

## **TEACHING COMMUNICATIVE APPROACH-BASED ENGLISH TO MSU CADETS**

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*Communicative approach in language teaching has become widely used in European countries and the USA. Nowadays there are a lot of language schools and courses providing language training based on these principles, and supported by the system of assessment including commonly accepted TOEFL, IELTS, and other testing tools. It seems expedient to apply the methodology for the sake of language training of future seafarers. The efforts to do so are being undertaken by Maritime English Dept, the Maritime Academy, MSU in Vladivostok, Russia. There are some hindrances in the way which could be eliminated through joint efforts on the part of the shipping industry, University administration, and teaching staff. Positive outcomes of introducing communicative approach in Kherson State Maritime Academy can be used as guidance for finding solution to the problems.*

**Keywords:** communicative approach, language skills, psychological barrier, a facilitator, closed pairs, open pairs, group work, responsibility, commitment, motivation.

### **Background**

We are witnessing a situation when international mercantile marine keeps growing, world shipbuilding is booming and highly sophisticated and environmentally safe ships continue replenishing the world merchant fleet. Shipping is involved in globalization to a far greater degree than other sectors as ship owners enjoy the possibility of employing crewmembers from any part of the world. Here comes the question: who will con the ships and control sophisticated equipment

ensuring the ships' safe and accident-free operation. The desired answer would be that of well-trained, motivated and well-socialized inflow of young deck and engine officers.

The backbone of such breed of seafarers in case of Russia seems to be their competency in the English language. Whereas in the times of the Soviet Union there was a huge fleet of merchant ships securing employment for every graduate of higher marine engineering institutions, the graduates of today tend to seek employment with foreign-flag ships, joining international crews. The reasons of such a situation are as follows: there's few ships left under the Russian Federation jurisdiction; the level of payment is higher, working conditions are better and social package is thicker in foreign shipping companies than in domestic ones. Every high school leaver faces the problem of choosing his / her profession; and a profession prestige value is a decisive factor. The very notion of prestige related to a profession / specialty implies the attitude on the part of an individual and the whole society towards factors underlying a common idea of an attractive career and, consequently, quality of life. Therefore high-quality level of entrants to seafaring jobs is a prerequisite for further work with cadets and their successful employment. It should be noted in this respect that the notion of marine romance lost its attractiveness for young people long ago. Hard labor of a well-skilled seafarer deprived of advantages that work and leisure ashore gives is becoming less and less appealing for a young person spoiled by civilization amenities. Only an appropriate payment for such labor that can guarantee a worthy life to a seafarer and his/her family members becomes a prevailing factor when one chooses seafaring as his/her profession. A survey of students and cadets' motivation to work in the shipping sector has shown that the young people's decision to get maritime education was influenced by: interesting employment upon graduation – 44%; their relatives, friends and acquaintances' recommendations and family traditions – 26%; prestige value of maritime education – 22%; and only 5% believed shipping companies' guarantees. 68% of respondents are planning to devote their life to marine career upon graduation, and 15% have not decided yet. However, out of the group intending to work at sea only

19% are going to work there till their pension age; 27% intend to work there till they are promoted to the rank they wish; another 27% are planning to do so till they find a higher-paid position ashore, and 22% more are going to work as crew members till they save enough money to purchase real property. Thus, most young people consider their marine career as a temporary arrangement and they are not prepared to carve out such a career during all their life span. It is, therefore, equally important for a seafarer working with a shipping company to gain an offing to carve out his/her career and be secure socially working either at sea or ashore. The personnel problem and the image of a shipping sector are interconnected; therefore, the approach to correcting the situation should be system-based. Need to increase shipping companies' responsibility for training of their ships' crews is one of the aspects of the systemic approach; it fully corresponds to the IMO idea that maritime education and training should become an integral part of shipping industry. This is fully applicable to successful language training.

Till collapse of the USSR and consequent destruction of its Merchant Marine the maritime education and training system in this country offered a then relevant approach to language teaching based on traditional grammar-based / translation-based methodologies. These, however, are hardly suitable under the current circumstances. Being aware of the need for changes the Maritime State University named after Admiral G.I. Nevelskoy (MSU) chose to introduce another approach to teaching English. The idea is to introduce a communicative approach into teaching seafaring cadets English for the sake of quality language training of future merchant mariners in compliance with the requirements of the Federal State Educational Standard, 3<sup>rd</sup> generation, and these of STCW-78, as amended in 1995 and 2010, to facilitate training such ship officers who would possess sufficient language proficiency to secure safety of navigation. In other words training the kind of the ship officers capable of efficient communicating in English both when fulfilling their professional duties and socializing with other seafarers of different nationalities in mixed crews to have a positive impact on a ship's psychological situation, and, in the final run, on providing for safe, secure and efficient shipping on clean oceans.

This attempt undertaken by MSU was at the initial phase supported by *Marlow Navigation Co. (MN)*, which is authorized by the *International Maritime Employers Committee (IMEC)* to supervise training programs in MET institutions throughout the world. In case of CIS this *IMEC*-supported programmes are English language ones with particular emphasis on the communicative approach.

### Essence

The communicative approach isn't something new in language teaching, in Europe and the USA it is considered quite traditional. It was in the 1960-s when the European Council took a number of measures aimed at teaching foreign languages throughout West Europe. A workgroup of experts, created in 1971 made a research into a possibility of teaching adults foreign languages. The outcome was a *Modern Languages: 1971 – 1981* paper containing the analysis of prerequisites for such system of language training. A number of research projects followed, one, namely *Project 12 Learning and teaching modern languages for communication* being of particular importance. The joint efforts resulted in establishing an integrated communicative approach to teaching languages in West European countries, based on systemized theory and practice of language teaching. The implementation of the projects would give Europeans the freedom of communication, breaking through the language barriers for the purposes of mutual understanding and respect. Moreover, *IMO Model Course 3.17 (Maritime English)* is also based on the communicative approach principles.

Russian researchers in linguistics and methods of teaching have also made a great contribution into the development of the method in question. It was *Dr. E.I. Passov* who offered the name of communicative method and substantiated its concept in his works even earlier than the Western researchers had done. The communicative method was based on the ideas of communicative linguistics, activity theory, and the concept of personality development through the intercultural exchange. In the following theoretic research and practical applications the focus was initially made on teaching speaking skills, but eventually the method

became applicable to all kinds of oral and written communication. Basically the method aims at drawing language teaching process nearer to actual communication process, therefore the topics, intentions of utterance, communicative situations should be thoroughly selected to suit practical needs and interests of the trainees and should govern the communications behavior of themselves and that of the teacher.

Considering the advantages and disadvantages of the method one should tell among the former:

- simultaneous development of basic language skills (listening, speaking, reading and writing);
- presentation of language material preceding practicing / producing stage;
- no psychological barrier between the teacher (or, actually a facilitator) and students;
- variety of forms / techniques used: language games, pair work (closed pairs and open pairs), group work, discussions of every kind, etc.;
- formation of not only language skills, but also thought skills in the course of language training;
- language learning through culture learning and vice versa.

As to disadvantages of the method the critics most often point at grammar. Grammar is not specifically taught using this method, there's an attempt to substitute an analytical approach cherished by traditional methodology, when a language learner has to study the grammar rules before going over to reproduction of language material with a synthetic approach typical of learning a native language. Such an attempt is extremely sensitive to such factors as students' motivation, a group of learners' synergy, and a teacher's language competence and commitment to the discussed methodology. It is also time consuming (and that's one of the reasons the Maritime English Dept has asked for some optional hours to be detailed for the first- and second-year cadets).

### **History of Implementation**

Elements of communicative-oriented teaching have been used in Maritime English Dept practice since late 1980-s. The work in

the field is closed connected with the name of *Assoc. Prof. Valentina Petrenko* who pioneered introduction of intensive language teaching at the Maritime State University. Under her guidance a team of teachers, among them *Olga Kazinskaya, Dmitry Mishchenko, Raisa Korobka, Tatiana Berkovich* conducted classes following the principles of communicative competence formation teaching. In the 1990-s there were some selected groups of cadets who studied the English language using *Cambridge Course* based on communicative approach principles. Yet, those were sporadic and confined attempts. The situation was aggravated by ever decreasing language level of entrants, as the job of a seafarer was becoming less and less attractive through 1990-s and 2000-s, reduction of number of classes per week (2-3 hours a week for most of the semesters), fall in a status value of a teacher's job due to low wages and consequent voluntary termination of service by some experienced staff, substituted by newcomers not necessarily meeting all the requirements, not always properly trained and committed. It should be stressed that a maritime English teacher takes time to be grown, even in best cases of a committed newly joining teacher.

Changes came with the advent of *MN* bringing a pilot language teaching programme to Maritime State University. As it was mentioned above the company is entitled by *IMEC* to be in charge of training programmes for future seafarers. *IMEC*, uniting more than 100 major shipping companies, operators, crewing agencies from all over the world, has come to an understanding that it would be less expensive and more feasible to spend some money for good language training to have human error caused accidents at sea, and consequently losses, prevented from happening.

2010 witnessed workshops for Maritime English Dept teachers conducted by *Ms. Tatiana Pankratova* (then an *IMEC* programme coordinator for Russia) and the beginning of the implementation of the pilot project to deliver 100 hours of *Headway (Oxford University Press)* based language course free to 4<sup>th</sup> year navigating cadets of the Maritime Academy. Out of 82 cadets who volunteered to participate only 33 completed the course. The reasons for such a dramatic cut were as follows:

1) difficulties in arranging for classes in the second half of the day because of cadets' engagement for keeping watches and taking part in some other events;

2) part of the cadets, who volunteered, had failed academic assignments and had to take exams / test at the time the pilot programme classes were held;

3) some cadets realized they were unable to cope with the material of *Headway Pre-Intermediate / Intermediate* courses.

However, the pilot project was regarded by monitors from *Marlow Navigation, Cyprus*, to be a success. At the meeting of MSU administration, Marlow Navigation responsible officers, and *Prof. Valentyna Kudryavtseva* from Kherson State Maritime Academy, Ukraine (KhSMA) where the communicative approach based language training is implemented on a full scale it was decided to introduce the method at the Maritime Academy, MSU for language teaching of first-year navigating and engineering cadets. The move received support on the part of the MSU Academic Council that made a respective decision of introducing communicative competence-oriented teaching at the Maritime Academy.

At the initial phase the programme received financial backing from *MN* through its Vladivostok office and personal efforts of *Mr. Dmitry Shchadin* heading the office. *Prof. Valentyna Kudryavtseva* conducted two workshops for Maritime English Dept teachers in 2011-2012. MSU administration, on its part, favored the requests for some extra hours, and optional hours for first-year cadets were detained. Unfortunately, the promises to assist in repairing / decorating four classrooms remained unfulfilled and the Maritime English Dept had to find some other ways of solving the problem. The outcome of the academic year 2011-2012 was generally favorable: quite a number of cadets displayed their motivation and interest in the new method.

Things grew worse next year, with cessation of financial backing from *MN*, and ever increasing dissatisfaction of teachers with level of wages and material provision for teaching process. The goal set in the previous year to make up a communication competence-oriented manual for second-year cadets was not reached, as a number of would-

be co-authors had quit due to different reasons (maternity leaves, dissatisfaction with the terms of employment).

At the same time two teacher of the Maritime English Dept, namely *Assoc. Prof. Olga Kazinskaya* and *Assoc. Prof. Elena Trofimova* had a business trip to Kherson and saw for themselves that the method worked, the classes were conducted in English, and cadets showed developed listening and speaking skills, unlike, to our regret, most of the Maritime Academy, MSU cadets do.

### **Why Success in Kherson, Why not quite a Success in Vladivostok?**

Comparing situations at two maritime educational institutions, both located in CIS countries being providers of approximately the same quality human resources to shipping industry, as both institutions inherited to the former USSR system of seafarer training and their cadets are of approximately the same mentality and their income level of language proficiency does not differ much, seems logical to find an answer to the question, and therefore to find solutions to the problems MSU is experiencing in introducing communicative approach into language teaching.

As *Prof. V. Kudryavtseva* points out, the key word here is commitment: commitment on the part of an institution administration, that on the part of an officer in charge, and that on the part of the teachers. Of great importance is the matter of support from the consumers of the institutions' product, i.e. the shipping industry.

KhSMA administration is constantly monitoring the language training process and giving very support to the programme coordinator (Prof. V. Kudryavtseva) and language departments engaged. This institution trains cadets only, while the Maritime Academy is just another institution at MSU among the total number of seven, which might be the reason for the lack of attention to its problems. There's an urgent necessity in reducing the number of classes per a teacher to approximately 600 hours an academic year, to provide for teachers' proper preparation. And raising the salary level is a persistent problem, as well.



KhSMA enjoys financial support on the part of the shipping industry, namely on the part of *Marlow Navigation, Cyprus*. Moreover, best cadets are being selected by the company and are given opportunities to have shipboard training with the purpose of consequent enrollment, which undoubtedly raises the cadets' motivation to learn the English language. Collaboration between MSU and maritime industry employers leaves much to be desired. The university is far distant for the Marlow Navigation, Cyprus to be interested in closer cooperation. In the meanwhile the other shipping companies seem to be satisfied with a situation when, having input nothing, they get newcomer ship officers. It should be stressed therefore, that their complaints of poor quality of language training could be justified only provided they had had a finger in language training themselves.

The teaching staff. Though in terms of salaries teachers at KhSMA and MSU receive approximately the same money, the cost of living in Russian Far East seems to be more expensive and low wages are one of the causes Maritime English Dept at MSU suffers from shortage of experienced and committed teachers. The gravity of the situation can be illustrated by the fact that out of 14 teachers who had been trained by *Tatiana Pankratova* and *Valentyna Kudryavtseva* seven quit during the previous couple of years.

Material and technical base. The communicative approach implies certain requirements to classrooms and material and technical support. While availability of books, CDs, CD-players, copying devices for producing required number of handouts are generally satisfactory at MSU, a critical is the situation with the classrooms satisfying the requirements, i.e. the ones accommodating P-arranged desks and having sufficient space for on-foot activities in the course of the class. A solution to the problem should be found immediately as with every next year the demand for such classrooms increase as it is now the first-, second-, and third-year cadets who are supposed to be trained using communicative approach.

Cadets' motivation seems to be an issue of special mentioning as quite many of the entrants have chosen cadets' specialities because of free-of-payment education and are not necessarily interested in

becoming seafarers in future. There should be a more rigid selection, and as some professionals at the Maritime Academy propose, newly-enrolled first-year cadets should be sent to their first shipboard training aboard the *STS Nadezhda* to make their minds as to continuation of studies or aborting.

The new federal Law on education also gives hope for selection of only those motivated to study seafaring professions, as there are clear limits for those who failed in academic assignments, and we could anticipate stronger motivation to study properly.

### Conclusions

It is obvious that the communicative approach should be introduced in teaching Maritime Academy, (MSU cadets the English language due to the reasons of training competent ship officers and personal development. The objective isn't easily achieved due to some reasons described above. However the experience gained at Kherson proves that there are ways to be a success. In order not to fail close relations with consumers of MSU product – shipping industry – should be established, so that employers would support language training from the first year of studies. There's a compelling need to increase shipping companies' responsibility for training their future crews. Commitment on the part of MSU administration and Maritime English teachers is of no less importance. Provided these conditions are observed the success of communicative approach introduction into language teaching practice at MSU is guaranteed.

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