



MIXED CREW ONBOARD, MIXED CREW AT UNIVERSITY

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Abstract. Introduction: This paper explores the evolving challenges of teaching English in a maritime education and teaching (MET) – institution, with increasingly multicultural classrooms and heterogenous student corpus. As a teacher, I have traditionally worked with relatively monocultural student groups, where linguistic challenges were more predictable. However, with growing diversity in my classrooms—now comprising students from a wide range of linguistic and cultural backgrounds—new complexities have emerged. While Maritime English remains the overall goal, significant variations in pronunciation, accent familiarity, and linguistic influences create new pedagogical concerns. For instance, students may have strong command of English but use phonetics that differ from what many educators are accustomed to. Students may speak English in a way that can be challenging both for instructors and fellow students. These factors raise questions about where to place English language instructional emphasis—should pronunciation training become a more central part of the curriculum? Questions concerning *Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency* (CALP) also emerge, since, for example, the students must do a bachelor's thesis in English. **Aims and Method:** The aim of this study is to examine how increasing classroom diversity, combined with differences in pronunciation and linguistic structures, affects teaching strategies and student comprehension. Additionally, it investigates how intercultural communication related questions affect MET. To find answers for these challenges, semi-structured interviews were conducted with experienced faculty at a Finnish MET-institution. **Results:** Results suggest that when MET institutions begin educating international degree-seeking students, a broader revision of teaching content, pedagogical methods, support systems and language instruction may be needed. The faculty needs to meet the situation with open minds and a willingness to adapt. The university needs to develop suitable support systems and consider what academic requirements are reasonable. **Conclusion:** With an increasing number of international students studying in a MET-institution, the focus for English teaching changes. For non-native English speakers the context bound BICS (Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills) used to be the focus (i.e., *Maritime English*). In a MET institution where the language of instruction is English as a non-native language, many (both international and national students), need a more CALP (Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency) oriented focus. With limited resources the different needs can cause conflicting situations for the teachers of English.

Keywords: Maritime English; International students, Pronunciation; Intercultural communication; MET.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Due to the inherently international nature of maritime professions, it is relatively straightforward to attract international students to METs, particularly to programs offered in English. At Novia University of Applied Sciences, in Finland, approximately 40 per cent of the students currently enrolled in the maritime education programme—amounting to 235 individuals—are international. This demographic distribution raises broader pedagogical questions concerning curriculum design, teaching strategies, and the assumptions underlying subject-specific knowledge.

Among the teachers interviewed for this study, several described situations in which they needed to explain seemingly basic concepts—such as the use of a compass and cardinal directions to international students. At first glance, such difficulties might appear to be linguistic or pedagogical in nature. Why would maritime students, preparing for seafaring careers, struggle with such foundational navigation terms? However, closer examination reveals that these challenges often stem not from language barriers or instructional methods but from differences in students' prior experiences and cultural contexts.

In Finland, most children grow up with forests and natural environments as part of their everyday lives. Even in early childhood education, outdoor learning is common, and by the time pupils finish primary school, they have typically participated in basic orienteering activities using compasses and maps. For many Finnish learners, the forest is a space of play, discovery, and embodied learning. Concepts such as cardinal directions are not merely taught—they are experienced. In contrast, students from countries such as Nigeria, Bangladesh, or Indonesia may not have encountered similar activities in their schooling. In some of these contexts, entering the forest can pose real dangers, including venomous animals, unmarked and inaccessible terrain, or even threats from armed groups. Orienteering is therefore neither a common pastime nor a component of the curriculum. As a result, what seems like "common knowledge" in one context may be entirely unfamiliar in another.

This example highlights a recurring theme in this study: when teachers in international classrooms face unexpected difficulties, the underlying causes are often complex. The challenges may relate to language, but just as often they concern differences in educational background, cultural norms, or lived experiences. Understanding these layers is essential for navigating the pedagogical demands of increasingly diverse learning environments.

1.1. Aim of Study

The purpose of this study is to explore how teachers at *Novia UAS, Technology and Seafaring*, experience and make sense of these emerging complexities that arise when the student corpus has become international. Through semi-structured interviews with faculty members who have taught both before and after the internationalisation of their classrooms, this research aims to capture the reflections of the teachers navigating in a changing environment. Since the situation is relatively new also for the author, exploring, with an open mind, how faculty experiences the development was seen as important.

A central proposition of this paper is that the faculty's experience in the MET setting mirrors the realities faced by seafarers in today's globalized maritime industry—namely, working and living in mixed-nationality crews where English functions as the shared language. Rather than viewing this as a complication, this paper argues that such parallels offer a valuable opportunity: the university setting can serve as a preparatory ground for intercultural cooperation and communication at sea.

The study therefore aims not only to document teacher perceptions but also to suggest pedagogical strategies that actively embrace student diversity. This includes promoting teamwork across national and linguistic lines, embedding intercultural communication into the curriculum, and expanding the scope of Maritime English teaching to include both technical terminology and broader communicative competence for life and work onboard. Ultimately, the goal is to use teacher experience as a guide for developing educational practices that reflect—and prepare students for—the realities of international seafaring.

1.2. Background

There have of course been international students in Finland for quite a while but mostly as exchange students. The number of international degree-seeking students have grown significantly during the past maybe 10-15 years. The development began with the European Union introduced Bologna process in the late 1990's, a process that brought exchange students to Finland. An increasing amount of exchange students in turn, resulted in a need for introducing study programs with English as the teaching language, which enabled for international students to come to Finland to study for a degree. The exchange students were first taken care of more like guests by the university faculty, while the degree-seeking students of today maybe are more seen, and treated, as any students, just as the national students. What has

maybe been forgotten is that the students are *not* as the national students – international students bring with them a wide array of aspects that affect their successful studying, and their challenges are different also from exchange students' challenges. (Kisch, 2014) Kisch (2014), in here article *Helping faculty teach international students*, gives an easy overview about what kind of questions US-faculty members were struggling with. Many of the phenomena needing special attention Kisch describes, resonates well with the purpose of this paper. Such phenomena are for example academic writing, plagiarism, encouraging spoken communication and contacting faculty.

Ma (2022), in *Challenges and Strategies Facing International Students and Faculty in U.S. Higher Education: A Comprehensive Literature Review*, gives an excellent overview of challenges that international degree students, the faculty working with them, and that the welcoming university (e.g., a MET-institution) face. The review covers a range of topics, from the students' homesickness and financial pressures to faculty's problems and attitudes. Since this study uses language and communication skills as a lens, only this aspect will be mentioned here. It is stressed that passing a language test to be accepted to a university is not enough, but that:

"A higher level of English proficiency is a challenge for emergent multilingual students who must meet the requirements of disciplinary knowledge, academic language, and social conventional English skills at the same time" (Ma, 2022, p.22)

The quotation summarizes the step – greater or smaller – that a non-native English speaker must take. The student must develop language skills from "conversational fluency" to "academic language proficiency", in other words, from BICS (*basic interpersonal communicative skills*) to CALP (cognitive academic language proficiency). For a closer discussion on BICS and CALP, see Cummins (2008). In short:

"BICS refers to conversational fluency in a language while CALP refers to students' ability to understand and express, in both oral and written modes, concepts and ideas that are relevant to success in school. (Cummins, 2008)

Ma (2022) also describes other than language challenges. Those challenges are mentioned again in the results chapter here, but owing to limited space, they are not described. Ma summarizes these in the abstract:

"[...] both international students and faculty [...] are facing challenges in terms of language, culture, classroom discussions, academic expectations, and interpersonal relationships. (Ma, 2022)

2. METHOD

This study explores how teachers experience the shift from teaching a nationally homogenous student body to an increasingly international cohort at a maritime university. To investigate this, a qualitative research approach was employed, drawing on semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method.

2.1. Data Collection

A total of five semi-structured interviews were conducted with teaching staff during a two-week period at the end of the academic semester. The interviews lasted between 30 and 60 minutes and were designed to allow for open-ended, reflective responses while still ensuring that key themes were consistently addressed. Four of the interviews were conducted face-to-face on campus. One interview was carried out remotely via Microsoft Teams due to the interviewee further away from campus.

The language of the interviews was determined by the participants' preference. Three interviews were conducted in Swedish and two in Finnish. All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' consent to ensure accuracy and facilitate a detailed analysis. After the interviews, the recordings were transcribed as exactly as was considered necessary. Since the analysis would focus more on themes than for example on the discourse, a verbatim transcription was not deemed necessary. No translations were performed at this stage; each transcript remained in its original language for the analysis.

2.2. Interview Guide

The interviews were conducted at the author's home institution, a maritime university undergoing an increasing degree of internationalisation among its student population. The interview guide was developed based on two main sources: (1) the author's own teaching experience in multicultural classrooms, and (2) relevant literature on language use, communication challenges and pedagogy in internationalised higher education settings.

The semi-structured format allowed for flexibility while ensuring that key thematic areas were consistently addressed across interviews. The guide was designed to explore participants' experiences related to linguistic diversity, teaching strategies, and what here is called intercultural communication. The interview guide consisted of five main sections: Introduction, Background of Participant, Challenges and Strategies, Intercultural Communication, and Conclusion. The guide was used in all interviews, but

follow-up questions and clarifications were included where relevant. Each interview began with a brief explanation of the purpose of the study and a reassurance regarding confidentiality and voluntary participation. Then the participants were asked to describe their teaching experience, particularly in relation to how the student population had changed over time regarding cultural and linguistic diversity.

The *Challenges and Strategies* section focused on language and communication related difficulties encountered in multicultural classrooms, including issues of pronunciation, accent variation, and student comprehension. Participants were invited to reflect on how these challenges affected their teaching, and what strategies they had developed to address them.

Questions concerning *Intercultural Communication* explored how students from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds interacted with each other, and how teachers facilitated communication across those boundaries. And finally, the participants were invited to share any additional reflections and to offer suggestions for improving teaching practices in multilingual and multicultural classroom settings.

2.3. Interviewees

As previously mentioned, five interviews were conducted. The selection of interviewees was based on purposeful sampling (Bullard, 2024), with the aim of capturing a sufficient range of experiences among faculty members at the maritime university. The researcher selected participants based on their primary teaching responsibilities, ensuring representation from both practical navigation instruction, including simulator-based teaching, and more theoretically oriented areas, such as STEM subjects and thesis supervision.

All interviewees were from Finland, experienced educators, and several had been teaching at the university prior to the onset of internationalisation. This made it possible to capture reflections on how the shift toward a more culturally and linguistically diverse student population had influenced their

teaching over time. In addition to covering varied subject areas, the selection process also considered gender balance, resulting in a diverse group. An overview of the interviewees' professional backgrounds is presented in Table 1.

3. ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

The interviews were first transcribed in full. However, during the initial phase of analysis, it became clear to the author that listening to the recordings provided a deeper understanding of the discussions than the written transcripts. As a result, each interview was listened to three to four times, allowing patterns and connections between responses to emerge organically. The more relevant parts were given further attention.

Throughout the listening process, the author took handwritten notes, capturing initial interpretations, repeated ideas, and keywords or concepts that stood out. These notes could include comments that linked interview content to the author's general understanding. For example, in one interview, the participant discussed the difficulty of understanding various accents in English, particularly from Bangladeshi and some African students. This prompted a reflection in the notes: "*Here: SMCP!*", referring to the *Standard Marine Communication Phrases*. (Figure 1)

The interviewee refers to what in Finland is known as "Rally English", i.e., a usage of English, by Finns, not even trying to sound like standard English (Wikipedia contributors, 2025). The point being that some Finns talk *Rally English*, which is difficult for non-Finns to understand, and that some students have accents that are difficult for Finns to understand. But, if they talk about topics that students and teachers are familiar with, they will understand each other. The same principle works when using the *SMCP* – the phrase can be pronounced in whatever way, but, since the phrase is familiar, the likelihood of it being understood is higher.

The analysis followed a thematic, interpretive approach, grounded in the recurring stories and

Table 1. Presentation of the interviewees

Category	Teacher 1	Teacher 2	Teacher 3	Teacher 4	Teacher 5
Years Teaching International Students	10	15	15	10	15
Teaching Navigation		X		X	X
Teaching in Navigation Simulators				X	X
Teaching STEM subjects	X				
Working with Theses	X		X		X
Other Comments	Female	Male	Female	Male	Male

Here: SMCP!

Rally English ... They know, but accents are challenging... Bangladeshi, many Africans...

The topic is central. Talk about what they know.

Figure 1. Screenshot of notes made during analysing process.

examples that were identified through listening. As themes began to take shape, the interview content was revisited and thought over again. This iterative process enabled the author to find similar ideas across interviews. The final themes were not pre-defined but developed based on the content of the interviews and the researcher's knowledge about the teaching context. This process provided an overview of the participants' perspectives, allowing the author to understand what was said and meant within the specific context of maritime education at this university.

3.1. Themes

The thematic structure presented in this *Analysis and Results* part, is grounded in both empirical interview material and theoretical preunderstanding. The categories, or themes, that emerged from the interview data were not developed in isolation but were influenced by an initial reading of literature, particularly Ma's (2022) comprehensive review of challenges and strategies in multilingual and multicultural higher education settings. Ma outlines recurring linguistic, cultural, and pedagogical barriers experienced by international students and faculty—many of which surfaced also in the present data. While the interviews were conducted in a different national context, Ma's synthesis provided a useful conceptual background that likely influenced the formation and interpretation of the themes.

The themes in the interviews that were deemed suitable for this study were the following:

1. Language Proficiency and Communication
2. Instruction Clarity and Comprehension
3. Academic Writing and AI
4. Grouping & Participation
5. Cultural Norms & Expectations
6. Background Knowledge & Experience
7. Teacher Role & Constraints

3.1.1. Language Proficiency and Communication

The international students have passed an English language test before they are admitted for studies. That does however not guarantee that it is easy for

faculty to understand all students. Among the students that are challenging for the interviewees to understand were students with a fluent English but with an accent or dialect difficult to understand. Nationalities and regions with this kind of English that were mentioned were South Asian dialects, franco-phone-sounding accents and, perhaps surprisingly, Scotland.

Teacher 4 gave examples from his onboard career, mentioning that also accents from Finland's neighboring countries can be challenging. A Norwegian for example had pronounced 'thruster' with a Scandinavian ö-sound (close to the English 'bird'), tröster (TREU-stehr or /'tʁø:stɛ/) and 'pub', pöb (puhb or / pœb/). According to him, one learns to understand different accents with growing experience, just as seafarers know about the Filipino pronunciation of 'cheap' meaning 'chief'.

There is no space here to describe all linguistic differences, but one feature is worth mentioning, that also was mentioned by a respondent was rhythm: *"The rhythm of the speech can also be confusing"* (Teachers 1 and 3).

Worth noticing is that neither of the teachers working with navigational simulators reported difficulties with the context bound English, for example radio communication.

3.1.2. Instruction Clarity and Comprehension

Most respondents discussed instruction-giving as an area that requires more attention when working with international students. Experiences of not being understood were described: *"One must be very concrete, abstract expressions are challenging for many students."* (Teacher 1).

Teacher 2 was thinking that *"When giving instructions – some students understand – others do not. It is more about the student's know how than language skills. This is also why Research Methods is so difficult! It is abstract, the topic is unknown, difficult, and it is difficult to know what [in a misunderstanding] is language and what is concept/topic."* Teacher 1 echoed the thought about abstract expressions being difficult: *"What is a paragraph, what is text alignment, sub-chapters, line spacing etc. One must show, not only tell."* And, *"Written feedback is not useful for all"*.

3.1.3. Academic Writing and AI

Teacher 1 had reflected a lot on the usage of AI, probably because she works with thesis supervision. One reflection was that *"If they feel they are not good enough in English, they begin using AI!"*, and *"Even in video presentations they use AI-generated spoken English."* The reason for excessive use of AI generated text, she believed, is that *"Academic writing terrifies them!"*. These thoughts resonate well with what Teacher 2 discussed about familiar topics that are easier to write or talk about than abstractions and "academic writing". This anxiety was echoed in the comments of Teacher 2, who pointed out that students find it significantly easier to speak or write about familiar, concrete topics than to engage with abstract or unfamiliar academic material (c.f., CALP).

The problem with using AI is not (only?) the question about whether it is cheating or not, but also a missed learning opportunity. Should students even learn, or practice, independent, reflective writing? The usage of LLMs such as *ChatGPT*, is a broader discussion, and will not be addressed in this text. It maybe suffices to say that these observations on academic writing and AI use highlight a broader question about institutional expectations of academic literacy and the realities of international as well as local students when it comes to academic skills.

3.1.4. Grouping & Participation

One recurring theme in the interviews was the importance of group dynamics and how student participation is shaped by cultural, linguistic, and institutional factors. Many interviewees noted that students tend to group themselves according to shared national, linguistic, or cultural backgrounds—particularly in simulation exercises and classroom discussions. It was seen as limiting interaction and mutual learning. Teacher 5 observed that in larger classroom settings, it is difficult to intervene in these patterns, but in structured formats like simulation teams, grouping can be pre-arranged to ensure diversity. Mixing nationalities was widely regarded as beneficial, not only for encouraging the use of English in authentic communicative settings, but also for fostering intercultural awareness and teamwork, both important onboard skills.

However, large group sizes also posed a challenge to meaningful participation. Teacher 3 noted that students become more hesitant to speak in larger groups, especially when language confidence is low or accents are unfamiliar. In contrast, smaller settings or one-on-one interactions made it easier to build rapport and support student involvement. Names were another practical barrier to participation: teach-

ers reported difficulties in remembering names or matching names to students, which in turn created distance and limited spontaneous engagement.

Teachers also expressed uncertainty about the reasons for students' reluctance to participate orally. It was not always clear whether silence stemmed from linguistic insecurity, cultural norms around authority, or a lack of understanding of the task at hand. Teacher 4, for example, highlighted the ambiguity in interpreting students' responses—or lack thereof—during debriefings and feedback sessions. Similarly, Teacher 1 pointed out that when students lack confidence in their English, they may avoid speaking altogether, choosing instead to use AI-generated text or to submit written assignments with minimal engagement.

Despite these challenges, many teachers stressed the value of diverse groupings. Teacher 5 suggested that interaction among students from different backgrounds opens the classroom to a broader spectrum of maritime experiences. Teacher 4 also noted that such diversity mirrors the composition of real-world crews, making it essential for students to practise collaboration in mixed groups. The interviews suggest that structured grouping strategies, along with deliberate facilitation of intercultural interaction, are important for enhancing participation and also preparing students for the communicative realities of work at sea.

3.1.5. Cultural Norms & Expectations

A number of interviewees reflected on the influence of cultural norms and expectations in shaping classroom interactions. Teachers described how unfamiliarity with local norms—for example, punctuality, expectations around participation, or presentation formats—could lead to misunderstandings or hesitation among international students. Teacher 3 noted that *"students must also learn that one must come on time"*, highlighting that even basic expectations may not be shared. Differences in communication style were also commonly observed. Being on time and communication style can also be connected – Teacher 4 noted that he (Finns?) tends to begin a lecture with the most important points, points that the rest of the lecture can build on. To arrive late can therefore have dire consequences, i.e. the whole point with a lecture can be missed. Teacher 4 expected that this could work differently elsewhere.

Gender roles and cultural values were another point of reflection. Teacher 3 shared experiences of teaching female students from Arab countries who at times appeared to seek silent approval from male classmates before engaging in tasks, leading to spec-

ulation about whether these behaviours were culturally embedded or shaped by confidence. Teachers were generally cautious not to overinterpret such dynamics but acknowledged the need to be aware of how norms around gender and hierarchy may influence student behaviour.

Teachers also encountered uncertainty in distinguishing between cultural norms and individual educational background. For example, when students hesitated to ask questions, it was not always clear whether this stemmed from a lack of knowledge, cultural values around teacher authority, or fear of making mistakes. This ambiguity made it difficult for teachers to respond appropriately. Teacher 5 remarked that during debriefings, international students often appeared defensive or reluctant to share their reasoning behind decisions made in simulation tasks. Even in one-on-one conversations, this pattern persisted, suggesting that it was not solely due to group pressure.

Other teachers highlighted cultural differences in how feedback is received and interpreted. Teacher 4 expressed concern about unintentionally offending students during feedback sessions, noting that the cultural boundaries of acceptable humour or criticism were not always clear. Similarly, the act of physically assisting students—such as showing how to tie a knot—could raise questions of personal space and appropriateness that may vary by culture. He also reflected, that “if we were not aware of sensitive things, work would be even more difficult.”

Overall, the interviews reveal that teaching in a multicultural environment requires not only linguistic adaptation but also heightened cultural sensitivity. The shift from a predominantly Finnish student body to a more diverse classroom has prompted teachers to reflect on their own assumptions, routines, and communication practices.

3.1.6. Background Knowledge & Experience

An interesting aspect in the respondents' answers were about how students' prior learning and life experiences influence their participation and understanding in class. As was presented in the introduction to this article, differences in the background of the students can result in the teacher becoming perplexed – how come you do not know about this? Teacher 4 mentioned that “*the more I know about the students, the better*”, meaning that he can adapt his teaching to fit the student, only if he knows them. Teacher 3 gave an example that she does not know in how much detail she needs to address topics, for example about how and why to brush one's teeth.

Teacher 5 again had noticed that “*The students of today know less about for example ships.*” and “*For many foreign students studying seafaring is like studying anything else.*” These comments are good examples of how the international students probably have a different mindset compared to our earlier students. Typically, the Finnish students all have a relative or similar who works, or have worked, at sea. The students, mostly from the coastal region of Finland, are familiar with working at sea, they have been onboard Ro-Pax ferries, seen ports and been yachting with smaller sailing- or motorboats. It is somehow self-evident that not all our international students have this kind of background, but that they have different motives for doing maritime studies. They might be in Finland and look for education in English, which of course is limited, they might think that the studies also prepare for a career ashore or something else.

Teacher 5 also pointed out a positive aspect that our international students bring with them: “*Our upper-level students [who have worked onboard] enrich the teaching.*” They have knowledge of a world we are not familiar with. Many of our international students already have watch officer CoCs, and they bring with them experiences from their career: “*It is interesting for us – they open up their seafaring culture for us.*” He mentioned a student who was doing his bachelor's thesis on the port of Chattogram (Chittagong) in Bangladesh. We have a lot to learn from this kind of experience (for comparison: Finland's largest port, Helsinki, maybe 500 000 TEU's, located very close to open sea, and Chattogram, closer to 3,5 million TEU's, located approximately 7 nm upriver).

3.1.7. Teacher Role & Constraints

The teachers interviewed expressed a heightened awareness of their evolving role in response to the increasing diversity within the student body. Several described a shift from traditional content delivery toward a more responsive and facilitative role, one that involves not only teaching subject matter but also navigating linguistic variation, cultural sensitivities, and differing educational expectations. Teacher 5 noted that while the classroom has become more diverse, he is still keen to maintain his own teaching style, which includes values considered “normal in Finland” such as punctuality, directness, and low power distance. Yet this often requires careful adaptation: “we now have more non-Finns than Finns. The dynamics have changed.”

One of the most mentioned constraints was the difficulty of forming personal connections in large, multicultural groups. Teacher 3 pointed out that learning students' names is not only practically

difficult due to unfamiliarity but also has pedagogical implications. When names are hard to recall or pronounce, spontaneous interaction becomes less likely, which in turn limits participation and rapport. Roll calls and other tracking measures have become more important in establishing basic familiarity.

Teachers also noted a growing uncertainty about where their responsibility begins and ends. For example, some expressed discomfort with interpreting student silence: was it a matter of confidence, language skills, or cultural reticence? Teacher 4 reflected on the challenge of giving constructive feedback in culturally sensitive ways, acknowledging that the risk of unintentionally offending a student has increased. The issue of humour was raised in this context as well, with one teacher stating that “teaching has turned drier,” given the need to avoid culturally inappropriate remarks. Others commented on how their own cultural assumptions were being challenged, particularly in relation to feedback, physical proximity, and interpersonal norms.

At the same time, teachers recognised that their own limitations in English or pedagogical tools could also be a barrier. Teacher 1, for instance, remarked on the difficulty of being “concrete enough” in giving instructions, particularly when dealing with abstract academic concepts. In some cases, the ambiguity about whether misunderstandings stemmed from the students’ language ability, prior education, or the teachers’ own clarity led to self-questioning. “I don’t know if it is me or them,” one teacher admitted, when reflecting on communication breakdowns in simulator tasks.

Overall, the findings suggest that teachers in maritime education today must not only deliver subject-specific content but also navigate a complex web of intercultural, institutional, and linguistic constraints. Their role requires increased reflexivity, flexibility, and emotional intelligence—often without clear institutional guidance or pedagogical training to support this expanded scope.

4. DISCUSSION

This study set out to examine how faculty members in a maritime education and training (MET) institution experience the shift toward increasingly international student cohorts. The analysis revealed seven interconnected themes that reflect the evolving pedagogical landscape in multilingual, multicultural classrooms. Drawing on both interview data and previous research (e.g., Ma, 2022), this discussion highlights how the faculty’s observations mirror seafarers’ experiences onboard—and how this parallel can be turned into a pedagogical asset.

While students entering the MET programme have passed English language tests, teachers report that communication remains a challenge—often not due to grammar or vocabulary, but because of accent, rhythm, or fluency differences. This supports findings from Ma (2022) and others that communicative proficiency is more nuanced than test scores reveal. It also highlights the need to move beyond a simplistic view of “language problems” and instead recognise the spectrum of Englishes that students bring with them. The notion of “standard” or “correct” English—sometimes unconsciously held by faculty—may need to be revisited in light of real-world maritime communication, where English is used as a *lingua franca* among non-native speakers.

Teachers frequently reflected on the need to simplify and clarify instructions, particularly when working with abstract academic or conceptual content. The difficulty lies not just in language, but in students’ unfamiliarity with Finnish educational practices and genres. The need to “show, not only tell” underscores the importance of scaffolding, visual support, and contextualisation in teaching. This finding aligns with Cummins’ (2000) distinction between Basic Interpersonal Communicative Skills (BICS) and Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP)—many students cope well in everyday communication but struggle when linguistic demands intersect with academic abstraction.

The increasing use of AI-generated text among students signals both a shift in student behaviour and a deeper anxiety around academic literacy. It was observed that students tend to rely on AI tools when they feel their own English is insufficient—especially when asked to produce formal or abstract writing. Rather than framing this solely as misconduct, faculty members saw it as a missed opportunity for developing voice, reasoning, and reflective expression. The findings support a broader argument that academic writing is not just a skill but a social practice (Lea & Street, 1998), one that requires culturally responsive teaching and dialogic support. AI tools may help, but they cannot replace the pedagogical space needed for students to grow into competent academic communicators.

Student grouping emerged as a site of both friction and potential. While students often self-organise along linguistic or national lines, teachers noted that diverse groupings could foster more authentic communication and better simulate the mixed-crew environments of real ships. However, participation is shaped by more than language: students may hesitate to speak up due to cultural norms around authority, fear of making mistakes, or lack of prior experience with the task. Small-group or one-on-one

interaction was seen as more effective in promoting engagement. These insights reinforce the idea that meaningful inclusion requires intentional design—not only in grouping, but in building psychological safety for diverse learners.

Faculty accounts suggest that cultural differences extend beyond communication to include expectations around punctuality, feedback, gender roles, and authority. Teachers often found themselves unsure whether behaviours reflected culture, personality, or educational background. The ambiguity made it difficult to intervene appropriately. This highlights the need for intercultural competence not just among students, but among teachers as well. The challenge is not only to accommodate diversity, but to actively use it as a resource for dialogue and learning. Faculty members were already doing this—viewing cultural differences not as obstacles but as gateways into richer understandings of seafaring, communication, and leadership.

Many Finnish students bring with them informal but significant maritime knowledge through family connections, prior sailing experience, or regional familiarity. International students, in contrast, may have no such background—or, in some cases, entirely different kinds of maritime knowledge based on their professional experience. Rather than seeing this as a deficit, teachers began to recognise the value that diverse backgrounds bring to the classroom. A student writing a thesis on the port of Chattogram, for instance, offered insights not typically found in Finnish maritime education. This suggests that classrooms can become arenas for mutual learning, where teachers and students alike expand their understanding of global maritime contexts.

Finally, the teacher's role is clearly changing. No longer merely a subject expert, today's MET faculty must also be language facilitator, cultural mediator, and adaptive communicator. Teachers described this expansion with a mix of curiosity, self-doubt, and fatigue. Constraints such as large groups, institutional routines, and lack of pedagogical training in intercultural competence were frequently mentioned. Yet, there was also recognition that teaching in this context is not just more complex—it is also more rewarding. As one teacher put it, "The dynamics have changed," and in that change lies both challenge and opportunity.

5. CONCLUSION

During the process of doing this study, I how come to think that the international students we have, bring with them exactly what MET education should

be like: a mixture of nationalities, students forced to cooperate with other students from all over the world, getting used to each other's accents and ways of expressing themselves and learning that there are a lot of positive aspects to learn from in an international community. Practical reasons such as time, group size, economical restraints, etc., can make it difficult to form the education as would be beneficial for the aspects brought forward in this paper. This is the pedagogical direction we should intentionally pursue, not only because it reflects maritime reality, but because it enhances the quality and relevance of the education itself.

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