



ENGLISH AS A LIFELINE: WHY MARITIME STUDENTS IN GREECE MUST MASTER MARITIME ENGLISH

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Abstract:

In today's globalized maritime industry, English is more than a tool for communication—it is a critical factor in safety, professional development, and operational efficiency. This article argues that maritime students in Greece must prioritize the mastery of Maritime English to succeed in their careers. Drawing from personal teaching experience in a Greek Merchant Marine Academy, the article highlights real-life scenarios where English proficiency directly impacts safety at sea, international teamwork, and career opportunities. It also underscores the need for educational reform to move beyond grammar-heavy curricula toward context-based, communication-focused instruction. References to International Maritime Organization (IMO) guidelines and academic research support the case for reshaping English instruction to meet global maritime standards.

Keywords: Maritime English, safety at sea, ESP

1. Introduction

When I first stepped into a classroom at a merchant marine academy in Greece, I knew I was entering a world with its own language—nautical terms, navigation systems, safety drills, and technical manuals. What I quickly discovered, however, was that for many cadets, the greatest challenge was not reading nautical charts or repairing a two-stroke engine. It was mastering the Maritime terminology and communication in English. In a country where the shipping industry is both a historical legacy and a pillar of the economy, the ability to operate in English is not a luxury—it is a lifeline. Yet too often, English instruction in Maritime Academies is treated as just another subject, rather than a core competency as vital as navigation or engineering.

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2. The Global Language of the Sea

According to the International Maritime Organization (IMO), English is the official language of maritime communication. The Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP), developed by the IMO, were created to reduce miscommunication that could lead to dangerous errors at sea (IMO, 2001). Whether cadets are working aboard Greek-flagged vessels or international ships, they will interact with multinational crews, port authorities, engineers, and emergency services—all in English.

One of my students, now a third officer on a bulk carrier, once told me about a near-miss during docking operations in Singapore. The captain's orders, delivered in unclear English, were misinterpreted by a non-Greek crew member. It was only thanks to another officer's quick thinking—and a more fluent command of SMCP—that a collision was avoided. Incidents like these are not rare; they underline the life-saving importance of clear, standardized English at sea.

3. Communication, Not Just Grammar

Traditional English instruction in many Greek Maritime Academies tends to lean heavily on textbook grammar and vocabulary memorization. While these elements are important, they do not prepare cadets for the real-life communication challenges they will face on the bridge or in an engine room. What is needed is a shift towards practical, situational learning: simulated radio exchanges, interpreting equipment manuals, participating in safety drills in English, and practicing SMCP in real-time scenarios. Research supports this approach—language acquisition is significantly improved when instruction is contextual and task-based (Richards & Rodgers, 2014). Additionally, listening and pronunciation skills often go underdeveloped, yet they are critical in an environment where poor radio clarity can mean the difference between a successful rescue and a tragedy.

3.1 Safety First

The numerous nautical incidents, though not primarily a language issue, raise questions about communication during emergencies. In a multilingual, high-pressure environment, effective English communication becomes a matter of survival. For Greek cadets who will serve on global crews, even a simple misunderstanding of an evacuation order or a fire alarm instruction could be catastrophic. It is also important to note that English is the language of technical manuals, software interfaces, inspection checklists, and international regulations like SOLAS and MARPOL. Proficiency is not just about speaking—it is about being able to read, interpret, and act on complex information quickly and accurately.

3.2 Bridging the Gap

As an English instructor, I have witnessed firsthand how much more confident and competent cadets become when they realize that their language skills can be just as

"hands-on" as their engine training. Role-playing scenarios, shipboard simulations, and even storytelling exercises can be introduced during the lesson, where students can recount past shipboard experiences in English and prepare for future demands. These moments not only improve fluency—they build confidence, camaraderie, and a real sense of purpose. But we need systemic change. Greek maritime academies should invest in specialized teacher training, updated curricula, and modern language labs. Collaboration with marine officers and maritime linguists could help bridge the gap between textbook English and real-world Maritime English.

4. Conclusion

For maritime students in Greece, mastering English is not about passing a class—it is about being safe, employable, and respected in one of the world's most demanding professions. As educators, we owe it to them to treat English not as an academic hoop to jump through, but as a lifeline that can save lives, open doors, and connect oceans.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

About the Author

Evaggelia Giovanoglou is an English Language teacher. She received a Bachelor's degree in English Language and Literature from the Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece and a Master's degree from the Hellenic Open University, Greece. She has been active in teaching English as a foreign language in the private sector since 2007. Her current field placement is with the Merchant Marine Academy of Crete, Greece, as a visiting professor for the subject of Maritime English. She is interested in intercultural classes and teaching English for Specific Purposes.

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