



What language should be used in Maritime Training?

By Murray Goldberg

Introduction

The maritime industry, by definition, is international. Yet mariners from all corners of the earth are required to work together, communicate and interact. They are also required to train and be trained. Despite the language barriers, the system works as well as it does for a few reasons - one of them being that the IMO, in 1995, designated one language, English, as the official language for mariners. Building on that, the IMO issued the SMCP (Standard Marine Communication Phrases) to further enhance the ability of mariners from various parts of the world to communicate in a standardized way. Standard English maritime testing, such as MarTEL, has been created and employed to further ensure minimum universal communication proficiency. This is all good and necessary, but it does not negate the fact that English is not the native language of most mariners, and that by some accounts 80% of maritime accidents are caused by human error, with 50% being attributable to poor communication.

It is in this context that Yuli Chen and Hejun Geng, lecturers at the Merchant Marine College at the Shanghai Maritime University, decided to look at the language in which mariners are trained. The two obvious choices are to train mariners either in English or in their native language. The former has the potential advantage of improving English proficiency in the trainees (at the expense of training outcomes). The latter has the potential advantage of improving training outcomes (at the expense of English language proficiency). Instead of these two alternatives, Chen and Geng propose bilingual MET as a possibility - training mariners in a combination of their native language and English.

Chen and Geng discussed the philosophy and practice of bilingual maritime education in an interesting paper presented at IMLA 20 - the 20th conference on maritime education and training. Their paper was entitled "BILINGUAL EDUCATION IN MET: METHODOLOGY AND PRACTICE". Today's blog summarizes their thoughts on bilingual maritime training.

The Problem

According to Chen and Geng, most MET institutions provide instruction wholly in the native language of the students. Yet this creates a problem:

"There is hence a common practice that in non-English-speaking countries and regions seafarers are completely educated and trained in [their] native language except for the maritime English course... [This may] give rise to an academic knowledge gap between the transfer from English to [the] native language and further causes a delay for seafarers to appropriately apply the academic knowledge in the real English-working environment on board."

The authors further reflect that teaching non-English speakers wholly in English is impractical at best, and is therefore not a viable alternative. Instead, they propose bilingual MET.



Bilingual Education

The authors describe bilingual education as follows:

“Bilingual education involves curriculum instruction used alternatively in two languages. In the broad sense, bilingual education is a strategic approach to deal with the proficiency relationship between a minority language and a majority one for the student. However, in the specific sense, bilingual education is mainly focusing on the method that the lecturers use alternatively two languages in class, very often a native and a secondary language.”

They describe two general forms of bilingual education - additive, and subtractive. In the first, the goal is to add new knowledge by teaching that knowledge in the non-native language. In the latter form, the goal is to replace existing native-language knowledge using terms from the new language. In the words of Chen and Geng:

“[Bilingual education can] either be additive or subtractive, being premised either on the value of adding academic knowledge of another language to that of the student’s existing language repertoire or, conversely, of losing or replacing one of language with another.”

The authors talk about ways to measure success of bilingual education - notably there are two goals that it is meant to address:

1. Language and literacy development - the main goal here being to make non-English speakers proficient in English by teaching them domain-specific knowledge in the language they are to use when operating in that domain (as mariners).
2. Academic achievement - it must be acknowledged that it is not sufficient that the students learn English. They must also, of course, learn the topic of instruction.

Bilingual MET in China

According to the authors, as early as 2001, the Chinese ministry of Education had implemented bilingual education in universities and colleges as a way to “cultivate the international talents to meet the educational challenge of the future”. In 2011, the Shanghai Maritime University launched a bilingual Bridge Navigational Systems course. In this course, teachers are selected who are at least Second Mates and who have significant seagoing experience. They are also selected to have proficiency and academic knowledge of the subject both in English and Chinese.

“[The] teaching syllabus is also developed in both languages. Students ... are provided with both the Chinese textbook and original English one including the English electronic slides. The academic knowledge in class is introduced in full English firstly and then repeated in Chinese if students [have any] doubt. Assessment is conducted in English.”

So clearly there is a good deal of English used in the course, and the students are supported with materials both in their native language and English. I find it particularly interesting that assessments were conducted in English. This, no doubt, was an instrumental factor in providing the necessary incentive and motivation for students to make use of, and pay attention to, the English language materials even though this would have required more effort on their part.

Although the authors do not present any empirical evidence of the program’s success, they do provide the following:



“According to the assessment results and the participation activities of the students in class, it is concluded that students were well motivated and expressed high enthusiasm to attend this class since their maritime English and academic knowledge were also further improved compared to the students’ instructed in full Chinese language.”

Conclusion

The authors conclude that while bilingual MET does create additional burdens for instructors (such as additional time, costs and a higher degree of language and pedagogical competence), they feel as though the positive outcomes are worth it. Indeed, at the very least this is an area that deserves further experimentation and analysis. It would be great to hear from any readers who have experience in this area - either as instructors or as trainees.

For more similar articles, please refer to www.maritimeprofessional.com