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Do we need standards for Maritime Englısh?

Introduction

The paper presents the assumptions and first results of an international project MarTEL - Maritime Test of English Language [2]. The project in which the Maritime University of Szczecin is involved aims at setting standards of competency for Maritime English by means of transfering already existing norms for the certification of the English language as well as those in the IMO model courses.

1. MarTEL Project

The international MarTEL project is one of a series of EU projects which are developed with the participation of the Maritime University of Szczecin. The project is financed by the European Union with Leonardo da Vinci funds. Its aim is to work out international standards for Maritime English. There is lack of standards for certification at the international, European or national level. There are some guidelines and recommendations pertaining to the education and training, curricula and mminimum requirements, for example as defined in the STCW Code. They tackle however only a part of the overall professional competences of the seafarer. Thus the only confirmation of maritime competences concerning the

Fig. 1. MUS Rector signing the Agreement

language is a given professional licence, e. g. Officer in Charge of a Navigational Watch Certificate. Another, additional kind of attestation can be produced in the form of a school completion diploma or a certificate of a language course. In case of STCW Convention the knowledge of active skills of English is restricted to a set of phrases called SMCP (Standard Maritime Communication Phrases). A question arises whether this limited command of English relying only on the knowledge of the phrases can ensure appropriate level of navigational safety and provide for adequate communication onboard the vessel.

The necessity of ensuring effective communication was highlighted in the 39th session of STW, 2008. Admittedly it was mainly concerned with the place (space) on the ship but it would be hard to imagine that it did not account for personal communication as well. Lack of language standards for respective levels of responsibilities on the ship seems dificult to comprehend. There certainly exists a need for the standardisation or even certification. The development of a sequence of such standards for Maritime English is precisely the task that the educational institutions from the following seven European countries set themselves: England, Turkey, Norway, Poland, Slovenia and Scotland. These standards are intended for respective levels of responsibilities and departments including officers, chief officers and also pilots. Furthermore a test of English is to be developed for those who wish to pursue a career of ship's officers by joining a Merchant Navy school.

2. Maritime language competences

The problem of sea personnel education has been dealt with for a long time in the international arena [7]. It underpins the enhancement of safety of shipping. It has also been readily perceived by IMO, the European Union, classification societies, governments – flag states and ship owners. For example, EMSA [1] reports that on all ships registered in the member states, mariners of over 40 different non - EU countries are employed. Around 75% of seafarers employed on EU registered ships do not come from the Eurpoean Union and have been educated in the institutions outside the Unnion. It is surely not a favourable situation for a proper level of navigational safety to be ensured. Therefore EMSA experts continue the process of assessing the educational systems in respective countries. The Norwegian classification society DNV goes even further implementing their own system of competence certification: DNV Sea Skill [3]. The system, naturally does not negate the certificates issued by a given Administration or does not assess its educational systems. However, in its attempts to focus on narrow, specialised functions (type of vessel, kind of operation, the level of competency, etc.) the society will verify the competencies shown and will accordingly issue a certificate. IMCA (International Marine Contractors Association) will act in a similar way as it has developed a system of training and certifying the competences for the posts held in the marine offshore industry. IMO would like to draw on their experience inviting this organisation to take part in work connected with the revision of the STW Code and Convention. One of the seven priorities of the review laid down by IMO in the 38th session of STW is: "taking ino account specific conditions of short sea shipping and offshore industry".

It follows that most probably, in the future, new competences will be determined, which will apply to the positions occupied in this industry.

So would it not possible to act in the same way in case of maritime English? So that the acquired language abilities could be confirmed in accordance with internationally recognised standards and certificates? They would certify the acquired language competence. And it is precisely what the situation is like in case of many other professions, where it is possible to obtain a language certificate relating to one's profession or occupation. In Poland it concerns, for example, doctors, lawyers, civil servants but not seafarers. Hence the need for the standards to be established, which for the shipowner could be a clear sign of the language competence. The competence which, first of all, is necessary to accomplish professional tasks assigned to a given position and rank. But, on the other hand, could also give enough fluency to play various social roles (cultural awarness) while permanently staying in the environment of people of different nationalities.

Formally the maritime competence of the English language should be understood as the **ability of communicating effectively in English while running the ship at a**

predetermined level of competency. It should be stressed that the process of competence confirmation needs thorough assessment. The assessment should be objective and reliable. It poses, however, serious problems due to lack of measurable criteria and standards. The criteria can be both of prescriptive or descriptive nature.

3. The role of tests

The confirmation of competence will require its demonstration and evaluation. The International Maritime Organisation encourages modern tools, both in the process of training and verification to be used alongside more traditional methods. Wherever it is possible they should comprise Computer Based Technologies like computer software or simulators. Moreover, in the framework of the STCW Convention and Code comprehensive review carried out by IMO, during the 39th STW session, the updating of the Convention was suggested to include distance learning methods. The proposals refered to changes in section I of the Convention, regulation I/12 to contain the following text: „Parties may allow the training of seafarers by means of methods of distant learning and e-learning in accordance with the standards and other provisions set forth in section A-I/12,Part 3''.

Under the circumstances, a convenient form of verifying the competence can be employed that consists of tests. Access to them can be readily provided just by means of the Internet applications. Tests like those can be stored in specialised centres. The tests designed by task groups of experts would become available for a lot of people being trained in those centres or even outside them. Work of this kind has already been performed, alter alia, in the European project NetOskar [6]. Within this project a data bank comprising a few thousands of multiple choice questions was created. They cover the competences for all departments, functions and levels of responsibility included in the STCW Convention.

Applications making use of tests have several advantages, among other things:
- they are simple and instantly ready to use,
- they can be checked fast,
- they are objective,
- they can be quickly updated.

It is important not to overlook the opportunity of exercising other invaluable features of the test. The testing unit should motivate for learning (impel the testee to fill in the gaps in their knowledge- highlighting the areas in which they occur). Tests can be an excellent source of self-study (acquiring terminology, grammar, phrasal verbs, etc.). The problem while designing questions for a test boils down to the problem of creating a question of good quality. So what is meant by "good quality"? Here are some of the features:
- the question should be 100% accurate,
- in no case should it contain erroneous information,
- the topic of the question is essential,
- the question must not contain any misleading tricks – like double negation,
- the correct answer should be hard to guess,
- the question should be interesting and "appealing",
- questions should be supplemented with drawings, diagrams, photos, films, etc.

As for the Martel project the process of working out the most suitable techniques and methodologies is currently in progress. However the method of competence assessment by means of tests has been fully accepted (Fig. 2). They will embrace all four language skills of listening, speaking, reading, and writing- first of all in terms of communication but also taking use of English (grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation) into account.
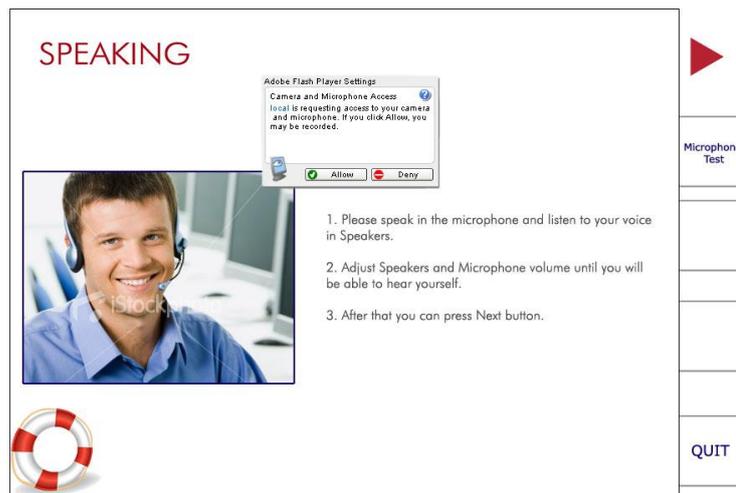
Fig. 2. Dialogue window – „Pronunciation" part - MarTEL

4. First results

For the process of new question development to be under control it is important to ensure the co-operation of the language experts from other institutions and potential users in making comments, reporting their remarks and observations. Each question, before it is fully incorporated into the system will be under close scrutiny of the indpendent experts. It will have gone through respective stages of the verification before being fully admitted. A reservation of any kind will result in the verification process of the question validity to start from the beginning – a correction will be made or the question withdrawn altogether. The question accepted for use is to be periodically verified. Should it become obsolete it will be brought to the fore or withdrawn. This kind of a procedure ensures the desirable quality of questions and functions of the whole system.
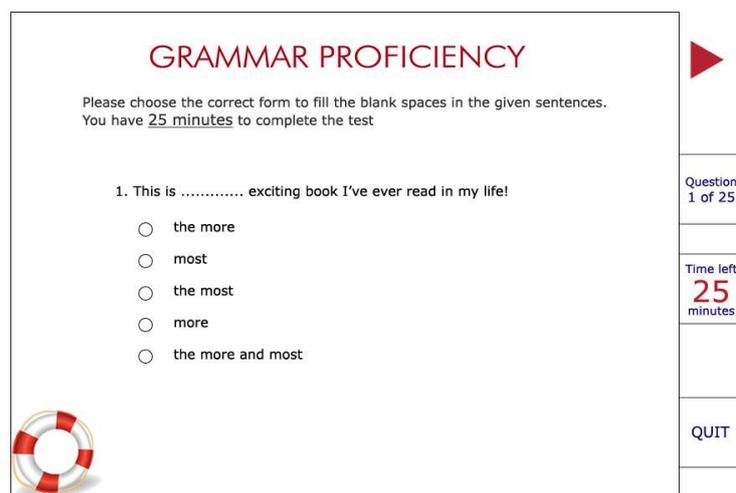

Fig. 3. An example of a question in the Grammar Proficency Part - MarTEL

First evaluation of the proposed questions for the Foundation test which was designed by a Martel task group took place, among other institutions, in the Maritime University of Szczecin. The participants were students and in service navigation officers. Relevant results of their answers accuracy for the test questions were shown in the graphs (Fig. 4, Fig. 5)

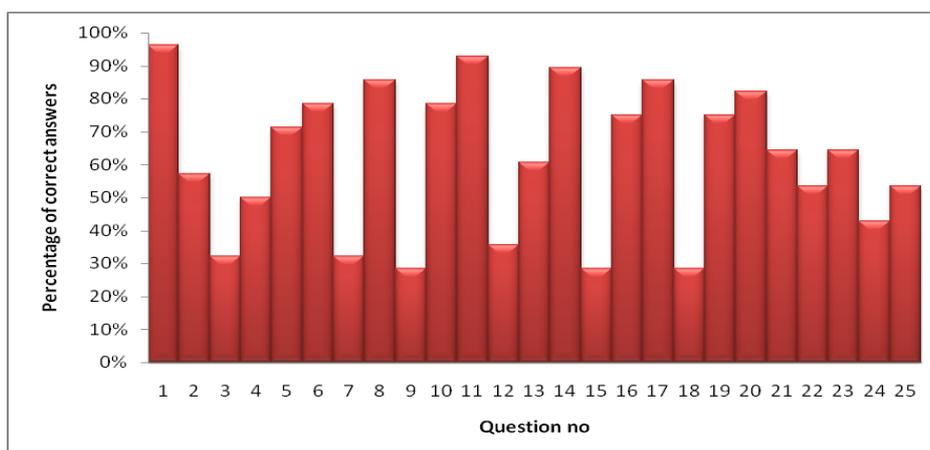Fig. 4. A MUS student taking the test, * photo A. Bąk

Fig. 5. Grammar test performers (students) – proposal of grammar proficiency test, MarTEL

The analysis of the results achieved enabled to identify which of the questions proposed needed revising. The questions enjoying either too many correct or incorrect answers were classified as the ones which would require the revision (e.g. question no. 1 on Fig 4). From the observations provided it followed that the problem with solving the task or ease with which it was done, often had its roots in the nationality of the testee or the testor. It does not refer only to differences in the pronunciation or accent but depends on how far the mother tongue and English are apart in linguistic terms. Then those tests which are designed by a homogeneous group of experts in a given country could not necessarily give the expected results in another country. In the MarTEL project that risk will be greatly reduced by the international composition of the maritme English expert groups.

The partners in the MarTEL project are convinced that designing standards for maritime English is a necessity. The necessity underpinned by the ultimate need to enhance safety of navigation. They reach out to the teaching institutions, maritime administrations, shipowners, as well as the crews of seagoing ships to meet their expectations.

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