

International Seminar on Maritime English

Maritime Faculty, Istanbul Technical University, Istanbul, Turkey

20 to 22 March 2002

The importance of effective communication*

A Winbow

STCW and Human Element Section
International Maritime Organization

Abstract

This paper reviews the need for effective communications at sea and ashore and highlights international developments aimed at ensuring that seafarers gain the appropriate skills and knowledge to communicate effectively and efficiently.

Introduction

Communication is an essential part of human interaction. The benefits of effective communication are many and obvious as they enhance all aspects of our personal and professional lives. Ineffective or misunderstood communications in our personal lives may give rise to problems or embarrassment but in our professional lives the results of misunderstandings may have much more serious results. In the world of international shipping, with seafarers from many countries sailing on ships trading to all parts of the world, effective communication between those on board and between ship and shore is vitally important.

The importance of communications

Although used in a slightly different context, a phrase from some British propaganda during WWII neatly sums up the dangers of ineffective communications: 'Careless talk costs lives'. That may be over-dramatic in most cases where communications between seafarers or between ship and shore go awry but it does illustrate the importance of effective communications and the real dangers if they go badly wrong.

IMO analyses reports of casualties and accidents to see if there are any lessons to be learned for the future. Many accidents are found to be due mainly to operational issues of proper procedure, maintenance and design, rather than to proper implementation of regulations but effectiveness of bridge resource management and particularly ineffective relationships between master, crew and pilot are recurrent themes. Communication difficulties often occur in these areas due in part to cultural differences but also due to language 'barriers'. Some examples from recent analyses illustrate the problems.

* The views expressed in this paper are those of the author and may not represent the views of IMO or its Secretariat

Tanker mooring accident

A 56,000 gt Bahamian flag tanker was berthing at an oil terminal in the UK when a mooring line parted and struck the crew of a mooring boat causing serious injuries. The pilot had intended to run the breast line ashore but not to make it fast until the ship was alongside and had believed that the master had understood his intention. The master thought however that the line should be heaved tight and instructed the mate on the fo'c'se accordingly. Because all verbal communications between the master and crew were in Korean, a language he did not understand, the pilot did not know that his intentions had been mistaken until the accident occurred. The accident was caused because of the breakdown of communications between the pilot and the ship's master.

Bulk carrier grounding

A 36,000 gt Panama flag bulk carrier was leaving port under pilotage when it ran aground. The pilot was conning the vessel and giving instructions to the helmsman but his attention was distracted and he failed to properly monitor the actions of the helmsman. The result was that he failed to hear the helmsman's replies and the ship swung out of the channel and aground. The accident was caused because of the poor communications between the helmsman and pilot.

Passenger ship fire

A small fire in some bedding spread throughout the ship and 158 people lost their lives. Escape routes were filled with smoke and those unfamiliar with the ship needed the assistance of crew and signage to find their way. The signs were not in a language familiar to those who were passengers on board so provided an ineffective means of providing safety instructions. The officers and many of the crew did not share a common language and the language of the crew was not the same as most of the passengers. Although the fire was not related to poor communications between officers and crew, the poor safety organization on board coupled with the inability of the officers to communicate with all of the crew and the inability of the crew to communicate with the passengers, exacerbated the loss of life.

All three cases demonstrate, in their various ways, the need for effective communications to ensure safe and efficient ship operation.

Communication

So what is communication? If it is so important, how do we ensure that when one person talks to another, that the other person listens and understands? How do we know if the message (or sign) has not only been heard (or read) but also understood? What can be done to limit the opportunities for mistakes and to enhance the effectiveness of communications?

It is a self-evident fact that people speaking different languages can generally not converse at all and even people speaking their own language can misinterpret spoken messages. Many will recall playing games where a message passed through a series of people can become quite unrecognisable from the original message after being re-worded or abbreviated by individuals passing a message one to the other. And the reason these messages become garbled is probably because we probably have *too* many ways of passing ideas one to another.

For effective communications, when the sender of a message communicates with the intended recipient, there has to be a correlation between what the sender is thinking about and what the receiver is thinking about. Text or words must therefore be used in a consistent way, and the first requirement for communication is a set of messages that are used consistently.

If we know why we fail sometimes to send or receive the intended communications we can start to address the problem. The most obvious solution to the problem of failure of communications through different languages is, of course, to use the same one.

The language usually used on board ship is the national language of the crew. However, in these days of multinational crews, a variety of languages may be used or alternatively one working language adopted. Whichever is used, ships trading internationally must conduct ship to shore communications in a language that can be understood as navigational and safety communications must be precise and unambiguous to avoid confusion and error.

And in the world of international transport and shipping, the chosen international standard for achieving effective communication on board and between ship and shore is the English language. An adequate standard of English is therefore not only an international requirement for certification of seafarers but also a key element in ensuring safe, efficient and profitable ship operations.

But even English speakers manage to misunderstand each other at times. And when different national or regional variations of the English language are added, the possibilities for mis-communication are increased. There is a saying that America and the UK are divided by a common language and a few examples serve to indicate the problems:

English	American (English)
Bonnet (car)	Hood (something on a coat)
Boot (car)	Trunk (a suitcase)
Petrol	Gas (a fuel to cook on)
Trousers	Pants (worn under trousers)
Waistcoat	Vest (worn under a shirt)
Full stop	Period (a length of time)
Football	Soccer

So the answer in the maritime world is to use a 'standard' form of English where, as far as possible, words convey only one meaning so that the opportunities for mis-communication are reduced to the lowest level possible.

English language

So which English to choose if there are so many versions? The answer of course is not necessarily to favour one version of English over another but to choose, and agree on an international basis, the words and their related meanings so that all can use them. And the first IMO attempt at developing and agreeing a maritime vocabulary – the Standard Marine Navigational Vocabulary (SMNV) – was adopted by IMO in 1977. It was however not the only attempt at identifying maritime and nautical words and phrases to be used by mariners. A number of countries and individuals (including Captain Refik Akdogan from Turkey) produced books aimed at those who taught English to mariners.

The SMNV was not intended to be mandatory but rather that through constant repetition in ships and in training institutes the phrases and terms were expected to become those normally accepted and used amongst seafarers in preference to words of similar meaning. In this way it was anticipated that an acceptable form of maritime English would develop for the interchange of communications between seafarers and between ship and shore.

In the early 1990's IMO realised that the changing conditions in modern seafaring necessitated a more comprehensive standardized safety language covering all major safety-related verbal communications.

After a long gestation period the Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP) were adopted by the Assembly in November 2001 as resolution A.918(22).

Advantages of a dedicated vocabulary

The maritime world has, like many specialised areas of activity, a language of its own. And some of the words and phrases are unlikely to mean anything outside of the maritime world or, if the words are understood literally, the reader will gain a wrong, and possibly odd understanding: forward spring – a rope; a gypsy – part of the windlass; monkey island – on top of the wheelhouse etc. So any vocabulary chosen has to be aimed closely to the real work of the seafarer if it is to be used and be useful.

And although being able to converse in English in all circumstances might be welcome, as far as the seafarer training and education is concerned, it is more important for him or her to be familiar with the words and phrases related to work. In selecting those words and phrases however a number of factors need to be considered:

- .1 the time it takes to learn the vocabulary and the associated meanings; and
- .2 the number of words and phrases an individual can be expected to absorb.

These factors are unlikely to limit the number of phrases and words identified in a dedicated vocabulary but may have an effect on the ability of an individual to learn and use them in the correct context. The number of different ideas that can be identified is very large, particularly where it is possible to combine concepts or words together to form new expressions.

The typical length of a message, for both sender and receiver, is ultimately restricted by the amount of information that a person can handle at one time. Much longer sentences can often only be understood only if they are easily decomposable to shorter sentences so a vocabulary made up of shore terms or phrases that can be combined will probably have a greater chance of success. And if we want it to be used and understood internationally we need to make its learning a mandatory requirement and the STCW Convention does this for parts of the SMCP. Regrettably however, it is open to doubt whether all native English speakers are taught the SMCP as part of their training so there remains a possibility for confusion actually caused by those with English as their mother tongue.

Importance of sound training

The international framework is set: a mandatory requirement for proficiency in English; a standard maritime vocabulary; guidance in the form of an IMO model course (3.17) based on the communicative approach to teaching, all that is needed to complete the task is the teacher of maritime English.

If 'careless talk' does cost lives, then the responsibility on those who teach English to seafarers is a major one. The task of the teacher is to create sufficient opportunities for learning to take place. Communicative language teaching makes use of real-life situations that necessitate communication and the SMCP provides a very useful tool for developing those situations. Unlike the more traditional audiolingual method of language teaching, which relies on repetition and drills, the communicative approach can vary according to the student's reactions and responses. The real-life simulations can be change from day to day and be made topical. Teachers can set up a situation that students are likely to encounter in real life and the students' motivation and understanding can be enhanced through

communication on meaningful topics. The good teacher therefore needs to be constantly exploring new ideas and be imaginative in developing new situations.

Conclusion

Effective communications are an essential ingredient to safe and efficient ship operations. Communication can be achieved in many ways but the prime method for operational communications is through speech. And when in an operational situation such as berthing a ship or fighting a fire, it is vitally important that those involved can communicate effectively. The international community has chosen the English language as the medium for that communication and IMO has developed a standard vocabulary and the training tools to deliver it. We all now look to the teachers of maritime English to instil in young maritime students the appropriate skills and knowledge to ensure that failures of communications are no longer cited as a contributory cause of maritime accidents.
