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CONTROVERSY OF STANDARDS FOR MARITIME ENGLISH TESTING

This paper deals with the problem of insufficient maritime safety today and contributing role of poor Maritime English language proficiency of seafarers in maritime safety worsening.

It has been reported that the over 80% of accidents on ships manned by multinational crews are caused by human error and most of them are due to poor standards of maritime English. [8, p.176]. There are many reports and papers identifying poor communication as one of the most significant factors in accidents at sea and at ports. [1, p.2].

Many authors devoted their scientific papers to the analysis of Maritime English proficiency monitoring standards current state (R. Ziarati, J. Uriasz, T. Ulkuatam, S. Sernikli, J. Roenig, G. Velikova, H. Lahiry, P. Trenkner, C. Cole, A. Sihmantepe). Much more authors have researched a great deal of existing English language proficiency monitoring standards and their deficiencies (J. Alderson, C. Claphman, D. Wall, R. Boonkit, A. Raimes, S. Messick, G. Henning, G. Fulcher, F. Davidson, D. Douglas, F. Davidson, B. Lynch, C. Chapelle). Also there are some research works in English for specific purposes standards analysis (Y. Mackay, A. Mountford). But there are still many admonitions to the quality, adequacy and solvency of these standards.

Now many efforts are made by international institutions, IMO. Their works are becoming more detailed and more sophisticated as they try to infuse the multi-layered fabric of the Maritime English Language. [6, p.2]

It is well-known that Maritime English is a restricted language of shipping industry. Therefore it's better to classify it as an ESP (English for specific purposes). To master Maritime English as ESP means to acquire a certain level of professional knowledge and experience to become comprehensible, although the major part of Maritime English is general English words and only 7% belongs to purely maritime terminology with isolated meaning it becomes a unique language that only seafarer will understand. [3]

Whatever methodology is used in Maritime English training process, learning outcomes of seafarers should be adequately monitored with taking into account all necessary requirements for English language communicative competence of future seafarers prescribed by IMO documents (STCW, Model Course of English Language 3.17), requirements of British Council English Language Proficiency Standards (ELP), Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), English for Specific Purposes Proficiency Standards (ESP).

Let's set forth the contradictions which contribute to tests imperfection:

1. Gap between the requirements of STCW Convention to the level of mixed crew members English language proficiency and current state of their communicative competence;

2. Discrepancy between the requirements of IMO Model Course 3.17 to teach cadets English with the use of communicative methodology and insolvency of communicative methodology to ensure sufficient level of grammar knowledge and correct writing, as this methodology mostly fosters maritime vocabulary formation and also reading, comprehension and speaking skills;

3. Inconsistency of IMO requirements to apply adequate to seafarers' communicative competence monitoring standards, because of their focusing on vocabulary and reading check more, than on grammar knowledge and correct fledged writing and speaking skills verification.

Rather famous maritime test today is MarTEL. Its core aim is a series of maritime English language standards at three different levels, which are tested via online platform. In October 2007, a pilot MarTEL of the phase 1 test was carried out on a selection of cadets and officers in the partner maritime institutions in Poland, Finland and Turkey.

An outstanding problem for MarTEL test is its inaccessibility, i.e. the points for taking MarTEL are located selectively: in the United Kingdom, Ireland, Bulgaria, Turkey, Spain, Sweden, Poland, Finland, Slovenia, where testing centers are located. To take this test you should leave message on its official site and wait for connection, sometimes it takes too much time.

Whatever monitoring system is used for assessment of seafarers' English proficiency level, first of all it should pursue validity. Validity is the appropriateness of a given test or any its component parts as a measure of what it is expected to measure. A test is said to be valid to the extent that it measures what is supposed to measure. Furthermore, test-developers, not only have to ensure that the material included in a test is appropriate for the purpose for which it is intended, but also to ensure the results are accurate. [7, p.137].

There are such types of validity concerning the Maritime English tests adopted for MarTEL by Reza Ziarati: 1) content validity (relevancy) – the content is based on IMO standard and model courses; 2) requirement validity (competency, IMO STCW relevance); 3) structural validity (consistency) conformity to European English language frameworks; 4) range validity (coverage) relation of tests to tasks carried on board vessel; 5) depth validity (assessment/ performance criteria) defined by a set of assessment criteria; 6) professional validity. [7, p.142]

It is crucial to know whether we really measure what we intend to measure. Furthermore, the unified notion of validity of language testing also concerns consequential aspect of the test, which means how the use of the test will impact on test users. [2]

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1. Assessment of seafarers' English proficiency level, first of all it should pursue validity for the appropriateness of a given test as a measure of what it is expected to measure.

2. Correlation between actual English language proficiency levels and necessary maritime certificates, professional competence prescribed by STCW and communicative competencies from IMO Model Course 3.17 should be done to keep in mind all these requirements to seafarers' communicative competence when developing testing standards for Maritime English.

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