



THE IMPORTANCE OF PRACTICING THE SPEAKING SKILL FOR STUDENTS OF THE MERCHANT MARINE ACADEMY

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Abstract:

The acquisition of speaking skills is not only crucial for the learning of a second language but is quite a complex one. Speaking is fundamental in language learning, particularly in English for Specific Purposes (ESP), where communication in real-life professional fields is essential. For students at the Merchant Marine Academy, developing speaking proficiency in English is highly necessary, as it serves as the international lingua franca. Effective oral communication ensures safety, coordination, and efficiency in multinational crew environments, where miscommunication can be catastrophic. As Hutchinson and Waters (1987) state, "*What distinguishes ESP from General English is not the existence of a need as such, but rather an awareness of the need.*" In this context, Merchant Marine students must actively practice speaking skills to function effectively in their future roles.

Keywords: English for Specific Purposes, Maritime English, speaking in the classroom, speaking practice

1. The Role of Speaking in Maritime Communication

Communication in the maritime industry is mostly achieved by spoken English, whether for ship-to-ship coordination, emergency procedures, or daily operational tasks. Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP) were developed by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) to standardize maritime English and make sure that miscommunication is minimized. However, mastering these phrases requires active speaking practice in realistic situations that need to be simulated within the classroom context. According to Jenkins (2007), "*English as a lingua franca is about mutual intelligibility rather than native-like accuracy.*" This highlights the need for cadets to focus on clarity, fluency, and the ability to communicate effectively, goals that ought to be the cornerstone of every modern Maritime curriculum.

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Furthermore, studies show that oral communication in high-risk industries, such as maritime transport, is critical for safety. Roberts *et al.* (2005) argue that "*a failure in communication is often a contributing factor in maritime accidents.*" This underlines the necessity for cadets to practice speaking regularly, not only to enhance their linguistic competence but also to ensure safety at sea.

2. Challenges in Speaking Development

Despite modern approaches in teaching speaking, many Merchant Marine students face difficulties in developing this skill. Limited exposure to authentic communication, lack of confidence, and fear of making mistakes can hinder oral proficiency. Dornyei (2001) emphasizes that "*motivation is one of the key factors that determine the rate and success of second language attainment.*" When students treat speaking as directly linked to their professional success, their motivation increases, making them more willing to engage in oral practice, overcoming any possible shyness or insecurities.

The traditional focus of ESP courses on reading and writing skills rather than speaking can be another challenge to be faced by the students. As Richards (2008) points out, "*Curricula often prioritize grammar and vocabulary over communicative competence, leaving students with passive knowledge rather than active speaking ability.*" This underlines the need for instructional reforms towards the use of interactive speaking activities, such as role-playing maritime scenarios, simulated radio communication, and group discussions. While the designated textbook covers technical maritime terminology and professional communication, its difficulty level often exceeds students' proficiency, necessitating a more tailored approach to instruction. Needs analysis can be valuable in this case, as it helps bridge this gap by identifying both objective needs—such as language tasks required in real-world maritime contexts—and subjective needs, including learners' attitudes, expectations, and motivations. Findings suggest that incorporating learner input through surveys, interviews, and self-assessments leads to a more student-centered syllabus, increasing engagement and motivation. As adult learners, these students can actively contribute to shaping their curriculum, making learning more relevant and effective.

3. Strategies for Enhancing Speaking Proficiency

To address these challenges, speaking practice should be integrated into Maritime English courses through task-based and communicative approaches. Brieger (1997) advocates for "*real-world simulations and situational role-plays to bridge the gap between classroom learning and professional communication.*" For example, simulated shipboard emergencies or routine navigational dialogues allow students to apply language in a relevant context. Enough class hours should be dedicated to practicing speaking skills and thus allowing the students to build their competence as well as confidence.

Peer interaction also plays a crucial role in developing speaking skills. As Swain (1995) states, "*comprehensible output is just as important as comprehensible input in language learning.*" Encouraging students to engage in structured discussions, debates, and oral presentations fosters fluency and confidence. Additionally, incorporating technology, such as maritime communication software and virtual reality simulations, can provide realistic speaking practice. Virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) applications can immerse students in Simulated Learning Environments, such as shipboard environments, helping them practice real-world communication scenarios. Speech recognition & AI-based tools can offer pronunciation practice and interactive language exercises adapted to maritime terminology. Students can be encouraged to interact in English outside class hours, reinforcing practical usage through online communication tools such as forums and discussion boards.

4. Conclusion

Speaking is a vital skill for Merchant Marine Academy students, as it affects their ability to perform in international maritime settings. Regular speaking practice improves fluency, confidence, and professional effectiveness. The importance of oral communication in ensuring safety and efficiency mandates that ESP curricula should prioritize interactive and task-based speaking activities. As research suggests, creating an educational environment where cadets actively use English in professional contexts will better prepare them for their future life at sea.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares 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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