

## Maritime English: the importance of a common language

Read the article and answer the following questions.



- What are the operations/circumstances where problems are faced due to insufficient command of Maritime English?
- The use of the SMCP's is not as widespread as one would expect judging from their importance. Why does this happen?

### **The IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases – a communicative Survival Kit<sup>1</sup>**

Investigations into the human factor regarding disasters at sea, which focused on communication behaviour, revealed that one third of accidents happen primarily due to insufficient command of Maritime English.

In VTS (Vessel Traffic Service) controlled areas, for instance, communicatively relevant factors contribute up to 40% of collisions involving the human element; most of them caused by failures in radio communication even in routine conversations, but some also through face-to-face communication deficiencies.

Port State Control inspectors often encounter problems in getting elementary information from ships' officers due to their substandard English. Pilots frequently voice their concern in this respect too and multi-ethnic officer staffs occasionally fail to communicate effectively when managing panicking crowds on board distressed vessels, etc.

More than 86% of all SOLAS vessels are presently crewed with multilingual personnel who, for diverse reasons, are frequently unable to render the Maritime English skills required, risking and even causing damage to lives, property and the environment.

This eventually made IMO re-consider how to minimize Maritime English communication problems. In 2001, IMO adopted the Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP) and via STCW 95 they became a mandatory part of the education of officers at all white-listed training institutions.

The phrases provide a sort of Survival Kit; they include all essential safety-related communicative events where spoken English is required. Being trained in the use of the SMCP, officers will definitely encounter less communication difficulties managing safety-related situations, performing navigational duties, and organizing or supervising cargo operations.

The SMCP have been available since 2001. It is therefore understandable that only those generations of officers having graduated after 2001 are familiar with them, and they do not represent the majority of active officers yet.

However, IMO strongly recommends using the SMCP in preference to other wordings; in this way, combined with an efficient system of instruction, they will become an efficient safety language.

**B.** The phrases in the left column below come from an actual communication in a collision incident<sup>2</sup>. The vessel (Japanese) was in a close-quarters situation and trying to avoid collision. Make the exchanges clearer using the SMCP. Match to an appropriate phrase suggested by the SMCP listed on the right.

- |  |  |
|--|--|
| 1. We'll slow down.                              | <input type="checkbox"/> Stay clear of me.                 |
| 2. I am doing about 5 knots.                     | <input type="checkbox"/> What are you intentions?          |
| 3. Try to avoid me.                              | <input type="checkbox"/> I am reducing speed.              |
| 4. I just smacked into your bow.                 | <input type="checkbox"/> My present speed is 5 knots.      |
| 5. Do you wish to slow down or to cross our bow? | <input type="checkbox"/> I have collided with your vessel. |

**C.** Fill in the following words in the gaps.



facilitates competence instructions mishaps error codified

### “English rules the waves”

English – or rather “Maritime English” – is the language of maritime operations. The IMO (1) ..... English as the official language of seafarers and adopted the *Standard Marine Communication Phrases* to standardize safety terms and phrases such as the gem: “I am sinking. Please proceed to my assistance. What is your ETA at our distress position?”

Having a common language at sea is important (just ask the passengers on the *Costa Concordia* who couldn't understand the crew's Italian (2) ....., or for that matter the crewmembers who didn't speak Italian). Like any accepted set of standards, a common language (3) ..... safe interaction and commerce. According to recent IMO statistics “80% of accidents taking place at sea are caused by human (4) ....., with half due to poor communication.” Undoubtedly some of these (5) ..... are due to language comprehension difficulties – not a surprise if you can imagine trying to understand a heavily accented, non-native speaker trying to communicate something in a panic.

The IMO has studied requiring a standardized Maritime English-language (6) ..... test as an amendment to its Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping, but so far has only posted guidelines.

**D.** What do you think of an English language test for all seafarers? Do you think it is a good idea?



## 2. Miscommunication as a cause of accidents

**KEYWORDS:** Language competence / miscommunication

- Language competence (or competency): the knowledge that enables you to produce and com