

# An Introduction to the ICAO Descriptors



**TEST OF ENGLISH  
FOR AVIATION**

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# 1. ICAO Descriptors

There are 6 profiles (Pronunciation / Structure / Vocabulary / Fluency / Comprehension / Interactions) and 6 bands in each profile.

There are also a set of "Holistic Descriptors" which describe in general terms what the purpose is of creating the rating scale: namely, to identify proficient speakers who shall:

- 1. communicate effectively in voice-only (telephone / radiotelephone) and in face-to-face communications.**
- 2. communicate on common, concrete, and work-related topics with accuracy and clarity.**
- 3. use appropriate communicative strategies to exchange messages and to recognise and resolve misunderstandings (e.g. to check, confirm or clarify information) in a general or work-related context.**
- 4. 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.**
- 5. use a dialect or accent which is intelligible to the aeronautical community.**

## 2. Special Features

The following facts about the rating scale should be noted:

- Reading and Writing are not tested.
- Phraseology and/or Operational Knowledge are not tested.
- Some of the descriptors appear to describe language one would not normally expect to find in aviation contexts, e.g.
  - Idiomatic language (Vocabulary)
  - Register (Vocabulary)
  - Cultural subtleties (Comprehension)
  - Non-verbal cues (Interactions)
- The overall mark is the lowest profile.

The descriptors emphasise communicative efficiency.

- Is effective communication with the candidate possible?
- What is the communicative effect of candidate error?
- How much strain does L1 interference place on the listener?
- Can the speaker by-pass vocabulary gaps with paraphrase?
- Can the speaker manage initial misunderstanding?

## 3. Progression of the Scale

The differences between each level are not equal. 3 and 4 describe quite wide ranges of performance in particular. Teachers and raters are largely concerned with levels 3 – 5.

	<b>P</b>	<b>S</b>	<b>V</b>	<b>F</b>	<b>C</b>	<b>I</b>
<b>6</b>						
<b>5</b>						
<b>4</b>						
<b>3</b>						
<b>2</b>						
<b>1</b>						

## 4. Pronunciation

Take some time to look at the ICAO Descriptors for Pronunciation and notice the differences between the levels. There are some elements of "jargon" that you may wish to check the meaning of, if you are unsure:

*Stress*

*Rhythm*

*Intonation*

*Accent*

*Dialect*

Look at the Pronunciation Descriptors. What are the main differences between each level? (Our suggestions are at the [end of this document](#)).

<b>Expert 6</b>	<b>Pronunciation, stress, rhythm, and intonation, though possibly influenced by the first language or regional variation, almost never interfere with ease of understanding.</b>
<b>Extended 5</b>	<b>Pronunciation, stress, rhythm, and intonation, though influenced by the first language or regional variation, rarely interfere with ease of understanding.</b>
<b>Operational 4</b>	<b>Pronunciation, stress, rhythm, and intonation are influenced by the first language or regional variation but only sometimes interfere with ease of understanding.</b>
<b>Pre-Operational 3</b>	<b>Pronunciation, stress, rhythm, and intonation are influenced by the first language or regional variation and frequently interfere with ease of understanding.</b>
<b>Elementary 2</b>	<b>Pronunciation, stress, rhythm, and intonation are heavily influenced by the first language or regional variation and usually interfere with ease of understanding.</b>
<b>Pre-Elementary 1</b>	<b>Performs at a level below the Elementary level.</b>

## 5. Structure

Now look at the ICAO Descriptors for Structure. You will notice that they talk about “complex” structures and “basic structures”.

As a general rule, we tend to call a grammatical structure “basic” if it is usually taught at or below B1 level in the Common European Framework (Pre-Intermediate in traditional textbook terminology).

Thus they include structures like past and present simple, present continuous for actions in progress, simple modal verbs like can and must. But note that ICAO have themselves published a somewhat controversial list of structures in Document 9835, that we also refer to.

Read through the pronunciation descriptors and note the differences between levels. At the end of the document you can see our suggestions [at the end of the document](#).

<b>Expert 6</b>	<b>Both basic and complex grammatical structures and sentence patterns are consistently well controlled.</b>
<b>Extended 5</b>	<b>Basic grammatical structures and sentence patterns are consistently well controlled. Complex structures are attempted but with errors which sometimes interfere with meaning.</b>
<b>Operational 4</b>	<b>Basic grammatical structures and sentence patterns are used creatively and are usually well controlled. Errors may occur, particularly in unusual or unexpected circumstances, but rarely interfere with meaning.</b>
<b>Pre-Operational 3</b>	<b>Basic grammatical structures and sentence patterns associated with predictable situations are not always well controlled. Errors frequently interfere with meaning.</b>
<b>Elementary 2</b>	<b>Shows only limited control of a few simple memorized grammatical structures and sentence patterns.</b>
<b>Pre-Elementary 1</b>	<b>Performs at a level below the Elementary level.</b>

## 6. Vocabulary

The Vocabulary descriptors also contain some “jargon” that you should check:

*Range*

*Accuracy*

*Paraphrase*

*Idiomatic language*

*Nuances*

*Register*

Look through the descriptors below to identify the differences described at each level, then check with our suggestions at the [end of the document](#).

<b>Expert 6</b>	<b>Vocabulary range and accuracy are sufficient to communicate effectively on a wide variety of familiar and unfamiliar topics. Vocabulary is idiomatic, nuanced, and sensitive to register.</b>
<b>Extended 5</b>	<b>Vocabulary range and accuracy are sufficient to communicate effectively on common, concrete, and work related topics. Paraphrases consistently and successfully. Vocabulary is sometimes idiomatic.</b>
<b>Operational 4</b>	<b>Vocabulary range and accuracy are 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>
<b>Pre-Operational 3</b>	<b>Vocabulary range and accuracy are often sufficient to communicate on common, concrete, or work related topics but range is limited and the word choice often inappropriate. Is often unable to paraphrase successfully when lacking vocabulary.</b>
<b>Elementary 2</b>	<b>Limited vocabulary range consisting only of isolated words and memorized phrases.</b>
<b>Pre-Elementary 1</b>	<b>Performs at a level below the Elementary level.</b>

## 7. Fluency

The Fluency descriptors include some items of terminology or terms of debatable meaning. Check that you have an idea of their meaning before looking at the table.

*Fluency*

*Fillers*

*Connectors*

*Discourse markers*

*Formulaic speech*

*Spontaneous interaction*

*The natural tempo of English speech*

*Speech flow and style*

Then look at the table to identify the key differences between levels. As before, we suggest answers at the [end of the document](#).

<b>Expert 6</b>	<b>Able to speak at length with a natural, effortless flow. Varies speech flow for stylistic effect, e.g. to emphasize a point. Uses appropriate discourse markers and connectors spontaneously.</b>
<b>Extended 5</b>	<b>Able to speak at length with relative ease on familiar topics, but may not vary speech flow as a stylistic device. Can make use of appropriate discourse markers or connectors.</b>
<b>Operational 4</b>	<b>Produces stretches of language at an appropriate tempo. There may be occasional loss of fluency on transition from rehearsed or formulaic speech to spontaneous interaction, but this does not prevent effective communication. Can make limited use of discourse markers or connectors. Fillers are not distracting.</b>
<b>Pre-Operational 3</b>	<b>Produces stretches of language, but phrasing and pausing are often inappropriate. Hesitations or slowness in language processing may prevent effective communication. Fillers are sometimes distracting.</b>
<b>Elementary 2</b>	<b>Can produce very short, isolated, memorized utterances with frequent pausing and a distracting use of fillers to search for expressions and to articulate less familiar words.</b>
<b>Pre-Elementary 1</b>	<b>Performs at a level below the Elementary level.</b>



## 8. Comprehension

Before reading the descriptors, check that you can define the following terms:

*An accent intelligible for an international community of users*

*Clarification strategies*

Then read the descriptors to identify key differences between the levels, before checking our answers [at the end of the document](#).

Expert 6	<b>Comprehension is consistently accurate in nearly all contexts and includes comprehension of linguistic and cultural subtleties.</b>
Extended 5	<b>Comprehension is accurate on common, concrete, and work related topics and mostly accurate when the speaker is confronted with a linguistic or situational complication or an unexpected turn of events. Is able to comprehend a range of speech varieties (dialect and/or accent) or registers.</b>
Operational 4	<b>Comprehension is mostly accurate on common, concrete, and work related topics when the accent or variety used is sufficiently intelligible for an international community of users. When the speaker is confronted with a linguistic or situational complication or an unexpected turn of events, comprehension may be slower or require clarification strategies.</b>
Pre-Operational 3	<b>Comprehension is often accurate on common, concrete, and work related topics when the accent or variety used is sufficiently intelligible for an international community of users. May fail to understand a linguistic or situational turn of events.</b>
Elementary 2	<b>Comprehension is limited to isolated, memorized phrases when they are carefully and slowly articulated.</b>
Pre-Elementary 1	<b>Performs at a level below the Elementary level.</b>

## 9. Interactions

In terms of interactions, it is useful to think how you would define the following notions:

*Responses are immediate, appropriate and informative*

*Manages the speaker / listener relationship*

Then read the descriptors to identify key differences between the levels. You can check our ideas at the [end of the document](#).

<b>Expert 6</b>	<b>Interacts with ease in nearly all situations. Is sensitive to verbal and non-verbal cues, and responds to them appropriately.</b>
<b>Extended 5</b>	<b>Responses are immediate, appropriate, and informative. Manages the speaker/listener relationship effectively.</b>
<b>Operational 4</b>	<b>Responses are usually immediate, appropriate, and informative. Initiates and maintains exchanges even when dealing with an unexpected turn of events. Deals adequately with apparent misunderstandings by checking, confirming, or clarifying.</b>
<b>Pre-Operational 3</b>	<b>Responses are sometimes immediate, appropriate, and informative. Can initiate and maintain exchanges with reasonable ease on familiar topics and in predictable situations. Generally inadequate when dealing with an unexpected turn of events.</b>
<b>Elementary 2</b>	<b>Response time is slow, and often inappropriate. Interaction is limited to simple routine exchanges.</b>
<b>Pre-Elementary 1</b>	<b>Performs at a level below the Elementary level.</b>

## 10. Key Differences

### Pronunciation

Level 2: heavily influenced by first language, usually interfere with ease of understanding

Level 3: influenced by first language, frequently interfere with ease of understanding

Level 4: influenced by first language, but only sometimes interfere with ease of understanding

Level 5: though influenced by first language, rarely interfere with ease of understanding

Level 6: though possibly influenced by first language, almost never interfere with ease of understanding

### Structure

Level 2: limited control; simple memorised

Level 3: basic structures not always well controlled; errors frequently interfere with meaning

Level 4: basic structures used creatively; usually well controlled; errors rarely interfere with meaning

Level 5: basic structures consistently well controlled; complex structures attempted with errors

Level 6: basic and complex structures consistently well controlled

### Vocabulary

Level 2: limited range; isolated words

Level 3: often sufficient for familiar topics; range limited; word choice often inappropriate; can't paraphrase

Level 4: usually sufficient for familiar topics; can often paraphrase when lacking vocab or in unusual situations

Level 5: sufficient for familiar; paraphrases consistently and successfully; sometimes idiomatic

Level 6: sufficient for a wide range of topics; idiomatic, nuanced, sensitive to register

## **Fluency**

Level 2: short, isolated, memorised utterances; frequent pausing; distracting fillers

Level 3: inappropriate phrasing and pausing; hesitation due to processing language; ineffective communication; sometimes distracting fillers

Level 4: stretches of language at appropriate tempo; loss of fluency does not prevent effective communication; limited use of discourse markers and connectors; fillers are not distracting

Level 5: speaks at length and with relative ease; may not vary speech flow as a stylistic device; appropriate use of discourse markers and connectors

Level 6: speaks at length; natural effortless flow; varies speech flow for stylistic effect; appropriate discourse markers and connectors spontaneously

## **Comprehension**

Level 2: isolated memorized phrases slowly and carefully articulated

Level 3: often accurate; acceptable accent; may fail to understand the unexpected

Level 4: mostly accurate; acceptable accent; can comprehend the unexpected - perhaps slowly and with clarification strategies

Level 5: accurate in familiar situation; mostly accurate with the unexpected; able to comprehend a wide variety of speech types

Level 6: consistently accurate in nearly all contexts

## **Interactions**

Level 2: slow; often inappropriate; simple, routine exchanges

Level 3: sometimes immediate, appropriate and informative; initiates and maintains exchanges on familiar topics; generally inadequate with the unexpected

Level 4: usually immediate, appropriate and informative; initiates and maintains exchanges even with the unexpected; deals adequately with misunderstandings by checking, confirming or clarifying

Level 5: responses are immediate, appropriate and informative; manages the speaker/listener relationship effectively

Level 6: interacts with ease in nearly all situations