

HUMAN FACTOR

Cracking the comms conundrum

It's time the industry paid more attention to crews' poor English skills, says **Martin Ziarati** of the Centre for Factories of the Future

..... Would you believe that up to 40% of collisions at sea are related to poor communication between crew members? Most of them are caused by failures in radio communication even in routine conversations, but some also through face-to-face communication deficiencies. Unfortunately, many seafarers still tend not to take Maritime English education seriously enough.

Around 75% of seafarers presently employed aboard merchant ships or at work in most European ports neither come from European Union countries, nor have been educated in institutions with these countries. As a result, they are not fluent in English or even able to speak the language at all. English is now universally accepted as 'the language of the sea', but the quality of English spoken by the world's seafarers is very uneven.

The accident described in Table 1 is just one of the many examples of how poor onboard communication can cause accidents at sea. The left hand column in the table represents the dialogue between the officer of the watch (2/0) and helmsman (QM) onboard the Maersk Dover, as stated in the UK's Marine Accident Investigation Branch report, whilst the right hand column shows the Standard Maritime Communication Phrases (SMCP) code that could be used instead, as well as stating when the speaker has provided unnecessary information.

The use of colloquial language onboard caused the



close-quarters situation between the ro-ro passenger ferry Maersk Dover, the tanker Apollonia and the container vessel Maersk Vancouver in the Dover Strait on 17 October 2006.

..... How would you respond to the command 'Wreck ahead'?

This question is related to the next example of an accident caused by miscommunication (the name and nationality of the vessel are withheld for legal reasons).

In this accident, which happened around 12 years ago, an officer onboard his ship heard 'Wreck ahead' and, because of his relatively low level of understanding of the English language, he did not react properly. He kept the position, continued ahead and collided with the wreck. However, on this occasion we cannot so easily criticise those involved, as the command 'Wreck ahead' is not part of the IMO SMCP Code.

Use of the SMCP Code would have made all the difference in the Maersk Dover incident, but the only way to avoid another 'Wreck ahead' incident would be to improve the overall English



language competence of the officer at the helm.

..... But how exactly do we address such a daunting challenge as improving Maritime English standards across the board? The UK-based Centre for Factories of the Future (C4FF) and its European partners are working on this thorny problem. In 2011, they finalised the initial development of international standards for Maritime English, called MarTEL. Supported by the EU through its Leonardo da Vinci programme, the project's aim was to create standards for Maritime English at three different levels, complete with

teaching and online testing facilities. These standards — set at Cadet, Officer and Senior Officer levels — are soon to be implemented in maritime education and training institutions around the world.

However, the initial MarTEL project did not include standards for ratings. A series of English language tests and learning materials for ratings (MarTEL Phase R) have therefore now been developed by C4FF and its Turkish partner TUDEV.

The hope is that this new standard will not only improve safety at sea, but will also help to reduce the seafarer shortage in Europe. MarTEL Phase R is intended as an entry-level

qualification, giving trainees a secure grounding and starting them on the pathway to a more senior officer position.

Other new features have also recently been added to the MarTEL scheme. The new additions include a set of comprehensive Maritime English teachers' guidelines for each MarTEL standard including Phase R, a learning and revision application for mobile phones and a separate enhanced speaking exam for all MarTEL standards. This provides a two-tier system for the assessment of speaking skills — consisting of the current MarTEL test and a separate oral exam which is assessed through a

one-to-one session with a qualified examiner. Having these two forms of speaking assessment should better meet the needs of the maritime industry, where oral communication is emphasised. The oral exam is recorded and sent for assessment to a verification centre in the UK.

..... Further work in this important field was underway as the Telegraph went to press. The results of the MarTEL and MarTEL Plus projects were due to be presented at the Maritime English Standards Conference in London on 23 November, which will be covered in the next Telegraph.

Commands captured by the VDR		Standard Maritime Communication Phrases (SMCP Code)
2/0	Mate (QM) just come round, astern of him will you.	Hard-a-starboard
QM	Yeah, astern of the one just...	Hard-a-starboard
2/0	You see the Maersk one? Come ahead of him and astern of him, but don't go too close to him.	Superfluous information
QM	Wait 'til I get round here is that alright?	Superfluous information
2/0	Mate (QM) no, just keep to port now.	Keep her on our portside
2/0	He ain't on my radar him, that Maersk ship (Maersk Vancouver), now just keep steady, steady as you are, steady as you are.	Steady as she goes
QM	Steady steady steady, coming steady alright, nothing happened go round him.	Steady as she goes
2/0	Yea, I'm gunna wait til he's about there.	Superfluous information
2/0	Right, come round to starboard now.	Hard-a-starboard
QM	Right, coming round to starboard now.	Hard-a-starboard
2/0	Don't make it too obvious for the old thingy-me-bob	Superfluous information

Table 1 Actions taken by Maersk Dover



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