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SOME DICHOTOMIES IN MARITIME ENGLISH TEACHING

A dichotomy means a division into two parts, opposed yet related, counteractive and interactive, independent but complementary, promoting and restricting each other. A correct understanding of some dichotomies in maritime English teaching (MET) may help to find solutions to the handling of some relationships concerning MET, and thus evaluate its effectiveness. The dichotomies under discussion are: 1) maritime subjects in English and English in maritime contexts; 2) general English and maritime English; 3) knowledge impartation and skill training; 4) student-centredness and the teacher's leading role. The author intends to offer some tentative ideas so as to arouse the interest of his colleagues and counterparts who may come up with more valuable opinions, rather than make a subjective assertion of his own.

1. INTRODUCTION

A dichotomy is a division or separation into two parts which are sharply contrasted. Talking about a dichotomy, people tend to think of the two parts merely as opposites which are contradictory and conflicting by nature. This is, however, a superficial and one-sided understanding. As every coin has two sides, everything has two aspects. It's true that the two sides are opposites, front and back, obverse and reverse, but it is precisely the two opposites that constitute the unified whole. Neither of the two can claim to represent the whole. Therefore the essence of everything lies in the unity of opposites: one divides into two and two combine into one.

This paper presents three dichotomies in maritime English teaching (MET). These dichotomies have always been existing in MET, whether recognized or not, and however treated, consciously or unconsciously, with or without priority and preference. An impartial analysis of the two sides of these dichotomies might help us understand the essence of MET and guard against the pitfalls of superficiality and one-sidedness.

2. MARITIME ENGLISH AND MARITIME SUBJECTS TAUGHT IN ENGLISH

This dichotomy embodies the relationship between the language course and subject course. Maritime English is, as the term suggests, English used in maritime contexts, of English for Maritime studies. When referred to as the name of a course, it is obviously a language course. Maritime English is English after all. Though premodified by "maritime", "English" is the central word, and the language is the core or focus of attention of the course. The student's attainment of the language proficiency is its main objective. However, maritime English, like other branches or sub-branches of ESP, is intended for a particular group of learners, i.e., seafarers or would-be seafarers, and based on their special needs and interests, i.e. working in the maritime sector or studying for a maritime career. Therefore, it could be identified by analysing the linguistic characteristics of the learner's specialised area of work or study, and it necessarily reflects, to a certain extent, the content of various maritime subjects.

A maritime subject is a branch of knowledge studied, which concerns ships or the sea. Owing to the international nature of the work in the maritime sector and undesirable communicative competence of the Chinese seafarers, it is much encouraged now in China that maritime subjects should be taught in English, so that the learners could get used to acquiring knowledge through the medium of English, and later when they enter upon a maritime career, will find little difficulty in communicating in a multi-national environment and conforming to the international norms governing the maritime practice. As a subject course lays emphasis on the learner's obtaining the knowledge of the subject matter, the language itself is not the purpose of learning, but a medium of instruction. However, teaching maritime subjects in English helps to create a very good English environment and benefits the learners in their language acquisition, as they can improve their linguistic skills unconsciously in the process of assimilating knowledge of the subject matter.

To sum up, Maritime English touches upon maritime situations in which English is used, but gives prominence to language learning; whereas maritime subjects taught in English uses English as a vehicle, and lays emphasis on conveying knowledge of the subject matter. The former may consolidate the learner's understanding of the maritime knowledge while the latter may facilitate the learner's language acquisition. The two are independent of each other with different objectives of their own, but they are mutually complementary with "by products" conducive to those of their opposites. In Shanghai Maritime University, courses of both types are offered in the third year of the undergraduate programs on the supposition that the first two years "study of "general English" has laid a solid foundation for taking more specialized courses to be conducted in English. The maritime English courses offered are *English for Navigation and English for Marine Engineering*. The courses of this type play a role of transition between the course of general English and those of maritime subjects taught in English by reinforcing the linguistic skills the student has already acquired and simultaneously introducing the student to some technical terms and essential knowledge necessary for engaging in the maritime occupation. The courses of the latter type are *Maritime Safety Management*, *Ship Manoeuvring*, *Rules for Preventing Collisions at Sea*, and *VHF Communication*, etc. Most of the teachers who have given the two types of courses hold that

efforts should be made to offer more subject courses taught in English though the students still have difficulty in their comprehension now. The transitional role of the maritime English courses is felt at present, but it will diminish with the improvement of the general English level on the part of the student and the increase of the subject courses taught in English.

3. MARITIME ENGLISH AND GENERAL ENGLISH

In the area of English language teaching in China, there has been a tendency to give prominence to general English to the neglect of ESP with English for maritime transportation as one of its branches. The unified National College English Tests (CET) Band 4 and Band 6 are offered to students of all specializations at the collegiate level twice every year. The results of the tests are not only used by the educational authorities to assess the teaching quality of various institutions, but also considered by employers as part of the qualifications of their recruitment candidates. Consequently the tests almost play a dominant role and produce a profound influence over the English teaching of the whole country. Nearly all the universities and colleges offer "college English" (general English) as a required course to their students in the first two academic years, and thus leave little room for the existence of ESP courses. Moreover, some influential linguists in China advocated that there should be no such division between general English and ESP; for English, as a tool, can serve all purposes. This viewpoint once added more difficulty to the already difficult situation of ESP, maritime English being no exception.

Nevertheless, as China is vigorously developing market economy by deepening its reform and opening its "door" wider to the outside world, there has been a growing demand for business English, a branch of ESP in the recent years. The Nacional Examinacion Center and the University of Cambridge Local Examination Syndicate have jointly offered BEC (business English certificate) 1, BEC 2, and BEC 3 tests to candidates of all trades and professions with ages ranging from 17 to 40. This has also contributed to the national drive for the study of business English. As Hutchinson and Waters (1989: 7) said, 'the traditional leisurely purpose-free stroll through the landscape of the English language seemed no longer appropriate in the harsher realities of the market place.' As a result, ESP has gradually established itself, and is gaining certain prestige, especially in the sector of non-formal education. The slow but steady rise of ESP has subtly elevated the position of maritime English in maritime institutions. Furthermore, the necessity for the serious implementation of the international convention STCW 78-95 has given remarkable impetus to its further development. Importance has recently been attached and attention given to maritime English teaching and training not only by maritime universities and institutes, but also by the competent authorities concerned and the whole shipping circle.

With the position of maritime English secured, the next question is what should be the methodology of MET as compared with that of general English teaching.

Maritime English is not a matter of teaching a specialized variety of English. The fact that it is used for maritime purpose does not imply that it is a special form of English, different in kind from other forms. It's true that there are some terms and features which can be identified as typical of the maritime context, and which the learner is more likely to meet in the target maritime situation. But these differ-

ences do not overshadow the far larger area of common ground that underlies all English use. Though the content of learning may vary, there is no reason to suppose that the process of learning should be any different for the maritime English learner from that for the general English learner. In fact, there is, as Hutchinson and Waters (1989: 18) suggest, "no such thing as an ESP methodology".

If there is no or little methodological difference between the two, how should MET be conducted? As ESP was the outcome of the rapidly growing market, so maritime English came into being as a result of the expansion of the maritime industry. Needs account of the existence of MET, and the conduction of MET should, in return, be based on the learner's needs. The MET teacher should be aware what the learner has to know in order to function effectively in the target maritime situation. For example, he might need to understand radio weather messages, read admiralty charts, follow sailing directions, use navigational instruments, establish telegraphic communication, carry on ship's correspondence, write an accident report, etc. He might also need to know the linguistic features, whether semantic or structural, stylistic or functional, which are commonly used in the contexts identified. The teacher must also identify what the learner already knows so that he can decide what the learner lacks at the present stage of study. On the basis of the analysis of the learner's needs and lack, the MET course can be properly designed and tailored to the attainment of the identified goal. Of course it is also possible to specify the needs of the general English learner, such as the need to seek social status or simply to pass the examination, but they are not so definite, specific or clear-cut as those of the maritime English learner.

In short, the difference between maritime English and general English is theoretically nil in terms of the linguistic features and teaching methodology, but practically much with regard to the content and the learner needs. The common ground they share determines their interactive relationship while the disparity between them shapes their mutually complementary roles.

4. KNOWLEDGE IMPARTATION AND SKILL TRAINING

The discussion of the relationship between knowledge impartation and skill training does not apply only to MET. It is, in fact, pertinent to language learning and teaching as a whole. However, since MET is more needs-oriented as mentioned above, it seems worthwhile to give some space to the exploration of this dichotomy in terms of learner needs.

Traditionally, foreign language learning is regarded in China as the mastery of a body of linguistic knowledge including phonology, syntax and lexicology, which can be divided into small blocks of manageable size, and logically, teaching involves the presentation of this body in a systematic and assimilable way. Clear presentation, lucid explanation and learners' correction are seen as essential to the impartation of knowledge from the teacher to the learner. Form and accuracy are given prominence. A good teacher is supposed to be both a knower and a giver. A learner is a passive taker, sometimes like a duck to be force-fed with those blocks of knowledge. Of course, this approach to language learning and teaching has its advantages. Bling grammar-consciousness, the learners usually turn out to be good at analyzing language phenomena, detecting linguistic mistakes, understanding involved texts and producing grammatically correct sentences. But disadvantages manifest themselves when it comes to using the language in real communicative

settings. Most learners find themselves "deaf and mute" in front of native speakers of the language they have learned. They are so careful about grammar and so sensitive to mistakes that they dare not make utterances or write sentences without much consideration, and this often results in the breakdown of the oral or written communication. The learners' speed of reading is comparatively low. In brief, this approach leads to the learner's imperfect acquisition of communicative competence.

The approach on the other side of the dichotomy is to treat language learning and teaching as a matter of skill training. Language proficiency is seen to reflect itself in the communicative use of such language skills as listening, speaking, reading and writing, and those skills are to be acquired by constant practice in authentic or quasi-authentic environment rather than by absorbing knowledge about the language. Stress is laid on function and fluency, and class activities are more task-based and meaning-oriented. The teacher is supposed to be an organizer and helper while the learner, an active participant. However, this approach is sometimes carried to an extreme by ignoring the learner's mistakes in order to preserve the authentic atmosphere and not to interrupt the proceeding task, and by underestimating and even neglecting the role of knowledge instruction. Consequently, fluency tends to be achieved at the expense of accuracy and knowledge. According to Widdowson (1990: 161), 'It turns out that learners do not very readily infer knowledge of the language system from their communicative activities'.

Maritime English is, as mentioned above, English used in maritime settings, between members on board the ship, between ship and ship, and between ship and shore. Owing to the multi-lingual and multi-cultural composition of the interlocutors, and the precarious and vicissitudinous nature of seafaring work, language proficiency is highly necessary for seafarers. Fluency and accuracy are equally important, especially when English is used in the situations of preventing accidents, dealing with emergencies and coping with casualties. A moment's hesitation or a slight error may cause great danger and loss. Therefore MET should view dual simultaneous focus on form and accuracy as well as meaning and fluency, i.e. a combination of the above two approaches, as exceedingly desirable. According to Lightbown and Spada (1993: 105), 'Classroom data from a number of studies offer support for the view that form-focused instruction and corrective feedback provided within the context of a communicative program are more effective in promoting second language learning than programs which are limited to an exclusive emphasis on accuracy on the one hand or an exclusive emphasis on fluency on the other'. When it comes to the correction of the learner's mistakes in the process of task-based activities, this dual focus could be achieved by encouraging the learners to manage the interaction themselves and limiting the teacher's role to using camouflaged correction techniques to upgrade learner utterances.

In short, MET is a matter of both knowledge impartation and skill training, which interact with each other and facilitate learning with complementary force. Two extremes should be avoided, as neither has proved to be effective if used to the exclusion of the other. The integrative approach of dual focus is the happy medium for the avoidance of such extremes.

5. CONCLUSION

Dichotomy is a relative concept. The absoluteness of notion may result in extremes in action. To avoid lapsing into lopsided fallacies, we must consider the two parts of a dichotomy as opposed yet related, counteractive and interactive, independent but complementary, promoting and restricting each other. A correct understanding of this may help to find solutions to the handling of some relationships concerning MET, and thus heighten its effectiveness. The dichotomies in MET as presented above are certainly not exhaustive. The author intends to offer some tentative ideas so as to arouse the interest of his colleagues and counterparts who may come up with more valuable opinions rather than provide a complete list and make a subjective assertion.

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Sažetak

NEKE DIHOTOMIJE TIJEKOM UČENJA POMORSKOGA ENGLESKOG JEZIKA

Pod pojmom dihotomija razumijeva se podjela na dva međusobno oprečna ali ipak povezana pojma koja djeluju protivno ali i uzajamno, koja su nezavisna ali se i nadopunjuju, koja se međusobno potiču, ali i ograničavaju. Pravilno shvaćanje nekih dihotomija tijekom učenja pomorskoga engleskog jezika može pomoći u pronalaženju rješenja nekih odnosa koji se pritom javljaju, ističući tako korisnost sama učenja. Dihitomije o kojima se raspravlja, obuhvaćaju: 1. predmete pomorske struke na engleskom jeziku te engleski jezik u tekstovima iz pomorstva, 2. opći i pomorski engleski jezik; 3. stjecanje znanja i nove ideje koje bi pobudile zanimanje nastavnika jezika kao i nastavnika struke kako bi i oni izašli s više korisnih mišljenja, a ne samo branili svoje mišljenje.