

Maritime standards of competence

Cargo transportation by sea is one of the most international economic activities. It can be frequently seen that crew members from different countries work together effectively because they have the internationally recognised qualification. This qualification comprises standards which ensure the adequate level of safety of the navigation. Especially in shipping a wide range of international standards is observed which are accepted by the member countries of the International Maritime Organisation (IMO). One of the most important IMO's achievements is the implementation of the number of global standards and requirements. These standards relate to the appropriate skills needed to perform specific duties on a merchant ship. Nevertheless, there are still many accidents at sea caused by human error (it is estimated that this is about 90%). Their common cause is the lack of accurate and up-to-date knowledge. To minimise such situations, the periodical reviews of the training systems and standards are conducted. According to the European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA) about 75% of maritime crew on the European Union's ships come from over 40 different countries outside the Community. Although the regular audits are carried out on ships, one cannot question the diplomas and certificates issued by other maritime institutions. Hence, various attempts are being made to verify education and certification of maritime countries for compliance with the requirements of the IMO and EU directives. Due to the fact that the traditional navigation tasks are subject to the rapid change, it is often the industry itself that sets out the standards independently of the IMO. For instance, the IMCA (International Marine Contractors Association) has developed standards for training and certification for positions in the coastal marine industry. However one may question the lack of standards in other areas of the maritime industry. For example, although English is the primary language of communication at sea, there are no standards for the maritime English language. The negligence in this area is the reason for many accidents. According to the study (Fig. 1) approximately 11% of collisions are caused by various language communication problems. Therefore, the standards of maritime English language should be defined. There is a need for internationally recognised and accepted language standards which will provide a clear view of the seaman's level of English. The standards should guarantee the effective communication in the marine environment.

In order to find the solution of the problem, a group of nine marine partners implemented the Martel project (Maritime Tests of English Language). The project is funded by the EU Leonardo da Vinci programme and the countries involved in it are: United Kingdom, Finland, Norway, Slovenia, Poland and Turkey. In addition the maritime academies from Bulgaria and Ukraine were invited to verify the results of the tests. As the project is in the completion phase, the achieved results were presented at a final conference in Szczecin, Poland in early October 2009. As a result of the project, the maritime standards in English were developed and defined in three levels. The first lowest level determines the degree of maritime English necessary for those who want to start a career at sea. This test is also addressed to employees of companies participating in the organisation of cargo transportation at sea, such as ship brokers, freight forwarders, linesmen, etc. The second level of the tests refers to the operational positions at sea. The standards have been defined separately for the deck and the engineering departments. There are 5 different types of skill areas which can be distinguished as: reading, speaking, writing, listening and language structure. In level 3 a similar division of skills into sections can be observed. The differences in standards between the deck and engineering departments exist within the scope and criteria established for specific skills, such as the greater emphasis is placed on writing and reading skills for mechanics, and on listening and speaking for the navigators. Furthermore there have been study guidelines, study units and exercises developed for each level of Martel tests. Every phase of the work has been evaluated and reviewed by an independent group of experts and tested by students, deck officers and engineers. In addition, a web platform available at www.martel.pro has been created, where it is possible to perform all the tasks and exercises. At the moment, Martel standards are in the final stage of preparation, and their final version will be tested in selected training centres in the following months. The final release of the tests will be made public in early 2010. Then it will be possible to transform Martel into internationally recognised qualifications for maritime English. The introduction of such language standards will not only increase the safety of navigation but also contribute to the protection of the marine environment.