**MARITIME ENGLISH**

**VALUING A COMMON LANGUAGE**

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Valerie has taught General, Technical and Specialist English to non-English speaking trainees for over 28 years and was awarded a Bachelor of Arts degree from Victoria University of Wellington, in 1978. While living in Singapore, Valerie taught at The British Council's English Language Centre for nine years, which included training English teachers from Singapore's Ministry of Education. Awarded a British Council scholarship, she gained a Master of Arts degree in 1990 from Reading University, UK, the thesis focussing on Teaching English as a Foreign Language.

Married to maritime educator Rod Short, Val received her maritime education through an osmotic process, learning about the oceans, ships and the international shipping industry while living in New Zealand, England, Singapore and Australia, where she was responsible for introducing and teaching Maritime English for overseas trainees at the Australian Maritime College, Launceston, Tasmania in 1991. Rod was then Principal of the AMC.

Valerie developed an understanding of the needs of English teachers in MET centres required to teach Maritime English and from 1992, training programs were developed in the Asia Pacific region. From 1996, when the Association of Maritime Education & Training Institutions in the Asia Pacific (AMETIAP) was formed, AustralAsian Maritime Education Services Ltd., became a Member. This enabled training programs to be provided for MET institutions in Vladivostok, Manila, Dalian, Shanghai, Qingdao and Hong Kong. From 2002 - 2004, Stages I, II and III training at more advanced levels was presented in Vladivostok, Manila and Tokyo.

A pioneer in the Asia Pacific region in providing this training, Valerie was also appointed to the Roster of Consultants at the International Maritime Organisation (IMO), in 1999.

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Introduction
The purpose of this Briefing paper is to explain the value of a common language for communication at sea. The variable teaching standards of Maritime English are described with explanations about why these variations can have a negative influence on the lives of seafarers aboard the thousands of merchant ships in today’s international shipping industry.

The Briefing examines the need for the provision of more specific teaching standards through the regulatory framework, for improved teaching standards at maritime training colleges and at the level of shipping companies and ship manning agencies.

Finally, an urgent plea is made to teachers, managers and seafarers to work together to raise standards in line with the requirements for watchkeepers in the relevant section on communication in English stated in the Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping (STCW 95). These provisions are discussed in detail at Section 2c dealing with the regulatory framework.

1. The case for a common maritime language
People living ashore, non-mariners and even professionals working in government authorities and other business environments are often surprised to learn that thousands of crew on board today's merchant ships receive intensive training in Maritime English communication before going to sea. While it may be understood that seafarers from non-English speaking countries need to learn 'English', the question often posed is ‘but why Maritime English’?

A simple analogy can be made with the airline industry where aircraft are flown all over the world and pilots need to communicate with ground control at airports, various way points, receive air traffic and weather information and relay special requests for passenger services. None of this would be possible using different languages and English is the designated communication medium.

Yet ships were crewed by seafarers from many different cultures long before the airline industry began and, when interacting with ‘those who go down to the sea in ships’, it can be easily understood that a common language is absolutely vital between crew on the same ship.

Common seafaring idiom persists among English speaking seafarers, the origins of which can be traced to historical usage, eg 'port', ‘starboard’, ‘bow’, ‘stem’, ‘foc' (the forecastle being exactly that in the 1500's/1600's), ‘bosun’ (boatswain - the man in charge of boats, possibly ferrying personnel to and from the shore), ‘gunwale/gunn’l’ (or the ship's wall from which the heavy guns protruded), being just a few examples. Trainees need to learn such terms early in their training to obviate confusion when attending technical classes conducted in English or going to sea for the first time into an English speaking environment.

Today, the common language requirement extends to communication between vessels encountered at sea, with head office and shoreside authorities such as vessel traffic services, cargo, customs and other port personnel, including pilots and tugboat skippers. During emergency situations, VHF communications will be necessary between search and rescue personnel, possibly including ship to aircraft interchanges and those charged with this interaction need to ensure communication is as precise, simple and unambiguous as possible to avoid confusion or errors in safety procedures.

There are well documented incidents where communication breakdowns have led to loss of life after a vessel has been overwhelmed by the ocean, by fire or other catastrophe, necessitating an 'abandon ship' procedure; where passengers are involved, the statement that “people panic in their own language” is well known, illustrating the impossible situation of evacuating safely if no common means of communication has been established which might help to address a panicked, chaotic environment.

The need for effective communication at sea

a) Onboard communication
During trainees’ early training at shore based establishments, it is important to raise awareness that English, as the designated medium of communication at sea, improves communicative ability with other crew members, facilitates social harmony and consolidates teamwork on board, which, in emergency situations, can be vital to the safety of everyone. With the world's shipping increasingly crewed by seafarers from non-English speaking cultures, this is particularly relevant since each cultural group may be speaking its own first language, while using English communication only when needed during shipboard operations.

To function efficiently during routine shipboard operations, all crew need to know the exact terminology of the vessel's equipment, its usage and safe handling. A well organised training system will ensure the Maritime English syllabus is carefully planned and coordinated with the technical subjects, preparing trainees to learn authentic ‘Maritime English' in context. Ideally, teachers of Maritime English liaise with technical instructors to provide dual instruction known as ‘twinning', so educating English teachers and supporting instructors.

Clear and concise oral communication in English remains a vital necessity and those crewing large cruise vessels and ferries need to communicate effectively with passengers, many of whom could be speaking a variety of languages and who have little or no concept of how to observe safety regulations on a seagoing vessel. This highlights the necessity for crew to attain a fairly advanced level of fluency in English, to receive clear instructions to carry out normal routines and to interact with differing nationalities, especially in emergencies.

Not only do crew members need to know and understand specialised vocabulary for the safe operation of the vessel, training in handling various
types of electrical equipment and cargo computers is vital, including the all important engines and machinery in the engine room. Here a problem has been highlighted in that operational and maintenance manuals may be in the languages of the original manufacturers i.e. German, Japanese, Norwegian etc. This situation is gradually being addressed yet, even if manuals are provided in English, (the presumed ‘common’ language on board), if the crew are multi-national, translation may be necessary by an English speaker who might not be an electrical engineer or computer expert.

A similar situation arises, for example, with the IMO Convention on preventing marine pollution (MARPOL 73/78), which specifies the many instances where it is expressly forbidden to cause pollution by the discharge of oily wastes into the sea, or to dump plastic and other non-biodegradable material while the vessel remains at sea. Copies of this regulation may not be readily accessible to all crew members and it is unlikely that this printed material would be provided in all the languages necessary within a crew coming from a variety of non-English speaking cultures. Therefore it is necessary for crew to be well trained and to understand the important conventions before joining a ship, or at least be able to understand instructions in English regarding the necessity to observe the Convention’s requirements.

b) Watchkeepers
As already mentioned briefly, watchkeepers on the ship’s bridge often need to communicate by VHF radio, with other ships, shore authorities such as Vessel Traffic Services, Port State Control and Security inspectors, pilots and vessels servicing the ship, such as tugs and bunkering craft. In these circumstances and as required by international regulations governing communication, English is expected to be the medium of communication. It is important that this communication is clear and concise, repetition often being required to overcome the high levels of sound within the ship, radio interference, external wind and sea noise, or lack of understanding by non-English speaking shore authorities or crews of other vessels.

These contrasting situations illustrate the so-called ‘human factor’ which has been identified in recent years, particularly when the causes of marine casualties were analysed. There are well documented cases where either poor or no-communication during an emergency situation at sea has contributed either to loss of life or even to loss of the vessel itself. A well known example here is the panic of both passengers and crew during the disastrous fire on board the ferry ‘Scandinavian Star’ some years ago, when so many nationalities could not communicate with each other, contributing to the high loss of life.

Such communication problems are unacceptable when it should be possible to tighten the control of crew placement to ensure each crew member has at least a basic grasp of Maritime English communication and particularly that all officers possess the level of English communication required by STCW 95. The introduction of the International Safety Management Code, (ISM) was also intended to ensure a ‘common language’ was established at the outset of every voyage and, where there is a multi-national crew, English (of the Maritime variety) would be the common medium of communication.

These factors of ship to shore communication were experienced in 1995 when it was possible to organise a visit to the Vessel Traffic Services Control Centre in Hong Kong’s Marine department for a group of trainees from The Hong Kong Polytechnic University’s Department of Maritime Studies.

To impress on the trainees the many problems encountered at sea with communication between ships of many nationalities, using ship-to-shore VHF communication, they listened to the VTS controllers - and saw the ships on radar being guided in and out of Hong Kong harbour. It was most interesting to observe the reactions of the trainees as they understood the difficulties of ship’s personnel with very poor English, or none at all, as well as the problems of the VTS controllers. Many times the phrase could be heard : “Your message not understood, repeat please”. “Change to channel .... and repeat your message please”.

c) Evidence of communication problems at sea
It could have been expected that IMO’s Maritime Safety Committee, comprising representatives from many countries and economies, having agreed that English should be the common language on board ships with multi-national crews, appropriate directives would have been communicated to all relevant personnel; particularly to maritime training centres where advice was needed for those charged with teaching Maritime English to trainee seafarers, yet the reality has been very different.

The need for this recognition was urgent, as evidence mounted of communication failures during ship casualties. Problems with communication at sea had been recognised for many years; for example, five years before the SMCP was published in 1997, it was stated in the Report of the Inquiry into Ship Safety (“Ships of Shame”) published in December 1992, and presented to the Australian House of Representatives Standing Committee on Transport, Communications and Infrastructure, that:

The Committee was advised of cases where officers and ratings were unable to communicate because they did not share a common language (para.3.29, 3.30).” Report “Ships of Shame” page 88 (para 6.30).

In the Sequel to this Report published three years later in 1995, it is stated on page 6: “In its initial inquiry the committee was repeatedly told of severe language problems on board some ships. There are ships where there is no common language
between crew members; and ships which have difficulty communicating with pilots and tugs". Review Inquiry 1995: page 397.

and on page 7:

“The committee was told of multi racial crews, ships with as many as nine different cultures aboard; of sign language being used as the principal means of communication and ships with operational manuals in a language not understood on board” Review inquiry 1995: pages 391-399.

The Committee commented:

“The committee heard that the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA) assesses the ability of crews to communicate essential information by drills and observation. Its task is made more difficult unless there is a common use of English on board.

“The Safety of Life at Sea Convention (SOLAS) is to be amended to require ships to have essential information available in a common language. Whilst safety issues will be addressed by these amendments, welfare issues, such as the need to communicate on matters of health and well-being will remain a problem.” Review inquiry 1995: page 6.

The Committee recommended:


Such a recommendation is to be welcomed, however, it is almost impossible to ensure all maritime training centres, worldwide, incorporate Maritime English into their curricula to the standard necessary to ensure effective communication on board ships at sea and in ports.

d) Examples of non-communication at sea : 2006

It would be satisfying to be able to assure readers that the entire situation is now well under control with multinational crews all well trained and properly assessed for the minimum English standards required before placement on board all ships.

Sadly, this is not the case as reflected in a report on 22 March 2006 from the Indian Master of the mv Searose G, Captain Youvraj Kapoor, which describes communication difficulties with other vessels during his dramatic rescue of some of the crew from the mv Teklivka in the eastern Mediterranean. The rough seas and ‘heavy weather’ conditions hampered the search and rescue operation and the long report is very detailed in its description of finding the position of the distressed vessel which sank, leaving 15 crew members adrift in life-rafts. This report can be read in all its graphic detail at: <MerchantNavy@yahoo groups.com>.

The report describes how a container ship, mv Hyundai 205, also became involved, managing to rescue three crew members, though from which liferaft was not clear; the mv Searose G eventually arrived at the scene and hauled 10 survivors from their liferaft, covered in fuel oil and suffering from hypothermia. Communication with other ships involved wasn’t always clear due to language difficulties, the strong winds and noisy seas. When, after many hours, Captain Kapoor arrived off Port Said, he expected the survivors would be taken from his ship by an Egyptian naval cutter however, this also proved difficult owing to the inability of the Egyptian crew to communicate in English.

Captain Kapoor is very honest in his appreciation of the professional assistance he received from Sea Management, London and full of praise also for his own officers and crew for their sustained effort and courage throughout the rescue in such demanding storm conditions.

Another report on 20 June 06 concerns mv Hawk Limassol carrying bulk cement and with a draught of ‘about ten metres, which ran into trouble in Lagos owing to low water which prevented her being berthed safely. The report describes several communication confusions, amongst which the inability of the ship’s captain to speak English was a major problem. The full report can be read at <captsekh@yahoo.com>

e) The social value of a common language on board

Where there can be a mixture of nationalities within a crew of say, 15 - 25 people on a bulk carrier, container vessel, oil tanker or gas carrier, harmony is of the utmost importance when the ship may be at sea for several weeks between ports. Language barriers can prevent normal social interaction on board, causing some crew to become isolated and unhappy.

An illuminating and important report on this situation was published in 2001 by the Seafarers’ International Research Centre (SIRC) in Cardiff, United Kingdom. Titled ‘Transnational Seafarer Communities’, the report describes research carried out over a 3-year period, from 1999 on board 14 different ships, mostly crewed by multi-national seafarers.

The data and findings cover many aspects of the crews’ lives, with comprehensive discussion regarding communication difficulties and the effects caused by this during onboard operations. Taped interviews were held with 242 seafarers on board the vessels, plus crewing managers in 10 companies and 141 seafarers in North Germany and Holland, while seafarers’ families in India and the Philippines, 131 in all, were also interviewed.

For anyone interested in the social and welfare effects of multi-national crewing, this Report is a vital insight, with the section on communication, covering pages 13-16, being introduced as follows:

“In the context of declining crewing levels the effect of social isolation, and the importance of ENGLISH in minimising such isolation amongst mixed nationality crews, increasingly requires attention.”
“On many of the vessels included in the research, the stated common working language (English) was a second language for everyone on board.”

- see following table:

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<tr>
<th>Ship</th>
<th>Nationalities</th>
<th>‘native’ speakers</th>
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<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>7/36</td>
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<td>3</td>
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<td>14/37</td>
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This in-depth Report continues stating that:

“Seafarers frequently suggested that communication difficulties were the only, or the main, drawback of mixed nationality crews. One seafarer expressed a fairly typical view when he described how the benefits of working with other nationalities related to exposure to other cultures but the negative side related to communication difficulties” ....

“Sometimes miscommunication caused problems when working together and undertaking job-related tasks. Whether classified as merely irritating or actually hazardous, such problems tended to be exacerbated by the unwillingness of individuals to admit to their difficulty in understanding or communicating.”

A discussion follows about the ‘working culture’ of most ships where senior officers exercise a considerable amount of power over juniors and even more over ratings. A certain amount of fear can exist amongst these juniors afraid to be seen as less than competent in any aspect of their job, including fluency in English. This point is discussed in section (5) regarding cultures where ‘loss of face’ is an all pervading factor.

The wide variety of ‘Englishes’ is also discussed with resultant confusion and misunderstanding and goes on to point to the vital need to ensure seafarers receive ‘adequate’ (using that STCW 78/95 word which, in fact, is a most ‘inadequate’ adjective to describe English proficiency) skills in English before placing them in multinational crews.

Summarising this section, the Report concludes:

“In any situation and aboard any ship, safe working practices depend, in part, on adequate communication between crew members. Our findings suggest that such ‘adequate’ communication implies a lot more than simply an understanding of technical job-related terms or a grasp of a Maritime vocabulary”.

- to which this writer would simply append ‘amen’!

2. The regulatory framework

a) Involvement of The International Maritime Organisation (IMO)

In the early 1970’s, prior to the advent of the STCW Code, discussions were held during meetings of IMCO’s Maritime Safety Committee regarding the problems of language difficulties arising on board ships at sea, crewed by multi-national seafarers. By 1973 it had been agreed that, where such problems occurred, a common language should be used for navigational purposes and that language should be English. As ships became larger, more technically sophisticated and with crews coming from more varied cultures, the issue of a ‘common language’ became even more pressing.

Since navigational and safety communications from ship to shore, ship to ship and on board ship must be precise, simple and unambiguous to avoid confusion and error, the need increased for a more standardised English to be used.

This led to the development of the Standard Marine Navigational Vocabulary (SMNV), which was adopted in 1977 and amended in 1985. Even so, it gradually became apparent that the SMNV was not comprehensive enough. Also in 1984 a well researched linguistic approach to the subject was published under the title SEASPEAK. Although not adopted formally the work influenced policy and, by 1992, the Maritime Safety Committee was instructed to develop a more comprehensive standardised language to take into account the changing conditions in modern seafaring and covering all major safety-related verbal communications.

After many years of careful development, the Standard Marine Communication Phrases came into being and the “Foreword” to the Resolution A.918(22), adopted on 29 November 2001, explains how specific phrases were drafted and trialled from 1992. The writer assisted with this trialling, recommending amendments to the Phrases in the various sections. Finally, at its 68th session in 1997, the MSC adopted the draft IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP) and the usage of these Phrases was made a requirement within the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers (STCW 78/95) for officers in charge of a navigational watch on ships of 500 gross tonnage or more.

Creating such an authoritative, comprehensive and specifically worded system of oral communication is excellent, however it is far more difficult ensuring the system is properly taught. Trainers need time and training opportunities to understand the system and learn how to teach it effectively. This has occurred both on the AMETIAP teacher training programs and
during some of the annual gatherings of the International Maritime English Conference (IMEC). Hopefully, the SMCP will become common usage at sea although it is difficult convincing English speaking seafarers that this concise system of phrases is highly effective, especially since Maritime English is not usually included in their training. However, most instructors encourage the use of the SMCP during training on navigation simulators.

b) Codes, Resolutions and model courses

**Standards of Training, Certification & Watchkeeping 78/95 (STCW 95)**

The levels of attainment required for watchkeepers by this convention were specified and approved under IMO's auspices, and the implementation is carried out by each country's marine administration. The language describing competencies however is not always helpful being often vague and imprecise, using words such as ‘appropriate’, ‘adequate’, ‘acceptable’. This is no doubt an intended diplomacy, to provide as wide an interpretation as possible, but it is not helpful to teachers trying to understand the required attainment levels. Neither does this ‘wide-open’ situation provide for standardization worldwide.

For Maritime English, the STCW 95 Code states at Table A - 111/11:

**Competence:** “Use the Standard Navigational Vocabulary as replaced by the IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases and use English in written and oral form.

**Knowledge, understanding and proficiency:**

**Adequate** knowledge of the English language to enable the officer to use charts and other nautical publications, to understand meteorological information and messages concerning ship's safety and operation, to communicate with other ships and coast stations and to perform the officer's duties also with a multilingual crew, including ability to use and understand the Standard Marine Navigational Vocabulary as replaced by the IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases."

**Demonstrating and evaluating competence** in the officer's ‘adequate’ knowledge and **use of oral English** is to be by both 'Examination and assessment of evidence obtained from practical instruction; also that, 'English language navigational publications and messages relevant to the safety of the ship are correctly interpreted or drafted.'

**Competencies for Engineers** - given at Table A-111/1 are similarly imprecise.

For teachers of Maritime English, there are other benefits flowing from the IMO, for example, the provision of educational and training materials such as:

- access to the IMO Library, including the catalogue – free of charge;
- the IMO News, published quarterly and full of useful information;
- availability of posters, brochures and similar illustrated material of very high quality – usually free of charge;
- inexpensive training videos – eg ‘Safer Shipping & Cleaner Oceans’.

IMO’s journal ‘IMO NEWS’, published quarterly, contains many useful articles, photographs of interesting ships at sea and in port, plus notices of conferences and updates on the STCW 95, which are invaluable as authentic reading texts for trainees. Now available on the internet at <http://www.imo.org/home.asp?topic>, this useful magazine is a mine of important information for both trainers and trainees.

Many of the major decisions by the various IMO committees such as the Maritime Safety Committee are published in the journal, providing authoritative news for teachers of Maritime English which can also be utilised as reading comprehension text for trainees.

**Ship security**

In recent years there has been an increasing need for greater security on board ships at sea to the extent that the International Ship and Port Facility Code (ISPS) came into force from 1 July 2004. This comprehensive set of measures aims to enhance the security of ships and port facilities and was developed in the wake of the 9/11 attacks in the United States. Implemented through chapter XI, in the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS), the ISPS Code requires an officer be responsible for ensuring the ship is secure.

A security plan is drawn up for each vessel which is checked on arrival and departure from each port. In some countries, a Port Security official will inspect the security arrangements on board. This inspection can include questioning crew on many aspects of the ship which may be very intimidating, particularly where there is insufficient competency in English.

The requirements of the ISPS Code are very specific, covering every aspect where the ship could be at risk. For example, a careful watch is kept at the ship's gangway, all visitors being required to sign in and out, including those delivering services to the ship. An inspection prior to unberthing ensures no-one has tried to stow away prior to the ship leaving port.

Where a vessel is manned by a multi-national crew, it can be understood there is a necessity for those charged with the above responsibilities to possess a reasonable standard of English to interact courteously, but firmly with all those approaching the ship.
Port State Control
The Port State Control authorities in different ports will also question crew on the effective use of equipment, especially where any breakage or deficiencies are found. Should this questioning reveal inadequate ability to understand or communicate in English, the ship can be prevented from leaving port, causing expensive delay.

Flag State inspections
A ship in port can also be inspected by a representative from the State where it is registered, the name of which appears at the stern, and the State’s flag flown. Questions can be asked of senior crew which will need answering in English since different nationalities can be involved and where compliance with the State’s requirements must be understood.

So regulations exist and on a well organised ship, will be put into practice. Unfortunately, it is only necessary to read the annual reports of some of the Port State Control authorities, online descriptions of accidents by some of the maritime news media, or to ask questions of seafarers encountered to learn that, in reality, the ideals of the above ‘Codes’ are all too frequently ignored. Miscommunication does occur, ships are detained and crews can be marooned in ports with unpaid salaries. Often it is the generous care of the port chaplain from the Mission to Seafarers which ensures the crew’s welfare and eventual repatriation.

3. Those Teaching Maritime English
While seafarers of all nationalities can be held responsible for their inability to communicate in English, the common language of the sea, it is their trainers who need to upgrade their teaching skills. Also, responsibility lies with those who permit seafarers to be employed when fully aware of their poor communication skills. Ship manning agencies worldwide recruit seafarers’, and are an important cog in the industry, yet difficult to supervise and control.

Defining the criteria for the ‘ideal’ trainer of Maritime English lies within an ongoing debate, providing hours of discussion at the regular gatherings of the International Maritime English Conference (IMEC) meeting annually in different countries. A project on this topic was commissioned by the International Association of Maritime Universities (IAMU). The final research report was presented at the end of January 2006 by the researchers, respected academics involved in teaching Maritime English at well established European Universities.

The Report covered a wide diversity of topics including:
- ‘Categorising the profiles of the various types of currently employed Maritime English (ME) instructors, clarifying the usefulness and limitations of each.
- Identifying the linguistic and methodical requirements of a qualified Maritime English instructor and the ways of meeting them.
- Identifying the horizontal/vertical maritime background knowledge (scope/depth) to be expected of a Maritime English instructor.
- Identifying adequate, appropriate and practicable further qualification measures for Maritime English instructors in the maritime field, in language teaching/acquisition methodology and course development.
- Proposing an appropriate affiliation of the Maritime English teaching staff within the structures of MET institutions in order to guarantee their involvement in the overall MET conception of the latter.’

It is to be hoped the Report’s recommendations will be widely disseminated to Maritime Training Institutions to provide guidelines for engaging new staff and for providing in-service training for teachers of Maritime English. All too often teachers are employed to teach ‘English’ to seafaring trainees on the basis of being well qualified in linguistics, literature or the finer points of English grammar, but with little or no knowledge about ships, the international shipping industry or the vital need of their trainees to communicate in English within a multi-national crewing environment.

Worse is the employment of itinerant ‘native’ speakers who are happy to teach English, often part-time and therefore inexpensive, run tutorial groups or ‘conversation clubs’ with no teaching qualifications or maritime knowledge.

Addressing this ‘problem’ has presented a quandary internationally, because shipping has increased, and multi-national crewing is common particularly from the Asia Pacific region. Watchkeepers are required to be ‘adequate’ in their use of English language, and teachers need to be well trained in communicative techniques for teaching Maritime English.

However, such training was not available, which is why a series of staged training programs was developed in the Asia Pacific region to provide the necessary ‘maritime’ input and introduce trainee-centred learning, or communicative teaching which had been the norm in language teaching since the mid-seventies in many western European countries.

The first of these teacher training programs began in 1994 with the teachers in the English Language Centre at the then Far Eastern State Maritime Academy, located in Vladivostok, now the Maritime State University. Many changes have occurred with extensive upgrading in recent years, including teaching Maritime English. For example, much smaller classes and the installation of excellent multi-media equipment, as used with the English teachers in 2004. The use of ‘Maritime’ English is second nature for many of these teachers who have sailed on training vessels and cargo ships; their needs were for up to date materials, exposure to communicative methodologies and the opportunity to learn from a ‘native’ English speaker.

In 1996, the Association of Maritime Education & Training Asia Pacific (AMETIAP) was formed and the
training programs continued in Vladivostok, while also expanding into the People’s Republic of China, the Philippines, Hong Kong and Japan. Initially, the Stage I program introduced teachers to basic concepts of teaching English in a specialist industry (English for Specialist Purposes - see (4) below), different ships and their operations, utilising authentic materials and trainee-centred methodology. Guidance related to understanding how to integrate maritime material with an existing general English syllabus, and learning the reasoning for the differences in teaching ‘Maritime’ English to general English.

Most language learning relies on common situations and ideas through which different verb tenses, vocabulary and structure usage can be taught and practised. Integrating the wealth of maritime terminology into the usual progression of an English syllabus is simple, for example:

- descriptions of different ships / reasons for particular designs;
- cargoes which demand special stowage / explanations for this;
- routine ship operations, safety factors, routes and destinations.

Regular oral communications are practised with other topics such as preventing marine pollution, manning and regulation of shipping, safety and emergency procedures, security at sea etc. providing further education and interest for the trainees.

4. ‘Maritime’ English - English for a Specialist Purpose (ESP)

The question as to just what constitutes ‘Maritime’ English can be explained in that it belongs in the industrial sphere of specialist English usage, which is not difficult to understand. In fact, teaching an English syllabus within an industry based environment is less demanding than the English required in the spheres of general, academic or legal language, where there are definite protocols governing the exact nature of English expected during oral communication, ie ‘formal v informal’, clearly defined vocabulary for acceptable academic text, and legal or diplomatic phrasing in particular documents.

To explain further, an ESP syllabus is anchored firmly within the language used in a particular industry, with all the ideas and vocabulary necessary for the industry’s operation, dedicated equipment, machinery and personnel employed, reflecting usage and management.

Most teachers of English are familiar with the many variations in the language which, through historical and cultural development, have emerged over time. Probably an initial basic principle which needs to be understood is just where the term ‘Maritime English’ stands in relation to other forms, or varieties, of English language.

Although some historical and idiomatic language remains within the ‘Maritime English’ used by contemporary seafarers, it is the specialist vocabulary and technical terminology today’s trainees need to understand, as relevant for example to specialised ships; eg gas and oil tankers, combination carriers, container and reefer ships, car carriers, roll-on/roll-off ferries, and heavy lift ships, each vessel type having its routine operations and interaction within its sphere of the international shipping industry, also designated terminology determining communication in English at sea or alongside when loading or discharging cargo. Even in general conversation, seafarers will commonly use familiar ‘maritime’ idiom when English is the common medium of communication, whether on board ship or ashore.

As a teaching/learning discipline, Maritime English is also comparable with other forms of ESP, eg:

- EAC - English for Academic Courses
- E.Sc. - English for Scientific Courses
- EIP - English for Industrial Purposes - containing specific jargon for each industry
- EFL - English as a Foreign Language
- ESL - English as a Second Language

Both forms of general English usage related to the learner’s own cultural language background, depending on whether English has been given foreign (EFL) or second (ESL) language status within that culture.

Over time, industries have developed their own terminology or jargon, which is language containing words used in a special or technical manner by those involved within the industry, whether it is in manufacturing, power generation, mineral exploration and mining, steel making, aviation, oil extraction, production and refining, or the operation of ships, their cargoes and their participation in world trade, to name just a few.

So when we refer to ‘Maritime’ English, it is exactly that, the English language necessary to function within the maritime industry, with its widely diverse activities such as transporting raw materials, for example: iron ore, copper, gypsum, crude and refined oils, bulk foods - sugar, wheat, rice, edible oils, or containers stuffed with a myriad of manufactured and packaged products. Some cruise vessels carry over 2000 passengers, so that English is necessary for communication with passengers, and vital when an emergency occurs. English is further used to operate vessels within the technical spheres of navigation and engineering.

5. Cultural influences on the way languages are taught and learnt

Overcoming cultural barriers in language teaching is always a major challenge. An important objective being to ensure the learning environment fosters and encourages learners at every opportunity. A communicative teaching/learning environment may not be a familiar concept to everyone reading this Briefing, especially where a background of teacher centred education and training has been experienced. The usual method of maritime training in many countries, not only in the Asia Pacific region, is that of large classes of trainees listening to a lecturer, who
may or may not welcome questions or interaction during the teaching session.

While this teaching method is common in many countries, especially at the Polytechnic and University level, it is far from effective when helping young adults to communicate with each other in a foreign language, in this case, in English language steeped in a maritime context. While this Paper is not a treatise on language teaching methodology, it is important to understand that trainee centred learning is a cornerstone of Maritime English teaching.

a) Trainee centred approach

Weaning teachers away from a ‘teacher-centred’ approach and fostering a trainee centred situation in the classroom involves gaining trust and providing enough evidence that, rather than an attitude of teachers ‘losing control’, trainees are embarking on a far more effective, imaginative and interesting methodology encouraging them to become enthusiastic learners.

This communicative language teaching approach was developed, particularly by British applied linguists, as a reaction away from grammar-based teaching, with its reliance on repetitive exercises, and the “listen and repeat” approach to oral/aural learning. Experience had proved that learners do not acquire the necessary competence or fluency in using a language necessary to not only apply the grammatical rules of the language, but also to know when and where to use the sentences practised and to whom.

Applied to achieving competence in using English language, it needs to be stressed that a ‘thinking-in-English’ approach is all important, enabling learners to understand meaning, without which no sensible usage can be developed. Whereas in the past English was taught through emphasising the grammatical structure of the language, this approach has been superseded to emphasise “meaning before grammar”. It makes far more sense to encourage learners to try and “say what they mean” first, then it is possible for grammatical errors to be unravelled, while the meaning intended is retained.

Similarly, in the context of interacting with fellow crew on board a multi-lingual crewed vessel, the necessity to communicate the correct meaning can be readily understood, especially when interacting with another vessel or shore authorities using VHF radio. Also during emergencies, conveying accurate facts over the VHF in a meaningful manner becomes absolutely essential to avoid loss of life and perhaps the vessel itself.

Enabling pre-sea trainees, or any language students, to understand the importance of thinking about the meaning they wish to convey, is obviously challenging, both for the trainees and trainer. Relinquishing total control of the learning environment is necessary to provide time and space for ‘thinking about’ and ‘practising’ the language, including making mistakes.

The trainer needs to provide the trainees with ideas, vocabulary and a specific task within which to grapple with the words to generate a specific outcome. Errors will occur but should not be corrected until the task is complete, then all can learn from some of the more important confusions. The trainer can circulate, monitor, listen and observe, and if asked, provide assistance, otherwise trainee groups need to understand it is their own generation of English (of the ‘maritime’ genre in this context) which is the major objective.

Again, in the context of learning about ships and the industry, all the training material should focus on the maritime sphere, providing an authentic learning base to educate and motivate the trainees. These ‘trainee centred’ sessions mean that trainers in Maritime English can gradually guide their trainees towards taking some responsibility and becoming involved in their own learning by working together on given assignments in small groups where ideas and known vocabulary can be discussed to complete the given task.

The practical aspects of operating different ships, stowing cargoes, loading and discharging, provide ideal content for trainee centred learning. Audio visual material can introduce the topic while group discussion provides “communicative” strategies. Samples of authentic maritime text, technical media and shipping photographs can provide data, before discussion and planning of the set task leads to the production of a summary in Maritime English.

It is not necessary to create difficult or complex tasks for the groups. The production of lists, cross-referenced with relevant details, diagrams on wall posters, or questions and class discussion are sufficient to ensure every trainee can contribute some idea or sentence in the context of Maritime English. Employing authentic material in regular use on board ship also provides ideal familiarisation practice for seafaring trainees, eg safety instructions, accident reports, emergency procedures, log books and security reports. These all provide realistic vocabulary within general English expression.

b) Group work

During the course of the group work, the trainer should allow trainees the freedom to express themselves without fear of public correction and gradually it will be observed how much this freedom of expression is enjoyed and the challenge accepted, groups often vying with one another to produce interesting and different outcomes which are shared at the end of the session. Fear of ‘losing face’ if errors are identified in public, can prove a major stumbling block for some trainees. This can lead to inaccuracies becoming entrenched, which is why the non-public identification of errors is an important strategy, as explained below.

“Honesty is the best policy” is not a common ethos in many cultures, however trainee seafarers need to understand how essential this attitude is for their own safety and that of fellow crew, plus their seagoing
‘home’, the ship. The Maritime English class should be
a relaxed and encouraging environment where this
belief can be fostered and practised.

The ‘loss of face’ syndrome is evident on board
when a crew member makes a mistake in speaking
English, or misunderstands a more senior person but
is reluctant to ask for clarification. Pre-sea trainees
can learn about this during Maritime English classes to
avoid such embarrassment or even compromising the
safety of the ship and crew.

Further consolidation can build on the classroom
learning environment with written assignments,
projects or other ‘homework’ topics. Where these
indicate inaccuracies in grammar construction or
vocabulary, they can be gathered to provide a
‘correction’ session from which everyone can learn,
without any trainee being aware of the origin of the
errors. Once more, all the language used in such
evaluation sessions will be firmly based within a
‘Maritime’ English environment.

During the teacher training programs, trainee
trainers experience the communicative
teaching/learning approach at every possible
opportunity since all training sessions employ
interactive method with a balance between trainer
input and group discussion involving case studies,
problem solving, class presentation and evaluation.

6. Educating Trainers in teaching Maritime English

With reference to the SIRC Report quoted previously,
regarding the vital necessity of ensuring ‘adequate’
training in English communication is provided to all
seafarers before they go to sea, it can be reported that
in the years since 1995, while providing training
programs in Maritime English for teachers in countries
around the Asia Pacific region, it has been observed
that many of these teachers have no knowledge of the
promotion of IMO’s mandatory use of “Maritime
English” as required within the STCW 78/95 Code.

Frequently the introduction of this requirement on
printed transparencies of the relevant pages from
STCW 78/95, with careful explanations and sections
from the manual of the Standard Marine
Communication Phrases was met with surprise and
exclamations that “no-one had told us about this
requirement”.

Indeed, very few of these teachers of Maritime
English know anything about IMO or that the
organisation plays such an important role in the
regulation of the international shipping industry; IMO's
explanatory video “Safer Shipping and Cleaner
Oceans” has been of invaluable assistance in this
respect. Even less is known about the expectation of
IMO’s Maritime Safety Committee that seafarers
should communicate effectively with each other.

From the initial provision of the teacher training
programs in 1994, through to 2004, this lack of
awareness has been encountered with teachers from
the Philippines, Sri Lanka, the People's Republic of
China, and Japan. In contrast, the English proficiency
requirements of STCW 78/95 are well understood in
maritime training centres in Russia.

It is not difficult to understand why there is this
general lack of awareness in that government
administrations dealing with matters maritime are
usually the people with a thorough awareness of such
international regulatory bodies; when new
Conventions are issued, they are dealt with by these
authorities and, it is assumed, pass on relevant
information to those responsible for implementation,
including Maritime Training Centres. Presumably also,
those charged with compliance and teaching relevant
parts of the IMO Conventions are advised, however,
very seldom would a centre’s administration think of
advising those teaching Maritime English.

Yes, they are teaching ‘English’, and since it is within
a Maritime Training Centre, the nomenclature
“Maritime”, has been added, particularly in recent
years. However, the reality of meaning is often not well
understood, either by administrations, senior technical
teaching staff or by the teachers of “Maritime” English
themselves. That is why it has been important when
providing a training program for teachers that, at the
outset, a full understanding of the subject is provided
in the early training sessions.

Some similar explanations are also provided in the
IMO Model Course 3.17 published in 2000. There is
also an extensive bibliography of textbooks, videos
and English Language Coursebooks readily available
from British sources, eg Marlins Ltd., Videotel,
London, and Headway Coursebooks; while the
Recommended reading list could have been taken
from a British University reading list offering a Master’s
degree in teaching English to ESL or EFL learners.
Having studied for just such a Master’s degree in
teaching English as a Foreign Language at Reading
University, in Berkshire, UK, (awarded in 1990), the
writer fully appreciates this comprehensive and very
useful reading list.

However, problems arise, firstly insofar as many
Maritime English teachers, especially around the Asia
Pacific region, may not possess tertiary teaching
qualifications so that the theoretical and practical
teaching implications expected by IMO Model Course
3.17 are simply too advanced for them.

Secondly, unless educated within an English
language medium, or where English is a recognised
second language, as, for example, in Singapore, the
Philippines and India, initially the teachers’ own
English competency may need considerable
improvement, for example in Japan, the People's
Republic of China, Vietnam, Cambodia, Indonesia and
South Korea, where English language has not
traditionally been included in the general education
system.

Thirdly, there is the common problem of affording
quality materials for the teaching of Maritime English
and many of the teaching resources listed in IMO
Model Course 3.17 are not inexpensive. Budgets tend
to concentrate on the provision of the latest navigation/
engineering simulators for example, or providing
computers with the best possible software for the various departments of the Training Centre, or Maritime University, while the English or ‘Foreign Languages’ department is often given very low priority in funding allocations.

There are locations which have utilised the IMO Model Course 3.17 since its publication in 2000, and the writer has spoken to teachers fortunate to have received it. Also, where it was possible to provide copies of the Standard Marine Communication Phrases, once published (in 2001), (as noted on page 6 of the Model Course), teachers could begin learning how to adapt the oral exercises provided in such manuals as ‘Seaspeak’ (1997) and the Standard Marine Navigation Vocabulary (1977) with the more comprehensive material from the Phrases.

Knowing the above constraints, it has been a deliberate policy to motivate the teachers on the AMETIAP training programs, to augment their English textbooks, by providing authentic maritime resources gleaned from organisations such as the Australian Maritime Safety Authority (AMSA), Lloyd’s List Newspaper, IMO News, Fairplay, The Sea (published by The Mission to Seafarers), and other shipping newspapers, videos, including materials from the Worldwide Fund for Nature and supporting materials which can be obtained freely.

The experience gained in the Asia Pacific region illustrates the importance of educating the teachers of Maritime English to be selective and eclectic in utilising and developing materials for teaching their trainees. Traditionally in the Asia Pacific region teachers have been expected to receive a syllabus compiled by more senior staff and to adhere rigidly to the lessons provided in the syllabus.

Not only is this an inhibiting influence on teachers, but often very large classes of trainees prevent communicative teaching and trainee-centred, interactive learning which is so necessary in language teaching and especially in encouraging trainee seafarers to practise effective oral communication, enabling sensible responses on the ship’s bridge, on deck during routine cargo operations and in the engine room.

This point could be broadened into discussing ‘effective’ teaching and learning, but that is not the objective of this brief; yet, as explained earlier, teaching Maritime English requires that teachers be made aware of the importance of effective teaching for seafaring trainees and of its very specialist position within a dynamic and fast changing industry. There are problems enough, what with ill-trained crews, some of whom may have false qualification certificates, poorly maintained ships which can be detained by Port State Control inspectors and which may strand the crew in a foreign port without wages for several months.

These problems are compounded when the crews cannot communicate properly with the port authorities because they have not received satisfactory training in Maritime English; worse too is the fact that the manning agency responsible for placement of these crews did not ensure the seamen possessed English competency. That remains another important topic in need of research and reporting, as mentioned in the 2001 SIRC Report discussed above.

In contrast, there are the ‘city’ like environments of some of the large cruise ships with perhaps over 2000 passengers and 1500 or more crew of many nationalities. This type of luxury, sea-going environment is a multi-million-dollar business and any misplacement of crew who cannot communicate effectively could cost the training/placement agency its contract.

7. New Directions
From the foregoing sections of this Briefing Paper, insight may have been gained into the complications of providing well trained seafarers as crew for the thousands of vessels comprising the international shipping fleet, with shipowners relying heavily on their vessels being manned by crew from many countries.

The question can be asked why it is that the all important aspect of ensuring these multi-national crews can communicate with each other is not a mandatory requirement, placed on those with the responsibility of crewing the ships - the ship management and manning agencies, of which there are unknown numbers worldwide.

Many ship management agencies are properly managed and resourced, running training centres with internationally recognised training systems audited by accredited organisations. Trainees are recruited from reliable education systems, follow accepted training routines and are employed on ocean going ships after certification by their country’s maritime administrations.

From the foregoing discussion and explanatory data, it can be discerned that it is almost unrealistic to expect today’s mixed nationality crews to understand and communicate with each other clearly and concisely. Yet, given all the factors as to why such universal communication is all important, and to generally enhance the image of the international shipping industry, it is essential that those training seagoing crew to communicate effectively, do so to the very best of their ability.

There are many trainers with the relevant qualifications and experience employed in maritime universities, shipping companies’ training centres and some ship management training centres, but only a few are able to travel and provide high quality, intensive training programs for teachers of Maritime English or pre-sea trainees.

It is important that teachers of maritime English get together from time to time and share their practices. Surveys can then help to establish areas of concern and also demonstrate methods which achieve effective results.

Through the network of the Association of Maritime Education and Training in the Asia Pacific (AMETIAP), there has gradually emerged a small group of
experienced, ‘native’ speaking trainers in Maritime English, who can be released to lead ‘short course’ intensive training for both teachers of Maritime English and some seafaring trainees. A small number being also experienced, professional seafarers, a most valuable combination of skills.

In January 2006, training of this nature took place on board a training vessel of Japan’s National Institute for Sea Training (NIST), the TS ‘Taisei Maru’, on a voyage from Tokyo to Osaka. Besides the Japanese crew, 9 other trainee-trainers participated from AMETIAP Members: 2 from Sri Lanka, 4 from the Philippines, 2 from China, and 1 from Vietnam. This on-board training was led by a most experienced ship master, an English native speaker from California’s Maritime Academy, ably assisted by his colleague, a Chief Engineer. This on-board training voyage is reported in AMETIAP’s Newsletter No 20 - see References.

The significant aspect is that this voyage was the culmination of providing training programs for teachers of Maritime English in shore based locations where a frequently heard request was for the opportunity to visit ‘real ships’. This is now being accomplished within a far more authentic learning environment than merely ‘visiting’ a ship, that of being ‘at sea’.

It is the fervent wish that this initiative taken by the Tokyo University of Marine Science & Technology, together with Japan’s National Institute for Sea Training and with the support of Japan’s Ministry of Education, can be ongoing, and can perhaps be emulated by similar sea going training aboard other training ships operated by AMETIAP member institutions.

This would enable many more teachers to experience and learn about ships in their natural ocean setting, while also realising the necessity of communicating together, and with the ships’ crews, in the ‘common’ language of Maritime English.

8. Conclusions

This briefing paper has endeavoured to include the most cogent discussions to illustrate that Maritime English can make a positive contribution towards the safe and efficient operation of ships in an international industry. As it stands, the regulatory framework covers the important spheres and, once the attainment levels for Maritime English proficiency in STCW 95 have been clarified, teachers can be trained to adjust the syllabus accordingly.

Teaching standards vary internationally in teaching the professional subjects at maritime training centres around the world, and despite some excellent examples, many remain in need of improvement. The teaching of Maritime English is a critical activity and one in which substantial improvement is needed.

General recognition of the need to raise teaching standards in maritime education and training was emphasized by the Mr H Madsen, CEO of Det Norske Veritas, when, in his address to Posidonia in June 2006, he reported on a survey conducted by DNV which found that 50% of the academies surveyed were operating in a sub-standard manner.

The MET providers themselves are best placed to address this serious situation. Ten years ago a major initiative was taken with the formation of the Association of Maritime Education and Training Institutions in Asia Pacific. Now developing as a global network, the Association has major potential to assist the development and raising of standards in MET.

As mentioned earlier in this brief, it was through AMETIAP that the writer became involved in the first training of teachers of Maritime English within the Asia Pacific region. This training continues, albeit in differing formats, and new initiatives are developing. Participation in the regular International Maritime English Conferences is growing, enabling greater recognition of the importance of effective Maritime English teaching.

In closing the writer wishes to express her appreciation of the generous advice and assistance of colleagues who teach Maritime English, of the organizations that support these teachers, and of the seafarers who understand the importance of clear communications and the role of English as the global language of seafaring.

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