IT TAKES TWO TO TANGO: LEARNING FROM EVERYDAY COMMUNICATION

Language skills are critically important in aviation. Whatever our level of fluency and confidence in English we can all continue to learn from even the most routine, everyday exchanges, says **Lynn Davis**.

KEY POINTS

- **Everyday communication in aviation has several characteristics that we need to be aware of, including automaticity, lack of body language and facial expression, inferencing, and the effects of stress and fatigue.**
- **There are several blocks to communication, including underarticulation, speed, accents, lack of clarity, vocabulary choice, and lack of consideration for the receiver.**
- **In an English exchange, arguably native Anglophones have greater responsibility than their non-Anglophone counterparts.**
- **We can all learn from – and improve – our everyday exchanges in aviation, no matter how routine.**

Safety in the sky depends on efficient, accurate and precise oral communication between ATC and pilots despite exchanges taking place over less than perfect frequencies with one or both parties working in a language which is not their mother tongue.

Communication involves remarkable and complex cognitive processes.

When we speak, our brains rapidly find the right vocabulary, arrange it in the correct order and synchronise the physical movements required to utter comprehensible sounds. This already demanding process becomes doubly complex in a non-native language.

Spoken communication is, by definition, instantaneous and transitory. We can't take time to review and improve our grammar or lexical choice. As listeners, we have to keep up with the speaker, recognise and decode the message immediately. Listening comprehension requires speedy processing but also places a load on the memory – you have to remember how the sentence started to make sense of the whole.

Processing speed can be critical in an emergency. We need regular practice and training to keep our reflexes sharp.

Characteristics of Everyday Communication

Familiarity breeds automatic response

Routine vocabulary in a well-known context is processed in a flash precisely because of its familiarity. Essentially, we know the script already. Frequently used terms become automatic rather than consciously controlled. We are on autopilot, not actively flying the linguistic plane. But, inevitably, we have fewer fully automatic processes in

a second language than in our native tongue.

Challenges arise at the point where effective communication is at its most important and the stakes are at their highest – the non-routine situation when swift, accurate communication is vital.

Verbal only

Working on radio frequency poses special linguistic challenges as we lack the support of body language and facial expressions that usually aid understanding. The words themselves may be indistinct or distorted if transmissions are less than crystal clear. We depend on words alone, albeit supplemented unconsciously by our tone of voice and vocal quality.

Inferencing

Anticipation and drawing inferences are normal elements of listening skills. We automatically anticipate what we will hear based on the context augmented by our expertise and experience. If information is missing, for example if there is a momentary glitch in transmission, we fill in the gaps, intuitively making an educated guess. As with all language processing, this is more challenging in a second language.

Sometimes, however, the message is not the one we expected. Some comedy is based on this very idea of mistaken anticipation – a sentence appears to be going in one direction, we anticipate what's coming next but are surprised and amused by a sudden change of tack. The humour is created by incongruity.

A simple example of such an unexpected linguistic twist is the story of two fish in a tank. One says to the other, "do you know how to drive this thing?" We imagine a fish tank until we realise we have to switch our mental picture to a different type of tank. Verbal gymnastics of this kind partly explain why humour is so difficult to appreciate in a second language.

Psychologist Professor Richard Wiseman has demonstrated how long it takes a listener to decode a joke. For instance, the following has a three-second time lag between hearing and reaction: 'A skeleton walks into the bar and orders a pint of beer and a mop'.

This illustrates how, even in our mother tongue, there is a time lag in processing unexpected information – we need a moment to recalibrate. Again, we see the particular linguistic challenge of the non-routine event.

Stress

Fatigue and stress impede our cognitive functioning, slowing down complex tasks. Stress, for instance associated with non-routine and emergency events, can affect language skills and communication, whatever our language level. Stress also conveys itself to our listener through our vocal quality and tone, with a knock-on effect on the listener.

It takes two to tango

This is obvious, but important: there are two sides to every conversation. Both participants contribute to successful communication. In an English exchange, arguably native Anglophones have greater responsibility than their non-Anglophone counterparts. After all, they have a wider range of linguistic resources at their disposal.

Native English speakers may not need English lessons, but they do need language awareness. They can fall into the trap of assuming that everyone else speaks English so they will be understood with no extra effort on their part. This isn't helpful. Perhaps ICAO should require native English speakers to have regular training in communication skills.

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Common Blocks to Communication

Every conversation, however routine, is an opportunity to develop and maintain good communication habits, which can then become reflexes automatically deployed even in emergencies. After every exchange we have an opportunity to reflect on the effectiveness of communication and what could be improved. Here are a few common issues.

Under-articulation

When listening to a flow of speech, it can be difficult to identify where one word ends and another starts. We may be forced to make a guess, which may seem to make sense but can in fact be wrong. Anyone who has ever misheard a song lyric has probably experienced this problem.

In English lessons we use real live traffic recordings giving a wealth of examples of indistinct speech. 'Lead-off lights' can sound like 'leader flights', 'CPR' seems to be an unfamiliar word 'seepeyar', and 'unconscious' sound remarkably like 'conscious' if not clearly articulated.

The simple remedy is to articulate clearly, especially maintaining clear word boundaries.

Speed

Stress often makes us speak faster than usual. Given the decoding time lag and issue of memory charge, rapid speech places extra pressure on the already stressed listener, creating a constellation of unnecessary added difficulty.

We don't need to speak at dictation speed, but maintaining a measured pace ultimately saves time, avoiding the need for repetition and reducing misunderstandings.

Accents

Pronunciation is an ICAO language testing criterion. For level 4, first language influence must 'only sometimes' interfere with ease of understanding. The bottom line is that accents must be comprehensible. But we should also consider regional native Anglophone accents, which can be just as strong and challenging to understand.

We naturally become used to familiar accents which seem less strong than

those we rarely hear, even if the speakers in fact have the same ICAO English level. Many of us are unaware of our own accents and how others hear us.

Specialist aviation English teachers know the importance of using listening materials illustrating a variety of regional and international accents. Improving pronunciation requires as much self-awareness and focused work as other aspects of language learning.

Clarity

Communication also has a cultural element. We English are notoriously indirect communicators. This is seen as polite. For example, a pilot request to ATC started: "Can I ask you if you would be kind enough to…" when "Please…" would have been better. In normal life this may be polite but on frequency we need clear, economical expression, remembering that controllers may be handling several conversations at a time.

Another peculiarly English tendency is minimising. When a pilot told ATC of "a small hiccup" and said "it would be nice" to have the police "on stand-by", ATC didn't know what was really happening or the appropriate response. If an English person says that he or she has "a bit of a problem", it may mean they are in real difficulty. We need to be aware of our own communication styles and work to be clear, precise and direct, eliminating extraneous verbiage to allow listeners to process information quickly and accurately.

Vocabulary Choice

Native speakers usually have a broader lexical range than even fluent non-natives, but may not know which choices are easier for others to understand. For example, an Anglophone pilot may not appreciate the unnecessary complication caused by the small but critical difference between 'passed out' (became unconscious) and 'passed away' (died).

Language learners are usually taught the more formal register and may not encounter informal or casual language so often. Correct, direct, formal language is necessary.

Consideration

Native and strong speakers sometimes show little consideration for the challenges faced by others with weaker, though still functional, skills.

If your message has not been understood, you help no-one by simply repeating the same words in the same way, even increasing in speed and tone tension as irritation sets in. Stress or embarrassment may force the listener to guess – and guessing can be dangerous. A quick YouTube search under 'angry ATC' reveals numerous examples of controllers speaking to pilots from all over the world but making no effort to articulate clearly or to use standard phraseology and sometimes becoming unacceptably rude.

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Conclusion

None of us can afford to be complacent about our communication skills, which need constant training and reinforcement to be available on demand in every situation. Above all, every conversation, however routine, is an opportunity to practise and to learn.

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