Language and Identity of Aviation Security

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Abstract

The Aviation Security (AVSEC) officers must navigate the complex interaction of maintaining authority while demonstrating politeness in their communication with passengers. This research explores how aspects of language proficiency for interaction are used by AVSEC officers to balance these roles and construct their professional identity. The research problem addresses how interaction proficiency serves both the functional need for authority and the relational need for politeness. The objective of the study is to identify the markers that contribute to this balance on communication effectiveness. Employing qualitative analysis, data were collected through recordings, observation and in depth interview of AVSEC officers at several workload simulations. The study finds that effective communication in AVSEC relies on a blend of clear verbal instructions and strong non-verbal cues to manage interactions smoothly and professionally. Officers must respond quickly, clarify when necessary, and interpret both verbal and non-verbal signals to prevent misunderstandings and uphold security. AVSEC officers balance authority with courtesy, using direct language and body language to ensure passenger cooperation, safety, and comfort.

Keywords: authority, discourse markers, identity construction, politeness

Introduction

In the air transport business, effective English communication is crucial for personnel, as it encompasses the ability to interact effortlessly in diverse situations while being attuned to both verbal and non-verbal cues. One of the aspects being considered in a personnel's English proficiency is interactions. This skill is carefully tested and scored according to international regulation of civil aviation organizations (ICAO). Minimal requirements of proficiency for this skill range from level of operational and level up to extended and expert. Interaction skills are proficiency to respond promptly and appropriately is essential, allowing individuals to manage interactions and maintain effective speaker-listener relationships. Moreover, the capacity to initiate and sustain exchanges, even in unexpected circumstances, plays a significant role in ensuring smooth communication. Handling misunderstandings adeptly by checking, confirming, or clarifying information further highlights the importance of proficient communication in fostering cooperation and understanding among colleagues and passengers alike.

Effective communication is crucial for Aviation Security (AVSEC) officers, as they must convey critical safety regulations and procedures clearly to maintain airport security. By explaining security protocols in an authoritative yet approachable manner, they ensure passengers understand the importance of compliance without feeling intimidated, fostering a cooperative atmosphere. This skill not only helps maintain order but also enhances passenger trust, contributing to a smoother travel experience. In aviation security, discourse markers are essential for AVSEC officers, as they shape professional identity and facilitate effective communication. Language and cultural identity are reflected through accent, vocabulary, and discourse, which signal affiliation with specific social or

professional groups. In Aviation Security (AVSEC), officers use clear, standardized English and profession-specific terminology to ensure effective communication across diverse linguistic backgrounds, while their discourse remains formal and authoritative to maintain safety and efficiency. On the other hand, markers like "please" and "thank you" promote polite interactions while reinforcing the officer's authority and maintaining a respectful tone or falling intonation on expression's stress point [1]. By using phrases such as "I appreciate your cooperation," officers can build rapport with passengers, making them feel valued and enhancing the overall security experience at airports.

Professional identity construction is a complex and essential process across various fields, with educators [2], [3] facing the challenge of balancing authority, empathy, and adaptability. In the medical field, students [4], [5] cultivate their identities through clinical practice, learning to convey both competence and care. Similarly, in the tourism industry, workers such as tour guides [6] and hotel staff [7], [8] shape their professional identities by blending hospitality skills with cultural sensitivity to improve guest experiences. The concept of professional identity extends beyond individual roles; it is also deeply influenced by external markers, such as uniforms, which are integral to a company's brand identity. Uniforms serve as a powerful tool for consistency, helping distinguish individuals within an organization while conveying a sense of unity [9]. They not only signify professional roles but also communicate an organization's presence and ethos. For example, a flight attendant's uniform does more than denote their position—it signals their readiness to interact with passengers and project professionalism, enhancing customer trust and satisfaction [10]. Ultimately, a well-developed professional identity—supported by external symbols like uniforms—can open doors to career growth, while the inability to cultivate a positive identity may lead to stagnation or early career exit.

Communication is a dynamic process through which individuals produce, interpret, and share meaning, shaping social reality and conveying social identity. Language, as a system of symbols— spoken, signed, or written—enables people to express themselves within their cultural and social groups. Its precise use is particularly significant in contexts where clarity is crucial, guiding how we construct discourse, from private conversations to public interactions. Identity, both individual and social, is shaped relationally, with social identities emerging from group affiliations and self-image. Through communication, individuals develop these identities, reflecting the social constructionist view that the self is shaped by relational and linguistic processes [11], [12].

In aviation security, much like in other service-oriented fields, balancing authority with rapport is essential for effective interactions. AVSEC officers must enforce regulations while maintaining a cooperative, approachable atmosphere, achieved through both language and appearance. Officers consistently use polite discourse markers, asserting authority while maintaining a respectful and approachable demeanor, which shapes their professional identity and ensures effective communication in high-pressure situations. At InJourney Airports, in addition to a formal security outfit, officers also wear a distinctive Indonesian batik design as a variant. This combination blends professionalism with Indonesia's famed hospitality, making passengers feel more comfortable and connected to local culture. By delivering services with Indonesia's distinctive hospitality, InJourney ensures that AVSEC officers, as the first point of contact, present a friendly yet professional appearance. This approach supports the airport's human-centered philosophy, where authority and approachability work together to foster trust and smooth communication.

To qualify as an AVSEC officer, regarding to Table 1, candidates must achieve at least a level 4 Operational on the English Proficiency Test (EPT). The evaluation of AVSEC interaction is one of the key descriptors outlined by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) regarding English proficiency requirements for all personnel. This criterion follows the assessment of pronunciation, structure, vocabulary, fluency, and comprehension. Given that English is used in a

fast-paced environment, communication must not only be clear, concise, and precise, but appropriate responses must also be delivered quickly, with an expectation of rapid response times. Interaction skills refer to this capacity, including the ability to initiate conversations, address misunderstandings, and resolve them effectively, with descriptions aligned with levels 4 (Operational), 5 (Extended), and 6 (Expert).

Table 1. Interaction Scale

Level Indicator	Description
Op-4: 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.	A pilot or air traffic controller who does not understand an unexpected communication must be able to communicate that fact. It is much safer to query a communication, to clarify, or even to simply acknowledge that one does not understand rather than to allow silence to mistakenly represent comprehension. At Operational Level 4, it is acceptable that comprehension is not perfect 100 per cent of the time when dealing with unexpected situations, but Level 4 speakers need to be skilled at checking, seeking confirmation, or clarifying a situation or communication.
Ext-5: Responses are immediate, appropriate and informative. Manages the speaker/listener relationship effectively.	Interactions at this level are based on high levels of comprehension and fluency. While skills in checking, seeking confirmation and clarification remain important, they are less frequently deployed. On the other hand speakers at this level are capable of exercising greater control over the conduct and direction of the conversation.
Exp-6: Interacts with ease in nearly all situations. Is sensitive to verbal and non-verbal cues and responds to them appropriately.	Expert speakers display no difficulties in reacting or initiating interaction. They are additionally able to recognize and to use non-verbal signs of mental and emotional states (for example, intonations or unusual stress patterns). They display authority in the conduct of the conversation.

Source: ICAO English Proficiency Requirement

This research is conducted at Tebelian Class 2 Airport, a regional airport located in Sintang, West Kalimantan. Officially inaugurated and resumed operations in 2021, the airport enhances connectivity between surrounding regions such as Sekadau, Sanggau, and Melawi supporting key local industries like agriculture, mining, and tourism. Currently, the airport operates a single flight with limited frequency to and from Supadio Airport. Given this operational scale, the number of AVSEC personnel is maintained at the minimum required standard. Consequently, it is not unusual for AVSEC Junior officers, rather than AVSEC Basic, to handle both AVSEC responsibilities at the airport [13].

This research aims to examine how AVSEC officers use discourse markers to convey both politeness and authority in interactions. Additionally, it seeks to explore the ways in which these markers contribute to the construction of AVSEC officers' professional identity. By analyzing the specific discourse markers employed, the study will reveal their role in balancing the demands of authority and relational dynamics. Ultimately, this investigation will enhance our understanding of communication practices within the aviation security context.

Research Method

This study employs a qualitative approach, utilizing discourse analysis to examine naturally occurring interactions among AVSEC officers at Tebelian Airport in West Kalimantan. Two types of data are collected. First, recordings capture officers' responses in simulations designed to reflect routine

inspections relevant to their operational context. In education, simulation plays a critical role in preparing professionals for high-stakes situations by providing a controlled environment to practice decision-making, communication, and stress management [14], [15], [16], [17], [18]. These recordings are later converted into transcription using online AI transcription tools. Second, real interactions are documented through an observation checklist, which allows for systematic data collection on AVSEC officers' behavior and language use during actual airport operations. This checklist is adjusted from interaction descriptors provided by ICAO English Proficiency Requirement which captures broader elements of their communication and interaction, as they engage with passengers in real-time. These include body language, eye contact, physical proximity, and the officers' ability to read and adapt to passengers' non-verbal cues. By examining both simulated verbal and natural non-verbal communication behaviors, the study provides a comprehensive view of how AVSEC officers manage authority and rapport, shaping their professional identity in real-time passenger interactions.

The recorded interactions will be compiled into a corpus of transcriptions to analyze the frequency and types of discourse markers used by the AVSEC officers. The analysis will explore how these markers serve various communicative functions and influence perceptions of the officers' identities among passengers and colleagues. Additionally, the data will be coded to identify patterns of politeness strategies and their role in constructing the professional identity of AVSEC officers at Tebelian Airport, contributing to a deeper understanding of effective communication practices in aviation security.

Result and Discussion

Originally, ICAO English proficiency standards were designed primarily for communication between pilots and air traffic controllers. However, these interaction descriptors, with a minimum passing standard of Level 4, can also be adapted to suit aviation security (AVSEC) contexts. To measure proficiency of AVSEC during interaction, descriptors from level 4 to level 6 are used as control. Thus indicators of interaction must cover:

1. Responding promptly and clearly (level 4)
2. Handling unexpected situations by seeking clarification when necessary to avoid misunderstandings (level 4)
3. Confirming and verifying information adeptly, while perfect comprehension may not always be achieved (level 4)
4. Managing interactions fluently (level 5)
5. Requiring less frequent clarification as they confidently guide conversations (level 5)
6. Navigating all situations effortlessly (level 6)
7. Interpreting both verbal and non-verbal cues to respond appropriately (level 6)
8. Demonstrating authority, empathy, and professionalism while ensuring safety and security (level 6)

Embodied in a role that requires both security enforcement and passenger comfort, an AVSEC officer's identity balances authority with politeness. This dual identity is evident through their interactions observed within the airport setting. While other indicators, such as responses to verbal communication, should be observed, only Level 6 - Expert of AVSEC also encompasses non-verbal interactions. However, it is important to recognize that AVSEC interactions with customers are centered around enforcing regulations related to specific procedures. Consequently, the expected response from customers is generally an action—rather than a verbal reply—such as following instructions or performing the required tasks as directed by AVSEC. Regardless of their AVSEC level, all officers must be proficient in recognizing non-verbal cues as part of their essential skill set. Therefore, recognizing non-verbal cues is an essential skill for AVSEC officers, forming a key part

of their profiling abilities.

Verbal Interaction. In certain interactions, verbal communication takes a less dominant role, with most exchanges being one-sided as instructions are given by the speaker to guide the listener's actions. In such scenarios, the listener's response often manifests as compliance through physical action rather than extended verbal feedback, or as brief verbal reactions to indicate agreement or disagreement. This dynamic is particularly relevant to the role of AVSEC officers at airports, where their primary duty is to enforce regulations to ensure flight safety. Their communication often involves issuing clear, directive instructions to passengers, leaving little room for extended dialogue. However, when confusion or disagreement arises, passengers may respond by seeking clarification or expressing objections. In such cases, the AVSEC officer typically addresses the situation by reiterating or explaining the applicable regulations.

The verbal content analysis from the AVSEC simulation transcript reveals various linguistic strategies employed by officers to balance authority and politeness in interactions, as shown in Table 2. Key discourse markers include the use of *could/would* and formal address, both of which serve to soften directives and enhance respectfulness in communication. The frequent use of *please* and greetings further demonstrates the emphasis on polite engagement, contributing to a cooperative atmosphere. Interestingly, imperative commands are utilized with both subject and object perspectives, with object-oriented imperatives slightly more frequent than subject-oriented ones, indicating a tendency to issue directives that still prioritize the listener's perspective. Additionally, phrases like *thank you* and expressions of apologizing and reasoning show attempts to address passenger concerns and minimize face-threatening acts. Overall, these findings highlight AVSEC officers' careful use of language to assert authority while fostering a respectful and professional interaction.

Table 2. Verbal Content Analysis

Corpus/Discourse		%
Please		13.3
Could / Would		16.7
Imperative Command (IC)	Subject Point of View	10.0
	Object Point of View	16.7
Apologizing		3.3
Reasoning		3.3
Greetings		13.3
Thank you		6.7
Formal addressee		16.7

Non-Verbal Interaction. Since verbal interaction is often limited, responses in the conversation between AVSEC and customers will typically shift to non-verbal communication. This shift occurs due to the time-sensitive and safety-oriented nature of their interaction. AVSEC personnel must efficiently manage security procedures and ensure passenger safety, which requires quick and clear communication. Given that the time available for each exchange is often brief and focused on critical security measures, non-verbal cues such as gestures, signs, and body language become essential for conveying important information quickly and effectively.

The non-verbal content analysis from the observation of AVSEC interactions with customers reveals the key non-verbal cues employed to manage communication effectively and assert their professional identity, as shown in Table 3. Intonation and body gestures are the most prominent cues of the observed behavior. This highlights a strong reliance on both friendly soft vocal tone and firm steady physical posture in conveying authority and approachability. Hand gestures follow closely, suggesting that AVSEC officers use their hands to reinforce messages by providing visual emphasis or clarify

their messages. Facial expressions allow officers to display appropriate emotional yet professional demeanor, while head gestures such as nodding are used minimally, likely to avoid misinterpretation. Together, these non-verbal elements reflect AVSEC's commitment to manage the delicate balance between authority and approachability, enhancing customer interaction through clear, non-verbal communication.

Table 3. Non-Verbal Analysis

Cue	%
Intonation	29.2
Hand Gesture	20.8
Facial Gesture	16.7
Head Gesture	4.2
Body Gesture	29.2

Authoritative Identity. This identity refers to the construction and display of an individual's identity that aligns with a position of power, control, and expertise. In professional settings, this identity is shaped through communication, behavior, and decision-making processes that assert authority while maintaining credibility and respect. The concept highlights how individuals in roles such as security personnel, leaders, or other authority figures establish and reinforce their position through their actions and interactions, particularly in environments where power dynamics are crucial such as at the court [19]. In the context of aviation security (AVSEC), an authoritative identity refers to how officers present themselves as figures of authority while enforcing security protocols. This identity is typically constructed through a combination of verbal and non-verbal communication strategies, including tone, posture, command of language, and professional demeanor.

The AVSEC's verbal language strongly reflects an authoritative identity through its use of concise, direct statements that focus solely on the message such as shown in Table 4. Sentences are generally short and to the point, avoiding unnecessary detail. Imperative commands in the form of verbs dominate their speech [1], with subject omissions in 26.7% of cases, enhancing the command's immediacy and authority. Longer sentences are rarely used, reserved only for specific cases where additional explanation is necessary. This structured language style reinforces the AVSEC's authoritative role while maintaining clarity and efficiency in communication.

Table 4. Authoritative Structure

Verb	Noun		
Empty, place, remove, take off, step aside, provide, prepare, show	your the	belonging, ID, passport, ticket, wrist, belt, jacket, coat	1)

Non-verbal cues such as a steady, firm stance, the presence of a uniform, and adherence to established procedures collectively convey the authoritative identity AVSEC. The identity of an airline company can be in the form of a company logo and company uniform. Uniforms are an identity for officers so that they are easily recognized by passengers [10]. Uniforms serve as markers of group membership, helping individuals align with the values and goals of their organization. They promote a sense of belonging and enhance in-group solidarity while distinguishing the wearer from outsiders [20]. A confident posture, often marked by an upright and alert stance, signals competence and control, while the uniform while the uniform— complete with distinct accessories such as an identification vest, badge, and rank insignia— represents institutional authority, professionalism, and trustworthiness. Following standardized procedures consistently not only enhances operational effectiveness but also reinforces the perception of discipline and reliability. Together, these non-verbal elements project a sense of security and command, ensuring that AVSEC personnel are seen as capable and unwavering

in maintaining safety and order in the aviation environment.

Politeness Identity. Politeness identity reflects how individuals project themselves as considerate, respectful, and socially aware, especially in professional interactions. It encompasses language and behavior that align with social norms and power dynamics to build trust and maintain harmony, particularly in roles involving customer service, education, healthcare, or security. In Indonesia's competitive aviation industry, airlines strive to enhance their services, with officers prioritizing top-notch customer service. Uniforms play a vital role in reflecting the airline's identity, ensuring officers are easily recognized while exuding courtesy and professionalism. Designed to be clean, functional, and stylish, uniforms convey values like elegance, politeness, discipline, and dynamism, blending form and function to support the dynamic demands of aviation service. [10].

In terms of AVSEC uniforms, while the conventional design emphasizes authority and power to reflect their critical role in ensuring security, they also incorporate accessories such as a scarf, sash or *udeng* (traditional headpiece) on designated days or during celebrations of significant Indonesian events. Its' use in AVSEC uniforms not only showcases national pride but also conveys elegance, politeness, hospitality and approachability, aligning with the broader cultural narrative while softening the authoritative image with a touch of elegance and cultural connection. This integration of cultural ornamentation in professional attire promotes Indonesian culture to a broader audience, supporting tourism by highlighting the country's unique heritage and craftsmanship.

Figure 1. Traditional Ornament for AVSEC Uniform

When it comes to communication, AVSEC officers frequently employ polite language cues to create positive interactions with passengers, ease potential tensions, and promote cooperation. This involves the strategic use of common discourse markers such as please, could/would and thank you which soften requests, reduce the potential for face-threatening interactions, and convey empathy and consideration. Additionally, the use of imperative commands to convey politeness can be observed from a subject-oriented perspective. Although imperatives are typically used to direct or prohibit actions, a subject-oriented imperative shifts the focus to the speaker rather than the listener, indicating that the speaker will take action instead [2]. In case of an officer confiscating an over-capacity power bank, the emphasis is on the officer's action rather than on directing the passenger. This approach emphasizes the speaker's willingness to manage the situation, fostering a sense of cooperation and benefiting the passenger's experience [21].

For safety reasons, would it be alright if **we store** it for you?   2)

Non-verbal cues significantly contribute to softening the authoritative tone of an AVSEC officer's imperative commands, infusing their communication with politeness. While a firm and upright body posture primarily reflects an authoritative identity, it does little to convey politeness. However, a neat and well-groomed appearance subtly enhances the perception of professionalism and respect, contributing to a polite and approachable demeanor. In contrast, other non-verbal cues such as a calm and low intonation help mitigate the commanding tone, making the interaction feel less forceful.

Similarly, a smiling facial expression conveys warmth and approachability, creating a more positive experience for passengers when addressing regulations. Hand gestures, such as thumb pointing or open-palmed motions to provide direction or clarify a message, further emphasize politeness by visually supporting verbal communication in a non-intimidating manner. These elements work together to balance authority with respect, ensuring effective yet considerate interactions.

Conclusion

Effective communication within the context of AVSEC requires a balanced integration of both verbal and non-verbal cues to manage interactions efficiently and professionally aligning directly with the language proficiency standards for AVSEC interactions from levels 4 to 6. Officers must respond promptly and clearly, seeking clarification when necessary to prevent misunderstandings and verifying information, reflecting the core elements of clarity and accuracy in communication. They must manage interactions fluently, guiding conversations with confidence and requiring minimal clarification, which aligns with the ability to navigate communication smoothly. Additionally, officers must interpret both verbal and non-verbal cues to respond appropriately, showcasing their proficiency in understanding and adapting to diverse communication dynamics.

Results shown by AVSEC respondents from Tebelian Class 2 Airport, while verbal exchanges are often brief and direct, non-verbal communication becomes equally important, particularly in time-sensitive and safety-oriented situations. AVSEC must not only convey authority through concise verbal instructions and clear body language but also project politeness and empathy to ensure passengers remain cooperative and comfortable. The dual identity of AVSEC officers—balancing authoritative control with courteous professionalism—plays a crucial role in maintaining security while fostering a positive passenger experience. Proficiency in both verbal communication and non-verbal cues, such as body posture, hand gestures, and facial expressions, is essential for ensuring clarity, minimizing misunderstandings, and reinforcing both security and customer service objectives. Thus, AVSEC officers' ability to effectively use both forms of communication is key to their role in safeguarding aviation environments while upholding a standard of respect and professionalism.

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