



## **There are many accidents due to linguistic problems. Should we not pay more attention to the English language competence level of seafarers?**

Professor Ziarati initiated a discussion on Maritime English in LinkedIn and many people from the maritime community made valuable contributions. The contributions were considered valuable and on that basis a panel was formed by MarEdu ([www.maredu.co.uk](http://www.maredu.co.uk)) to discuss the importance of Maritime English and take into consideration contributions made by group members of the MET Network. The following is a report written as a development paper for publication in MariFuture Platform. A notice will be posted in the LinkedIn so that those who made contributions to the discussions on Maritime English as well as any new comment could be taken into consideration when developing the full paper for publication in a refereed conference or a maritime journal.

### **Introduction**

There are many accidents due to linguistic problems and research has shown that one third of all accidents and incidents at sea and ports are due to communication and linguistic mistakes and mishaps (see [www.martel.pro](http://www.martel.pro)). Reducing accidents by one third is well worth the effort of improving the English language competence level of seafarers. IMO STCW clearly states that there should be effective communication on board vessels, yet does not set a meaningful standard to safeguard such an important requirement. Shouldn't the national administrations take language competency in English language more seriously? Do we have to wait for more accidents at sea to prove the seriousness of the problem? Shouldn't IMO clearly state that English is the language of the sea? It is understandable that it is the member states in the IMO that decide on such issues, but could more effective leadership by IMO itself reduce accidents and loss of life at sea by, for instance, supporting the EU funded MarTEL Standards ([www.martel.pro](http://www.martel.pro))?

On the other hand ships are becoming bigger, faster, and more technologically advanced, but personnel are not adequately trained to manage the new technologies on board. As such, some argue that it is difficult to pinpoint if the problem of accidents and incidents at sea and port is due to English language competencies of seafarers or other factors.

### **Position of SMCP in Communication at Sea**

The Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP) is a set of key phrases in English, which is the internationally recognised language of the sea, supported by the international community for use at sea and developed by the International Maritime Organization (IMO). SMCP aim to explain: 1) external communication phrases – ship to ship and ship to shore communication, and 2) on board communication phrases – communication within the ship.

It is like any tourist with a phrase book in her/his hand. S/he may be able to communicate certain phrases but s/he will not be able to understand in full. SMCP might be a good start but the seafarer must obtain fluency so as to understand nuances, turns of phrase, colloquialisms and so on. It is not enough to know what "hard to starboard" means!

The history of SMCP is not long as it all begun in 2000s when increasing numbers of accidents at sea were found to be due miscommunication among/between seafarers. Until the incident of the *Herald of Free Enterprise*, the ship was seen as a technical system therefore Maritime English teachers used to teach English very technically and scientifically e.g. navigation, ship theory, etc. In the 1980s, the limitation and performance of Radar itself were taught, whereas today the limitations and communication skills of the radar observer and the bridge team is developed and assessed; and a more comprehensive approach to developing the English language skills of seafarers is undertaken.



Some suggest that the ship-to-ship communication on COLREGs actions (which is included in SMCP) should be discouraged by IMO. It is reported that the underlying reasons of many collisions are miscommunication of ship officers while trying to communicate and agree on a course of actions are because of use of VHF. For instance, In the UK, the Maritime Coastguard Agency, discourage their Officers to use VHF in Collision Avoidance, (See “MGN 167 M+F - Dangers in the Use of VHF Radio in Collision Avoidance”) but what does IMO recommend, considering the increasing use of VHF in collision avoidance? This is a valid question to ask.

### **What is the current situation and solution?**

Let us examine the situation in Italy. As per the requirements of the certification process, Deck Cadets undertaking the Officer of Watch Exam need to take a written Exam in English and it is reported that half of those taking the exam unfortunately fail.

Some argue that minimum common technical language requirements must be satisfied. So far, English is accepted as the International language of the sea, but too often colleges, universities, education providers fail to produce seafarers competent in English hence the unacceptable number of accidents and incidents at sea due to linguistic and communications mistakes which could have been avoided.

There is also issue that people thinking in their mother language when speaking or writing and then translate it into words. But the question is how we can get our students to master English when they live and work in non-English speaking countries? A crew may all come from, for example, the Philippines, there is no way they are going to speak to each other in English on board. Therefore you need specific, tailor-made courses that they need to follow while navigating at sea. These courses should include repetition, and drills must be included with a view to improve communication skills to an acceptable standard.

Working in multi-cultural environments could be beneficial if this does not or not expected to contribute to accidents. The fact is that not everyone is or can be taught in an English speaking institution. Looking at the SMCP; it is realised how little English is spoken in the maritime colleges. This is what the education providers are still missing; perhaps, they need to communicate in simple English terms to reduce the risks of misunderstandings.

On the other hand, some argue that the common language spoken internationally is not English, especially aboard commercial shipping. It is not also “Black and White” that many accidents at sea occur solely because of linguistic problems, since all actions leading up to the accident will play a part, which points more towards a general professional competency than lack of competence in English language alone. For instance, if we consider *Able Seaman* (Deck) duties, it can be mundane and repetitive to the point of complacency which can be a key factor towards the cause of some of the accidents taken place at sea and ports. So, this has to be investigated too.

Language is one of the many barriers to overcome while teaching, and if the student does not understand the subject matter to the required standards then the problem needs addressing with the instructor. The question is how many instructors at sea are actually internationally qualified as instructors? This is another issue that need to be looked into.

It should be noted that many English language instructors at colleges, universities, etc., have never served on board any type of ship themselves. It is true that seafarers MUST obtain fluency to understand English; but a crew composed of many nationalities such as Indian, Filipino, German, French, Spanish, Croatian Thai, Australian, and American when trying to speak to and understand each in English alone could be tricky. Furthermore, each of them has their own version of English often different to “English English” and to each other particularly with regard to pronunciation. There is also the accent issue which contributes to misunderstandings between/among seafarers. For instance, a Spaniard speaks with a completely different accent compared to an Englishman or a Frenchman.



Similarly with reading, the issue is that seafarers need to read and understand many instruction manuals related to technical equipment such as Radar, ECDIC, VDR SSAS, BWAS, GMDSS or mechanical equipment such as pumps, hydraulic or pneumatic systems or windlass; ropes and wires and so on. Those manuals are usually produced in the country where they are made e.g. Korea, China, Japan, Germany; Sweden, Norway, Italy, USA, France. All are written in a language which is nominally English, but which is actually quite difficult for everyone to understand because they are written in their own country's version of English. For example, there are even differences between "English English" and "American English". Seafarers have to understand these differences and use those publications appropriately; often they succeed; but sometimes they don't. This highlights importance of teaching "standard" English to the Maritime Community however the variety in accents and writing are inevitable. One thing that should be emphasised in teaching English is to get learners to listen/read in as many accents as possible.

The reality is that in order to master a language you must think it, eat it, walk in it and listen to it 24 hours a day. English is a must for a professional seafarer, so if s/he is a professional then they would wish to improve their English, just as they wish to improve their other essential skills.

Mastery and awareness are interconnected. It seems that we have to face the possibility that the level of English required by regulations is simply not enough to ensure that the seafarers actually master the language for the purposes of safety. If one knows 70% of the necessary English, it probably means that there is 30% of it that they should know, but do not - a gap the seafarer will carry with them to the detriment of the environment that they will be working and detriment of the people working with them/around them.

This may be the reason why we have to help our students achieve a mastery of English. Mastery of the language improves the ability to adapt to new situations and decreases the variability associated with lack of knowledge. One should remember that language (spoken or written) is but a part of communication. So, it is necessary to work harder not only in "English-ability" but also working to improve their communication skills.

<b>Unconscious Incompetent</b>	He who knows not, and knows not that he knows not, is a fool - shun him
<b>Conscious Incompetent</b>	He who knows not, and knows that he knows not is ignorant - teach him
<b>Unconscious Competent</b>	He who knows, and knows not that he knows, is asleep - wake him,
<b>Conscious Competent</b>	But he who knows, and knows that he knows, is a wise man - follow him

**Table 1** - Conscious Competence model<sup>1</sup>

### **Vision of MariFuture**

A solution could be to give technical lessons or deliver training courses (STCW) directly in English; this could improve from the beginning of a student training. For instance, the SOS programmes ([www.maredu.co.uk](http://www.maredu.co.uk)) delivered in Turkey in 2005 to date has proven to be successful as the programme was delivered in English. Students who graduated from these programmes have achieved competence in English language within the context of their academic and vocation education and training.

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<sup>1</sup> Conscious Competence Learning Model – See <http://www.businessballs.com/consciouscompetencelearningmodel.htm>



MariFuture carried out a major research project (See – Safety on Sea ([www.maredu.co.uk](http://www.maredu.co.uk)) and the results were published by IMarEST (Ziarati, 2006). The results of the research clearly showed that many seafarers disregard existing rules and regulations, for instance, contrary to existing regulations they still use VHF in ship-to-ship communications. The second problem shown in the research results is that Colregs are often not interpreted correctly by MET instructors/institutions, particularly those using their native language to teach Colregs. There is a serious concern about the understanding of these regulations. MET institutions should put more emphasis on the teaching of Colregs and ensure that they teach them in a practical environment such as in ship simulators. The MariFuture Platform has developed two stand-alone and online platforms ([www.maider.pro](http://www.maider.pro) and [www.surpass.pro](http://www.surpass.pro)) to reduce accidents and incidents at sea. They contain a set of scenarios based on previous accidents.

The IMO only concerns itself with matters brought to it by its member states and these countries often look after their own interest and try to keep regulations to minimum, hence the reason, for the STCW being the minimum standards agreed rather than Gold standards expected by the public and the MET professionals.

### **Acknowledgement**

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RE-edited by Professor Ziarati