DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE ENGLISH LANGUAGE TEACHING TOOLS

FOR THE MARINERS

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ABSTRACT

This paper focused upon the challenges faced by the teachers of English while preparing and selecting teaching material for the students of professional training institutes. The students under consideration were trainee marine engineers from maritime training institute studying "Technical Report Writing". There is no prescribed textbook and reference books available are generic as the need of the shipping industry is very limited. The main challenges faced by the teachers are motivation, unavailability of materials, course duration, the influence of SMS language, support from other departments in engineering institutes and a mixed class of students. However, every problem has a solution and as teachers of English, we can use case studies and analyze the same in all respects, use videos for developing writing skills (reports, letters, notices, etc.), use the specific terminology, plan activities like debates, panel discussions, presentations, etc. Thus, appropriate teaching material can help the teachers to face these challenges.

KEYWORDS: Communication, English for Specific Purposes, Motivation, Specific Terminology, Technical Professional Training Institutes, Effective Teaching-Learning Materials, The Shipping Industry & Maritime English

1. INTRODUCTION

The basic aim of this paper is to highlight the important aspects of communication skills as per the demand of the industry and the growing need to prepare useful and effective teaching-learning materials for the students of professional training institutes. This paper deals with the challenges of selecting/preparing appropriate teaching and learning material for the professional courses under English for Specific Purposes (ESP). It also discusses the need for the shipping industry (Marine profession) where communication on board the ship plays a vital role and has its specific restrictions and limitations. The primary need of the profession is to communicate with the international crew coming from countries like the Philippines, China, Ukraine, Croatia, etc. So having a common frame of reference is highly essential in this profession. This has led to the emergence of the concept i.e. "Maritime English". This paper is, thus, an attempt to familiarize the readers with this concept and understand the scope of language in the marine profession.

It becomes mandatory to understand the role and importance of communication in the shipping industry considering Maritime English as one of the areas of ESP (English for Specific Purposes). The seafarers have to master the communication skills because they have to deal with the multinational crew. Not only do they need to know the language of seafarers which is English but also understand the cultures and social setups of the crew members coming from different countries. So there must be some common expressions, terms, and terminology, styles, structures, etc. to be able to communicate with the other nationalities. For example, for a non-mariner the ship may have its front or backside but for the seafarer, it is the bow and the stern and so on. There cannot be many words for the same references but commonly

accepted words and expressions in the profession agreed upon by the marine fraternity. IMO (International Maritime Organization) has published a book "IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases" to cater to the needs of the industry though it partially covers the areas of maritime communication with more focus on nautical operations than on the engineering activities. It can be used as one of the reference books across the courses.

Thus, material selection or preparation is one of the most important tasks of the teachers in professional institutions. One has to understand that in the era where LA (Learner's Autonomy) is becoming a more and more practical approach in the teaching-learning scenario, the needs of the learners cannot be overlooked. Moreover, the students these days are also inquisitive about what they are learning and why they are learning. Thus, as language teachers, we must make them realize the need for effective communication and the difference between communication and effective communication in the technical scenario. Apparently, there is a need of selecting and preparing relevant material for the teaching purpose. This not only motivates the students but also satisfies the needs for the industry where these students are going to represent the institute they come from.

Now, what is the role of a language teacher and how would he or she know these expressions? It is only by understanding the specific language of seafarers, the references and the terms and terminology associated with them and using them effectively in the teaching materials. One can learn these terms and expressions by referring to the relevant documents published in various journals and magazines or newsletters etc. The other marine engineers/nautical officers from the institutes can also be the most reliable source of information serving the purpose.

Thus, with the appropriate study material in form of texts, audio-video clips, handouts, etc. one can plan a blend of lectures and activities in the classroom making it a very interactive session and providing an effective environment for learning. Although there is a wide scope for research in this area this papers highlights more of the engineering side.

2. BACKGROUND

The ESP referred to under this study is the Maritime English, which is taught to the students of Marine Engineering and Nautical Technology under the courses like "English Language Skills" and "Technical Report Writing" in the first and the third year respectively. These students come from different school backgrounds and different boards. They are totally new to the world of seafarers, some even have little knowledge of ships and merchant ships, IMO, maritime geography (sea routes/canals/cargo), etc.

3. NEEDS OF THE INDUSTRY

3.1 Effective Communication within the International Community

"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" (International Seminar on Maritime English Maritime Faculty, Istanbul Technical University, Istambul, Turkey, 20 to 22 March 2002) This statement is very much applicable in the marine profession. Although there are limited areas for communication, there must be clear communication between the crew members. For example: If the message sent is "repair the anchor windlass", the receiver should go to the bow and not to the stern as the anchor windlass is located at the bow. Hence, along with the language competency, one needs to be alert and have the presence of mind all the time.

3.2 No Scope for Committing Errors:

A small communication error may have fatal consequences further causing a disaster not only to human life but also to the environment further leading to great monetary loss. Many accidents have taken place at sea due to lack of understanding of proper terms/language. The use of common language cannot be overemphasized in emergencies like a fire, collision, grounding, etc. It only helps in understanding and respecting cross-cultural issues, so vital for the harmonious atmosphere on board.

Example

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. (International Seminar on Maritime English Maritime Faculty, Istanbul Technical University, Istanbul, Turkey,20 to 22 March 2002)

3.3 Ability to Interpret and Use the Codes and Symbols Effectively:

Like any other profession, the marine profession also has its own symbols and codes for communication. So the training institutes have to see that the students master these codes and symbols along with English before going on board the ship. For example,

Figure 1: Symbols

3.4 Technical Communication

Students should be able to plan, make a rough draft, draw sketches and diagrams, describe facts, suggest remedial measures and prepare any written document as per the requirements. The documents could be letters, agendas, reports, notices, etc. The reports broadly include breakdowns of machinery/auxiliary machinery, electrical equipment, hull and accidents related to personnel. Other documentations on board the ships are ER (Engine Room) logbook, ER log abstract, movement book, various indents, dry dock reports, handing/taking over reports, etc. Incorrect usage of words may lead to legal actions.

4. CHALLENGES TO THE ENGLISH TEACHERS

4.1 Motivation

This is one of the most important responsibilities of any teacher. Especially, in professional training institutes, it gives a bigger challenge as the students are supposed to be good at using language effectively and should be trained in the soft skills, preparing/delivering presentations, writing reports, notices, agendas, minutes of meetings and letters required in the profession, etc. However, in the actual situation, the language teachers find greater gaps in the competency levels of the students and at times it becomes mandatory to teach basic language structures and grammar to these students, which becomes an added responsibility on part of the teacher and the institute because our students are the products for the

industry. Thus, to motivate these students they must be demonstrated the need for effective communication which can be done in various ways like using case studies, conducting plenary discussions and symposiums, etc. The institutes should develop a culture of effective communication for the students to follow their footsteps. The senior/other faculty members should also emphasis the use of appropriate terms during dealing with other subjects.

4.2 Material

Availability of relevant materials to teach/train the students in language usage becomes vitally important in this case. There should be reliable sources for providing these materials in the form of case studies, reports, letters, etc. The concern teachers should be able to select material and prepare relevant activities in accordance with the data/information available in the materials. Although there are books and other literature available on Maritime English, material specific to teaching English is not readily available. Teachers need to create new teaching material by blending language and technical material to cater to the needs of the industry. This needs a lot of efforts and skills and hence a big challenge for the teacher.

4.3 Influence of SMS Language

As we all know that the students, nowadays, are highly influenced by the SMS (Short Message Service) language and to make them aware of the traditional systems of language as is being used on board the ships becomes a difficult job for the language teachers. At times students do not find any need for using complex structures in communication. These influences are almost fossilized in the students by the time they come to the training institutes.

4.4 Supports from the other Departments

It is very important to note that the English language cannot be taught in isolation to the students; especially when it is ESP (English for Specific Purposes). There has to be a technical counterpart along with the language teacher to meet the objectives of teaching. Other departments should also strive for providing correct and appropriate exposure to the language. If the faculty themselves use incorrect expressions, pronunciation, terms and terminology, etc the students are bound to commit errors because they are learning these things for the first time and the faculty are role models for these students. Thus, language teachers should take inputs in terms of materials from other faculty members to give the students the right exposure to language usage. And if the need be trained the trainers so that they themselves give the right exposure.

5. Actions to Face the Challenges

Every problem has a solution within itself. Only it needs to be identified and applied at the appropriate place and time. A passionate and innovative teacher can definitely bring change. Various new techniques can be used to give the right exposure to the students. Some of these are discussed below:

5.1 Using Case Studies/Research Papers/Reports:

The most effective teacher tested method to motivate students and teach them the right expressions of language, without their knowledge of leaning them, is using case studies. Students should be asked to analyze, discuss and respond to the given text. A lot of cases are available in different sources for training purpose. Many videos and audios based on maritime accidents are also available to be used in the class. Marine Accidents Investigation Branch (MAIB) is a vital source to get case studies in the form of reports pertaining to marine accidents which also include accidents due to a

communication error. This not only makes them aware of the facts but also helps in achieving the ESA (Evaluation, Synthesis, and Analysis) levels of Bloom's Taxonomy. It develops the creativity, logic and analytical skills of the students. The case studies can be used as materials for developing reading skills along with the writing skills. Even research papers can give exposure to the specific expressions used in the maritime profession.

5.2 Developing Vocabulary

Activities like crosswords, puzzles, jumbled words, grids, etc using marine terms and terminology can help the students in enhancing their vocabulary relevant to the profession. Constant use and exposure to these terms and terminology will help them in getting acquainted with them and transfer those terms from their passive vocabulary to the active vocabulary in a short span of time. Students can be advised to make a register to keep adding new terms they come across while learning all the subjects. This is also the teacher tested method of developing vocabulary. After some time, tests (multiple choice, complete the statement by using right words, a small crossword, make sentences, etc) can be conducted to check the level of the students.

5.3 Developing Spoken English Skills:

Any professional must be good in spoken skills. He/she must be good at presenting his/her ideas and expressing their views as and when required. As in any other profession, the marine profession also has videos/audios to be used in the classroom for exposing the students to real life experiences and situations. Such videos help them to learn the language usage in a given situation. After exposing the students to these videos and audios debates, discussions, symposiums, etc can be conducted in the classroom to enhance their speaking skills. They can also be asked to prepare some technical project which is part of the syllabus and present them in the classroom using powerpoint presentations. Some practice in pronunciation is must to overcome the pronunciation barriers. As the crew is multinational, there are certain sounds which if mispronounced can lead to disaster as in the following example:

A: Here is my sector. This is the most important device of the coast guard. This device, this device….. Survival radar.

B: Mayday, Mayday, Hello! Can you hear us? …….. Can you hear us? …….Can you hear us?

A: Hello!!

B: We are sinking!! We are sinking!!

A: Hello! This is German Coast Guard.

B: We are sinking!! We are sinking!!

A: What are you THINKING about?

This is the inability of some of the other speakers of language to produce the sound "/θ/" (th) and also to distinguish between /s/ and /θ/. This led to the disaster.

Source: youtube

Such pronunciation barriers can be overcome by providing individual attention and giving practice in loud reading or speaking.

5.4 Developing Writing Skills

If possible, teachers can gather various relevant but non-confidential documents from the marine engineers and nautical officers to use as samples for reading and comprehending. Thus, students will know what kind of writing is required on board the ship and what are the right expressions and formats for such writings. Then similar situations can be given to the students for writing such documents. Some methods could be as follows:

5.4.1 Teaching Technical Paragraph Writing

Some topic sentences can be given in the class to the students and they can be made to develop a paragraph using the techniques of paragraph writing. The researcher has used many such techniques to give appropriate exposure to the required language competence. For example, "The main sea water pump motor vibrates due to misaligned load." can be given as a topic sentence and the students can develop it further. And the answer to the above topic sentence is:

"The main sea water pump motor vibrates due to misaligned load. The pump and motor for larger systems are coupled for convenience of handling and maintenance. So while assembling new pump motor or after overhaul, care has to be taken that, the shaft centerlines of the motor and pump are perfectly in line. Mismatch in center lines either transversely or angularly leads to vibrations. Informatively, massagers use this concept by deliberately shifting the load away from the centreline of rotation. For higher mass and revolutions these produce noise and subsequent damage to parts. Damage to bearings is the first symptomatic failure indication. Main sea water pumps handle large water mass and the centrifugal pump casing and the motor are independent. If they are mounted vertically then the probability of misalignment is least, due to dowel pins. However, misalignment is more pronounced in horizontal pumps."

5.4.2 Teaching Description Writing

After discussing characteristics of a technical description students can be asked to write a description on any of the products or processes which are prevalent in the shipping industry. For example: "Describe sewage treatment plant on board the ship." can be done by giving a flow chart as an aid to develop the description.
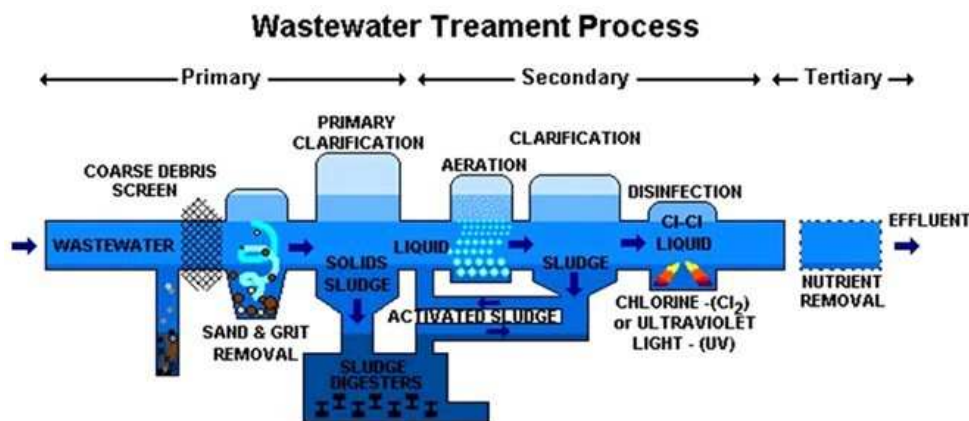

Figure 2: Waste Water Treatment (Source: UK Essays)

The probable answer could be:

"Sewage treatment is the process of removing contaminants from wastewater, from household/onboard sewage. It includes physical, chemical, and biological processes to remove these contaminants and produce environmentally safe

treated wastewater. It is done in three major steps.

Step One: Primary Treatment

Screening is the first stage of the wastewater treatment process. Screening removes large objects like, diapers, nappies, sanitary items, cotton buds, face wipes and even broken bottles, bottle tops, plastics and rags that may block or damage equipment. Special equipment is also used to remove grit that gets washed into the sewer. This involves the separation of organic solid matter (or human waste) from the wastewater. This is done by putting the wastewater into large settlement tanks for the solids to sink to the bottom of the tank. The settled solids are called 'sludge'. At the bottom of the tanks, it undergoes sludge digestion. The rest of the water is then moved to the Secondary treatment.

Step Two: Secondary Treatment

The water, at this stage, is put into large rectangular tanks. These are called aeration lanes. Air is pumped into the water to encourage bacteria to breakdown the tiny bits of sludge that escaped the sludge scrapping process.

Step Three: Final Treatment

Next, the 'almost' treated wastewater is passed through a settlement tank. Here, more sludge is formed at the bottom of the tank from the settling of the bacterial action. Again, the sludge is scrapped and collected for treatment. The water at this stage is almost free from harmful substances and chemicals. The water is allowed to flow over a wall where it is filtered through a bed of sand to remove any additional particles. The filtered water is then released into the river/sea."

Similarly, all types of shipboard write-ups like "Notices", "Safety Instructions", "Reports" etc. can be practiced in the class in the domain of English language teaching courses. This can be very well done by integrating teaching i.e. if both the technical and English faculty conduct such sessions together, it will be an added advantage to the learner because they will not know the appropriate language use but also will revise the technical concepts already studied.

5.5 Teacher Training

The English teachers can be given a short training to get acquainted with the language used on board the ship so that they themselves know the world of shipping better and this will also inspire the students to better their professional communication.

6. CONCLUSIONS

Material selection and preparation in professional training courses is a challenge for the teachers of English. And it can be faced by adopting various methods and techniques in preparing the materials as per the needs of the industry.

The ideas and views expressed in this paper are sole of the author.

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