

S L O W D O W N THOSE RADIO CALLS

Many pilots are guilty of making, at some time, a radio call that's hard to understand. One of the main reasons is the speed of their delivery.

Radio calls are arguably second only to lookout in the critical basics of safe flying. Yet, complaints are widespread among pilots about the poor delivery of those calls.

Claude Preitner, a CAA medical officer and a 1600-hours pilot, had a recent experience.

"I was flying to Whanganui and traffic was heavy. There were a lot of aircraft reporting their position. One pilot in particular was just incomprehensible. I didn't know who they were, or where they were."

Fortunately, Claude had ADS-B IN on his tablet and was able to identify where that pilot was.

But he says it's obvious that if a reporting position isn't clear, it's worthless.

"If not understood by others, reporting only creates confusion, contributes to radio clutter and gives a false sense of security."

Underconfident, overconfident

CAA aviation safety advisor Carlton Campbell says sometimes the speed of a radio call is due to fear, particularly in the case of student pilots.

"When people press the button, they're really trying to get the message out and, in some cases, get the radio call over and done with because they're a bit apprehensive."



Other times, says Carlton, it's due to the opposite – complacency.

“Some of our more senior commercial pilots are very au fait with their RTF. They know what they're saying – they've said it a thousand times. As a consequence they rattle it off as fast as their brain thinks, forgetting that it's supposed to be informing somebody else's situational awareness.”

Paul Kearney, the CFI at Massey University School of Aviation, supports that view, saying many of their students will be quite nervous about making radio calls when they first start.

“But at the later stage, when they think they're really good at making calls, it becomes ‘the faster I can do it, the better I must be’.

“It's a matter for the flight instructor to slow the student down and get them to acknowledge that if they want other aircraft to understand their radio calls, they must slow them down.”

A call-replay function in the school's Diamond aircraft allows students to replay the radio calls of other aircraft. Paul says it's a useful tool that lets students hear how many times a poorly done radio call needs to be replayed, to understand what was said.

Massey also makes use of simulators to ensure students practise perfect radio calls.

“So if they're not quite right or the wording's wrong, then we can fix it in the simulator before we fly,” says Paul.

Too fast

Amy Dreverman, from Wellington Aero Club, says not only do many pilots speak too quickly, they can be ‘lazy’ in their delivery.

“I think we don't articulate clearly enough, and when combined with the speed that we talk – and sometimes on the radio, there's pressure to perhaps talk faster – it can make it quite difficult to understand at times.”

Twenty-year-old Alice You is training at Massey University. While she's now getting used to the New Zealand accent, she says some locals do speak quite indistinctly.

“When I first started doing this course, it was really hard. Sometimes it's quite ‘blurry’, and it fades sometimes.

“Like, there was an aerodrome next to Taupō – Taumarunui. And on the radio, it just sounds like [a blur].

“I just find it really hard to locate where they are and avoid them.”

Twenty-year-old Shagun Sharma is in his second year at Massey.

“I have been told I'm too fast and I have been told ‘slow down’. I've been trying to do that. So I'm sorry for anybody out there who's been listening to me,” he says, laughing.

CAA flight examiner Marc Brogan recently demonstrated for a student how fast their radio call had been.

“You couldn't make out any of the words, so the detail of the radio call was lost.”

Once on the ground, Marc started talking rapidly to the pilot.

“And they looked at me, puzzled. And I said, ‘That's effectively what we hear via the radio’.”

Marc says speaking face-to-face is a world away from speaking on the radio.

“If you don't understand someone or they don't understand you, you've got facial expressions which will relay (to you) how effective you're being, but in the air of course, you don't have that. So it's lost.”

Carlton Campbell says the correct speed is about 140 words a minute.

“Whenever we're in an aircraft, speak..at..a..slightly.. slower..than..your..normal..conversational..pace.”

Claude Preitner, who's from Switzerland, is very aware of how important it is to speak slowly and distinctly.

“I want to be absolutely confident that other traffic is clear as to my own position and my intentions.”

“Say again”

Amy Dreverman says some pilots who don't understand a radio call don't necessarily ask a pilot to repeat.

“Because it seems like it's your fault for not hearing it, and it's not on the other pilot.

“It depends what environment you're in. If you're in controlled airspace, it can be busy and you don't want to clutter the airways more than is necessary.

“And if you're in uncontrolled airspace, there's an inclination to just try and decipher it as best you can and keep a closer lookout, which is not ideal, because they could be right where you are.”

Amy says safety always demands asking an unclear pilot to repeat themselves.

The president of the NZ Association of Women in Aviation, Margaret Wright, wholeheartedly agrees. »

// We're human, you're never really going to be perfect, but if people can practise the call first, make it nice and concise, and then articulate clearly, you get a perfect radio call. //

» “You always ask them to repeat. Safety’s number one, and they could be in close proximity. It’s important that we get a visual contact with them.”

Alice You says pilots sometimes don’t think about why you’ve asked them to ‘please repeat’.

“I’d just be like, ‘Where are you going? What are you talking about? And say again?’ They still read the name too fast.”

Paul Kearney is also finding an increasing divide between the task of transmitting the radio call and the pilot remembering what the call is actually for.

“Let’s say you’re operating in uncontrolled airspace, and somebody makes a radio call. You need more information from them, so you ask them to repeat. It’s very, very difficult, at times, to get them to respond to you.”

“So it’s almost like radio calls are being done as a transmit-and-forget. ‘I’ve done my job, I’ve done my position report, tick checklist’ rather than a tool to actually communicate between pilots.

“And from talking to other examiners, they sort of found the same sort of thing.”

Carlton Campbell agrees.

“We feel as though we’ve just got to get it done. But really, we should be conveying the same information we need to help our decision-making and our sequencing, when we’re in the listening position.”

“Overhead water tanks”

Apart from speed, possibly the most complained-of radiotelephony habit is the local use of informal reporting points – ‘overhead water tanks’ type of thing.

Shagun Sharma, from Massey, finds this particularly difficult.

“Sometimes they say, ‘Oh, yeah, overhead a street or a house’. And like, I don’t know where you are. I just don’t know.

“So I just avoid it as far as I can. You’re at 1500 feet and they’re at 100 feet in an ag aircraft – they’re clear but you still don’t know where they are.

“It’s just a problem sometimes.”

It’s not just international students who have a problem with informal reporting points.

Even someone with Margaret Wright’s experience finds colloquial reporting points difficult.

“You really don’t know where they are. It’s not an actual position report – they’re reporting from somewhere pretty obscure.

“When we’re doing a cross-country and in a place we don’t fly to very often, it can certainly be an issue.”

The varied pronunciation by different pilots of Māori place names is something that Alice You, just beginning her aviation career, and from overseas, and Margaret Wright – 40 years with a current PPL and very much a local – both struggle with.

CAA investigator Jason Frost-Evans says pilots should try to pronounce Māori names correctly. “Firstly, to be respectful, and secondly to avoid confusion.

“When people don’t take care with how they pronounce Māori place names, you can get one name pronounced half a dozen different ways.

“If everyone says Māori place names the correct way, everyone understands where everyone else is, and that’s good for safety.”

Over reporting

In the *Vector* article “Too much noise in the CFZ, too little in the MBZ” (March/April 2017) Carlton Campbell says it’s a fine line how many calls a pilot should make.

“While pilots should make them at recognised reporting points ... (or clearly identifiable geographic features) some pilots make position, height and intention reports

far in excess of what's necessary. The result is a jumble of reports, which can become confusing, and counter-productive to safety."

Carlton says it's about making calls to enhance the mental map of other traffic, and not adding to the 'noise'.

Push to transmit, not to think

Matt Earl is training at Nelson Aviation College. He says pilots who 'push to think' are frustrating to try to listen to.

"I've been guilty of this as well. People go to make their call, stutter, almost like stalled during the call. They've pressed the button and they're still trying to string the call together in their head."

Amy Dreverman offers this key tip for any ab initio pilot.

"If you have the time, articulate in your head what you want to say first. That way, you've got clarity with what you're saying, making sure the details are correct.

"Then when you go to say it, you can say it more clearly, and much more confidently."

Shagun Sharma from Massey says running through the call in his head first, interestingly, helps him to slow his delivery.

"I plant a structure in my head which is basically where I am, what I'm doing and what I intend to do. And if reading back the clearance, then what I intend to do.

"And that's how I just go ahead with it and then add stuff into it. So that's a basic structure for it. If you keep that in mind, you should be fine."

Matt Earl agrees it's a really good exercise.

"We're human, you're never really going to be perfect, but if people can practise the call first, make it nice and concise, and then articulate clearly, you get a perfect radio call." 

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