

Command of English Would Have Prevented Brazil's Worst Air Tragedy Ever

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Brazil's worst air accident ever, on September 29, 2006, when an executive Legacy jet piloted by two Americans collided with a Boeing 737 over the Brazilian Amazon resulting in the death of 154 people, might have been prevented if only the Brazilian flight controllers who were monitoring the smaller plane had command of the English language.

This is the understanding of Ulisses Fontenele, the former president of the ABCTA (Associação Brasileira dos Controladores de Tráfego Aéreo - Brazilian Air Traffic Controllers Association). He has called attention to the fact that less than 10% of the about 2,500 flight controllers working in Brazil are able to speak English fluently. And according to Fontenele, those who speak the language do it because they learned English on their own initiative.

He believes that the US pilots Joseph Lepore and Jan Paladino and the personnel at Brasília's control tower had a hard time understanding each other. For Fontenele, there was a series of mistakes that culminated in the collision. He compared what happened to the domino effect (in which a single piece knocks down hundreds of others) and said that the tragedy might have been avoided if a single error in the sequence had not been made.

"If there was no trouble with the English when they took off there would be no accident. But there was an endless number of errors. If only one of them had been eliminated we wouldn't have any accident," he stated.

Fontenele says that nowadays Brazilian flight controllers have a six-month course where they learn some English language phraseology. The classes, which are part of what people learn to become a flight controller, teach typical terms of air control and some lingo and jargon.

"After that, depending on where the professional is going to work, he doesn't get any recycling or refreshing course. In six months there is very little you can learn. You learn the basic of the basic. This is a very big flaw in controllers' training."

The former controller believes that the little knowledge of English is not enough when a flight controller has to deal with an abnormal situation as the one with the Legacy. "If something out of the ordinary happens, the flight controller may not be able to communicate in English. After all, all he learned were typical and basic flight control phrases for when everything is normal in the air."

Fontenele recalled another situation, albeit not tragic, which occurred decades ago, and also had to do with communications difficulty between foreign pilots and Brazilian controllers. He mentioned the story of an American pilot who was flying to Rio de Janeiro and informed the control tower that there was a fire in the soil, which can be translated as solo.

Since the word "solo" in Portuguese means earth's surface but also floor, the controller understood that the airplane's floor was on fire and forced the plane into an emergency landing in Brasília.

According to the Brazilian Air Force's social communication office, since 2004 there have been agreements with English-teaching schools to improve the flight controllers' knowledge of English. That office also informed that only English-speaking controllers work with international flights.