

AVIATE, NAVIGATE, COMMUNICATE

Safety culture and communication in the Greek Military Air Force

by Katerina Rintari
BA English Philology
MA Teaching Methodology
rintarikat@vodafone.net.gr

I once tactfully asked a student of mine and cadet in the Military Air Force why he insisted on having a negative attitude towards learning English. He automatically responded that he only had to use Greek military airports where both Pilots and Air Traffic Controllers spoke Greek. To this he playfully added that the one concerned should be the foreigner sharing the Greek military aerodrome (!), his eyes hopelessly rolling around the class for approval only to be frowned upon. A little overwhelmed, but definitely relieved by the knowledge that this was just the exception to the rule, I began my teacher-like preaching which that response deserved.

In answer to such a stance, I should say that one should be prepared for contingencies.

In August 2007, while fires raged all over the Peloponnese peninsula and Greece, a state of emergency was declared for the country. International help arrived comprising about 35 aircraft and helicopters from Holland, France, Germany, Spain, Serbia, Israel and a number of other countries to battle flames that tore through forests and swallowed villages. **The only common means of communication in aviation phraseology? English.**

An axiom that applies in aviation and in three words sums up the pilot's first priorities is: Aviate, Navigate, Communicate. This is an axiom that applies whether flying a single engine aircraft or a supersonic jet. It is the last part of this axiom that is mostly underestimated. **But, if communication is ineffective, how can coordination be achieved and how can a mission be completed? Language is the ally behind the scenes.**

Identifying and understanding the reasons for poor communication is vital to ensuring safe flights and effective operations. Most people do not understand the frequency of airline accidents or near-accidents, because it is mostly accidents with fatalities that receive media coverage. However, there are numerous other cases that go unreported, though they may also involve distress, confusion, delays, injuries or ineffective operations. Accidents that happen because of technical problems, icing conditions, pilot's error and the like are widely reported. **What many times is swept under the carpet is problems or near-accidents that occur either on the runway or in the air due to miscommunication.**

A number of reasons that lead to a breach in communication could easily be spotted by experts and trainers, such as misused terms, use of non- standard phraseology, use of language that is too casual for the task at hand etc. But to the discerning eye, this is just the tip of the iceberg. There are **underlying reasons** that affect language learning and consequently communication and these **have to do with our mentality and our**

culture. In fact, three distinct conditions can be identified as the main culprits for adopting the! wrong attitude towards foreign language acquisition.

1. The Contentment Syndrome.

A stable situation is convenient because changes demand great effort, old habits cannot be easily aborted and are more convenient even when we know that they are wrong. **The syndrome of contentment** can operate both on an individual and a group basis jeopardising in this way a whole system. It all boils down to the conviction that things are good enough as they are. It is fully **understandable for someone to feel more secure and confident when using his own language, but what happens when one of the parts engaged is non- Greek?** What happens when Greek and non- Greek pilots are engaged in the same operation to save their fire-ravaged country?

2. The belief that whatever is free of charge is unworthy of attention.

We live in a culture that nourishes this belief. It is **an attitude that expands to all sectors of public education** without realizing how costly it turns out to be having both short term and long term effects. **It looks awkward to see that students are indifferent or even contemptuous towards a teacher / trainer who teaches in the public sector while at the same time they are willing to pay the same teacher exorbitant fees to provide private tutoring!** At this point, I can't help but remember the revealing anecdotal story of how I. Kapodistrias introduced the cultivation of potatoes in Greece. Kapodistrias ordered a shipment of potatoes to be offered to anyone free of charge in an attempt to spread the cultivation of the product. No wonder the offer was met with indifference. Kapodistrias, being aware of Greek attitudes, ordered guards and armed forces to patrol and protect the shipment on the docks of Nafplion. Only then did people become willing to buy or even try to steal the 'so- precious' potatoes. But that was back in 1828!

3. Poor Safety Culture

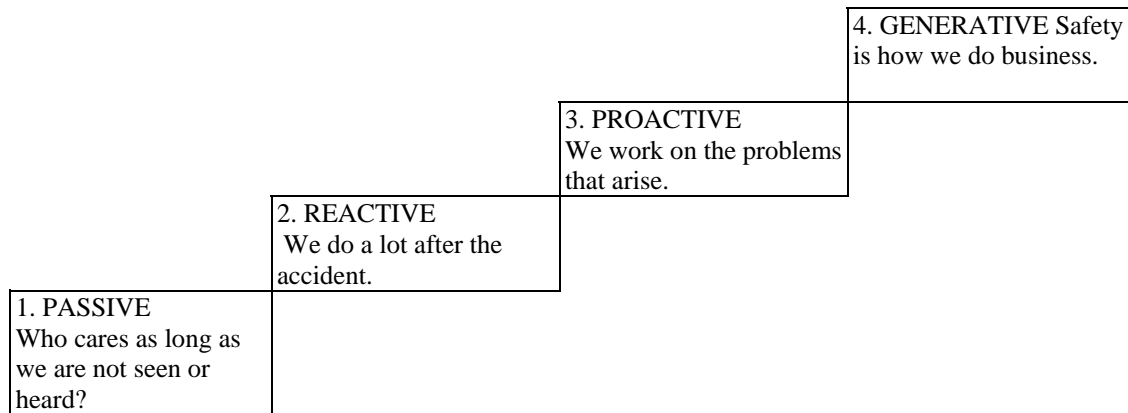
Man is the most flexible, precious and adaptable element of the aviation system, but at the same time one of the most vulnerable to the forces which can affect his abilities. The context and culture in which he lives determine his outlook on safety issues covering all areas of social and individual life. This extends to his attitude towards language use too.

Safety culture appears in the will of an organisation and its members to learn through past errors with a view to developing and preventing their reoccurrence. In layman's terms: 'better safe than sorry'. As far as language is concerned, safety culture demands that focus be placed on aviation language training so as to meet successfully the linguistic needs of any operation. It demands that incidents of flawed communication and previous errors be recorded and analysed regardless of whether they result in an accident or not. Inadequacies of the system ought to be identified and stressful circumstances under which an error might appear ought to be examined in order to eliminate the occurrence of any unfortunate event.

Education can improve communication and cooperation of the engaged parties as long as it is set against a background of safety culture that moves from **the passive state (i.e. I've never really had to use English so far besides some standard phraseology)** to

the generative (i.e. my command of English ensures effective participation in any operation that might arise within or beyond Greek boundaries).

THE EVOLUTION OF SAFETY CULTURE



If safety culture became an intrinsic part of our general culture, we would feel much safer as citizens of a country that does not have to mourn more victims to negligence. We have learnt, unfortunately the hard way, that it is much wiser to protect a forest from burning rather than cry over its ashes after disaster has taken its toll. In the same way, we don't need to see any aviation accident caused by miscommunication in order to give language its rightful place in training. It's a matter of attitude.

in: TESOL Greece Newsletter 96, October-December 2007, page 9