

MarTEL - Developing Standards for Maritime English for Safer Seas and Ports

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It is acknowledged by all concerned that effective knowledge of English at sea and in ports is a must for all seafarers responsible for safety and security of the ship, its crew and its passengers. Yet as evidenced by recent reports, articles and papers particularly accidents reports by major and reputable investigation authorities that the standard of English of some seafarers is so bad that they have difficulty communicating not only between themselves but also with agencies outside the ship (Alert, 2007).

Investigations into the human factor regarding disasters at sea, which focused on communication behaviour according to Trenker (2007) revealed that one third of accidents happen primarily due to insufficient command of maritime English. He reported that in VTS (Vessel Traffic Service) controlled areas for instance, poor communicating of relevant factors contribute up to 40% of collisions involving the human element, most of them caused by failures in radio communication even in routine conversations, but some also through face-to-face communication deficiencies.

The studies by Trenker (2007) is in line with the authors own findings (Ziarati, 2006). A review of some 300 accidents revealed that standard of English of seafarers is one of the two main causes of accidents and incidents at sea and in port (Ziarati, *ibid*). What is so alarming is that while accidents at sea and in ports are decreasing, accidents due to human failure, particularly due to poor standards of English by seafarers are on the increase (MarTEL, 2007, Ziarati. 2009).



MarTEL Partnership from right to left: Capt. Marco Otolini (Glasgow College, UK), Dr Osman Turan (Strathclyde University, Scotland), Bahar Tugay (Berke Marine, TR), Capt. Taner Albayrak, (TUDEV Institute, TR), Tomaz Gregoric (Spinker, SI), Capt. Heikki Kovisto (Satakunta University, FI), Professor Dr Reza Ziarati (General Coordinator, TUDEV, TR and Chairman of C4FF, UK) – Project coordinator, Capt. Hilde Kjerstad (Tromso University, NO), Capt. Yanusz Uriasz (Szcecin University, PL), Dr Martin Ziarati (C4FF, UK) – Project Manager, Nesrin Gulsaran, Serhan Sernikli and Tezer Ulkeatam (TUDEV, TR).- the latter is the Chair of the MarTEL Taskforce at TUDEV.

Trenker (2007) reports 80% of all SOLAS vessels are presently crewed with multilingual personnel who, for diverse reasons, are frequently unable to render the maritime English skills required. It has been argued that in order to improve management, operation and/or support

on board vessels, the amount of paperwork in the form of procedures, leaflets, questionnaires, e-mails and checklists are on the increase, stating that all have come about in response to an earlier accident or incident at sea or in ports.

To improve the standard of Maritime English IMO in 2001, introduced SMCP Standard Marine Communication Phrases. The aim was to get around the problem of language barriers at sea and to avoid misunderstandings which can cause accidents. The question often asked is SMCP used at sea? (Alert 2007). The problem is that IMO does not carry out inspections to see if STCW is correctly implemented let alone monitoring the implementation or usage of SMCP at sea or its effective application.

While SMCP has provided a sort of survival kit, it only includes the essential safety related communication events where spoken English is required. IMO in introducing SMCP neglected two very important considerations. The need for competence in English language by all seafarers and a means of monitoring and measuring this competence, and second, that without competence in English language and reliance on memorising SMCP, when emergencies do occur psychology plays an important role viz., if these marine communication phrases are not learned in a context of English language environment, then at the time of panic, there are no assurances that they are recalled correctly and this has been observed in several recorded accidents (Ziarati, et al, 2009). Valerie Short states that while STCW95 contains guidelines to watch keepers stipulating that standards of English of seafarers should be 'adequate' (whatever this means!) for general OOW duties, yet she notes that the STCW code does not provide indications of English proficiency levels to be achieved.

To date the response to poor English competences has been reactive and IMO practice as has been the case in the past have been often a response to specific disasters, see for instance, SOLAS, MARPOL, etc. The interest in Maritime English was renewed in a recent meeting of IMO MSC 2006 meeting when the UK delegation supported by several other countries warn the Committee of severe consequences if action is not taken to remedy the poor standards of Seafarers' English. There were discussions at the workshop meetings at the event that what is needed is to develop a set of comprehensive standards for Maritime English and provide a means of assessing English proficiency level of seafarers. The assessment system should also test the English skills and not maritime knowledge of a seafarer. It should be a vocational in nature and unlike conventional testing system should be skilled based with not too much reliance on grammar. There was a strong feeling that English should be taught in the context of maritime English as suggested by Loginovsky (2002).

Birth of MarTEL

In response to the IMO MSC 2006 call by the UK delegate in 2007, C4FF (UK) with support from TUDEV (TR) and a number of MET institutions and progressive enterprises in several EU countries instigated a project called MarTEL.

MarTEL is a set of standards for Maritime English. The proposed standards are expected to make seas and ports safer and save lives and to improve the quality of live on board vessels through improved communications. The standards include three assessment phases, ranging from Elementary to Upper-intermediate/advance in Phase I, English Tests for given skills for Deck and Marine Engineering Officers of Watch in Phase II and English Tests, again for given skills, for Senior Deck and Marine Engineering Officer in Phase III.

MarTEL is no a tool set to solve problems but a pro-active approach to avoiding problems in the future, hence a Newtonian approach. It overcomes the limitations of SMCP and removes

the need to use standards such as IELTS or TOEFL as these are not designed for seafarers' requirements. Unlike IELTS or TOEFL, MarTEL is a vocational approach and relies on the languages skills needs of different types and ranks of seafarers.

MarTEL, abides by the findings of an earlier EU funded Leonardo pilot project that, there is no language called 'Maritime English' and that competence in English Language is only attained if developed in the context of English language. Maritime English is the vocational element of the English Language for seafarers and should be treated as any other ESP (English for Special Purposes). This concept agrees with findings of arguments presented by Loginovsky (2002). MarTEL also clearly identifies the English Language needs of each type and rank of seafarers, setting English proficiencies levels at three different phrases. MarTEL embraces SMCP and incorporates additional content which has been emanated from the study of some 700 accidents. MarTEL, places less reliance on conventional English Language tests such as IELTS, TOEFL, etc. The latter standards are developed for academic studies. Most Merchant Navy Officers come through vocational routes. Furthermore, IELTS, TOEFL do not distinguish languages skill needs, of different types and ranks of officers and they do not embrace SMCP. One very important attribute of MarTEL is that it is about the Maritime Test of English Language and not English Language test of Maritime knowledge. MarTEL, takes the arguments of all scholars and researchers in the field of English language competency requirements at sea. The development of MarTEL Standards necessitated the views of Catherine Logie (2007) to be taken into consideration. She is of the opinion that Maritime English training at METs lacks the following:

- Time allocated to Maritime English
- Up-to-date resources integrating Maritime English content with the Communicative Approach to language training.
- Time to develop practical skills of listening and speaking (with priority given to learning terminology).
- Exam systems evaluating spoken competence.
- A standardised qualification for Maritime English trainees and trainers.
- Opportunity for Maritime English trainers to update their knowledge of both subject content and methodology.

MarTEL, offers Test at three different levels/phases:

- Phase 1 - Upper intermediate/Advance
- Phase 2 - Officer of watch – Deck
 - Officer of watch – Marine Engineers
- Phase 3 – Senior Officer – Senior Deck
 Senior Marine Engineers

Each phase contains a standard (test) supported by a set of study guidelines and each having a series of study units, language skills and skill levels for each type and rank of officers. In Phases 2 and 3 these skill needs are clearly identified which are based on the outcome of some 700 accident investigations. Each phase has been tested and evaluated in several countries involved with the MarTEL project. The outcomes of the EU funded MarEng (2205-07) has been included in the MarTEL study units and the findings of MarEng Plus (2008-2010) will be included in MarTEL standards.

The two Maritime English project teams currently funded by EU, viz., MarTEL and MarEng Plus have agreed to cooperate and this is expected to strengthen the products being developed within the two projects.