

SEPTEMBER 2022



RTF COMMUNICATION



THE SAFETY ROLE
OF NATIVE
ENGLISH SPEAKERS

Contents

Background	03
Methodology	04
Respondents	05
Is aviation safety compromised?	07
Would training help?	08
Would testing help?	09
Factors for safe RTF	10
Personal experiences	11
Can ICAO / regulators help?	12
Compare: native vs non-native	13
Comments	15
Further information	16



Background

An ICAO review of 28,000 incident / accident reports found that communication was a factor in over 70% of the problems. In 2008, ICAO introduced the *Language Proficiency Requirements* to improve aviation safety. These standards aim to ensure that ALL pilots and controllers working in an international environment are able to communicate clearly in English.

These English language requirements apply to ALL personnel - including Americans, Canadians, British and Australians. In reality though, the burden of responsibility has fallen on English as a Second Language (ESL) speakers. They have had to invest considerable time, money and effort into improving and maintaining their level of English. They have been required to pass Aviation English exams in order to retain their right to work, with the majority having to be re-tested every 3-5 years.

Native English speakers, by and large, have been unaffected.

But ICAO did not intend this to be the case. The *Manual on the Implementation of ICAO Language Proficiency Requirements* states:

"...native and other expert users of English can acquire strategies to improve cross-cultural communications..."

Native speakers in particular have *"an ethical obligation to increase their linguistic awareness"* and *"...focus on strategies that aid comprehension and clarity"*.

This study considers the role of native English speakers in safe international RTF communications.

Methodology

Pilots, controllers and other aviation personnel were invited to complete an online **questionnaire**.

The questionnaire was only provided in the English language and was open to replies from 12 August - 3 September 2022.

The invitations and the link were sent by email as well as distributed by social media. Respondents were encouraged to share the questionnaire with their friends, colleagues and professional networks. No rewards or incentives were offered for completing the questionnaire.

As well as multiple choice questions, respondents were also able to leave comments throughout.

All questions were mandatory with the exception of those asking for personal information (name, email, nationality, etc.) which were optional.



Respondents



NUMBER OF RESPONDENTS: **1974**



77 DIFFERENT FIRST
LANGUAGES

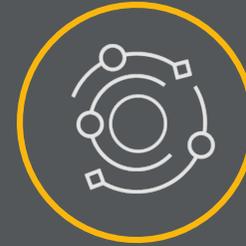
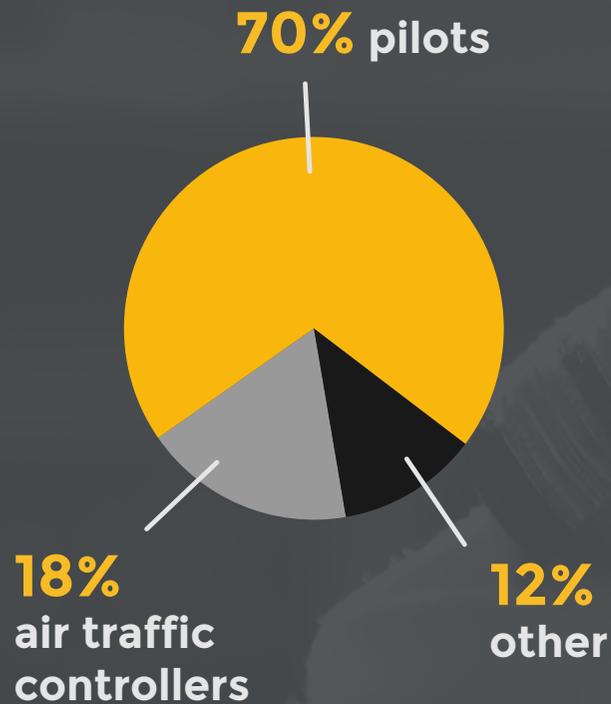


112 COUNTRIES

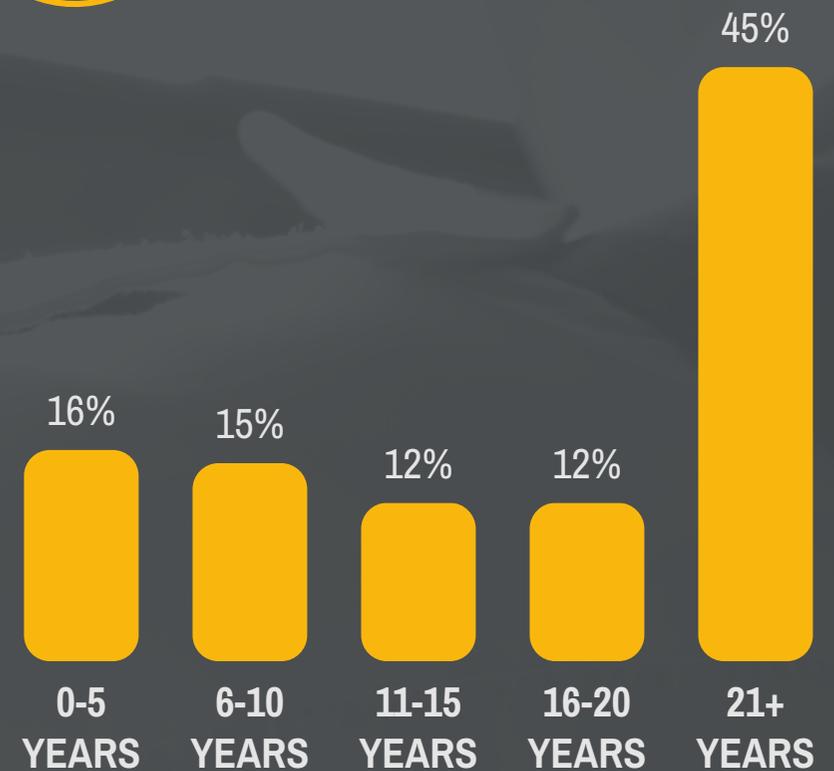
Respondents



PRIMARY PROFESSION IN AVIATION



YEARS EXPERIENCE WORKING IN AVIATION



Q.1

Do you think that aviation safety is ever compromised because of the way native speakers use English?

Yes 65%

No 24%

I don't know 11%

Usage of idiomatic phrases that people of foreign culture may not understand
RUSSIAN PILOT, 3 YEARS

Often native speakers get disappointed if you don't promptly catch the meaning of the message and when you ask to repeat it they simply do that; same words, same speed and rhythm of the speech. That does not help the listener nor safety
ITALIAN PILOT, 35 YEARS

The use of slang or dialects is detrimental to safety
SPANISH PILOT, 33 YEARS

Definitely. I know for a fact that many non native speakers are intimidated by the way native speakers use the language and they're terrified from both not understanding them and also being embarrassed in front of those around them
KUWAITI INSTRUCTOR, 2 YEARS

Rate of speech way above the recommended 100 wpm, use of slang and strong accents
BRITISH AVIATION ENGLISH TRAINER, 12 YEARS

Native speakers often do not adhere to standard phraseology, which can intimidate non-native speakers into guessing what is being said. Oftentimes non-native speakers only know standard phraseology and very little colloquial English. This lends itself to miscommunication and dangerous situations
US CONTROLLER, 30 YEARS EXPERIENCE

As a pilot, I can tell you that when a native-speaking pilot and a native-speaking ATC talk, the foreign pilots usually don't understand most of it
ITALIAN PILOT, 30 YEARS

THEY USE SLANG INSTEAD OF STANDARD PHRASEOLOGY
SPANISH PILOT, 30 YEARS

The safety is compromised when you don't follow the standard fraseology
ARGENTINE PILOT, 35 YEARS

Native speakers don't even try to speak more clear, to let foreigners to understand
UKRAINIAN PILOT, 33 YEARS

They talk to the rest of world like they do with their childhood best friend, sitting down in a pub with beers on the table. They even don't take into consideration about experience, background, English level, fatigue and stress pilots could face with
ITALIAN PILOT, 10 YEARS

Depends from where they are. UK is perfect, USA is just a nightmare
FRENCH PILOT, 33 YEARS

Monolingual Native speakers are not aware of the challenges of understanding and speaking a foreign language
BRITISH EXAMINER, 30 YEARS

Personally I have missed many instructions many time forcing the ATC to repeat. Really UNSAFE
ITALIAN PILOT, 38 YEARS

Native speakers compromise safety when they assume everybody speaks and understand same level as they
MEXICAN PILOT, 40 YEARS

Non standard phraseology is very common
COLOMBIAN PILOT, 22 YEARS

Q. 2

Would it be useful to provide **TRAINING** to help native English speaking pilots and controllers communicate more effectively, especially with non-native English speakers?

Yes, good idea 89%

No, it's not necessary 8%

I don't know 3%

Providing training to native English speaking pilots and controllers would raise awareness of the difficulties of comprehensiveness that arise when non-native speakers interact with them
ARGENTINE INSTRUCTOR, 7 YEARS

Ongoing training that explains how non-standard phraseology comes through to non-native speakers could be helpful. Once professionals understand why they need to adhere to the requirements, they are more apt to do so
US CONTROLLER, 30 YEARS

Native speakers have never tried how it is difficult to work in a foreign language
ITALIAN PILOT, 36 YEARS

Great idea, maybe start with making them aware of how they're endangering the industry by not recognizing that they also need to chip in
COLOMBIAN PILOT, 22 YEARS

It would be useful since it would be a true integration and acceptance of a single style of English worldwide, it would make communications between natives and non-natives more effective
COLOMBIAN PILOT, 10 YEARS EXPERIENCE

Yes, absolutely support that idea - awareness is needed on the specifics of RTF comms with non-native English speakers
BULGARIAN CONTROLLER, 22 YEARS

Yes, and the training should be conducted by non-native speakers
ITALIAN PILOT, 40 YEARS

BUT IT MIGHT BE HARD TO CONVINCE THE "NATIVES" THAT THEY MUST LEARN AND ADAPT
SWISS CONTROLLER, 35 YEARS

I fully support this idea. To make them understand the difficulties that persons that are not that proficient in English face, and to try to make them use phrases that are more easy to comprehend
MACEDONIAN CONTROLLER, 27 YEARS

THE SUBJECT SHOULD BE INCLUDED AS A MUST IN ANNUAL TRAININGS (AS PART OF CREW RESOURCE MANAGEMENT) IN COMMERCIAL OPERATIONS AND AS A GOOD PRACTICE INFORMATIVE/ADVISORY MATERIAL FOR THE GENERAL AVIATION
LATVIAN CONSULTANT, 27 YEARS

Very good idea to get both sides to work together for the same goal
ALGERIAN PILOT, 17 YEARS

It is difficult to change everyday behavior
CROATIAN CONTROLLER, 30 YEARS

I do not think it's a question of training. I think it's just a question of attitude
GREEK PILOT, 4 YEARS

A MUST
SPANISH PILOT, 25 YEARS

A short but formal course would be a great idea in my opinion. I introduce the idea of conscious language use in CRM seminars, but it is little more than a discussion
BRITISH PILOT, 18 YEARS

They need to familiarise themselves with different accents of non-native English speakers pilots and controllers
MAURITANIAN EVALUATOR, 14 YEARS

Q. 3

Most native English speaking pilots and controllers are automatically 'signed off' as ICAO Level 6. Do you think it would be useful to **TEST** the Aviation English communication skills of native English speaking pilots and controllers?

Yes, good idea 69%

No, it's not necessary 25%

I don't know 6%

We should all be tested
IVORIAN ATCO, 7 YEARS

YES, IT IS EXTREMELY IMPORTANT TO CHECK ENGLISH OF NATIVE SPEAKERS THOROUGHLY BEFORE GIVING THEM LEVEL 6
INDIAN PILOT, 5 YEARS

Those who will be well understood by non native English speakers will have the best rank
CAMEROONIAN ATCO, 18 YEARS

In Spain we have to do a test similar to the English one for rate our Spanish level , so they don't give us the level 6 just for being a native speaker
SPANISH ATCO, 5 YEARS

This kind of tests would help to standardize and check several facts affecting aeronautical communications such as willingness to communicate, standard and non-routine, non-native English speakers communications comprehension
COLOMBIAN ATCO, 20 YEARS EXPERIENCE

I'm not sure if testing them is a solution right now, I would train them first and then check if the test is needed or not
COLOMBIAN ATCO, 2 YEARS

Very little upside. The rules are already in place
US PILOT, 37 YEARS

Should be a good idea to test how they are understood by a non native ICAO Level 4 English speaker
ITALIAN PILOT, 19 YEARS

One standard for all
BRITISH PILOT, 50 YEARS

Being a native English speaker doesn't automatically make them 6 within aviation standards
PORTUGUESE PILOT, 15 YEARS

It would have to be a completely different test to those that we use in aviation at the moment
CZECH INSTRUCTOR, 13 YEARS

Yes, even if they are native, they need to use phraseology correctly
BRAZILIAN PILOT, 20 YEARS

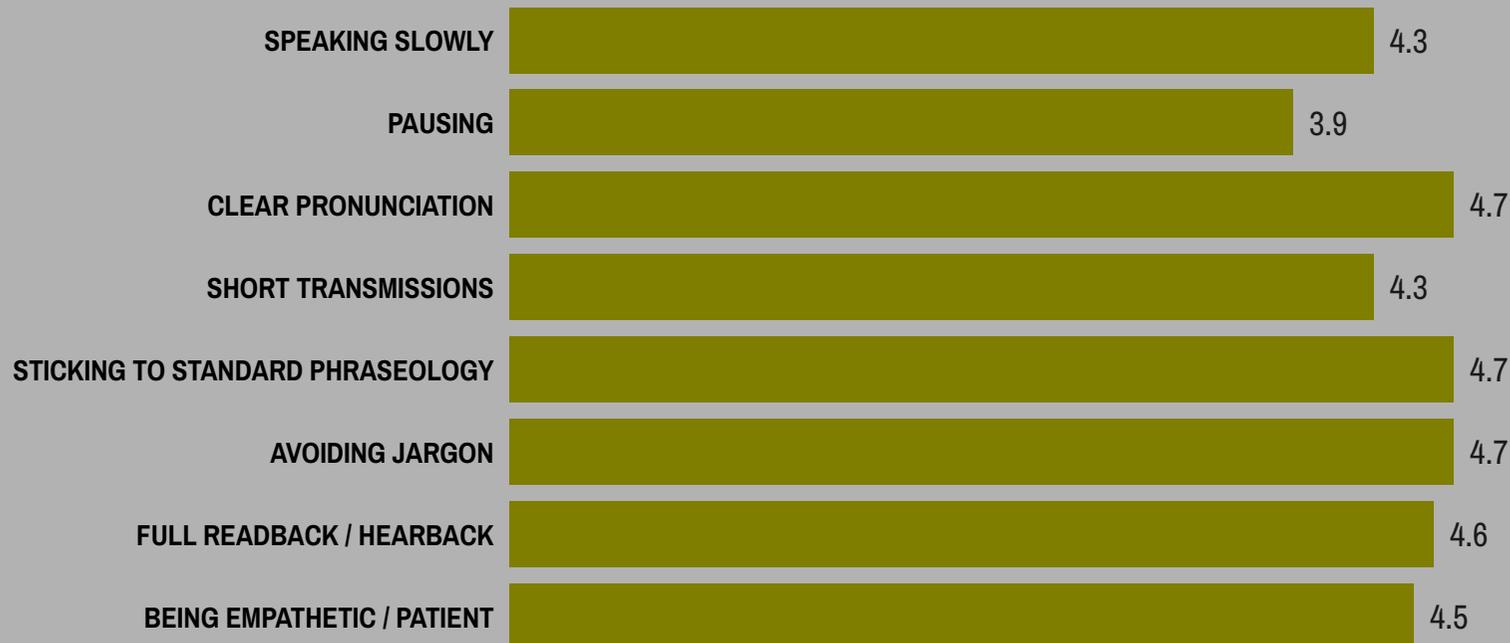
To add one test more , for what? It will be good to open this problem during CRM or RTF communication courses
RUSSIAN PILOT, 35 YEARS

ICAO English Level would not assess the use of standard phraseology, and therefore it would not solve the issue I mentioned. I would rather focus on training them in using standard phraseology and improving radio skills and discipline
COLOMBIAN ATCO, 7 YEARS

IT COULD BE USEFUL JUST TO TEST IF THEY ARE ABLE TO USE STANDARD RADIO COMMUNICATION, NOT ENGLISH SPEAKING SKILLS
ITALIAN PILOT, 3 YEARS

Q.4

How important are these factors for safe RTF communication? (1 = not important, 5 = very important)



1 = not important,
5 = very important

Being aware that English is no longer American or British or so on
KUWAITI INSTRUCTOR, 2 YEARS

A good dose of humility! English-speaking pilots are not owners of the world and pilots do not fly only and exclusively in places where English is spoken as the national language. Just imagine if from a certain period onwards native English-speaking pilots were suddenly obliged to speak in another language
SWISS PILOT, 15 YEARS

YES I BELIEVE IT SHOULD BE MANDATORY FOR A NATIVE SPEAKER TO BE AT LEAST HELPFUL TO A NON- NATIVE SPEAKER. HAVING THE ATTITUDE OF "WELL IT WOULDN'T BE MY FAULT" NEEDS TO CHANGE.
IRISH ATCO, 33 YEARS

BE ALWAYS CALM
GREEK PILOT, 5 YEARS

To be polite
RUSSIAN PILOT, 30 YEARS

Human touch is very important
INDIAN PILOT, 32 YEARS

Most important: sticking to Standard Phraseology
SPANISH ATCO, 43 YEARS

They have to be more polite with the non native speakers
PANAMANIAN PILOT, 20 YEARS

Speak slowly. Why speak quickly and then have to repeat the message?
US PILOT, 37 YEARS

Whatever you wanna say, ask or state be short and precise
SERBIAN ATCO, 22 YEARS

Q.5

Personally, have you ever had any RTF problems because of the way native English speakers communicate?

Yes, many times, they use non-standard phraseology, and speak in different accents and different speeds, causing confusion in communication
COLOMBIAN PILOT, 23 YEARS

PEOPLE ASSUME A PERCENT OF THE COMMUNICATION, YOU HAVE TO GUESS THE REST OF IT, THEN THE RECEIVER TELLS YOU IF YOU ARE RIGHT OR WRONG
SPANISH PILOT, 40 YEARS

I know of many incidents in which ATC spoke too quickly and didn't have patience with EFL speakers. ATC just needs to slow down and be patient. It would save them time and eliminate confusion that might cause an incident
US INSTRUCTOR, 15 YEARS

I did, especially when flying in the UK. They talk very fast and incomprehensible, using a lot of unfamiliar terms and talk by slang
SERBIAN PILOT, 18 YEARS

Just go in NY or London and wait ... the event !
ITALIAN PILOT, 22 YEARS

Yes many times flying to US and northern England
ITALIAN PILOT, 30 YEARS

Yes, many times, specially in unexpected situations
SPANISH ATCO, 24 YEARS

One solution for example is to request : PROGRESSIVE TAXIWAY CLEARANCE
FRENCH PILOT, 31 YEARS

Absolutely YES!!!
ITALIAN PILOT, 29 YEARS

Sometimes (I'm answering as a native speaker). I have, in the past thought "how on earth is that person going to understand that?" referring to a non native speaker.
IRISH CONTROLLER, 33 YEARS

Yes i did, due to the ridiculously fast speech of an atc operator
ITALIAN PILOT, 40 YEARS

Of course, in more than one occasion
ITALIAN PILOT, 30 YEARS

Of course, many times when the controller speaks too fast or use non standard phraseology
COLOMBIAN PILOT, 9 YEARS

The U.S. and Aussie controllers use more non-standard colloquial and idiomatic terms
ITALIAN PILOT, 25 YEARS

Yes, USA. Rapid comms. Lack of empathy
BRITISH PILOT, 50 YEARS

Yes, many times due to high rate of speech and poor pronunciations
PILOT SINGAPORE, 21 YEARS

Several times I didnt understand what NES said to me. I had to guess and ask again to clarify their intentions, I was embaressed
SERBIAN CONTROLLER, 22 YEARS

Especially in the US, where jargon and slang is part of their standard way of communication
GERMAN PILOT, 10 YEARS

Sure. Multiple. Some do not even bother to speak distinctly, assuming that the rest of the world should understand everything they say. Non-native English speakers, being aware of their limitations, are more attentive
BULGARIAN CONTROLLER, 38 YEARS

I had and still do. Sometimes native English speaker crews ask for clarification to native controllers. What can I expect for myself?
SPANISH PILOT, 32 YEARS

Q.7

Would it help if ICAO and other regulators / aviation associations supported this issue?

Yes, definitely 74%

Maybe 24%

No 2%

ICAO cannot regulate anything. ICAO just recommends
CANADIAN PILOT, 40 YEARS

My hunch is the best way to address the issue may be reducing work-load...
GERMAN PILOT, 25 YEARS

Only if the same is done for other ICAO languages
FRENCH PILOT, 32 YEARS

However, speaking from experience for regulators and aviation associations, language issues are a pain in the a*** and a burden...so you will not get the support you need. It is also a money issue...
GERMAN PILOT

ICAO should require native English speaking pilots to understand non native speakers to a certain extend and adapt their communication to the other party
DUTCH PILOT, 40 YEARS EXPERIENCE

I fear ICAO will never be of a big help (as acting only on States decisions and on full consensus)
SWISS ATCO, 35 YEARS

I don't know why the problem has not been addressed until now
ITALIAN PILOT, 45 YEARS

WHEN A NON ENGLISH SPEAKER REQUESTS 'SPEAK SLOWLY' OR 'SAY AGAIN' AND THE NATIVE SPEAKER GETS INPATIENT AND ANGRY, THERE SHOULD BE CONSEQUENCES FOR HIM/HER
TURKISH PILOT, 7 YEARS

ICAO is where it starts, with the publication of clear Standards and Recommended Practices
CANADIAN PILOT, 50 YEARS

It will bring to focus a big issue which has remained out of focus and has been cause of aviation accidents
PAKISTANI TRAINER, 37 YEARS

I think they already do it!
BULGARIAN ATCO, 25 YEARS

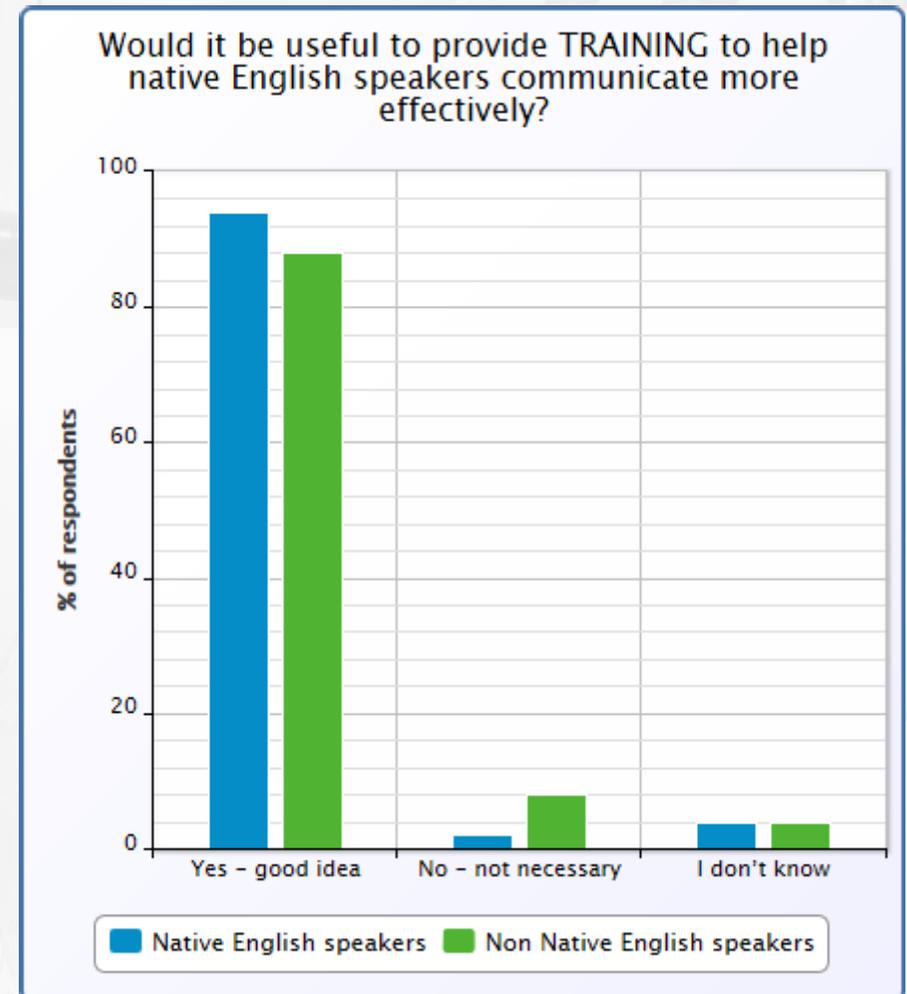
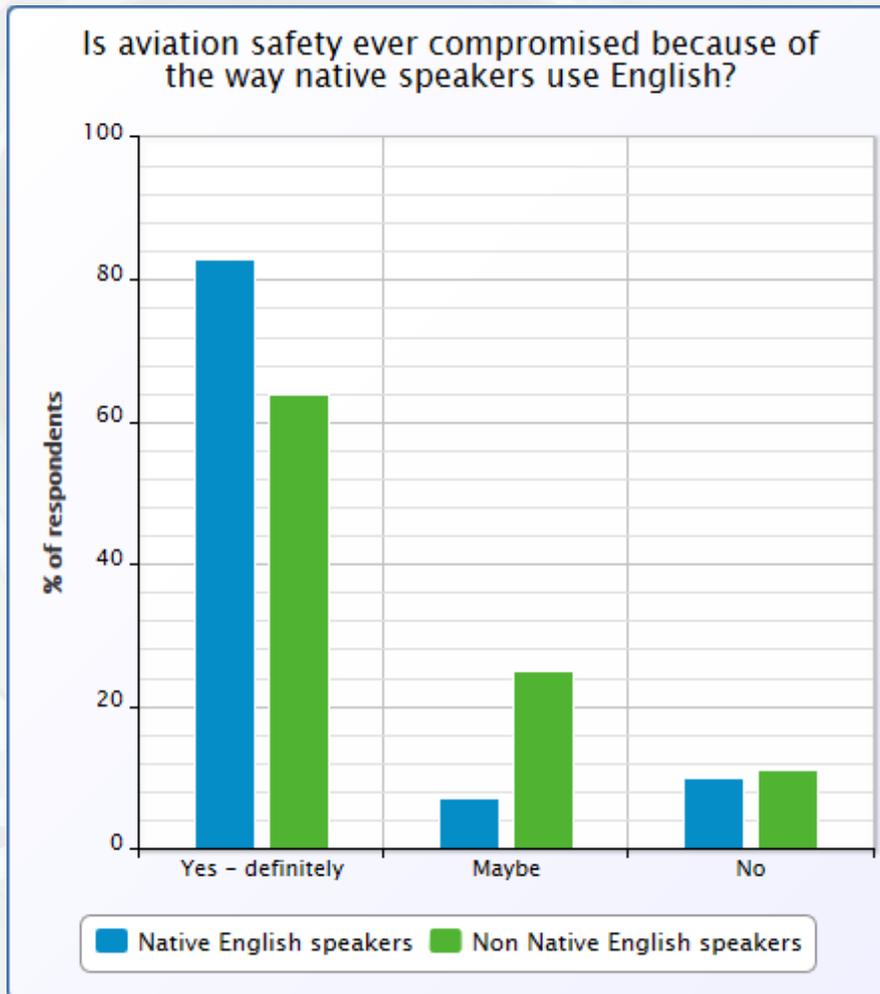
The Flight Academies should teach English communication and Aviation English at the same time that their students are learning pilot's career
COLOMBIAN PILOT

International airports have to communicate in English only. Even with local carriers and ground services. That will lift up situation awareness!
RUSSIAN PILOT, 28 YEARS

I see it as a subject that must be introduced from initial training for pilots or air traffic controllers
ITALIAN PILOT, 35 YEARS

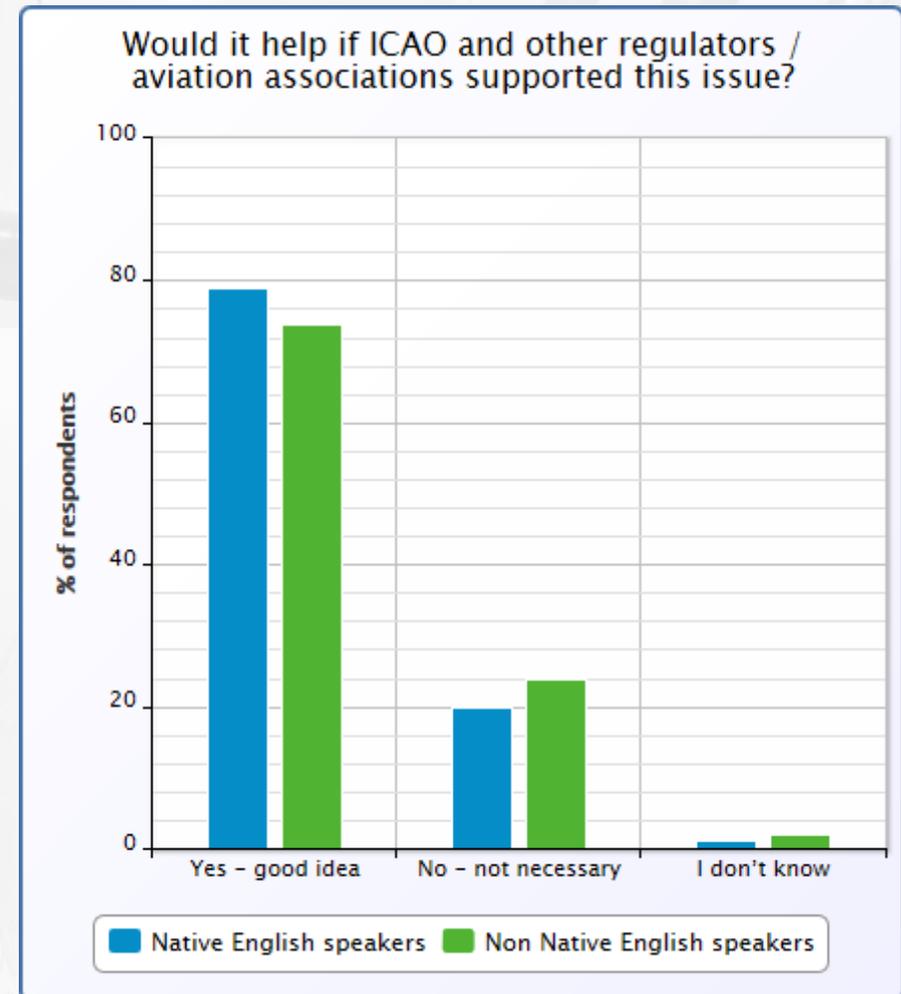
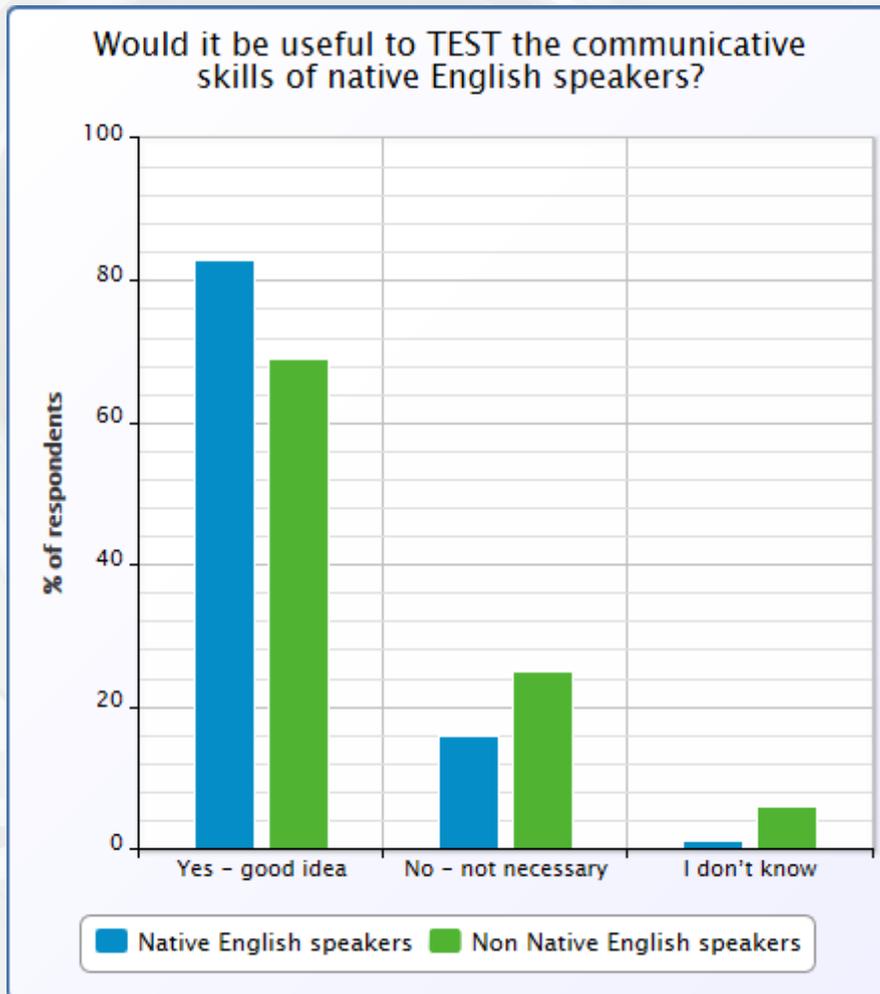


COMPARE THE ANSWERS FROM **NATIVE** ENGLISH SPEAKERS WITH THE ANSWERS FROM **NON-NATIVE** ENGLISH SPEAKERS





COMPARE THE ANSWERS FROM **NATIVE** ENGLISH SPEAKERS WITH THE ANSWERS FROM **NON-NATIVE** ENGLISH SPEAKERS



Q. 8

Comments / Ideas?

I would prefer this to remain anonymous to avoid problems with my firm
SPANISH ATCO, 23 YEARS

Happy to see "communication" being identified as a key tool in enhancing safety and efficiency in Aviation

INDIAN PILOT, 22 YEARS

Is time to correct things safety depend from those words ...!

ITALIAN PILOT, 22 YEARS

I really hope a regulatory countermeasure exists in regards to controllers that don't perform their job professionally and somehow feel untouchable. I strongly recommend severe actions as it has become really intolerable !!

UAE PILOT, 27 YEARS

I am retired by now (after 33 years in ATC). I find it great that you point your finger on a safety issue that didn't get the needed attention so far!
SWISS CONTROLLER, 35 YEARS

I think that is one of the most serious problems for not native English pilots

ITALIAN PILOT, 3 YEARS

Is there any official phrase that could be used (from the initial contact) to let ATC controllers know that the pilot is not a native English speaker?... As for example there is one for the 'student pilot' in the UK and USA
DOMINICAN REP., PILOT, 25 YEARS

I don't think that that native English speakers should be assessed, but I believe it would be useful to have some kind of theory on how to communicate with people that are not native English speakers more effectively.

BOSNIAN ATC, 20 YEARS

It's not all about native speakers, we (non-native) speakers also need to develop our skills to provide a better service in English
KYRGYZ ATCO, 10 years

Keep in mind the third party: A native-English pilot and a native-English controller may be understanding each other well, but a foreign pilot listening on the same frequency to maintain situational awareness may be "lost" in non-standard phrases and rapid speech patterns
GERMAN PILOT, 25 YEARS

There is a big expectation bias that the way "we" speak is the right way and others need to conform

INDIAN PILOT, 20 YEARS

An ATC Clearance is like a contract where both sides must fully understand (and then execute/work along) this clearance/contract. If no mutual perfect understanding is achieved, safety is compromised. Even if it sounds "cool" and kind of sexy to speak on the frequency your native English fast, using colloquial and non-standard local terms, this hampers the good mutual comprehension. Both sides (native and non-native English speakers) must show good will and mutual consideration to achieve perfect comprehension = SAFETY...

SWISS ATCO, 35 YEARS

TEST ALL

SERBIAN ATC, 22 YEARS

Further information

PAUL STEVENS

CEO, MAYFLOWER COLLEGE

paul@maycoll.co.uk

www.maycoll.co.uk | www.SayAgainEnglish.com