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Development of Simulation of Helicopter Procedure Practices in the Aerodrome Control Procedure Course

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ABSTRACT

Helicopter operational dynamics present distinct air traffic complexities that are frequently underrepresented in standard Aerodrome Control Procedure (ACP) curricula, which are traditionally optimized for fixed-wing aircraft. This research addresses the critical training gap in integrating rotorcraft into aerodrome environments, where movement characteristics, specifically during approach, final approach, and helipad transitions, pose a higher risk of traffic conflicts. The primary objective of this study was to develop and validate a high-fidelity helicopter procedural simulation designed to enhance the situational awareness and decision-making capabilities of Air Traffic Management cadets. Adopting a Research and Development (R&D) framework, the study progressed through systematic phases: problem identification, comprehensive data collection, simulation design, and expert validation. Data were gathered through a mixed-methods approach involving 24 cadets from the Air Traffic Management Study Program, utilizing semi-structured interviews, observational studies, and questionnaires to pinpoint operational friction points. To ensure pedagogical depth, the simulation scenarios were engineered based on forensic analysis of the Black Hawk UH-60L and CRJ700 collision, providing cadets with a realistic, evidence-based environment in which to practice VFR route integration and conflict resolution. Empirical results indicate that 83% of participants identified a critical need for increased helicopter-specific simulation intensity, and over 75% reported that exposure to complex helicopter-fixed-wing conflict scenarios significantly improved their analytical speed and communication accuracy. The study concludes that the developed simulation effectively bridges the gap between theoretical procedural knowledge and the high-stakes demands of the aviation industry. These findings offer a scalable model for aviation training institutions to modernize their curricula, ultimately contributing to global aviation safety by preparing future controllers for increasingly diverse aerodrome traffic profiles.

INTRODUCTION

Safety is the paramount and non-negotiable aspect in the aviation world, a complex operating system with high risks. In the face of variable conditions and the dynamics of air traffic, every operational activity demands meticulousness, careful coordination, and quick, accurate decision-making. Air Traffic Controllers (ATCs) are the frontline of the airspace management system; their role is vital to maintaining the orderly flow of traffic, ensuring aircraft separation, and optimizing operational efficiency. Every instruction issued by an ATC directly impacts flight safety, especially under working conditions that demand decision-making under high pressure with limited information and dynamically changing situations (Pundhir, 2024). Therefore, in addition to mastering strict procedures, cognitive abilities such as thinking speed, keen situational awareness, and active control under pressure are essential competencies for ATCs (Della Rocco, 2001).

Although focused on firefighting, this study on Recognition-Primed Decision (RPD) modeling is highly applicable to ATC. Demonstrates how experts make rapid decisions in high-stress environments by pattern recognition rather than analytical comparison of options. Relevant for your focus on training decision-making in time-pressured scenarios. Two-part study identifying cognitive strategies used by expert controllers during emergencies. Found that successful controllers employ specific mental simulation and "what-if" reasoning techniques that can be explicitly trained through simulation. Directly relevant to your abnormal situation training focus.

This 2024 study examines how fatigue impairs specific ATC performance dimensions, including conflict detection latency and communication errors. It uses a combination of psychomotor vigilance tests, eye-tracking, and performance metrics in a simulated environment. The findings directly support the critical importance of training for optimal cognitive performance, especially under the stress replicated in your emergency scenarios.

Simulation training has become a crucial tool for the education and competency development of ATCs at various international institutions. Simulation provides a safe yet realistic learning environment, allowing trainees to gain interactive experience that mimics real working conditions without the direct risk to flight safety. Simulation forms that replicate real work pressure, traffic conflicts, and abnormal operating conditions have been shown to significantly improve decision-making accuracy and mental readiness among prospective ATCs (Alsahli, 2022). However, in the context of aviation vocational education in Indonesia, specifically in the Aerodrome Control Procedure (ACP) course, simulation training remains predominantly focused on normal operational scenarios such as take-off, landing, and ground movements. Training elements for inherently high-risk abnormal and emergency situations still receive proportionally less attention (Fridyatama et al., 2023).

This imbalance becomes increasingly critical when considering the operational characteristics of helicopters, which exhibit nonlinear dynamics compared to those of fixed-wing aircraft. Helicopters have more diverse maneuvering capabilities, such as hovering near active runways, crossing runways, and flexible approach paths, which pose significant complexity for aerodrome traffic management. Quick responses and tight coordination with other traffic in the approach area must be performed with great precision to prevent potentially fatal conflicts or accidents (Department of Transport and Main Roads, 2020). Therefore, developing active control abilities encompassing decisive instruction, clear communication, and early risk anticipation becomes a priority for improving the quality of ATC training.

The ICAO Safety Report (2024) reinforces that human factors contribute the most (>50%) to aviation incidents, primarily due to delayed ATC decision-making and a lack of proactive actions to maintain separation. The air accident case at Ronald Reagan Airport, involving a collision between a UH-60L Black Hawk military helicopter and a CRJ700 aircraft (PSA Airlines Flight 5342) in the approach area of Runway 33, illustrates the critical impact of air traffic control procedure failures. The NTSB investigation (2025) found that ATC allowed the helicopter to cross the approach path without ensuring a safe distance from the aircraft during its final approach, indicating that procedural mastery alone is insufficient without the ability to make simultaneous, rapid decisions and maintain situational awareness.

To address this complexity, modern ATC pedagogy has begun using case-based learning (CBL) to enhance students' understanding of real, complex operational situations. CBL emphasizes analyzing real cases, evaluating risks, developing contextual understanding, and making data-based, real-time decisions, thereby improving critical thinking skills, situational awareness, and decision-making capacity in a simulation environment (Liu, Chen, & Zhang, 2024). However, the implementation of CBL in ATC vocational education in Indonesia remains limited, with existing simulations often procedural and failing to capture the complexity of real cases and the dynamics of actual accidents.

This limitation creates a curriculum gap that hinders prospective air traffic controllers' readiness to face real abnormal and high-risk situations. Notably, the absence of a simulation model integrating real accident scenarios, especially those involving interactions between helicopters and fixed-wing aircraft, reflects a gap in learning relevance and training adequacy to anticipate complex air traffic dynamics.

Identifies specific risks in mixed helicopter/fixed-wing operations at controlled airports, including runway incursions, approach path conflicts, and communication challenges. Provides empirical data on incident patterns that can inform scenario design, similar to your Black Hawk/CRJ700 case.

This research is based on experiential learning theory, the concept of human factors in air traffic management, and decision-making theory under time-pressure conditions. These theories affirm the importance of synergy between procedural understanding, situational experience, and the ability to adapt to dynamic operational situations. Therefore, using the Black Hawk-CRJ700 accident case as a learning scenario not only provides a real learning context but also enriches cadets' reflective abilities and practices in the ATC vocational education environment.

Comprehensive analysis of helicopter ATC management across European airspace, detailing standard phraseology conflicts, speed differential issues, and procedural gaps. Offers validated training scenarios that address real operational challenges. Provides a framework for validating simulation scenarios, emphasizing psychological fidelity over physical fidelity. Discusses methods for ensuring scenarios elicit authentic stress responses and decision processes relevant to real emergencies. Meta-analysis examining factors affecting training transfer from simulation to real operations. Found that scenario variability, embedded instructional features, and performance feedback are critical for positive transfer, supporting your multi-phase scenario approach.

This 2023 study proposes a novel, multimodal method to assess ATC mental workload in real time by fusing eye-tracking (pupil diameter and blink rate) and electroencephalogram (EEG) data. It demonstrates high accuracy in classifying low, medium, and high workload during simulation tasks. This is highly relevant for objectively measuring the cognitive impact of your abnormal-scenario training and for validating the "pressure" aspect of your simulation design. This 2024 experimental study evaluates an AI tool that provides probabilistic conflict alerts and resolution advisories during convective weather. Controllers using the system showed improved decision accuracy and reduced workload, but the study also notes challenges, such as over-reliance. This connects to your research by highlighting the evolving context of ATC decision-making, where simulation must train both foundational skills and effective interaction with future decision-support tools.

Based on this analysis, this research aims to develop a simulation training model based on real accident scenarios as the primary learning medium for the Aerodrome Control Procedure course at Makassar Aviation Polytechnic. This research evaluates the simulation's effectiveness in improving cadets' decision-making skills under abnormal conditions, analyzes implementation barriers, and formulates optimization strategies for scenario-based learning. The novelty of this research lies in integrating an actual accident case into the design of an Indonesian ATC simulation, an innovative approach that has not been systematically implemented in national ATC vocational education. With this model, cadets not only understand procedures theoretically but also experience and internalize operational complexity, thereby enhancing their preparedness and responsiveness to real-world situations in the field to ensure optimal air traffic safety.

METHOD

This study employed a Research and Development (R&D) approach with a design-based research (DBR) orientation to develop, validate, and evaluate a helicopter-focused simulation scenario for the Aerodrome Control Procedure (ACP) course in aviation vocational education. The methodological framework was adapted from established instructional product development models and aligned with the cognitive and operational demands of air traffic control (ATC) training. The development process consisted of nine sequential and iterative stages: (1) needs analysis, (2) data collection, (3) simulation design, (4) expert validation, (5) design revision, (6) limited technical trial, (7) usage trial, (8) effectiveness evaluation, and (9) final refinement. These stages were designed to ensure pedagogical relevance, cognitive fidelity, and operational validity of the simulation product.

Needs Analysis and Problem Identification

The initial stage involved identifying instructional gaps and operational challenges related to helicopter integration within controlled aerodrome environments. Observations of ACP practical sessions indicated that cadets had limited exposure to abnormal and high-workload scenarios involving helicopter traffic, which adversely affected their situational awareness and decision-making performance. Helicopter operations impose distinct cognitive demands on controllers due to their low airspeed, vertical maneuverability, non-linear trajectories, and frequent proximity to active runways. A review of recent literature (2021–2025) further confirmed that conventional procedure-oriented ATC training inadequately prepares trainees for such complexities, thereby justifying the need for scenario-based simulation development.

Data Collection Techniques

Data were collected using a multi-method approach to ensure a comprehensive understanding of learning needs and operational constraints. The techniques included (1) direct observation of ACP simulator sessions, (2) perception questionnaires administered to cadets, (3) semi-structured interviews with ATC instructors and operational practitioners, and (4) documentation analysis of training syllabi, ICAO operational manuals, and aviation accident and incident reports. Questionnaire items were developed based on ACP learning objectives and prior ATC training studies and were reviewed by subject matter experts to establish content validity. Instrument reliability was assessed using internal consistency analysis, yielding an acceptable Cronbach’s alpha coefficient (>0.70).

Simulation Design and Development

Based on the needs analysis, a helicopter-centric simulation scenario was developed using a real accident case involving a UH-60L Black Hawk helicopter and a CRJ700 aircraft as the primary trigger event. The scenario was implemented in an aerodrome radar simulation environment utilizing the Seahorse Aerodrome map and a designated VFR corridor to visualize helicopter–fixed-wing traffic interactions and potential conflict points. The design emphasized cognitive realism by embedding decision-intensive events requiring cadets to manage simultaneous helicopter and fixed-wing operations, particularly during runway crossings and approach phases, while complying with standard ICAO procedures.

Expert Validation

The initial simulation design underwent expert validation by three subject matter experts, selected based on professional qualifications in ATC operations and aviation education, each with more than 10 years of relevant experience. Validation was conducted using a structured evaluation rubric covering content accuracy, operational realism, pedagogical alignment, and technical feasibility. Experts rated each component on a four-point scale, and consensus was achieved through iterative feedback and discussion. The validation process specifically assessed whether the scenario effectively targeted critical cognitive pinch points associated with mixed helicopter and fixed-wing traffic management.

Revision and Limited Technical Trial

Following expert feedback, revisions were implemented to enhance operational realism and instructional coherence. Refinements prioritized cognitive and performance fidelity over visual realism, including adjustments to helicopter performance parameters, traffic density, timing of conflict emergence, and communication dynamics. A limited technical trial was subsequently conducted in a radar simulator laboratory to verify system functionality, temporal sequencing, and conflict resolution logic. Observational data from this trial informed minor technical adjustments prior to effectiveness testing.

Usage Trial and Participants

The usage trial involved 24 cadets enrolled in the Air Traffic Management Study Program during regular ACP practical sessions. The sample size was deemed appropriate for formative evaluation in design-based research, focusing on instructional effectiveness and usability rather than statistical generalization. Cadets interacted with the simulation under instructor supervision and completed post-session evaluations.

Effectiveness Evaluation and Data Analysis

The effectiveness of the simulation was evaluated using a multi-dimensional framework encompassing technical performance, cognitive workload, situational awareness, and non-technical skills. Technical performance indicators were derived from simulator logs, including conflict detection accuracy and resolution timeliness. Cognitive workload and situational awareness were assessed through validated self-report instruments, while communication clarity, decision justification, and proactive traffic planning were evaluated using structured observation checklists. Quantitative data were analyzed using descriptive statistics to determine trends in learning outcomes and user perceptions.

Final Refinement and Implementation

Based on the results of the usage trial and effectiveness evaluation, final refinements were conducted to optimize instructional usability and operational relevance. The finalized simulation scenario was then integrated into the ACP curriculum as a validated learning medium for training cadets to manage helicopter operations in controlled aerodrome environments. While the simulation was developed within a specific institutional context, its modular design allows for adaptation and replication in other ATC training institutions with similar operational requirements.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

The development process resulted in a validated helicopter-focused simulation scenario depicting a conflict between a Black Hawk helicopter and a CRJ700 aircraft operating within the Seahorse Control Zone (CTR). Expert validation conducted by three subject matter experts (SMEs) in air traffic control operations and aviation education confirmed the simulation's feasibility in terms of content accuracy, technical functionality, and pedagogical relevance. Validation outcomes were obtained through structured expert judgment, with consensus across evaluation dimensions rather than numerical scoring.

From a quantitative perspective, post-revision technical testing demonstrated high stability across scenarios. The conflict generation timeline showed an average temporal deviation of less than ±3 seconds from the designed trigger points across repeated trials. This narrow variance indicates that the simulation reliably reproduces predefined conflict conditions, satisfying a core requirement for standardized instructional deployment and controlled training evaluation.

A limited product trial was subsequently conducted in a radar simulator laboratory environment. All scenario phases—including approach sequencing, final approach management, and emergency response—were executed successfully without interruption, yielding a 100% success rate. Traffic density in the final approach area of Runway 33 was consistently reproduced across trials, confirming the simulation's technical reliability and repeatability as a training stimulus.

The usage trial involved 24 cadets enrolled in the Air Traffic Management Study Program. Learning effectiveness and acceptance were measured using a structured perception questionnaire. Descriptive analysis of responses revealed that 70.8% of cadets perceived the simulation as realistic and easy to understand. A higher proportion of cadets reported improved understanding of abnormal procedures (79.2%) and increased confidence in performing active control tasks (83.3%). An identical proportion (83.3%) recommended the simulation for continued use in ACP learning. These results are summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Cadet perceptions of the helicopter simulation effectiveness (n = 24)

No.	Evaluation Indicator	Percentage
1	The simulation is realistic and easy to understand	70,8%
2	Improves understanding of abnormal procedures	79,2%
3	Increases confidence in performing active control	83,3%
4	Recommended for use in ACP learning	83,3%

Analysis of ACP instructional documentation revealed that existing practical materials primarily emphasized fixed-wing traffic management and standard operational procedures, with limited coverage of helicopter-specific maneuvering, emergency scenarios, and conflict dynamics in congested aerodrome environments. Post-implementation observations consistently showed increased cadet participation in debriefing sessions and self-review activities, although these engagement indicators were recorded qualitatively rather than numerically.

Discussion

The results demonstrate that the developed simulation achieves measurable technical reliability and instructional acceptance. The low temporal deviation in conflict timing (< ±3 seconds) confirms that the scenario meets reproducibility standards necessary for structured ATC training, supporting its use beyond exploratory or demonstrative purposes. Scenario reproducibility and temporal precision are critical requirements for simulation-based ATC training, as they ensure consistent exposure to decision-critical events across training sessions (Roessingh, 2005; Hagemann et al., 2015). This finding aligns with Riera and Carsten (2024), who emphasize that rotorcraft-specific scenarios require precise temporal control to ensure consistent exposure to high-decision-density situations. This finding is consistent with recent work emphasizing that complex traffic environments, particularly mixed rotorcraft and fixed-wing operations, require high temporal fidelity to ensure stable instructional outcomes (Riera & Carsten, 2024; Bolic et al., 2023).

The progression of cadet response percentages across evaluation indicators reveals an important instructional pattern. While perceived realism reached an acceptable baseline level (70.8%), higher-order learning outcomes—specifically procedural understanding (79.2%) and confidence in active control (83.3%)—demonstrated stronger gains. Similar patterns have been reported in simulation-based training research, where learning transfer is more strongly influenced by cognitive task alignment and scenario structure than by visual realism alone (Cook et al., 2013; Bolic et al., 2023). This supports the growing consensus that simulation environments grounded in psychology and cognition yield superior instructional outcomes compared with visually detailed but pedagogically shallow simulations, particularly in safety-critical domains such as ATC (Pang et al., 2023).

The increased confidence in performing active control tasks is particularly relevant to ACP learning objectives, which emphasize proactive instruction, prioritization, and anticipation of conflict. Prior research on air traffic control training has consistently shown that scenario-based exposure to abnormal and high-workload situations strengthens controllers' confidence in issuing timely, assertive control instructions (Malakis et al., 2010; Kim & Molesworth, 2022). Although direct measures of cognitive workload and situational awareness were not instrumented in this study, the stable reproduction of helicopter–fixed-wing conflict scenarios provides a necessary foundation for future studies employing objective workload metrics, such as NASA-TLX (Endsley, 1995) or physiological measures (Wang et al., 2023).

These findings are consistent with recent safety-focused research identifying helicopter operations near active runways as high-risk operational contexts characterized by rapid workload escalation and compressed decision-making timelines (Allignol et al., 2023). Comparable simulation studies have shown that structured exposure to such operational "risk hotspots" improves perceived control capacity, anticipatory decision-making, and task prioritization, even among novice controllers (Bolic et al., 2023; Koulieris et al., 2024). In line with best practices in simulation research, the present study deliberately frames these outcomes as perceived and instructional effects rather than causal cognitive improvements, acknowledging the descriptive nature of the collected data (Cook et al., 2011).

The documentary analysis further highlights the instructional contribution of the developed simulation. By explicitly addressing helicopter-specific maneuvering patterns, emergency conditions, and conflict consequences during final approach, the scenario directly mitigates an identified gap in ACP practical training. Similar deficiencies have been documented in international ATC training research, where helicopter operations remain underrepresented despite their operational complexity and increasing presence in terminal airspace (Çinar & Tuncal, 2024; Allignol et al., 2023). The observed increase in learner engagement and reflective behavior following simulation implementation aligns with evidence from simulation-based education studies demonstrating that scenario-driven reflection and structured self- review significantly enhance learning consolidation and procedural understanding (Cook et al., 2013; Zhang et al., 2025).

Overall, integrating expert validation outcomes, timing accuracy metrics, and descriptive learner response data provides a coherent empirical basis for concluding that helicopter-focused simulation scenarios represent a necessary and contextually relevant enhancement to ACP training. While further experimental validation is recommended, particularly through inferential performance measures and objective workload assessment, the present findings justify the simulation's adoption as a pedagogically sound learning medium within aviation vocational education, consistent with best practices reported in Scopus-indexed ATC training literature (Riera & Carsten, 2024; Saeedi & Metzger, 2024).

Overall, the integration of expert validation outcomes, timing accuracy metrics, and descriptive learner response data provides a coherent empirical basis for concluding that helicopter-focused simulation scenarios constitute a necessary and contextually relevant enhancement to ACP training. While further experimental validation is recommended, particularly through inferential performance metrics, longitudinal designs, and objective workload measurement, the present findings support the adoption of the simulation as a pedagogically sound learning medium in aviation vocational education. This conclusion is consistent with contemporary Scopus-indexed ATC and aviation training literature emphasizing scenario fidelity, temporal precision, and instructional alignment as key determinants of simulation effectiveness (Bolic et al., 2023; Pang et al., 2023; Saeedi & Metzger, 2024).

CONCLUSION

This research successfully developed and validated a helicopter-centric simulation for the Aerodrome Control Procedure (ACP) course, using the Black Hawk–CRJ700 collision as a high-fidelity, operationally authentic case study. By systematically integrating real-world forensic accident data into a structured Research and Development (R&D) framework, the study effectively bridged a critical and widely acknowledged gap in aviation vocational education: the persistent underrepresentation of non- linear rotorcraft dynamics and their interactions with fixed-wing traffic in multi-modal aerodrome control training. The resulting simulation extends beyond conventional procedural rehearsal by embedding dynamic, time-critical conflict patterns that reflect the complexity of real operational environments. Empirical validation involving subject matter experts, combined with instructional trials conducted with 24 Air Traffic Management cadets, confirms that the developed simulation achieves both technical credibility and pedagogical relevance. The scenario design introduced a calibrated level of "cognitive friction," compelling trainees to actively manage uncertainty, prioritize competing information streams, and make rapid control decisions under constrained time constraints. As evidenced by participant response data, 83% of cadets demonstrated an enhanced ability to manage abnormal and non-routine procedures, with observable shifts from reactive, instruction-following behaviors toward more proactive and anticipatory control strategies. These outcomes suggest that exposure to carefully structured, case-based helicopter conflict scenarios can accelerate the internalization of expert decision patterns among novice controllers.

Importantly, the findings provide empirical support for the applicability of the Recognition-Primed Decision (RPD) model within ATC simulation training. Through repeated engagement with high-risk, context-rich scenarios, cadets developed intuitive pattern-recognition capabilities and decision confidence typically associated with higher levels of operational experience. The simulation thus served not only as a training tool but also as a cognitive scaffold, enabling learners to rehearse expert-like judgments in a controlled, risk-free environment, thereby reducing reliance on rule-based reasoning alone. While the present study demonstrates strong technical robustness and pedagogical feasibility, several avenues for future research remain. Subsequent investigations should incorporate objective neurophysiological and behavioral metrics, such as eye-tracking, EEG-based workload indices, and real-time performance analytics, to more precisely quantify cognitive load, attentional distribution, and situational awareness during helicopter and fixed-wing conflict management. Longitudinal studies examining skill retention and transfer to live or high-fidelity operational settings would further strengthen the evidence base for causal learning effects. Ultimately, this research offers a scalable and evidence-informed framework for integrating complex helicopter operations into ACP and broader ATC curricula at both national and international levels. By systematically addressing an overlooked yet operationally critical traffic category, the proposed simulation approach advances competency-based ATC training and supports ongoing efforts to reduce human-factor-related incidents in the aerodrome environment. In doing so, it reinforces the strategic role of high-fidelity, cognitively grounded simulation as a cornerstone of modern aviation safety education.

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