Maritime English – A Necessity for Nowadays Apprentices

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Abstract: - Maritime English proved to be a very important part of a future navigating officer’s training and it will still gain in importance as long as the shipping industry is in progress. It’s only up to young seafarers to get acquainted with Maritime English as their lives, other crew members’ lives and the ship’s integrity might depend on this particular aspect.

When students that are not native English go on board merchant vessels for the first time to be Apprentice Deck Officers they find it hard to learn anything from experienced Officers who are speaking to them in English and also these Officers are not always speaking the most correct English. As it is well known, most of maritime accidents happen due to human errors and these occur especially because of bad communication. This is a result of not using standard Maritime English that should be well known by all crew members of a ship, with a special attention drawn towards young Apprentices.

Because the concept of a single nationality crew is no longer met in the world shipping industry, proper communication can be achieved only by using Maritime English focusing especially on young Apprentices as they are the mistakes sensitive ones.

In this paper we are trying to illustrate that young students going on board ships as Apprentice Deck Officers must speak a proper Maritime English in order to reduce the barriers of a good communication between crew members of different nationalities and to improve ship-to-ship and ship-to-coast communication.

Key-Words: - maritime English, apprentice, ship, maritime university, communication

1 Introduction
Nowadays it is well known all around the shipping industry that English is the main and only language that should be used in any type of maritime communication. Even so, more and more people, especially students of Maritime Universities from countries where a different language is used for teaching, have trouble understanding the importance of speaking English. Their English language should also be fluent and easily understandable by all the other members of the team or crew that are not native English.

English is the international language that is used worldwide and therefore the shipping industry accepted it as the main language on board ships and in communications ship-to-ship and ship-to-coast. In this era of globalisation, the Apprentice Deck Officers wishing to go on board merchant ships cannot afford to be left out for not mastering English. This is the main reason for which teachers from Maritime Universities all over the world should try to explain to their students the importance of knowing Maritime English. It does not matter the subject that the teacher has to teach during his/her classes as long as the specific maritime courses would have the key words attached in English.

It is worth noting that the new learners (in this case, students from a Maritime University) of a language (English language) really do need to build a solid foundation of knowledge and it is useful for them that all of their teachers know and control Maritime English. It should become really easy for them to use some important maritime terms used daily on board ships and in any type of communications.

2 Sea Language – Maritime English
The need for effective communications at sea and ashore is internationally well known by all the
shipping industry and the seafarers are obliged to gain the appropriate skills and knowledge to communicate effectively and efficiently. Communication is an essential part of human interaction. The benefits of effective communication are many and obvious as they enhance all aspects of our personal and professional lives. Ineffective or misunderstood communications in our personal lives may give rise to problems or embarrassment but in our professional lives the results of misunderstandings may have much more serious results. In the world of international shipping, with seafarers from many countries sailing on ships all over the world, effective communication ship-to-ship and ship-to-coast is vitally important.

Today it is quite normal for ships around the world to sail with a compliment of twelve able crew members. It is also possible for this very same vessel to sail around with twelve completely different nationalities, all speaking English daily, all communicating, socializing and swearing in that one common language. All of them have learnt and maybe most of them are still learning to use English on a daily basis at work and as the communication language.

Twenty years ago a certain vessel ended up aground not five minutes after exiting Falmouth dry dock. Whilst the damage was not great and the vessel managed to scrape herself off the mud to proceed on her way (after suitable inspection and a new Master), the event occurred simply due to the language barrier on board. The very frustrated Chinese Captain was at the moment of the grounding, spitting hysterically into the mouthpiece of the bridge phone in Mandarin. He was obviously trying to educate the Nigerian Chief Engineer below, who was by then shrivelled in fear underneath the console, that he needed an astern movement on the engine. Due to the serious lack of a common language, regulations, like the one produced by IMO, came into being.

It can also be pointed out that many ships floating around today are filled from top to bottom with some weird speaking Scotsmen that even a Scottish lowlander cannot understand (some say this is not English, more like a group of people clearing their throats in a loud and unapologetic fashion) and others have noted that some ships sail around with Singaporeans who have created their own English language which again nobody can understand and that comes without a dictionary, but this anomaly might have to be accepted without question. No law in this world, no dictionary, translator or reduction in salary is going to make a Scotsman or Singaporean talk in understandable English so whilst all other nations have made great effort to learn the language and to use it in favour of their own tongue, they will just have to accept the fact that half those whose mother tongue is English can’t be understood by anybody else.

IMO analyses reports of casualties and accidents in order to see if there are any lessons to be learned for the future. Many accidents are found to be due mainly to operational issues of proper procedure, maintenance and design, rather than to proper implementation of regulations, but effectiveness of bridge resource management and particularly ineffective relationships between Master, crew and pilot are recurrent themes. Communication difficulties often occur in these areas due in part to cultural differences but also due to language ‘barriers’ which seem to be a big problem as the crew members do not want to acknowledge the fact that communication (especially a proper one which implies using an English language that can be understood by anybody) is very important if you want a safe voyage from point A to point B.

Because most maritime accidents are caused by human error, notably breakdowns in communication or cooperation, the legislation nowadays emphasizes the importance of the English language proficiency in relation to safety at sea. Instruction and practice of maritime English for communication and cooperation is an important element in maritime education.

Maritime English is to a great extent restricted to IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases, which builds on a basic knowledge of English and has been drafted in a simplified version of maritime English. It includes phrases for use in routine situations such as berthing as well as standard phrases and responses for use in emergency situations. Under the STCW 1978, as amended, the ability to understand and use the SMCP is required for the certification of officers in charge of a navigational watch on ships of 500 gross tonnage or above.

An integrated bridge simulation system is primarily designed and introduced to train and develop potential cadets and officers with the necessary knowledge and skills in properly and correctly stipulating and managing a vessel. Whereas a new and alternative use of the integrated bridge simulation system has been discussed and proven to be suitable and effective in training and assessing communication skills, especially in contextualizing the practice of the mandatory part of the IMO SMCP, reinforcing the trainees to play different roles in a realistic atmosphere and environment. It has been decided that most of the
scenarios and contents in SMCP can be flexibly designed or tailored and properly practiced in an integrated bridge simulation system based environment. The key task then is how to organize and implement the syllabus of maritime English teaching and learning via this effective learning by pedagogic methodology.

A multitude of new methodologies have been explored and discussed in recent years in an attempt to approach the training and testing the proficiency of maritime English that meets the international standards laid out in STCW. Among those trendy guidelines, utilizing integrated bridge simulation system in a bridge activities context is deemed as one of the most effective experiential learning and training methods, which will allow the trainees accustomed to a workplace environment to expand their practice little by little, so that they may communicate and pass messages with confidence when taking up their future jobs onboard.

In the light of many previous discussions in the aspect of using integrated bridge simulation system in maritime English practice, it can be concluded that affirmativeness in the possibilities is obvious. However, solutions in combining this technology with operational teaching and assessing maritime communications especially with coursework deign has not much been referred to. Using the integrated bridge simulation system can assist maritime English teaching, training and assessing. Collaborated operation of the system can be of benefit in facilitating communication and maritime English training and practice, as well as enhancing mutual understanding of the navigation customs and culture background among cadets and seafarers from different countries.

3 Apprentices inside a multinational crew

The multinational crews appear on the shipping market as a result of different economical reasons. First of all there is the necessity to reduce the costs with personnel, but also to keep the requested standards onboard.

In this way, owners change their crew resource option to work force markets from Asia and Eastern Europe mainly. At the beginning they take position onboard as O/S or A/B in the deck compartment and as motormen in the engine department, and latter on, owners start to accept them also as deck and engineer officers, even at the managerial level, as Master, Chief Officer and Chief Engineer.

Changing from a single nation crew to a multinational crew has not been avoided by problems and difficulties, mostly due to different concepts applied by the owners onboard related to multiculturalism and working relationships. An ideal solution will be to have seafarers’ from the same nationality in one department and if possible to provide the operational officers from the same nation. To satisfy the owner’s certitude that everything is alright onboard and his property is used in good condition, the ship management will be covered by the owner’s people, same nationality with the owner or very confident persons. In present, many companies apply this concept, even better, onboard ship the operational crew is covered by one nationality crew members and only the ship management is from a different one, in case of impossibility to be from the same nation.

Until 2004 Constanta Maritime University students’ practice has been developed onboard of scholar ship “Neptun”, but due to a lot of engine and hull problems this activity had to be suspended.

Afterwards, the solution found was to send our students in international voyages with different shipping companies, local or international, and for this action the local crewing agencies or owners offices have been contacted. This was only the first step to the present situation, when over half of our students cover their requested onboard training on ships of different owners, most of them, international shipping companies with a great rename on the world shipping market, as NYK Ship Management, Japan, Peter Dohle from Germany, Maersk, Denmark, CMA-CGM from France and many others, totally 22 shipping companies being part of the partnership.

Taking account of the present regulations regarding onboard training period as cadet, 12 months for deck cadet and 6 months for engineer cadets, our University took the decision to help and facilitate students’ onboard practice. In this way, in the present there are agreements signed between shipping companies’, their local representatives and the University, where there are stipulated the requested training objectives, onboard live and work condition and schedule for students and the level of theoretical knowledge necessary to be acquired by students before proceeding to onboard practice.

Adopting this solution, in time, the number of shipping companies’ interested to take cadets has increased and the number of students trained has increased also. Through this protocol, companies have the possibility to offer to our students scholarships during their study years and other facilitations in order to create their own group of future company’s officers. In the present there are
ship owners who select students, through tests and interviews, from the first study years and include them inside of future companies’ personnel development program, offering students monthly scholarships, opportunity to cover the necessary onboard cadets’ practice and the certainty at the end of their studies of a position inside the company.

For the future, we are interested to increase the number of partner shipping companies and also to extend the Erasmus programme in order to offer to more students the possibility to execute the necessary cadets period at the end of their study years and to make possible their participation to the officer certification exams after their graduation.

Starting from the present situation, when the world fleet is based on multinational and multicultural crews, and taking in consideration that our students execute their onboard training on ships of international owners, a group of lecturers from our University had the initiative to realize a study about the students apprehensions and considerations regarding the first voyage or voyages onboard ships with multinational crews. This initiative has raised after a number of bad feedbacks from students’ very disappointed by the first cadet voyage and who intended to give up to a maritime career after finishing their academic studies.

To do this study they adopted the questionnaire and direct discussions techniques, involving in this action students’ from different faculties, in connection with maritime carrier, just arrived home from a cadet voyage.

The questionnaire was based on a set of questions about the company where they made the voyage, crew structure by nationalities, social life and working activities onboard, type of relationships developed onboard with the others crew members, what nationalities and cultures they consider to be closer to their own culture, whether they have difficulties to socialize onboard, how much time do they consider necessary to achieve skills in order to understand other cultures and which are their opinions about the direction of their future maritime careers.

Analyzing the questionnaires answers we were able to open a free discussion with students and to try to find the motivations for different answers. During discussions most difficult was to make students to speak freely about their experience during onboard stage or stages and to pass over the fact that they were talking with a teacher.

The answers’ analyze allowed us to have a percentage view about students’ opinions and the results showed that they are more compatible with European countries seafarers’, they have more possibilities to develop social and work relations with them and they accept more easily orders and instructions from European officers and Masters. Part of them acknowledged that they interacted without problems with Asian seafarers also. Most difficult was to collaborate with superior officers or nominated onboard training officer when they were from an Asian culture. Some difficulties have been noted in relations with Eastern European officers, but these were produced due to different personal opinions, not professional.

A very important point found in almost all questionnaires studies was about difficulties in communication with other crew members, partly because of poor English language knowledge, partly because the English was talked with native language spelling influence and many words were difficult to be understood. Starting from the language problems, a number of students avoided to socialize with some of the crew members and maintained a strictly professional relationship.

The period considered as minimum necessary to accommodate and start to interact with other nationalities crew members onboard has varied from one week to one month, more accessible on ships with a strong cadet training programme developed. Longer has been considered the accommodation period to daily duties and to the training schedule, some students’ taking the giving up decision due to their forbearance about the possibility to reach the conditions requested for duty onboard.

For many students it was difficult to express an opinion or a point of view about cultural similarities or differences with other nationalities because they didn’t have enough knowledge about these matters, but they talked about what they felt in relation with other nationality crew members considered to be cultural correspondences or differences. They found many common aspects with persons from all over the world, especially about the free time spending or passions for sport activities and events, about musical preferences and in many cases these represented the starting point in a future personal and friendly relationship. Differences were based, as expected, on religious problems or native social life characteristics, most of them in relation with Asian or African seafarers met onboard.

As a general opinion, problems arise from the nationality and cultural differences considered possible to be overcome if there is an interest to develop a long and nice career in the maritime industry, especially onboard ships. An interesting opinion was obtained from the questioned students, who considered that problems and misunderstandings can appear every time and in
every working environment. They acknowledge that onboard environment is a particular one, with restrictions imposed by the space and activity characteristics, but the attraction for this job, not an easy one, but with many satisfactions, can lead to a personal approach more open to understanding and acceptance of the other nationality cultures and particularities.

On the other way, students’ who express their option to give up to an onboard career, want to perform in a relative activity field, where they have the possibility to put in practice the knowledge acquired during the study years.

4 Conclusion

Nowadays most maritime education and training institutes have installed integrated bridge simulation systems, based on which maritime teaching and training have been designed and experimented. In response to these changes, course and syllabus design and organization as well as instruction and evaluation have thus undergone reforms since the attention of simulator training has been particularly drawn to.

Physically within language skills targeted integrated bridge simulation system training, all means of lingual communication devices employed in real ship operation should be properly fixed to simulate navigational and safety communications from ship to shore and vice versa, from ship to ship, as well as onboard ship. These should include radiotelephone, loudspeaker, satellite, etc., which are used for communications with parties outside the ship, and engine order telegraph, voice tube, loud speaker, public announcement system, telephone, walkie-talkie, etc. that contribute to ship’s onboard communications.

Maritime English course design and organization is critically important throughout the whole training program. It ought to take into account the emphasis IMO guidelines on ship management lays in the need for good communication. The major concepts and skills with this aspect are: Understanding culture differences; Situational awareness; Close loop communication; Briefing and Debriefing; and Communication procedures. Effective communications are an essential ingredient to safe and efficient ship operations.

Communication can be achieved in many ways but the main method for operational communications is through speech. And when in an operational situation such as berthing a ship or fighting a fire, it is vitally important that those involved can communicate effectively.

The international community has chosen the English language as the medium for that communication and IMO has developed a standard vocabulary and the training tools to deliver it. This is the main reason why teachers of maritime English instil in young maritime students the appropriate skills and knowledge to ensure that failures of communication are no longer cited as a contributory cause of maritime accidents.

References: