

The Necessity of Maritime English for the Shipping Industry

ABSTRACT

The ability to communicate in a common language in the shipping industry is crucial in determining the successful communication among crew members of different nationalities. Indeed, the issue of seafarers' training in Maritime English has been of great importance due to its effect on safety on board. The present paper raises some main issues to be addressed in the design and implementation of a Maritime English course. First, there will be an investigation of the basic arguments regarding the importance of studying Maritime English. Then there will be an analysis of the distinct features of this English for Specific Purposes (ESP) course in order to investigate, afterwards, students' needs and expectations of a Maritime English course. The main skills that the research focuses on are reading comprehension ability, writing skill, oral communication skill and cultural competence development. It also explains the methodological approach the teacher should follow in order to improve students' skills and competences in reading, writing, oral communication and the cultural aspect of language. Furthermore, the paper suggests the pedagogical approach to be adopted in the course, based on Humanistic Language Teaching principles such as cooperative learning, student-centered methodology and learner autonomy approach.

Keywords: Distance Education, Pandemic, Middle School Students

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How to Cite This Article

Saridaki, E. (2023). "The Necessity of Maritime English for the Shipping Industry", *International Academic Social Resources Journal*, (e-ISSN: 2636-7637), Vol:8, Issue:45; pp:1908-1913. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.29228/ASRJOURNAL.67256>

Arrival: 22 October 2022

Published: 31 January 2023

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INTRODUCTION

According to legislation, the English language has been established in the shipping industry as Maritime English and, thereafter, teaching of the subject at marine academies, colleges and universities worldwide follows the IMO (International Marine Organisation) model course. This model has set some standard guidelines for teaching and mastering the English language in order to comply with certain guidelines and regulations. Since the IMO codified English as the official language of seafarers, the importance of designing and implementing maritime English in Marine Academies has been of primary importance so that students become proficient in standardized Maritime English and acquire the necessary language competences. The IMO adopted since 2001 the SMCP (Standard Marine Communication Phrases) to standardize safety terms and phrases recommending the use of SMCP in preference to other wordings. These phrases provide essential safety-related communicative events in which spoken English is required so that officers encounter less difficulties in managing safety-related situations, performing navigational duties and organizing or supervising cargo operations.

THE IMPORTANCE OF MARITIME ENGLISH IN THE SEAFARER'S PROFESSION

The basic arguments that point out the importance of Maritime English in the seafarer's profession can be summarized as follows:

- ✓ The majority of maritime accidents are due to miscommunication among crew members

Investigations into the human factor concerning accidents at sea have shown that one third of accidents happen mainly due to insufficient command of Maritime English. According to recent IMO statistics, 80% of accidents taking place at sea are caused by human error, with half due to poor communication. Regarding communication failure, Ryne and Koester (2005) state that "human communication error can be defined as human error which occurs as a result of a failure in communication, be it ship to ship, ship to shore or intra-ship".

Some of these errors are due to language comprehension difficulties that seafarers have in trying to understand a heavily-accented, non-native speaker of English communicating something in a panic. Indeed, these miscommunications are related to language and cultural barriers and, as Thiel (1996) states: "most marine accidents happen because of human errors that are due to inadequate language communication".

- ✓ Crew members belonging to different nationalities

The shipping industry is not bound to a single country or region and, therefore, on a single vessel there are persons belonging to various nationalities. More than 86% of SOLAS Vessels are crewed with multilingual personnel who is frequently unable to communicate properly in English, risking and even causing damage to lives, property and the environment. According to research conducted by Shen & Zhao (2011), many ship owners complained about Chinese seafarers' inadequate command of English and many Chinese shipping enterprises had difficulty in

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communicating effectively with foreign shipping industries, producing misunderstandings among those working in the shipping industry. However, ship owners and shipping companies often seem to overlook basic issues regarding their crew's adequate training in Maritime English. It goes without saying that employing seamen from different nationalities demands improved standards of training on board ship concerning Maritime English.

✓ Knowledge of Maritime English facilitates adequate preparation in case of emergencies

Since an emergency on the vessel can arise anytime, it is absolutely important for a seaman to be prepared and respond accordingly. The steps that involve the seaman's training in emergencies, the same apply in Maritime English. As a result, if seafarers are not trained adequately in dealing with emergencies in maritime English, they will not be able to respond in such situations and, therefore, they will result in further accidents, mishaps or even fatal accidents.

✓ Command of Maritime English improves intercultural communication on board

Fluency in English is not only important to emergency situations and for ship-shore communications on which the shipping industry has mainly focused. Fluency in English has far-reaching implications not only for the safe operation of the vessel but for the safe co-existence of disparate groups representing different cultures. The sociocultural aspect of shipboard interaction is significant to good morale which, in turn, interacts with the ship's safe operation. More precisely, the seafarer sails in ships with multicultural crews whose cultural mix may vary from one voyage to the next and provided that the crew can talk to each other, their harmonical co-existence can work as well as single culture crews. The ability to communicate in a common language determines the success of a multicultural crew, regardless of the different cultural backgrounds members of the crew come from and also ensures the building of interpersonal relations in a ship which functions as a miniature society.

For the above-mentioned arguments, the contribution of Maritime English as an integral part of seafarers' training is indisputable. The questions that are raised in the present research concern a systematic approach of the learning process aiming to improve students' command of Maritime English throughout their training and afterwards, as professionals in the shipping industry.

TOWARD A SYSTEMATIC APPROACH OF MARITIME ENGLISH TEACHING

Moving forward to course implementation this research will look at matters such as:

- ✓ What are the distinct features of Maritime English as an ESP (English for Specific Purposes) course that should be considered in course design?
- ✓ What are the students' needs and skills that should be developed in a Maritime English course?
- ✓ How can Maritime English be approached both by learners and teachers?
- ✓ What are the components that need to be included in a Maritime English course?

LANGUAGE FEATURES OF MARITIME ENGLISH

Maritime English has an independent language system with its specialized vocabulary and grammar. The British linguist, Firth J. R. (1951) used the term Maritime English as a label for a strictly reduced linguistic system applied for marine activities. In fact, Maritime English is part of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and as such it focuses on learners' immediate needs, it is based on authentic materials and activities, developing a process-oriented syllabi with students' active participation (Brunton, 2009). Since Maritime English is very important not only for students of marine academies but for all professionals working in the shipping industry and marine nations as well, the main question that is raised regards the linguistic features of Maritime English that differentiate this EAP course from other EAP courses. As far as the writing conventions of Maritime English are concerned, there are certain elements that characterize written communication that could be summarized as follows: Firstly, communication, both oral and written, must be polite, concise and clear. Shen and Zhao (2011) refer to "7C" in written marine communication which are: "courtesy, consideration, completeness, conciseness, clarity, correctness and concreteness". More precisely, courtesy is the key-element in written communication which means that the vocabulary selected should be polite words and expressions showing respect to the addressee. In addition, clarity is very important to avoid misunderstandings and misinterpretations that could be devastating. Also, sentences should have simple but concise structure so that speakers express exactly their intentions. Moreover, unnecessary repetitions should be avoided and speakers should try to express themselves in few words so that receivers read their correspondence and are willing to answer. Another important principle concerning the structure of written communication is to avoid lengthy sentences, on the contrary, sentences should be short and to the point. Indeed, the content needs to be syntactically correct and double-checked before it is sent to the receiver.

TOWARD A METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH OF TEACHING MARITIME ENGLISH

DEFINING STUDENTS' NEEDS IN A MARITIME ENGLISH COURSE

Another main question that should be considered before designing a Maritime English course concerns students' needs and expectations of their training in Maritime English. According to Hutchinson and Waters (1987), the term "needs" refers to learners' "preferred way of learning, techniques and materials, whereas, Robinson (1991) defines "needs" as "the language skills learners need to acquire in order to function effectively in the target language".

Learners' needs of Maritime English courses have to be specified taking into consideration both national and international demands of maritime industry. Kourieos (2015) summarizes marine students' skills as follows: students must be able to read and understand classroom material and take notes, interact with their teacher and peer students orally, express themselves accurately in writing, listen to class lectures and use the standard marine communication phrases.

Among the most important skills that need to be developed is the reading comprehension skill in order to be able to understand effectively articles, reports, instructions, manuals and other written material. Also, they need to develop their vocabulary and learn special terminology and phrases, extract the basic ideas of a text and complete reading comprehension tasks in the classroom.

Another important skill is their oral communication ability in order to communicate with multilingual crews whose mother tongue varies one from another. They also need to communicate with port authorities, use English for inter and intra-ship communication, for ship to shore and shore to ship communication. Furthermore, students have to improve their oral proficiency in English in order to be able to provide instructions to passengers in case of emergencies.

In addition, students have to improve their writing skills to write reports, answer to emails and messages appropriately. As professionals in the marine industry, they have to respond to both formal and informal mails, interact with colleagues and clients and prepare written presentations in professional meetings. More importantly, they have to take and deliver messages via VHF (very high frequency) radio.

PEDAGOGICAL APPROACHES

In designing a Maritime English course, marine institutions need to respect the standards that are agreed upon by IMO member countries so that they are in accordance with the aims and specifications posed by the IMO requirements. Course designers also need to determine the learning strategies that instructors can use in order to achieve the expected learning outcomes.

In our attempt to define "strategies" we quote Oxford's words (1990): "strategies are specific actions taken by the learners to make learning easier, faster, more enjoyable, more self-directed, more effective and more transferrable to new situations". She suggests the following three types of strategies for effective learning: cognitive, metacognitive and socio-affective strategies that could be described as follows: cognitive knowledge regards solving new problems by using their prior knowledge, postcognitive strategy concerns time organization, self-monitoring and self-assessment and, finally, socio-affective strategy concerns emotions control, positive attitude toward learning and motivation.

Also, the most well-known approaches that were affected by the fields of psychology, cultural studies and communication studies are Humanistic Language Teaching and the Communicative Approach. More precisely, the Humanistic Approach considers the student as an active agent who can contribute to improving his own competence and performance, and not as an object who receives passively the teacher's knowledge. It stresses the importance of emotional issues to learning outcomes and as significant factors affecting the quality of student performance. The Communicative Approach explores the communicative function of language and the importance of concepts such as "meaning" and "pragmatics" in order to communicate effectively in a given situation. Cooperative Learning is another approach affected by humanistic teaching principles, stressing the importance of team work in the learning activity where each member of a team contributes towards achieving the best collective performance. The specific approach aims at reducing student learning pressure, improving students' social and communicative skills and bridging linguistic and cultural diversity among participants in the learning environment. Its overall aim is to make students feel responsible both for the process and the end product. Furthermore, Social Constructivism should be adopted that views learning as a social act that contributes to knowledge acquisition based on students' previous knowledge, personal experiences and motives that students bring into the classroom. Learner autonomy is a key-word and the notion of student's "learning how to learn" acquires primary importance than getting passive knowledge from teachers. The general idea of the approaches mentioned here could be summarized as follows: the aim of the teaching and learning process is to encourage communication among students in a motivating learning environment so that they are able to acquire linguistic, encyclopedic and professional competence.

Gonzales-Davies (2004: 17) also refers to certain points in designing learning activities that could be taken into account in designing classroom activities for Maritime English:

- ✓ need to respect individual learner styles and teacher styles
- ✓ an interaction and communication among all the participants in the learning process
- ✓ the acceptance of students' diversity and their perception of their role as autonomous learners
- ✓ the perception of the teacher's role as guide, counsellor, informer and evaluator
- ✓ an acceptance of the relevance of recent research on emotional intelligence to learning outcomes
- ✓ learning through negotiation in a classroom environment viewed as a combination of a hands-on workshop and a discussion forum
- ✓ the frequent use of a ludic angle that can contribute to relaxation, to undoing creative blockage and to group binding

LEARNING TECHNIQUES AND ACTIVITIES

Improving students' reading comprehension ability is one of the core activities in a Maritime Course and absolutely necessary for students' professional development. Comprehending English texts is a complex activity that requires strategic skills on the students' part based on certain steps to follow. Block and Duffy (2008: 25) describe the comprehension process as such: "Comprehension is a strategic process; that is, good readers proactively search for meaning as they read, using text cues and their background knowledge in combination to generate predictions, to monitor those predictions, to re-predict when necessary, and generally to construct a representation of the author's meaning".

Vocabulary of Maritime English includes special terms that have to be learned in order to avoid any misunderstandings. It is worth mentioning Romanova's special taxonomy of maritime English vocabulary in three categories: core vocabulary used in general language, semitechnical vocabulary used in general language applied also in scientific discussion and, finally, technical vocabulary that is used in the maritime and engineering area. The use of SMCP (Standard Marine Communication Phrases) is of primary importance in developing reading comprehension skills and be familiarized with standardized language for navigational purposes meet the communication requirements of the maritime profession. They can also enrich their vocabulary by reading extra texts and material outside the classroom such as maritime newspapers. Through the skimming (reading quickly in order to understand the main ideas of the text) and scanning (reading quickly in order to extract specific information) techniques can practice their reading comprehension ability. Other exercises that could be designed for this purpose are: filling in gaps with vocabulary within the text, finding synonyms from the text, completing gaps with appropriate standard communication phrase, matching the two halves of sentences reading the text and filling in the missing phrases, answering comprehension questions, matching to make collocations, marking sentences as true or false, completing tables with derivatives, matching terms with their definitions, matching verbs with appropriate nouns to make collocations. To conclude, vocabulary has to be learnt in such a way that is linked directly to students' professional needs. Romanova (2011) stresses the importance of teaching maritime vocabulary through learning activities that correspond to their professional needs in the shipping industry based on students' language level.

Developing students' writing skills is extremely important in Maritime English teaching since except for VHF communication, emails are widely used in maritime communication. Students should learn about certain requirements and features that written communication must meet in order to avoid misunderstandings and other serious consequences. Some of the learning activities that would help students develop their writing ability are: putting titles in emails and other types of written correspondence, distinguishing between formal and informal expressions in written texts material, practice by writing emails on various subjects, filling in documents related to their profession, incident report writing, pre-departure checklists writing, completing log books etc.

Another important students' skill that should be developed is their speaking capacity since improving their communicative competence can be characterized as the "building block" in their education that ensures safe working conditions at sea. Communicative competence is a key-word that refers to their ability to understand and use language appropriately both in school and social environments. Authentic material directly linked to their professional environment would motivate students and strongly encourage them to participate actively in the learning process. The students as well as the graduates have to understand and practice the principles of politeness and formality in their oral communication. Also, lectures are the least preferred means of instruction, whereas, classroom discussion is rated highest by the students.

Intercultural competence development should be part of the learning process in Maritime English teaching. Intercultural competence is students' ability to communicate successfully with people from other countries and sensitivity development toward cultural differences. Therefore, students must have excellent command of English

together with sociocultural awareness in order to be able to communicate appropriately with multicultural crews. It has been suggested by Leon (1999) that the cultural dimension of language be integrated in English language teaching since many errors in oral communication are due not only to grammatical gaps but also to cultural differences among speakers. Seminars on the cultural aspect of language and its effect on appropriate communication would help students develop cultural awareness and be more sensitive to communication gaps that are due to cultural differences. English texts on the subject of sociocultural diversities and their different interpretations would help students both improve their command in English and cultivate their cultural competence. Furthermore, discussions on matters related to cultural differences would sensitize students on this important aspect of their profession and would help them respect cultural and social norms of different nations.

CONCLUSIONS

The importance of teaching Maritime English is indisputable in the marine profession and, generally, in the shipping industry. What is stressed in the present article is the necessity for a student-centered approach that would focus on students' needs and expectations aiming to improve their skills in this type of English for Specific Purposes course as a mandatory component of their training.

The development of oral competence as well as cultural awareness is among the most important skills to be instilled to maritime students. Additionally, their reading comprehension ability and their command of special vocabulary used in the shipping industry constitutes another significant aim of the learning process. Also, the development of writing skills should be stressed in the framework of students' training in Maritime English.

The courses need to be designed not only for academic purposes but, mostly, for professional needs since Harding (2007: 7) mentions that: "markets are on the lookout for employees with professional skills". Authentic material such as documentaries, online news and journal articles would motivate students and help them realize the interconnection between their training and the professional world. Similarly, text material selection should be related to the latest maritime advancements and regulations and be presented with illustrative material that would make the learning activity more interesting and closer to their interests.

The approaches that should be adopted emerge from the Humanistic Language Teaching model according to which the aim of the teaching process is to encourage communication in an encouraging environment where the student is seen as an active participant and not as a passive agent of knowledge transmitted by the teacher. Also, the concept of synergy is a key-word in the suggested approach where every member of the team contributes to the best collective performance, encouraging cultural and language diversity. In this framework, the teacher's role is that of the facilitator and guide in the learning process, providing motives and encouraging students in their learning difficulties. Collaboration between subject specialists, students and professionals is also required.

Crews of different nationalities that speak different languages work on board vessels, consequently, problems in verbal communication may arise that are likely to be a danger to the vessel, the people working there and the environment, as well. Seafarers need a standard language to communicate and, therefore, their training in Maritime English acquires a distinct importance to their career as professionals. To this context, systematic attempts should be made in order to design and implement Maritime English courses that would meet the international standards set by those involved in the shipping industry aiming to ensure, most of all, safety at sea.

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