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AVIATION ENGLISH: HOW FLIGHT ATTENDANTS AND AIRPORT AGENTS DEAL WITH LIGUISTIC DIVERSITY IN THEIR PROFESSIONAL ACTIVITIES

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ABSTRACT

This pilot study explores how aviation workers who interact directly with passengers (airport agents and flight attendants) deal with different accents of the English language in the context of their profession. To do so, field research was carried out at Brasília International Airport Presidente Juscelino Kubitschek, where the participants from Brazilian airline companies answered a questionnaire about their approaches to cross-cultural communication in English. The results show that most of the aviation worker participants see the diversity of English as a barrier to achieve meaning in communication, yet they have various pragmatic and non-verbal approaches to deal with that; which according to the concepts of English as Lingua Franca and English for Specific Purposes are valid and part of the process of developing the use of English in their jobs. That shows that, even without dominating standard grammar and vocabulary, they are strategically competent and that they learned how to negotiate meaning to achieve their communication purposes. There are also some participants who did not see dealing with accents as a difficulty, which seems to correlate with the motivations that made them learn English being different than the others. Further studies should be done in larger airports with higher flow of foreign passengers and should be done with pilots as participants to get a more robust sample size, which may generate more depth and diversity of points of view so that the aviation industry can potentially modify its linguistic policies and practices.

Keywords: English as Lingua Franca; English for Specific Purposes; Aviation English; Linguistic Diversity; Accents.

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1 INTRODUCTION

In 1951, the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) stablished English as the official language of aviation. Since then, the language must be spoken between international pilots and flight controllers to avoid misunderstandings in communication and prevent problems that can cause accidents. Besides professionals in these two groups, most airline companies around the world demand fluency in English from flight attendants and some from airport agents so that understanding, safety and satisfaction exist between crew and passengers.

In this context, to understand why English is the official language of aviation, it is necessary to contextualize the relationship between English and civil aviation by presenting the concepts of English as Lingua Franca (ELF), English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and Aviation English (AE). Besides that, to comprehend cross-cultural communications and English as a worldwide language with many variations. Furthermore, some understandings of World Englishes and language approaches will be discussed with the support of ICAO's guidelines and requirements.

Considering this dynamic linguistic context, the first important concept to understand why English is the standard language of aviation is English as a Lingua Franca (ELF). According to Jenkins et al. (2011), ELF is an acquired language system that serves as a means of communication between people from different mother languages. Nowadays, English is the chosen foreign language of worldwide communication because of its role in the large-scale globalization in the last century.

With that in mind, as English became the language of international technology and commerce, a new generation of learners who needed to know the language in their jobs started to appear. That is what Hutchinson and Waters (1987) call English for Specific Purposes (ESP), an English as a Second Language concerned with teaching by highlighting the specific skills students need according to their field and how they learn.

Peter Ragan (1996), in his work "Aviation English: An Introduction", shows some historical and social reasons of why English is so important in the aviation industry. He explains that the need for safety and efficiency in communication are the main reasons for why English must be employed in a particular way in particular situations by aviation professionals. ICAO, in their "Guidelines for Aviation English Training Programmes" (2009) recognizes Aviation English as ESP:

Aviation English is an example of teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The goals and the techniques employed in ESP – whether in the fields of the hotel industry, advertising, shipping, pharmaceuticals or business meetings – are significantly different from those of teaching everyday English as a Foreign/Second Language (TEFL/TESL¹). There is less of a transition from ESP to aviation English than from TEFL/TESL (or TESOL²) to aviation English. (INTERNATIONAL CIVIL AVIATION ORGANIZATION, 2009, p. 37).

Furthermore, it is also necessary to highlight the differentiations of the English language called World Englishes, which is a result of geopolitical relations, cultural diversity and language spread (Horner et. al, 2011). Those differentiations, as will be seen later, are very present in the daily routine of aviation workers. That is one reason why English accents are something that the crew must be prepared to deal with. The ICAO, in its "Manual on the Implementation of ICAO Language Proficiency Requirements" (2004), says:

It is important to understand that the traditional models of "native" pronunciation used in many traditional English teaching contexts can no longer be considered valid because the English language cannot be seen as "belonging" to any of the major, traditional, first-language, English speaking countries. (INTERNATIONAL CIVIL AVIATION ORGANIZATION, 2004, p.23).

In Canagarajah's (2014) study "In Search of a New Paradigm for Teaching English as an International Language", he contextualizes how English has changed from a language with its standards made by homogeneous native variants to an international heterogeneous language used by multilingual speakers in the most varied contexts due to globalization. Because of that, the author explains that it was also necessary to change the pedagogical orientations as English usage becomes more and more international and diverse. That is exactly the context where the English used in aviation is inserted: flight attendants and airport agents must interact with passengers from all over the world. Some pedagogical approaches suggested by Canagarajah can be seen in another study called "Materializing 'Competence': Perspectives from International STEM Scholars." (2018). In this paper, the author demonstrates that linguistic resources that are not traditionally based on just grammar can successfully achieve meaning depending on the purpose, social context, and environment. Those can be semiotic resources such as gestures, body movement, posture, positioning, and drawings. All of them work together with equal importance to help the comprehension of the communication.

¹ TEFL is Teaching English as a Foreign Language and TESL is Teaching English as a Second Language.

² TESOL is Teaching English to Speakers of Other Languages.

In summary, because the emergence of English is a Lingua Franca due to advances brought by globalization, the need for many industries to adapt the language to their contextsthose in the field of aviation must take into consideration the heterogenous nature of the English language nowadays. With that in mind, this study aims to investigate through field research how aviation workers, especially airport agents and flight attendants, deal with the linguistic diversity of the English language in their professional activities; and how productive their approaches are considering the concepts and ideas mentioned above.

In this context, the objective of this study was to investigate what linguistic strategies aviation workers use when they encounter different English accents that passengers speak. The methodology used was to interview them through a questionnaire personally delivered in the airport. The results were that most of the aviation workers who participated in the research use non-verbal and pragmatic strategies to communicate, in other words, they do not use just standard grammar and vocabulary norms. The analysis of these results shows that while participants see accents as a language barrier, they also identify their approaches as part of their strategic competence to overcome difficulties in professional communication.

2 METHODOLOGY

This section presents how the field research to understand how aviation workers deal with English accents occurred. The questions were presented to them on Google Forms through a printed QR Code. Thirty QR Codes were distributed to all airport agents, flight attendants and pilots of different airline companies who were passing by the arrival area in the peak time of the Brasília International Airport Presidente Juscelino Kubitschek. That was done in March 30th of 2022 around 7 PM. Located in the center of the country, the Brasília airport is the largest airline hub of Brazil, serving as a stop-over point to help passengers to get their final destination. Besides that, it is the second largest airport in Brazil in terms of passenger movement, and it is the only air terminal with connections to all Brazilian capitals. (AEROPORTO DE BRASÍLIA, 2022). However, it has fewer direct flights to international destinations than airports in Brazil's other major urban centers like São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro.

The questionnaire was made in Portuguese to facilitate participation, once English is not a mandatory requirement for airport agents, and to give the opportunity for a more genuine expression from the participants in their mother-language. The form starts asking them to indicate their role: airport agent, flight attendant, or pilot. Then, it follows to the first question that was related to their preparation regarding the professional use of the English language. The second question asked about their motivation to learn English. Then, the third and fourth questions asked the frequency they need to interact in English, and the regularity they find foreign people with non-standard English accents, respectively. Lastly, the fifth and main question asked how they deal with the diversity of English accents in their jobs. All the workers' responses and results were related and analyzed to understand the main question about the accents.

2.1 PARTICIPANTS

Out of the 30 QR codes distributed, 13 participants answered: 11 airport agents, 2 flight attendants, and no one pilot (See FIGURE 1). The lack of adherence of pilots is probably due to their busy routine. All of them were walking in a hurry, and many did not accept receiving the printed QR Code. The ones who accepted may have forgotten to answer. Because of that, this study will focus only on airport agents and flight attendants; and that is important to say because the English used by pilots is potentially very different than the other two groups of crew members. That occurs not only because they rarely interact with passengers working in the cockpit, but also because pilots have many more linguistic standards and phraseologies to learn to communicate between themselves and with the control tower, and they frequently pass through rigorous English skills tests. If the pilots had answered, it would drastically change the results, so it was decided that it is actually beneficial to focus only on the professionals that have more direct linguistic contact with the passengers: airport agents and flight attendants. Besides that, according to Inframerica, the Brasília's airport administrator, around 6 thousand employees work or have their base in this airport. However, when they were contacted, they did not give the number of employees divided by role or airline company.

FIGURE 1 - PARTICIPANTS' ROLES IN AVIATION³

- Cargos
- 2 Comissário(a)

³ Original in Portuguese:

^{11 -} Agente de aeroporto

Roles



3 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the results, some comments, and the analysis of participants' formal linguistic education in English, motivations, professional interactions with foreigners in English, and approach to dealing with different accents in English; which are the three themes dealt with in the five questions of the questionnaire mentioned before. The first four questions lead to a better understanding of the results of the fifth and main question. This will be presented in order based on the form.



Did you go through any evaluation, preparation or training related to the professional use of the English language? If affirmative, briefly explain how it was.

FIGURE 3 – PARTICIPANTS WHO HAD FORMAL ENGLISH INSTRUCTION (OVERVIEW)⁵

- ⁵ Original in Portuguese:
- Casos afirmativos

⁴ Original in Portuguese:

Você passou por alguma avaliação, preparação ou treinamento relacionado ao uso profissional da língua inglesa? Em caso afirmativo, explique brevemente como foi.

^{4 -} Sim

^{9 -} Não

^{2 -} Fez teste de Inglês no momento da contratação

^{1 -} Fez um curso de Inglês tradicional por conta própria

^{1 -} Fez um curso de Inglês tradicional e depois estudou vocabulário e conversação voltados à aviação

Affirmative cases



Besides a traditional English course, they had studied aviation-oriented vocabulary and conversation as well

In the first question "Did you go through any evaluation, preparation or training related to the professional use of the English language? If affirmative, briefly explain how it was.", as presented in Figure 3, 9 (69,2%) participants answered "No", and 4 (30,8%) answered "Yes". Among those 4 who answered in the affirmative, as can be seen in Figure 4, 2 (50%) said that they took an English test in the moment of the recruitment; 1 (25%) answered that they had done a traditional English course on their own; and the other one (25%) answered that besides a traditional English course, they had studied aviation-oriented vocabulary and conversation as well.

Most of the participants had not taken a course, preparation, or passed through an English evaluation. All nine workers who answered "No" are airport agents, and that is justified because English is not a mandatory requirement for this role, although it should be since their responsibilities involve important communication with the passengers. The airport agents are the essential professionals for the proper functioning of the processes of the company and the relationship with the customer. They are the first crew members the passenger will have contact with in the airport. They are responsible for solving crisis,

misunderstandings and doubts, for guiding people who need help, and for customer services in general. Consequently, English not being a mandatory requirement for this role is a mistake, and it is something that should change.

Finally, both flight attendants had had an evaluation, which was expected due to their role that requires English as mandatory. Contrary to popular belief, flight attendants do not only serve foods and beverages during the flights. They preserve safety inside the cabin by transmitting security information, checking conditions in the passengers' seats, attending pilots' requests, and being prepared for any emergency situations. All of which make fluency in English essential.

In the second question "What motivated you to learn English? When was the first time that you got interested in the language?", it is possible to divide it in two: the motivation and the time. Concerning the motivation, 1 answered to understand the artists' songs and interviews of whom they are fan; 1 said that it was because they wanted to be a diplomat; 1 said they had was always identified with the language; 1 said that they just found it interesting; 1 was motivated by their mom; 1 said it was because they won a scholarship in a language school; 1 learned naturally while living abroad; 2 did not specify, they just said "I always liked it", "I identified with it…"; 2 said it was because of their job in aviation ; and 2 do not know English, but they wish to learn. In this last one, 1 specified that the motivation was to have a better performance in their job.

Concerning the time when they first had contact with English, 3 did not specify when, one said that they had "always" had contact, another said while "living abroad", 3 were in their adolescence, 3 were in the childhood, 2 said it was in adulthood, 2 do not know English. With that said, most learned English in some capacity before adulthood.

Although English is not mandatory for airport agents, the huge majority have learned English in some moment, except two of them. That demonstrates that there is a relationship between knowing English and finding a job in the aviation field, even if the language is not mandatory for the role in the case of airport agents. About the flight attendants, one answered that they have always liked English, and the other started learning because they won a scholarship. All the motivations are really diverse, so that makes it difficult to find anything in common between them and the desire to work in aviation. In order to do so would require follow up questions with the participants, which is not viable because it goes beyond the scope of this project. None of the participants answered that they started learning English just to work with aviation, and only two answered that they started after joining the job.

FIGURE 4 – FREQUENCY OF PARTICIPANTS' PROFESSIONAL INTERACTIONS WITH FOREIGNERS IN ENGLISH (OVERVIEW)⁶

How often, in your professional routine, do passengers whose interaction needs to be done in English appear?



The third question, whose results are shown in Figure 6, asks "How often, in your professional routine, do passengers whose interaction needs to be done in English appear?". According to their open-ended answers, 8 (61,5%) of them, such as, "Frequently", "Always", "Daily" or "Everyday" can be grouped to say that it is really common; 3 (23,1%) who said "Occasionally", "5 to 6 six times a week" or "Not so much" can be grouped to represent that it happens sometimes; and 2 (15,4%) who said "Almost never" and "Hardly, once a week" can be grouped to represent that it is rare.

Although the professions, place and field are the same, the answers are diverse. For example, both flight attendants had different answers: "Every day" and "Almost never".

⁶ Original in Portuguese:

Com que frequência, na sua rotina profissional, aparecem passageiros estrangeiros cuja interação precisa ser feita em inglês?

^{8 -} Frequentemente / Sempre / Diariamente / Todo dia

^{3 -} Ocasionalmente / 5 a 6 vezes por semana / Não muito

^{2 -} Quase nunca / Dificilmente, uma vez por semana

Concerning the airport agents, most of them answered that it is frequent, and the minority that it is eventual or rare. These divergent answers among the same roles probably occur because their experience periods in the job are different, or it can also be related to the airlines they work for and the routes they serve.

FIGURE 5 – FREQUENCY OF PARTICIPANTS' INTERACTIONS WITH FOREIGNERS IN DIVERSE ENGLISH ACCENTS⁷



Do you regularly meet passengers with non-standard English accents?

In the fourth question "Do you regularly meet passengers with non-standard English accents?", according to Figure 5, 6 (46,2%) answered "Occasionally"; 4 (30,8%) answered "Always"; 2 (15,4%) answered "Frequently"; 1 (7,7%) answered "Rarely".

Considering that the flight attendant participants work for national companies and do not fly internationally; and that the Brasília airport, although it is international, does not

⁷ Original in Portuguese:

Você encontra com regularidade passageiros com sotaques em inglês diferente do padrão norte-americano e britânico?

^{6 -} Ocasionalmente

^{4 -} Sempre

^{2 -} Frequentemente

^{1 -} Raramente

receive a great flow of international flights; it is surprising that the majority of the answers are "Always" or "Occasionally". That demonstrates that, even with the Brasília airport not being so busy with international flights such as the airports of São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro, English is really necessary to become an aviation professional no matter where, and that it is important to be ready to interact with different accents.

The fifth and last question "How do you deal with different accents of the English language in your work?" received many varied answers. In this question, two participants said that they use Google Translator and their cellphone, and that it helps a lot with all the languages. That is how they "get by". Besides that, one aviation worker said that they deal with it by speaking slowly, three answered that they use mimics or gesticulation, one said that they use writing, two said that they deal with this with a certain facility or that they "usually comprehend them", two said that they deal with it by asking the passenger to repeat, and one said that they try to deduce through the context. Moreover, one participant answered that they see English accents as a form to improve oral comprehension, one said that they deal with it by asking for help from another person, and another one said that they deal "in a natural way". Finally, there was one who interpreted the question wrongly by saying "Frequently".

According to the answers, it is possible to notice that most of the participants interpreted the question as what they do to understand the passengers and for the passengers to be understood by them. In other words, they associated dealing with the accents with achieving meaning in communication successfully.

Besides that, it is also possible to notice the variability of different answers. All thirteen participants answered differently and without a pattern. Some of them do not feel difficulty to deal with accents, and some others use different strategies to overcome this kind of language barrier. This variability in how they deal with the diversity of English might be explained by when they started learning the language because the majority of them (7 of 13 workers: 2 in the adolescence, 3 in the adulthood, and 2 do not know) started later in life, as can be seen in the answers to the second question. Ortega (2011) explains that such people exhibit much greater variability in their levels of linguistic attainment, which also reflects their interactions with different accents.

Moreover, by comparing the answers individually, in general, it is possible to see that the participants who said that they deal with this linguistic diversity with facility, naturally, or do not have a problem with that, are the ones who started learning in childhood, or the ones who said that they "have always liked" English and lived abroad. The ones that had concrete motivation such as "wanted to be a diplomat" or "wanted to understand their favorite artists" also reported dealing with linguistic diversity with facility or naturally. On the other hand, the participants who see that as a challenge are the ones who started learning English late, do not know any English yet, or started learning just because of the job. Ortega (2011) explains that too, by saying that motivation is another source of individual difference.

Another factor that explains the variability among the answers is the lack of aviationspecific courses taken by the participants. As can be seen in the first question, 10 of 13 workers have not taken any Aviation English course, preparation, or done any English evaluation before joining the job. 2 took an English test in the recruitment phase, and only one had studied aviation-oriented English. This disparity between being and not being specifically prepared for aviation contexts reveals why there is no standard answers as well. If it was common to take a linguistic aviation-needs course previously, the answers would probably be more similar.

However, it is important to note that the different strategies presented in the answers demonstrate the use of semiotic resources beyond formal grammar and vocabulary, which according to Canagarajah (2018), have central importance to achieve successful communication. The author says:

What accounts for the ability of people to achieve communicative success is not the knowledge of norms, grammars, and conventions as a product. It is the procedural dexterity to emplace oneself in relevant social, material, and semiotic networks and engage strategically for one's objectives, knowing that there is no unconditional success in communication. (CANAGARAJAH, 2018, p.22).

In order to reinforce that the workers' strategies are productive, it is important to take into account Canagarajah's concept of strategic competence. He says that it "refers to the ability to anticipate and repair potential communication breakdown in contexts of variable grammatical proficiency among interlocutors." (2014, p. 772). The potential communication breakdown may be seen here as the challenge of dealing with different English accents; and the interlocutors with variable proficiencies here are the aviation workers and the passengers. Even though they do not dominate English grammar and norms, they learned how to negotiate by utilizing other resources because they need to achieve their communication purposes according to their everyday needs. Those practices have constituted their spatial repertoire, which Canagarajah defines as "the full range of semiotic resources that are part of an activity in a situated material and social environment." (2018, p.8). Thus, the workers who mentioned context, mimics, repetition, speaking slower, gesticulation, and writing in how they deal with

accents can be considered strategically competent and legitimate English users. This is reinforced by Jenkins et al. (2011) who assert that, once English is a Lingua Franca and the standard language of aviation, the language used in these interactions "involve[s] not only the frequent systematic use of certain forms (lexicogrammatical, phonological and so on) that are not found in native English, but also a range of pragmatic on-line processes" (2011, p. 296). Therefore, it is possible to say that the aviation context tends to a more pragmatic and non-verbal communication as well. This result also corroborates the contemporary concept of ESP, which highlights the importance of shifting "attention away from defining the formal features of language usage to discovering the ways in which language is actually used in real communication" (HUTCHINSON; WATERS, 1987, p. 6).

The results here present an opportunity for the aviation industry to implement those approaches and strategies in the airlines' training programs for flight attendants and airport agents. Flight attendant schools can also benefit from it. If the future worker learns how to deal with foreign passengers and their accents in advance instead of leaning it from their everyday experience, that will certainly make their communicative productivity better, will avoid surprise misunderstandings, and the passenger will feel better served.

4 CONCLUSION

The beginning of the twentieth century is marked with the expansion in the integration of the world's economies and cultures known as globalization. This circumstance led to change the status of English becoming a Lingua Franca, which brought along many other changes such as the emergence of "New Englishes", and the need to use English in a specialized way for each knowledge area, also known as English for Specific Purposes. One of these areas is aviation, in which its context deals a lot with different types of people, and so, different types of English.

Because of that, this study analyzed how aviation workers - airport agents and flight attendants from Brazilian airline companies – deal with different English accents spoken by passengers that regularly appear in the daily routine of their job. In order to do that, field research was carried out at the Brasília International Airport, the second busiest airport in Brazil where, according to most of the research participants, interactions with foreign passengers have to be done in English every day or frequently.

As a result, this study showed that most of the participants have some kind of difficulty in achieving meaning while dealing with different English accents, while the minority deals with it with facility or naturally. The ones that see accents as a challenge in communication shared many varied approaches to dealing with it. However, the strategies are basically semiotic resources such as mimics, gesticulation, repetition, writing or technology, which is, for Canagarajah (2018) important strategic competence. Those approaches are central in a context where English is used as a Lingua Franca; and they can also be considered a normal and important part of the development of English for Specific Purposes.

Further studies must include airline pilots separated in the research considering that they interact less with passengers and more with control towers. Thus, they will probably have more standard answers unlike the airport agents and flight attendants since pilots use more ready-made phraseologies, have rigorous trainings and preparations, and take regular English tests as required by ICAO.

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