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Proficiency Test in English Language for Air Traffic Controllers

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Abstract

The Proficiency Test in English Language for Air Traffic Controllers (PELA Test) was developed in recognition of the need for (student) air traffic controllers to demonstrate proficiency in English when standard International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) Radiotelephony (R/T) phraseology proves inadequate for effective aeronautical communication. Completed in 1994, the PELA Test underwent a period of evaluation in 1995-97 with almost three hundred student controllers from six States.

This edition describes the changes made to the PELA Test arising from comments made by the first User Group Meeting in February 2001.

The PELA Test is fully compatible with the requirements of ICAO's Language Proficiency Standard - Level 4, Operational (detailed in the Guideline to Annex 1, 'Personnel Licensing' [2004]).

The actual deliverable is the PELA Test, available under conditions specified in a licence agreement between EUROCONTROL and European Civil Aviation Conference (ECAC) Member States. However, a sample test can be freely consulted.

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Oral responses	Interactive	Appropriacy	Trialling
Listening	Language proficiency	Test validity	Interlocutor
Effective communication	Test security	Rater	Candidate

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1 1	15 10 1997		Revised first edition editorial changes, inclusion of en-route version	All
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2 2	17 11 2003		Proposed Issue of third edition, for HRS-PSG Meeting end of January 2004 document configuration and editorial changes	All
3 0	05 03 2004	040201-03	Released Issue of third edition (agreed on 28-29 01 2004) final configuration adjustments	All

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SUPPORTING MATERIAL

The deliverable HUM ET1 ST05-DEL05, 'Proficiency Test in English Language for Air Traffic Controllers', consists of the following material

- this guidance document, 'Proficiency Test in English Language for Air Traffic Controllers' (HUM ET1 ST05 3000-GUI-01), providing information about the PELA Test, and
- a number of annexes:
 - Annex 1: 'PELA Test' (HUM ET1 ST05.3000-TST-01)
Complete test version - restricted distribution.
 - Annex 2: 'Guidelines for Administrators of the PELA Test' (HUM.ET1 ST05 3000-GUI-02)
 - Annex 3: 'Training Package for PELA Test Raters' (HUM ET1 ST05 3000-GUI-03)
Restricted distribution.
 - Annex 4: 'Training Package for PELA Test Interlocutors' (HUM ET1.ST05.3000-GUI-04)
Restricted distribution
 - Annex 5: 'PELA Test Sample Version' (HUM.ET1 ST05.3000-EXP-01)
 - Annex 6: 'Report on the Evaluation Phase of the PELA Test' (HUM ET1 ST05.3000-REP-01 - EATCHIP, 1997 - T4).

Note As explained in further detail in Section 8.3 of this document, between 1992 and 1999 the PELA work was adopted by the EATCHIP1 Programme and the above numbering was allocated to the PELA products. Since 1999 the project is being developed as part of the Training Sub-Programme of the EATM(P)¹ Human Resources Programme under Work Package number HRS/TSP-005 However, for simplification purposes the former EATCHIP reference system has been maintained Nevertheless, it is planned that some of the above-listed documents will be revised, the new HRS/TSP-005 numbering will be then allocated to those updated publications

All test and information materials are currently available in CD-ROM format using MS Word 97 SR-2 and Corel Draw 9 0 software.

Audio recordings of pilot and controller messages (on CD-ROM) accompany Annexes 1, 3, 4 and 5

¹ In 1999 the 'European Air Traffic Control Harmonisation and Integration Programme (EATCHIP)' was renamed the 'European Air Traffic Management Programme (EATMP)' Today it is known as 'European Air Traffic Management (EATM)'

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2. TEST DESIGN

2.1 Aim of the PELA Test

The test is designed for student air traffic controllers with the specific aim of -

determining the proficiency in English, at an agreed minimum level, which will allow air traffic controllers to carry out their tasks, ensuring safety and expedition to air traffic, in the international environment in which they work.

The test therefore reflects a range of tasks undertaken in Air Traffic Control (ATC) but with the specific focus on language use rather than operational procedures

2.2 General English Requirements

Because of the specific nature of the PELA Test, it is recommended that student air traffic controllers first attain a level of proficiency in plain English before commencing the specialised ATC English training leading up to the PELA Test

This level of proficiency in plain English is broadly equivalent to such recognised tests as Cambridge First Certificate (University of Cambridge), the Anglo-Continental English Language Pre-test System (Anglo-Continental Educational Group), EUROCONTROL (1996 & 2003) English language Placement Test (EPT, at 65%) or similar English language training will therefore have to reflect these broad-based general English requirements as well as providing training in the more specialised ATC language that is the focus of the PELA Test. Students should be encouraged to continue learning and practising English beyond this level.

The minimum level of language proficiency to be demonstrated by operational air traffic controllers is prescribed as Level 4 (operational) of the ICAO standard for language proficiency for aeronautical communications. Details can be found in the Guideline to ICAO (2004) Annex 1: 'Personnel Licensing'. The PELA Test is fully compatible with Level 4.

2.3 English Language and ATC Training

Since the PELA Test has been specifically designed for student air traffic controllers and reflects the realities of ATC, knowledge of ATC procedures and ICAO Radiotelephony (R/T) phraseology are essential. It is suggested that the PELA Test be administered to student controllers towards the end of their final phase of ATC training. Ideally this specialised aviation English training would take place in parallel with ATC training.

4. MODIFICATIONS TO THE PELA TEST

In line with recommendations made by the User Group a number of improvements to the structure, layout and format of the PELA Test have been made. The actual test items, previously validated, remain unchanged from the original versions of PELA.

4.1 Paper 1 – Listening

- No change to the name
- All versions now have the same format and presentation
- Existing test items retained but number increased from 68 to 80
- Better balance of ATC functions (tower, approach and en-route)
- Simplified tables
- Easier to read instructions
- Improved layout – less distraction for candidates
- Pass mark increased from 50% to 70% (56/80)

4.2 Paper 2 – Oral Responses

- Originally titled 'Interactive 1'
- More versions of tower, approach radar and en-route radar
- Revised charts
- Two practice items included
- Number of test items increased from 28 to 30
- Pass marks for language performance and appropriacy both increased to 70% (21/30)

4.3 Paper 3 – Oral Interaction

- Originally titled 'Interactive 2'
- New scenarios developed for tower and approach functions
- Common PELA charts (same as for Paper 2) applied throughout
- More versions developed

6. SPECIFIC TEST OBJECTIVES

In order to meet or exceed the English language performance requirements of the PELA Test, candidates must demonstrate ability in the following set of specific test objectives

6.1 Paper 1 - Listening

The candidate should be able to understand communications between pilot-controller and between controller-controller in which the pilot or controller:

- reads back and/or acknowledges a controller message,
- requests approval or clearance,
- gives information,
- requests information,
- gives/requests reasons,
- requests the controller to do something,
- checks, confirms and clarifies,
- gives/denies approval and clearance (controller only)

The candidate should be able to:

- recognise the communicative function of messages with and without explicit indicators. (For example, is the message an instruction, a request or a query?)

6.2 Paper 2- Oral Responses, and Paper 3 - Oral Interaction

In simulated interactions between pilots and controllers, the candidate should be able to:

- give instructions,
- give information,
- request information,
- give/deny approval and clearance,
- give/request reasons,
- check, confirm and clarify.

The candidate should also be able to understand messages in which the pilot:

- reads back and/or acknowledges controller message,
- requests approval or clearance;
- gives information,
- requests information;
- gives/requests reasons;
- requests the controller to do something;
- checks, confirms and clarifies,

- recognises the communicative function of messages with and without explicit indicators. (For example, is the message an instruction, a request or a query?)

6.3 Paper 4 - Reading (optional)

This is an optional paper and not considered as being essential to the main aim of the test. However, it was developed at the request of some States and allows candidates to demonstrate their ability to understand and interpret ATS texts in English.

In Paper 4 candidates respond to eighty items relating to selected extracts of text from typical ATS documents. They are required to provide written answers in the form of short phrases.

The paper has a duration of approximately 45 min.

7. **RATING SCALES FOR THE INTERACTIVE PAPERS OF THE PELA TEST**

7.1 **Paper 2 - Oral Responses**

Paper 2 is rated separately on the appropriacy of the candidate's response to a given pilot message **and** on his/her performance of English expression

Each of the (thirty) responses given by the candidate scores either a 0 or a 1 for both appropriacy of response and English language performance features (See pages 20 and 21)

To pass Paper 2 of the PELA Test a candidate must score at least 21/30 (70%) on **both** appropriacy and language performance

These pass marks have been revised upwards from the original test to reflect improvements made to the PELA Test by the PELA Working Group (2002).

7.2 **Paper 3 - Oral Interaction**

Paper 3 is rated on the overall proficiency of the candidate in his/her use of English expression in being able to understand and clarify a problem communicated by a pilot. Successful candidates receive a Pass or Pass+ mark (See pages 22, 23 and 24.)

Paper 2 – Oral responses is rated on both the appropriacy of the response and on language performance

Paper 2: Band 0 – Performance below the required standard

APPROPRIACY OF RESPONSE

There is no response or the response is not appropriate. The candidate is unable to identify the main points and the important details of the incoming message and/or is unable to formulate a relevant response. *Any response which compromises the safety of aircraft is considered inappropriate.*

LANGUAGE PERFORMANCE FEATURES

Overall

In order for the candidate's message to be understood, the listener has to make considerable allowances. The comprehensibility of the message is affected by the presence of some or all of the performance features described below

Fluency

There are undue hesitations and difficulty in producing utterances. Hesitations longer than three seconds at the beginning of a message and longer than two seconds in the middle of a message should be critically reviewed in relation to the complexity of the situation and the impact on overall fluency

Pronunciation

There are frequent inadequacies, or mother tongue interference, in pronunciation, rhythm, stress or intonation. The listener has to make considerable allowances for the candidate and the intelligibility of the candidate's production is affected

Vocabulary

Limitations in the range of lexis and expression cause difficulties of comprehension for the listener.

Phraseology

The candidate has problems with phraseology and produces non-phraseological forms. This may be evidenced in a lack of clarity or conciseness and the existence of ambiguities

Paper 2: Band 1 - Performance at or above the required standard

APPROPRIACY OF RESPONSE

The message is an appropriate response to the stimulus. The candidate is able to identify and respond to the main point(s) and important details in the incoming message, although minor mistakes in interpreting specific items of information related to the use of the candidate charts or notes are acceptable.

LANGUAGE PERFORMANCE FEATURES

Overall

The candidate's message can be understood although the listener may have to make some allowances.

Fluency

The candidate produces stretches of language at an appropriate tempo. There may be some hesitations or apparent slowness in language processing but these are not frequent or intrusive enough to place unacceptable strain on the listener.

Pronunciation

The candidate's pronunciation, rhythm, stress or intonation may affect accent (i.e. the candidate may sound like a non-native speaker) and this may require the listener to make some allowances for the candidate but it will not usually affect intelligibility or ease understanding.

Vocabulary

Vocabulary range and accuracy are usually sufficient to communicate effectively. Any restrictions will not greatly affect the overall comprehensibility of the message but may have a small effect on conciseness and demand a little extra concentration from the listener.

Phraseology

Standard phraseology is used. The candidate may have some difficulties arising for instance from the lack of operational ATC experience but, even though there may be some strain on the listener, the message is clear, concise and unambiguous.

Paper 3 – Oral Interaction is rated on the overall proficiency of the candidate in his/her use of English expression in being able to understand and clarify a problem communicated by a pilot

Paper 3: Band 0 - Performance below the required standard

Overall

In general, the candidate's production is not clear with much ambiguity. The interlocutor and/or the candidate frequently have to negotiate meaning.

Comprehension

The candidate's understanding of the main points and details in the interaction is in doubt. Displays of apparent understanding during Phase 1 are not fully substantiated by the report given by the candidate in Phase 2.

Interaction

The candidate may be partially able to compensate for information which has not been fully understood by checking, confirming or seeking clarification of information but is unable to respond in full to the demands of the interaction. Responses are not always appropriate or relevant to the context of the interaction.

Fluency

The candidate's fluency is adversely affected by undue hesitation and/or apparent difficulties in producing utterances. There may be some use of formulaic phraseology (e.g. 'stand-by', 'roger', 'call you back', etc.) to act as fillers and to maintain a surface impression of fluency, but this does not adequately compensate for an obvious weakness in this area.

Pronunciation

There are frequent inadequacies, or mother tongue interference, in pronunciation, rhythm, stress or intonation. The listener has to make considerable allowances for the candidate and the intelligibility of the candidate's production is affected.

Vocabulary

Limitations in the range of lexis and expression may cause difficulties of comprehension for the listener. Word choice is often inappropriate. The candidate is often unable to paraphrase successfully when lacking vocabulary.

Grammar structure

Basic grammatical structures and sentence patterns are not always well controlled. Errors frequently interfere with meaning.

Phraseology

The candidate's use of R/T phraseology is frequently inaccurate or inappropriate. The candidate also lacks confidence in switching between phraseology and appropriate plain language.

Paper 3: Band 1 - Performance at or above the required standard

Overall

In general, the candidate's production is clear, concise and unambiguous, although at times the interlocutor and/or candidate may need to make some allowances or negotiate meaning

Comprehension

The candidate is in touch with the essentials of the interaction although for unusual or complex messages comprehension may be slower or require clarification strategies. The report given by the candidate in Phase 2 corresponds in broad outline and essential facts to the content of the interaction during Phase 1

Interaction

Responses are usually immediate, appropriate and informative. The candidate initiates and maintains exchanges even when dealing with an unexpected turn of events. He/she deals adequately with apparent misunderstandings by checking, confirming or clarifying

Fluency

The candidate produces stretches of language at an appropriate tempo. There may be some hesitations or apparent slowness in language processing but these are not frequent or intrusive enough to place unacceptable strain on the listener. Formulaic phraseology (e.g. 'stand-by', 'roger', etc.) may act as fillers and as strategies to minimise the effects of hesitations. However, these will in general assist the listener and will not impede the clarity of the message.

Pronunciation

The candidate's pronunciation, rhythm, stress or intonation may affect intelligibility (i.e. the candidate may sound like a non-native speaker). This may require the listener to make some allowances for the candidate but will not usually affect intelligibility (i.e. the message can be understood)

Vocabulary

Vocabulary range and accuracy are usually sufficient to communicate effectively. Any restrictions will not greatly affect the overall comprehensibility of the message but may have a small effect on conciseness and demand a little extra concentration from the listener. The candidate can usually paraphrase successfully when lacking vocabulary in unusual or unexpected circumstances

Grammar structure

Basic grammatical structures and sentence patterns are used creatively and are usually well controlled. Errors may occur but rarely interfere with meaning.

Phraseology

The candidate is, in general, able to use R/T phraseology accurately and appropriately, although there may be some lapses. He/she is also able to switch between phraseology and appropriate plain language when required

Paper 3: PASS+ - Performance clearly exceeding the required standard²

Overall

The candidate's production is consistently clear, concise and unambiguous, seldom requiring the interlocutor to make allowances or negotiate meaning

Comprehension

The candidate is in touch with the essentials of the interaction and even unusual or complex messages seldom render comprehension slower or require clarification strategies. The report given by the candidate in Phase 2 corresponds in broad outline, essential facts and minor detail to the content of the interaction during Phase 1.

Interaction

Responses are immediate, appropriate and informative. The candidate initiates and maintains exchanges even when dealing with an unexpected turn of events. He/she deals effectively with apparent misunderstandings by checking, confirming or clarifying.

Fluency

The candidate produces stretches of language at an appropriate tempo. There are few hesitations or apparent slowness in language processing. Formulaic phraseology (e.g. 'stand-by', 'roger', etc.) is used appropriately as the situation requires. The candidate makes appropriate use of discourse markers and connectors.

Pronunciation

The candidate's pronunciation, rhythm, stress or intonation may affect accent (i.e. the candidate may sound like a non-native speaker), but this rarely affects intelligibility (i.e. the message is understood).

Vocabulary

Vocabulary range and accuracy are sufficient to communicate effectively, and sometimes include idiomatic expressions. The candidate paraphrases consistently and successfully when lacking vocabulary in unusual or unexpected circumstances.

Grammar structure

Basic grammatical structures and sentence patterns are used creatively and are consistently well controlled. Complex structures are attempted but with errors which sometimes interfere with meaning.

Phraseology

The candidate is consistently able to use R/T phraseology accurately and appropriately. The candidate also switches easily between phraseology and appropriate plain language when required.

² A candidate who clearly exceeds these requirements may be awarded a PASS+

8. BACKGROUND TO THE PELA TEST

8.1 Need for Harmonisation

It is generally acknowledged that for a number of reasons - historical, cultural and political - the level of English language among the air traffic controllers of Europe varies greatly. With the requirement for the harmonisation of air traffic services in Europe and with the knowledge that nowhere is communication more critical and misunderstanding potentially so disastrous than in ATC, the need to define a minimum proficiency in English language for ATC is recognised as being of great importance.

8.2 Common Standard of English in ATC

The concept, for a common standard of English among air traffic controllers, was developed at the first English Language workshop held at the EUROCONTROL Institute of Air Navigation Services (IANS), Luxembourg in June 1988. This workshop concluded that controllers should achieve a pre-determined, minimum level of knowledge and skills in the English language - especially listening, pronunciation and comprehension - to enable them to carry out their tasks in such a manner as to contribute positively to the safety of air traffic. This concept has recently been reinforced by the proposed changes to ICAO (2003) Annex 10, whereby the English language shall be available for aeronautical communication in designated international airspace and at designated international airports (ICAO State Letter 31.05 2002 refers).

8.3 Start of Project

In September 1988 EUROCONTROL's Training Working Group (TWG) encouraged IANS to commence work on the development of appropriate tests. In 1990 the Project Supervision Team (PST) was established to monitor and guide test development. Because of its unique experience in English language testing and administration the British Council was contracted, in January 1992, to design a suitable test.

Shortly after this, in February 1992, the project was adopted by EATCHIP³ as part of the Specialist Task (ST) dealing with the Specification of Training and Institutional Training (ST05 3000) integrated within the Work Programme (V3 0) of the Human Resources Domain. (Today the PELA Project is being developed within the Training Sub-Programme (TSP) of the EATM³ Human Resources Programme (HRS) under Work Package number HRS/TSP-005.)

³ In 1999 the 'European Air Traffic Control Harmonisation and Integration Programme (EATCHIP)' was renamed the 'European Air Traffic Management Programme (EATMP)'. Today it is known as 'European Air Traffic Management (EATM)'.

8.4 Project Supervision

EUROCONTROL maintained overall responsibility for the project chairing the Project Supervision Team (PST) which comprised eleven States and one airforce (The Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, Ireland, The Netherlands, Portugal, Sweden, Switzerland, The United Kingdom and the German Air Force)

The PELA Test has now the potential to reach student air traffic controllers in all 41 ECAC States

8.5 Experienced Test Design Team

A Test Development Team of experienced English language specialists having an extensive ATC-English background was established in Madrid in January 1992. This team was supported by test design experts from Thames Valley University, London. Two of the item writers were based at the 'Ecole Nationale de l'Aviation Civile (ENAC)', Toulouse, and another at Palma de Mallorca. Teamwork was coordinated by the British Council Field Manager, in Madrid, in close consultation with EUROCONTROL at IANS

Test design commenced in January 1992 and terminated at the end of December 1993.

8.6 Needs Analysis and Test Design

By means of a questionnaire to EUROCONTROL Member States, the project set out to analyse ATC transmissions in terms of language use and to establish ATC expectations of the test. Authentic R/T recordings were obtained and used by the Test Development Team in Madrid and the item writers in Toulouse to develop materials for the test.

8.7 Test Trialling

The initial test design was submitted to the PST, in December 1992, to agree detailed test specification and content validation. In February and March 1993 four versions of the test were successfully trialled in nine European States (Czech Republic, Denmark, France, Germany, Hungary, The Netherlands, Spain, Sweden and Switzerland) on 253 student air traffic controllers

The PST met again, in April 1993, to evaluate the trialling exercise, review test design and discuss test administration. A number of PST Members had been actively involved in the trialling.

9. TEST EVALUATION

9.1 Test Administration

From March 1995 until December 1996 a system for the administration, security and maintenance of the PELA was evaluated by EUROCONTROL. By the end of 1996 almost three hundred student air traffic controllers from France (127), Ireland (8), The Netherlands (14), Sweden (47), Switzerland (69) and The United Kingdom (28) had taken the test. A further 33 French students completed the PELA Test in February 1997 (EATCHIP, 1997 – T4, refers.)

Training packages for test raters and interlocutors (for the interactive sections) have been developed to support test administration. These packages, together with guidelines for test administrators, are included in the PELA Test package

9.2 Test Performance

Analysis of the evaluation phase of the PELA Test Project (1995-96) indicated that the test responded effectively to its defined language performance requirements and specific test objectives (see Sections 5 and 6). This evaluation of the PELA Test also demonstrated that an adequate knowledge of ATC procedures and experience in the operational (or simulator) environment is essential. It was noted that those students able to practise the test and become familiar with its construction performed better than those with little or no experience of the test format. Apart from some minor editorial amendments suggested to the presentation and layout of the test, it has been well received by the student air traffic controllers.

9.3 Test Security

To maintain the integrity of the test and to guard against abuses of the system, test security will have to be strictly enforced. Because of the potential impact of this test on aviation safety, fair and objective assessment of candidate performance is necessary.

9.4 Further Test Development

After a period of implementation of the PELA Test by States a Working Group of PELA users was established in 2002 to review the existing test and prepare new versions. The group also initiated development of a computer-based application of PELA to the Listening and Oral Responses (originally Interactive 1) papers. This application, still under development and due in

2004, will now be Web-based, providing a more secure and stable platform for the administration and development of the PELA Test

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This project is dedicated to the memory of

Paul McCann and Alex Teasdale
