

MarEng: A Web-based Maritime English Learning Tool

Alejandro F. López de Vergara Méndez

Universidad de La Laguna (Spain)

Abstract

The Web-based Maritime English Learning Tool (hence MarEng) is an international project, partly financed (74%) by EU programme Leonardo da Vinci. MarEng aims to produce an on-line high quality, low cost, language learning tool. MarEng is addressed to maritime students, teachers and professionals that may need a thorough command of maritime English, in order to comply with IMO STCW¹ regulations. All MarEng material is English-English, and complies with IMO SMCP² (2001) recommendations. All users are supposed to have a language initial level equivalent to B2 (Vantage) or C1 (Effective Operational Proficiency) (Trim et al. 2001).

The MarEng tool is based on the voyage of a virtual ship, MS Marina, and comprises nine general topics in two levels. Namely, the Inner Circle (basic) and the Outer Circle (advanced), according to trainees' previous maritime background. Inner and Outer circle are not language level-related. Users may skip from one to the other, as required. All material may be used online in the classroom, in distance learning and for self-study purposes. The final version of the tool is expected to be released on the Internet by mid-2007, once it may have undergone the evaluation stage. Use of the tool will be free of charge, although user registration will be required.

Key Words: Maritime English, learning/teaching resources, web-based tool, types of materials.

Introduction

The Web-based Maritime English Learning Tool, MarEng, is an international project, partly financed (74%) by the EU programme Leonardo da Vinci, through contract 2004 FIN-04-B-F-LA-160515 of the Community Vocational Training Action Programme 2000-2006. The Project originated in 2004 at the Centre for Maritime Studies (University of Turku, Finland), where it is coordinated, and is expected to finish early in 2007, when the final tool will be finally delivered and posted on the Internet. The tool will be free of charge but registration will be needed.

MarEng main objective is to produce a maritime English high-quality, low cost, language learning tool that may be accessed from the Internet. MarEng tries to contribute in a largely needed field, where valuable language resources of this kind, are rarely known world-wide, due to a number of situations, as Pritchard (2005), rightly states:

- Non-existence of standards on Maritime English syllabus
- Restrictive national legislations and language policies
- Lack of standards on Maritime English courses
- Undefined status on Maritime English within MET [Maritime Education and Training] institutions.
- Slow or insufficient adjustment of conventional materials to the developments in FLT, EFL, ESL and modern teaching technologies.

Seventeen partner institutions from six EU Member States (Belgium, Finland, Latvia, Poland, Spain and the United Kingdom) are involved in MarEng (see Appendix). The group consists of a wide variety of maritime institutions. Those involved in the project are education and maritime experts such as English lecturers and teachers, researchers, training managers, seafaring professionals and representatives of the maritime industries.

The project is divided into five Work Packages, one dedicated to the administration of the project and four to the design, development, production, testing and marketing of the MarEng Web-based Maritime English Learning Tool.

Materials and Methods

Materials

MarEng is based on nine topic areas, each covering a part of the daily situations aboard the virtual ship MS Marina. Situations may be classed according to two levels, known as the Inner Circle (basic) and the Outer Circle (Advanced). However, it should be noted that the terms “basic” and “advanced” may be misleading, as they refer to the actual maritime background of the user, and not to his/her initial language level. MarEng users starting language level should be, at least, equivalent to B2 (Vantage), or ideally, C1 (Effective Operational Proficiency) as outlined in the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages Learning, Teaching, Assessment (Trim et al. 2001). In fact, users may skip from one circle to the other, according to their needs and situations.

The following table shows the nine topics, according to the two levels:

INNER CIRCLE		OUTER CIRCLE	
1	In Port	Port Operations and Cargo Handling	1
2	The ship and her crew	Types of ships. The Bridge. The Engine Room.	2
3	Leaving port	Port State Control	3
4	In the fairway	Navigation, Seamarks, Lights, Buoys, Lighthouses	4
5	A working day on board	Watches on board	5
6	A storm	The Weather and Radio communications	6
7	An accident on board	Radio Medical and Helicopter Rescue	7
8	Trespassing	The Coast Guard Duties	8
9	Approaching Port	VTS, Pilotage and Ice Navigation	9

Being a EU project, and by consensus, all MarEng texts are written according to British English standards, not only in spelling (e.g. “boatswain” vs. “bosun”), but also in vocabulary (e.g. “port” vs. “left”), some differences occurring between maritime British English and other maritime English varieties, such as American or Australian. In addition, all material is to be both linguistically and professionally correct. However, no extra-linguistic, purely sea-faring theory is included within the tool, as such a procedure would be beyond the scope of the project.

With regards to audio files, all texts come in a dual way: first the real recording, seeking, where possible, the greatest possible variety in accents and pronunciations,

whilst keeping its intended realistic nature. Then users are offered an alternative recording, performed by a professional native speaker of English. Thus, learners may be exposed to a variety of accents and pronunciations, being able to compare the standard with other non-standard, in some cases non-native, varieties actually used by maritime professionals. E.g.: a recording at London Docks, where stevedores are working.

Experimental Procedure

Among the seventeen partner institutions (see Appendix I), eleven work directly in the “material production” (i.e., will write and prepare the exercises, look for appropriate graphic or written material, tape the scripts) process, including digitising and setting the material into computer form.

The nine broad topic areas have been allotted to the different Material Producers according to their own specialisation or experience. Thus, the University of La Laguna, the Åland Polytechnic and the Centre for Maritime Studies, look after: A storm, The Weather and Radio communications, An accident on board and Radio Medical and Helicopter Rescue. Other partners, such as Gdynia Maritime University (Poland) have been assigned other topics, such as Types of ships, the Bridge, the Engine Room, etc.

In order to coordinate such an international team, some decisions had to be taken, e.g., language to be used, text, audio and video file formats to be sent to the coordinator in Finland. For coherence purposes, it was agreed that all materials would be written only in English, for the time being, no other languages being used. Among the different varieties, British English is the one preferred, although alternative spellings and vocabulary, where appropriate, have been included in certain exercises.

The partner in charge of the computer solution, Lingonet Oy (Finland), distributed among all producing partners a CD-ROM with detailed instructions on how to submit the material, and clear examples of each kind of exercises contained in the database, with more than two hundred possibilities. Exercises are grouped into eighteen categories, comprising cloze tests, quizzes, cross-words, reading and listening comprehension tests, and jumbled texts. Some typical exercises within classroom learning, e.g., reading comprehension texts with open-questions, have been dismissed, as they are not accurate for distance learning or self-study purposes.

All material has to refer to a reference code, as well as indicate further instructions for the programmers, such as accompanying audio or video files, photos, etc. In order to keep coherence, unless otherwise stated, exercise headings are provided by Lingonet. Below is shown a sample exercise, as it is sent to the computer experts at Lingonet:

Text Type 15. A safety announcement (2)

<*Sécurité, Sécurité, Sécurité | Mayday, Mayday, Maday> (Safety)

<All planes, all planes | *All ships, All ships> (addressee)

This is

<Captain | *Harbourmaster > (PSC Authority) Santander <*Harbourmaster | Captain> (PSC Authority) Santander <Harbourmaster> <Captain| *Harbourmaster > (PSC Authority)

<PanPan | *Sécurité> (Safety)

Navigational <notice |*warning> (announcement); Tug < *sunk | shipwrecked>
(not afloat) in Santander <bay | *harbour> (port).
I <*say | repeat> (inform) again
Navigational <notice |*warning> (announcement); Tug < *sunk | shipwrecked>
(not afloat) in Santander <bay | *harbour> (port).
<Over | *Out> (end of message)

The above example is a productive exercise where the learner has to fill in the gaps by typing the correct answer with the help of a clue. In the sample task, the clue is phrased in English; but it can be also given in any other language. When the exercise is checked, wrong answers will turn red, but the learners can still edit their answers (until they get it right). The key (Text Type 15) refers to a model exercise in Lingonet's database.

Although students will not see it on screen, in order to set the material for computer use, some codes and clues for the computer experts have to be inserted. In the above example, a vertical slash indicates an alternative between two or more possibilities, shown between angular brackets. Correct answers are marked with an asterisk. Clues are shown in parenthesis.

When designing exercises, material producers have to take into account all possible variants, including spelling, and alternative answers, where appropriate. Any possible answers, and/or alternative spellings not foreseen by the authors, unfortunately, will not be taken into consideration, and, therefore, will not exist for the tool purposes.

Results

At the time of writing, a free sample version of the MarEng tool may be downloaded from Lingonet at: <http://www.lingonet.com/MarEng/>, and the evaluation beta version is being prepared to be delivered among the advisory and zero partners. Zero or silent partners will carry out the necessary trials of the draft version before its final release on the Internet. In addition, all materials have already being tried out, individually, by the producing partners and volunteers. The evaluation stage is expected to take place from October 2006 to March 2007, and the final version to be delivered by mid 2007.

Conclusion

This paper aimed at introducing potential users to the concept and structure of the MarEng tool. The final product will be a valuable resource for both classroom and self-study or distance learning study. Although access to the tool on the Internet will be free of charge, user registration will be needed. Further releases may include other languages than English, e.g., for vocabulary exercises. Suggestions from readers and users of the tool as to possible improvements, changes and corrections will be most welcome.

References

IMO (1996) Seafarer's Training, Certification and Watchkeeping Code 78/95. London: International Maritime Organisation.

IMO (2001). IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP). London: International Maritime Organisation.

Pritchard, B. (2005). "Maritime English Resources Database – a year after" in The International Maritime English Conference – IMEC 17 Proceedings. Marseille: IMLA-IMEC / Ecole National de la Marine Marchande.

Trim, J.L.M., D. Coste, B. North y J. Sheils (coord.) (2001). Common European Framework of Reference for Languages Learning, Teaching, Assessment. Strasbourg: Council of Europe / Conseil de l'Europe - Modern Languages Division.

Appendix

A Web-based Maritime English Learning Tool Partners

Material Producer Partners

University of Turku, Centre for Maritime Studies, FI [<http://mkk.utu.fi>]

University of Antwerp, Institute of Transport and Maritime Management, BE [<http://www.itmma.org>]

University of Antwerp, Department of International Business Communication, BE [http://www.ua.ac.be/main.asp?c=*IBC]

University of La Laguna, Technical School of Navigation, Marine Engines and Radio electronics, English and German Linguistic studies, ES [<http://www.ull.es>]

University of Helsinki, Department of Translation Studies, FI [<http://www.rosetta.helsinki.fi>]

Åland Polytechnic, The Åland Maritime Institute, FI [<http://www.ha.aland.fi>]

Lingonet Oy, FI [<http://www.lingonet.com>]

Sydväst Polytechnic, School of Maritime Studies, FI [<http://www.sydvast.fi>]

Latvian Maritime Academy, LV [<http://www.lama.lv>]

Gdynia Maritime University, PL [<http://www.am.gdynia.pl>]

European Languages Centre, GB [<http://www.eurolang.com>]

Advisory Partners:

APEC Antwerp/Flanders Port Training Center, BE [<http://www.portofantwerp.be/APEC>]

Finnish Ship's Officers' Union, FI [<http://www.seacommand.fi>]

Finnish Maritime Administration, FI [<http://www.fma.fi>]

National Board of Education, FI [<http://www.oph.fi>]

Oy Rettig Ab Bore, FI [<http://www.rettig.fi>]

Maritime Administration of Latvia, LV [<http://www.jurasadministracija.lv>]

End-notes

[1] The Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watch-keeping for Seafarers (STCW 78/95) states that officers in charge of watch-keeping on vessels over 500 tons, should be capable of addressing both the crew and the passengers in clear, standard English, as well as capable of using IMO SMCP 2001, in order to avoid losses in human lives or cargo.

[2] The Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP 2001), is a set of instructions and recommendations aimed at avoiding errors in communications from ship to shore and vice versa, ship to ship, and on board ships. Based in standard maritime English avoids ambiguous phrases and vocabulary, such as emphatic questions, synonyms and certain modal sentences.