

MARITIME COMMUNICATIONS

Talking our way to safer shipping

Communication problems are often blamed for accidents at sea. Maritime English experts **Dr Martin Ziarati** and **Alison Noble** argue that the shipping industry should follow aviation's lead in assessing English competency as part of a vessel's safety audit procedures...



The SeaTALK project is part of a drive to develop effective global standards for the use of Maritime English in shipboard communications. Picture: Danny Cornelissen



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According to the International Maritime Organisation, there are 85,000 working vessels (of 100gt and above) on the world's seas. The shipping industry is a key component of the global economy, carrying nearly 90% of world trade — and, as such, demands high standards of safety and security. Not surprisingly, accidents and incidents occur.

On average, two ships are lost every week, and it is well documented that more than 80% of accidents are put down to 'human error' (IMO, 2012, Horner, 2014). Of this 80%, a remarkable 30% are caused by linguistic and/or communication mistakes (Ziarati, 2006, Trenkner, 2010).

In 1995, in an attempt to improve safety at sea, the IMO officially adopted English as the working language onboard, and over the last few decades the specific competency of 'Maritime English' has developed to the point that the Standards of Training Certification & Watchkeeping Convention now requires seafarers to be able to communicate 'effectively' in (Maritime) English.

The IMO provides guidance on the teaching of Maritime English through its Model Course 3.17. Recently, the International Maritime Lecturers' Association (IMLA) completed a revision and update of the model course to the latest industry and regulatory standards.

However, despite the efforts to raise Maritime English standards, accidents, often caused solely or partly by communication failure, still take place — generating a threat to life, property and reputation. This could be prevented through global recognition of the need for a standard approach and assessment framework for Maritime English.

MET institutions have embraced the need for improvement in the teaching and assessment of Maritime English and, working with other parties, have put time and effort into developing tools and solutions to enhance both methods and results. EU projects such as MarTEL, MarTEL Plus, UniMET and SeaTALK — the most recent enterprise — are evidence of their efforts.

The SeaTALK project (www.seatalk.pro) is the latest initiative of the Marifuture Platform (www.marifuture.org) and aims to establish a standard approach to teaching and learning Maritime English through the creation of standard curriculum content, learning outcomes, assessment methods, scoring and credit systems — all delivered through an innovative online platform.

For ease of reference, both language criteria and assessment descriptors are linked to the CEFR (Common European Framework of Reference for Languages). Moreover, SeaTALK is based on the EQF (European Qualification Framework) which allows for the mutual recognition of competences acquired through the establishment of a reference framework, uniform for all participating countries.

SeaTALK also incorporates the ECVET (European Credit System for Vocational Educational Training) model, with the aim of facilitating seafarer mobility. ECVET is strongly based on learning outcomes and competences acquired via alternative learning methods.

With funding from the European Commission's Lifelong Learning Programme and support from universities, colleges and businesses across Europe, the SeaTALK project aims to involve the rest of the

global Maritime English community in creating the largest existing database for Maritime English resources.

Maritime English lecturers and maritime professionals can use the database to access the learning materials. The SeaTALK partners welcome support from Maritime English teachers around the world who would like to contribute their own materials (for more information, visit www.seatalk.pro).

By extending the work of previous projects (MarTEL, MarTEL Plus, UniMET, SOS) it is hoped that this framework offering standardised curriculums, content and assessment standards for Maritime English will be the first step in setting global standards and will lead to safer seas for all.

Despite such innovative work and recent developments, the maritime industry still lags behind other sectors, such as aviation, which require training and assessment in English for Specific Purposes (ESP). The International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) was established in 1947, and since 2008 it has required trainee pilots in member states (native and non-native English speakers) to obtain a qualification in Aviation English before they can become an aircraft pilot. To help member states implement ICAO standard practices and ensure quality, in 1999 ICAO established the Universal Oversight Audit Programme, which allows ICAO to carry out regular, mandatory, systematic and harmonised safety audits (www.icao.int).

The IMO, as the global governing body of the maritime industry, has no equivalent authority or body. Although regional equivalents such as the European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA) play a part, it is primarily left to individual countries and institutions to deliver their own Maritime English training and assessment as long as they meet the IMO minimum standard of 'adequate' communication.

This lack of an international standard, and lack of the authority and ability to enforce such a standard, explains the widespread variation in seafarer training and competencies that constitutes the root cause of communication failures and leads to fatal accidents.

With projects such as SeaTALK, the community is taking steps to set standards in Maritime English, yet there are still variations between regions such as Europe, America, Asia and Africa. Until the global community forms a consensus, differences in ability will continue to pose a threat to safety onboard.

By providing the framework for standards of training and assessment, SeaTALK hopes to prompt maritime bodies to enforce such standards with the aim of guaranteeing the quality of communication at sea, thus enhancing safety. If you wish to learn more, or contribute to SeaTALK, visit www.seatalk.pro



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