How Poor English Skills Have Caused Plane Crashes

Exercise 1 – Vocabulary

standardize	To make processes, products, etc. of the same type have the same basic features, quality, etc.
[verb]	*Ex: We **standardize** parts such as rear-view mirrors so that one type will fit any model of car we make.*

collide	To hit someone or something while moving.
[verb]	*Ex: Two trains **collided**, causing hundreds of injuries.*

altitude	The height of an object or place above the surface of the sea or ground.
[noun]	*Ex: Athletes often train at high **altitudes** before important competitions.*

visibility	The distance one can see as determined by light or the weather.
[noun]	*Ex: **Visibility** can be extremely poor at this time of the morning.*

control tower	A building at an airport from which the movement of aircraft is watched and controlled.
[noun]	*Ex: The plane requested permission to land from the **control tower**.*

vague	Not certain, clear, or precise in meaning or nature; not thinking or communicating in a way that is clear or precise.
[adjective]	*Ex: The new sales manager appears to have only a **vague** understanding of our product line.*

Exercise 2 – Reading

How Poor English Skills Have Caused Plane Crashes

Most of the time, if you make a mistake speaking English, you might be a bit embarrassed, but nothing bad will happen. However, that isn't the case for pilots and airline crews, with good communication sometimes being the difference between life and death.

Here are two of the worst plane crashes caused by poor communication before English language requirements for airline crews were standardized in 2001.

Charkhi Dadri Mid-Air Collision

On November 12, 1996, a Saudi Arabian Airlines Boeing 747 collided with a Kazakhstan Airlines IL-76 in the air above Charkhi Dadri, India. According to the Air Traffic Controllers Guild, the crash was caused by a misunderstanding between the crew of the Kazakh plane and air traffic control.

The Kazakh co-pilot thought they had been told to fly at 14,000 feet, but they had actually been warned not to because the Saudi Arabian plane was flying at that altitude.

The planes collided, killing all 349 people on both planes. It was the world's deadliest mid-air collision.

The Tenerife Airport Disaster

On March 27, 1977, two planes collided on the runway at Los Rodeos Airport, now called Tenerife Airport.

A terrorist incident at a nearby airport caused a number of flights to be redirected to Los Rodeos Airport, where visibility was poor due to fog.

The native languages of the crews involved were Dutch on one plane, English on the other, and Spanish in the control tower. The crews had difficulties understanding each other in English because of their accents, and they were confused by the vague language used when asking for permission to take off.

The planes, which were unable to see each other in the fog, collided when one plane tried to take off, wrongly thinking it had permission to do so. The resulting fires killed 583 people, with only 61 surviving, making it the deadliest airline accident in history.

Exercise 3 – Discussion

Discuss the following questions with your tutor.

1. What are your thoughts on the accidents featured in the article?

2. Are you afraid of flying? Please explain your answer.

3. What would you say was your worst flying experience? Please share your story.

4. Do you expect air travel to become safer or less safe over the next 50 years? Why?

5. Is having good English skills important in your line of work? Please explain your answer.

6. Other than English, what languages would you say are the most useful to know? Why?

7. What English accent do you find easiest to understand? Please explain your answer.

8. Do you think English will ever be replaced as the global language? Why? Why not?