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Communicating with VTS via VHF: An approach to teaching the essentials for successful communication in English based on the recommendations in the SMCP and proposed from the perspective of VTS

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Abstract: This session will present ideas of how to prepare future nautical officers for VHF communication with VTS or MRC Centres as part of the Maritime English curriculum. It will refer to the SMCP as the basis for clear and unambiguous communication between a vessel and a shore station. It will introduce the essential communicative situations together with ideas for selecting the key vocabulary, language structures and communication control devices. It will also present ideas for teaching the presented material. The focus will be on the perspective or expectations of a VTS Operator when called by a Master.

Keywords: *VTS, SMCP, VHF, vocabulary, communication*

Introduction

Selecting the contents for the training of Maritime English at maritime colleges and academies can be a challenge. Using the IMO Model Course 3.17 has always been a good guideline for the selection of the contents. Finding the proper amount of it in the actual training can be difficult. Regarding the entrance requirement of nautical colleges and academies, the actual command of the English language should be of no concern for planning the curriculum. Referring to the recommendations in the IMO Model Course 3.17 regarding the use of the SMCP, it is key to select the main VHF communication situation/scenarios which are really of importance for the future watch keeping nautical officer at the beginning of his or her career. Situations/scenarios which are regarded as less important can be internalized by learning from senior nautical officers.

The IMO Model Course 3.17 is also not very specific about the number of phrases to be considered nor the methodological approach of teaching them to students.

It also does not make sense to make students learn the recommended phrases by heart. The SMCP should be regarded as a recommendation regarding the vocabulary and the structures with a hint to intelligent communication control devices. It is key for future nautical officers to understand that the SMCP offers a collection of useful ideas which have to be adapted to the real-life scenario which can be expected when speaking over VHF with other stations and particularly with shore stations. The following ideas focus on the (SMCP based) English language used in a communication between a vessel and a Vessel Traffic Service centre or a Maritime Rescue Coordination centre.

There is a comment to be made: If the SMCP are checked for the level of English which is required to make use of them, it can be estimated that it is most probably Level A2 (the second level out of six in the European Framework of Language Reference). The SMCP are basically

simplified English with only 5 tense forms (with 2 of them used in passive voice) and a very limited number of structures to be required when using them (e.g., some/any, much/many, a limited/artificial use of modal verbs, a reduced use of adverbs, a limited but focused use of prepositions of time and place). Looking at the recommended tense forms the level can even be regarded as being as low as A1 (the entrance level). It can be assumed that the entrance level of cadets at maritime colleges, academies or universities is B2 (level four) or C1 (level five) after finishing the necessary schooling to be allowed to enter a college, academy or university (possibly even C2 (level six = near native use of English) after spending a year in an English-speaking country as part of their school education). Considering this, it is obvious that an instructor (1) has to make the cadets somehow limit what they are already able to say in English when applying the SMCP in the recommended manner with reference to the language structures and (2) to make sure the cadets use the SMCP-recommended vocabulary (mainly verbs) in the specified meaning (that means learning to “blank out” all the other meanings he or she might have already been using in everyday situations).

When creating a lesson plan as a part of a curriculum aimed at preparing nautical cadets to be watchkeeping officers in charge of communication with VTS or MRCC, the following questions should be considered:

- 1) What are the general principles of using the SMCP (regardless the actual situation/scenario), i.e. are there any general ideas or principles that always apply when using the SMCP regardless of the actual communication scenario?
- 2) What are the situations/scenarios in which watchkeeping officers will have to speak with shore stations?
- 3) What vocabulary will have to be used to speak clearly and unambiguously with the shore stations?
- 4) Which language structures can be expected to be useful to manage the situations?
- 5) Which intelligent communication control devices might be used to eliminate possible misunderstandings?

General Principles for Using the SMCP Regardless of the Actual Communication Situation

Using the following six general principles when speaking over VHF with a shore station are just a recommendation. When carefully analysing the SMCP, it is obvious that these guidelines or principles are very helpful for facilitating understanding even when the reception is poor due to causes beyond the actual use of the English language. Although there is probably no expectation from the shore station for the nautical watch officer to make use of these general principles, applying them is also in the interest of the shore station when being called by a vessel.

A) Always try to keep the message as short and simple as possible.

VTS will always appreciate clear and precise messages. On the other hand, there might be cases in which it can be advisable to expand the conversation and use controlling devices to make sure there is no misunderstanding, e.g. if one of the two speakers has a strong accent which the other speaker is not familiar with.

B) Always try to avoid synonyms.

It appears that the recommendations in the SMCP always choose one particular meaning of a certain word (which is especially true for verbs). The word should always be used in this particular meaning. A VTS operator who only speaks English in the VHF communications

during working hours might be confused if the nautical officer does not use a word recommended in the SMCP in the meaning recommended.

C) Always try not to use contracted forms.

Although contracted forms might save time and thus might keep the message as short and simple as possible, they might also contribute to misunderstandings if key words are not said in full, e.g. auxiliary verbs which provide a clear time reference in the message.

D) Always try to produce fully worded answers to “yes/no” questions.

Again, although it should always be the intention of the nautical officer to keep the message as short and simple as possible, using only “yes” or “no” as an answer might cause misunderstandings or uncertainty because by switching the hand-held device the one word might get lost or just anticipated by the recipient.

E) Always try to avoid ambiguous words, especially ambiguous modal verbs.

The SMCP offers ideas for how to use modal verbs either in only one meaning, e.g. “can” only in the meaning of “ability” and not in the meaning of “permission”. Permission is recommended to be expressed with “have permission”.

F) Always try to produce one message for one event.

Even if three pieces of information are to be transmitted by the nautical officer, they should not be communicated in one long sentence. They should be communicated in three short sentences, possibly even numbered so VTS can keep track of the incoming facts.

What are the situations/scenarios in which future nautical officers can be expected to speak with VTS or MRCC even at the beginning of their career?

- a) the first or second contact with a VTS centre when approaching a port or a Traffic Separation Scheme during which (depending on the area) certain routine traffic data are required to be transmitted, e.g. ETA at a pilot station, last port of call, port of destination, number of persons on board, dangerous goods, security level, fresh water draft, air draft (when entering a canal where bridges will have to be passed);
- b) traffic information service for the area transmitted by VTS on a regular basis (and requesting a confirmation of the information in the report) including the weather situation (e.g. winds and visibility), hydrographic information (e.g. the tides), the traffic flow (e.g. vessels constrained by draft or extraordinarily large vessels and their present positions), obstructions to shipping (e.g. hampered vessels), information about seamarks (e.g. buoys unlit or removed), closed anchorages, suspended services (e.g. tug assistance or pilotage);
- c) SECURITE message (and requesting confirmation of the information) about out-of-the ordinary actions or incidents in the area (vessels not under command, areas closed for navigation, oil clearance operations, gunnery exercises, suspended traffic lanes in a TSS);
- d) responding to questions or advice by VTS during a port approach (e.g. the present position, one’s own intentions, traffic in one’s own vicinity);
- e) informing about proceeding to an anchorage, having the anchor position confirmed by VTS, giving the anchor and notice time, informing when getting underway again;
- f) when approaching the fairway asking for and understanding information about the pilotage;
- g) giving information before leaving a berth (ETD, persons on board, dangerous goods, next port of call, tug assistance, linesmen);
- h) transmitting the final information after the pilot’s disembarkation when leaving the port.

It can be assumed that in case of an emergency on board the Master or senior nautical officers will be in charge of communication with other stations (MRCC, law enforcement vessels). However, it would be advisable to introduce some basic vocabulary that can be expected to be used in a VHF communication regarding the incident. Possible situations/scenarios can include: fire on board, grounding, not under command (adrift), person over board, requiring medical assistance (e.g. a helicopter transfer of an injured crew member).

What vocabulary will have to be used to speak clearly and unambiguously with the shore stations?

Based on the situations/scenarios listed above, the SMCP should be scanned in order to create a list of either vocabulary or phrases which can be used in the listed scenarios. It would be advisable to establish contact with VTS centres or MRCCs in one's vicinity. One could ask to be allowed to listen to the "real-world" VHF communication at the centres, create sample communications based on this information while using the SMCP, having the sample conversations checked by the VTS or MRCC team for plausibility (but always stressing that these are samples for training purposes and that is why they have to be in the "extended" SMCP version).

It is not always easy to assemble these phrases because the SMCP are organized to present phrases centred around a general communication topic (e.g. "Position", "Avoiding dangerous situations"). They do not present comprehensive sample conversations (with one exception – for the communication with a VTS centre – A6.1.1 "Acquiring and Providing Routine Traffic Data" – which covers nearly completely the phrases necessary for the "First/Second call when approaching a port" scenario).

Which language structures can be expected to be useful to manage the situations?

It was mentioned above that the grammar in the SMCP is simplified, i.e. only 5 tense forms (with 2 of them used in passive voice) and a very limited amount of structures is required when using the SMCP (e.g., some/any, much/many, a limited/artificial use of modal verbs in order to avoid ambiguity, a reduced use of adverbs, a limited but focused use of prepositions of time and place).

Communication over VHF always has a specific purpose. VTS or MRCC always aim to be able to have an overview of the traffic flow in real time and to be able to anticipate future movements of vessels and to establish the consequences of past actions of vessels. That is why the proper use of tense forms seems important to make sure that all time references in messages transmitted to VTS or MRCC are expressed simply and clearly. That is why only the five tense forms recommended in the SMCP should be used by the nautical staff on the vessel. These tense forms are Present Continuous, Simple Past, Simple Present Perfect, Simple Future and Simple Present (only to be used for stative verbs, e.g. require, have, agree).

Which communication control devices might be used to eliminate possible misunderstandings?

The future nautical officers should be able to make use of the following communication control devices (some of them are recommended in the SMCP; some are just applied by seafaring personnel and also shore stations because experience shows that they are very useful):

- a) eight message markers to prepare the recipient for the contents of the message;
- b) repetitions of the received message content;

- c) fully worded answers to “yes/no” questions;
- d) the international alphabet when spelling (i.e. using a code for a letter);
- e) numbers to be given in digits;
- f) procedure words like “repeat”, “say again”, “mistake”, “correction”, “over”, out”.

Experience shows that VTS or MRCC always try to keep any communication over VHF short in order not to block the channel for possible important transmissions. That is why the devices listed above are not always used (they are regarded as what they are – recommendations). But they are used when the VTS or MRCC controller realizes that a critical scenario is developing and that the conversation over VHF must be precise, efficient and completely unambiguous. Then, every nautical officer is expected to “switch” as well and should be able to use all of these devices.

What is a possible approach to teaching nautical cadets how to communicate professionally and safely with VTS or MRCC?

Here is a possible procedure for teaching the above mentioned ideas:

- 1) Create VHF sample conversations to cover the above mentioned situations/scenarios (by using expertise from VTS controllers);
- 2) Check the conversations for the used vocabulary and create vocabulary lists (experience shows that the proper use of verbs is key);
- 3) Check the conversations for the used language structures and create an overview of those structures (especially the used tense forms);
- 4) Introduce the cadets to the SMCP and explain the organisation of the phrases (part A6 VTS (Vessel Traffic Service));
- 5) Show cadets two or three parts (e.g. A6.1.1 “Acquiring Routine Traffic Data” and A6.2.3.1 “Clearance, Forward Planning”, A6.2.3.3 “Arrival, Berthing and Departure”) to make them aware of the special arrangement, i.e. the fact that the phrases are usually not structured like sample conversations but that the words to be expected in a certain situation/scenario are “scattered” all over the complete collection of phrases;
- 6) Show cadets or, even better, have them listen to a short and “unsafe” sample conversation, i.e. a version without the communication control devices, produced as an audio file by you and ask them to think about and discuss how to make this version ”safer” by incorporating the communication control devices;
- 7) Show the extended version (i.e. the one with all the possible communication control devices incorporated) and have the cadets listen to this version, possibly while stopping your audio file and asking them to discuss possible words to fill in the gaps;
- 8) Create a version of the sample conversation (maybe a digital presentation) where the part of the vessel is given in the cadets’ native tongue and have them translate while either you read the part of the VTS controller or another cadet reads it;
- 9) Create further sample conversations in a similar way (i.e. as a digital presentation) and have cadets work through these ones like the first one; always be strict about the recommended word (from your list) and the recommended tense form and the “logical” communication control device.

Conclusion

A nautical cadet should be prepared for unambiguous and clear communication with a shore station via VHF. It can be assumed that there will be an “introduction phase” on board during which he or she will have time to learn from senior officers. However, the approach explained

above provides a procedure for the planning and implementation of this preparation and might be useful for cadets after they have started their first assignment as a nautical officer.