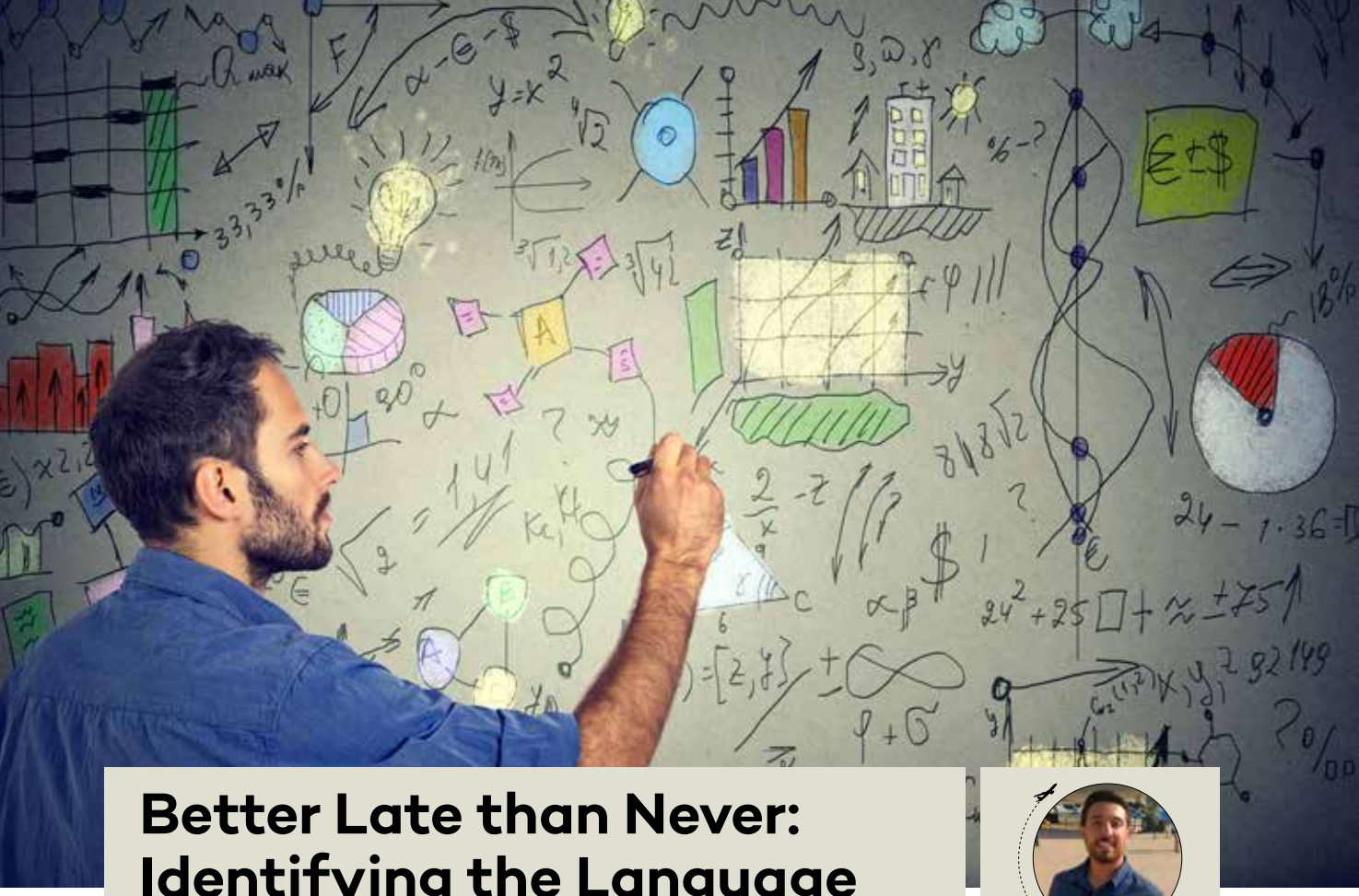

Better Late than Never: Identifying the Language Learning Needs of Pilots

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The COVID-19 pandemic has had a devastating impact on many industries. Yet, the aviation industry has suffered considerably more than any other industry due to travel restrictions both on the local and global scale. As the pandemic spread around the world, the decrease in flight operations hit an all-time record with around 80% of flights cancelled. Although, the industry seems to have warmed up to a small extent with some economic relief packages delivered by a number of governments and the increase in the demand on cargo operations, the IATA still foresees that global airline revenue in 2021 will decline by 46% compared to 2019. In light of the existing impact of COVID-19, it can be argued that, in the long run, we are still far away from beginning to see daylight even after all of this suffering. Amid such fuzziness, pessimistic expectations, and recovery concerns, the IATA, airline companies, and pilots' associations around the world still seek answers for the issue of sustainable refresher training programs. In fact, the real problem is not when and how to recover from the impacts of COVID-19 pandemic; rather it appears now to be how to ensure the safest flight operations as soon as possible. In that case, a thorough assessment of pilots' needs has surfaced as a life saver for the aviation industry.

The instrumentation of comprehensive needs analysis studies for a faster recovery and orientation is of utmost importance for both currently employed but not working pilots and for those who were laid off due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The latest figures show that the number of flights after the outbreak of COVID-19 has reduced to 23.1 million, which was around 40 million flights in 2019. What's more the number of active working pilots was around 315,00 whereas it now has significantly reduced over the last few months. Norwegian is known to have laid of 1,570 pilots; Delta Air Lines has furloughed 1,941 pilots recently and Finnair with around 1,000 furloughs; and recently Etihad dismissed 400 pilots. However, the aviation industry will eventually need these pilots. Therefore, airline companies cannot just assign homework or the pilots cannot be simply asked to work and practice at home.

Being a pilot requires both personal investment such as time, effort, and motivation, and financial investment. However, the ultimate attainment of getting your pilot's license

is just the beginning of your journey. Similar to the take-off and touch-down of the aircraft under your control, you encounter several ups and downs in your career as a pilot. No matter what you fly, a single-prop TBM 900 or the latest generation Boeing 787s and Airbus 350s, the foremost prerequisite you need to meet is, for sure, the flight time and type rating. That's what matters for a pilot. Therefore, learning how to fly resembles learning a second language in a number of ways. First, the extent to which second language learners are exposed to meaningful input in the target language affects the degree of proficiency. Also, if you keep close relations to the target language-speaking communities, you are more likely to develop better in that language when compared to those who prefer to keep their distance from the target community. Similarly, the more you fly, the more learn. In this sense, depriving pilots of their foremost need to fly and practice may result in the decrease of flying skill. Another similarity is that both skills require some sort of drills. This may include grammar drills for second language learners to have better control of linguistic features; whereas the drills for a pilot may include walk-around checks, pre-flight checklists, emergency response plans, etc. Finally, second language learning and learning how to fly are similar in terms of aptitude to perform the desired actions in the target situation. A pilot is expected to have advanced motor and cognitive skills, and the aptitude to control a plane; second language learners, also, are expected to have the aptitude to apply various learning styles to be a more proficient user of the target language. In a nutshell, it would be a great mistake to expect people to develop these two namely different yet conceptually similar skills on their own. Therefore, the burden is on the shoulders of policy makers, civil aviation authorities, and airline companies to come up with sustainable refresher training programs for a faster recovery of the airline industry. So, what has been done so far? And, what can be done in the near future?


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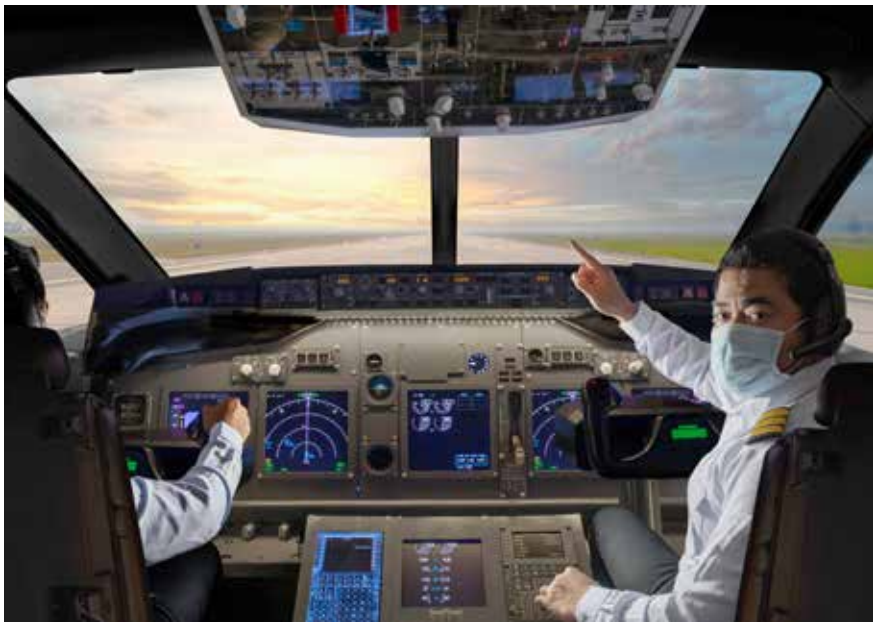
To come up with meaningful answers to these questions, it is a must to define what is meant by the word "need". Oxford dictionary defines it as a situation when something is necessary or must be done. On the other hand, from a scientific perspective, it refers to the requirements of the target situation. To be more clear, it can be further divided into three: lacks, wants, and necessities (see, Hutchinson & Waters, 1987, English for Specific Purposes: A Learning Centered Approach). In the case of aviation, while necessities refer to what pilots must know to be able to practice their profession in the target situation, wants refer to what they feel as necessary for the same purpose, and lacks refer to the gap between what they already know and what they must know in the end.

Having established the foundation of pilots' needs, now is the time to move on with latest local and global developments in terms of need analysis assessment. To begin with the local scale, it has been proposed that listening comprehension and speaking are the most significant areas in which pilots need to develop themselves. In this sense, Turkish Airlines offers an Introduction to Aviation English course to pilots. Although, this seems to be a hybrid course including both e-learning and classroom instruction, it is limited in its scope. The overall course outline includes aviation

alphabet and numbers, parts of an aircraft and cockpit, how does an aircraft fly, concept of speed, pre-flight briefing and monitoring a sterile cockpit, walk around, and finally radiotelephony. Moreover, such a course is offered by Turkish Airlines Aviation Academy, thus the share of Aviation English in refresher training programs, if any, is not within our knowledge yet. Similarly, Pegasus Airlines, one of the most frequent-flying low-cost carriers in Turkey, offers Pilot Training programs for prospective pilots. However, there is no sign of Aviation English courses in their curricula; rather language proficiency is a must-have prerequisite to apply for this program, which contradicts with the fact that language learning does not happen at once; rather it happens in a continuum. For these reasons, it can be concluded that the present state of Aviation English learning opportunities is limited. Even worse, there exists no future plan to be implemented by local authorities or airline companies towards meeting the needs of pilots in Turkey.

Disregarding such needs may pose a big threat on the safety of flight operations in Turkey once the so-called new normal is on. Needless to say, the



fatal consequences of lack of English language proficiency on aviation have been witnessed many times in history. As a matter of fact, the official report on the latest incident of Pegasus Airlines in 2020 was partially due to linguistic restrictions of those involved in radiotelephony communication. That's why, it should always be borne in mind that any comeback in the aviation industry in terms of the number of passenger flight operations will definitely require pilots with effective communication skills in English; thus, making Aviation English a part of refresher training programs must be the top priority of civil aviation authorities and airline companies for safer flight operations during the new normal.

On the other hand, the analysis of pilots' needs for a safe and speedy recovery of the industry will find its way on a global scale, if it's not on the local scale yet. In one of such recent attempts, a joint webinar by the IATA, ICAO, and IFALPA was held focusing on managing pilot training and licensing during the COVID-19 pandemic. The objectives of the webinar were to present what had been done to maintain operations in terms of pilot training and licensing, and to discuss the challenges and possible solutions for a recovery. Although, the latter is not the interest of this article, the first issue offers great insights into the issue of a possible decrease in English communication and flying skills of pilots during worldwide lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The implementation of alleviations to the Standards of ICAO Annexes was one of the initial interim measures established to support continued operations during COVID-19. This means several exemptions for pilots including licenses, medical certificates, recency, recurrent training, and language proficiency. For the time being, such exemptions will be in force until March 31, 2021. When analyzed from the perspective of pilots, these exemptions seem to be a real relief. However, providing pilots with such exemptions has some significant drawbacks. First, the joint webinar suggested pilots refresh their knowledge through books and online courses. Yet, as mentioned earlier, piloting an aircraft safely cannot be limited only

to having good 'control' or knowledge from the pilots' handbook of aeronautical knowledge, aircraft flight manuals (AFMs), instrument flying handbooks, and aeronautical information manuals; rather, such theoretical refreshments need to be backed up with hands-on training. Although, the implemented exemptions provided relief for pilots on a great number of issues, no step has been taken yet towards providing pilots with practical solutions on one of the most important issues in the event of the return to normal flight operations: fitness to fly.

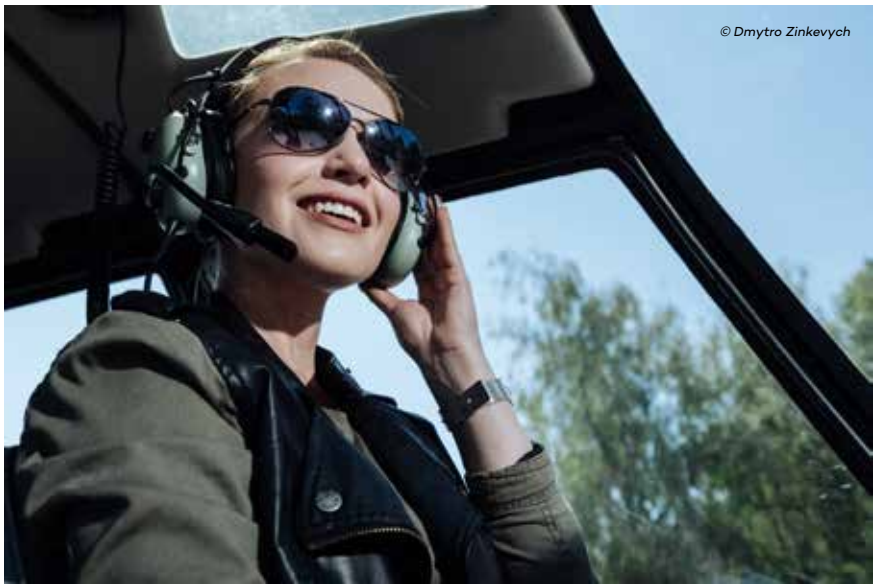
Another drawback of the proposed exemptions for pilots was the extension of the validity of pilot licenses until March 31, 2021. This means that pilots would be away from the flight-deck for some more time in the near future. As we are about to welcome 2021 and there is no reason to set forth any time for a return to normal flight operations, this exemption can be even further extended. However, the renewal and revalidation of Instrument Rating (IR) can be a great challenge for pilots due to having become distanced from the flight-deck. The revalidation process of IR would be normally completed in a Flight Navigation Procedures Trainers (FNTP) II simulator;

whereas the class rating cannot be revalidated in a simulator. Similarly, upon the expiration of IR, pilots are required to renew it in an aircraft. Such requirements have two consequences for pilots. First, even if the exemptions for pilot licensing is further extended, pilots will still need to practice until the due date for the renewal and revalidation. However, the burden of funding for training both on EASA approved flight simulators and in an aircraft will still be on the shoulders of pilots. Second, the nature of simulating real-life flying scenarios in a simulator requires being physically present in the simulation centers. This, however, poses health risks for pilots, which may even have more tragic consequences. Hence, aviation authorities need to come up with sustainable solutions for such issues by taking the needs of pilots into consideration.

Apart from pilots' needs during the COVID-19 pandemic, their ongoing needs in terms of training should also be taken into consideration carefully for safer flight operations. A number of attempts have been made to analyze what pilots require in the target situation to best practice their profession. For instance, in Korea, where the aviation industry showed a steady increase within the last couple of years and the number of pilots was around 2,500 as of December 2019, approximately 27 million people traveled by plane and preferred Korean Air. However, ensuring the safety of its passengers without effective pilot training programs would have definitely been quite challenging for the flag carrier of South Korea. What's more, when coupled and backed up with scientific research, it turned out to be the perfect match for their pilots' needs. The initial analysis of pilots' needs in Korea had yielded the following implications: The considerably more experienced pilots were not in need of English language training. On the other hand, language proficiency requirements of the ICAO were challenging in terms of fluency, comprehension, and vocabulary. Also, Korean pilots preferred native English-speaking teachers in their classes (see Shin & Kim, 2005 for more detail). These findings have quite significant implications for the aviation industry for various reasons.

First of all, working in the aviation industry, which probably benefited more from the effects of globalization than any other industry, requires having good communication skills in English as lingua franca. This becomes even more important for pilots during flight operations. However, their ongoing need to learn and practice English language have turned out to be a source of business around the world. On the one hand, cadet pilots try to do their best in Aviation English courses but their attempts usually result in either a total failure to learn English or attainment of proficiency in English only to a limited extent. On the other hand, the already employed pilots are not offered any kind of training to practice English in cases like lay-offs. Once they return to work, they are likely to encounter linguistic challenges. If such needs are not taken into consideration seriously, both the prospective pilots and those who have been laid-off recently will end up in complete failure to perform effectively in the target situation.

Second, no matter how experienced you are as a pilot, your flying skill will not help you in all cases. The best yet the most tragic example to such a scenario was the Tenerife Disaster, in which a misunderstanding between pilots and air traffic controller resulted



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in a complete tragedy. That's why pilots' needs in terms of English language proficiency are usually the same for all aviators who learn English as their second language. In an attempt to assess the needs of cadet pilots in Turkey, similar conclusions have been made. Listening comprehension was one of the two most challenging areas for Turkish cadet pilots. This can be associated with the fact that they are not exposed to authentic listening materials until they take Aviation English courses. Even if they take such courses, it is still quite challenging for them to develop listening skills as the institutions do not allocate enough time for it in their curricula. The conditions are even worse in tertiary level Aviation programs. Although the number of academic programs has burst in the last few years significantly, there exist two drawbacks to be worked up. First and most importantly, these institutions lack qualified teachers to offer Aviation English courses. Another reason is that the curricula of these pilotage programs unfortunately lack compulsory Aviation English courses. In fact, the latter is closely related to the first issue. However, there is no effort so far to implement teacher training programs for Aviation English courses. Therefore, listening comprehension, the first area in which cadet pilots in Turkey need to develop themselves, is and will be the bleeding wound of aviation in Turkey.

Following the first area of need, speaking appears to be the second most important need. The underlying reasons for speaking in English being a challenge for cadet pilots are sociocultural matters in Turkey. Although Turkey is an ethnically diverse country, the nationalist point of view towards English is still existent in many regions of Turkey. That results in no reason for the development of intrinsic or extrinsic motivation for second language learners in Turkey. Furthermore, they do not look for opportunities to develop close relations with limited number of English-speaking communities in the Turkey. Consequently, only those who manage to find a way to learn English at an early age thanks to their determined English teachers or the parental support can get the opportunity to attain higher degrees of English language competency. On the other hand, the others who never attempted to learn or who started to learn English later in their

life after deciding to be a pilot fail to attain a high degree of speaking skill because it becomes significantly more difficult for the second group to process information after a certain age. To put it in a nutshell, although General English and Aviation English are quite different subjects in essence, learning English as a second language and learning Aviation English in Turkey are strongly correlated in that it becomes easier for proficient users of English to learn Aviation English more easily and smoothly whereas it is difficult to claim that learning Aviation English is a similar experience for those who did not have any prior knowledge of English. That's why providing sustainable solutions on a local scale for the growth of the aviation industry, national authorities including the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Transport and Infrastructure should cooperate and handle such needs of pilots with care.

At the end of the day, the last questions to seek answers to here are, what can be done to meet the needs of pilots on a global scale? As is proposed in the theory of the big bang, everything just started with a big bang. Similarly, the ever-popular issue of the COVID-19 pandemic all started with a kind of big bang in Wuhan, China in 2019. However, nobody was well-prepared for such a global phenomenon in terms of managing the human resources and there seemed to be no emergency action plan. This resulted in temporary lay-offs and permanent termination of contracts in the aviation industry. On the other hand, there hopefully exists a brighter future with the increased safety measures and the proliferation of COVID-19 vaccines. In this sense, it is important to develop a sustainable action plan for a return to normal flight operations. This must include refresher training programs as well as language courses for pilots. With the latest developments in technology, there is a number of Web 2.0 tools and online platforms for learners of English and other languages to both learn and practice the target language with their counterparts. Similarly, there exists several software to assist learners of Aviation English online. However, the integration of such tools and software into training programs to be offered by airline companies should be completed before it is too late. To do so, a comprehensive needs analysis questionnaire should be conducted with as many pilots as possible and their felt needs should be identified. This would contribute significantly to safer flight operations during the new normal. As always, better late than never