



MARITIME ENGLISH – THE FUTURE (MarTEL)

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It is of no surprise that a large portion of accidents at sea are caused by poor communication. The Prestige disaster in 2002 is just one of many examples that demonstrate this crisis. There have been many surveys and research studies conducted in recent years which prove that the lack of International standards in maritime English needs to be resolved (Robinson, Nautilus, Dec 2007). The MarTEL project (www.maritime-tests.org) believes it is the solution to this problem. MarTEL is at the forefront of contemporary 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.

MarTEL will make a difference and save lives at sea. All too often an accident at sea leads to the deaths of seafarers. These are considered industrial accidents and are rarely reported in the international or even national press, and owing to the global nature of merchant shipping these deaths often go unnoticed by the wider world. MarTEL is also expected to have an indirect environmental impact. If safety standards are improved as a consequence of better communication skills it follows that greater safety at sea will lead to fewer environmental disasters like that of the oil tanker Prestige. In November 2002 the Liberian tanker, Prestige, broke up and sank with 77,000 tons of oil on board, just 120 miles off the Spanish coast. Soon after the first mayday call communication procedures broke down and the SMCP were abandoned, consequently the emergency situation was badly handled by the ship's crew. The resultant oil spill left thousands of fishermen out of work and contaminated more than 100 beaches. It caused untold damage to the environment which could have been avoided had proper communication been followed throughout.

MarTEL will therefore make a difference to the maritime community and will offer a new and innovative approach to the Maritime English Language testing of mariners across the European Union. Through an interactive online learning platform, MarTEL will create and test a set of accepted standards of Maritime English Language for merchant seafarers. The Project is funded by the European Union and promotes lifelong learning among adult European learners and supports the development of linguistic diversity and closer cohesion in Europe. MarTEL's main aim is to improve safety at sea, which justifies the Project's inclusion within the EU's Leonardo da Vinci Programme.

At first maritime English may not seem to be of great importance; however the issue takes on greater significance when one considers the fact that the 75% of seafarers presently employed aboard merchant ships or at work in most European Ports do not come from European Union countries and have been educated in institutions outside of the Union thus are not fluent or even able to speak English at all. Merchant shipping is an international industry and accurate and appropriate communication is vital. It is widely accepted that English is the language of the sea. Therefore a seafarer's ability to communicate to an acceptable standard of English is essential. Furthermore, the staggeringly high number of accidents being caused or in some way related to poor levels of maritime English language on board merchant vessels or in ports has been of

increasing concern to seafarers, ship owners/operators and MET institutions. The problem acquired greater significance upon the publication of official International Maritime Organisation (IMO) statistics, stating clearly that 80% of accidents at sea are caused by human error and nearly half of which are attributed to communications failures.

As it stands there is a distinct lack of standards for the certification of Maritime English at international, European and even national levels, other than the existing English language standards and maritime English course model including the IMO's SMCP (Standard Maritime Communication Phrases, 2001). MarTEL aims to change this. The MarTEL Standards are expected to be incorporated and accepted by a number of MET institutions and accreditation bodies across the European Union. The core aim of the project is a series of maritime English language standards at three different levels, which will then be tested via MarTEL online platform, these levels include:

- The **Preparation standard**, which will include tests at three levels of proficiency: Elementary, Intermediate and Upper Intermediate/Advanced in line with IMO Course Model 3.17 but the content will be based on active learning and on maritime terminology and usage, with little emphasis on grammar.
- The **Officer standard**, which will be based primarily on either Navigation (Deck) English or Marine Engineering English. These tests will focus on skill levels considered appropriate for a given type and rank of officer, with less prominence to grammar.
- The **Senior Officer standard** is aimed at the senior officers in charge of vessels over 3000 GRT. The standard will include a section on language requirements for these vessels. All standards for Officer and Senior Officer Levels will give differing levels of importance to different skills and proficiency requirements at various ranks and duties. For example, a Chief Engineer should be competent on reading and writing but a more moderate level of speaking may be tolerated.

Evaluation

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 facility. The evaluation process included the assessment of the appropriateness (validity), currency and scope of the MarTEL Standards under controlled conditions with real cadets at a MET institution 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.

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 during the start of the new year. Several refereed papers on MarTEL have been published (Ziarati, 2008 – IMLA 08, Albayrak, 2008 – IMLA 08, Ziarati et al, 2009 – Bridge 09) and a number are due for presentation and publications in major transnational and international conferences (IAMU, 09, IMLA 09, IMEC 09 and IMAM 09) in September and October 2009.

The MarTEL Standards are being transformed into internationally recognised qualifications. The next few months will therefore 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 and regular up-dates on the MarTEL Project, please visit www.maritime-tests.org