

SAFETY AT SEA



The 1990 Scandinavian Star ferry disaster claimed the lives of 158 people. Language problems between different nationalities were blamed for the high death toll Picture: Associated Press

“Better communication among seafarers will save lives at sea and help to protect the environment”

A solution to bridge the language gap?

Dr Martin Ziarati describes a new project to ease communications at sea...

It is no surprise that a large portion of accidents at sea are caused by poor communication. 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.

There have been several studies conducted in recent years which show that the lack of international standards in maritime English needs to be addressed (see the Telegraph, December 2007). Indeed, International Maritime Organisation (IMO) figures show that as many as 80% of accidents at sea are caused by human error, and nearly half of these are attributed to communication failures.

The MarTEL project believes it has the solution to this problem. The introduction of the IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP) was a useful first step, but the general English language proficiency of seafarers also needs tackling.

What exactly is the level of English needed to do particular jobs at sea, and what vocabulary and grammar should the seafarers be expected to know? The core aim of the MarTEL project is to establish a series of maritime English language standards at three different levels, which will then be tested via the MarTEL online platform. These levels are:

- Preparation standard, which will include tests at three levels of proficiency: Elementary, Intermediate and Upper Intermediate/Advanced. The content will be based on active learning and on



Dr Martin Ziarati pictured at Coventry University's Technocentre

- maritime terminology and usage, with little emphasis on grammar
- Officer standard, which will be based primarily on either Navigation (Deck) English or Marine Engineering English. These tests will focus on the skill levels considered appropriate for a given type and rank of officer
- Senior Officer standard, which is aimed at the senior officers in charge of vessels over 3,000gt. The standard will include a section on language requirements for these vessels.

The standards for Officer and Senior Officer levels will give different levels of importance to the different skill and proficiency requirements of various ranks and duties. For example, a chief engineer should be competent in reading and writing but a more moderate level of speaking may be tolerated.

MarTEL is at the forefront of

research in the field. It has been developed by a consortium of highly experienced European partners; each from a different but related background that complements the project perfectly. The consortium includes maritime universities and training institutions as well as private companies which have specific experience or expertise in the project's area.

Better communication among seafarers will save lives at sea. Improved language skills will also help to protect the environment by making pollution disasters like that of the Prestige less likely.

Although the SMCP were in place in 2002 when the tanker broke up off northern Spain, communication procedures broke down in the heat of the crisis — contributing to a devastating oil spill which contaminated over 100 beaches and led to the loss of

thousands of jobs in the fishing industry.

MarTEL will therefore make a difference to the maritime community, and will offer a new and innovative approach to maritime English language testing across the European Union. The project is funded by the EU Leonardo da Vinci programme, and promotes lifelong learning among adult European learners as well as closer cohesion within Europe.

To enhance MarTEL's potential, each stage of the project has followed a process of evaluation and phase testing of the standards and their accompanying online testing facilities. The evaluation process included the assessment of the appropriateness (validity), currency and scope of the MarTEL standards under controlled conditions with real cadets at Maritime English Teaching (MET) institutions in Turkey, Poland and Finland.

The findings were encouraging and showed the true extent of the MarTEL project's potential in developing appropriate maritime English language standards. The MarTEL standards have now been evaluated and the tests are currently undergoing their final preparation before being piloted in a number of selected European MET institutions in the next couple of months.

It is expected that MarTEL will be ready for delivery at the start of the new year. Several refereed papers on MarTEL have been published, and presentations are being made to major transna-

International Maritime English Conference October 2009

The world's maritime English teachers and researchers meet annually to share their findings at the International Maritime English Conference, which is being held this month in Szczecin, Poland. As in Dr Ziarati's work, several other lectures and workshops will address the issue of what to teach maritime English students and the best way to do this. In addition, there is a strong strand of 'cultural diversity' presentations dealing with the fact that effective shipboard communication relies on more than just language study. More to follow in future editions of the Telegraph.

tional and international conferences in September and October this year.

The MarTEL standards are being transformed into internationally recognised qualifications. The next few months will there-

fore be an eventful period in introducing MarTEL and the expected improvements in safety at sea for European seafarers in the near future.

For more information, please visit www.maritime-tests.org

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