

## **Profiling the Maritime English Instructor**

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### **ABSTRACT**

In the last few years Maritime English has attained the status of a “hot topic” where, mostly as a result of misdemeanours at sea causing loss of life, damage to property and environmental pollution, the legal requirements (i.a., STCW/SOLAS) regarding communicative competency have been considerably sharpened to specifically promote safety at sea and contribute to cleaner oceans. Coincidentally, as the percentage of seafarers in the shipping industry shrinks and the number of internationally employed shore-based personnel increases, Maritime English has become an essential career tool, permitting mobility, flexibility and competitiveness.

The authors, having worked extensively in this field, have observed the sudden rise in interest and concern of maritime organisations as to how to accommodate the new demands. Maritime Education and Training institutions, often reluctant to recognise Maritime English on an equal footing to Navigation or Marine Engineering, or to dedicate more instruction hours in an already tight programme, have been keen to find more effective strategies. Often this is attempted by paying little or no attention to the amorphous global body of Maritime English instructors at their disposal. This body, in the experience of the authors, consists of a group of career specialists, a group of English language and literature graduates often employed to teach general English, a group of former seafarers who are thought or claim to have a good command of the English language but who seldom have teaching qualifications, and a group of native English speaking persons who are often not qualified teachers, let alone experienced in maritime matters.

With the above in mind it is clear that the Maritime English teaching community requires a solidly based investigation into the professional profile of the Maritime English instructor. As a

result, the authors intend to explore the current situation calling upon their own experience, their previous research, personal interviews and a questionnaire. At a later stage they will attempt to prise open the door by creating generally accepted guidelines and recommendations for MET institution management on how to qualify teachers of general English to become lecturers in Maritime English, meeting at least the requirements of the STCW78/95 on the one hand, and on the other to give prospective Maritime English teachers an idea of what will be expected from them should they wish to teach seafarers at university or college level.

This paper is intended to kick-off the process, providing descriptions, initial thoughts and comments on the topic. Round-table discussions will be held at upcoming IAMU and IMEC (International Maritime English Conference) gatherings where the participants, i.a., will be invited to complete a questionnaire. The authors will record the results in a complementary paper to the present one, along with their reflections and recommendations as noted above.

## **1. Introduction**

Relevant investigations have revealed that more than three in ten accidents occurring at sea or in ports can be attributed to communication deficiencies, primarily to an insufficient command among seafarers or other maritime personnel of what is called Maritime English (ME). As a result, in the last few years Maritime English has attained the status of a “hot topic” where, mostly due to these nautical misdemeanours, the legal requirements (i.a., STCW/SOLAS) regarding communicative competency have been considerably sharpened to promote safety at sea and in ports. Coincidentally, as the percentage of seafarers in the shipping industry shrinks and the number of internationally employed shore-based personnel increases, Maritime English has become an essential career tool, permitting mobility, flexibility and competitiveness.

The authors, having worked extensively in this field, have observed the sudden rise in interest and concern of maritime organisations as to how to accommodate the new demands. Maritime Education and Training institutions, often reluctant to recognise Maritime English on an equal footing to Navigation or Marine Engineering, or to dedicate more instruction hours in an already tight programme, have been keen to find more effective strategies. Often this is attempted by paying little or no attention to the amorphous global body of Maritime English instructors at their disposal. This body, in the experience of the authors, consists of a group of career specialists, a group of English language and literature graduates often employed to teach general English, a group of former seafarers who are thought or claim to have a good command of the English language but who seldom have teaching qualifications, and a group of native English speaking persons who are often not qualified teachers, let alone experienced in maritime matters.

With the above in mind it is clear that the Maritime English teaching community urgently requires a solidly based investigation into the professional profile of the Maritime English instructor. As a result, the authors intend to explore the current situation calling upon their own experience, their previous research, personal interviews and a questionnaire. Further, they will attempt to prise open the door by creating generally accepted guidelines and recommendations for MET institution management on how to qualify teachers of general English to become

lecturers in Maritime English, meeting at least the requirements of the STCW 1978/95 on the one hand, and on the other to give prospective Maritime English teachers an idea of what will be expected from them should they wish to teach seafarers at university or college level. Quite simply, teachers of Maritime English, just like all other instructors involved in the education and training of seafarers, have to comply with Section A-I/6(3) of the STCW 1978/95 which requires, that "all instructors... are appropriately qualified for the particular types and levels of training... of seafarers either on board or ashore."

Specifically the following questions need to be addressed (see also section 3 of this paper):

- What types of Maritime English instructors are currently employed at MET institutions? What is the usefulness and limitations of each type?
- What are the linguistic and methodical requirements of a "qualified" Maritime English instructor? How can these requirements be met?
- What is the minimum maritime background knowledge required? How can this be best acquired?
- What further qualification measures for Maritime English instructors in the maritime field and in language teaching/ acquisition methodology can be identified?
- Which professional organisation or affiliation would best assist Maritime English instructors in meeting the requirements of STCW 1978/95?
- Is there a suitable body to oversee developments and advise IAMU on progress?

This paper is intended to kick-off the process, providing descriptions, initial thoughts and comments on the topic. Round-table discussions will be held at upcoming IAMU and IMEC (International Maritime English Conference) gatherings where the participants, inter alia, will be invited to complete a questionnaire. The authors will record the results in a complementary paper to the present one, along with their reflections and recommendations.

## **2. A Typology of Maritime English Instructors**

In MET institutions worldwide the following types of Maritime English instructors may be found.

### **2.1 Career Specialists**

Within this group graduates from universities or general English teachers are to be found who are a priori hired by MET institutions to teach will-be seafarers in Maritime English and who no longer have the time or possibility to professionally delve into their favourite authors or indulge in the vagaries of Anglo-American culture with their students. Such professionals, if they take their jobs seriously, have to be willing to "marinate" themselves, a task that can be time consuming. More precisely, it takes a general English language teacher at least two years of "land based" qualification, making use of many different sources of information, before roughly knowing what s/he is really teaching and the extent to which this is relevant and trade

related. This learning process will linger on throughout the instructor's active teaching lifetime. To be fair it has to be stated that a considerable number of well-respected colleagues have taken this route becoming good, indeed excellent Maritime English lecturers; but it does take time and requires a good portion of enthusiasm to grapple with "all that salty stuff". This group of teachers enjoys a comparatively good standing in the workplace since consultation, and even co-operation with technical subject colleagues, is usually the rule rather than the exception. However, it is not unusual for them to be looked upon as teachers of second hand knowledge by both the lecturers in maritime-technical subjects and by the management, with the result that rank and the subsequent rewards can vary negatively.

Managers should be aware, however, that it does not make sense to press general English teachers into a Maritime English job if they are not motivated to become fully engaged in this field.

How to motivate them then? The above qualification process may be considerably and efficiently shortened and optimised if teachers are sent aboard active merchant vessels for, say, at least half a year or even for shorter periods if repeated at certain intervals. It is not at all necessary that Maritime English instructors have to hold a certificate of competence as deck or engineer officers; the GOC (GMDSS) could be a reasonable merit, nonetheless. A number of maritime academies/ universities run training vessels where extraordinarily good facilities to acquire the necessary maritime background knowledge may be found. Furthermore, shipping companies with a direct connection to MET institutions and/or an interest in quality training are willing to accept maritime laymen/ women on board their vessels just for the cost of their nutrition, or under an agreement that the crew, in return, will receive "free" on-the-job English language training. This experience, usually perceived by the participants as highly motivating, not only allows the future specialist to soak up all kinds of maritime information from the marine environment at the corresponding maritime-technical faculties of their institutions, but also usually results in sufficient knowledge and hands-on experience being gained for sound and effective Maritime English teaching to be practiced. Indeed, confronted by a class of "wannabe" seafarers an important means of gaining respect is that of the "street-cred" of the instructor, or in this case "seafaring credibility".

A noteworthy procedure where general English teachers who wish to become qualified Maritime English instructors is applied at the Qingdao Ocean Shipping Mariners College (QMC), P.R. China. The corresponding teacher is supervised by an experienced Maritime English lecturer and has to acquire or upgrade her/his maritime background knowledge by attending specific courses performed at the College. Then s/he has to embark on a vessel, be it a training ship or an active merchant ship, for a contracted period of time, at least three months. After this s/he has to sit an examination designed to assess the general maritime and specific Maritime English knowledge acquired. Having successfully passed all these steps, only then will the employee be entitled to be called a Maritime English lecturer and to teach Maritime English to nautical and/or engineering degree courses, and (sic!) at an increased hourly rate.

This appears to be an admirable system; perhaps instigated, and maybe facilitated, by the fact that QMC is the prime MET institution of COSCO, one of the largest shipping companies in the world. However, the authors have observed a reluctance on the part of most MET institutions to promote the design of any programme to “marinate” their Maritime English instructors.

The above group of Career Specialist Maritime English instructors may be found in ones and twos at MET institutions but never in the sort of numbers that would be desirable, or in fact required under STCW 1978/95. Where they do exist they usually enjoy a high reputation and are on equal terms with their colleagues in the maritime/ technical fields. Consequently, there is often parity concerning rank and the associated rewards; at some universities, for example, university lecturers of Maritime English can be found and even full professors have been appointed holding chairs of Maritime English/ Maritime Communication. However, at others, Maritime English teachers hold the lowest academic ranks or are even hired on a temporary basis. Sadly, seniority often results in more administration and less teaching with the result that this category is exposed less to the needy students who are subsequently instructed by general English teachers. If the majority of institutions were to promote and encourage Maritime English qualifications many of today’s problems would be solved and this paper made redundant. However, reality looks quite different. Thus, one of the goals of this initiative is investigate why this is the case.

## **2.2 English Language and Literature Graduates**

The vast majority, possibly almost all, of this category of English lecturers are qualified English language teachers holding a university degree in English language and literature. They are enthusiastic lovers of the beauty of the English language and its literature and less burning freaks of applied linguistics, especially of English for Specific Purposes, not to mention Maritime English, as they are not trained and sometimes not even motivated for the task. They are satisfied with teaching general English which often occupies a considerable amount of hours at many MET institutions, especially in those countries where the educational system at the primary, and especially secondary levels, does not pay that much attention to English language teaching/ acquisition as in a number of, for example, west and central European countries. Here general English is seldom taught today to nautical/ engineering students since it is believed that they are well prepared in this field. The teachers involved indeed play third fiddle at their individual schools. However, as English language instruction is a so-called STCW 1978/95 subject and not dispensable from a certificated curriculum, the management of a number of MET institutions employ these teachers and do not ask too much about what exactly they teach in their classes. This is usually due to the simple fact that better qualified personnel are not at their disposal, especially if there is little attraction regarding salary, promotion, and other conditions for general English teachers to undertake a pains-taking qualification in the maritime field.

## 2.3 Former Seafarers

An attractive solution would seem to be to engage deck, engineer or radio officers who, for whatever reasons, have abandoned sailing, taken up regular English language university courses and graduated as BA, MA or secondary school teachers. However, as with all "ideals", such persons are rarely encountered. Thus at some institutions the tendency has been for ex shipmasters, deck, engineer or radio officers, who are thought to have, or claim to have, a good command of the English language, to replace the trained English instructors and teach Maritime English. This primarily occurs at colleges where there are no, or not enough, qualified Maritime English teachers and/or where the general English teachers are either reticent to deal with the Maritime English part since they have no idea, or the wrong idea, of what is expected of them, or where they are not prepared to be engaged in a non-poetic, prosaic job, preferring to stick to the general scene they are familiar with. It should be noted here that in the authors' investigations female members of staff, who are well represented as language instructors at many maritime institutions, have indicated the prevalence of sexism; that women are thought to be incapable and/or inappropriate to teach a "technical" subject such as Maritime English; further, that they would not be welcome on board an operating vessel, and in certain circumstances, in the port that it operates from.

The authors have observed many different "Maritime English" classes in progress given by ex seafarers and based on these experiences conclude that:

- in almost all cases the teacher's command of English, i.e. pronunciation, grammar, fluency, intelligibility, etc., ranked from just tolerable to very poor
- in almost all cases the students were over-challenged, i.e. they either hardly understood the language used or the language applied was so sophisticated that they failed to grasp the subject matter the instructor was speaking about
- in almost all cases if Maritime English teaching or language teaching in general was taking place it was in an entirely haphazard manner, basic pedagogical skills being noticeable in their absence
- in almost all cases there was no adherence to a curriculum where students could follow their progress, there being no revision, briefing or preparation at the beginning of the class and no follow-up or debriefing

The widespread notion, that a good English speaker must also be a good English teacher is simply misleading and can even be detrimental to the students. Advocates of this standpoint completely neglect that even native English speakers need to qualify to become professional English language teachers. Qualifications, and the means to attain them, are paramount to STCW and underpin the drive for improved, sustainable quality within the shipping industry.

An interesting and attractive qualification system is applied, for instance, at Danish MET institutions. Here deck, engineer or former radio officers possessing an extraordinarily high standard of English and wishing to teach Maritime English have to take a reduced, but more than basic, extramural course of two years following an individually tailored programme which includes methodology, (applied) linguistics, curriculum development etc., at a specified

university which is authorised to perform such. All the courses are paid for by the corresponding maritime academy and the time spent is counted as work time.

A current trend, which appears to be on the increase at MET institutions in non-native English speaking countries worldwide, is the delivery of technical subjects in English. In principle there is nothing wrong with this, indeed, it is even a good idea. However, certain provisions should be considered:

- that this specific form of Maritime English teaching is regarded as **one** element in contributing to trade-related Maritime English teaching which is not suited to fully or even partly replace, the teaching of “proper” Maritime English linguistics/ communication
- that the lecturer has a command of English which is suitable for the task
- that the lecturer has received (basic) training in communication strategies
- that the students are neither over-stretched by the language used nor by the content of the lecture
- that the lecture is prepared in such a way that a co-operating Maritime English instructor is able to support it before and/or after (“twinning”)

The essence of this so-called "twinning" approach is what is known as Content Based and Communicative Language Teaching (CBT/CLT) that involves the partnering of technical subjects with Maritime English. Since a significant body of trained and qualified Maritime English instructors (category 2.1 above) is not likely to exist overnight or in the foreseeable future, this is the only practical way to put Maritime English lecturers and those who teach technical subjects, in one and the same boat. This, the authors wish to ascertain, will be to the benefit of all graduates and to the industry while raising the reputation of Maritime English lecturers and the essential as well as responsible task they are being asked to perform. Further, it will also promote the Maritime English proficiency of the technical subject teachers in the longer term.

## **2.4 Native English Speaking Persons**

Native English-speaking persons, “backpackers” and housewives among them, temporarily hired as teachers, belong to this category. The expectation is that such employees will solve, or help to solve, the problem of motivating students to listen and speak in English. However, these persons seldom bring with them teaching skills or maritime knowledge. Often, too often, they are not even trained teachers; neither do they hold a university degree in applied linguistics. Generally they are left to their own devices to work outside the main curriculum and have no contact with the nautical and engineering staff.

However, most of the native English speaking persons at MET institutions the authors have interviewed are willing to give their classes a maritime flavour but lack the know-how and assistance to do so. This can be successfully achieved by establishing a "buddy" system where experienced Maritime English instructors are appointed to introduce the native English speaking "teachers" to this special language and to integrate their class activities within the core programme. More generally speaking, the role of such "teachers", and the benefits to be

gained, have clearly to be defined within the context of the General and Maritime English curricula in order to draw optimum profit from their work.

One may learn from the above that the Maritime English teaching community needs a solidly based investigation into the professional profile of a Maritime English instructor. This should not be just an academic exercise, but, inter alia, aim to create **generally accepted guidelines/recommendations** for MET institution management on how to qualify teachers of general English to become lecturers in Maritime English, meeting at least the requirements of the STCW 1978/95 on the one hand, and on the other to give prospective candidates to a Maritime English teaching job an idea of what will be expected from them should they wish to teach seafarers at university or college level.

Further, it would be wise to consider and catalogue the exact role and function of the other categories of English instructors, who undoubtedly will continue to be employed at maritime institutions, so that there is no misunderstanding in the contribution of each.

### **3. Establishing the Professional Profile of a Qualified Maritime English Instructor**

As indicated in the introduction to this paper there is an urgent need to establish the professional profile of a qualified the Maritime English instructor in order both to satisfy the demands of the current legislation and the requirements of the maritime industry. The topics listed below require careful consideration and discussion in order to obtain reliable data for further in-depth research, as firm and comprehensive answers cannot yet be given. Thus, they should be regarded as impulses or waypoints for round-table discussion during the IAMU Assembly.

- Categorising the profiles of the various types of Maritime English instructors employed and clarifying the usefulness and limitations of each;
- Identifying the linguistic and methodical requirements of a “qualified” Maritime English instructor and the ways of how to meet them;
- Identifying the minimum horizontal maritime background knowledge (scope of maritime knowledge) and vertical maritime background knowledge (depth of maritime knowledge) to be expected of a Maritime English instructor and the ways of acquiring such;
- Identifying adequate, appropriate and practicable further qualification measures for Maritime English instructors in the maritime field and in language teaching/ acquisition methodology;
- Proposing an appropriate professional organisation or affiliation of the Maritime English teaching staff at MET institutions to meet the requirements of STCW 1978/95;
- Proposing a suitable body to oversee developments and advise IAMU on progress.

## 4. Conclusion

Throughout most of the last century it was common for ships to be financed, built, managed, commercially traded, manned and registered by a single country. Communication among parties in the operations chain was not usually a problem. However, over the past 25 years or so, 80% of the world's merchant ships have become multilingual and multiethnic in crew composition. As a result the opportunities for communication lapses leading to human error resulting in danger to the ship, the people on board and the environment, have greatly increased.

It has been during this period that, coinciding with the international acceptance of English as the lingua franca of trade and commerce, Maritime English has gone from a minor, preparatory subject to one considered by many people as the key obstacle to be overcome within MET institutions. This has been reflected variously in the number of class periods allocated to Maritime English, the improved status of its instructors, the appointment of subject professors, extensive research, IMO proclamations and the growing interest in relevant conferences, workshops, etc. In fact, in a growing number of institutions today Maritime English is regarded as a co-equal subject of MET with the same rights and duties of the more traditional subjects such as navigation and engineering. Similarly its teachers are recognised as bearing considerable responsibility for the safety of seafarers and the ships they sail in. All this implies that those in charge of Maritime English instruction in general, and the Maritime English instructors themselves in particular, are not only required to keep abreast with current developments in methodology, linguistics, and curriculum development, but are also fully aware of, and heed to, at least the minimum requirements as laid down in the STCW 1978/95. Fortunately professional bodies such as IAMU and other international associations are in a position to offer global fora where all interested parties may partake. It is an exciting prospect to be able to chart the progress in the years to come.

In conclusion, it may be timely to recollect why one working language within our industry is a prerequisite, not just a tool, by recalling the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa in his poem in honour of Prince Henry the Navigator:

*For God desired that all the world be one,  
And that the sea unite and not divide.*

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