MARITIME ENGLISH FINAL ASSESSMENT OF FUTURE DECK OFFICERS AT THE NIKOLA VAPTSAROV NAVAL ACADEMY, BULGARIA

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Abstract. The present paper aims to contribute to the process towards global standardization of Maritime English (ME) testing and assessment that has been in progress for many years. It focuses on the format of the current final state exam for future deck officers graduating from the Naval Academy in Varna and the testing requirements it conforms to while pointing at its strengths and weaknesses. It also attempts to review this assessment tool in the light of the test specifications developed on the basis of the Maritime English competence yardstick linked to the CEFR reference levels to describe a language user's proficiency in the absence of universal testing and assessment standards for Maritime English.

The author's belief is that the development of the blueprint for the test, namely the test specifications, is a step in the right direction and will help us further enhance the quality of the final product. Besides, it is a good starting point for testing and assessing students whose native language is not English and whose language of instruction is their native language supported by Maritime English.

Keywords: Maritime English testing; assessment tool; specifications; test tasks; marking; linguodidactology

Background

This paper is a follow-on of another publication written about 15 years ago and dedicated to the state of affairs in Maritime English testing at the time. It discussed the issue in terms of tests availability, criteria for measuring Maritime English (ME), test administration and so on. First, it focused on several tests designed for the purpose of measuring ME in maritime context – MARLINS, TOMEC and MARTEL, and commented on their format, skills tested, scoring and interpretation of results. Then, it argued in favour of the recently promulgated Yardstick of ME competence for ship officers as an instrument likely to affect positively both ME training and testing (Velikova 2009).

Both at that point and now there were International Maritime Organization (IMO) requirements set out for English Language competence as a working language both in

the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) Convention, Chapter 4 and 5, and the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers (STCW Convention) and code. The International Code for Safety Management and Operation of Ships, and Pollution Prevention (ISM Code), too, emphasizes on effective communication in the execution of crew's duties which in practice is usually made in English. (STCW Code Table A-III/1).

A few years later Trenkner and Cole highlighted the importance of "an appropriate assessment tool [that] has to be developed and a standard yardstick adopted" (Cole, Trenkner 2009) in order to make an instrument available to Maritime Education and Training (MET) institutions and the industry suited to reliably assess and measure the communication performance of students and/or officers… . "Assessment is a challenging task but necessary not only to satisfy the new [Manila] provisions but also to simply benefit our students by ensuring their safety in the fleets they serve and the safety of shipping in general." (Cole, Trenkner 2012)

Analysing the situation, they brought to the attention of the ME community the outcomes of several European projects MarTel (2007-2009)[1] and MarTel Plus (2010 – 2012)[2], and justifiably so because the MarTel project was concerned with several aspects of ME testing and assessment – establishing standards for all classes of seafarers – both ratings and officers, both deck and engine room personnel while MarTel Plus built on the first project by creating a set of guidelines for each of the four MarTEL standards as well as introducing an enhanced oral competency test. The MARILANG Project (2015 – 2018)[3] went a step further to include three new categories – Electro-Technical Officers, Global Maritime Distress and Safety System (GMDSS) radio operators, and personnel providing direct service to passengers in passenger spaces on passenger ships. Other project objectives were development of test specifications for test writers, creation of a databank of test items, development of an online platform for new Maritime English training and assessment programme, etc.

The current context of ME teaching and testing is determined by the Manila amendments to the STCW Convention 78/95 (2010) and the IMO Model Course 3.17 Maritime English (2015). In the latter the IMO recommends that "Tests of English language competence should aim to assess the trainee's communicative competence. This will involve assessing the ability to combine knowledge areas of English language with the various language communication skills involved in order to carry out a range of specific tasks. Assessment should not test the trainee's knowledge of separate language areas alone" (2015, p. 208). The Model Course distinguishes between progress and final assessment testing and refers to IMO model course 3.12 on Assessment, Examination and Certification of Seafarers, however, linguistic competence cannot be assessed in the same way as any other subject knowledge.

The only commercial test recognized by the maritime world is still only MARLINS. The other ME tests are primarily teacher-made, no matter whether achievement or proficiency type, each of them based on own resources, understanding, and experience

measuring competence and interpreting scores in a different way. Regretfully, the research made by the previously mentioned projects is not accessible to the public so what remains for the ME teacher is to make the best of a bad affair.

State of Affairs in Bulgaria

The Nikola Vaptsarov Naval Academy (NVNA) is one of the leading Maritime Education and Training institutions in Bulgaria. It offers a four-year course of training for both deck and engineer officers. Having officially incorporated the STCW requirements for English language competency for Officers in Charge of a Navigational Watch, the syllabus includes a short course on the Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP). The syllabus consists of both General and Maritime English modules and finishes off with a state exam. Strictly speaking, this is an achievement test because it focuses on both grammatical and terminological knowledge, i.e. it measures the extent to which the material covered has been learnt. Still, it is also, or rather tends to be a proficiency test as well, because it focuses on functions, real-world usage and effective communication. One of its distinguishing features to bear in mind is the interaction between subject matter knowledge and language knowledge (Douglas 2000).

The Test

When developing a testing system a number of points need to be considered: general statement of purpose, type of test (proficiency or job-related), description of test takers, target language situation, levels to be tested (correlated to other internationally recognized testing systems), number of items and skills to be tested, test specifications, marking criteria, etc.

In our case the purpose of the test is to assess the ME competence of the future deck officers regardless of the coursebooks they have studied. The test evaluates the test taker's ability to communicate only in professional situations.

All navigation students, whether Bulgarian or not, male or female, full-time or part-time, graduating from the NVNA constitute the test takers' audience as potential members of multinational crews.

The target language situation is confined to a job-related maritime context.

The levels to be tested are defined according to the Yardstick of English Language Competence for Deck Officers. We have found that the bands pertinent to our particular situation range from 4 to 7, i.e. those corresponding to modest users, effective users, competent users and good users. We also firmly believe that the Yardstick proves an invaluable tool when used in conjunction with General English rating scales, such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) ranging from A1 to B2.

Regarding topics it would be appropriate to say that the IMO Model Course 3.17 (2015) proves highly useful in terms of categorizing the different communicative settings on board ship in relation to the different ranks and functions of seafarers.

	LISTENING	READING	SPEAKING	WRITING
Suggested topics	1. Ships in general inspections, etc. 2. Safety on board 3. Navigation 4. Meteorology 5. Cargo		6. Maintenance, port state control, 7. Communications 8. Maritime trade 9. Maritime law, security, etc. 10. Collision Regulations, etc.	
Tasks	Dialogue – 1 item	1. Multiple choice questions (MCQ) with four options -40 items; 2. Pilot book extract answering open ended Qs – 8 items 3. MARS report	1. Dialogue – 1 item 2. Discussion on a topic – 1 item Non-interactive and interactive speaking	1. Essay writing on a MARS report – 1 item 2. Letter/witness statement – 1 item
Skills required	SMCP ● understanding terms and phrases ● applying phrases in compliance with radio regulations ● understanding detailed information ● understanding gist, main ideas ● understanding inference ● identifying viewpoints and attitudes	● locating and identifying relevant information ● understanding gist and main ideas ● scanning for specific information ● guessing meaning of unfamiliar words and expressions from context understanding cohesive devices within a text ● understanding inference identifying viewpoint and attitude	SMCP ● reproducing standard phrases as precisely as possible ● using standard phrases effectively ● describing people, places, objects and events ● comparing, and contrasting people, places, objects and events ● asking for information ● explaining how something works ● giving directions and instructions ● stating facts giving advice on how to solve a situation or a problem ● expressing and eliciting opinions, intentions, attitudes	● giving and asking for advice, information, or instructions ● making and responding to requests, orders, etc. ● describing, comparing and contrasting people, places, objects, events and sequences of events ● stating facts describing operations and processes ● narrating a sequence of events (e.g. report) ● explaining cause and effect processes ● presenting and analysing argument, evidence, and examples

Marking Criteria			grammar/accuracy, vocabulary/ appropriateness, relevance/task completion and fluency	control of grammatical structures and vocabulary, task completion, relevance

The test specifications above cover the topics to be tested, the skills and the subskills that the test-takers should demonstrate. It is important to note that the SMCP are included in the listening and speaking column which is related to the ability of seafarers to communicate using them. It may not become clear at first sight but the skills are tested in combination. Thus, listening and speaking are integrated when the students are tasked to make a dialogue. Reading a pilot book extract requires comprehension by them to answer questions on the passage. Similarly, reading a MARS (Maritime Accident Reporting Scheme) report will entail writing an essay analyzing the situation described in it. In order to be fair to the test-takers there are preparation materials used during the course of study as well as during the one-week intensive course preceding the state exam. The tasks are set so as to correspond as closely as possible to the particular context their future work presupposes.

Grammar and vocabulary are not included in the specifications but test takers will be expected to have a good range of everyday vocabulary and terminology and demonstrate good control of basic grammatical structures. More complex structures will be expected to be less common and less accurately used.

The test is structured in two parts – written and oral, each consisting of three tasks. The first task comprises 40 multiple choice questions each with four options. They test terms, terminological collocations, grammar and linking words, word building and cover the whole material studied throughout the course of study. Here is an example of a multiple choice item which checks knowledge of terms.

A ship is afloat when she is _____.
A. borne by the water   B. underway
C. making headway   D. making sternway

Reading and commenting on a MARS report is a more demanding task. The report is usually related to breaches of the Collision Regulations, the STCW convention as regards keeping a navigational watch, problems in communication, etc. Before proceeding to the comment, students have to identify the type of situation and the participants involved. They also have to find answers to questions such as where?, when? how? and what? This is where the analysis proper starts and where they are able to give their opinion about the situation, about which was the rogue vessel, about what measures should have been taken to prevent an accident. This is so because MARS reports are used to trigger some ideas and arguments on the part of

the students acting as professionals. We consider it highly positive that our students "act" as specialists on the text-level domain offering completed solutions, pros and cons (Velikova, Toncheva 2009).

The third task consists in preparing a letter or a witness statement based on bulleted information. Here again they have to prepare a text of their own, identify sender, addressee, other parties involved, fill in gaps in the bullets given and finish off with a proper conclusion. Here is another example:

Write another letter (to whom?) about loading your vessel with lentils in bags. Inform them about:
  – Poor packages – specify
  – Damage to bags in Lower Hold (LH) 1 (due to what?)
  – Possible result
Describe careless work of crane operators in LH 3:
  – Pallets fallen
  – Effect to cargo and ship structure
State who is responsible for what.
Ask for survey to be made.
Request urgent repair and replacement of cargo.

Obviously, students must have good knowledge about types of cargo, cargo handling and other ship operations in order to create a discursive text following a format (letter/witness statement), keep appropriate layout, style and register in order to make a coherent text and finally communicate effectively with the port authorities or their owners.

The oral test starts with reading a pilot book extract and answering a number of questions locating relevant information, scanning for details, guessing meaning of unfamiliar words, etc. Students are expected to have previous knowledge of nautical publications. The problem with this task is that people with good command of English may easily answer the questions without knowing the peculiarities of such a text or even the meaning of certain terms.

Route
1. From a position SSE of Europa Point, the coastal route leads generally NNE, E and NE for a total of about 60 miles to the approaches to Málaga.
Topography
1. The E side of the Rock of Gibraltar is described in West Coasts of Spain and Portugal Pilot. Sierra Carbonera, a S extension of Serraní de Ronda, rises to 310 m about 5½ miles N of Europa Point.
2. From Punta de la Chullera, the coast rises and leads 1½ miles NNE to abreast

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Piedra Alcorrin (2.23). Lying between Piedra Alcorrin and Punta Torre del Salto de la Mora (2.23), 2¾ miles NNE, there is the sandy shore of Fondeadero de la Sabinilla (2.28), through which five streams enter the sea. The largest of these is Arroyo del Estanquillo which lies 5 cables N of Piedra Alcorrin.

3. Sierra de Marbella is a mountain range which is not as high as Sierra Bermeja (2.22) and not so easily identifiable, being more extended E and W. The irregular crest, La Concha, attains an elevation of 1270 m, 3 miles NW of Marbella and another crest, Pico de Juana, with an elevation of 1184 m, lies 1½ miles NE of La Concha.

4. Sierra de Mijas rises to an elevation of 1150 m. From the E, this range may be identified by the town of Mijas which appears as a white band halfway up its S slopes.

Caution

In poor visibility, when viewed from the E, the dip between the Sierra Carbonera and the Rock of Gibraltar might be mistaken for the approach to the Strait of Gibraltar.

1. What is the direction of the route along the coast?
2. What is the elevation of Sierra Carbonera?
3. What is characteristic of the coast of Fondeadero de la Sabinilla?
4. Where is the mouth of Arroyo del Estanquillo?
5. Why is Sierra de Marbella not easy to distinguish?
6. What is the meaning of irregular crest?
7. What is Sierra de Mijas and how can you recognize it?
8. What should mariners look out for in fog?

The next task involves discussion on a topic similar to the ones given in the specifications concerning maritime issues. This entails describing procedures, presenting ideas, comments and supporting points of view; explaining stages in a process; comparing and contrasting. These are often accompanied by personal opinions and experiences from students' last training practice.

Eventually, the test finishes off with a dialogue rooted in a job-related situation. Students are expected to demonstrate familiarity with the situation and negotiate, if required, with a pilot, discuss further manoeuvres with an officer of the watch from another ship on the VHF, argue with a foreman about cargo handling and securing, justify a practice or decision before a port state control officer and other port officials and so on.

Scoring is not an easy task, the reason being the nature of tasks chosen for the test which yield themselves to different types of assessment. While multiple choice items are easy to rate, the passing grade being above 65%, the rest of the activities are not since both the holistic and the criterion-based approach are applicable to them. In an attempt to be consistent, we have recently made steps to introduce marking criteria for different types of errors in speaking such as control of grammar/accuracy, vocabulary/appropriateness, relevance/task completion and fluency. The

final score on the topic is calculated as an overall percentage with each of the criteria being weighted more or less equally. The professional dialogue is graded based on similar criteria, e.g. Grammar/Accuracy account for 30 %, Vocabulary/ Appropriateness – 40 %, Relevance and Fluency are rated equally – 15%. The reading comprehension task is also not difficult to assess depending on the number of correct answers given.

In the writing part students are expected to produce coherent and meaningful texts using the appropriate format, register, grammatical structures and vocabulary. Here again task completion and relevance are included in the marking scheme. When problems arise the testing board can resort to the test specifications discussed before. All told, we still believe that the process towards global standardization of Maritime English assessment should continue and will hopefully supply us with the necessary tools to assess our students' ME proficiency.

To sum up, the test is skills-based, testing both receptive and productive skills in an integrated manner. Different testing techniques are employed in it. The test itself does have a content validity as it involves real-life situations, and the language used is topical and meaningful, as authentic as the test conditions allow. It is fair because it is designed to take the most out of the students in similar circumstances and does not confront them with unknowns. In terms of practicality and reliability, there is still much to desire especially when it comes to multiple choice items. The length of tasks and task types are determined in advance. Test administration guidelines are strictly observed. Instructions and guidelines are clear and standardized, familiar to the students. The time for administering the test is uniform for the written part – 3 hours, but this is not the case with the oral part which is as much as the student needs to prepare for presentation. However, this may be one more argument for the authenticity of the test – as it is in real life, it may take more time to negotiate meaning for one person than for another. That is why other techniques are commonly used for the assessment of the language proficiency of the students and timing is often disregarded. As a whole the test is a sample of the real-world usage of the maritime proficiency sphere which is its highest accomplishment as a final specialized test.

Conclusions

Developing ME tests – whether achievement or proficiency ones – is a challenging task bearing in mind the lack of internationally accepted assessment standards. They require time, responsibility and commitment in order to produce reliable assessment tools. Last but not least, they require continuity in the efforts made so that we don't start reinventing the wheel over and over again.

Overall, the test for assessing future deck officers presented here is comprehensive, covering the four skills and aiming at acceptable levels of language competence. Therefore, we believe that the development of the blueprint for the test, the test specifications, is a step in the right direction and will help us further enhance the

quality of the final product. Besides, it is a good starting point for testing students whose native language is not English and whose language of instruction is their native language supported by ME.

NOTES

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