



## UNDERSTANDING AND ENHANCING THE MIXED-ABILITY NATURE OF MARITIME ENGLISH DECK CADET CLASSES IN GREEK ACADEMIES

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### Abstract:

The teaching of Maritime English constitutes an integral – vital component of Maritime Education. In countries with deep-rooted seafaring culture, such as Greece, maritime English is a compulsory, highly credited module taught in all six semesters at the Maritime Academies. In all the academies, Maritime English instructors frequently encounter difficulties due to the mixed-ability nature of the cadet classes. The notion of ‘mixed-ability’ in this context takes a distinct meaning: it goes beyond the heterogeneous proficiency levels of the students, often mentioned in literature; it also entails other layers of heterogeneity, those of varied maritime terminology backgrounds of the cadets, depending on whether they entered the academies via General High Schools or Technical Vocational High Schools. This second set of levels of mixed-ability has not been addressed yet by the scientific community and is the main rationale behind writing this paper. This study explores the challenges associated with teaching maritime English to mixed-ability deck cadet classes in Greek academies, with a focus on the aforementioned double-meaning of heterogeneity, which creates a complex four-layered diverse content. Throughout the paper, the terms “mixed-ability” and “diversity” are used interchangeably to refer to the aforementioned four levels. Also, this paper attempts to scrutinize all sorts of possible solutions arising from the double challenge of teaching English in mixed-ability academy classes. The article concludes with practical recommendations on how to improve cadets’ learning and teaching performance and with implications for curriculum design within Greek Maritime Academies.

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## 1. Introduction

Maritime English has a pivotal role in the global shipping industry, functioning as a maritime lingua franca; in other words, the primary medium of communication among multinational crews. In the context of the Greek Maritime Academies, where future deck officers are trained, Maritime English is a core subject in all three years of training, aligned with international standards, such as the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) and the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watch-keeping for Seafarers (STCW).

Teaching Maritime English to deck cadets in the Greek Academies presents a significant pedagogical challenge due to the multi-layered mixed-ability nature of students. It is a well-known fact that English language teachers in all academies have to deal with the heterogeneity of cadets' knowledge upon admission to their studies. The first-year academy students enter training with diverse levels of English proficiency and terminology competence, requiring instructors not only to understand those differences but also to enhance learning outcomes through targeted differentiated pedagogical strategies. Teaching in a multi-level setting where students learn and progress at different paces affects task design, classroom interaction and learning outcomes. This is a pressing problem that almost all English instructors face daily and should be given serious attention.

## 2. Objectives of This Study

Despite the importance of the aforementioned problem, a thorough search for scientific literature has shown that there is a lack of scientific works devoted to the multi-layered challenges of mixed-ability deck cadet language classes and to pedagogical solutions to address them. Thus, this paper aims to fill this gap in maritime pedagogical research by providing valuable insights into the difficulties of teaching heterogeneous maritime English classes and solutions to tackle the issues. Having said that, this brings us to the significance of the current paper.

### 2.1 Significance of This Study

This research is worthy of attention for the following reasons:

- a) It fills the gap in nautical pedagogical literature by raising awareness of a neglected but important maritime training issue.
- b) It deepens instructors' knowledge of the field. By adopting the proposed strategies, Maritime English teachers will not only be able to tackle the difficulties of diversity management, but they will also be able to remodel the cadets' diversity into a learning asset.

- c) It will also be significant to policy-makers, school administrators, course designers and textbook writers.
- d) It will provoke further research.

### **3. Detailed Analysis of the Distinctive Multi-layered Nature of Maritime English Deck Cadet Classes**

English as a Foreign Language specialists very often pinpoint that, more often than not, English language classes are inevitably heterogeneous. According to Ur (2005), all language classes with more than one learner have a mixed-ability nature, posing difficulties to both students and teachers. Similarly, Ansari (2013) states that almost all language classes include students of various interests, needs and abilities. Having said that, Maritime English academy classes are not an exception, of course. The problem of mixed-ability classes in the Greek academic context is exacerbated by the fact that the very term “heterogeneity” takes a more complex definition as it is more diverse and multifaceted for two main reasons. Firstly, students have a wide range of language competence levels, ranging from very basic knowledge to acquiring a Certificate of Proficiency in English. At this point, it should be noted that this mixed-ability characteristic is typical in various English as a Foreign Language classes and is also addressed by pedagogical researchers. The second reason, which is understated or rather not stated at all in the literature, is the fact that upon entering the academies, the cadets’ knowledge of maritime terminology varies tremendously, from a total lack of such knowledge if they graduated from general high schools to excellent maritime terminology if they graduated from technical and vocational high schools.

This dual focus makes maritime English teaching particularly demanding as it further splits the abilities of the academy students into the following four categories:

- a) those having very basic knowledge of general English and absolutely no knowledge of maritime terminology
- b) those having very basic knowledge of general English but excellent command of nautical phraseology
- c) those being proficient in general English but lacking knowledge of maritime phraseology
- d) those who are proficient in both general English and Maritime English

This four-layered chaotic mixture of heterogeneity poses great challenges to Maritime English instructors and is, surprisingly, a crucial issue that has not been addressed by maritime pedagogy research studies so far. Understanding the aforementioned four-layered nature of Maritime English classes is absolutely essential for effective teaching and learning in the Greek academic context, as all four types of students are present in almost all Greek academy classes, making it difficult for instructors to deal with the diversity of learning requirements. While some students may find tasks extremely easy, some others may struggle for hours. The diversity of the classrooms represents the complexity of the teaching setting, making effective teaching

extremely difficult. To ensure quality education, maritime instructors need to recognise and appreciate the cadets' diversity and create a conducive environment for them to learn.

#### **4. Further Challenges in Teaching Maritime English in Greek Mixed-ability Academy Classes**

The aforementioned four-dimension characteristic of maritime English classes is on its own a multifaceted major teaching challenge. Other minor-collateral challenges that are mentioned in research and are certainly exacerbated within the distinctive heterogeneous Greek academic context are the following three.

##### **4.1 Variety in Cadets' Learning Pace**

Research indicates that in mixed-ability classes, students vary in learning pace, making it difficult for instructors to implement a single teaching approach effectively (Ismail et al, 2020). Applying this difficulty in the Greek maritime context, there are automatically four different learning paces evident in each class, making teachers' task-time expected completion impossible to manage, which leads us to the second challenge.

##### **4.2 Lesson Planning Difficulties**

The variety of mixed-ability students' pace makes it difficult for teachers to proceed according to their lesson plan. As Adhikari (2023) puts it, preparing materials for mixed-ability classes is challenging. Assigning tasks to the four-level complex ability maritime classes is far more than challenging. The term confusing would be a more appropriate adjective in this context, as the possibility of cadets completing the same task at the same time is almost impossible. The wide gap among cadets' levels in linguistic and maritime skills makes it difficult for instructors to plan a balanced lesson that fits and satisfies their needs.

##### **4.3 Issues of Students' Demotivation**

When teaching mixed-ability classes, not all students can easily engage equally in the classroom. According to Hordiienko & Lomakina (2015), one of the most typical problems of mixed-ability classes is the demotivation of low and average students. When instructors teach difficult tasks, advanced students engage more, while low and average students fear making mistakes and choose to remain silent, thus developing inferiority complexes. On the other hand, according to Zrig (2025), simplifying the tasks to motivate low-ability students decreases advanced students' interest. Considering both pedagogy specialists, one can state that maintaining motivation in mixed-ability classes is a vicious cycle; monitoring the level of tasks does not eliminate demotivation. Applying those two strategies in the Greek academic context, the possibility of demotivation is always apparent, irrespective of how easy or difficult the prepared tasks might be, considering the complex four-layered ability nature of classes.

## **5. Practical Pedagogical Solutions to Enhance the Mixed-ability Nature of Maritime English Deck-cadet Classes**

Mixed-ability Maritime English classes are very common in Greek academies, so every instructor must find ways to teach students with different abilities together in the same class. Of course, this is a very difficult endeavour but certainly not impossible. In the subsections that follow, several practical strategies are proposed.

### **5.1 Good Classroom Organisation**

According to Zrig, “*good classroom management is a prerequisite for success in a mixed-ability class*” (Zrig, 2025, p.47). Classroom management involves group-work, peer-work and pair-work. As far as group-work is concerned in a maritime academic context, students can be grouped either according to their strengths (proficient students together, weaker students together / students with high knowledge of terminology together, students who lack terminology together) or in groups with mixed linguistic and maritime competence. The first type of grouping is useful as it engages all students and assists the instructor in controlling the classroom. The second grouping, which is also called peer tutoring, basically consists of advanced learners who improve the skills of weaker ones, while in the meantime solidifying their own. Small groups of peer tutoring deck cadets can motivate linguistically or terminologically weaker students to learn from their advanced peers and feel free to take initiative without fear of making mistakes. Also, as Hordiienko & Lomakina (2015) argue, instructors can use peer tutoring to their advantage as engaging advanced learners in this process saves teachers’ time. In the academic context, this is a huge advantage for Maritime instructors as every teaching minute counts.

### **5.2 Resources Adaptable for All Students**

A time-consuming, yet very successful strategy for heterogeneous classes is preparing materials suitable for various students’ abilities (Hordiienko & Lomakina, 2025). Adapting lesson plans and assignments to various students’ strengths can help motivate, engage and involve all students. In the Greek academic context, this strategy can be applied as follows: assigning grammatically average tasks to linguistically weak students, grammatically complex tasks to linguistically advanced students, lexically average tasks to students with low terminology competence and lastly, lexically complex tasks to students with advanced maritime phraseology. With these four directions, instructors will be able to address the four-layered-ability nature of their classes, thereby challenging advanced students, while at the same time motivating average ones. Lastly, giving additional activities to advanced students, who complete tasks ahead of schedule, keeps them involved.

### **5.3 Needs Analysis**

Considering the multi-layered, complex nature of Maritime English classes, carrying out needs analysis is amongst the most useful tools in the hands of English instructors.

Identification of learners' needs should start on their very first lesson, when instructors can ask them to write down on paper their levels of proficiency and whether they attended general or technical-vocational high school – Maritime Sector, so as to assess whether they are competent in maritime phraseology. This valuable information should be collected, filed and taken into consideration in task preparation and students' assessment-progress throughout the taught semesters until they graduate. Also, every time they return from their training voyage, instructors can place an empty carton-box outside their classroom and ask them to write anonymously and in detail skills that they found useful/useless on board and propose untaught skills that they found difficult to deal with and would have been practically useful if they knew. By applying this strategy anonymously, deck cadets can express themselves without hesitation, offering their instructors valuable food for thought for enhancing their teaching based on their on-board needs.

#### **5.4 Vocabulary Development Strategies**

Maritime English relies heavily on specialised terminology. Effective vocabulary instruction is therefore essential. Considering the fact that each class comprises terminologically weak and advanced students, an effective strategy is to type and file all the core vocabulary and make it available to all students via email for homework use and via PowerPoint presentation for daily in-class use. In this way, students of all levels will be able to assess assigned tasks more easily and at the same pace. This targeted instructional strategy can enhance their phraseology mastery and significantly influence their overall communication ability.

#### **5.5 Use of Global Maritime Distress (GMDSS) Lab and Full Mission Ship Bridge Simulator Lab**

Maritime English is not only theoretical knowledge, but also a practical communication tool for seafarers. Thus, it is worth applying it directly in the two maritime labs that all academies acquire. It would be an effective technique if English instructors co-taught sessions with captains once a week in each lab. In the GMDSS lab, students could have hands-on experience with various distress communication equipment, while at the same time practicing proper Maritime English to ensure that distress messages can be understood in order to avoid communication failure. In the Full Mission Ship Bridge Simulator, students could practice bridge watch-keeping and vessel manoeuvring, while in the meantime communicating in Maritime English. These two types of co-teaching sessions will motivate both weak and advanced learners, who will be able to enhance their competency in a realistic hands-on environment, which has the power to eliminate their heterogeneity.

## 6. Conclusions

Taking all the above into consideration, one can conclude that mixed-ability Maritime English classes are prevalent in the Greek academies. Students' abilities differ both linguistically and terminologically, thus creating a four-layered complex ability context in the classrooms. This diversity poses a number of significant challenges for teachers. Despite these difficulties, this research demonstrates that, by adopting the proposed pedagogical strategies, instructing mixed-aptitude deck cadets is not impossible. Pedagogically innovative techniques can help instructors address diverse learner needs. From the teachers' point of view, what matters is to be able to differentiate between the students' needs in order to help them achieve their learning potential. It is important for instructors to acknowledge the fact that academy deck cadets are indeed different in four directions and therefore need innovative techniques to acquire Maritime English. Only in doing so can teachers make the learning environment as meaningful and fruitful as possible for all parties involved. Ultimately, the goal is to equip cadets with the linguistic and professional skills necessary for safe and effective communication in the global maritime industry.

### 6.1 Implications for Future Research

This research has identified pertinent issues not yet mentioned in marine pedagogical research. The distinct four-layer notion of mixed-ability Maritime English classes is an unequivocal signal for language educators to adapt new teaching approaches that are not yet integrated in the Greek academies. In a nutshell, the current study proposes a pedagogical framework to both course designers and instructors and offers insights into making the teaching/learning process beneficial for all. Lastly, being pioneering in its research field, this article can be used as a basis for further theoretical and practical research, which will identify more cutting-edge strategies to address the pedagogical challenges of mixed-ability Maritime English academy classes. It is the authors' hope that the outcome of this study can serve as a valuable reference for developing new Maritime English courses or revisiting existing ones.

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### Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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