



MARITIME ENGLISH SKILLS FOR MERCHANT NAVY DECK CADETS: CHALLENGES AND TEACHING STRATEGIES

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Abstract:

Given the global attribute of the shipping sector, maritime English constitutes a crucial component of maritime education in general and deck cadet training, more specifically, as it ensures safe and effective communication in multinational ship environments. Despite the adoption of Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCPs), merchant navy deck cadets continue to struggle linguistically with the use of English in real-world shipboard circumstances and with their everyday encounters with multinational personnel. There is a great disparity between traditional classroom language training and the practical linguistic demands on board vessels. This paper explores the main challenges faced by both merchant navy deck-cadet academy students and their English professors and proposes effective teaching methodologies to address these challenges within the Maritime English Curriculum of the academies. The study also contributes to the field of English for specific purposes (ESP) as maritime English equips students with linguistic and cultural competencies specifically addressed to the maritime industry.

Keywords: Maritime English, deck-cadets, merchant navy academy students, maritime linguistic challenges, maritime teaching strategies, English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

1. Context for the Paper

1.1 Introduction

The background of this research is rooted in the recognition that English has long been established as the official lingua franca of maritime communication, both on board among multicultural crews and between vessels and ship authorities. The need for standardized maritime communication terminology has been intensified due to the

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increasing globalization of the maritime industry. As Sukomardojo & Ratnaningsih (2022) point out, the global shipping industry relies heavily on effective communication, as over 80% of world trade is transported by sea. Maritime English is an umbrella term which refers to all the spoken and written specialized terminology essential to seafarers at sea or in port.

1.2 Maritime English as a Specialised Branch of English for Specific Purposes (ESP)

ESP courses are centered on specific contexts where the English language is taught for specific purposes to serve the needs of targeted professionals. Having said that, maritime English is a branch of ESP as it addresses the unique linguistic requirements of seafarers and merchant navy cadets. As Gabedava & Hu (2025) mention, maritime English is a specialized branch of ESP designed to meet the communicative needs of maritime professionals. Unlike general English, Maritime English encompasses technical terminology specific to maritime contexts. Maritime terminology is concise and unambiguous so as to ensure safety at sea. As Sukomardojo & Ratnaningsih (2022) put it, the introduction of Standard Maritime Communication Phrases (SMCPs) by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) aimed to reduce ambiguity and enhance communication efficiency. In order to achieve this, only memorization of phrases is not enough; deck cadets should develop skills of interpreting, adapting and applying this language terminology in practical, real-time maritime contexts. Deck cadets do not use English for academic purposes; instead, their linguistic needs revolve around the following tasks: understanding technical manuals, reporting technical problems, participating in safety procedures/ briefing/ handovers and recording in the maintenance logbook. All in all, they are asked to perform complex communicative functions that are way more demanding than memorizing maritime terminology.

1.3 Brief Description of Maritime English Courses in the Greek Academies

In the Greek Institutions, merchant marine officers are trained in six academic semesters and two semesters of practical on-board vessels training. Maritime English is a compulsory course in all six semesters and carries double unit credits. Also, during their last semester, students have the chance to choose and write a dissertation on a Maritime English title in the English Language. Maritime English professors make sure that students not only acquire the specific terminology but are also able to practically and effectively apply it in everyday routine activities as deck officers and as fully qualified captains at a later stage.

Despite the importance of Maritime English in the Academies, merchant navy cadets very often struggle to achieve the required level of linguistic competence. In this context, the objective of this paper is twofold: firstly, to examine the key challenges they face and secondly, to explore effective teaching strategies to address these issues.

2. Challenges in Maritime English Learning

The analysis that follows reveals key Maritime English challenges faced by Merchant Navy cadets.

2.1 Linguistic and Terminological Complexity

The linguistic complexity of maritime terminology is one of the primary challenges of deck cadet students. During their sixth semester in-class training duration, cadets are exposed to a vast range of technical vocabulary related to navigation, engineering and safety procedures. SMCP alone contains endless low-frequency terms, hindering their retention. Giving too much emphasis on rote memorization does not help; instead, it creates a cognitive burden on the learners. As Yuriivna et al. (2025) argue, while memorization is useful, it is not sufficient in dynamic maritime situations where linguistic adaptability is required. Lack of this adaptability can compromise safety on board. Integrating communicative competence training programs can ease the learners' struggle to adapt standard maritime phrases to unexpected emergency scenarios and, thus, ensure safety on board.

2.2 Lack of Strategic Competence and Confidence

Irrespective of the linguistic proficiency of the crew members, communication breakdowns are unfortunately inevitable in their daily routines, mainly caused by unfamiliar accents of co-workers and very noisy working conditions under extreme pressure or bad weather. Manurung & Fitria (2025) state that "*strategic competence refers to the ability to overcome communication breakdowns*". When cadets do not comprehend a message, they either use an avoidance strategy by remaining silent or give an unclear response out of fear of making a mistake. In both scenarios, communication is hindered, posing a great risk which may easily lead to accidents. As Yuriivna et al. (2025) also point out, particularly in emergency contexts, communicative effectiveness should be prioritized over grammatical perfection. Effective understanding is ensured when deck cadets are confident to paraphrase requests, ask for repetition and confirm instructions.

2.3 Lack of Intercultural Competence

Additionally, the multicultural nature of maritime crews adds another layer of communication complexity due to the diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds of seafarers. Within this context, effective communication requires not only language skills but also intercultural competence. As Cole & Trenker (2011) emphasize, given the globalized nature of seafaring, intercultural competence is an essential component of Maritime English. Pure technical terminology can significantly increase the risk of miscommunication on board and falls short of preparing them for the culturally varied forms of communication that dominate life on board. These varied forms of cross-cultural challenges may go beyond linguistic barriers and include issues of politeness; for example, in some cultures directness of orders and requests is valued, while in others it

is regarded as disrespectful and requests are preferred to be expressed indirectly. Body language also varies between cultures and can cause great misunderstanding if not taken into consideration. For example, “*shaking the head in a horizontal direction in most countries means “no”, while in India it means “yes”*” (Papaleonida, 2016). Such an oral response to an important yes-no question could prove risky if misunderstood. All in all, the issue of multicultural challenges among crews is also mentioned by Franceschi (2014), who raises the importance of intercultural collaboration skills among maritime professionals, so that they can communicate across cultural boundaries.

2.4 Gap between Classroom and Real-life Communication

Last but not least, the gap between theoretical knowledge and practical application is a significant issue for deck-cadets. Studies “*reveal the disconnect between theoretical instruction and practical realities cadets encounter during training*” (Manurung & Fitria, 2025). The cadets are not adequately prepared for onboard communication tasks, such as reporting technical problems or participating in briefings.

This gap has a three-fold negative effect:

- a) it limits their ability to apply language effectively in operational contexts,
- b) it hinders their performance during their on-board training semesters,
- c) it poses risks to crew coordination and overall shipboard safety.

Studies have shown that this gap is mainly due to the lack of authentic exposure in maritime classrooms (Manurung & Fitria, 2025). The lack of realistic maritime listening, speaking, reading and writing contexts leaves cadets underprepared for the complexity of actual on-board dynamics.

3. Teaching Strategies for Maritime English

After analyzing in detail, the key challenges of maritime English learning, this section aims to give a detailed analysis of the key teaching strategies which can tackle the aforementioned difficulties.

3.1 Emphasis on Teaching Intercultural Communication Skills

An effective way to bridge the gap between technical maritime proficiency and practical on-board communicative competence is to enhance intercultural communication skills. As Trenkner (2009) points out, in maritime professions, communication and collaboration across international boundaries become effective through intercultural communication skills, which basically involve a thorough understanding of linguistic and cultural differences. It was thought that applying this theory to the Greek academic context could practically entail the following four teaching strategies:

- a) Use of authentic listening exercises featuring varied English accents, followed by tasks that replicate on-board challenges more realistically.

- b) Use of educational videos that depict the body language peculiarities of certain nations, with emphasis on gestures that are normal to most nations but disrespectful to some others.
- c) Classroom simulation and roleplays that explicitly enhance sociolinguistic competence by equipping cadets with strategies of politeness and cultural adaptation.
- d) Use of intercultural interactive workshops with explicit teaching of cultural norms and values. The integration of the aforementioned strategies in the maritime curriculum can hopefully increase cadets' cultural sensitivity.

3.2 Use of Authentic Maritime Materials

In maritime training, the adaptation of language materials to the immediate, authentic professional needs of the learners shifts teaching beyond memorization towards tasks that cadets are literally expected to perform on board. As Lau & Ng (2015) argue, the implementation of task-based learning activities, such as simulated maritime communication scenarios, role plays, and authentic case-studies, can make maritime students adapt more easily to real maritime settings, operational on-board procedures and interpersonal crew interactions.

In practice, this could involve designing tasks where cadets:

- a) simulate reporting a machinery/technical failure
- b) conduct briefings and watch handovers
- c) familiarize themselves with the high lexical-technical register of authentic shipboard texts, such as manuals, safety posters and logbook entries.
- d) develop confidence and competence in a controlled, realistic environment through replication of emergency situations, radio communications and on-board interactions.
- e) improve their decision-making skills and confidence by applying SMCP in low-fidelity simulations, such as bridge-team exercises.

Such authentic-based tasks, which are part of the experiential learning approach, ensure that cadets develop the linguistic competence needed to tackle the real-world on-board daily pressures. As Simanjuntak et al. (2024) point out, in research conducted in maritime institutions, *"this experiential learning approach not only improved students' linguistic proficiency but also fostered critical thinking and problem-solving skills essential for professional success in the maritime industry"*.

3.3 Technology-enhanced Maritime Tools

The integration of technology, such as AI-based tools, can offer new opportunities to maritime English training. According to Lall & Liu (2025), AI-driven systems can provide personalized feedback and assess on-board communication performance, improving maritime training effectiveness. AI can effectively prepare seafarers for real-life on-board challenges so as to mitigate potential mishaps.

3.4 Needs Analysis of Course Curriculum

Needs analysis is an integral part of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and basically involves analysis of the learners' needs in order to achieve the desired linguistic competence. According to Manurung & Fitria (2025), "*conducting a needs analysis is a critical step toward improving the effectiveness of Maritime English Instruction*". For the Greek maritime academic context, this means examining the specific linguistic skills that the deck-cadet students should acquire in their profession. This can be achieved, among other ways, by close contact with the first-year students as soon as they return from their first training voyage. Maritime teachers can either ask their students directly what they found helpful on board/ what needed more elaboration, or they can give them the chance to express their views anonymously in writing via a carton letter box. This way, teachers can have a thorough assessment of their students' needs and, thus, adjust their future lesson plans accordingly.

3.5 Collaborations with Captains

Maritime English teachers have the maritime linguistic expertise; however, they, more often than not, lack actual maritime practical hands-on experience, as they have never worked on board. This experience is often needed in order to explain specific terminology or operations, such as bunkering and Ship-To-Ship (STS). To bridge this gap, co-teaching with colleagues, Captains in certain lessons or technical modules/chapters, can align linguistic instruction with technical training.

This paper suggests that a combination of all the aforementioned five teaching approaches is necessary to effectively address the complex needs of Merchant Navy Cadets.

4. Limitations and Considerations

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this paper, which basically stem from its theoretical nature. Comparative studies involving multiple academic institutions in Greece could offer a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges faced by merchant navy students and of specific teaching strategies to overcome them. Ultimately, this article contributes to the ongoing discourse of understanding and enhancing maritime education to develop competent maritime professionals.

5. Conclusions

This article embarked on a critical exploration aimed at enriching both the theoretical understanding of the linguistic challenges faced by deck-cadets and of practical teaching methods to overcome them. Maritime English plays a pivotal role in ensuring effective communication in the global shipping industry. Despite its importance, Merchant navy cadets face numerous challenges in acquiring those skills due to the limitations of traditional teaching methods. The complexity of maritime communication requires

curriculum reform, integration of authentic materials, simulation-based language practice, needs analysis, technology-based tools, and collaboration with colleagues to equip cadets with the skills needed for safe and efficient communication on board. By doing so, they can better prepare cadets for the demands of modern maritime communication. Ultimately, the effectiveness of maritime training programs depends on the alignment of teaching practices with the specific needs of the maritime profession. This article seeks to bridge the gap between classroom maritime English learning and real-world application on board vessels by enhancing educational practices in maritime English in order to prepare maritime professionals who will be able to communicate effectively in the increasingly diverse and globalized maritime contexts.

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Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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