

MARITIME ENGLISH

Speaking in tongues

Professor Boris Pritchard of the University of Rijeka investigates the place of Maritime English in the training of seafarers, and discusses how greater international standardisation can be achieved



Professor Boris Pritchard

It is a fact sometimes lamented in the seafaring community that there is no uniform system of maritime education and training (MET) around the world.

Academic research projects conducted between 1992 and 2005 (CAMET, EASTMET, METHAR, MET-NET, GLOMET) reveal variations, to a greater or lesser extent, along a number of lines:

- ▀ programmes of study at MET institutions (navigation and marine engineering curricula)
- ▀ syllabus contents
- ▀ types of MET institutions and their facilities
- ▀ qualifications of lecturers employed in national MET institutions
- ▀ national MET systems vs national educational system

Most of these factors have an important impact on designing the learning outcomes expected of a student in terms of competency in Maritime English and on the quality of the final 'product': a qualified/licensed ship officer with a competency in (Maritime) English that meets not only the minimum STCW requirements for a respective level but also the expectations of their future employers — shipping companies.

Although the systems of MET in the world today vary a great deal, one can talk about three prevailing types:

- ▀ maritime education and training starting at the level of secondary education (trainees aged 14/15), conducted at secondary (vocational) maritime training schools, followed by higher education programmes leading to a BSc degree — so far the prevailing MET system in the world
- ▀ maritime education and training starting only at post-secondary or higher educational level (aged 18/19), through either vocational training or academic programmes. It is provided invariably by maritime academies, colleges and universities and is on the increase in Scandinavia, US, UK etc.
- ▀ maritime education and training involving periods of school training interchanged with periods of sea service ('sandwich system') — traditionally practised in UK

It must be noted that all these systems may lead to the highest STCW certificates. In many countries the three systems often coexist, and this situation may be therefore considered as a fourth — 'mixed' — system of MET.

This typology of MET systems has an important bearing on the design and teaching of Maritime English courses, especially in respect of the ratio between Maritime English as a sub-set of English for Special Purposes (ESP) on the one hand and English for general purposes (EGP) on the other. Thus a student enrolling in maritime studies at the age of 18 or 19, say in northern Europe, will need less instruction in EGP, and focus instead on 'technical' English — ie, Maritime English proper — required for acquiring BSc degrees in nautical studies or marine engineering, and the respective officer certificates of competence.

Consequently, the students starting their MET career at the age of 14 will need a more balanced proportion of EGP and ESP/Maritime English throughout their training. Studies presented at International Maritime English Conferences have also shown that the learning process and exposure to Maritime English — eg, in terms of number of contact hours per week/term — vary according to the similarity to, or difference between, English and the students'



Today's ships' officers need to be highly competent communicators. Picture: Danny Cornelissen

respective mother tongues.

It is clear that a competent modern ship's officer needs to be (a) an expert in his/her own field of study (nautical studies or marine engineering), (b) an information technology (IT) expert, (c) a competent communicator, (d) a culturally-aware maritime expert and manager, and (e) a person of integrity. His/her command of both general and Maritime English is vital to all these five qualities.

STCW requirements for Maritime English may be used as a standard, minimum safety framework but these are insufficient to meet the needs and expectations of the three main stakeholders in maritime education and training: the shipping industry, the maritime administration, and the MET system.

Though clear and pinpointed in places, the STCW requirements are vague and insufficiently comprehensive as far as knowledge and competences (skills) for the three levels of certification are concerned.

Fortunately, recent developments in the IMO seem to have taken into consideration views and suggestions made by international Maritime English associations and forums (IMEC, IAMU WG, etc). This will hopefully result in the adoption of certain amendments concerning Maritime English to the existing IMO STCW 1995 Convention at the June 2010 STCW conference in Manila.

Therefore, as far as competence in Maritime English is concerned, the shipping industry today needs high quality deck/engineer officers, who go well beyond the basic STCW standards and who are competitive on the ship officer market. This is primarily required of holders of chief officer, master and chief engineer certificates, and is especially true in respect of growing changes in ship design, modern propul-

sion systems, marine equipment technology, complexity of cargo operations, challenging environmental issues, team management, safety-related and corporate/business communications. Good Maritime English is also crucial for communication among multilingual, multicultural and multireligious crews.

To this end the learning outcomes for Maritime English courses (either BSc degree or certificate-oriented) will have to cope with two major challenges:

- ▀ harmonisation of study programmes and syllabuses
- ▀ mobility of programmes of study, students/trainees and teachers

Beside mandatory STCW requirements, harmonisation of study programmes (curricula) and syllabuses is the basic prerequisite for mobility of qualified officers and ratings. In practical terms this means that, for example, a student may decide to start his MET training in Sweden, continue the studies in Spain and end them in Bulgaria, and that his BSc degree or HND/HNC will be equally acceptable throughout Europe or beyond. This also implies that all the Maritime English syllabuses include active use of IMO SMCP, use of English in ship handling operations, and a number of STCW-related topics for the appropriate level.

However, the analysis of MET programmes of study and their respective syllabuses shows considerable differences among European and other MET institutions, which makes mobility difficult though not impossible to implement.

The same holds for Maritime English courses.

There is no uniformity in the number of (Maritime) English courses and the number of classes assigned for each course within the average three-year BSc degree programmes of study across Europe. This also holds for the respective Maritime English syllabuses. For example, some MET institutions take up the subject of maritime communications involving the application of IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP) throughout the two or three-year course, while in other training establishments this important part of the tuition is covered by short intensive courses, either within the larger framework of Maritime English or as a special independent course.

Another example is the choice of course materials and other resources. Today we have a wide choice of high quality Maritime English course materials produced by Maritime English teachers worldwide and by specialised commercial companies.

These teaching materials apply the most recent achievements in the approach and language-teaching methodology (content-based learning, student-centred communicative approach, competence-oriented courses). They are often accompanied by attractive multimedia CD-ROMs, make intensive use of computer-based training (especially in testing), and are increasingly offered online. This imposes the difficult task on the Maritime English teacher/instructor of selecting the ones that best suit the purpose of the course and combine such resources with her/his own teaching materials, students' learning styles etc. The instructor also has to conduct a careful needs analysis with the end-user (shipping companies and trainees) before embarking on a new course or updating existing Maritime English courses.

A lot has been done in improving the degree of harmonisation but the hindrances to educational mobility are still numerous. However, the maritime industry rightfully expects MET institutions, maritime administrations and the respective educational authorities, at least within the EU, to continue to work together and make mobility feasible to the benefit of shipping, as has already been the case in other spheres of education and training.

One place that lends itself to discussing and finding ways to harmonise the Maritime English syllabuses, teaching materials and meeting the real needs of the industry, especially in view of the current world economic crisis, is the International Maritime English Conference (IMEC). Through its annual conferences, website contributions and other activities this world association of Maritime English teachers/instructors offers the best opportunity to analyse the achievements and plan future actions to ensure continuous adaptation of Maritime English courses to the needs of the shipping industry and maritime administrations, and thus to accomplish the three main goals of any maritime education and training system: safer seas, cleaner oceans and the efficient running of maritime transport business.

▀ The next International Maritime English Conference will be held on 28 October-1 November 2010 at the Arab Academy for Science, Technology and Maritime Transport in Alexandria, Egypt.

▀ More information can be found at www.imla-imec.com — along with the research papers discussed at last year's conference at Szczecin Maritime University.