

From the Cockpit  
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**Q. When flying on international flights, what language do pilots use to communicate with the various countries' air-traffic controllers?**

**A.** To help answer your question, I consulted Professor Marjo Mitsutomi, a linguistics expert at the University of Redlands. She is also a licensed pilot and a member of the International Civil Aviation Organization task force, which created the newly established ICAO English proficiency standard.

According to Mitsutomi, in March 2003, "to respond to the increasingly critical need of accurate communication in busy skies," the ICAO elevated English to the "official language of aviation," replacing its earlier recommended-only status on the list of approved languages, which included French, Spanish, Russian, Arabic and Chinese. This marks a historical first that one language will be "used as a medium for communication in one industry by everyone."

Mitsutomi further explains that currently, the extent of English proficiency varies greatly among crews and air-traffic control personnel, and that there is no guarantee that one's counterpart on the same radio frequency actually speaks and understands English.

Communications lapses and errors that affect safety are not uncommon, because proficiency is limited to memorized industry-specific phraseology, created for standard procedures, routine operations and some predictable emergencies. This phraseology, also known as radiotelephony, cannot possibly cover every conceivable situation that might take place in the air and on the ground.

By 2008, pilots and air-traffic controllers of the 188 member countries must meet standards that will ensure they are competent in English, in addition to knowing the prescribed air-traffic-control phraseology, although they will still be able to use their native languages for local flight operations.

Here's an informative paper by Dr. Mitsutomi:

<http://www.miair.us/icao/Aviation%20English%20concept.pdf>

**Q. Sometimes, as we await boarding in the terminal, we can see the pilot on the ramp looking around at the airplane, even when it's pouring rain. What exactly is he doing?**

**A.** It's called a "walk-around" inspection, and constitutes an important link in the safety chain established to ensure that aircraft are airworthy before flight.

On the old three-man crews, the walk-around was the flight engineer's job because he also held an airframe and power-plant mechanic's license. Today, pilots do the walk-around. It's mostly the co-pilots you see on the tarmac, but captains sometimes venture out, too, especially when the weather is good.

The recommended sequence is to start at the left forward fuselage and proceed around the entire airplane in a clockwise direction.

We pay close attention to the general condition of the airplane, engines and control surfaces. We also check the operation of lights and look for any missing parts, fluid leakage or accumulations of ice or snow. Tires and brakes are inspected for integrity and excessive wear.

Aircraft maintenance personnel are notified when any irregularity is discovered during the walk-around, so it can be further inspected and, if necessary, corrected before flight.