



Language Lessons

How to teach radio listening skills

BY SHANNON SHEPPARD

Pilot: "Sanford Tower, Connection five zero six, midfield downwind niner center."

Tower: "Connection five zero six, runway niner center clear for the option."

Pilot: "Clear for the option niner center, Connection five zero six."

At Orlando Sanford International Airport, the skies are filled

with Cessnas, Cirruess, Arrows, and Seminoles. Delta Connection Academy, one of the biggest flight academies in the country, is the launching point for these aircraft. At about 1,000 feet above the surface, students and instructors are navigating the skies and the radios.

Tower: "Connection four zero three, start your left turn heading

zero-five-zero please."

Pilot: "Left turn zero-five-zero, connection four zero three."

For many students, learning to communicate on the radio is just as difficult as learning to control the aircraft. At Delta Connection Academy, recent averages suggest that 30 percent of the student body speaks English as a second language. The

implementation of the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) document 9835 requires pilots, controllers, and flight crews operating on international flights to speak and understand English at a level-four proficiency.

Due to these requirements, flight schools across the country and abroad are seeking new ways to train English-as-a-second-language (ESL) students for flight training. ESL student pilots must work toward reaching and maintaining ICAO level four during the initial phases of their flight training.

For many students, learning aviation-specific English is a daunting task. Vocabulary and listening skills taught in most plain-English programs simply do not apply to flight training. Flight schools and airlines throughout the world are now turning to English instructors and certified flight instructors (CFIs) to help their student pilots reach ICAO level-four English proficiency.

Practical English

Language instructors and CFIs must now work together toward improving ESL student pilots' listening and speaking skills. Language instructors often use the communicative approach in the classroom for teaching listening and speaking. The communicative approach focuses on encouraging student communication through role-playing, problem solving, and description activities.

In the aircraft, flight instructors use the communicative approach every day. However, in the aviation classroom, using the communicative approach, especially for ESL students, will help those pilots improve their listening skills. One tool for incorporating the communicative approach in the classroom is Dave Pascoe's free website www.LiveATC.net.

LiveATC.net allows amateurs

and professionals alike to listen to live, streaming pilot/controller conversations. At Delta Connection Academy, students practice listening to LiveATC.net on a daily basis. Through guided classroom exercises, ESL student pilots spend at least one hour each day listening to the local radio communications made by pilots and controllers. This practice allows students to hear the

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Authentic listening opportunities are essential for acquiring language skills. Active exposure to radio communications on the ground will improve student skills

by focusing solely on listening comprehension. By using the activities described below, instructors can help their students gain better radio technique. Before participating in these activities, students must first have a foundation in radio terminology.

1. Listen and Complete. In this activity, students listen to radio calls to fill in data on the transcription sheet. The focus is on "the numbers," or specific information such as runways, headings, altitudes, and speeds.

First, the instructor selects an airport, date, and time from the LiveATC.net archives. The instructor should listen to the material prior to classroom instruction and prepare a transcription of the radio calls. It would look something like this:

Pilot: "Sanford Tower, Connection four zero zero is midfield for runway nine left."

Tower: "Connection four zero zero runway _____ clear to land, wind _____ at _____."

Pilot: "Runway _____ clear to land, Connection four zero zero."

In class, the students listen to and read the radio transcript simultaneously. Students must listen for and fill in the missing information. By listening for "the numbers," students can improve their listening skills for critical flight information.

To assess this activity, instructors can either individually check the transcription sheets for accuracy, or the transcriptions can be corrected through guided discussion. If students are struggling with the radio communications, replay the dialogue, pause, and say the correct information; then replay the dialogue again. This technique helps ESL students hear a phrase such as "runway three-six" from both the pilot/controller and the instructor's voices in an isolated form.

2. *Listen and Write.* Developing a style of shorthand is an essential skill for all pilots when listening to longer clearances. Identifying aircraft call signs is equally important for radio communications. Strengthening these two skills is not only helpful for native English speakers, it is critical for ESL student pilots as well. In this activity, students listen to broadcasts to practice recording controller clearances for specific pre-assigned call signs.

As mentioned in the last activity, the instructor should select an airport, date, and time from the archives. The instructor should listen to the selected recording and note call signs that are used often. In the classroom, the instructor assigns a call sign from the recording to each student. While listening to the radio, the students identify their assigned call signs and record the clearances associated with their call signs.

Depending on the students' comprehension level, the recordings may have to be played multiple times, but the replaying of the radio broadcasts should decrease as the students' listening skills improve.

3. *Listen and Respond.* As many flight instructors already know, student pilots may be great at hearing the radio calls, but responding quickly to clearances can be tricky for beginners. In this activity, the speaking and listening components are linked to improve overall radio fluency. Students listen to the radio calls and verbally respond to those clearances.

Prior to class, the instructor should select an airport, date, and time from the archives, and, using this radio selection, the instructor assigns known call signs to each student. The students then listen for their call signs. When an assigned call sign is used on the radio, the instructor pauses the radio broadcast, and the student

responds to the clearance with the correct read back.

At first, students will struggle with accurately reading back the clearances, but it's better for students to struggle in the classroom than during critical phases of flight. The pacing of this activity will increase as students become more confident with their read backs.

By listening to authentic radio communications, students can become more familiar with the actual communications between pilots and controllers, not those assumed or created in prerecorded scripts.

4. *Listen and Answer.* The unfamiliar radio call or clearance may occasionally occur. In this activity, students have the opportunity to discuss those nonstandard or unusual radio calls by asking and answering questions about terminology and procedures.

By playing a live streaming broadcast or selecting a recording from the archives, the instructor can pause the transmission whenever an unusual or nonstandard term or phrase is used. The instructor should then ask appropriate questions to elicit student understanding of the situation, term, or phrase—something like this:

Pilot: "Sanford Tower, Connection two three six is midfield two-seven left."
Tower: "Connection two two six, follow a Cessna on a mile-and-a-half final, report traffic in sight."
Pilot: "Was that for two two six or two three six?"

Instructors can then ask such questions as, "Why does call sign confusion occur?" or "What should you do if you believe there is call sign confusion?"

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Nonstandard Terminology

While many in the field of aviation work toward developing standardized terminology, aviation radio communication is not a standard sublanguage. No amount of phraseology memorization or scripted procedure comprehension will prepare ESL student pilots for all possible radio communications. Anomalies will always occur, and students need to be prepared to use and understand nonstandard language. By listening to authentic radio communications, students can become more familiar with the actual communications between pilots and controllers, not those assumed or created in prerecorded scripts. By using the activities de-

scribed here, students have the ability to listen, analyze, and decide what responses and actions would best fit each specific situation before encountering those conditions in the aircraft.

Recently, at Orlando Sanford International Airport, a pilot received clearances that were not typical for entering the traffic pattern. Let's take a look:

Tower: "Zero zero tango, why don't you... ah...descend, can you descend to 500 feet?"

Pilot: "Descending to 500 feet for zero zero tango."

Tower: "Zero zero tango proceed to the numbers of runway three six and report reaching."

Pilot: "I'll report to the numbers on three six and call you."

Tower: "All right."

Tower: "Connection five zero three, when you enter the downwind there'll be a helicopter inbound from the south; he's going to be at 500 feet."

Pilot: "Okay, Connection five zero three, we're going to look out for that traffic."

Tower: "Zero zero tango, can you proceed to your landing site from there?"

Pilot: "Proceed to my landing site sir, runway niner center?"

Tower: "Okay sir, um, you're parking at the southeast ramp, can you proceed to the southeast ramp from there?"

Tower: "Oh zero zero tango you're not a helicopter, are you?"

Pilot: "No sir, zero zero tango is just above the numbers of runway three six."

Tower: "Okay, zero zero tango, Roger, you're cleared to land on runway niner center, I was told you were a helicopter and disregard, you're cleared to land runway niner center."

Pilot: "Cleared to land niner center, zero zero tango, don't worry about it."

As you can see, after several such clearances, the pilot finally queried the controller, and both the controller and pilot learned of their misunderstanding. The controller believed that the aircraft was a helicopter rather than a Cessna. By listening to conversations like this with their students, instructors can pause the dialogue and ask their students questions to analyze the conversations, recognize misunderstand-

ings, and decide on appropriate phrases for querying the controller.

Real-life recordings such as those at LiveATC.net also provide students the opportunity to hear the nonstandard phraseology, unreadable radio static, and genuine problems that occur during typical, day-to-day flights. The experiences gained through authentic listening provide more benefits to the student than the traditional prerecorded voices used in most English classrooms. Students who use live recordings may hear terms such as "tallyho," "no joy," or "where ya parkin'?"—none of which are taught in standard radiotelephony texts.

When working with ESL or new student pilots, listening to real-life audio transmissions can be beneficial when incorporating the communicative approach in the classroom. Radio communication is a cornerstone of aviation, and activities such as those described here allow students to practice radio skills before entering their aircraft.

Shannon Sheppard holds a master's degree in English and is certified to teach English as a second language. All call signs and tail numbers were changed in the transcription examples used here. The author extends a special thank you to Dave Pascoe, creator of www.LiveATC.net, and Delta Connection Academy.

