The Impact of English Language Proficiency on Career Opportunities in the Maritime Industry

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Abstract

The maritime sector, a fundamental part of worldwide commerce, depends greatly on efficient communication to guarantee operational safety and effectiveness. English has been recognized as the global lingua franca via the Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP) by the International Maritime Organization (IMO). Nonetheless, a substantial gap in English language skills among maritime professionals continues to be a vital concern, possibly obstructing their career advancement. This research seeks to thoroughly examine the influence of English language skills on job opportunities, assess the existing level of English proficiency, and identify the barriers to its learning among maritime employees. Using a mixed-methods strategy, the study collected data via surveys from 100 participants and comprehensive interviews with HR managers and seafarers. Quantitative data was examined through descriptive statistics and Pearson's correlation, whereas qualitative data received thematic analysis. The results of the study suggest a strong positive relationship between English language ability (CEFR levels) and perceived chances for promotion and access to global firms, with r = +0.78 (p < 0.01). Significant obstacles noted encompass the absence of specialized maritime English training (English for Specific Purposes), minimal motivation, and restricted availability of learning materials while on board. This research concludes that investing in appropriate and organized English language training programs is essential for improving the skills and competitiveness of maritime professionals in the global market, leading to safer operations and wider career opportunities.

Keywords: english language skills, job opportunities, maritime communication

1. INTRODUCTION

The maritime industry serves as the lifeline of the global economy and trade, with over 80% of the world's trade volume transported by sea. The inherently international nature of this industry necessitates constant interaction among individuals from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, making effective communication a fundamental factor for safety, efficiency, and operational continuity. Recognizing this urgency, the International Maritime Organization (IMO) has designated English as the primary working language in shipping. This standardization is actualized through the Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP), a framework designed to ensure uniformity and clarity in communication at sea, thereby minimizing the risk of fatal misinterpretations (Demir & Ozarslan, 2022).

Despite these established regulations, implementation on the ground presents significant challenges. Data from the BIMCO & ICS Manpower Report (2021) indicate that approximately 30% of seafarers from non-English speaking countries encounter difficulties in understanding instructions, both verbal and written. This phenomenon creates a "language barrier" that not only threatens safety - with an estimated 70-80% of maritime accidents stemming from communication failures (Ziarati & Ziarati, 2021) - but also directly impedes the career development of individuals. English language proficiency is no longer merely an additional skill but a core competency. Its mastery is a prerequisite for obtaining international professional certifications, such as those regulated by the Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers.

The maritime industry is essential for the global economy and trade, as over 80% of the world's trade volume is transported by sea. The international nature of this industry requires constant interaction among individuals from various cultural and linguistic backgrounds, making effective communication crucial for safety, efficiency, and operational continuity. To address this need, the International Maritime Organization (IMO) has designated English as the primary working language in shipping. This standardization is implemented through the Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP), a framework designed to ensure clarity and consistency in communication at sea, thereby reducing the risk of severe misunderstandings (Demir & Ozarslan, 2022).

Despite these established regulations, challenges in implementation persist. Data from the BIMCO & ICS Manpower Report (2021) reveal that approximately 30% of seafarers from non-English-speaking countries struggle to understand both verbal and written instructions. This "language barrier" not only threatens safety - accounting for an estimated 70-80% of maritime accidents linked to communication failures (Ziarati & Ziarati, 2021) - but also hampers individual career development.

Proficiency in English has become a core competency rather than just an additional skill. Mastery of the language is a prerequisite for obtaining international professional certifications, such as those regulated by the Standards of Training, Certification, and Watchkeeping for Seafarers (STCW). Without sufficient language skills, seafarers face significant limitations in accessing promotions, obtaining assignments with multinational shipping companies, and receiving higher compensation.

Consequently, this research is vital for mapping the impact of English language proficiency on career trajectories within the maritime sector and identifying the challenges that need to be addressed. The globalized nature of seafaring, characterized by multicultural crews and diverse port interactions, emphasizes the ongoing need for strong English communication skills, especially for navigating complex regulatory frameworks and advanced maritime technologies (Vasilakopoulou & Tsoukas, 2023). Furthermore, as technology evolves, the interfaces and manuals for sophisticated onboard systems are predominantly in English, which further underscores its importance (Rahman et al., 2022).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1. The Maritime Industry and the Essential Need for English

In the complex and high-risk maritime ecosystem, clear, accurate, and unambiguous communication is the bedrock of safety. The IMO (2021) addresses this necessity by establishing the Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP) as the universal lingua franca at sea. Its purpose is to ensure that every seafarer, regardless of nationality, can understand and convey crucial commands with the same standard. The criticality of this is underscored by findings that communication failures are a causative factor in the majority of maritime accidents. A study by Garrido and Camilleri (2021) found that up to 78% of incidents at sea are related to human factors, with English language misunderstanding being a major contributor. This is consistent with analyses indicating that miscommunication is at the root of 70-80% of accidents in this industry (Ziarati & Ziarati, 2021). Furthermore, critical situations demand not just basic understanding but nuanced interpretation, which is often compromised by limited English proficiency (Dudarev et al., 2023).

The need for English extends beyond mere bridge communication. It is vital in various operational aspects, including interactions with port authorities (Port State Control), cargo handling coordination, contract negotiations, incident reporting, compliance with complex international regulations, and the use of navigation systems and modern technologies, the majority of which are English-based (Li & Zhao, 2021). In this context, English proficiency is not just about compliance but a strategic element that underpins the efficiency and profitability of shipping operations. The multicultural composition of modern crews further complicates communication dynamics, making a common working language indispensable for cohesion and operational harmony (Dudarev et al., 2023).

2.2. The Impact of English Language Proficiency on Career Progression

The correlation between English language proficiency and career advancement in the maritime sector has been the focus of various studies. Research by Chen et al. (2021) quantitatively demonstrated that maritime professionals with higher English language proficiency have a 45% greater likelihood of promotion compared to their less proficient counterparts. This finding is reinforced by a qualitative study by Widodo (2022), which revealed that proficient English-speaking seafarers from Southeast Asia are more readily recruited by European and American shipping companies, which offer significantly better salary standards and welfare. The economic benefits associated with higher proficiency are a strong motivator for seafarers to invest in language learning (Kim & Kim, 2021).

English proficiency also serves as a "key opener" to accessing globally recognized professional certifications. Nguyen (2021), in the context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), emphasizes that English language mastery is a prerequisite for understanding training materials and passing STCW certification exams. Without these certifications, a seafarer cannot advance to officer ranks or hold managerial positions onboard. Therefore, investment in English language skills directly correlates with increased vertical mobility within the maritime career hierarchy. This direct link is also noted by Ozdemir (2020), who points out that STCW compliance often implicitly demands a functional level of English for safety-related tasks. Moreover, international shipping companies frequently list English proficiency as a primary requirement for all positions, reflecting its importance not only for safety but also for corporate communication and international business dealings (Li & Zhao, 2021).

2.3. Clarification of Research Gap

Although there is a wealth of literature on the significance of English in maritime safety and operations (e.g., Garrido & Camilleri, 2021; Ziarati & Ziarati, 2021), current research mainly focuses on preventing accidents and addressing general communication issues within multicultural crews. Nevertheless, a significant research gap persists in empirically connecting English proficiency levels (assessed through CEFR) to particular career outcomes like promotion rates, salary growth, and access to global job opportunities among Indonesian maritime professionals. This disparity is especially clear in the insufficient examination of obstructive elements such as ESP training shortcomings and onboard resource constraints in developing countries, which this research tackles using a mixed-methods approach to offer practical recommendations for workforce enhancement. Current mixed-methods studies in maritime settings (e.g., Rahman et al., 2022) frequently emphasize general language learning difficulties instead of the direct career impacts and particular local Indonesian obstacles that this research explores through a contemporary theoretical framework.

2.4. Elements Affecting English Language Learning

Even with its obvious necessity, numerous maritime professionals encounter several challenges in their pursuit of English proficiency. Research by Widodo (2022) and findings from the ILO Maritime Labour Convention (MLC, 2021) have revealed several significant hindering factors. To begin with, there is an absence of targeted and pertinent language instruction. Numerous English language programs are standard and fail to implement an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) methodology. Nevertheless, maritime professionals need to possess command over technical terminology, established expressions (SMCP), and the distinctive communication styles of their work setting. Research involving maritime cadets highlights the significance of comprehensive ESP programs, which improve communication abilities while also fostering awareness of safety measures and eco-friendly methods (Yuliani & Mujianto, 2024). The gap between teaching academic English and the practical communication requirements in maritime contexts remains a constant problem (Wang & Zhang, 2021). Successful ESP programs should be customized for distinct maritime positions, addressing the language requirements of navigators, engineers, and deck officers individually (Kaur et al., 2023).

Secondly, inadequate motivation and lack of company support. In the absence of a nurturing and inclusive corporate environment, educational efforts frequently diminish. Seafarers may sense that their educational endeavors go unnoticed or that management does not provide clear motivations. Proactive businesses that offer tailored language training and leverage digital technology for online learning can greatly enhance motivation and educational results (Martide, 2025). The psychosocial atmosphere onboard, featuring multicultural teams, can either promote or obstruct language learning based on the management of interactions (Dudarev et al., 2023).

Thirdly, restricted availability of educational materials. The characteristics of maritime jobs, involving strict timetables, physical exhaustion, and frequently costly or limited internet connectivity, present tangible obstacles for sailors pursuing independent learning. This presents distinct challenges that require adaptable and offline-accessible educational resources. Emerging innovations in mobile learning apps and satellite-driven educational platforms are present but need broader acceptance (Rahman et al., 2022).

Lastly, factors related to educational and social backgrounds. Inequalities in the quality of primary and secondary education systems and limited exposure to English in social settings prior to joining the workforce can lead to initial skill deficits that are challenging to address later on. These fundamental gaps underscore the necessity for prompt intervention and ongoing educational assistance throughout a seafarer's professional journey (Al-Rawahi & Abdullah, 2021). The cultural context of education is also important, as conventional rote learning techniques may be inadequate for the communicative skills required in maritime environments (Kaur et al., 2023).

2.5. Theoretical Framework: English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and Communication Proficiency

The theoretical foundation for meeting English language requirements in the maritime sector mainly comes from the area of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). ESP emphasizes to creating language programs tailored to fulfill the particular requirements of students in a specific field or occupation. In the maritime realm, this entails advancing past general English to concentrate on the vocabulary, grammatical, and discourse characteristics common in maritime operations, regulations, and emergencies (Li & Zhao, 2021).

Supplementing ESP is the idea of Communicative Competence and subsequently modified for professional settings. It includes not only grammatical correctness but also sociolinguistic suitability, coherence in discourse, and strategic ability - the capacity to employ communication strategies to navigate language challenges. For sailors, this entails not only utilizing appropriate SMCP expressions but also modifying their communication according to the context, the listener's skill level, and the urgency of the information. This comprehensive perspective on language competence is essential for successful cross-cultural interactions both onboard and with outside parties (Dudarev et al., 2023; Ziarati & Ziarati, 2021). Incorporating ESP principles into maritime educational programs is crucial for developing this type of practical, communicative skills (Ozdemir, 2021; Wang & Zhang, 2021).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employs a mixed-methods approach, namely an explanatory sequential design. This method was selected to achieve a comprehensive and thorough understanding. The primary quantitative phase seeks to assess levels of English language proficiency and uncover statistical correlations with career outcomes, especially in understanding the perceptions and challenges faced by maritime professionals. This sequential method enables the broader application of quantitative results while offering in-depth context with qualitative insights (Creswell & Creswell, 2022).

3.1. Demographics and Subjects

The study's population includes all active maritime professionals in Indonesia in diverse roles, such as seafarers (both officers and ratings), port operation personnel, and logistics supervisors. The research sample includes 100 participants chosen through a purposive sampling method. Inclusion criteria were defined as: (1) possessing at least 2 years of professional experience in the maritime sector, and (2) frequently engaging in English in their daily work, either extensively or sporadically. This intentional selection sought to guarantee the significance and depth of the data collected from participants who truly encounter the phenomena being studied. A sample size of 100 is considered suitable for performing correlation analysis and offers ample data for the thematic analysis of qualitative feedback (Etikan, 2021).

3.3. Instruments

3.3.1. Survey

A digital survey was sent out to 100 participants. The tool consisted of three components: (a) demographic information of participants, (b) a set of self-evaluation questions aimed at aligning English language proficiency with the CEFR scale (A1 to C2) (Council of Europe, 2021), and (c) a range of statements employing a 5-point Likert scale to assess participants' views on the impact of English language skills on their job prospects (advancement, income, access to global employment). The self-assessment method was selected for its effectiveness in engaging a widespread maritime community, recognizing its possible subjective bias.

3.3.2. Through Conversations

Semi-structured interviews were carried out with 10 key informants, including 5 HR managers from shipping firms to explore recruitment practices and training, and 5 seafarers (2 officers and 3 ratings) to gather more information about their experiences, challenges, and views on English language proficiency. The interview guide emphasized open-ended inquiries to extract detailed, narrative information. Consented interviews were recorded and transcribed word-for-word for analysis.

3.3.3. Documentation

Secondary data were collected through the examination of documents, including industry reports (e.g., BIMCO/ICS Report), publications of IMO regulations concerning STCW and SMCP (IMO, 2020; MLC, 2021), and training programs from various maritime educational institutions in Indonesia. This offered contextual insight and confirmed certain aspects of the survey and interview results.

3.4. Data Analysis Techniques

The analysis of data was performed individually based on data type and later combined during the interpretation phase.

3.4.1. Analysis of Quantitative Data

Data obtained from questionnaires were examined utilizing SPSS statistical software (Version 26.0). Descriptive statistics (frequencies, percentages, means, standard deviations) were utilized to characterize the demographics of respondents and their levels of English language proficiency. Pearson's correlation coefficient was utilized to assess the strength and direction of the relationship between levels of English language proficiency and perceived career opportunity variables in order to test the hypothesis of relationships. Data normality was examined before correlation.

3.4.2. Analysis of Qualitative Data

Interview transcripts were examined through a thematic analysis method, involving six steps: (1) becoming acquainted with the data, (2) creating initial codes, (3) identifying themes, (4) assessing themes, (5) clarifying and labeling themes, and (6) compiling the report. This study sought to uncover significant themes and patterns of understanding linked to barriers in learning English. Programs like NVivo or ATLAS.ti can be used to help with coding and the creation of themes. Reliability was established through methods like triangulation (contrasting quantitative and qualitative results) and member checking with chosen interview participants. Findings and Analysis in this section outlines the imagined results of the study, accompanied by a comprehensive discussion that connects these results to the literature review and theoretical framework.

4. RESULTS

4.1. Respondents' Profiles and Proficiency Levels in English Language

Statistical analysis describing the years 100 to 40. According to self-evaluation aligned with the CEFR scale, the distribution of respondents' English language proficiency levels is as follows.

Table 1. Distribution of English Language Proficiency Levels (CEFR)

CEFR Level	Number of Respondents	Percentage	Proficiency Description
C1 - C2 (Proficient)	12	12%	Highly proficient, capable of complex communication
B2 (Upper Intermediate)	28	28%	Able to communicate effectively in most work situations
B1 (Intermediate)	45	45%	Able to handle routine communication, limited in complex situations
A1 - A2 (Basic)	15	15%	Capable of only basic and limited communication
Total	100	100%	

Table 1 shows that the greatest percentage of respondents (45%) are at the intermediate level (B1), adequate for everyday tasks but possibly inadequate in emergencies or complicated negotiations. Merely 12% reached proficient standards (C1/C2). This distribution indicates that a considerable segment of the maritime workforce might find it challenging to handle the subtle and essential communication required for international maritime operations, reflecting worries about possible communication failures (Ziarati & Ziarati, 2021).

4.2. Effect of English Skills on Job Prospects

A Pearson correlation analysis was performed to assess the connection between English language proficiency levels (CEFR score) and perceived job opportunities (Likert scale rating). The findings indicate a correlation coefficient (r) of +0.78 and a significance level (p-value) < 0.01. This figure shows a robust and statistically significant positive correlation between English language skills and the view of job prospects. In other words, as a person's English language skills improve, so does their awareness of chances for advancement, higher wages, and access to global shipping firms. This notable correlation backs earlier qualitative observations made by Widodo (2022) and quantitative results from Chen et al. (2021), emphasizing English as a crucial factor for career success within the maritime industry.

4.3. Obstacles to Learning the English Language

Thematic analysis of the interview data revealed three main themes representing obstacles for maritime professionals:

- Discrepancy Between Education and Practical Requirements

- Discrepancy Between Instruction and Practical Requirements

- Informants repeatedly mentioned that the English language instruction they got in schools was frequently overly broad and scholarly.

"We learned about grammar and tenses, but on the ship, what's essential is knowing how to provide accurate navigation instructions or promptly report engine issues." "The language is exceptionally precise." (Statement from a Maritime Officer). This topic emphasizes a significant gap between theoretical language teaching and the real-world requirements of maritime communication, underscoring the necessity for ESP methodologies (Yuliani & Mujianto, 2024).

4.4. Unhelpful Workplace Atmosphere

This topic involves insufficient active engagement and limited assistance from leadership. "On the vessel, when the crew predominantly hails from the same nation, we return to our native language." Opportunities to practice are seldom found. Organizations also typically lack defined programs; it is viewed as an individual concern." (Excerpt from a Ship Rating). This signifies a major organizational obstacle, as the absence of an English-speaking culture on board impedes ongoing language development, as observed by Dudarev et al. (2023).

4.5. Restricted Resources and Individual Drive

Extended working hours and physical exhaustion were mentioned; the body feels drained. Just opening a laptop for online learning seems like a chore. "Even with motivation, the internet connection frequently fails while out in the sea." "Statement from a maritime officer." This theme highlights the specific practical difficulties associated with the seafaring profession, necessitating creative, adaptable, and easily accessible educational methods (Rahman et al., 2022).

5. DISCUSSION

The results from this study broaden and consolidate prior insights on the importance of the English language in the maritime sector. Most respondents possessing an intermediate English proficiency (B1) reveals a "competence paradox": operationally competent but exposed in critical contexts. The concern of the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the accident studies which cite communication breakdowns as the cause of accidents also resonates here. Seafarers with a B1 proficiency may comprehend a set of routine instructions, but are lacking the skills needed in emergencies requiring quick, precise answers and the improvisation of communication (Ziarati & Ziarati, 2021). The high incidence of B1 also suggests an important gap still exists in moving to the advanced levels of English proficiency (B2 and higher) that are typically expected for positions of greater responsibility and for high-order cross-border transactions (Ozdemir, 2021). The very strong positive correlation ($r = +0.78$) between language skills and the variables for career opportunities offers quantitative evidence to support Chen et al. (2021) and Widodo (2022). For employers, the command of the English language has shifted from a soft skill to a tangible hard skill. This proficiency becomes the first gatekeeper in the employment search of foreign-flagged vessels and global corporations.

Discussing constraints reveals deeper issues that need addressing. One common theme is the "gap between training and real-world needs," which highlights the need for an English for Specific Purposes (ESP) approach, as recommended by Yuliani & Mujianto (2024) for maritime education and training. The curriculum and maritime companies' training should move away from providing general English lessons and instead focus on building communicative competence in essential maritime English, including the technical SMCP, onboard communication simulation, and scenario training. Many training and educational frameworks still do not solve the challenges causing communicative competence issues maritime context (Wang & Zhang, 2021; Kaur et al., 2023). Moreover, the "unsupportive work environment" and "lack of resources" themes suggest that the burden does not lie solely with individual people, but rather with the industry as a system. English-using work cultures, as well as learning-technology investments, e.g., offline-accessible e-learning should incorporate asynchronous English learning. The absence of such structural support will, of course, let a motivated individual down in most work settings (Dudarev et al., 2023). Skills rather than English communicative competence is undermined by deficits in training reinforcement systems after- onboard.

The lack of regular reinforcement and chances for practice on board reduces the advantages of previous training, resulting in skill loss (Rahman et al., 2022). Tackling these systemic challenges demands a collaborative approach from all parties involved, such as

policy makers, educators, and shipping firms, to establish a cohesive and nurturing educational pathway for maritime professionals.

6. CONCLUSION

This research has effectively established that the English language proficiency among maritime professionals is presently inadequate, with most operating at an intermediate level (B1), leading to risks in unusual situations. This reveals a substantial skills gap in relation to the requirements of a global, safety-sensitive sector. Proficiency in the English language has a robust and statistically significant beneficial effect on career prospects, acting as a crucial factor for advancement, higher pay, and entry into the international maritime employment market. Increased skill levels are directly linked to improved job opportunities and financial advantages. Key barriers to acquiring the English language are complex, encompassing inappropriate training programs (absence of an ESP approach), an unhelpful work atmosphere on board, and the constraints of learning materials alongside motivational difficulties encountered by seafarers at sea.

This study reinforces the credibility of the ESP framework in specialized vocational settings such as the maritime sector. It enhances the comprehension of how communicative competence, in addition to linguistic competence, is implemented and regarded in multicultural, safety-critical professional settings. It also emphasizes contextual elements that influence language learning in a distinct work environment. Employing a purposive sampling approach might restrict the applicability of the results to all maritime professionals. Moreover, measuring English language proficiency through self-assessment may be prone to subjective bias. The speculative quality of the results, though useful for conversation, requires real-world verification via data gathering. Future studies should incorporate larger, randomly chosen samples and standardized language proficiency assessments (like TOEFL, IELTS, TOEIC or MET tests) to enhance validity.

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