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Navigating the Lingual Waters: Challenges and Solutions for Malaysian Seafarers in Maritime English Communication

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ABSTRACT

Effective communication is essential in the maritime industry to maintain seamless operations and ensure safety at sea. In increasingly multinational crews, language barriers and cultural differences remain significant contributors to maritime incidents. To address these issues, the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) developed Maritime English (ME) and the Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP) to standardise and improve verbal communication between crew members and between ships and shore services. This study investigates the communication challenges faced by 27 Malaysian seafarers, focusing on how linguistic diversity, cultural factors, and technical jargon affect their ability to convey and comprehend information accurately. Data were collected through surveys and semi-structured interviews, analysed using descriptive statistics and thematic analysis. The study also examines the role of technology—such as translation software, messaging applications, and integrated communication systems—in supporting Maritime English in multilingual contexts. Findings provide maritime-specific recommendations to enhance training programmes, including integrating SMCP-based drills, maritime-focused video resources, and multi-tool communication strategies. By addressing these challenges, the study contributes to improving safety and operational efficiency in the Malaysian maritime sector while strengthening Malaysia's role in the global maritime community.

Keywords: Communication challenges, Malaysian seafarers, Maritime English, multilingual maritime

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INTRODUCTION

The global nature of the maritime industry necessitates a common language for safe and efficient operations. The International

Maritime Organisation (IMO) mandates the use of English—particularly through its Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP)—to standardise verbal communication between ships, and between ships and shore services. Despite this standardisation, non-native English-speaking seafarers, including Malaysians, continue to face significant challenges in mastering Maritime English.

In multinational crews, differences in language proficiency, pronunciation, and cultural communication norms can lead to misunderstandings, delayed responses, and, in some cases, safety risks. Prior research has shown that miscommunication remains a contributing factor in maritime incidents, yet much of the available literature focuses on general English proficiency or on global and regional seafarer populations, rather than on the specific linguistic and operational realities faced by Malaysian crews.

While IMO regulations provide a framework for standardising Maritime English, there is limited understanding of how Malaysian seafarers experience and navigate communication challenges in real-world operational contexts. Without targeted, context-specific strategies, linguistic barriers and inconsistent use of SMCP may continue to hinder both safety and operational efficiency.

Existing studies often examine Maritime English in an international context but rarely address the intersection of language proficiency, cultural diversity, and technological support tools within the Malaysian maritime workforce. The literature lacks empirical evidence on how Malaysian seafarers apply SMCP in daily operations, how they overcome communication barriers, and how technology can be integrated into language training to address these issues.

This study offers new insights by focusing exclusively on Malaysian seafarers and combining quantitative and qualitative data to examine the linguistic and technological dimensions of Maritime English use. By identifying challenges, coping strategies, and the role of digital tools, it provides maritime-specific, context-driven recommendations for training institutions, shipping companies, and policymakers, bridging the gap between global standards and localised practice.

RELATED LITERATURE

Effective communication is vital in both the maritime and aviation sectors, where language limitations can have direct safety implications. Research on radiotelephony communication in aviation highlights issues—such as non-standard phraseology, accent variation, and speech rate—that closely parallel challenges in Maritime English. In both industries, precise, concise, and unambiguous communication depends heavily on language competence, particularly among non-native speakers (Kim, 2023).

In maritime contexts, mixed-nationality crews with varying levels of English proficiency often experience misinterpretations that hinder operations and jeopardise

safety. While the IMO's Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP) aim to reduce ambiguity, inconsistent application remains common (Bocanegra-Valle, 2010; Litikova, 2021a).

Recent studies have begun to address the impact of digital transformation and post-COVID operational changes on maritime communication. For instance, Wang et al. (2021) reported that the shift towards remote vessel inspections and increased reliance on digital communication platforms during COVID-19 heightened the importance of written and asynchronous communication in English. Similarly, Alqurashi et al. (2022a) found that integrated maritime communication systems, when combined with standardised language protocols, significantly improved cross-border operational clarity. These findings point to a growing need for seafarers to be adept not only in spoken SMCP but also in using digital communication tools effectively.

Furthermore, Hangad and Clarin (2023b) observed that online and blended maritime English training—necessitated by pandemic restrictions—enhanced vocabulary retention and technical language use when coupled with simulation-based learning. This is consistent with developments in the aviation sector, where interactive simulations and virtual reality are increasingly adopted to replicate real-world communication scenarios and improve phraseology retention (Kim, 2023).

Lessons from aviation's solutions—such as structured language training, strict adherence to standardised phraseology, and the integration of communication-support technology—are highly relevant to maritime contexts. The adoption of maritime-specific e-learning platforms, interactive SMCP drills, and real-time translation systems mirrors aviation's Global Maritime Distress and Safety System (GMDSS) in its capacity to enhance operational clarity and reduce misinterpretation.

This cross-industry and post-pandemic perspective emphasises that ongoing education, digital skill integration, and consistent use of standardised communication practices are essential in reducing language-related problems and enhancing both safety and operational efficiency at sea.

METHODOLOGY

A total of 27 Malaysian seafarers participated in the study, representing various ranks including Captains, Chief Engineers, Deck Officers, Engine Officers, Electrotechnical Officers, Technical Superintendents, Ratings, and Cadets. Participants ranged in age from 25 to 55 years, with sailing experience varying from less than 3 years to over 10 years.

Purposive sampling was used to ensure diversity in years of experience, linguistic background, and shipboard responsibilities. Recruitment was conducted via institutional channels (maritime academies and professional associations), email invitations to alumni networks, and social media platforms (LinkedIn and Facebook groups for maritime professionals).

The survey questionnaire was adapted from previous studies on maritime communication (Baugh & Stolzer, 2018) and contained both closed-ended and open-ended questions. Closed-ended items measured the frequency of Maritime English usage, difficulty levels in specific contexts, and effectiveness ratings of technological tools. Open-ended items invited respondents to share personal experiences and coping strategies. The semi-structured interview protocol was designed to elicit detailed narratives regarding language barriers, pronunciation and accent issues, and training experiences.

Ethical approval was obtained from Malaysian Maritime Academy. All participants provided informed consent before participation. Responses were anonymised, and participants were informed they could withdraw at any stage without consequence. Quantitative survey data were analysed using descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, and mean ratings) to identify trends in language use and communication challenges. Qualitative data were analysed using Thomas's General Inductive Approach (Thomas, 2006), which provides a systematic and transparent method for deriving themes from raw textual data. The analysis followed three key stages. First, during data reduction, interview transcripts and open-ended survey responses were read repeatedly and condensed into brief, meaningful units. Second, in the stage of category development, these units were grouped based on similarity to generate initial categories representing recurring ideas. Finally, thematic refinement was conducted by revisiting and merging categories, removing overlaps, and aligning the emerging themes with the study's objectives. This process produced clear, evidence-based themes grounded in participants' experiences, ensuring analytic rigour and credibility.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The survey results indicate that the majority of respondents (85%) had over 10 years of sailing experience, with 11% having less than 3 years and 4% between 7–9 years. The sample represented a range of positions, including Captains, Marine Engineers, Deck Officers, Electrotechnical Officers, Technical Superintendents, Ratings, and Cadets. Malay was identified as the primary language for 66% of respondents, followed by English (18%), with 16% using a combination of languages (e.g., Malay-English or Tamil-English). This distribution underscores a strong tendency toward Malay as the dominant language, while also reflecting bilingual capabilities among a portion of the participants.

The study further explored how frequently respondents use Maritime English in their work environments. The data on the frequency of Maritime English usage at work (Figure 1) reveal a high level of engagement with the language in professional settings. Nearly half of the respondents (45%) reported using Maritime English "often" while an additional 33% indicated that they "always" use it. A smaller portion, 22%, stated that they use Maritime English "sometimes." No respondents indicated that they "never" or

"rarely" use Maritime English at work, which underscores its important role in everyday communication. These results suggest that Maritime English is widely used in professional settings, with most respondents depending on it frequently or consistently.

The survey also explored how often respondents encounter difficulties in understanding Maritime English instructions (Figure 2). The data show that most respondents experience minimal difficulty in comprehension, with 52% of respondents reporting that they "rarely" encounter difficulties, while 26% mentioned they "never" have issues. A smaller group, 14%, indicated they experience difficulties "sometimes" and only 8% of respondents reported facing challenges "often" or "always." These findings suggest that comprehension of Maritime English instructions is generally high, with the majority of respondents experiencing few or no challenges in understanding.

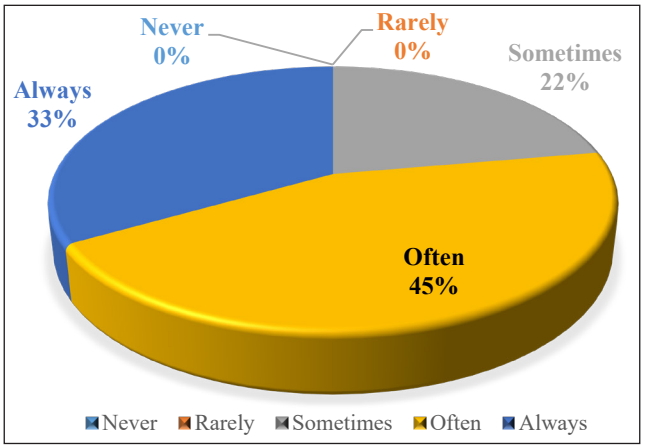

Figure 1. Frequency of maritime English usage at work

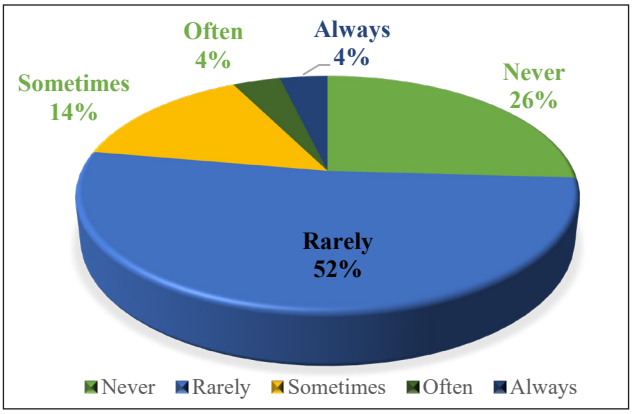

Figure 2. Frequency of difficulties encountered in understanding maritime English instructions

The data, as illustrated in Figure 3, indicate that communication issues during emergencies are infrequent among respondents. The majority of respondents, 59% reported that they "rarely" experience communication issues during emergencies, while 15% said they "never" encounter such problems. An additional 11% mentioned facing issues "sometimes" and another 11% reported experiencing them "often." Only 4% indicated that they "always" face communication challenges in emergencies. These results suggest that communication challenges in emergencies are generally limited, with most respondents rarely or never experiencing such difficulties.

The study revealed several key communication challenges faced by Malaysian seafarers, with the most significant being accent and pronunciation issues. Variations in pronunciation, particularly when diverging from the Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP) norm, can lead to misunderstandings, especially in multilingual and multinational crew environments (Litikova, 2021a). Similar findings have been reported by Froholdt (2010), who noted that non-standard pronunciations in ship-to-ship and ship-to-shore communication can impede operational clarity. Training on SMCP-based standard pronunciation and encouraging seafarers to request repetition or clarification are effective strategies for minimising such risks.

Another critical challenge is understanding technical jargon specific to the maritime industry. New entrants to the sector often struggle with specialised terminology, such as navigation commands and machinery operation terms, which can lead to operational confusion and errors (Romanovska, 2024). Bocanegra-Valle (2011a) emphasises that technical vocabulary acquisition is essential for safe operations, particularly in high-pressure environments. To address this, language training should integrate maritime-specific audio-visual resources, such as the IMO Model Course 3.17: Maritime English, COLREGS

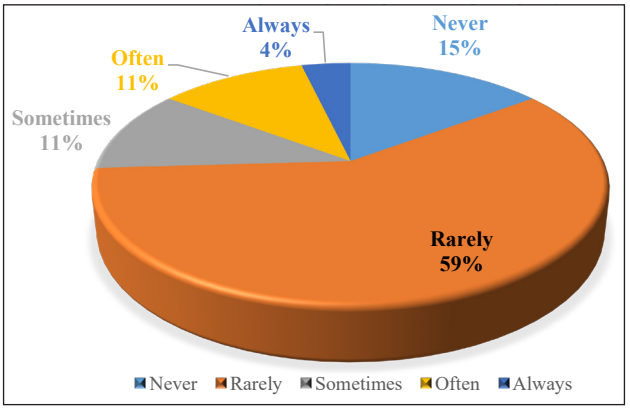

Figure 3. Frequency of communication issues experienced during emergencies

(Collision Regulations) training videos, and recorded VHF radio communications, which present technical vocabulary in authentic contexts and operational scenarios.

English inconsistency on board remains another barrier to effective communication. This aligns with findings from Pyne and Koester (2005), who found that mixed-language use during critical operations increases the risk of misinterpretation. To promote uniformity, crew members should be encouraged to adopt English consistently for operational communication, supported by onboard drills where SMCP usage is mandatory.

The study also found that peer support plays an important role, with less experienced crew often seeking guidance from seasoned colleagues. This is consistent with Hangad and Clarin (2023b), who observed that informal mentoring contributes to improved speaking confidence among maritime students. Such practices could be formalised through structured mentorship programmes that integrate language support into operational training.

Technological tools were also identified as valuable aids. Translation software, while useful, is most effective when combined with other shipboard communication systems such as GMDSS, public address systems, and dedicated messaging platforms. Alqurashi et al. (2022a) similarly concluded that integrated communication systems enhance operational efficiency when used alongside standardised language protocols. Incorporating these tools into simulation-based training can allow seafarers to practice both linguistic and technological competencies in realistic operational contexts.

Rather than relying on general strategies like watching English movies with subtitles—which apply broadly to any language learner—this study recommends industry-specific multimedia materials developed by recognised maritime organisations. Examples include INTERCARGO safety videos, BIMCO e-learning modules, and International Chamber of Shipping (ICS) operational clips, which combine technical language input with visual demonstrations of real-life maritime operations. Such resources support Bocanegra-Valle's (2011b) call for ESP (English for Specific Purposes) materials that balance linguistic development with domain-specific operational competence.

By aligning language training with authentic maritime contexts and leveraging existing industry resources, seafarers can build targeted communication competence that directly supports safety and operational efficiency at sea. This approach bridges the gap between generic English learning strategies and the operational realities of maritime communication, addressing the sector-specific needs identified in this study.

CONCLUSION

In summary, this study has highlighted the primary communication challenges faced by Malaysian seafarers, including difficulties with accents and pronunciation, understanding maritime-specific technical jargon, inconsistent use of English on board, and the need to effectively integrate technology into communication practices. Addressing these

challenges requires targeted action from maritime academies and training institutions. Training programmes should incorporate maritime-specific English modules based on *IMO Model Course 3.17: Maritime English*, integrating Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP) and technical vocabulary through authentic materials such as VHF radio recordings, engine room instructions, and navigational briefings. Language instruction should be paired with simulation-based training to allow learners to apply vocabulary and communication strategies in realistic operational scenarios. Industry-endorsed multimedia resources from organisations like BIMCO, INTERCARGO, and the International Chamber of Shipping (ICS) should be embedded into curricula to combine language learning with technical and procedural knowledge. Peer-mentorship programmes can further support trainees by facilitating guidance from experienced mariners, while technology-focused instruction should train cadets to use translation software, messaging platforms, and integrated communication systems (e.g., GMDSS) in conjunction with English protocols. By aligning training initiatives with both linguistic and operational competencies, stakeholders can enhance the safety, efficiency, and global competitiveness of Malaysian seafarers.

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