

**SEAFARER TRAINING**

Despite the best intentions of the industry, we all know there's some way to go before English is fully established as the language of the sea. **SARAH ROBINSON** finds out what the academic community is doing to move things along...

# Are we all on the same page?



Improving seafarers' English is vital for safety and good morale  
Picture: Danny Cornelissen



Professor Peter Trenkner of Wismar University and the International Maritime Lecturers' Association

Poor communication remains a major cause of maritime accidents — and is linked to numerous other problems, including shipboard bullying and low retention rates for trainees. Over the last 40 years or so, the industry's main answer to these challenges has been to try and ensure that all crew members can communicate in a common language: English.

As multinational crewing gradually became the norm in the late 20th century, English was an obvious choice for the 'language of the sea', as it was already so widely used around the world. But it has taken a while for the require-

ment to speak English onboard ship to be formally enshrined in international maritime legislation, and the legislation we do have is not always implemented.

The most important piece of legislation establishing English as the official language of the sea is the SOLAS Convention as amended in 2004, which states the following in Chapter V, regulation 14:

'English shall be used on the bridge as the working language for bridge-to-bridge and bridge-to-shore safety communication as well as for communications onboard between the pilot and bridge watchkeeping personnel.'

This regulation is reinforced by the 2010 STCW Convention. In Regulation 1/14, STCW 2010 states:

'Each Administration shall require every company to ensure that: ... at all times on board ships there shall be effective oral communication in accordance with chapter V, regulation 14, paragraphs 3 and 4 of the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea, 1974 (SOLAS), as amended.'

In addition, officers in charge of a navigational watch on ships of 500 gross tonnes or more are required under the 1995 STCW Convention to know and use the IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP), which are

in English.

It is up to individual IMO member states how they go about training their seafarers to speak English and learn the SMCP, but the IMO does supply guidance in the form of a 'model course' (IMO Model Course 3.17 Maritime English) to show what trainees should cover in their Maritime English studies.

Yet there is an obvious problem with all of these regulations and official guidelines. As anyone who works at sea can testify, we haven't actually reached a point yet where all officers — let alone other crew members — can communicate effectively in English. One reason

for this is that the IMO legislation requiring the use of English onboard ship is not quite watertight, meaning that there are ways for companies and national governments to wriggle out of their obligation to ensure their seafarers can truly speak the language of the sea. 'SOLAS 2004 specifies that English must be used between ship and shore, and between a ship's crew and a pilot, but it does not actually require English to be used among fellow crew members,' points out Professor Peter Trenkner of Wismar University. Prof Trenkner and his colleagues at the International Maritime Lecturers' Association (IMLA) believe

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**SEAFARER TRAINING**

## MARITIME TESTS OF ENGLISH LANGUAGE

### Let MarTEL test your ENGLISH

**Why MarTEL?**

One of the key problems in the maritime industry is that almost 80% of collisions at sea are caused by human error, nearly half of which are attributed to communication failures among the crew. MarTEL was developed after identifying a lack of any Maritime English standards for seafarers, and has the ultimate goal of improving safety at sea by reducing accidents due to communication breakdowns. MarTEL has been designed to test mariners' Maritime English across a number of different ranks and positions: Rating, Officer Cadets, Officers and Senior Officers, across both Deck and Engineering positions.

**What are the Phases?**

The Phase 1 MarTEL test is designed for cadets entering a maritime training institution, and tests the English language in a maritime context. As such, an extensive knowledge of the maritime industry and related duties is not required.

The MarTEL Phase 2 test is split into two different tests: one for Deck Officers and the other for Engineer Officers. It tests English language proficiency in a maritime context, with specific focus upon the duties and responsibilities of both positions, including IMCA.

The MarTEL Phase 3 test is also split into two different tests: one for Senior Deck Officers and the other for Senior Engineer Officers. It tests English language proficiency in a maritime context, with specific focus upon the duties and responsibilities of both positions.

The MarTEL Phase 4 test for Ratings assesses the English language proficiency of Deck and Engineer ratings, who are personnel assisting Officers on board a ship. This Phase is also split into two separate tests for Deck and Engineer.

**Enhanced Oral Test**

The MarTEL Enhanced Oral Test is a multi-level test, designed as a reliable way of assessing the spoken language proficiency of prospective employees or trainees applying to maritime organisations and institutions. The material is set in a maritime context. It involves numerous interactive speaking activities, and is undertaken face to face with an examiner. It is far more comprehensive than the other speaking sections.

**Mobile Application**

MarTEL has an Android mobile application containing practice questions in the same format of the tests for each and every phase. This will benefit test takers in self-study and test preparation.

**Study & Teacher's Guidelines**

Comprehensive study guidelines facilitate test preparation for every phase. Teacher's guidelines and teachers in creating meaningful lesson content to prepare for the MarTEL tests.

**The MarTEL project: setting standards for Maritime English**

website: [www.maritel.pro](http://www.maritel.pro) e-mail: [info@maritel.pro](mailto:info@maritel.pro)

that a small amendment would make all the difference. To address this, they would like to see the following wording in the relevant SOLAS paragraph (proposed addition in red):

'English shall be used on the bridge as the working language for bridge-to-bridge and bridge-to-shore safety communication as well as for communications on board, and between the pilot and bridge watchkeeping personnel.'

'The addition of this one word, "and", would give the whole regulation a more comprehensive impact, and cover most of the communicatively relevant situations onboard ship,' argues Prof Trenkner. 'Unfortunately, as a non-governmental organisation, IMLA is unable to propose such an amendment, so we are hoping that we can work with an interested IMO member state to pursue this.'

The other big issue to address is implementation. Although perhaps imperfect, legislation on the use of English at sea does exist, but how is this to be implemented consistently around the world? In other words, what can be done to ensure that all seafarers are genuinely able to use the IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases, and that the more senior ranks can speak English well enough to communicate effectively with

VTS operators and pilots?

College-based training in Maritime English is a large part of the answer. Support for this training from employers and national governments ranges from excellent to non-existent, but the world's Maritime English tutors are doing their best to get their students up to scratch. These tutors are also highly aware of the accidents caused by poor communication at sea, and of the isolation and frustration felt by seafarers who cannot socialise together in a common language onboard ship. So Maritime English courses usually aim to go beyond the basics of functional language, encouraging students to achieve a higher level of competence that will allow them to use English confidently in a range of contexts.

It would be fair to say that the academic discipline of Maritime English is still emerging from its infancy, although it does have its own professional forum: the International Maritime English Conference (IMEC), which is part of IMLA. IMEC is working hard to share best practice and disseminate new research, but the standards and methods of Maritime English teaching vary around the world, with little consensus on the teaching materials that should be used, the level of attainment that should be reached or the quali-

cations that should be offered.

Acknowledging this, the European Union set up the MarTEL project in 2007 to develop a set of Maritime English standards — as well as computer-based tests to demonstrate that students had met these standards. The idea was that MarTEL would eventually come to be recognised and trusted throughout the shipping industry as a measure of a student's Maritime English competence. The first MarTEL project (2007–2009) created a set of Maritime English standards and tests with study guidelines for seafarers at the following levels:

- **Phase 1** — Cadet Level
- **Phase 2** — Officer Level (deck and engineering)
- **Phase 3** — Senior Officer Level (deck and engineering)

In 2010, further EU funding was awarded to an extension project, MarTEL Plus, which would develop the following features:

- enhanced speaking test, with one-to-one examination
- test and study guidelines of Maritime English for ratings
- teachers' guidelines for all MarTEL tests
- mobile phone application with practice tests
- enhancement of test centre quality control systems

Both stages of the MarTEL project were led by the UK-based educational development firm Centre for the Factories of the Future (whose slightly mysterious name is a legacy of a previous EU initiative). Partners included academic institutions such as the National Maritime College of Ireland and the World Maritime University, as well as professional bodies such as the Finnish ship officers' unions and the Irish Institute of Master Mariners.

MarTEL Plus reached its conclusion in November 2012, with a conference in London at which the various partners in the project came together to report on the various strands of the development work that they had carried out. A reporter from the Telegraph attended the conference as an observer, and it was obvious that care had been taken to ensure the tests had been assessed for validity (i.e. Do they really test what they set out to test?) and reliability (Do the tests remain a consistent measure of competence over time and when taken in different places?). The MarTEL Plus tests had also been thoroughly piloted to iron out mistakes and check that nautical college students found them straightforward to use.

The contributors to the MarTEL Plus conference were pleased with the project's results, and one speaker said: 'Hopefully this will smooth the path for establishing also standardised teaching methods and materials of Maritime English for the use of Maritime English teachers all over the world.'

With maritime academics clearly striving to raise standards and improve consistency at their end, it is to be hoped that international legislators, national governments and employers will now match this effort to improve the English-language competence of seafarers. Maybe one day we'll be able to say that English is the language of the sea and really mean it.

■ The MarTEL Plus tests are now undergoing final fine-tuning, and are due to be launched this summer — see [www.maritel.pro](http://www.maritel.pro) for more information.

# A welcome addition to meagre Maritime English resources

## English for the Maritime Industry

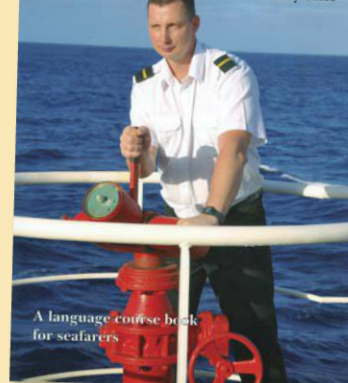
By Tony Grice  
Ildris  
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Accompanying CD £17.00 — ISBN 978 09574 54712  
■ [www.idrisconsultancy.co.uk](http://www.idrisconsultancy.co.uk)

As the momentum builds to standardise and professionalise Maritime English studies around the world, an increasing number of new teaching materials are coming onto the market. One of the latest is **English for the Maritime Industry**, by Tony Grice.

Aimed at pre-intermediate level students, the book covers the material recommended in the IMO Model Course in Maritime English, with a strong emphasis on spoken English. Each chapter includes a section on Standard Marine Communication Phrases which gives models of radio exchanges and provides simulations for students.

## ENGLISH for the MARITIME INDUSTRY

Tony Grice



A language course book for seafarers

There is help with pronunciation and a detailed glossary, as well as a bank of adapted maritime documents which follow up the theme of each unit and provide extra reading comprehension practice.

The nuts and bolts of the linguistic content will be familiar to anyone who has taught English as a foreign language, but the practice exercises are set in a maritime context. For example, in an exercise on comparative adjectives, students have to fill in the gaps in sentences like the following: 'A gantry can take a ..... load than a ship's derrick' [answer: heavier]. Acknowledging that many of the teachers will not themselves have seafaring experience, the book includes background information on all the maritime themes.

■ In common with most books featured in the Nautilus Telegraph, **English for the Maritime Industry** is available at a 25% discount in the Marine Society online shop [www.marinesocietyshop.org](http://www.marinesocietyshop.org) — just type in the promotional code Nautilus.

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## Seafarer SUPPORT



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**“The addition of this one word, “and”, would give SOLAS a more comprehensive impact on shipboard communication”**

Professor Peter Trenkner



Getting a message across at sea can be a challenge — even face to face  
Picture: Danny Cornelissen