheduling of pilots is done in such a way that it does not affect the scheduling of flights.

Training of Staff

With the official testing scheduled to begin in October, 2006, it was important that we begin to prepare our initial group of interviewers and evaluators for certification. Our initial group of interviewers / evaluators was required by the JCAB to attend a four day SST (Standard Speaking Test) Workshop on interview and evaluation techniques. After the completion of this workshop, we then adapted the interactive elicitation technique for our test interviews.

The start of the Pre-Testing Program was timed so that it would coincide with the training of our interviewers and evaluators. Interviewers were able to work on their technique without the pressures of conducting an official test interview. To gain experience and accuracy, the initial Pre-Test interviews were evaluated as a group using the English Language Proficiency Evaluation Sheet that was approved by the JCAB.

Our first group of interviewers and evaluators was tested and certified by the JCAB in September, 2006. JAL now has a total of nine interviewers / evaluators who are JCAB certified to conduct interview testing and evaluate official test results.

Pilot Training – Getting Ready for the Official Test

As early as the spring of 2005, we began to inform our pilots of the new ICAO English Language Proficiency Requirements. We issued a booklet that introduced the new regulation, outlined the structure of the test, and showed pilots how to improve their language proficiency.

JAL also developed a system for training our pilots who were Pre-Test evaluated as Level 3 or Borderline Level 4. Pilots evaluated as Pre-Test Borderline Level 4 were issued a Self Study Guide. Pilots who pre-tested below Level 4 are given either a three day or one day counseling course. The three day course is given during a 6 week time frame so that we can more closely monitor the progress of each pilot.

Making of the Official Test - Sharing the Workload

In 2004, the JCAB formed an ad-hoc committee made up of aviation language experts, air traffic controllers, pilots, and test making experts to begin work on a model test that could be used as a means to evaluate the language proficiency of pilots. The making of the model test took more than one year to complete and was approved by the JCAB in March, 2006.

One of the requirements to become a designated airline is the ability to make an official test based on the JCAB approved model test. In order to ease the burden of test making, our Project Team worked together with the ANA Project Team. As a result of this collaboration, we were able to make a Listening Comprehension Test and an Interactive Interview Test. The Listening Comprehension Test now has a database with more than 100 dialogs (300 questions). The Interview Test required us to come up with single picture cards, ATC role-play scenarios, and sequence picture cards. The interviewer is able to choose from many different picture cards and ATC scenarios so that pilots will always receive a 'fresh' Interview Test.

Administration of the Official Test

As mentioned earlier, we were authorized as a designated airline by the JCAB to begin official testing on October 2nd, 2006. Since we only needed two hours to conduct the test, we were able to minimize the impact of scheduling by assigning pilots to take the test on days when they were already assigned another ground duty, for example, a meeting, medical check, etc.

Pilots are first required to take the Listening Comprehension Test. This test takes approximately 30 minutes to complete and is done by computer. Since this system is completely computerized, the results are automatically recorded and can be known immediately.

The pilot will then take the Interactive Interview Test only if he has passed the Listening Comprehension Test with a minimum score of 70%. The interviewer first enters the pilot's employee number into the computer database. The computer then automatically registers an electronic form of the evaluation sheet and sets up the recording device. The interviewer then begins the interview test. An MP3 voice recorder is used as backup in case there is a malfunction with the computer recorder.

Evaluations are not done during the interview. The role of the interviewer is to get a 'ratable sample' from the pilot. All evaluations are done after the interview has taken place. Only certified evaluators can log into a secured computer and access a pilot's interview file for evaluation.

Evaluation of the Interview – Ensuring Accuracy

Interviewers and evaluators play a very important role in the testing system. The interviewer must provide a 'ratable sample' for the evaluator. The evaluator must then listen to the interview and correctly evaluate the pilot's language proficiency level based on the six evaluation criteria. This is not always an easy task for one evaluator. Therefore, we have set up some guidelines to ensure accuracy and standardization of our evaluators and their evaluations. An interview test can go through as many as three stages before final confirmation at an evaluation meeting. This three step process is time consuming and slows down the confirmation of the interview but it does ensure that evaluations are done in such a way that the pilot is getting a higher accuracy on the correct evaluation of his proficiency level.

Looking Towards the Future

As of May, 2007, JAL has tested more than 800 pilots. Our goal is to have all of our pilots tested and compliant by March 5th, 2008.

With the completion of the initial testing and training of our line pilots, we will continue to focus our efforts on establishing a more complete English Language Training Program. We plan to develop an online interactive study program that will focus on the use of plain English and ICAO standardized phraseology in Flight Operations. Individual and group counseling will also be made available to line pilots who want to schedule language training on their off duty days.

March 5th, 2008 is fast approaching, but it should not be seen as a 'deadline'. We should see it as a 'lifeline' that we extend to our pilots, our air traffic controllers, and most importantly, our passengers, who expect and deserve only the highest level of flight safety that we can offer them.
