



An empirical study on the communicative competence of Chinese seafarers



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ABSTRACT

Research suggests that one of the main barriers for Chinese seafarers to compete in the global maritime labour market is their insufficient English communication ability. Limited empirical research, however, has been conducted on examining the status of communicative competence of Chinese seafarers. This study intends to fill this gap by providing empirical evidence on the communicative competence of Chinese seafarers. Using mixed methods, this study revealed that Chinese seafarers had a poor to fair level of communicative competence and the level of communicative competence had a moderate correlation with their educational qualifications, and a strong correlation with their sea experience. However, no significant differences existed in communicative competence across age or rank groups of seafarers. Using qualitative data gathered from 12 interviews of Chinese seafarers, a discussion was given to explain the reasons behind these findings. Recommendations were made to improve the English communicative competence of Chinese seafarers.

1. Introduction

The growth of maritime education and training in China far exceeded the expansion of the Chinese merchant fleet. The Chinese national merchant fleet achieved a total of 85% growth between 1996 and 2011 [1], while enrolment of Chinese maritime cadets experienced a total of 813% increase during the similar time period [2]. Although there has been an oversupply of Chinese seafarers in the domestic maritime labour market, the share of Chinese seafarers in the international maritime labour market has only achieved a marginal increase despite the nation's ambitions to improve this. Currently, only 5% of the total Chinese seafarers are working on foreign vessels [3].

Research shows that the English deficiency of Chinese seafarers is one of the main barriers for them to compete in the global maritime labour market [4]. Some researchers believe that Chinese seafarers have improved their English ability since much effort and investment have been made in maritime English (In view of various definitions, maritime English in this paper refers to the English used by seafarers on board.) education and training in China since the late 1990s [5,6]. However, there is limited empirical research on the English level of Chinese seafarers. A high level of English communicative competence of seafarers is required for the prevailing multinational crewing practice in the shipping industry [7]. English language deficiency itself is not the only reason that can lead to miscommunication on board. Others, such as intercultural and psycholinguistic factors can also create communication barriers [2]. Thus, communicative competence is a

more appropriate term for evaluating seafarers' ability to communicate within the maritime context. The concept of communicative competence is relatively new in the maritime context and there is a dearth of research that examines Chinese seafarers' communicative competence.

Based on an established framework of communicative competence in the maritime context [8], this paper aims to develop and apply an instrument to evaluate the English communicative competence of Chinese. The paper has two objectives: 1) to develop an instrument to evaluate the English communicative competence of Chinese seafarers; and 2) to empirically investigate the current status of communicative competence of Chinese seafarers. This paper intends to answer two key research questions: 1) What is the current level of communicative competence of Chinese seafarers in their own opinion? and 2) Are there significant differences in the communicative competence across Chinese seafarer groups in terms of age, educational qualification, rank, and sea experience? To achieve the research objectives and answer the research questions, a mixed methods approach was adopted in this research. Specifically, an online questionnaire survey was conducted. In addition, twelve interviews were conducted with Chinese seafarers to complement the online survey.

2. Communicative competence in the maritime context

Since effective communication involves various human-related factors, technical advances in communication equipment on board cannot completely surmount the language barriers encountered among

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multilingual and multicultural seafarers [2,9,10]. Communication failures not only occur in long and short distance communication via electronic devices, but they also happen in routine face-to-face communication [11]. The Manila Amendments 2010 mandates effective oral communication among seafarers and puts the onus on every company to achieve this as a compulsory requirement in order to address an increased frequency of communication-related maritime accidents [12]. The mastery of overall communicative competence for seafarers has become increasingly significant in modern shipping, including linguistic competence, intercultural competence, psycholinguistic competence, strategic competence and pragmatic competence [2].

Savignon [13] defines communicative competence as the overall ability to dynamically and appropriately communicate intentions and purposes using gained knowledge and skills in various circumstances. The knowledge of the language code, i.e., grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation and spelling, can be indicated by linguistic competence [14]. Linguistic competence aims to ensure the understanding of the accurate literal meaning of the utterance [15].

The underlying abilities of interlocutors become one of the most important factors contributing to successful communication [16]. Among these underlying abilities can be, for example, the interlocutors' psycholinguistic competence [17]. Sufficient knowledge of psychological variables, such as the knowledge of dealing with a new working environment and coping with hierarchy stress, can facilitate effective communication among multinational seafarers working in a confined space on board. The expression, interpretation and negotiation of meaning are all influenced by the interlocutors' psycholinguistic competence [18–20].

Communicative competence also includes the ability to interpret social cultures and behaviour in various speech contexts [16]. Research conducted by Ziarati et al. [21] shows that nearly three quarters of seafarers agreed that cultural differences between multicultural crewmembers were one of the biggest barriers to effective communication on board [21]. Intercultural misunderstandings can result in tense interpersonal or intergroup relationships, distrust or conflicts [22] which can directly affect the safe operation of a ship.

Strategic competence in communication is especially essential for foreign language learners [23]. As such, strategic competence is of vital importance for multicultural seafarers since the majority of them are from non-native English speaking nations [24]. Strategic competence is most likely gained through experience in real-life communication situations rather than through simple practice in the classroom [25].

Pragmatic competence is also regarded as one of the main components of communicative competence [26]. It concerns the ability to perform speech acts and language functions appropriately in a given social context [26]. Much communication practice and activities in and out of class need to be carried out to improve non-native English speakers' pragmatic competence [27]. For second language learners, it is effective to improve pragmatic competence in a natural environment, i.e., by exposing them to the culture and language learning environment [28]. Consequently, it is essential to use English frequently in daily life and work to improve pragmatic competence.

Based on the above-mentioned components, English communicative competence in the maritime context presents a great challenge for Chinese seafarers since most components have not been adequately taken into account in the maritime English education and training in China. Literature indicates that the vast majority of Chinese seafarers treated language barriers as the main factor contributing to ineffective communication, mainly due to their insufficient listening and speaking ability [29]. The exam-oriented and teacher-centred maritime English education in China leaves little room for maritime cadets to take initiatives to develop and improve their communicative competence.

Currently, maritime English exams mainly test subject knowledge in English rather than the English knowledge in the maritime context. Tests of linguistic competence of maritime cadets tend to be

inappropriate and inadequate, and the abovementioned intercultural, psycholinguistic, strategic and pragmatic competences [2] are not included in either the maritime English teaching syllabi or examinations. Even though such competences as strategic and pragmatic competences can be developed and improved in one's daily life and work, a lack of awareness and understanding of them in the first place can make it difficult to master them.

3. Methods

To answer the research questions and achieve the research objectives, both quantitative and qualitative methods were applied in this research. The data were collected through an online questionnaire and semi-structured interviews. The questionnaire included four main parts: 1) the current status of the Chinese seafarers' communicative competence; 2) the relationship between the communicative competence of the Chinese seafarers and their employability in the international maritime labour market; 3) the current status of maritime English education and training in China; and 4) suggestions for improving Chinese seafarers' communicative competence. This paper mainly focused on the analysis of the first part, i.e., the perceptions of Chinese seafarers regarding their communicative competence. This part included 7 items about the demographic information of the Chinese seafarers and 35 items related to their communicative competence. The 35 items were modified from the existing literature [30,31] and adapted to the shipping context. To investigate the current level of communicative competence of Chinese seafarers, self-evaluation items were designed where participants of Chinese seafarers chose a value from a five-point Likert scale. Twelve interviews with Chinese seafarers were conducted to further explore qualitative information about their perceptions on communicative competence.

To recruit the questionnaire participants, the intention of this research was first expressed to relevant website administrators from whom permissions for advertisement were obtained beforehand. The online questionnaire was then advertised on three popular websites for Chinese seafarers with web traffic of over 1.5 million visitors. A link to this study was provided on these websites. The advertisements were reposted by website administrators to recruit sufficient numbers of respondents. Random sampling, confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the data collection process. The questionnaire was made available online for eight months. The 12 interview participants were randomly selected from those participants in the questionnaire who volunteered to participate in the interview.

Using an online survey tool called QuestionPro, quantitative data were classified into categorical data and numerical data and all data types were numerically coded. All analyses were conducted using the Statistical Packages for Social Science (SPSS) [32]. The general descriptive analysis was conducted to obtain the mean scores, standard deviations and range of scores for all independent and dependent variables. Since there is no existing instrument available to evaluate seafarers' communicative competence, the measuring instrument for this study was developed by the authors based on literature related to communicative competence [14,15,31]. To verify all underlying correlations between the measuring items of communicative competence, exploratory factor analysis (EFA) was conducted. In this paper, EFA enabled 35 measuring items for communicative competence to be extracted to a smaller set of components, and provided a factor loading for each item. With the factor loading of each item, a mean score of communicative competence was calculated. The analysis was performed based on the extraction method of principal axis factoring (PAF) and the rotation method of Promax with Kaiser Normalisation [33]. An ANOVA (Analysis of Variance) was then applied to test whether or not there existed significant differences across seafarer groups in terms of age, rank, educational qualification and sea experience. The findings of the data analysis were then interpreted and discussed by referring to the existing literature and the interview data collected.

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