

A New Means of Teaching and Learning Maritime English in the Multilingual, Digital 21st Century

Laura D. Cizer, Mariana Boeru

Lecturer, PhD; Teacher, PhD. Mircea cel Batran Naval Academy, Constanta, Romania

Abstract:

This paper reports on an innovative Maritime English (ME) learning tool intended to respond to the ever pressing need for better linguistic competences aboard merchant ships. The undeniable multilingual diversity of merchant crews can only be mitigated by a firm grasp of the professional lingua franca onboard, namely Maritime English. In this context, maritime higher education institutions have a responsibility to equip their students with the necessary language skills to which it is essential to add the digital skills and the “learn how to learn” skills that will help them continue to study and further specialize in their field while being aboard ships. In this respect, the authors of this paper have envisaged the production of a free, online, audio-visual, multilingual Maritime English dictionary. More precisely, this dictionary is intended to offer definitions, visuals and audio renditions of ME terms in 11 other European languages. It is anticipated to function as a tool to be used both in the pedagogical community and also in the specific professional context of seafaring. By providing free and easy access to digital learning content for teachers, students and professional beneficiaries, this dictionary sees the integration of digital technologies at all levels in the teaching and learning process while developing the users’ multilingual awareness.

Key Words: *online learning tool, digital skills, maritime English, lexical knowledge, multilingualism*

Introduction

With English that is admittedly the bridge language of communication at sea, and the IMO regulations that stipulate that seafarers achieve levels of competency in English for clear, effective and safe communications, maritime English (ME) has become a compulsory and highly important subject in naval academies and maritime institutions in Europe and worldwide. Moreover, the International Convention on *Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping* for Seafarers actually raises awareness of the fact that “in these days of multinational and multilingual crews, the importance of sharing a common language cannot be underestimated.” (STCW, 2013: 49)

Context and Needs Analysis

This paper is articulated on the intention to address one issue revealed by the findings of two Needs Analysis surveys conducted at Mircea cel Batran Naval Academy (ANMB) in 2016 in order to determine whether the foreign languages competence which students acquire and develop during their academic studies reflects the realities and challenges faced while working on board ships.

The 100 academy students who answered the questionnaire were in all years of study, attending all types of programs (full time and part-time education) and had already been on at least one voyage at sea.

In order to ensure that there was an evident connection between the world of education and the world of work, it was decided to survey 10 crewing agencies, too, as the main recruiters of workforce in the seafaring industry. The aim was to get the employer's perspective on the linguistic competence of seafarers as intimated by the interviewed managers of the participating crewing agencies.

The survey results revealed that a significant percentage of the students (70%) had faced communication difficulties while at sea due to insufficient knowledge of specialized vocabulary and considered the multilingualism and multiculturalism of multinational crews, which are typical of merchant ships, as a further challenge in effectively communicating with other crew members. Another poignant issue was the availability of the learning materials and tools as well as the relevance of their formats to the study of maritime English.

Consequently, the development of digital reference materials for the acquisition of maritime English vocabulary was identified as the principal need to be addressed. As such, the first step taken by the authors of this paper was to produce a free on-line illustrated dictionary of maritime English terms and their equivalents in Romanian. (Cizer & Lungu, 2016, p. 340-345)

The dictionary is intended to be used during face-to-face classes to supply quick visual explanations of the terms presented in our courses and seminars. Moreover, it was anticipated that the dictionary would offer the opportunity to hone our students' digital skills in a formal educational setting. We hoped that the students would exercise those digital skills later on while acting in professional contexts.

Furthermore, following the success of this dictionary, the authors envisage to take it to another level. More precisely, in response to the reality of multilingualism, the existent bilingual online illustrated dictionary will be so enriched as to simultaneously show equivalents of ME terms in other European languages as well. The next *Dictionary* is intended to function as a tool to be used both in the pedagogical community (maritime higher education institutions) and also in the specific professional context of seafaring, for multilingual purposes.

The innovative quality and main usefulness of such an endeavor lie definitely in the learning and teaching of English combined with an emphasis on linguistic diversity.

Potential Partners

Since English is the international language of the sea (including the IMO, ISAF and other international organisations), this language will definitely stay at the core of the dictionary acting as the bridge language. Moreover, non-English-speakers who go to sea need to know both the seafaring terms in their own language and enough English to be able to communicate with other seafarers of all nations. The creation of the envisaged partnership will be done with an evident respect for the linguistic diversity in Europe; the target languages cover: (1) English, the most common language for communication at sea (and also in Europe); (2) Spanish, French, Italian (three major EU languages), to which Portuguese and Romanian have been added with a view to covering the Romance languages family; (3) Dutch and Swedish to include the Germanic languages family; (4) Bulgarian and Slovenian from the Slavic languages family, and (5) Latvian, as a representative of the Baltic languages family.

Finally, mention should be made to the fact that the potential partners involved in making the Dictionary should definitely be MET providers such as naval academies and/or maritime institutions. As such, they all share a similar object of study and also issues regarding the scarcity of ME teaching/learning/training materials. Once this need (has been) acknowledged, the importance of creating a network of maritime and naval institutions has also emerged.

Description of the intellectual product

The novelty of this new *Dictionary* comes from several notable aspects. First of all, it will unite academics from European maritime higher education institutions and will bring them to work together in order to establish the English maritime lexical corpus on which the *Dictionary* is to be constructed. It is a first step taken towards aligning the maritime content taught at university level across Europe. It is expected to ensure a higher level of lexical uniformity and thus create a sense of “maritime community of practice” among those that teach maritime English, those that learn it as students and finally those that use it as seafarers.

Secondly, this *Dictionary* will act as a promoter of multilingualism since it offers not only the English translation and definition of maritime terms but it also simultaneously presents the user with multiple language equivalents of the searched terms thus, “allowing understanding and basic communication across different languages” (Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions Multilingualism: An asset for Europe and a shared Commitment, 2008:11). As such, the language composition has been carefully selected in order to integrate the most used languages in the EU: French, Spanish, Italian, Portuguese and Romanian thus covering the Romance language family, English, Dutch and Swedish from the Germanic

language family, Bulgarian and Slovenian from the Slavic language family and Latvian as a representative of the Baltic language family.

Thirdly, its innovative character also lies in the combination of its IT features such as the electronic, visual and audio components. A dictionary is a must-have in the process of language learning and all sea-going qualifications have a sitting-down and learning component, with a written or oral examination. Our multilingual online dictionary - with its professional design and presentation of the definitions and photos (taken on-board ships to create the real-life professional context), and audio-files in an ergonomic, effective and easy-to-navigate way (searchable in both English, and each of the ten other European languages), and also custom-designed activities for dictionary use and practice of Maritime English - will provide higher education students and teachers with better support in managing their studies. The audio renditions of the terms in all 11 languages will be provided by native speakers and are meant to further complement the text input so as to convey information in all possible ways: visual, textual and audio. Moreover, the audio files will help the students acquire the correct pronunciation and might enhance their multilingual comprehension skills by noticing phonological similarities among languages.

The availability (free downloadable application even for mobile devices) and easy use of such a digital tool will create the opportunity to deliver learning in other locations off campus such as home, community and workplace. The dictionary can be used during face-to-face classes to supply quick visual explanations of the terms English undoubtedly presented in the courses and seminars. It will also save teachers the expenses of print illustrations and it will help the learners understand the meaning and visualize the image denoted by the word in order to form an impression of the way in which objects function. In addition, long-term lexical retention has also been proved to be enhanced by exposure to visual and audio input.

At the same time, students are more likely to transfer the lexical knowledge acquired in class to subsequent on-board situations, thus benefiting from an instilled a positive and proactive attitude to lifelong learning. It is precisely this transferability of the knowledge and skills acquired with the help of our multilingual dictionary that makes it such a useful tool for the seafaring actors even when they leave the formal education setting and start circulating on the labor market becoming seafaring personnel.

Methodology

From the methodological point of view, the project is based on PAR structure (participatory action research – Kemmis & Mc Taggart, 1988, p. 5); therefore, it will involve all the institutions in a collaborative work process. Also, Wüster's (1979) theory of terminological lexicography as well as Bergenholtz and Tarp (eds.) (1995) guidelines for the preparation of a specialized dictionary will be used in devising the *Dictionary*.

The making of the *Dictionary* is structured into 3 sequential phases: (1) identification and delineation the problem, (2) implementation and testing and (3) reformulations, dissemination of results, dictionary exploitation.

This main objective will be accomplished by undertaking the following activities:

1. A multi-dimensional analysis of the ME syllabuses used in the maritime institutions involved in the dictionary production. The result will be a list of the appropriate lexical items whose exact number will also be established.
2. Design and setup of the working platform for dictionary content uploading (lexical contents, definitions and contextualization, audio references and photos). Guidelines for dictionary production will also be set in place as well as the working method intended to familiarize project participants with the platform.
3. Providing translations/equivalents of the English terms in the other languages: Bulgarian, Dutch, French, Italian, Latvian, Portuguese, Romanian, Slovenian, Spanish and Swedish.
4. Devising the dissemination kit containing the project presentation, 3 feedback questionnaires for students, teachers and third parties, and dictionary-based activities/tasks.
5. Testing and Evaluation of the designed on-line dictionary by means of the previously devised dictionary-based activities/tasks and feedback questionnaire among students of the maritime institutions taking part in the project.
6. Based on the feedback received, reports will be drawn up by each partner institution that will be centralized in one final report by the coordinating organization with a view to setting corrective measures.
8. Dissemination through all on-line means such as: official website, link to the official website on official websites of: maritime institutions involved, other maritime institutions in Europe, and stakeholders: crewing agencies, maritime training centers, etc.

Findings - Expected Results

There will be an increased motivation for language learning through an innovative method (on-line multilingual dictionary), the development of a partial competence (better acquisition and use of vocabulary and pronunciation), increased competence in foreign languages (focus on maritime English), increased level of digital competence, and greater understanding and responsiveness to linguistic diversity. The use of this on-line tool will enrich maritime-related vocabulary through acquirement of words, phrases, expressions that are required in fulfilling tasks on-board ships. This will result in improved communication and safety on-board.

At local institutional level, this *Dictionary* will be inserted in the ME syllabuses as an on-line teaching/learning tool for further reference.

As a result, at national, European and international levels, this insertion will be an example of innovation in the attempt to align maritime English lexical content in terms of competencies, quality, teaching means and techniques, use of ICT and openness to linguistic diversity at the same time. The fact that it will be freely available upon completion will largely contribute to its inclusion in other maritime institutions in Europe and beyond.

Conclusion

Maritime higher education institutions have a responsibility to equip their students with those key transversal competences that will enable them to perform on such a highly demanding and continuously evolving profession as that of seafaring. In addition to specialist knowledge and language skills, students need digital skills that will help them continue to learn and further specialize in their field while being aboard ships. They need to acquire the “learn how to learn” skills so that when they are at sea they can still be able to look for information and use it according to their needs. In this way, seafarers continue their life-long learning process and are able to transfer competences that they first acquired in school to professional learning contexts.

Also, integrating digital technologies at all levels in the teaching and learning process and, equally important, providing free and easy access to digital learning content for teachers, students and professional beneficiaries, this project will focus not only on the creation of the dictionary but also on popularizing it across educational communities so that the use of ICT become the mainstream practice.

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