



THE IMPORTANCE OF SOFT SKILLS AND MARITIME ENGLISH FOR EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN THE MARITIME INDUSTRY

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Abstract. Effective communication is a cornerstone of operational success in the maritime industry, where diverse teams navigate complex environments and high-stakes situations. This paper explores the industry's potential for growth and improvement while highlighting the exciting opportunities that arise from adopting soft skills and Maritime English as essential tools for enhancing communication among maritime professionals. *Soft skills*, including *teamwork*, *adaptability*, and *emotional intelligence*, are crucial in fostering collaborative and efficient work environments both onboard vessels and onshore maritime operations. The paper also examines the role of *Maritime English as a Lingua Franca*, emphasizing its importance in ensuring clarity and safety in communications across multicultural crews on board the ships. Through the analysis of current literature, case studies, and industry practices, this paper highlights the interdependence of soft skills and language proficiency in reducing misunderstandings and improving overall operational effectiveness. The findings underscore the necessity for targeted training programs that integrate *Soft Skills Development* with *Maritime English Proficiency*, ultimately contributing to safer and more efficient maritime operations. The paper concludes with recommendations for Maritime Education and Training (MET) institutions and industry stakeholders, urging them to prioritize these competencies in students' training and professional development initiatives. This approach fosters hope and optimism for the future of the maritime industry.

Keywords: Soft Skills; Maritime English; Effective Communication; Efficient Work Environments; MET.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In the maritime industry, the role of professionals is necessary. *Effective communication* is essential for ensuring safety, efficiency, and coordination among diverse teams and stakeholders. ‘*Soft skills*’ – personal attitudes that promote communication and teamwork – are now mandatory for success in this industry. It is also essential to develop speaking and understanding skills in *Maritime English*, the Lingua Franca of shipping professionals, for seafarers to operate effectively and efficiently onboard ships and in port operations (Maritime and Coastguard Agency [MCA], 2022). “The language of the sea”, the proper English is a comprehensive standardized language filled with nautical terms and phrases. The International Maritime Organization (IMO) has highlighted that language barriers can heighten the risk of miscommunication and potential maritime accidents (IMO, 2014). It is up to mariners to meet this challenge. Thus, the inclusion of soft skills education alongside that of Maritime English is essential to produce well-rounded individuals who can effectively navigate the challenges of contemporary maritime activities (Tzong & Tzeng, 2021). We achieve this through the development of language and interpersonal skills, which in turn improves maritime safety and efficiency, leading to a safer, more secure, and productive maritime domain. Maritime work takes place in a remarkably dynamic and multicultural environment, and *effective communication* is a key requirement for the work to proceed smoothly. Acquiring *soft skills and fluency in Maritime English* are essential factors in effective communication between maritime professionals. Soft skills encompass a broad range of interpersonal skills that facilitate effective interaction and collaboration in the maritime domain. The essential soft skills are *teamwork, adaptability, problem-solving, and conflict resolution* (Tang, 2018). These competencies are crucial in times of crisis, when rapid decision-making and cooperation are essential for the safety of the crew (Salas et al., 2015). Through the promotion of soft skills training, companies can foster a harmonious workplace, thereby enhancing a team’s overall output and ultimately improving shipboard safety and performance (Schulze, 2020). Additionally, studies have demonstrated that effective communication fosters *trust*, a crucial factor for teams to function efficiently. As Quigley and McKeown (2016) noted, trust fosters open discussion of the crew’s concerns and ideas. Even if they cannot influence decision-making, it leads to better decision-making. Hence, those with good soft skills are better able to manage human relations, thereby avoiding misunderstandings.

As the language through which global shipping operations are conducted, Maritime English – often

referred to as “the lingua franca of world shipping”, or the <SeaSpeak> – plays a crucial role in managing culturally diverse crews. When studying maritime communication, the International Maritime Organization (IMO) considers the importance of English proficiency for safety and efficiency at sea, as language misunderstandings can lead to serious accidents (IMO, 2014). The Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCPs) are a structured language which aids comprehension and leaves less room for uncertainty (Crookes, 2021). To achieve fluency in the everyday working language, Maritime English offers its advantages, enhancing ancillary competences, *active listening*, and *empathy* (Tzong & Tzeng, 2021). Being able to read between the lines and pick up on the idiosyncratic phraseology and tone of Maritime English can also facilitate better human relations at a time when things are tense. To integrate soft skills into the teaching of Maritime English, language activities that emphasize active listening and empathetic responses can be developed. Seafaring professionals who possess strong Maritime English skills lead multicultural teams, reducing misunderstandings and enhancing team synergy, which in turn promotes diversity in the shipping sector.

Soft skills are essential to Maritime English, where they are most crucial. Transmission of information in one language or system versus another depends mainly on the opposing human factors of being able to communicate explicit messages (transmission) and being able to interpret responses correctly (reception). According to Tzong and Tzeng (2021), training courses that emphasize not only the improvement of soft skills but also language performance yield the best results in maritime communication. It is imperative to invest in the training of the human side of the seafarers, i.e., soft skills and Maritime English. This investment promotes effective communication within the maritime industry, resulting in enhanced operational safety, efficiency, and collaboration in maritime operations.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE INTERCONNECTION BETWEEN SOFT SKILLS AND MARITIME ENGLISH

The connection between soft skills and Maritime English in the shipping industry is being acknowledged as increasingly necessary to raise the safety and efficiency levels. The importance of this inter-relationship between both and the fundamental nature for effective communication and cooperative tasks in marine operations is supported by extensive literature research. The data indicate that “soft skills” – *teamwork, leadership, and effective communication*

– are helpful not only for mastery but also general use of Maritime English in diverse kinds of maritime work.

Effective communication, and good Maritime English for that matter, in shipping and navigation is a matter of necessity in high-risk situations like maritime research. Indeed, if we take communication skills as the independent variable, Kelsey (2020) notes that these are important 'because safety depends on workers being able to share complex information with each other.' Ghaith and Sadiq (2018) also observe that Maritime English is a lingua franca in the international shipping business, emphasizing the necessity of linguistic proficiency for successful communication between interculturally heterogeneous crews. According to their research, not even advanced levels of language proficiency in their working language, Maritime English, guarantee successful teamwork and crisis management if strong soft skills are found to be missing. This emphasizes the importance of Maritime English for effective communication, thereby stressing that language competencies are of central importance for the audience's roles in the maritime world.

It is reported in the literature that poor soft skills can cause misinterpretations and errors leading to accidents and near-misses in maritime (Olausson, 2021). For example, miscommunication because of poor communication skills might have resulted in a collision between two ships. With tight communication circumstances danger can arise, therefore the inclusion of soft skills in maritime education is critical for ensuring a competent workforce. That is why it is very significant for maritime students to be educated not only about technical matters but as well as with the priority of giving them proper handling in terms of relationships with other people. With advances in technology and a greater focus on safety standards, the shipping industry has evolved drastically. One aspect of this change is the need for soft skills to improve *communication, collaboration, and decision-making*. It is known that professionals in the maritime field develop important soft skills and one of the key factors has been Maritime English, the language of international maritime communication: accurate and quick response based on diverse cultural environments and complex environments of maritime operations; special circumstances such as narrow straits, medical conditions, etc. This is where both *soft skills* and *hard skills* become extremely important.

We have seen how significant these interpersonal abilities are with many articles pointing to them as being essential to operations in Shipping. Kjaerulfs and Høj (2018) elaborate that effective communication is crucial as it is critical in a high-pressure maritime environment. What they say is that skills

such as *communication, teamwork, problem-solving, and emotional intelligence* are paramount when it comes to improving safety and how our businesses perform. Emotional Intelligence is becoming more of a foundation of effective leadership in the maritime industry. Leaders who exhibit high levels of emotional intelligence are stronger in the capacity of handling emotions, support stress, solve conflicts, and stimulate teams effectively (Chao & Zhang, 2022). Their findings propose that soft skills training incorporate some emotional intelligence training now that leaders must deal with highly specific issues in dangerous maritime settings.

The practice of situational awareness is particularly important for seafarers, due to the dynamic environment at sea. Chao and Zhang (2022) suggest that soft skills (in particular, *critical thinking* and *decision-making*) are better developed by training that includes Maritime English communication scenarios. They discovered that the better communication skills one has, the better one's perceptions of their situation and the decisions made in a crisis. A research report issued by the Maritime Safety Administration (MSA) (2020) illustrates that incompetence in Maritime English has the potential to cause communication failure in a crisis. The paper explains a case of poor emergency bridge-to-engine room communication that resulted in late response time, emphasizing to all crew members that to deal with a crisis successfully, they should have both high soft skills and proficiency in Maritime English. The MSA underlines the importance of soft skills, such as *assertiveness* or *emotional intelligence*, in stressful situations, also highlighting these skills are related to effective communication in Maritime English (MSA, 2020).

Communication is not just a skill, but a fundamental tool for safety in the maritime industry. Huang et al. (2021) stress the importance of effective communication among multinational crews to have an efficient operation and to ensure proper risk management. They observed misunderstandings stemming from language differences or unclear communication can lead to accidents and safety infringements, emphasizing the necessity of strong communication skills in the industry. So, everyone at sea should be able to communicate well.

There are many times in the marine industry when crews work together in high-stress environments. Wright and Acker (2020) note that strong social skills and trust are required for crew members to work together effectively. Their findings are that a culture of collaboration has a positive effect not only on crew morale but on safety performance. Workshops on teamwork skills can have a major effect on how teams deal with emergencies. This relationship not

only highlights the financial worth of the attributes of leaders in the maritime industry (leadership skills) in the training of effective leaders, but also the possibility of personal development and progress in a career in the maritime industry (King & Warsame, 2021). The reaction of a vessel crew has been the target of Kouadio and Hrobowsky's (2020) study during a marine oil spill event. They found that teaching soft skills, including *stress management* and *conflict resolution*, was key to the crew's performance during the disaster. Findings indicated that effective communication, cooperation in a high-pressure setting resulted in the quick handling of the spill and minimized damage to the environment (Kouadio & Hrobowsky, 2020).

Teamwork is also a critical soft skill and its effects upon shipboard working conditions are indeed direct and immediate. The good working relationship among the crew members can be realized when there is good communication in place and it is through the good use of Maritime English as explained by Wright and Acker (2020). The authors assert that training programs designed to train individuals in both maritime language and soft skills will provide them with coping mechanisms to the challenges at work on board a ship. A case study by Hänninen et al. (2019) investigated the practice of a major shipping company encountering communication problems between ship and crew in the cargo operations. Key findings from the study include:

1. **Communication Barriers:** The study identified several barriers to effective communication, including language differences, cultural misunderstandings, and the use of technical jargon that was not universally understood by all parties involved.
2. **Impact on Safety and Efficiency:** Poor communication was found to lead to operational inefficiencies, increased risk of accidents, and delays in cargo operations. This not only affected the shipping company's bottom line but also raised safety concerns for the crew and cargo.
3. **Recommendations for Improvement:** Hänninen et al. suggested several strategies to enhance communication, such as:
 - Implementing standardized communication protocols to ensure clarity and consistency.
 - Providing language training for crew members to improve their proficiency in the primary language used in operations.
 - Utilizing technology, such as communication apps or platforms, to facilitate real-time information sharing between the ship and shore.

4. **Cultural Awareness Training:** The study emphasized the need for cultural awareness training to help crew members understand and navigate the diverse backgrounds of their colleagues and partners, fostering a more collaborative working environment.

5. **Continuous Feedback Mechanisms:** Establishing feedback loops where crew members can report communication issues and suggest improvements was recommended to create a culture of continuous improvement. (Hänninen et al., 2019).

The connection between soft skills and safety management in shipping has been well-addressed in literature. The soft skills of seafarers influence the safety culture of shipping companies (Lee and Pruitt 2020). Integration of soft skills training in safety management systems aims to improve safety culture and prevent accidents. Therefore, improving soft skills with the help of specific training programs has become increasingly important for Maritime Education and Training (MET). Thomas (2019) has traced different soft skill-focused training programs such as the ones along the lines of simulation training, workshops, and peer learning activities. Programs such as these aid in developing the essential skills seafarers need for successful teamwork, communication, and problem-solving.

For example, in a similar case that was investigated by Kim and Lee (2021), there was a multinational shipping organization facing a cultural conflict among a crew team. The company had been in the process of conducting diversity training to enhance cultural sensitivity and empathy and reported that interpersonal relationships and teamwork had improved in response. This is a case that demonstrates the importance of soft skills in cultivating an inclusive and productive workplace (Kim & Lee, 2021). In a report released by the International Association of Maritime Universities (IAMU), the importance of cultural capability within the shipping industry featured heavily (IAMU, 2019). According to the publication, interpersonal competence and cultural awareness are matters of importance in the case of communication in Maritime English. Crew soft skills training allows crew members to be more aware of and accept cultural differences, and this in turn makes communication and cooperation in diverse teams more effective, which leads to increased safety and operational efficiency. Soft skills are required in the maritime industry and Maritime English is the prime medium of communication. These skills play a critical role in safety, teamwork, and on-the-job performance. With the increase of the industry, needs-driven training and development in soft skills competences,

as well as proficiency in Maritime English, will be necessary in enhancing maritime professionals to face contemporary challenges. Further studies are encouraged to explore ways to incorporate social skills into established maritime courses of instruction and assess their effects on performance results.

3. MASTERING MARITIME ENGLISH

"We can't ignore the fact that the notion of *Maritime English as a Lingua Franca* at sea (MELF) and all that it involves is already in one way or another introduced more or less discreetly in the syllabi, methodologies, and the goals of teaching at marine higher education institutions" (Chirea-Ungureanu, 2016: 48). This idea highlights the role of Maritime English (ME) as a means of communication between multilingual and non-native speakers. MELF at sea is designed to prepare students to employ English and Maritime English competently in their professional, frequently international, setting. Teaching Maritime English (ME) in this situation, the most important job of a Maritime English (ME) teacher is to teach students the language of General English. The focus is on communication rather than native speaker-like mastery of the language. Such an approach promotes skill transference to the multilingual workplace of today (Jacobs, H.H. 1996; Mason, R., 2015).

Conventional approaches to teaching Maritime English (ME) communication skills have needed definition. They need to be supplemented with an alternative knowledge base and be based strongly on Nautical Sciences and Marine Engineering. Once 'marinisation' of teachers happens, good communication on board is everything to ensure a ship runs smoothly! The importance of good communication in English for seafarers was highlighted also by the IMO in 2018. Communication and teamwork (often called "soft skills") were key to setting up and conducting successful maritime operations, the IMO 2018 report said. The report underlines that these soft skills (social interaction, communication, and cultural knowledge) are key in the successful development of Maritime English training courses enhancing crew performance (IMO, 2018). The hotspot in special vocational education and training is not only personal career opportunities, but it also makes a great difference in global shipping safety and high efficiency. It is a promise that everyone with a stake in the oceans today must further keep (Christopher, G. B., & Anburaj, G., 2021).

Effective communication in English is essential for maritime professionals as noted by Javidan & Naderi (2021). The research centered on communication, the impact on safety, and operational efficiency onboard

vessels. There was strong evidence from the study team's research that "members with a high level of Maritime English skills led to better teamwork" and efficiency in attending to precautions, indicating that soft competencies and Maritime English are interrelated (Javidan & Naderi, 2021). Interconnected with the multicultural maritime workplace, *cultural intelligence* is a component of both soft skills and Maritime English. According to the study by Lee and Pruitt (2020), "an awareness of cultural variations can improve relationships and reduce potential conflict onboard ship." With the infusion of cultural intelligence in Maritime English instruction, alongside the recognition of the vital contributions of teaching and training coordinators to this pedagogical venture, mariners can cultivate successful cross-cultural communication skills. Such techniques in return foster teamwork and enhance operational safety.

In practice, actual incidents have demonstrated how good communication in Maritime English is important. Here are a few examples from EMSA Annual Overview of Marine Casualties and Incidents:

- *MV Maersk Alabama Incident (2009)*: In a widely reported hijacking by Somali pirates, effective communication between the crew was critical for them to coordinate a united response. Their high proficiency in communicating in Maritime English, for example, in speaking directly and to the point when reporting the status and relocating, helped them perform their emergency routines successfully.
- *Costa Concordia Disaster (2012)*: An investigation into the disaster found that lack of communication between the crew, all of whom were fluent in Maritime English, played a role in the disorder of the evacuation. The case illustrated their need for standardization of communication protocols and comprehensive training to avoid future cases.
- *Suez Canal Blockage (2021)*: The Suez Canal grounding of *Ever Given* container ship on 23 March 2021. Maritime English for emergency language and for crisis response came into the spotlight after the *Ever Given* ship got stuck in the Suez Canal. Use of this language enabled the salvage teams and shipping companies to coordinate the salvage operation of the spill to take place in a timely manner.

4. RESULTS IN ANALYZING THE INTERDEPENDENCE OF SOFT SKILLS AND MARITIME ENGLISH

The maritime sector, a special working environment with a multinational workforce, values good commu-

nication and social interaction. Maritime English is the Lingua Franca between seafarers, marine professionals, and regulators around the globe in this context. Nevertheless, in the multifaceted working environment at sea and the multiculturalism of the crews, the relationship between soft skills and Maritime English becomes gradually more apparent. A good working knowledge of **Maritime English** is a prerequisite for understanding safety and emergency procedures, as well as most operational directions. However, competency in the language alone is insufficient. It is also about being able to communicate effectively, show empathy, and work together for social problem-solving. This is where the **soft skills** come in:

A. Communication Clearness and Interpersonal Ability highlight the Interrelationship between soft skills and Maritime English. The interaction between soft skills as well as Maritime English has been found out of which communication skill, and interpersonal skill are the foundation of using Maritime English effectively. For example, direct communication is crucial to avoid misunderstanding and thereby the risk of sea traffic accidents. Good communicators not only know how to use language, but they are also good listeners, consider the culture in which the communication takes place, and are flexible. These capabilities enable them to communicate, hold discussions, and take decisions leading to better teamwork and other operational effectiveness.

B. Leadership and Team Dynamics Leadership at sea is often about building personal relationships and creating a "team" environment. Leaders who speak English confidently to communicate their vision and to charge up their people have better team play. The need for soft power skills like empathetic conflict resolution becomes apparent as leaders counterbalance differences in cultural perspective and maintain an inclusive environment where everyone feels respected and heard. Effective leadership is therefore inherently connected with soft skills and language competence. This knowledge can embolden mariners, by suggesting that the soft skills that they have emerge such great influences as those in command.

C. Crisis Management and Decision-Making in Shipping often involves high-pressure situations, requiring strong crisis management skills. Soft skills, especially decision-making and problem-solving, are pivotal in applying Maritime English in these contexts. Professionals need to communicate quickly and clearly and pass vital information to their crewmates in emergency situations. The comparison of cases shows that teams that have strong soft skills react more efficiently to crises, becoming active

participants with the support of their linguistic abilities rather than merely users of a common language. Having this kind of understanding can give our maritime professionals that sense of "yes- I can," they are not just "soft" but used at the right time can make all the difference.

D. Implications for Maritime Education and Training. The analyses of this study support the fact that MET institutions need to incorporate soft skills with Maritime English training. Conventional language teaching tends to be concerned with grammar and vocabulary at the expense of functional communication. If the teaching staff and the trainers embrace a more holistic approach that includes the teaching of soft skills, like peer-to-peer guidance sessions, group tasks, and conflict resolution workshops, students could be better trained to meet the demands of a real-world situation in the maritime domain. Such holistic training ensures the all-around development of candidates, maintaining the balance between linguistic proficiency and soft skills indispensable in the world of shipping.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

On the one hand, research and studies show a clear relationship among soft skills and Maritime English:

A. Strengths, which are underlined by:

- *Soft Skills and Maritime English Communication*: The soft skills will help improve the communicative abilities in English. The Bachelor-degree specialists with strong interpersonal skills might experience that they are able to express their knowledge more logically and accurately as a result.
- *Minimizing Miscommunication*: Combining soft skill development with training on Maritime English can dramatically reduce the potential for communication errors, vital for promoting safety on board ships.

However, despite increasing awareness of these interdependent competencies, critical voids remain in the research and studies in this area of interest worldwide indicating:

B. Weaknesses, which are found in *Scanty Qualitative Evaluations* in existing research studies. They often prioritize quantitative evaluation without addressing the qualitative implications of practicing soft skills and language through real-life scenarios.

At this level, there is the need to acknowledge the importance of integrative approaches in maritime training. A narrow focus only on technical expertise or language proficiency will not address the complexity that is required to conduct good maritime

operations. Instead, a more holistic approach that combines technical and soft skills is required.

To improve the readiness of the maritime workforce, this paper highlights some **curriculum recommendations**. These enhancements are directly related to the proven correlation between soft skills and Maritime English and help bring training courses closer to the actual requirements of the maritime industry.

1. Regular Development of Soft Skills: Soft skills (*communication, teamwork, leadership, etc.*) need to be part of regular modules within the maritime courses. Active learning such as role play and group projects to replicate real-world situations where these skills are crucial can be successfully utilized. As Roberts (2022) highlights, 'Integrating soft skills training with technical maritime knowledge equips young people for the demands of contemporary maritime work, where collaboration and communication are crucial'.

2. Advanced Maritime English Training: Equal emphasis should be paid to Maritime English skills, by 'marinisation' of Maritime English teachers and training modules for technical terms used in the industry. This would include specially designed language training modules that orient students to industry technical language, as well as context like that of the industry, and facilitate students' capacity to communicate their ideas in diverse maritime teams effectively.

3. Cross-Curricular Links: Making relationships with individuals who specialize in comms and psychology could potentially bring wider insights into the use of soft skills within a maritime environment. Guest lectures, workshops, and interdisciplinary projects can help to illustrate how soft skills can be applicable in maritime situations.

4. Evaluating Soft Skills: Evaluation tools that promote and measure *soft skills* as well as *hard skills* are required to evaluate the students from an overall perspective. Such an approach can include peer evaluations, self-evaluations, and ongoing reflective journaling that invites students to examine the acquisition of interpersonal competences along with language.

5. Feedback Loops are not only a means of assessment but also a form of teaching. Creating structures for critical feedback and open discussion can lead to educational success and continuous improvement in our maritime programs.

6. The Training of Teachers and Instructors is not just a suggestion; it is a must. Continued pedagogy on the combination of soft skills and language learning is essential to keep up to date with industry and provide the best education to our students.

The linkages between soft skills and Maritime English are therefore indispensable for creating a competent workforce in the maritime sector.

The literature review provides strong arguments for the need for an education that provides the seafarer with both technical and human resource competences. The proposed strategies, when applied in the construction of courses, can remarkably increase the operational performance of their accreditation holders and hence the safety of maritime operations. While the industry evolves, the fact that courses can change to adjust to the challenges of the present-day maritime industry is reassuring.

The maritime sector is now standing at a crossroads, demanding an effective holistic communication comprising both soft skills and sound knowledge of Maritime English. These findings have indicated that soft skills contribute a lot to the enhancement of interpersonal communication and teamwork, whereas the determination of Maritime English is to communicate important information in standardized means. In the rapidly changing world of the industrial sector, there has never been a more pressing need for the development of these capabilities which are so essential for the creation of a safe and efficient work environment. The stakeholders play a very important role in this industry. Studies in the future should concentrate on designing specific training programs that combine technical skills with soft skills to help maritime professionals deal with the uncertainties of such dynamic industry. The results also highlight the importance of the training which will combine the Soft Skill development and Maritime English Proficiency to secure and for the safer and efficient shipping operations.

The Maritime Education and Training (MET) institutions and the maritime industry in which they serve should prioritize these competencies in their curriculum and professional development programs. This provides hope and confidence for the future of shipping, but it demands immediate action. This study emphasizes the bridging of soft skills with Maritime English, and how they contribute as the key to scalability success in both communication and operations in the maritime industry. The study has important connotations for maritime education by showing the relationships among these factors. It emphasizes the importance of dealing with a new social and professional reality, one which demands preparing professionals to work in a more globalized and diverse profession than the ones of the past. In a changing maritime world, investing in people is equal with investing in communication. Strengthening soft skills is imperative. Developing competencies that are both people and language-related is a priority.

This approach enables seafarers to meet challenges and other new ones with self-assurance and competence. After all, an integrated approach to learning like this can only help in making the high seas safer and more efficient.

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