

Speaking up for seafarers

Discrepancies between classroom theory and shipboard practice are undermining attempts to smooth out communication problems between multinational crews, warns Maritime English lecturer **PETER VAN KLUIJVEN** in this special article...

For more than 30 years I have been a lecturer of maritime English and communication. I must have trained thousands of students, and every once in a while I get totally frustrated and fed up! Not with the youngsters themselves, or with my work as such, but with the reaction so often heard when apprentices have returned from their training onboard.

Last month, as so often before, a student of mine returned from his training period with a major shipping company, and to my questions 'How was it?' and 'Have you learned a lot?' the reply was: 'Yes, I learned how things are in real practice, and to be quite honest, that is not always related to what you have taught us'.

This, of course, is shocking to hear, although one gets used to it.

All my lessons are directly related to shipboard practice, emphasising (hammering!) good seamanship, safety, standardisation, etc. It is widely known that of all maritime mishaps, accidents and disasters, some 93% are directly related to the human element — of which around 40% are related to communication. So you can be assured that my students enter their apprenticeships and professional lives with ample and appropriate knowledge on communication.

The problem is that we, the maritime lecturers, have so far been unable to really convince professional seafarers (especially deck officers) that applying the proper procedures, standards and structures 'invented' by the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) and International Telecommunication Union (ITU) will contribute to safer seafaring.

I know that in the initial stage of a career at sea, right after graduation, seafarers have all the good intentions to act according to the competences and proactive attitude that have been taught and learned. However, the moment they notice that some 'old salts' onboard have abandoned these principles and (very often) do as they please, they, too, will forget about what was learned, and continue in the easy and basic ways of doing things.

Mind you, I do not condemn the way the experienced bridge officer or engineer behaves onboard their vessel, and I am aware that there is a difference

between practice and theory, or rather between the conduct desired by shipboard colleagues and the conduct acquired by book learning.

What is worrying here is that there has always been a distinct discrepancy between land and sea in the industry. In spite of numerous efforts to bring these two worlds together — be it by means of practical shipboard training for lecturers, or by keeping seafarers up to date via refresher courses — it is and has always been a hard nut to crack.

Now, as to communication, the first thing the young apprentices usually notice during their training onboard, is the VTS communication, which is very often not according to standard procedure (to say the least).

We hear of VTS stations using their own national language on Channel 16, instead of English. There are people not addressing and identifying in VHF communication. Not using the word 'over'. French, Italian and South American stations not using SMCP. This all will inevitably invite new seafarers to immediately forget about standard — even mandatory — radio procedures.

The same goes for the proper use of intraship communication on the bridge — even by pilots. Big problem! Helm orders given wrongly, wrong procedures when handing over a watch, using hand signals during shipboard operations, etc. One of my students told me that turning both hands clockwise means 'Let go anchor', while anti-clockwise means 'Heave!'. A big problem indeed!

There should, of course, be a clear relationship between the theoretical and practical sides of seafaring. However, there are many factors that will disturb this relationship. Here culture clashes often play an important role. And again, communication (or rather mis-communication, or even lack of communication) is a frequent cause of improper shipboard conduct.

Also, factors such as shipboard organisation, knowledge and availability of procedures and regulations, and error-enforcing circumstances play a part. There may be incompatible goals, very often set by authorities and 'the office'. And worst of all: the crew's negligence. All these factors may invite seafarers to abandon their

usual proper shipboard conduct, also referred to as 'good seamanship', thus jeopardising the world around them and, what's more, setting bad examples to the newly-recruited trainees.

On the other hand, the maritime lecturer who refuses to accept developments and novelties, who persists in his or her own outdated views, who has lost the resilience to understand the young, or who has to use obsolete books and materials because his institute can't or is unwilling to provide the necessary means, is even a bigger threat to the application of good seamanship onboard vessels.

So, as always, the solution to the problem of discrepancies between classroom-theory and shipboard-practice must come from all parties concerned — in this case from the experienced seafarers and instructors.

We hope that through the publication in The Telegraph of articles related to this problem the two worlds will get closer together, and will exchange ideas on how to improve the relationship between practice and theory.

What do you think? Have you found that experienced seafarers are discouraging trainees from applying the practices they have learnt in college — particularly when it comes to shipboard communication? Write to the Telegraph and join in the debate. Our contact details are on page 17.

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Word of mouth: maritime language lecturer Peter van Kluijven

“I learned how things are in real practice, and to be quite honest, that is not always related to what you have taught us” Rotterdam cadet

Communications gap?

All around the world, new recruits to seafaring are learning English in maritime academies so they can communicate in the 'language of the sea'. Their lecturers meet annually at the International Maritime English Conference (IMEC) to share experiences and exchange ideas.

Although many of the IMEC presentations focus on language-teaching methodology, delegates have become increasingly concerned about the barriers to communication — and therefore the safety risks — presented by cultural differences onboard ship. Indeed, the theme of this year's conference, in Szczecin, Poland, was 'Maritime English: Improving Communication and Cultural Awareness'.

As one presentation pointed out: 'It is sometimes the simple mistakes we make, like showing the soles of our shoes or giving thumbs up, when dealing with different

cultures that can ruin a relationship or months of hard work. Learning the simple cultural dos and don'ts can avoid this and help generate respect and understanding.'

Of course, human beings being what we are, there are many in the industry who give short shrift to the lecturers' well-meaning efforts to promote inter-cultural understanding. But even if you think this is 'politically correct nonsense', would you go as far as encouraging new recruits to ignore international communication standards?

As he explains left, IMEC steering group member Peter van Kluijven feels that experienced seafarers are jeopardising safety by teaching trainees that procedural tools such as the IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases exist only on idealised vessels imagined by academics.

Is he right? Let us know.



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