

**Mission-relevant oral proficiency for CAS:  
 A comparison of STANAG 6001 Level 3 and ICAO Level 4**

*Table 2: Comparison of linguistic functions and language competence in the descriptors*

	<b>STANAG 6001 level 3</b>	<b>ICAO level 4 (= minimum level of proficiency determined to be safe for air traffic control communications)</b>
<b>Pronunciation<sup>1</sup></b>	Pronunciation may be obviously foreign.	Influenced by 1st language, but only sometimes interferes with ease of understanding.
<b>Structure<sup>2</sup></b>	Use of structural devices is flexible and elaborate. Errors may occur in low frequency or highly complex structures (...).	Basic structures used creatively (i.e. spontaneously); usually well controlled; errors rarely interfere with meaning.  Operational Level 4 speakers have good command of basic grammatical structures. They do not merely have a memorized set of words or phrases on which they rely but have sufficient command of basic grammar to create new meaning as appropriate. Level 4 speakers will not usually attempt complex structures, and when they do, quite a lot of errors would be expected resulting in less effective communication.
<b>Vocabulary<sup>3</sup></b>	Can convey abstract concepts in discussions of such topics as economics, culture, science, technology, philosophy as well as his/her professional field.	Usually sufficient to communicate effectively on common, concrete and work-related topics. Can often paraphrase successfully when lacking vocabulary in unusual or unexpected circumstances.
<b>Fluency<sup>4</sup></b>	Without searching for words or phrases, can use the language clearly and relatively naturally to elaborate on concepts freely (...). Produces extended discourse (...).	Stretches of language at appropriate tempo; loss of fluency does not prevent effective communication; limited use of discourse markers and connectors; fillers not distracting.

<sup>1</sup> ICAO Doc 98 35: “The six levels of pronunciation descriptors **are applicable at all levels to native and non-native speakers**. This implies that native English speakers may demonstrate Elementary Level 2 proficiency if their regional dialect is so localized that it is not readily understood by those outside of that particular region. On the other hand, speakers whose speech patterns clearly identify them as non-native speakers (having a so-called “accent”) may demonstrate Expert Level 6 proficiency, as long as this meets the criterion of “almost never” interfering with ease of understanding.”

<sup>2</sup> ICAO Doc 9835: “**Relevant grammatical structures and sentence patterns are determined by language functions appropriate to the task.**”

<sup>3</sup> ICAO Doc 9835: “Vocabulary can be classified by the domains of meaning to which it refers. [...] While memorizing phraseologies is neither an acceptable means of demonstrating language proficiency nor an effective or recommended language learning strategy, it is undeniable that context is a relevant factor in language proficiency. **Therefore, learning or testing that focuses on, or is designed to elicit vocabulary related to, aeronautical radiotelephony communications is preferable.**”

<sup>4</sup> ICAO Doc 9835: “For our purposes, fluency is intended to refer to the naturalness of the flow of speech production, the degree to which comprehension is hindered by any unnatural or unusual hesitancy, distracting starts and stops, distracting fillers (em ... huh ... er ...) or inappropriate silence. Levels of fluency will be most apparent during longer utterances in an interaction.”

<b>Comprehension<sup>5</sup></b>	May not fully understand some cultural references, proverbs, and allusions, as well as implications of nuances or idioms (...).	Mostly accurate; acceptable accent; can comprehend the unexpected, perhaps slowly and with clarification strategies As with all Operational Level 4 descriptors, comprehension is not expected to be perfectly accurate in all instances. However, pilots or air traffic controllers will need to have strategies available which allow them to ultimately comprehend the unexpected or unusual communication.
<b>Interaction<sup>6</sup></b>	Speaks readily and in a way that is appropriate to the situation. Can reliably elicit information and informed opinion from native speakers.	Usually immediate, appropriate and informative; initiates and maintains exchanges even with the unexpected; deals adequately with misunderstandings by checking, confirming or clarifying. A pilot or air traffic controller who does not understand an unexpected communication must be able to communicate that fact. It is much safer to query a communication, to clarify, or even to simply acknowledge that one does not understand rather than to allow silence to mistakenly represent comprehension

**Differences between the STANAG 6001 and the ICAO test construct:**

- **ICAO TEST CONSTRUCT: Successful aeronautical radiotelephony communication.** The specific features of aeronautical radiotelephony communications, i. e. purpose, environment, characteristics) can be found in Chapter 3 of ICAO Doc 9835.
- **ICAO TARGET GROUP:**
  - As clear communication strategies, comprehension of and rapid reaction to unexpected or unusual communication are part of the construct, **the ICAO rating scale applies to non-native and to native speakers alike.** ICAO does not regard the so-called native speaker as a language role model; it uses EFL research to determine which features in pronunciation are important to intelligibility (ICAO Doc 9835 2.5); whereas STANAG 6001 refers to the native speaker as the language role model.
  - Pilots and ATCs need strategies for linguistic difficulties in unexpected situations; these strategies are part of the assessment process. If such strategies are not available to them, they cannot be awarded the level: “The descriptor of Operational Level 4 under “Interactions” clarifies the need for clarification strategies. Failure to understand a clearly communicated unexpected communication, even after seeking clarification, should result in the assignment of a lower proficiency level assessment.” (ICAO Doc 9835)

<sup>5</sup> ICAO 9835: “This skill refers to the ability to listen and understand. In air traffic control communications, pilots rely on the clear and accurate information provided to them by controllers for safety. It is not sufficient for air traffic controllers to be able to handle most pilot communications; they must be ready for the unexpected. Similarly, pilots must be able to understand air traffic controller instructions, especially when these differ from what a pilot expects to hear. It is during complications in aviation that communications become most crucial, with a greater reliance upon plain language. **While comprehension is only one out of six skills in the Rating Scale, it represents half of the linguistic workload in spoken communications.**”

<sup>6</sup> ICAO Doc 9835: “Because radiotelephony communications take place in a busy environment, the communications of air traffic controllers and pilots must not only be clear, concise and unambiguous, but appropriate responses must be delivered efficiently and a rapid response time is expected. The interactions skill refers to this ability, as well as to the ability to initiate exchanges and to identify and clear up misunderstandings.”

- **Degree of standardisation of the oral proficiency test:** The ICAO oral proficiency tests are scripted.