

Background

Inadequate language proficiency has played a role in accidents and incidents and this led ICAO to adopt strengthened language proficiency requirements for radiotelephony communications.

Both ICAO phraseologies and plain language are required for safe radiotelephony communications and both have to be tested under the new requirements in ICAO Annex 1 and Regulation (EU) No 2015/340.

ICAO has established minimum skill level requirements for language proficiency for flight crew and air traffic controllers and has introduced a language proficiency rating scale ranging from 1 to 6, Level 6 being the Expert level.

Controllers are required to demonstrate proficiency in the use of both phraseology and plain language. Operational Level 4 is the minimum level of language proficiency that needs to be demonstrated by a controller to provide an ATC service.

The language proficiency requirements in ICAO Annex 1 apply equally to native and non-native speakers.

Who needs to be tested?

All applicants for a student air traffic controller licence are required to demonstrate at least ICAO Operational Level 4 in English to be issued the licence.

Applicants for the Aerodrome Control Instrument air traffic control service in Malta (LMML) are required to demonstrate at least ICAO Level 4 in plain language in Maltese. This is required to ensure that they can communicate effectively with the emergency services on the ground should the need arise. The Maltese language is not used in radiotelephony communications with aircraft and only a plain language test in the Maltese language is conducted.

All new applicants for a Malta air traffic controller licence have to demonstrate the required proficiency in the English language and if applicable also in Maltese.

Who can conduct the test for plain language?

Language Proficiency Assessors are specifically authorised by the Director General for Civil Aviation.

Language Proficiency Assessors have specialised qualifications and training in language assessment as well as operational experience [law Commission Regulation 2015/340](#).

Who can test knowledge of ICAO phraseology?

ATC examiners authorised by the Director General for Civil Aviation to conduct tests for the issue of an air traffic controller licence/student air traffic controller licence or the issue of a rating in an air traffic controller licence can test air traffic controllers/student air traffic controllers or applicants for such licences in phraseology.

How is the plain language test conducted?

The test takes about 45 minutes. The candidate is graded on speaking and listening skills.

The test is administered face-to-face and voice-only and is split into three parts. It is conducted in the form of a one-to-one interview during which the Language Proficiency Assessor asks questions that refer to common, concrete and work-related topics set in a context appropriate to aviation.

The first few minutes of the test are devoted to making candidates feel at ease, and to enable the Language Proficiency Assessor to obtain autobiographical material.

During the first part of the test the Language Proficiency Assessor will present situations to the candidate by the use of audio material (recorded pilot/air traffic controller messages) and the candidate has to respond verbally to follow-up prompts delivered by the assessor. During this part of the test the communication is non-visual to ensure that the examiner does not give away any facial cues.

During the second part of the test the Language Proficiency Assessor will present situations to the candidate by the use of audio material (recorded pilot/air traffic controller messages) and the candidate has to respond multiple-choice questions. During this part of the test the communication is non-visual to ensure that the examiner does not give away any facial cues.

During the final part, the Language Proficiency Assessor asks open-ended questions on normal / abnormal / emergency situations set in an aviation context, and on human / environmental / health / technical or other aviation-related subjects.

Note: There are different scenarios for ab-initio pilots, professional pilots and air traffic controllers.

From the test the Language Proficiency Assessor, assesses the six ICAO language proficiency skills (comprehension, pronunciation, structure, vocabulary, fluency and interactions). The test does not specifically assess phraseology and it is not intended to check technical competence which is tested by the operational examiner although the applicant is expected to understand and react appropriately to situations applicable to their level of experience.

The assessment is conducted in accordance with the ICAO holistic descriptors. The result of the test is issued as a level according to the ICAO Language Proficiency Rating Scale. The scale runs from Pre-elementary Level (Level 1) to the highest level, Expert Level (Level 6) (See Appendix 1).

The result of the plain language test is the lowest rating among the six individual ratings. For example, a candidate whose language proficiency in the six skills is rated in the following way:

Holistic Descriptors	ICAO Level
Pronunciation	4
Structure	5
Vocabulary	5
Fluency	5
Comprehension	6
Interactions	5

The overall ICAO Level 4 rating is given – the lowest among individual ratings.

The applicant will **not** be informed of the result of the test immediately after the test session but successful applicants will be issued an assessment report by Transport Malta showing individual scores in pronunciation, structure, vocabulary, fluency, comprehension and interactions.

Are the tests recorded?

All tests are recorded for audit purposes and the recording can be used in case of an appeal.

What is the minimum requirement for air traffic controllers to use radiotelephony equipment?

ATC controllers must pass the test in ICAO phraseology and meet at least ICAO level 4 in English plain language.

In addition controllers in aerodrome control must meet ICAO Maltese plain language level 4.

Do I have the right of appeal in the case of a failure?

The applicant has the right of appeal. Appeals have to be made to the Director General for Civil Aviation within 14 days of receiving the result of the test. If there is an appeal the Chief Language Specialist will be appointed to hear the test audio recording to assess the applicant's proficiency. His/her decision will be final.

There is no appeal if the assessment level is at the operational level or above that is for levels 4 and 5.

There is a right of appeal when the assessment is below the operational level, that is levels 3 to 1.

How often does the test need to be conducted?

Candidates who demonstrate Expert Level (Level 6) proficiency are tested every 9 years.

Candidates who demonstrate level 5 proficiency are tested every 6 years.

Candidates who demonstrate level 4 proficiency are tested every 3 years.

How can I contact Transport Malta Civil Aviation Directorate to take the plain language test?

Arrangements for the test will be made by the ANSP.

Is there an application form I have to fill?

Yes. The application form for a language proficiency test can be downloaded from the Transport Malta website <http://www.transport.gov.mt>.

Applicants for a student air traffic controller licence have to provide proof of having completed satisfactorily the communications examinations and the RT practical test.

My English is not perfect. What happens if I do not get at least an Operational Level 4 assessment?

To get a level 4 assessment you do not need to speak English like a native speaker. You do not need perfect grammar to communicate effectively but you need to be safe and effective in radiotelephony communication.

If you do not get at least a level 4 assessment, the Language Proficiency Assessor will give you advice on the training requirements you need to get to that level.

PEL Notice No. 25 Version 8

Language Proficiency Tests for Student Air Traffic Controllers and Air Traffic Controllers

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Unless you get at least a level 4 assessment you will not be able to act as an air traffic controller or student air traffic controller.

Is there anything else I need to know?

Make sure that you take your Malta ID card or passport when you go for the test. The Language Proficiency Assessor will not conduct the test unless you present an official ID that includes a photo.

Guidance Material

- PEL Notice 72 – “ICAO LPR - Safety Promotional Material” for information on the scope and focus of the Rating Scale, Training aids and information on language proficiency in aviation.
- Commission Regulation 2015/340
- ICAO Annex 1
- ICAO Doc 9835

APPENDIX 1 Language proficiency rating scale: Expert, extended and operational levels

Level	Pronunciation Uses a dialect and/or accent intelligible to the aeronautical community	Structure Relevant grammatical structures and sentence patterns are determined by language functions appropriate to the task	Vocabulary	Fluency	Comprehension	Interactions
Expert 6	Pronunciation, stress, rhythm and intonation, though possibly influenced by the first language or regional variation, almost never interfere with ease of understanding.	Both basic and complex grammatical structures and sentence patterns are consistently well controlled.	Vocabulary range and accuracy are sufficient to communicate effectively on a wide variety of familiar and unfamiliar topics. Vocabulary is idiomatic, nuanced, and sensitive to register.	Able to speak at length with a natural, effortless flow. Varies speech flow for stylistic effect, e.g. to emphasize a point. Uses appropriate discourse markers and connectors spontaneously.	Comprehension is consistently accurate in nearly all contexts and includes comprehension of linguistic and cultural subtleties.	Interacts with ease in nearly all situations. Is sensitive to verbal and non-verbal cues, and responds to them appropriately.
Extended 5	Pronunciation, stress, rhythm and intonation, though influenced by the first language or regional variation, rarely interfere with ease of understanding,	Basic grammatical structures and sentence patterns are consistently well controlled. Complex structures are attempted but with errors which sometimes interfere with meaning.	Vocabulary range and accuracy are sufficient to communicate effectively on common, concrete, and work-related topics. Paraphrases consistently and successfully. Vocabulary is sometimes idiomatic.	Able to speak at length with relative ease on familiar topics but may not vary speech flow as a stylistic device. Can make use of appropriate discourse markers or connectors.	Comprehension is accurate on common, concrete, and work-related topics and mostly accurate when the speaker is confronted with a linguistic or situational complication or an unexpected turn of events. Is able to comprehend a range of speech varieties (dialect and/or accent) or registers.	Responses are immediate, appropriate, and informative. Manages the speaker/listener relationship effectively.
Operational 4	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. Can make limited use of discourse markers or connectors. 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.	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.

Language proficiency rating scale: Pre-operational, elementary and pre-elementary

Levels 4, 5 and 6 are on preceding page

Level	Pronunciation Uses a dialect and/or accent intelligible to the aeronautical community	Structure Relevant grammatical structures and sentence patterns are determined by language functions appropriate to the task	Vocabulary	Fluency	Comprehension	Interaction
Pre-operational 3	Pronunciation, stress, rhythm and intonation are influenced by the first language or regional variation and frequently interfere with ease of understanding	Basic grammatical structures and sentence patterns associated with predictable situations are not always well controlled. Errors frequently interfere with meaning.	Vocabulary range and accuracy are often sufficient to communicate on common, concrete, or work-related topics, but range is limited and the word choice often inappropriate. Is often unable to paraphrase successfully when lacking vocabulary.	Produces stretches of language, but phrasing and pausing are often inappropriate. Hesitations or slowness in language processing may prevent effective communication. Fillers are sometimes distracting.	Comprehension is often accurate on common, concrete, and work-related topics when the accent or variety used is sufficiently intelligible for an international community of users. May fail to understand a linguistic or situational complication or an unexpected turn of events.	Responses are sometimes immediate, appropriate, and informative. Can initiate and maintain exchanges with reasonable ease on familiar topics and in predictable situations. Generally inadequate when dealing with an unexpected turn of events.
Elementary 2	Pronunciation, stress, rhythm and intonation are heavily influenced by the first language or regional variation and usually interfere with ease of understanding	Shows only limited control of a few simple memorized grammatical structures and sentence patterns.	Limited vocabulary range consisting only of isolated words and memorized phrases.	Can produce very short, isolated, memorized utterances with frequent pausing and a distracting use of fillers to search for expressions and to articulate less familiar words.	Comprehension is limited to isolated, memorized phrases when they are carefully and slowly articulated.	Response time is slow and often inappropriate. Interaction is limited to simple routine exchanges.
Pre-elementary 1	Performs at a level below the Elementary level.	Performs at a level below the Elementary level.	Performs at a level below the Elementary level.	Performs at a level below the Elementary level.	Performs at a level below the Elementary level.	Performs at a level below the Elementary level.

Note: The Operational Level (Level 4) is the minimum required proficiency level for radiotelephony communication. Levels 1 through 3 describe Pre-elementary, Elementary and Pre-operational levels of language proficiency, respectively, all of which describe a level of proficiency below the ICAO language proficiency requirement. Levels 5 and 6 describe Extended and Expert levels, at levels of proficiency more advanced than the minimum required Standard. As a whole, the scale will serve as benchmarks for training and testing, and is assisting candidates to attain the ICAO Operational Level (Level 4)