

## **An Investigation of Foreign Language Proficiency of Cabin Crew Candidates during Employment Process**

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### **Abstract**

This study investigates the Foreign Language Proficiency (FLP) of cabin crew candidates during their employment process by airway companies in Turkey. For the purpose of the study, participants (N=184) were administered a written test containing multiple choice questions of vocabulary, grammar, reading and dialogue completion, and a spoken text which was evaluated analytically. At the end of the assessment procedure, the ones with an average score of 60 and more out of 100 were accepted for the cabin crew position. Results showed that there is a significant and meaningful relationship between these two scores of the accepted candidates. As another purpose of the research, candidates were also given a survey in which they were required to give information about the personal methods, techniques they applied to learn English, and factors they considered to affect their language learning process. Results of this survey showed that watching films and serials in English, listening to English music are the most commonly stated personal techniques to help

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them improve their foreign language proficiency. Moreover, using mobile phone applications, attending language courses are listed among most affective factors.

**Keywords:** English as a Foreign Language, English proficiency, proficiency test.

## **Introduction**

John Adams, one of the noteworthy figures of the United States of America and its second president, claimed that ‘English is destined to be in the next and succeeding centuries more generally the language of the world than Latin was in the last or French is in the present age’ (Adams, 1852). In the 1800s many other scholars reverberated his comment. And not surprisingly, his prediction turned out to be a literal reality in the second half of the twentieth century. Therefore, as the language of the world, the English language has been accepted to have a key role in a variety of fields worldwide such as aviation without exception. As well known, English functions as a lingua franca among international cockpit crew; and it serves as the standard means of verbal communication between pilots and air traffic controllers not only in English-speaking countries but also in countries where international airports are involved (Breul, 2013).

Several varieties of Aviation English are in existence, most conspicuously the one recommended by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO). This issue has received limited attention especially in the field of languages for specific purposes (LSP) and English for specific purposes (ESP) (Sullivan & Girginer, 2002; Turner & Nübold, 1981; Varantola, 1989; Vatnsdal, 1987). As a common outcome of these research studies, basic standard English knowledge is required to be able to comprehend and produce the following main features of ATC-English (Philps, 1991; Vatnsdal, 1987) 1) rules about the order of priority between different types of messages; 2) a spelling code for letters and numbers; 3) rules for the expressions of call signs (by which aircraft and ground stations are identified); 4) rules about the message structure; 5) rules about which messages to send in cases of emergency; 6) a list of conventional expressions and their meanings; 7) a set of skeleton messages, i.e. a phraseology.

As stated previously, it is not meaningful to expect any aviation candidate (e.g., cabin crew, pilot) to be knowledgeable in this specific language area, however, it is most definitely necessary for them to have a basic level of Standard English to learn these features during their training and use them throughout their career. In the light of this discussion, this study aims to investigate (a) the English Language Proficiency (ELP) of cabin crew candidates without focusing on specific aviation English during their employment process by airway companies in Turkey and (b) personal methods and techniques applied to learn English as a foreign language, (c) the factors affecting their foreign language proficiency.

## **Literature Review**

### *Aviation English*

Communication in aviation involves people coming from different parts of the world. Although English plays a dominant role as a means of communication, the speakers of English in that environment are mostly non-native speakers. To be able to maintain communication, English serves as an official language regardless of national boundaries. Communication in aviation not only includes the communication between the crew members in the cockpit but also between the pilots and traffic controllers and it serves a Lingua Franca among the members of the cockpit crew (Kim & Elder, 2009).

In aviation English, two types of language use can be identified: "phraseology" and "plain language." Phraseology refers to the standardized words and phrases agreed on for use in radiotelephony communication. It is an example of a language for specific purposes (LSP), in other words, a language that is used in constrained and predictable ways for a limited range of communicative events (Basturkmen & Elder, 2004). Plain language is preferred when phraseology does not occur in radiotelephony communication between pilots and controllers. Plain language should be specific, direct, and explicit and should not lead any interpretations (International Civil Aviation Organization, 2004). In the literature, it has been agreed that when routine phraseology was not used, plain English is preferred by the speakers and the addressees in order to make certain that they have understood each other correctly (Morrow et al., 1994; Howard, 2008).

Although the aviation crew who is expected to be proficient in English at a certain level and carefully selected by a great number of participants and although there are only two types of English are being used by them, still some communication errors occur in phonology, syntax, semantics, and pragmatics (Gibson et. al., 2006). Sometimes these errors could be insignificant, however, in some cases, these types of errors could lead to some tragic and irremediable circumstances. In order to reduce these types of errors to the minimum, it is vital to set a language proficiency and production standard for the cabin crew both for the safety of the passengers and for their own safety.

### *Flight Safety and Testing Language Proficiency*

In recent years, the importance of having a sufficient level of English language proficiency for aviation safety was emphasized by many researchers (Tajima, 2003, 2004; Kim, Elder, 2009; Jones, 2003; Krifka, Martens & Schwarz, 2003). Therefore, there were some attempts to bring an appropriate standard for non-native English speakers in aviation (Civil Aviation Organization, 2004).

There are many factors such as personality (Fegyveresi, 1997), gender (Turney, 2017), shift work (Corradini & Cacciari, 2002), familiarity in operating environment and procedure (Rantanen & Kokayeff, 2002), workload (Morrison & Wright, 1989), heavy traffic (Morrow et al., 1993), time constraint (Reilly, 1989 cited in Saville-Troike, 1989) affecting the efficiency of the aviation communication which includes the communication between the pilot and the crew, pilot and the air traffic controller. In addition, the accent and the speech rate of the speakers are also among the factors that affect communication failure in aviation (Wever et al., 2006). In his study aiming at investigating the aviation English tests, Anderson (2010) mentions the key role of aviation language tests in terms of test-takers, crew members, air-traffic controllers, passengers, insurance companies, and airline companies in maintaining a common understanding.

Although communication is a vital component of flight safety as Sexton and Helmreich stated (2003, p. 71) "Cockpit communication is a rich area of study for language investigators, and it has been relatively under-researched given the critical role it plays in-flight safety.", there have

been a few studies on testing the foreign language production and proficiency of cabin crew (Alderson, 2009; Kim & Elder, 2015). With these purposes in mind following research questions were addressed for investigation.

1. Is there a relation between the written and oral proficiency test scores of the participating cabin crew candidates?
2. What are the most preferred English learning methods and techniques applied by the participating cabin crew candidates?
3. What are the factors the participants considered to affect their learning English as a foreign language?

### **Methodology**

For the purposes of this study, convergent parallel mixed methods research design (Creswell, 2013) was adopted in which both quantitative and qualitative strands were applied concurrently. Both strands were kept independent during analysis, and then the results were mixed during interpretation. As a result, the triangulation of data and a more comprehensive account of analysis increased the credibility of the study and helped compensation of weaknesses of either research types.

#### *Setting and Participants*

The study was conducted in the Continuous Education Center (CEC) of a foundation University in Turkey in the 2017-2018 academic year. CEC of every university is in charge of giving training in a variety of fields and offering authorized certificates to the public community. CEC, where this study was conducted, was authorized to offer cabin crew training in cooperation with a highly prestigious airway in Turkey as a result of a signed protocol. According to this protocol, when the airway announces vacancies for cabin crew, the CEC collects applications, administers an English language proficiency test, and the ones who are successful in the English language Test are interviewed by the jury assigned by the airway for physical and behavioral

suitability. If the applicants are successful in this last step, they are officially offered the cabin crew position. However, they are required to attend 30-day professional training beforehand.

One hundred and sixty-one participants attended the study. 71 of them were females (44.1%), and 90 were males (55.9%). As a requirement of the airway companies, all of them were university graduates. For the purposes of the study, only the data received from applicants who were offered the cabin crew position by the airway were included in the study.

*Instrumentation*

To investigate the relationship between the participants’ oral and written language proficiency two tests; (a) multiple-choice test (b) speaking test were administered.

Multiple-choice tests: It was prepared by a committee of two language experts who held a Ph.D. in language assessment. Since the aim of the test is to examine the applicants' general English proficiency, specific aviation terminology was not used in the stem of the items. Hundreds of items were written, and an item pool was prepared. These items were sent to external scrutiny for content and construct validity. Some items were suggested to be deleted, some were corrected, and a fifty question test was ready at the end of this process. The test was piloted with 100 students from different language proficiency levels in a language school. The levels and the intelligibility of the items were checked. After this step, the test was revised by the language experts once more and piloted with other 50 students in the same language school. At the end of the piloting process, the internal consistency reliability of each sub-test, and the reliability coefficient of the whole test was checked (see Table 1 for the values).

**Table 1.** Reliability Value of the Written Test in the Piloting

Sub-Tests	Internal Consistency Reliability (r)	Reliability Coefficient of the Test (r)
Vocabulary (N=15)	,76	

Grammar (N=15)	,71
Reading (N=10)	,74
Dialogue Completion (N=10)	,71
Written Test (N=50)	,73

In the final version of the test used in the piloting, there were fifty questions in total; fifteen vocabularies, fifteen grammar, ten reading, ten dialogue completion questions. In the real administration, the participants who answered thirty questions correctly were administered the speaking test. The number of questions in each proficiency level of the Common European Framework can be seen in Table 2.

**Table 2.** Number of questions in each proficiency level of Common European Framework

CEF Language				
Proficiency Level	Vocabulary (N)	Grammar (N)	Reading (N)	Dialogue Completion (N)
A1	3	3	2	2
A2	3	3	2	2
B1	3	3	2	2
B2	3	3	2	2
C1	3	3	2	2

**Speaking Test:** In order to examine the oral proficiency level of the participants, each of them was asked to explicate his/her opinion on a given topic. Topics included questions from life, general culture, art, and history (e.g., whom would you like to meet in Turkish history? Why?, If you won the lottery, what would you spend it on? Why?). The speaking test general took 3-5 minutes. In order to lower the anxiety level of the participant, the rater started with some warm-up questions such as introducing oneself. Then, the participant was asked to get ready for one minute and then give a 3-4 minute speech on a given topic. The speaking performance of the participants was rated by two raters on an analytical rubric used in TOEFL IBT (see Appendix for the rubric). The participants were rated on; general description, delivery, language use, and topic development. The top score a participant can get from each component is 25/100. After both raters scored the participant's speaking performance, the average of their scores was taken. In order to check the reliability of raters' scoring, inter-rater reliability was checked with Cohen's Kappa, and the substantial agreement was found (.76).

**Demographic Survey:** To investigate English learning methods and techniques applied by the participants and the factors they think affected their language proficiency during the foreign language learning process a demographic survey was prepared and administered to the participants. In the survey, there are nine questions (e.g., Have you gone abroad with the Erasmus program? Have you attended to English prep program in the university? Mobile phone applications to improve English) (see appendix for the complete survey).

### *Data Analysis*

The first research question aims to investigate the relationship between the written and oral test performances of the participants. For this purpose, the Pearson Correlation's statistical analysis was run. As for the second and third research questions, the frequency of the responses given to the items in the demographic survey was calculated.

### **Findings**



The statistical analysis of the data collected to investigate whether there is a relationship between the participants' oral and written language proficiency revealed that there is a significant positive relationship between these two variables (see table 3). The statistical analysis of the data collected to investigate whether there is a relationship between the participants' oral and written language proficiency revealed that there is a significant positive relationship between these two variables (see table 3).

**Table 3.** Spearman Correlation Analysis Result

<b>Correlations</b>		Written Test	Oral test
Written Test	Pearson Correlation	1	,414**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		,000
	N	204	204
Oral test	Pearson Correlation	,414**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	,000	
	N	204	204

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

As for the second purpose of the study, the personal methods and techniques applied by the participants during their language learning process were investigated through a survey. The frequency and percentage analysis of the responses given by the participants is given in the following table.

**Table 4.** Personal methods and techniques applied by the participants

<i>Methods &amp; Techniques</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Valid</i>
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Watching Serials with Subtitle	161	78.9	184
Listening to English Music	151	74	184
Watching Films in English	147	72.1	184
Spending Time with Foreign Friends	145	71.1	184
Reading English Magazines and Newspapers	135	66.2	184
Using Social Media in English	106	52	184
Online Chatting in English	103	50.5	184
Watching Serials without Subtitle	85	41.7	184
Playing Computer Games in English	73	35.8	184
Listening to English Radio Stations	61	29.9	184
Surfing Online	57	27.9	184

Finally, the factors that participants believed to affect their language learning were investigated with different items in the demographic survey. Results showed that 123 participants (%68.3) started learning English before puberty which is accepted as the critical age. Other results were depicted in frequency and percentage in Table 5.

**Table 5.** Factors that participants believed to affect their language learning

<i>Factors</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>%</i>	<i>Valid</i>
Attending a private language course	129	70.5	183

Using Smartphone applications	124	60.8	176
Having English speaking family members	119	64.7	184
Being Abroad for fun	88	48	183
Attending prep school in university	74	40.7	183
Attending prep school in high school	33	18	182
Being to Europe with Erasmus	22	10.8	184

Regarding these results, one of them necessitates further explanation. In the results, it was also found that participants who stated using smartphone applications specified some applications. Most commonly used ones are; Tureng (14,5%), Duolingo (24,5%), Busuu (12,8%) and Voscreen (9,4%).

### **Discussion and Conclusion**

This study was conducted to examine the English proficiency level of the cabin crew candidates during their employment process, the methods they used, and the factors they believed to be effective to improve their language learning process. Since it is an international field of work, most of the positions in airline companies require knowledge of the foreign language, including cabin crew positions. Airline companies invest quite an interest in the selection of the cabin crew for the quality of the service provided by the company depends greatly on the crew (Kim & Park, 2014). In their study, Kim and Park (2014) revealed eight domains of competencies that are required of cabin crews, one of them is the knowledge of foreign cultures and languages. In addition, Wattanacharoensil and Yoopetch (2012) investigated the competencies of the airline service quality in a Thai context. The study revealed that one of the competencies was 'speaking good English.' Therefore, while choosing employees for the cabin crew position companies test for the proficiency of the candidates in English.

The testing process of the English proficiency of the employees differs from company to company as it does from country to country. The results of this study showed that there is a significant positive correlation between the oral and written proficiency levels of the candidates, indicating that the success in the oral proficiency of the participants was positively related to their success in the written exam. There have been no similar studies that have investigated the relationship between the written and oral productions of the language learners. In addition, there has been no study conducted in Turkey related to the employment process of cabin crew in terms of their English proficiency.

In terms of the techniques and the methods that learners use in language learning, the results revealed that participants invested certain time to improve their English with activities like watching movies and TV series with subtitles, spending time with foreign friends, reading in English, using social media English and online chatting with foreigners. This result shows that the ones who are found to be proficient in English invested most of their daily time in activities that can be done by using English actively. Therefore, as it is always the case and the general belief, when the English is taken out of the borders of the classrooms in schools where formal face-to-face Language instruction is provided, language learners can improve their language skills better.

Finally, among the factors that the participating cabin crew candidates believed to affect their English language proficiency, attending a language course, using smartphone applications, having English speaking family members, being abroad frequently were listed. On the contrary to the general belief, being participated in the Erasmus program was stated to be effective by only 10% of the participants.

To conclude, the study showed that written and spoken English proficiency levels of the participants were highly related. The results of having over 60% proficiency score and the personal methods they applied, the factors they stated to be effective on their proficiency are all considered, it is possible to state that making use of English in every part of the daily life and using technology actively appeared to be interrelated.

## Implications

The results of this study offer some major implications especially for the field of English language teaching. It is obvious that when the language learners are guided to use English out of the classroom, in other words, in unofficial settings, their language proficiency level is affected positively. They can improve their listening skills while listening to English music, watching movies, speaking skills with communicating and chatting online with English speaking people, vocabulary knowledge also improves in relation to these daily activities. Reading English magazines also helps them develop both their reading, writing skills, and vocabulary knowledge. Additionally, these kinds of authentic activities should be used actively while teaching English. Instead of considering them as a waste of time, language teachers should be aware of the fact that, when they integrate these activities into their instruction, language learners' interest and awareness will raise too.

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