

# ICAO to Endorse Testing for Language Proficiency

Since the first ICAO symposium on the subject in 2004, disparities in the quality and appropriateness of language proficiency testing have been identified as obstacles to the effective implementation of ICAO's related safety objectives. Many States still lack the expertise and resources to implement ICAO Guidance regarding the selection or development of appropriate testing tools.

The Organization has therefore initiated a new collaborative endorsement process for aviation language proficiency tests, one that will leverage input from language testing experts and other stakeholders in order to provide States, operators, pilots and controllers with much higher confidence levels as they seek out programmes that will effectively meet their language proficiency objectives.

Aviation language testing for licensing purposes is currently not regulated. ICAO, as the only global aviation Standards body, has been deemed by language proficiency stakeholders as the sole Organization capable of fostering effective self-regulation in the industry.

ICAO has been working closely with a number of partnering bodies in this field since the issue of language proficiency shortcomings and their detrimental effects on safety came to the fore earlier this decade. These collaborating organizations include: the International Civil Aviation English Association (ICAEA); the International Federation of Air Line Pilots' Associations (IFALPA); the International Federation of Air Traffic Controllers' Associations (IFATCA); and the International Language Testing Association (ILTA).

Since the first ICAO symposium on the subject in 2004, disparities in the quality and appropriateness of language proficiency tests have been identified as obstacles to the effective implementation of ICAO's safety objectives in this field. The decision to establish a process to endorse language tests used for licensing purposes is the latest in a series of steps taken by ICAO since the issuance of its new Language Proficiency Requirements (LPRs) in March 2003. All of these measures have supported good practice in this field and serve to underpin the ongoing validity of the ICAO LPRs.

"It was essential in moving this initiative forward that a wide range of stakeholders come together to support the language test endorsement process," began Carolyn Turner, President of ILTA. Her association played an integral role in developing the endorsement concept. Charles Alderson,

a member of ILTA, had been doing research in the aviation language area within the Lancaster Language Testing Research Group (LLTRG). His results and discussions with other stakeholders led to the formation of an *ILTA Task Force* which culminated in a set of *Guiding Principles* to be used as baseline information for an eventual *ICAO/ILTA Joint Task Force*. This latter body had its first meeting in January 2010.

"Alderson's work in this area motivated our efforts," Turner continued. "We all became aware that the full range of stakeholders would need to work together - language testing experts, subject matter experts—in this case the operational stakeholders from IFALPA and IFATCA—and of course ICAO and ICAEA."

Difficulties still persist in the language proficiency area, primarily because many States lack the expertise and resources to implement the ICAO guidance established to assist them to oversee, select or develop appropriate tests. It was agreed by all concerned that States absolutely needed an independent entity to endorse English language testing programmes for them—in compliance with ICAO guidance.

The primary goal of the new testing endorsement initiative will be to provide a pool of testing systems of appropriate design and content, and which additionally meet well-defined standards of good practice from which States can then choose. More indirectly, ICAO's language test endorsements should help to promote the wider application of best practices throughout the proficiency testing profession.

The language test endorsement initiative has also been structured to be self-funding and self-sustaining. All efforts

will be made to reduce the costs for requesting test providers from developing States.

“The endorsement of tests in this field is a significant step which can only be warmly welcomed by both the operational and aviation language testing and training communities,” commented ICAEA President, Philip Shawcross. “Although the responsibility for selecting, approving and overseeing language testing is ultimately the responsibility of each national regulator, the authorities can often benefit from guidance and support as this activity is outside their core areas of expertise...”

Moreover, the many cases of sub-standard testing practice which have been reported to the ICAEA over the last year, in the lead-up to March 2011, are a cause of great concern and a phenomenon which definitely required remedial action.”

The new endorsement process will be both voluntary and confidential, but it will also be formative—providing test providers with constructive feedback and recommendations about how to enhance their exams. It is expected to gradually, but durably, enhance and extend standards of good practice across the board.

“The independent stakeholders in this endorsement process, under the auspices of ICAO, the professional federations IFALPA and IFATCA on one hand, and the international language testing experts of ILTA on the other, confer great strength and validity to the process,” confirmed Shawcross. “ICAEA, as an inter-professional association which has striven for the past twenty years to create links and develop synergies between the operational and linguistic communities, serves as a facilitator in this process. It is a source of great satisfaction for us to see that the integration of these different but complementary perspectives is becoming a reality within the framework of ICAO LPR implementation.”



Endorsement will be provided on behalf of ICAO for a maximum three year period. Subsequent endorsements will be subject to a much more streamlined review process. ICAO will be involved at all levels of the process and in every case will retain approval authority over final endorsements.

Testing providers will generally be subject to a two-phase process consisting of an initial review and, if needed, a final review. Endorsement will be granted only if recommendations made during the initial review have been implemented by the test provider. It could also be granted simply after the initial review provided that all requirements and criteria have been met at that stage.

IFALPA's members were both pleased and relieved to some extent by the endorsement announcement. Both the airline operators and the pilots who fly for them have been significantly committed to the education and re-education requirements necessary to improve English proficiency levels and industry safety.

Captain Rick Valdes, IFALPA Representative, and a founding member of ICAO's Proficiency Requirements In Common English Group (PRICE SG), noted however that although the airlines have spent considerable resources on retraining for

their pilot employees, they and their pilots have not always gotten the results from the process that some States and language education providers had assured them would be the case.

“One of the most serious concerns for IFALPA before this new ICAO endorsement mechanism was confirmed was that, in too many occasions, either States or companies who had provided the educational products were also conducting the testing,” noted Valdes. “Obviously these providers have a conflict of interest in this respect, in the sense that it is very much in their interest NOT to fail anyone. By having all tests endorsed by ICAO as we move forward, it adds a new level of independent oversight to this process that can only make it more effective.”

Valdes also remarked that the endorsement process will help to alleviate the ‘patchwork’ effect that the former regimen was engendering, leading to Level 4 English proficiency in one country being something very different from Level 4 in another country.

“No matter what country a pilot is operating in now, Level 4 English is going to mean Level 4 English,” he concluded. “This brings a degree of confidence to all crew members and will only serve to enhance the safety of operations globally.” ■