TEACHING MARITIME ENGLISH IN A MULTICULTURAL CREW CONTEXT: ENHANCING COMMUNICATION AND CULTURAL COMPETENCE

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Abstract:

The globalization of the maritime industry has led to increasingly multicultural crews aboard merchant vessels. Effective communication, primarily conducted in English, is crucial for operational safety and efficiency. This paper explores the pedagogical approaches to teaching Maritime English within the context of multicultural crews. It emphasizes the integration of intercultural competence into language instruction, addressing challenges such as language barriers, cultural misunderstandings, and the need for standardized communication protocols. The study reviews existing literature, highlights best practices, and proposes strategies for Maritime English educators to enhance both linguistic proficiency and cultural awareness among cadets.

Keywords: English outside of class, working-studying students, listening skills, speaking skills, self-study

1. Introduction

The maritime industry is inherently international, with crews often comprising individuals from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. English serves as the lingua franca, facilitating communication across nationalities. However, linguistic proficiency alone does not guarantee effective communication; cultural nuances and differing communication styles can lead to misunderstandings, impacting safety and teamwork on board. Therefore, Maritime English instruction must encompass both language skills and intercultural competence to prepare cadets for the realities of multicultural maritime environments.

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2. The Importance of Maritime English

Maritime English is a specialized subset of English tailored to the needs of maritime professionals. It includes standardized phrases, such as those outlined in the International Maritime Organization's (IMO) Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP), designed to prevent miscommunication in critical situations (IMO, 2001). Proficiency in Maritime English is essential for ensuring safety, compliance with international regulations, and efficient operation.

3. Challenges in Multicultural Maritime Communication

3.1 Language Barriers
Despite standardized communication protocols, varying levels of English proficiency among crew members can hinder effective communication. Misinterpretations may arise from accents, pronunciation differences, or limited vocabulary, leading to potential safety risks (Sampson & Zhao, 2003).

3.2 Cultural Differences
Cultural norms influence communication styles, perceptions of hierarchy, and conflict resolution approaches. For instance, some cultures may prioritize indirect communication, while others value directness. These differences can lead to misunderstandings and affect team cohesion (Bocanegra-Valle, 2017).

3.3 Psychological Stress
Working in a multicultural environment can be psychologically taxing, especially when cultural misunderstandings occur. Seafarers may experience stress due to isolation, cultural clashes, or communication difficulties, impacting their well-being and performance (Oldenburg & Jensen, 2020).

4. Integrating Intercultural Competence into Maritime English Instruction

4.1 Curriculum Development
Incorporating intercultural training into Maritime English curricula can enhance cadets' cultural awareness and communication skills. This includes teaching about cultural dimensions, communication styles, and conflict resolution strategies relevant to multicultural settings (Chirea-Ungureanu, 2015).

4.2 Simulation and Role-Playing
Using simulations and role-playing exercises allows cadets to practice communication in realistic scenarios, fostering both language proficiency and cultural sensitivity. These activities can replicate situations such as emergency responses, port communications, and multicultural team interactions (Bocanegra-Valle, 2017).

4.3 Assessment and Feedback

Evaluating cadets' intercultural competence alongside language skills provides a comprehensive understanding of their readiness for multicultural maritime environments. Feedback should address both linguistic accuracy and cultural appropriateness in communication (Čulić-Viskota, 2018).

5. Best Practices and Recommendations

5.1 Standardized Testing: Implementing Assessments like MarTEL

Standardized testing tools, such as MarTEL (Maritime Tests of English Language), are designed to measure maritime-specific English language proficiency in alignment with IMO standards, particularly the Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP). These tests assess not only general linguistic skills (reading, writing, speaking, and listening) but also task-specific communication scenarios encountered aboard ships.

Implementing MarTEL or similar assessments within a maritime academy setting provides several benefits:

- Benchmarking: It allows institutions to benchmark students' language proficiency levels against international expectations, helping to ensure that graduates are "sea-ready."
- Targeted Feedback: Detailed results help identify specific weaknesses in cadets' language skills—such as comprehension during radio communication or use of emergency phrases.
- Industry Recognition: Certifications from recognized language proficiency tests can add value to cadets' credentials and improve their employability.
- Curriculum Alignment: Test frameworks help shape and refine course objectives to better match operational language demands.

Moreover, integrating such testing from the first year and scaffolding it over time (e.g., with MarTEL Phase 1, 2, and 3) ensures progressive development of both general and maritime English.

Example in Practice: A Greek Merchant Marine Academy could incorporate MarTEL assessments at the end of each academic year, using results to customize instruction and provide remedial training where needed.

5.2 Cultural Exchange Programs: Enhancing Intercultural Learning

Cultural exchange programs, internships, or student mobility initiatives (e.g., Erasmus+ or bilateral maritime training exchanges) provide cadets with first-hand experience of working and living in diverse cultural environments. These programs help foster:

- Empathy and Tolerance: By engaging directly with peers from different backgrounds, cadets develop open-mindedness and respect for different work and communication styles.

- Real-World Practice: Experiencing how multicultural communication unfolds outside the classroom reinforces theoretical knowledge about intercultural competence.
- Soft Skills: Exchange participants often report growth in critical soft skills, including teamwork, adaptability, and conflict resolution.

These experiences are particularly valuable in the maritime domain, where cadets are likely to work in international crews from the very beginning of their seafaring careers.

Example in Practice: A Greek academy could partner with Northern European or Southeast Asian maritime schools to send cadets on short-term training placements, enabling immersion in foreign training environments, simulator work, and shipboard practice.

Chirea-Ungureanu (2015) emphasizes that such exposure bridges the gap between classroom learning and real-life application of both linguistic and intercultural skills, thus preparing cadets for the globalized nature of maritime operations.

5.3 Continuous Professional Development (CPD) for Instructors

The responsibility of preparing cadets for multicultural maritime settings falls largely on instructors, particularly those teaching Maritime English. However, teaching Maritime English effectively requires staying current with:

- Evolving Language Standards (e.g., IMO updates, new communication protocols)
- Intercultural Competence Theory (e.g., Hofstede's dimensions, Bennett's Developmental Model of Intercultural Sensitivity)
- Innovative Pedagogical Methods (e.g., simulation-based learning, digital platforms, flipped classrooms)

Ongoing CPD for instructors ensures they are not only linguistically knowledgeable but also culturally aware and technologically adept. This can include:

- Attending international conferences (e.g., IMLA, IMEC)
- Enrolling in online intercultural training (e.g., COIL—Collaborative Online International Learning)
- Participating in peer-observation and feedback sessions
- Engaging in joint curriculum development with international colleagues

Example in Practice: The academy could host annual CPD workshops focusing on simulation teaching, cultural case studies from recent maritime incidents, and updates to SMCP usage. Partnerships with universities offering applied linguistics or TESOL programs could also provide mentoring or refresher modules.

Ultimately, CPD helps instructors model the intercultural competencies they aim to teach—creating a learning environment that is inclusive, globally informed, and aligned with the dynamic needs of maritime professionals.

6. Conclusion

Effective communication in multicultural maritime settings requires more than linguistic proficiency; it necessitates a deep understanding of cultural dynamics. By integrating intercultural competence into Maritime English instruction, educators can better prepare cadets for the complexities of working in diverse crews, ultimately enhancing safety and operational efficiency at sea.

Conflict of Interest Statement
The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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Evangelia 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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