Responding to warnings that some states will miss the 2008 deadline for compliance with English language proficiency requirements for pilots and air traffic controllers, the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) has approved a resolution to allow more time for learning while pressing authorities to spell out their training and testing plans.

The ICAO resolution, adopted in late September during the 36th session of the ICAO Assembly in Montreal, also calls for establishment of globally harmonized language testing criteria.

Under previously existing requirements, approved in 2003, ICAO formally designated English as the language of international pilot-controller communications and established a March 5, 2008, deadline for completion of initial testing of pilots and controllers to ensure that they complied with English language proficiency requirements. Aeronautical station operators also must comply.

ICAO defines six levels of language proficiency, from "pre-elementary" at Level 1 to "expert" at Level 6, and says that pilots and controllers must demonstrate an "operational"

**ICAO has approved a series of proposals designed to minimize delays in compliance with its English language proficiency requirements.**

BY LINDA WERFELMAN

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# Speaking the Same Language

— Level 4 — proficiency or better to be permitted to conduct international flight operations (see "Minimum Requirements")**.**[1] Those who achieve Level 4 or Level 5 proficiency must undergo periodic re-testing; those at Level 6 are exempt from further tests.

Subsequent surveys of ICAO member states drew responses in large part from states in which English is a primary language; most of these states said that they were ready to meet the language proficiency requirements. However, ICAO audits found that a number of states had not established testing standards or developed plans for implementing the requirements.

When the ICAO Assembly convened in September, an introductory report from the Council of ICAO said that action was needed to "mitigate the impact of a delay in compliance by some states."[2] Nevertheless, the Council said, "While some states may not be compliant by March 2008, the applicability date establishes a milestone that helps to retain the focus required to implement the safety standards related to language proficiency as soon as practicable."

In a separate presentation to the Assembly, the International Federation of Air Traffic Controllers' Associations (IFATCA) said that many states were "not progressing at an acceptable pace with respect to timely implementation of language training" and that ICAO should establish and enforce "a method of accountability" for noncompliance. Other organizations and states asked ICAO to extend the March 2008 deadline or otherwise limit its

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scope. The proposals were not included in the Assembly's final action.

The ICAO resolution, which acknowledges the difficulties that some states have had in implementing language proficiency programs, as well as the need for more time to comply with the ICAO requirements, says that states that will not meet requirements by the March 2008 deadline should — by that date — develop implementation plans.

Those implementation plans should include a timeline for adoption of the language proficiency requirements in the national regulations and a timeline for establishment of language training and assessment capabilities, as well as a description of "a risk-based prioritization system for the interim measures to be put in place until full compliance … is achieved," the resolution says. In addition, the plan should describe procedures for "endorsing licenses to indicate the holders' language proficiency level," the resolution says.

Other provisions of the resolution call for states that will miss the deadline to "post their language proficiency implementation plans, including their interim measures to mitigate risk … on the ICAO Web site" before March 5, 2008. The states also must notify ICAO of the ways their operations do not meet the language proficiency standards and include information about those differences in their aeronautical information publications.

As long as a particular state has complied with these requirements, its pilots and air traffic controllers should be permitted to continue their work as usual, even without proficiency in English, the resolution says.

The resolution says that all states should allow pilots who do not meet ICAO language proficiency requirements to continue to operate in their airspace for up to three years after March 5, 2008, "provided that the states which issued … the [pilot] licenses have made their implementation plans available to all other contracting states."

The resolution also urges states "not to restrict their operators … from entering the

airspace under the jurisdiction … of other states where air traffic controllers or radio station operators do not yet meet the language proficiency requirements."

William R. Voss, president and CEO of Flight Safety Foundation, which for years has advocated development of English language proficiency requirements within aviation, said that although pilots and air traffic controllers from many states will need more time to become proficient in aviation English, "this is one of those rare occurrences where a failure to meet an aggressive target is better for safety than a more conservative approach.

"This is a vital safety issue. Many states will not make the [March 2008] deadline, but the system is far better off because people are trying to get it done."

### 'A Lot of Activity'

Elizabeth Mathews, a specialist in applied linguistics and the leader of the international group that developed ICAO's English language proficiency requirements, said that the delays in meeting the requirements are, at least in part, a result of the complexity of language training.

"But we're seeing various degrees of progress around the world regarding implementation," said Mathews, company director of Aviation English Services, which specializes in teaching aviation English. "What's very positive and encouraging is that there's a lot of activity in this area."

She praised the ICAO resolution as a workable solution that maintains pressure on states to comply with the language proficiency requirements while also maintaining the credibility of the ICAO standards.

United Airlines Capt. Rick Valdes, the International Federation of Air Line Pilots' Associations (IFALPA) representative to the ICAO study group that developed the language proficiency requirements, said he was relieved that the ICAO Assembly rejected proposals to abolish the March 2008 deadline, instead modifying the actions that states will be required to

## Minimum Requirements

Pilots, air traffic controllers and aeronautical station operators must demonstrate at least Level 4 proficiency by meeting the following criteria established by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO):

- "Pronunciation, stress, rhythm and intonation are influenced by the first language or regional variation but only sometimes interfere with ease of understanding;

- "Basic grammatical structures and sentence patterns are used creatively and are usually well controlled. Errors may occur, particularly in unusual or unexpected circumstances, but rarely interfere with meaning;

- "Vocabulary range and accuracy are usually sufficient to communicate effectively on common, concrete and work-related topics. Can often paraphrase successfully when lacking vocabulary in unusual or unexpected circumstances;

- "Produces stretches of language at an appropriate tempo. There may be occasional loss of fluency on transition from rehearsed or formulaic speech to spontaneous interaction, but this does not prevent effective communication. … Fillers are not distracting;

- "Comprehension is mostly accurate on common, concrete and work-related topics when the accent or variety used is sufficiently intelligible for an international community of users. When the speaker is confronted with a linguistic or situational complication or an unexpected turn of events, comprehension may be slower or require clarification strategies; [and,]

- "Responses are usually immediate, appropriate and informative. Initiates and maintains exchanges even when dealing with an unexpected turn of events. Deals adequately with apparent misunderstandings by checking, confirming or clarifying."

— LW

**Note**

1. ICAO. "ICAO Rating Scale for Operational Level 4." *Frequently Asked Questions About ICAO*. <www.icao.int/icao/en/trivia/peltrgFAQ. htm#lang>.

complete by March and allowing more time for learning English.

"The March 5 deadline was a must to get the process rolling, understanding that there might be a lot of states that are not going to be compliant by that date," Valdes said. "You've got to start somewhere. If you put it off for three years, then

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"Language testing and training is by and large an unregulated industry, or sometimes we call it a self-regulating industry … and it doesn't regulate itself very well," she added. "As a result, there's wide variety in quality and effectiveness of language training programs and also language testing programs."

In a presentation to the Flight Safety Foundation International Air Safety Seminar in October in Seoul, South Korea, Mathews said, "Around the world, there is a lot of bad language-teaching. … It's very much a buyer-beware market."[3]

Valdes agreed, adding that standardization and accreditation are part of any effective language training program.

"Today, ICAO English language testing and training does not have any accreditation process in place," he said. "Quite a few English-language schools have found a new medium to generate revenue, and even though they don't know anything about aviation, they are approaching the aviation industry as the means for the revenue, without understanding and taking the time to read the ICAO document that establishes the guidelines and the requirements. … Just because they've been teaching English for 50 years doesn't mean they understand the concept of aviation English."

ICAO is unlikely to monitor training, however, Barrette-Sabourin said, adding that the variety in the content of training programs, cultures and media, among other factors, would make oversight of training programs very difficult.

Training will improve to match the quality and demands of testing, she said, and ultimately, "good testing will have a 'washback' effect on training." The "washback effect" refers to the tendency of a test to influence the content of the related academic training.

### Implementation Workshops

Another provision of the resolution says that ICAO will develop a series of workshops to be held in each ICAO region to help states develop their implementation plans.

three years from now, we're going to be exactly where we are today."

Instead, the new guidelines will allow states to tell ICAO by the March 2008 deadline that "we're not going to be able to do it, this is the reason why, this is how we're going to fix it, and we should be compliant within the new three-year time frame," he said.

### Global Harmonization

Although other provisions of the ICAO resolution called for establishment of globally harmonized language testing criteria, the ICAO budget does not currently include funds for development of such a program. After funding is approved, the criteria will be developed, said Nicole Barrette-Sabourin, training officer at ICAO's Aviation Training Policy and Standards Unit.

Harmonized testing criteria will be "one of the most important ways that ICAO can provide support to member states on the implementation of these language proficiency requirements," Mathews said. "It's a response from ICAO to calls from many sectors of the industry."

In addition, the standardization of testing criteria is "probably the most important next step that ICAO can take," she said.

"There is a lot of bad language-teaching. … It's very much a buyer-beware market."

Training programs already are in place at some airlines and air traffic control organizations.

For example, Eurocontrol already has an English language proficiency test for air traffic controllers. The test includes two sections — an Internet-based listening comprehension test and an interactive speaking test, which uses visual and nonvisual communication. Eurocontrol says the two-part examination is designed to help Eurocontrol's member states comply with the new language rules and "ensure that all air traffic controllers in Europe will have a valid and reliable tool to measure their English language proficiency."[4]

Officials at China Southern Airlines describe the language proficiency requirements as "a major challenge," especially for airlines with large pilot populations.[5]

"It is rare for China Southern Airlines (CSN) to launch such a big training program," representatives of the airline said in a May presentation to an ICAO symposium on aviation language.

Their first step, they said, was a survey of the airline's 2,600 pilots to determine their familiarity with English. One factor was pilot age; younger pilots are more likely to have studied English in school, compared with pilots educated in the 1980s, when Japanese was the choice of most foreign-language students, they said.

By May 2007, the airline — working with training provider RMIT English Worldwide — had established English language training centers in 18 locations throughout China where CSN pilots are based, they said. Estimates were that, by the end of February 2008, 1,000 CSN pilots would reach Level 4 proficiency and 450 would reach Level 3; by the end of 2008, another 1,000 pilots were expected to reach Level 4.

Administrators of a program developed for pilots in Brazil found during a preliminary survey that pilots often complained of being "de-motivated" by English language materials encountered in previous English classes and frustrated by teachers who were unfamiliar with aviation and the crewmembers' routine.[6]

Adriana Lage Toma of the Advanced Training Organization in São Paulo said that weekly three-hour classes were offered at various times of day from Monday through Saturday, allowing pilots to choose sessions according to their work availability. After 125 class hours, tests found that 81 percent of the "low Level 3" students who began the program had progressed to Level 4; tests also found that 8 percent were evaluated at "high Level 3" and 3 percent had not achieved the minimum requirements to progress to the next class level.

"There is still a lot to be done in order to help those who … couldn't achieve the results designed," she said. "More research and study are taking place to find ways of assisting these students." ●

**Notes**

1. ICAO. *Manual on the Implementation of ICAO Language Proficiency Requirements*, Document 9835. 2004.

2. ICAO. *Assembly — 36th Session: Report of the Technical Commission on Agenda Item 30, A36-WP/359*. Sept. 26, 2007.

3. Mathews, Elizabeth. "ICAO Language Proficiency Requirements: The Value of Content-Based Language Training for the Aviation Industry." In *Sharing Global Safety Knowledge: Proceedings of the 60th Annual International Air Safety Seminar*. Alexandria, Virginia, U.S.: Flight Safety Foundation, 2007.

4. Eurocontrol. *Eurocontrol Launches English Language Proficiency Test for ATCOs.* <www.eurocontrol.int/corporate/gallery/content/public/docs/pdf/pressreleases/2007/070907_ELPAC_IANS.pdf>.

5. Yizhi, Zhou; Hesheng, Ou; Jingyu, Cao; Junqing, Li. "Aviation English Training Project for Pilots in China Southern Airlines." Paper presented to the Second ICAO Aviation Language Symposium, Montreal, May 2007.

6. Toma, Adriana Lage. "A Case Study — Training Aviation English to On-the-Job Brazilian Pilots." Paper presented to the Second ICAO Aviation Language Symposium, Montreal, May 2007.