Socio-psychological factors of maritime English communicative competency development

N. Ye. Ohorodnyk

Kyiv National Linguistic University, Ukraine
Corresponding author. E-mail: neo-marine@mail.ru

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Abstract. The current trends introduced in maritime education and training (MET) are analyzed. English language professionalization process is characterized from the perspective of new educational priorities. The structure of the seafarers’ professional activity serves as the methodological basis for the mentioned process. The specific seafarers’ working conditions affecting their communicative interaction effectiveness are explored. The influence of socio-psychological factors on Maritime English communicative competency is established.

Keywords: future seafarers, socio-psychological factors, Maritime English, communicative competency development, components of the professional activity structure.

Introduction. Globalization as a mankind civilizing transformation with a tendency to expand the space and reshape long-standing relationship involves radical changes in all spheres of human life. According to many, among its priorities are science and education as areas that produce and humanizes knowledge. Regarding its educational dimension globalization has become the most fundamental challenge faced by the tertiary school for more than a thousand-year history. The leading worldwide trend in the XXI century defined by scientists is the humanization of education, its pivot to the personality and basic human values. A new educational model for professional training of highly skilled specialists with humanistic ideology and culture is defined as human-centered by its philosophy. The keynote of it says: “No one is for the equipment; just the opposite, the equipment is for everyone”.

At the crossroads of educational paradigms and epochs the system of maritime education and training (MET) turned out. The dynamic socio-economic transformation experienced by post-industrial society affects radically the current state of the marine industry, and at the same time requires a revision of the seafarers’ professional status and qualities important for their successful career in the global professional community. New international and state standards with a high level of competency expected from the seafarers of a current generation are being implemented to make them competitive in the world labor market.

Thus, there has been the shift from the seafarers’ qualification model to their competency model with a relevant change in a traditional learning outcomes assessment – not knowledge and skills but competencies. Competency is considered to be a “knowledge-based, intellectual and personal experience due to socio-professional human life and activities” [4, p. 2], which is likely much more than the traditional paradigm of vocational training results. The current labor market requires professionals who are good at doing their work than those who know the way of doing it well.

A brief review of publications on the subject. The fundamental issues of future seafarers’ education and training are studied by a number of state and foreign scientists: M. Babysheva, O. Bezul’ts’ka, G. Bokareva, M. Bulatov, V. Cherniavsky, M. Miusov, I. Sokol, S. Yelets, V. Yelets and others. Among the experts in seafarers’ psychology are G. Kryvorot’ko, O. Istoimina, V. Kalyta, M. Korol’chuk, M. Orlova, M. Yanchuk. Some aspects of foreign language acquisition by future marine officers are covered by N. Bobrysheva, N. Demydchenko, S. Kozak, O. Myronenko, G. Pokhodzei, M. Solnyshkina, O. Soloviova, L. Stupina, O. Strelinka, V. Tenyscheva, O. Tyron, O. Frolova, O. Tsybul’ska, M. Shyslo, A. Bocanegra-Valle, P. Björkroth, C. Cole, R. Ellis, A. Noble, B. Pritchard, T. Trenkner, A. Waters, F. Weeks and others. Despite a significant number of studies on the specific issues of maritime education and training (MET), the problem of Maritime English communicative competency development within the framework of general professional seafarers’ competency and from the perspective of socio-psychological aspects is still open to scientific study because of its fragmentary analysis and incomplete understanding.

The purpose of the article is to analyze socio-psychological nature of Maritime English communicative competency development.

Results and discussion. It is noteworthy that the process of the state MET system modernization is going on according to the world’s engineering education updated standards generally and marine engineers’ standards of training specifically [2,4]. A new educational environment for future seafarers comprises several key features of the global educational paradigm:

Knowledge as an individual capital is no longer the force which it has been declared earlier. Knowledge is replaced by competencies, as noted above, what is the most significant difference between the modern approach and traditional training. However, the competency-based approach does not deny the value of knowledge in itself. It rejects the false idea, that everything that is studied and memorized, forms professional knowledge. One should draw a distinction between the intellectual knowledge for someone’s intellectual curiosity satisfaction and practical knowledge used for transforming activity. The main thing for professional knowledge as a factor and product of social life is to be in a constant operation and production, spread and consumed in everyday life. Therefore, it is this particular practical professional knowledge gained not from the knowledge representation, but through the active learning is stressed.

For several decades such transformations are also observed in a profession-oriented foreign language education, the main goal of which is to form foreign language communicative competency, meaning the language acquisition as a tool of intercultural communication, and a
foreign language skills development as a means in the dialogue of world’s cultures and civilizations.

There is a general belief that the shift in emphases means the change in principles, and the change of principles is caused by the shift in approaches, that is in the immediate driving force for further transitions and transformations in learning and education. So, in line with the competence approach a significant extension of the practical training component is assumed, that is interpreted as a so-called active learning with practical orientation by the standards of the World Initiative CDIO – the international educational project aimed at eliminating the contradiction between theory and practice through the unity of four engineering fundamentals: Conceiving – Designing – Implementing – Operating [2, p. 12]. The gain of practice-oriented approach to the content of training is necessary to bridge the gap between professional theory and practice. The practice-oriented education recommended by the special regulations [3,4] as a means of seafarers’ training professionalization, creates conditions for the interpretation of academic and professional activities. The simulation-based learning process with solving specific professional problems lies at the heart of this approach. By simulating the future seafarers’ professional content area and thus promoting their learning activity transformation into a professional one, it thereby gives reason to be considered as a way to achieve professional competency.

The seafarers’ professional activity is transformed appropriately with the third industrial revolution start accompanied by high technologies, causing marine engineers to transcend their specialization. Therefore, the idea of interdisciplinarity in professional education is also embodied in the process of their professional training. The main objective of the interdisciplinary approach is to eliminate the problems of knowledge transfer.

It is generally recognized that due to the lack of real strong links between disciplines, even graduates with a high achievements level are experiencing serious difficulties in transferring their quite sufficient knowledge to meet the challenges of a new discipline. Such willingness to knowledge transfer is gained by them, according to experts, for years of practice.

Solving the contradiction between actual knowledge and inability to enjoy them is achieved through large scale academic disciplines integration or interdisciplinary relationships. As a basis for integration, or that fertile ground where the components of various disciplines "take their root" a foreign language as a multidisciplinary subject was defined. The change of foreign language status in the higher education learning content is pointed by methodologists as well: "... a foreign language goes beyond the academic subject and becomes a resource for specialist formation" [16, p.145]. The English language formally approved as a working language on board a ship by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) is recognized as the best tool of interdisciplinary integration in MET. Thanks to the so-called triad interaction between Informatics (as a universal integration factor), professional disciplines and the English language multidisciplinary integrative competencies are formed, the professional knowledge fragmentation is eliminated; all the subject matter is run into one to form an "open" system of knowledge, which could be integrated into a new one.

Engaging in a complicated system of interdisciplinary communication activity transforms a closed dedicated teaching and learning process into an open multicomponent system with a wide range of participants and stakeholders. Thus, another mover of technological development and a crucial component of a new educational paradigm is the need for professional interaction with a mutually beneficial knowledge exchange.

The modern merchant marine trend to shipboard personnel internationalization as well as the growing importance of professional interaction in multilingual and multidisciplinary team actualizes the concept of foreign language professional communicative competency as a tool for effective problem solving at work. The effectiveness of professional communication is treated differently. In particular, by the CDIO standards the effective communication means the ability to obtain information and share it during the active cooperation” [2, p.5]. According to the STCW Convention (International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers), future seafarers’ communication is considered successful provided their full interaction within the multilingual crew, including both direct and indirect communication during marine equipment in-service and operation [4, p. 160]. It is significant that similar position is shared by the methodologists, since they consider the interaction productivity, i.e. the achievement of the desired result is more likely a measure of professional communication efficiency than speaking and writing skills proficiency. Besides, such interpretations correlate fully with a current tendency to knowledge obviation, i.e. their exteriorization or manifestation in professional activity and human relations. It is obvious that the foreign language proficiency is becoming more functional in nature. Satisfying the most important human needs, such as the need for communication and knowledge, it assumes the ability to correspond the aim, objectives and conditions of professional communication.

The mentioned strategic priorities of future seafarers’ professionalization encourage the search for effective ways of their foreign language communicative professionalization. Professionalization as a holistic continuous process of professionals’ development, which starts with a future career choice and ends upon the completion of the active employment related to the knowledge and skills acquisition as well as appropriate abilities development and at last, gaining a usage experience for all of this, in fact, represents the process of forming professional competency. Thus, the two concepts identity is obvious.

The future seafarers’ need in the English language proficiency at a competent user level is generally recognized, since this determines their working efficiency, career promotion, and finally, the safety of ships and cargo as well as marine environment. Therefore, the English language communicative competency is considered to be one of the key factors of seafarers’ reliability, contributing to faultless performance of their professional duties.

There are the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR/L) and the National ESP Curriculum among the regulatory documents specifying the teaching and learning process on English for specific purposes (ESP) in Ukraine. Both documents serve as regulators and useful resources during the course or syllabus design and development for different maritime specialties. They provide international standards for description and evaluation of profession-oriented language competencies, universally accepted levels of English profi-
ciency (CEFRL) along with adapted national parameters of English language acquisition (ESP Program); they also form the basis for the rational combination of European and Ukrainian standards for Maritime English communicative competency.

To promote the implementation of the STCW Code – (Seafarers’ Training, Certification and Watchkeeping Code) requirements in teaching English for future seafarers a training Model Course in Maritime English 3.17 was developed by IMO. It contains a detailed guidance on course framework and outline including aims, objectives, and a description of syllabus content, structure and methodology as well as a detailed teaching syllabus. Taking into account the advisory nature of this document, significantly note its vital role in achieving the target competency through its evident professional orientation.

Putting the task to provide Maritime English communicative competency standards it is essential to identify factors impacting their successful implementation. Given that Maritime English communicative competency is an integral component of the seafarers’ professional competency at large, it is appropriate to clarify the standards of seafarers’ competency in terms of their professional functions required and also some modern trends in MET reforming. Since the process of professionals’ development aims to create conditions for mastering a future profession, a brief description of the future seafarers’ work activity makes sense to provide insight into its basic components, including: functions, tasks, duties and responsibilities, tools and equipment, working environment, or working and living conditions [4].

Nowadays there are three levels of responsibility agreed internationally in accordance with the level of proficiency achieved for the proper performance of functions on board:

I – management level: senior officers (master, chief mate, chief engineer officer, second engineer officer);  
II – operational level: junior officers (deck officers, engineer officers, radio operators);  
III – support level: ratings, or rating crew members (able seaman (AB), ordinary seaman (OS), wipers, electricians, oilers, fitters, wipers and others) [4, p. 28-29; 80-82].

The focuses of this study are marine engineers (officers in charge of an engineering watch, duty officers, and electrical officers) responsible for technical operation of the ship, i.e. marine engineering at the operational level. According to the prescribed standards operational level provides the performance of all functions within the designated area of responsibility [4, p. 82]. The area of responsibility of these specialists is the mechanical propulsion and the operation and maintenance of the mechanical and electrical installations of the ship, maintenance a safe engineering watch, engine room multinational team management, personnel and vessel safety protection. The specified functions at the same time form an idea of the final working activity results and their area of responsibility and provide a focus for professional competency development.

The next structure component of the professional activity is the scope of activity – those objects that fall under the transformative professional activities. Considering the marine engineers’ areas of responsibility [4, p. 149-157], the complexity of their scope of activity becomes apparent. On the one hand, these are different kinds of technical equipment, which under certain conditions act either an object or subject of work: under operation – they are tools and instruments (equipment), under repair – the object of work. On the other hand, required at this level human resource management skills suppose that other engine room team members are also to be in focus for engine room officers in term of their soft and hard skills, and the level of their professional competency in whole. Being supervisors for the engine room team members with regard to their skills and abilities, the engine officers contribute purposefully to good relations between the crewmembers and promote their effective communication during collective interaction in the working environment.

Commonly, work tools and instruments for marine engineers include technical equipment of various kinds – for a hand or automated work. Nevertheless, the engine-room team is both the subject and the object of the organizational and managerial activity for an engineer officer with certain management functions, such as maintenance of a safe engineering watch, controlling the operation of the ship, ensuring safe working practices in the workshop environment and care for persons on board.

Professional duties or functions mean a group of tasks, duties and responsibilities carried out by specialists in accordance with their position. They are determined by the standard job description, and duplicated in a large number of other regulatory documents. They are sufficiently voluminous because cover all possible activities a specialist executes [4, p. 157-169, 188-198].

Remarkable is the fact of mainstreaming the adequate knowledge and use of English to enable the officers to perform engineering duties and interact effectively within professional and everyday communication in an international crew [4, p. 153].

It is obvious that a working environment for seafarers is a ship. Equivalent by importance to vital conditions of work relating to the sanitary standards, safety rules, etc., are social conditions. Social conditions present the social significance of a profession. They include psychological climate at workplace, corporate traditions and culture. Basically they determine the quality of life and efficiency of the ship’s crew.

Conducted psychological studies make scientists sure that the nature of the socio-psychological relations in multinational crews varies essentially depending on the type of a vessel, number of crewmembers, voyage duration and geography, endurance of a ship (frequency of contacts with the shore) [1, p. 45].

Psychologists have concluded the special nature of seafarers’ profession highlighting its extreme specificity that consists in a combination of professional and human activity within the vessel as a “stand-alone technical system”, and thus incomparable with any working object except a spaceship [1].

Having three modes of operation – daily, high alert and emergency modes, seafarers’ profession always belonged to difficult and risky ones. Among the seafarers’ working conditions in different ways affecting the crewmembers, psychologists point strict life regulation, ship limited space, high responsibility, prolonged stress, physical inactivity, sensory deprivation, isolation from family, social medium etc. Equally important for majority of crewmembers is operator’s type of activity associated with challenging analytic-synthetic brainwork and mental processes high stability.
Moreover, even under the normal working conditions there is a variety of stress factors affecting the seafarers’ activity including engine room officers onboard a ship. Among them – factors related to: a) natural conditions – pitching and rolling, frequent weather and climate as well as time zones changes; b) working conditions – noise and vibration, which, by the way, are extended not only to the working but also living areas, the wave hydrodynamic shock, high air and equipment temperature, electromagnetic radiation, petroleum vapor air pollution etc.; c) socio-psychological – work and life blending, a constant readiness to perform professional duties, a multinational crew, communication difficulties, relative social isolation, monotony, overwork, lack of information, danger expectations, etc. [1].

The analysis of the socio-psychological characteristics of the seafarers’ working environment allows for the conclusion about the increased level of their work complexity. These conditions are complicated by the periodic effect of extreme factors or a high probability of their occurrence that makes a challenge to human reserves up to their adaptive capability. Thus, the seafarers’ work is determined by the scientists as a work under special conditions.

It is clear that despite belonging to a “Man vs Machinery” profession category, the ship engineers’ professional activity has the human factor as a prevailing component. They perform the technical operation and maintenance of ship power plants both by means of technics and personnel. In the course of their activity not only the mechanisms but the engine room crewmembers are exposed to the transformative effect.

English language proficiency is one of the working functions in a mixed crew. Used in a professional and everyday communication it serves as a tool for effective professional interaction, providing mutual understanding as well as comfort and safety of the working environment, which is a ship. In fact, it is not only a place for work but also the seafarers’ temporary life space.

The specificity of communication on board the ship during a long passage has been described in a number of studies on seafarer’s psychology. Focusing on a high communication need for an effective socio-psychological adaptation, i.e. joining the team organically as well as much more need than other personnel has in cohesion and harmony in work, psychologists point out that the seafarers’ work specificity on the ship definitely affects the communication. Given the fact that communication is a type of a team work, and therefore an important factor of the team building, the scientists have chosen a number of factors affecting the process of communication on board that should be taken into account because of their adverse impact on the efficiency of crewmembers’ interaction [1, p. 45-49]. Of all the factors influencing the nature of communication the most important are:

- substantial reduction of the external contacts, i.e. a kind of seafarer’s social isolation;
- work and life blending with working and life areas proximity;
- multinational (mixed) crew and foreign-language communicative environment.

The consequences of the above factors are some difficulties and distortions in communication such as the syndrome of a "forced communication", i.e. communication against the will or declaration to talk to anyone at all, insubordination during the informal communication etc. .

Conclusions. Problems in communications create tension among the crewmembers by straining interpersonal relations, worsening the socio-psychological climate, and causing the conflict situations which are not only unwanted, but also extremely dangerous onboard. On the authority of experts, being competent in team building as well as interpersonal interaction marine officers can adjust communication conditions and prevent the conflict escalation. The objective and natural influence of socio-psychological factors, presented with current trends in the MET process generally and in a high in demand Maritime English communicative competency development specifically, requires their constant monitoring and consideration for the preservation of the leading positions in the world labor market.

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