



# What are the ICAO Holistic Descriptors?

One of the key aviation documents, Manual on the Implementation of ICAO Language Proficiency Requirements (Doc 9835), includes a set of guidelines that may be helpful to anyone who wants to take an ICAO exam. The manual includes the ICAO Holistic Descriptors and the ICAO Language Proficiency Rating Scale. This blog post will scrutinize the former, which are divided into 5 one-sentence (okay, one descriptor has quite a long and complex sentence ;) up-to-the-point statements. They all begin with "Proficient speaker shall...". Let's take a look at them right now.

*'Proficient speakers shall:*

- a) communicate effectively in voice-only (telephone/radiotelephone) and in face-to-face situations;*
  - b) communicate on common, concrete and work-related topics with accuracy and clarity;*
  - c) use appropriate communicative strategies to exchange messages and to recognize and resolve misunderstandings (e.g. to check, confirm, or clarify information) in a general or work-related context;*
  - d) handle successfully and with relative ease the linguistic challenges presented by a complication or unexpected turn of events that occurs within the context of a routine work situation or communicative task with which they are otherwise familiar; and*
  - e) use a dialect or accent which is intelligible to the aeronautical community.'*
- (ICAO Doc. 9835)

## **a) 'Communicate effectively in voice-only (telephone/radiotelephone) and in face-to-face situations'**





# What are the ICAO Holistic Descriptors?

Pilots and air traffic controllers work mainly with their voice and hearing. It's clear you need to know how to communicate and **be effective** (effectiveness, in this case, means if your communication has reached its goal with a success) using solely your voice. You are also required to handle *face-to-face situations*, which are all **the non-cockpit areas of your everyday life**, which can be easily forgotten and neglected by aviation English students.

## b) 'Communicate on common, concrete and work-related topics with accuracy and clarity'

Let's split this sentence into two sections' the first part (*'communicate on common, concrete and work-related topics'*)

- it shows the importance of talking **not only about aviation** but also about all the work-related issues, which are, broadly speaking, all the aspects of life affected by aviation like environment, health and safety.

Now, let's go back to the quotation and focus on the second part of it

- *'(...) with accuracy and clarity'*. Your speech has to be **relevant, correct and without any mistakes**. There's also a matter of *'clarity'*, which means you need to be **precise** and **avoid ambiguities**.

## c) 'Use appropriate communicative strategies to exchange messages and to recognize and resolve misunderstandings (e.g. to check, confirm, or clarify information) in a general or work-related context'





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Here you need to:

- *'to exchange messages'* - you hear (a passive skill) and speak (an active skill),
- *'to recognize misunderstanding'* - you know when there's a potential trap of an upcoming miscommunication or you are conscious when such a situation including a verbal problem has occurred,
- *'to resolve miscommunication'* - you react to an error using the various clarifying strategies ('to check, confirm or clarify information).

Moreover, it all has to be covered 'in a general and work-related context' - you are required to speak about the aviation world and its broad aspects and about general topics connected with your work.

**d) handle successfully and with relative ease the linguistic challenges presented by a complication or unexpected turn of events that occurs within the context of a routine work situation or communicative task with which they are otherwise familiar**

Let's split this long descriptor into the small and easy parts:

- *'handle successfully and with relative ease'* - you are expected to reach a goal of your verbal communication process and it should come easily to you, which means, you **don't hesitate to speak**, you **show confidence** about the use of **grammar structures** and **vocabulary**.





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- *'the linguistic challenges'* are all the moments when you are exposed and required to **use general English in the aviation context**. Forget about the standardized phraseology because it only *'shall be used in all situations for which it has been specified.'* (ICAO Doc. 9835) So, whenever you'll face:
  - *'a complication or unexpected turn of events'* - are all non-routine situations that may appear either when an aircraft is airborne or on the ground. When you have to face such a non-standard occurrence, your language skills are exposed to a *'linguistic challenge'* that you have *'to handle successfully'* and *'with relative ease'*.
  - *'occurs within the context of a routine work situation or communicative task with which they are otherwise familiar'* - meaning a complication or unexpected turn of events will imply only to the situations in flight or on the ground you have been already familiarized yourself with.

## **e) use a dialect or accent which is intelligible to the aeronautical community**

- *'use a dialect or accent'* - Let's take a look at the definitions of those words (both of are taken from Cambridge Online Dictionary):
  - dialect /'daɪ.ə.lekt/ - *a form of a language that people **speak** in a particular part of a country, containing some different words and grammar.*
  - accent - *the way in which people in a particular area, country, or social group **pronounce** words.*Both definitions emphasize a matter of speaking (keywords are in bold), therefore, you need to make sure you are...
  - *'intelligible'* - clear enough to be understood.





# What are the ICAO Holistic Descriptors?

- *'to the aeronautical community'* - you have to be understood by the aviators from all over the world, so you need to keep in mind the wide range of different mother tongues and English as the second language. Those people may have different problems in terms of English language acquisition and you need to stay as clear and precise as possible. Your English accent cannot reflect your first language (most of my readers are non-native English speakers) because it may affect your interlocutor's ability to decode the intention of your message.

## Summary

This article gives you a comprehensive explanation of the ICAO Holistic Descriptors. I did my best to present them in the easiest way possible but if you're still unsure what the 'proficient speaker' shall demonstrate at an ICAO exam, please let me know. Is there anything, in your opinion, that should be added to points a) to e) listed by the ICAO? Or maybe you feel something should be erased? Let me know via email or in the comments below what are your thoughts on this matter! Fly high and safely to keep the sky the safest place on Earth. :)

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