

A drop in the ocean

Time to commit to a standard for the assessment of seafarers' language skills says [Dr Martin Ziarati](#)



Dr Martin Ziarati

Considering that 90% of global trade is transported by sea and that 80% of accidents in the industry are attributed to human error it should be acknowledged that safe and efficient ship operations depend on the competencies of seafarers. One of these is the competency in maritime English.

Maritime English has acquired immense significance for a number of reasons, the need for clear communication and the globalisation of the shipping industry being the primary ones. Every failure to get a message across could not only cause damage to property and the environment, but also poses a threat to human health and life.

Sector: Education

I Keywords: Assessment, seafarers, maritime English

Background: Seafarers' language skills need to be appropriate to rank and responsibilities to prevent casualties and a lack of crew cohesion

The increasingly global and international character of the shipping sector has created the need for a lingua franca at sea. People from literally all over the globe meet on board a vessel, which makes a common communication 'tool' indispensable. In 1995, this gap was filled by English as the International Maritime Organization officially adopted it as 'the language of the sea'. Since that time, specialised English has become a popular course module at maritime institutions, and various teaching materials have been developed and many attempts made to ensure future seafarers are aware of the importance of English at sea. Yet recent research shows that this is just a drop in the ocean.

"An adequate standard of English is not just another formal international requirement of seafarers; it is a key element in ensuring safe, efficient and profitable ship operations"

LOOSE LIPS

According to IMO statistics from 2005, 80% of accidents at sea were caused by human error and nearly half of them were attributed to communication failures. The three true-life stories below reveal the impact of communication inefficiency in dealing with emergency situations.

On April 7, 1990 a fire broke out on board the *Scandinavian Star*. A number of crew members did not speak or understand English or Norwegian, and so were not able to help the passengers evacuate. In all, 158 people died in that incident. It



MarTEL has a series of Maritime English tests for seafarers at all stages of their careers

was concluded that the number could have been smaller had the whole crew been able to communicate in English.

In 1995, the *Royal Majesty* grounded near Massachusetts. The accident happened because Portuguese ships, which recognised the danger, were communicating between themselves in Portuguese rather than in English. Had the communication been conducted in English, then the *Royal Majesty* would have been made aware of the danger and found out that they had deviated from their course.

Then, on January 1, 2003 *Vicky*, a Turkish-registered fuel carrier, hit a wreck in the Dover Channel. The accident happened because the officer on board did not react properly to the warning "Wreck ahead"; a low level of English skills was identified as the main reason for his actions.

It appears that even different accents may lead to serious problems, impede shipping operations and cause damage to property: "While I was working as a deck cadet during my first sea experience, I had the chance to work with a multinational crew (Pakistani, Russian, Phillipino, Azerbaijani) but the working language on board was English," says a mariner helping with MarTEL. "During one of the voyages, we cleaned the bilges. An officer and I were operating the pumps on the bridge while communicating with the ratings who told us when to start and stop the pumps. On many occasions we had communication problems because the ratings pronounced the words 'start' and 'stop' with an accent that made the words difficult for us to differentiate. This miscommunication led to wrong pumps being stopped or started, therefore causing damage to the pumps."

HOME IMPROVEMENT

A number of renowned researchers such as Cole (1999, 2003, 2005), Loginovsky (2002), Pritchard (2000, 2005), Trenker (2003, 2005) and Ziarati (2006, 2007) recognise the need for improving the level of English within the maritime industry.

At the time of the publication of the IMO statistics in 2005 there were no recognised international standards for the assessment of Maritime English, which was a serious obstacle

to solving the problem. The International Maritime Organization advised not only further development of teaching and learning materials but, more importantly, the establishment of comprehensive standardised requirements for Maritime English. MarTEL was created in response to this need.

MarTEL was initiated in 2007 with the aim of designing a comprehensive international assessment framework for Maritime English that could be used by shipping companies, marine personnel and maritime training organisations. MarTEL has since created a series of Maritime English tests for seafarers at all stages of their careers, from cadets to senior officers.

MarTEL is the fruit of cooperation between the UK's Centre for Factories of the Future and tens of renowned educational institutions and maritime companies from across Europe including the Turkish Maritime Institute of Maritime Studies, Turkey's Piri Reis University, the National Maritime College of Ireland, the IMO's World Maritime University in Sweden, and the UK's Glasgow College of Nautical Studies, now called City of Glasgow College. MarTEL was created under the European Union's Leonardo da Vinci funding stream as part of the Lifelong Learning Programme.

MarTEL offers four levels of online tests, which are designed to match different requirements to different seafarers' ranks and responsibilities. Each MarTEL Test assesses the four key language skills: reading, writing, listening and speaking.

Testing experts and subject matter specialists collaborated to develop a set of comprehensive international Maritime English standards and valid and reliable assessment materials. The MarTEL team have conducted research to establish appropriate weightings for the different skills assessed in each phase test, as well as making sure the tests reflect real life situations the test takers will encounter at sea. As a result, a chief mate has to show a higher level of speaking ability than a chief engineer, while the latter is expected to perform better in reading and writing.

SEATALK

The EU-funded SeaTALK project, initiated in 2013, takes MarTEL to another level. It aims to satisfy the need for establishing a comprehensive harmonised framework for Maritime English Education and Training. This includes developing a standard approach to teaching and learning Maritime English throughout Europe, as well as standard curriculum content, which will enable seafarers to undergo common Maritime English training and allow National Authorities to more effectively assess qualification levels of seafarers with different nationalities.

Curricula and training modules created within SeaTALK are going to be fully compatible with the European Credit System for Vocational Education and Training (ECVET). This will facilitate the validation, recognition and accumulation of work-related skills and knowledge acquired in different countries, and in different learning environments. This, in turn, will

allow seafarers greater mobility in the international labour market.

The MarTEL and SeaTALK partners believe that implementing global standards for Maritime English will help to prevent accidents and increase safety at sea and in ports; prevent damage to property; enable greater mobility of seafarers; make shipping operations more efficient; facilitate communication between crew members in both professional and everyday situations; create a more harmonious atmosphere on board vessels and in ports and prevent environmental disasters.

With the language of the sea being English, shouldn't all seafarers have effective English skills that can be assessed by international standards? It seems that an adequate standard of English is not just another formal international requirement of seafarers; it is a key element in ensuring safe, efficient and profitable ship operations. **SN**

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Credit: El Gringo

Failure to communicate onboard can lead to damage to property and the environment

Testing times for seafarers of all ranks

MarTEL's four phases of online tests are tailored to different seafarers' ranks and responsibilities. Phase 1 aims to assess the English language proficiency level of young people who wish to become merchant navy officer cadets and so can be used as a placement or entrance exam by maritime education institutions. The test is also suitable for non-officer shipping personnel.

Phase 2 aims to assess the English language proficiency of officers who have recently graduated from a maritime academy or are already serving as officers on board a ship. The Phase 2 tests focus on context-specific vocabulary and communication situations, including SMCP. There are separate tests for Deck and Engineering Officers at this phase as the duties and skills required for each role are distinct.

Phase 3 aims to assess the English language proficiency of officers who hold a senior position and are in charge of vessels over 3,000 gt. As with Phase 2, there are separate tests for senior deck and engineering officers.

MarTEL Phase R aims to assess the English language proficiency of ratings who assist officers in all departments on board ship. There are separate tests for general, deck and engineering ratings.

Independent from the aforementioned tests, MarTEL offers the Enhanced Oral Test based on real-life tasks and scenarios. This is a multi-level examiner-led test of an individual's ability to comprehend and communicate effectively in English. **SN**