



THE PSYCHOLOGICAL BENEFITS OF LEARNING MARITIME ENGLISH FOR STUDENTS OF MERCHANT MARINE ACADEMIES

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Abstract:

This qualitative research explores the psychological benefits experienced by fifth-semester students at a Merchant Marine Academy through learning Maritime English. Through in-depth interviews with 50 students and thematic analysis, this study identifies four major psychological effects: increased communication confidence, reduced language anxiety, enhanced professional motivation, and a strengthened sense of global identity. Findings suggest that Maritime English learning not only improves communication skills but also supports the emotional and psychological preparedness of students for global maritime careers.

Keywords: Maritime English, merchant marine cadets, psychological benefits, communication confidence, maritime education

1. Introduction

English remains the dominant language for maritime communication worldwide, serving as a bridge among multinational crews on ships and in ports. While the functional importance of Maritime English is well established through international standards and the promotion by the International Maritime Organization (IMO), its potential psychological impact on students in training has received less attention. Maritime English serves as a technical and operational language, particularly through frameworks like the IMO Model Course 3.17, which is designed to ensure safe, standardized communication across international maritime operations (Trenkner & Cole, 2009). Yet, the process of acquiring such specialized language skills may yield benefits beyond technical competence. This research aims to explore how fifth-semester students in a Merchant Marine Academy perceive the influence of learning Maritime English on their emotional, cognitive, and motivational development.

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2. Research Questions

- 1) What are the perceived psychological effects of learning Maritime English among fifth-semester Merchant Marine students?
- 2) How does Maritime English learning influence students' confidence and anxiety related to communication?
- 3) In what ways does acquiring Maritime English contribute to students' motivation and readiness for international maritime careers?

This study focuses on three key research questions. First, it examines the perceived psychological effects of learning Maritime English among students who are in the transitional stage from basic training to advanced maritime simulations. Second, it investigates how learning this specialized form of English influences students' confidence and anxiety levels, especially in communication-heavy scenarios. Third, it explores how this learning experience contributes to students' motivation and readiness for future careers in a globalized maritime industry.

3. Literature Review

Language learning in professional contexts, particularly in fields like maritime operations, brings with it several psychological dimensions. According to Dewaele and MacIntyre (2014), foreign language learning can have a dual impact on learners, decreasing anxiety and boosting enjoyment and confidence, particularly when the language is viewed as relevant to one's identity and goals. This is especially pertinent for maritime students who often face performance pressure in simulations and during future onboard experiences. Psychological benefits such as increased confidence, emotional resilience, and cognitive flexibility are often overlooked in traditional maritime education, which prioritizes technical competency and safety protocols. However, language is not merely a tool for communication but also a vehicle for identity formation, motivation, and emotional preparedness. Glenk (2013) highlights that Maritime English not only contributes to effective ship operations but also supports emotional intelligence, particularly in managing high-stress and multicultural environments at sea. Similarly, Horwitz et al. (1986) emphasize the role of language anxiety as a psychological barrier, one that can be reduced through structured and career-relevant instruction.

Ushioda (2011) further emphasizes that language learning is most effective when it aligns with learners' self-concept and future aspirations. Students who recognize the vocational relevance of English in maritime contexts tend to demonstrate greater intrinsic motivation and long-term engagement with both language and professional training. In this context, Maritime English functions not only as a subject of study but as an integral part of shaping students' sense of identity as future maritime professionals. When students understand that their language skills will enable them to interact confidently with international crews and contribute to operational safety, they are more likely to internalize the value of their education, leading to enhanced self-efficacy and motivation.

According to Ryan and Deci (2000), intrinsic motivation is cultivated when learners find their educational activities meaningful and applicable, which strongly applies to the case of Maritime English, where the alignment between curriculum and career is clear. Moreover, Krashen's (1982) affective filter hypothesis suggests that learners are more receptive to language input when their emotional states—such as anxiety and motivation—are favorable, further supporting the idea that psychologically supportive instruction enhances language acquisition.

4. Research Design

To explore these issues in depth, this study employs a qualitative phenomenological approach to capture the lived experiences of learners. A total of 50 fifth-semester students from a Greek Merchant Marine Academy participated in semi-structured interviews lasting between 30 and 45 minutes. Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a representative range in academic performance, communication skill levels, and attitudes toward English learning. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis framework, which allowed for the identification of recurring psychological patterns and themes.

4.1 Rationale of the Study

Despite growing attention to technical and linguistic competencies in maritime education, the psychological dimensions of learning Maritime English remain underexplored. Understanding these can aid curriculum developers and educators in designing programs that support students' emotional well-being and long-term professional growth. This study fills that gap by exploring how language learning contributes to students' internal psychological development.

5. Findings

The findings of this research indicate a compelling consensus among participants regarding the wide-ranging psychological benefits associated with the study of Maritime English. One of the most consistently reported effects was a significant boost in communication confidence, particularly evident during practical, simulation-based training scenarios such as bridge communication tasks, distress call drills, and emergency coordination exercises. Students described how the systematic acquisition of standardized maritime vocabulary and phraseology not only enhanced the precision and clarity of their speech but also cultivated a growing sense of professional competence. This competence, in turn, appeared to mitigate the fear of speaking publicly or making linguistic errors, especially in high-pressure training environments. As they became more familiar with the linguistic conventions specific to maritime operations, students increasingly reported a sense of comfort and fluency, which gradually replaced earlier feelings of apprehension or inadequacy. Notably, the integration of structured

communication exercises—such as role-playing, radio dialogue simulations, and peer-feedback sessions—proved instrumental in lowering affective barriers. These classroom strategies normalized the experience of using English in professional contexts and created psychologically safe environments where students could practice, make mistakes, and receive constructive guidance without fear of judgment. This process contributed significantly to their development of emotional resilience and adaptability—qualities that are crucial for future officers expected to communicate under pressure in diverse, multicultural crews.

These findings align with the observations of Liu and Jackson (2008), who emphasized that frequent, contextualized exposure to a foreign language within relevant environments not only reduces learners' anxiety but also fosters more open, positive attitudes toward communication in that language. In the case of Maritime English learners, this contextual relevance was clearly a driving factor in their psychological engagement. Participants described a growing emotional and cognitive connection to the broader international maritime sphere, which they increasingly saw themselves as part of. For many students, this was a transformative realization: they began to view themselves not simply as trainees but as future professionals capable of functioning—and even thriving—within a global workforce. This emerging sense of global belonging and occupational identity had powerful psychological implications. It enhanced students' self-concept and reinforced their sense of purpose within the academy and beyond.

In parallel with this shift in self-perception, students also reported a noticeable surge in intrinsic motivation. Many indicated that as they came to understand the real-world significance of Maritime English—particularly its role in ensuring safety, operational efficiency, and cross-cultural cooperation—they felt more committed to mastering both the language and their broader technical curriculum. Rather than viewing language learning as a separate or abstract academic requirement, they began to see it as a foundational skill directly tied to their professional success and credibility. This sense of purpose catalyzed greater enthusiasm, discipline, and persistence in their studies. Importantly, the motivation derived from Maritime English extended beyond linguistic proficiency: students noted that it had a spillover effect on their overall academic and personal development. It enhanced their engagement in teamwork, fostered leadership skills in collaborative settings, and encouraged a mindset of continuous self-improvement. For some, it even inspired a greater interest in cross-cultural interaction and an openness to future international assignments or deployments.

Taken together, these outcomes suggest that Maritime English plays a multifaceted psychological role in shaping cadets' development—not only as communicators but as confident, motivated, and globally aware professionals. The learning of Maritime English appears to act as both a linguistic and psychosocial catalyst, preparing students for the realities of international maritime service while simultaneously supporting their mental and emotional readiness for complex interpersonal and operational challenges at sea.

5.1 Implications

The findings of this study suggest that the current allocation of only two hours per week for Maritime English in the fifth semester significantly underutilizes the subject's potential to support cadets' psychological and professional development. While the limited time may suffice for basic vocabulary and standard phrases, it is insufficient to foster the depth of learning that promotes confidence, emotional resilience, and a strong professional identity—key benefits reported by students.

Given that students experienced increased motivation, reduced anxiety, and a greater sense of belonging to the global maritime community, Maritime English should be more than a technical requirement; it should be seen as a vital component of holistic maritime education. To maximize its impact, curriculum designers should consider integrating language instruction into practical training modules, such as simulations and bridge communication exercises. This would allow students to apply their language skills in context, reinforcing both linguistic and psychological competence.

Moreover, expanding the course hours or providing supplementary sessions could enhance the emotional and interpersonal skills necessary for real-life maritime environments. In essence, the subject's value extends beyond compliance with communication standards—it plays a critical role in shaping confident, motivated, and globally minded maritime professionals.

5.2 Limitations

While these findings underscore the potential for Maritime English instruction to support holistic student development, this study is not without limitations. The research was confined to a single academic institution, which limits the generalizability of the results. Moreover, as the data is based on self-reporting through interviews, there is the possibility of bias or over-reporting of positive effects. Future research should consider longitudinal studies to track the lasting psychological effects of Maritime English learning, and cross-institutional comparisons could offer a broader understanding of how cultural and curricular variations affect outcomes.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, this study demonstrates that learning Maritime English provides a range of psychological benefits for Merchant Marine Academy students, including increased confidence, reduced anxiety, enhanced motivation, and a strengthened global identity. These outcomes suggest that Maritime English instruction should be viewed not merely as a technical requirement but as a core component of student development. Maritime educators are encouraged to adopt pedagogical practices that recognize and nurture these psychological dimensions, thereby preparing students not only for operational success but also for emotionally intelligent and resilient participation in the global maritime industry.

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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