



Time to engineer new standards

English language requirements for marine engineers need reviewing, argues University of Rijeka lecturer **Sandra Tominac**

Approximately a decade ago two of my senior colleagues teaching maritime English at the Faculty of Maritime Studies in Rijeka, Croatia, assembled an interesting and thought-provoking report concerning the importance of communication in marine engineering. What struck me the most about it was some of the witness statements on the actual English language competence of a significant number of marine engineers in practice, which unfortunately sound very similar to the complaints I often hear from marine engineers today. Statements were obtained from former students and seafarers and clearly pointed to the gap between international language requirements and the actual situation at sea. Following are several of them, all referring to situations where communication was frustrated due to an individual's lack of English language competence:

"Whenever we plan to go to a dry dock and have to prepare a specification, I ask my management for a relieve, quoting to have ulcer problems. In fact I have serious problems with my English."

"All of us speak some English. The real problem is writing. Everything is so evident on a piece

of paper. Your Technical Department immediately sees how capable you are."

"Engineers onboard many ships have some old papers that they jealously hide from other engineers. I noticed it on several occasions and asked one of my chiefs to show them to me. He told me I might have a look at them, but not to copy any of them. Those were the reports and some remarks written by an obviously more capable chief. They must have been extremely valuable to him."

It is clear that, irrespective of the international and national requirements stating that engineers have to possess English language knowledge in order to perform their duties safely and satisfactorily, everyday practice has been quite different for some time now. So why is this the case?

The responsibility for the overall safety of the ship and protection of the environment is normally shared by engineering and deck officers. However, somehow deck officers have always been considered a more crucial part of the ship's crew, while the engineers have come to the foreground only in cases of engine breakdowns or machinery troubles and failures.

A safe and productive voyage is a goal of every seafarer and operator. In it, the communication proficiency of watchstanding officers, both on deck and in the engine room, plays an important role. However, most maritime English syllabi focus on deck officers, whose English proficiency is addressed by the STCW Convention, a collection of Sea-speak manuals, Standard Marine Communication Phrases and a number of books commonly used in Maritime English training.

“All of us have some English. The real problem is writing”

Marine engineering student, University of Rijeka, Croatia

On the other hand, engineers, apart from a few rather general requirements set out in the STCW Convention, have no internationally accepted teaching standards for developing communication skills. IMO language competence requirements (table A-III/1



Communication in the engineroom is just as important as on the bridge Picture: Debbie Smith

of the STCW Code) suggest that engineers should know how to read and write in English so that they may use engineering publications and perform their duties and clearly understand and correctly interpret all technical information. However, this is rather general and not enough to establish the actual level of English required of an engineer to carry out his duty safely and satisfactorily, and consequently one is forced to take a deductive approach.

Thus, by investigating which engineers' duties require some communicative competence and studying parts of well organised company standing orders, one quickly realises that there are considerably more jobs that require written than oral communication. In fact, whatever happens in the engine room has to be recorded and reported in writing and only a few routine duties are associated with oral communication. This must surely be taken into account when (re)defining

standards of English language competence for marine engineers more precisely and when creating appropriate language training materials.

Finally, if standards of English language competence for marine engineers were precisely established and strictly implemented, the overall shipping community would benefit, shipowners would decrease operating costs and engineers themselves would gain greater personal and professional satisfaction.



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