Maritime English on Sea Trial

Captain Shahrokh Khodayari

Introduction:

The English language & its effect on maritime industry is an area that any lecturer dealing with nautical subjects has something to say about. There are studies relating the subject to many maritime accidents. The cultural differences & influence on the languages spoken is a key element. There are other difficulties while discussing various approaches to teaching the Maritime English at different levels. This essay also looks at some past experiences and aspects of training for a language used for specific fields. Utilizing existent media and sources are also discussed in the later parts of the article.

A) Realizing the need:

1. Accident investigations:

Whenever an accident occurs; there are many things which require a minimum language skills & knowledge to be able to carry out the process. The forms and questionnaires are a basic and vital source of information. Then there are interviews & various statements which will require a certain amount of proficiency in English. Getting further we should be able to present cases and give statements and defend our points in a court of law or some other judiciary system. Surely this needs ability and shortcomings can give rise to self-incrimination and unwanted results.

The root cause analysis and various concerns in an accident investigation have also revealed the contributory factor of language ability in many cases. The communication problems in the human element studies & attribution of causes have also been repeatedly denoted. (1)

With the requirements of the STCW and the effective communication on board ships, this will not only oblige the companies for measures to adapt in such enhancement; but also will consequently necessitate the training centres to get involved and be active with new curriculum & agenda.

The ultimate target must surely be proceeding towards a better and fruitful management, in which accident prevention is a key element.

2. The human element and management issues & their importance:

For every system with people involved; human elements are a focus area. Management on board as well as ashore can be highly influenced by the communication between the various sources. A major part of communication is language ability & usage which affects both issues. Management of multinational crew is very much predisposed by the interrelations made through a common language. To practice a reasonable correlation, we must use correct and culturally adapt language. We may have highly educated officers; but still have lots of problems if the ratings do not properly understand them. Safety concerns and conduct of
mandatory drills as well as emergency preparedness are also dependant on language ability.

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3. The fast paced industry; textbooks & internet:

No one can deny the influence that internet has on our societies. Moreover most of the maritime text books are available in English and to achieve an international level of training, we must use English as a common media. The other learning programmes like e-learning are very dependent upon the English language without knowledge of which; the process can not be followed. The shipping industry along with many related areas are moving too fast; so we need to keep up the pace by turning into the global common ways, then again we must somehow choose English. Even if we are rich in our own language, we still need to go public and into the outside world.

English language in the maritime world is really the master key for all the doors. It might not have been so for all the people in the past, but it surely is now for everyone from a deck-boy to the master as well as land-lubbers trying to gain maritime management skills by further studies and upholstering their knowledge.

B) Programming; Linguistics & your language—Right or Wrong:

1-The necessity of a language discipline:

We surely need to practice a certain set of discipline for learning a language. In order to be able to learn a language we must understand its Faculty. The arguments so as to whether this faculty is unique to the language or can be common with other logical faculties; is not to be discussed here. What we should all accept is that there are states for language faculty & language acquisition. Here we must argue that without a Universal Grammar which will result in principles; parameters & lexicons, acquiring a second language would not be possible & thus a discipline is necessary. So far these sorts of discussions are for very specialized systems; what we can agree on is that a language teaching programme should incorporate the various ideas & arguments; especially "The poverty-of-stimulus-argument”(3)

2- The necessity of an adopted programme:

The programme binding in the institutes is another aspect of the said discipline. At some occasions you can see the Maritime English subject is not taught properly & at times by tutors who do not have the related experience. Being merely an English teacher or lecturer may not be sufficient and if added with some maritime background; then the efficiency can be improved. The discipline of conducting classes can be very decisive too. Some institutions carry out English language courses prior to the nautical studies and some incorporate the English-for-Specific-Purposes in their programmes. A tried & tested system is relatively long English learning prior to nautical studies. During this period the cadets can also be familiarized with basic safety and responsibilities. The results have always shown better understanding of future courses, but as this is an expensive & time-consuming curriculum; it is rarely done nowadays.
C) Teaching the basics of phonetics

It has always been an issue whether teaching phonetics is necessary or not. We are not surely going to teach the marine cadets or an officer to be professional in the language field, what we really need is that the trainees can easily converse and communicate and study the textbooks or instruction manuals in their career.

1-The physical barriers:

Some languages due to the strong voices and sounds generated from the depth of the throat; various parts of the tongue; etc create certain physical barriers in learning another language. Some people due to age and long-term practices of some wrong pronunciations can not easily correct themselves.

As a mariner we may not really be obliged to make everyone speak perfect English. We should make them learn the sounds as close as possible to the required tone. On the other hand we must even teach the seafarers the different intonations and accents. While familiarizing with various accents; it is very important to be careful not to offend anyone. The way one speaks can at times be an area for jokes & laughter but this can not always be tolerated; especially if the people are of different nationalities.

The officers of the watch would need this understanding in a much more comprehensive way. The order relaying between other parties like pilots & stevedores are usually to be done by the officers in charge and hence they should be able to comprehend it primarily to fulfill the task.

The effective communication on board is affected by accents and misunderstandings. We can not eliminate them all but it is a good idea to explain various possible intonations and difficulties in pronouncing some of the words which may give rise to dangerous occurrences.

The staff must be taught to be familiar with various accents to the extent to understand them. That is the ultimate goal for this aspect.

2-Skills & art of phonetics:

If we teach the trainees about the phonetics; they will be able to use the language more systematically and with knowledge of basics. Even a bit of linguistics & the history of languages will help a lot. For this the trainer should have that knowledge in a higher level, so that understanding the differences between the sounds & letters in different languages will assist in making the distinction possible & perceivable. (4)

D) Difficulties in teaching a language:

1-Previous knowledge:

One of the areas with most difficulties is the amount and authenticity of what a learner already knows. In many countries the language learning like many other subjects is done in different ways. At some occasions things like language has been taught by people with wrong conceptions of language & incorrect pronunciations. The previous teachers might have been good at English but lack the ability to teach or train in the proper systematic approaches.
Then the process of turning the learners back on the right track is quite a task. At times you need to spend some time to wipe off the older accents & improper intonations; parts of which may never be corrected. As a result those with least primary knowledge may prove to be more easily trainable.

2-Cultural back grounds:

This is of-course a major area. Teaching a language you must have adequate knowledge about the culture of that language itself and some idea about the trainees' society & culture. This helps you a lot. To learn a language you do need to imitate a lot and use your memory at all times. Imitation of sounds and mimicry is a negative thing in some cultures; for instance in some Eastern societies. In some beliefs having a good foreign accent is not welcome. It can be construed as being alienated from your society or westernized! For many politicians it may be so but at some occasions the ordinary people have that sort of prejudice too. These will surely create problems for teaching a language.

Apart from the restraints that make teaching difficult; there are many other issues concerning the multicultural societies. Some students will feel shy to talk in front of others or give speeches & essays. Some are much better on the microphone than face to face due to behaviour patterns. There are some nations who use their body while using their tongue. This affects the study of language & may seem to be funny or odd to speak English like that.

The mentality predominant in a culture plays an important role. Use of irony or indirect addressing is a way to be conservative or polite in a society but may create confusion and misunderstanding in another.

3-Use of Metaphors:

This is surely very much related to the culture. Teaching a language would necessitate use of metaphors and if we want them to be understood, we must have adequate knowledge about the cultural conceptions. In an animal friendly society and while working with children in general; using sounds of animals will help teaching a lot. But for managers; use of metaphors is really a different and rather difficult challenge. Religious societies are somehow allergic to sex oriented or metaphysical metaphors. On the other hand a mainly industrial environment would require more scientific examples and utilities.

In principle the use of metaphors is a skill needed by any trainer. It might be a good idea to devise a set of metaphors for a variety of learners as acquired through long practice and usage with different categories of students. These can be used as catalysts for education process. It is very important to bear in mind that the chemistry and side-effects of these catalysts should be known, otherwise can ruin the teacher/student relation & cause misconceptions.

4-Knowledge of mother tongue:

It is an important issue to check that how much knowledge a person has from his/her mother language. In most cases we can not help it a lot but we should bear in mind that the language ability can be improved by bridging between the language to be learnt & the mother tongue. Many people, amongst whom are the seafarers’ have very limited knowledge about their own language. The grammar or methodology in a language will come with a certain degree of education which is not the case for most learners. From a point of view that does not approve
of perfect and grammatically correct communication; this may be not so important. But for teachers of the language; this makes things a lot easier. For instance if some one does not know the difference between transitive & intransitive verbs in his/her own language; it may be quite a difficult task to teach these in English. If we do not care much about such mistakes in future or using adjectives for adverbs & vice versa will not affect the intended communication; then we might not mind about this problem either.

In this issue we will surely appreciate the proximity that the mother tongues have with the English. For many people of Europe with mother tongues of Latin origin, learning the maritime English is not as difficult as for other people with languages of non-European origins.

The teacher must primarily have some knowledge about the linguistics in relation with the type and branch of languages spoken by the students and then be able to appreciate and evaluate how good the trainees are in their own mother tongues.

E) Importance of having various skills and the position on board:

For most ratings it is only important to be able to basically communicate on board for receiving orders; giving simple concise reports & human contact with fellow ship-mates. In devising a system for teaching Maritime English; we should surely bear this in mind. If we want to compare the officers; the deck officers will be in need of more communicative language abilities than the engineer officers. They are the officers with ship to ship & ship to shore contacts. On the other hand the engineers may require more abilities for reading and comprehension skills as they would encounter lots of manuals & knowhow booklets of the various machineries.

It is a common need for all to have the ability to communicate on board; taking & giving orders, etc. For writing; an important point is to help officers for report-compiling. At many occasions this would be very much necessary; on board for internal reports & very important for external dispatch.

For listening it seems that the importance for deck officers must be emphasized upon. Having practices for hearing different nationalities speak; will help a lot in this ability.

While learning general English; these skills are taught & practiced in a common way & with proper contexts; vocabulary & accent. But at sea this is usually not the way. A lot of texts come in a wrong grammar & vocabulary full of errors. The accents are not standard & we hear so many different intonations & pronunciations. It should be understood that knowledge of English in a standard form can not always be sufficient.

F) A chronicle of various methods experimented:

I have tried many ways and sources in a seaway to teach maritime English to a wide range of seafarers. They can be recalled of as following:

1-We used a set of books called “Seafaring English” (5) which had a very practical approach to the communications on board a ship.
There was another book called “English for maritime studies” (6) which was an excellent source & at some instances still is. The lay-out of the edition was quite helpful for teaching the cadets and it also contained a lot of lessons from the language itself. We used these books very often in most levels and the good point was that you need not have a very strong or remarkable background to understand them.

The problems encountered were usually with those trainees who had short courses like below 500 or 3000GT that could not spend a long time learning or practicing the English.

2- Later on there were books like “Standard maritime vocabulary” or “SMCP” as newer version. I started teaching them from their early introduction stages and specifically with short term courses they were excellent.

The idea of having the very useful words as a glossary is a very helpful one. I always start by teaching the basic words first. Not in a dictionary-like-manner but in fact in a more practical and also lingual approach. So that I do have many other related words in my list which required learning and spend about 3 - 6 minutes in average for every word and try to explain a bit of grammar as well as synonyms/antonyms, etc while defining the maritime word or phrase. As an example when trying to define “Adrift”; we can say that it is A+drift; what is drift and how will the meaning evolve adding an “A”. Then we can explain similar words like “Aloft”, “Aweigh”, “Awash”, “Aground”, etc which are all in the same category of nautical or related words.

It can also involve a bit of other subjects; when talking about the “Cardinal Points”, we can explain a bit of the buoyage. Also explaining topics of some safety requirements & regulations when defining “Accommodation ladder” and so on.

3- With the introduction of “MARENG” the path has been made very clear & easy. I have taught the programme for various levels & groups. There were engineers; deck officers; VTS operators and non-conventional-ship officers. Believing that the system has the versatility to be used partially or at random choice of lessons & topics.

Although the programme has been devised for an E-Learning system but at occasions it seems that if it is accompanied with the help & guidance of a teacher; its efficiency will be improved. The MARENG project seems to have been based on the idea that the person using it; has a primary or even intermediate ability in English. On the other hand as devised by the European system & modeling; it would have taken that most European languages have many similar words & basic concepts, hence the learner can work on those grounds and improve him/herself. If the programme is being used for other nationalities or people with different lingual origins; the efforts required to spend need to be increased. Having MARENG on a computer & projector, then asking the learners to listen; read; write and repeat as well as practice what they are presented to; has had reasonable results comparing to other systems. It is of-course a time-consuming schedule and the trainer has to be made familiar with the objectives and able to extracts areas of high importance & relevance to the job requirements as well as the tasks that the students should learn in order to optimize the curriculum.
Conclusion:

- Every individual has his/her own way of conceptions about the realities surrounded by & would tend to learn different things in different ways, even if possessing the similar or nearly similar experiences. That is a paramount element to be considered for a lecturer of any subject. For language as an original distinct way of communication amongst humans; a realization of various and versatile as well as strangely unique paths & key-ways should be made.

- English as the working language of the maritime world needs to be taught & learnt systematically. The trainers need to have a maritime background & experience.

- There is a vital need to understand & appreciate the cultural differences of trainees in order to be able to transfer the knowledge in a practical & useful way.

- Amongst all the various programmes; MARENG from the Leonardo Davinci project is the most useful & practical one.

- We need to share experiences & methods in teaching; especially the subject of Maritime English & then alter or adjust what has been proven fruitful in a way apt to our audience.

- By improving the understanding & communication skills we can enhance safety & workmanship standards in the maritime industry. English is a common & master key.

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