THE RABBIT HOLE

Looking at the course content you may wonder why some content is included to a very specific level of detail and why some items are covered only briefly, if at all. If you reflect on this you may find some lack of consistency in the content altogether - well I do. I have been employed with the civil aviation administration for 9 years, working specifically with theoretical exams and I thought I would offer some insights from "behind the scenes" to offer an explanation to why the training may feel a little academic:

Why do you need to attend a theoretical training course?

Short answer: To pass the theoretical exam.

Long answer: Learning to fly is a process of learning quite a bit of knowledge that is not familiar to most people. It is also a process of learning a lot of procedures, that in themselves are not complex, but must be committed to memory and that are numerous. Lastly, learning to fly is very exhilarating since it is something that most people have no prior experience with.

Because flying is expensive, you can't afford to “just” fly - and learn as you go. Most flight schools will or-chestrate a flying program that is optimized to the average student pilot capability, presenting you with a progression where each lesson builds on the previous.

Because flying in some areas is high risk, you can't approach it without discipline. You can't “just” fly and then not have the necessary learning experience, relying on having a safety pilot on board. You must take responsibility for every flight - including training flights. Flight training is designed to hold a level of complexity suited for your training progression.

Because of this, it is important that you have some formative basic theoretical knowledge, enabling you to grasp the foundation of each practical training activity. If you appear without a basic understanding, you will not be able to take responsibility for the decisions and exercises presented to you during the training and ultimately, the unforeseen challenges you will meet as a certified pilot.

The ideal method to learn to fly would probably be that students and instructors discuss the necessary knowledge prior to the flight lesson, fly the relevant lesson, evaluate the experience and observations made during the flight lesson and plan the ensuing activity. In such a way, the entire learning process will be tailored to the individual student, his or her predisposition, and needs.

However such method will probably result in that each session will last way longer than most people can allocate during a day and in that the student must keep a focus on a much larger range of topics, removing the focus from the essential and safety-critical elements of the session,

So you should accept that it is desirable to establish the basic theoretical knowledge foundation, that will support your understanding of the practical flight training, before committing to a flight training program, though it may be desirable to have a few lessons to relate to if you are a stranger to the environment.

Tradition

The European Aviation Safety Agency (EASA) has devised the theoretical knowledge syllabus.

The aviation authorities in Europe operate from one of two schools of thought:

- Regulatory activities should be as safe as *possible*, or;
- Regulatory activities should be as safe as *necessary*.

Traditionally the authority follows the first school since such a position is unassailable, but after the establishment of common European regulations, authorities have started to change their position to the latter.

Because of this development, requirements for theoretical training (and the exam) have changed. Before the common European requirements, the required theoretical training was very loosely defined by the International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO - a UN subsidiary), leading to that each national authority had to expand and operationalize the general training requirement. From this, the pressure was put on the authority not to make the requirements too rigid.

Later, in 2008, the regulation was handed over to the EU and when drafting the common requirements, they attempted to fix a relatively detailed set of rules to avoid debating the legitimacy of the requirement. In this process, however, they lost track of what is needed to support flight training - mostly because the involved persons lacked insight - and instead opted to have a great level of detail that enabled each member state to uphold part of the regulation suited for their tradition and ignore parts that were not, rather than agreeing to a common level of detail.

The syllabus, therefore, appears as a long line of academic topics that have a degree of detail that makes it appear to be relevant but is not designed to support flight training and that have almost no logic core.

The problem with this is that one is not able to foresee how each member state is enforcing the theoretical training requirement. Flight Schools are therefore only able to supply training that is applicable to what is known about the local authority requirement. And what may be sufficient training in one country, may not at all be usable in another, because of the different interpretations and weighting of the syllabus content. This is definitely contradicting the principle of controlling the training by learning objectives since there is no or little correlation between the informal requirements and the formal requirements.

As the European regulations have had runtime, most authorities are shifting from the first school of thought to the later. This happens because the EU politically wishes to make the leisure pilot requirement less stringent and more importantly because member states are discovering that they have become competitors and that organizations choose to move to the area with the most advantageous conditions.

In reality

Authorities take no interest in the quality of the theoretical training you receive. And the exam provided to ensure the adequacy of your training is not designed to promote good training programs since it contains no clear training requirements leading towards the needs of practical training.

Many years of theoretical training have shown that you need (at least) 100 hours of classroom training to obtain a sufficient level of knowledge in the 9 subjects of the PPL course, to enable you to pass the exam held by the authority AND most important of all, to have a meaningful progression in the following segment of practical training, where you will be required to draw upon your reservoir of knowledge, to make sense of why things are done the way they are on the flight line.

Since the apparent value of the theoretical training is depreciated by lack of relevance, many flight schools choose to approach theoretical training as a necessary evil and aim the theoretical training directly at the authority exam by focussing courses on training on solving problems from a question bank which is representative for the one used by the authority, rather than giving you the insight you need.

You should make a note of all this since you should be aware that you cannot determine relevance from legal requirements. Subsequently, you should recognize that flight schools are required to show compliance with legal requirements and you should therefore not rely on that the authority approval signals quality nor relevance.

The only one with a genuine interest in you acquiring the appropriate level of knowledge is then you!

To sum it all up: You are required to attend a theoretical course that was meant to support your practical training, but that has been corrupted by bureaucracy. The course is then optimized towards compliance rather than illumination.

You should accept this, take away as much as you can, and realize that you are not fully equipped for theoretical training, but that you will be supplemented during your practical training.

I invite and advise you to find - and choose - a flight school that recognizes these problems and supports you in the growing of your competencies to be a proficient pilot. They exist.

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