



A critical examination of the seafaring English education and training in China



Lidong Fan^{a,*}, Jiangang Fei^a, Ulf Schriever^a, Si Fan^b

^a National Centre for Ports and Shipping, Australian Maritime College, University of Tasmania, Launceston 7250, Australia

^b Faculty of Education, University of Tasmania, Launceston 7250, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:

Communicative competence
Chinese seafarers
Communication barriers
Maritime English education and training

ABSTRACT

The increased maritime accidents attributable to communication barriers have raised great concern about international shipping safety. The requirement for effective communication has been contained in the compulsory part of the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers in 2010. However, many Chinese seafarers still experience difficulty in communicating with foreign seafarers at sea even though they passed the English exams required for a Certificate of Competency. Literature argues that the outcomes of maritime English education are not satisfactory. However, this claim is too general and has not been substantiated with empirical evidence. Using a mix of qualitative and quantitative methods, this paper reveals that English communicative incompetence of Chinese seafarers was attributable to the maritime English examinations system, teaching materials, teaching methods and teachers and students themselves. Recommendations were made to improve maritime cadets' English communicative competence.

1. Introduction

Communication barriers at sea have become an increasing concern in the shipping industry due to the fact that many maritime incidents are related to communication failures. Consequently, the Manila Amendments 2010 adopted new requirements on effective oral communication among seafarers in every shipping company in order to address the increased frequency of communication-related maritime accidents worldwide [1]. The increased communication requirement brings great pressure to maritime English education in China where English is taught and learned as a foreign language. Although maritime English is defined literally as an umbrella term covering the English language used by individuals working in the maritime industry [2], maritime English in most cases refers to the English used in the seafaring context [8], a definition adopted in this paper.

In China, all seafaring students, known as maritime cadets, must pass the maritime English examination for the Certificate of Competency required by the International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers (STCW 78/95/2010). Meanwhile, Chinese students also need to pass general English tests as part of the requirements for their academic degree or diploma. With double requirements, Chinese seafarers should be competent in English communication if they have passed all the required English

tests. However, despite the fact that they have passed the tests and examinations, most Chinese seafarers cannot meet the industry requirements for English communication in the international maritime labour market [3].

The outcomes of maritime English education and training in China are unsatisfactory. Since there is limited empirical research conducted on the maritime English education and training in China, this paper intends to make a critical examination of the issue in order to improve the English communicative competence of Chinese seafarers. The research objectives of this paper are to: 1) investigate the current levels of Chinese seafaring graduates' communicative competence; 2) identify the factors that can affect the outcomes of maritime English education in China; and 3) explore appropriate ways to improve maritime English education in China. Both quantitative and qualitative methods were employed in this paper. The data collection tools comprised a questionnaire survey for Chinese seafarers and semi-structured interviews with maritime English teachers and Chinese seafarers.

2. A review of causes of Chinese seafarers' English communication deficiency

Using the search keyword 'Chinese seafarers' that contained in a paper title, there were limited peer-reviewed papers found in different

* Corresponding author. Present address: National Centre for Ports and Shipping, Australian Maritime College, University of Tasmania, Locked Bag 1397, Launceston, Tasmania 7250, Australia.

E-mail address: Lidong.Fan@utas.edu.au (L. Fan).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.marpol.2017.09.013>

Received 17 June 2017; Received in revised form 11 September 2017; Accepted 11 September 2017

0308-597X/© 2017 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

databases between 1991 and 2017: 12 papers in Web of Science, 16 papers in Scopus and 20 papers in ProQuest. Around 60 papers were found through the library MegaSearch which covered all databases at the University of Tasmania. Within these articles, there were much limited papers related to the causes of Chinese seafarers' English communication deficiency. The review of these papers found that the causes included but not limited to linguistic competence, cultural competence, work environment, interpersonal relationships, power relations, psychological factors and maritime English education.

While some scholars claim that Chinese seafarers' English language proficiency has been improved through a consecutive quality control system and advanced facilities in maritime English education and training (MEET) in China [4,5], many Chinese seafarers still find it difficult to communicate in English with others, such as port state control officers and pilots [6,7]. A survey of 28 Japanese Vessel Traffic Services (VTS) officers conducted by Uchida and Takagi [8] shows that among 19 nationalities of seafarers, the English spoken by Chinese seafarers was one of the three most difficult ones to understand due to their heavy accents and poor vocabulary. Similarly, Russian seafarers agreed that it was difficult to understand the English spoken by Chinese seafarers at sea [9].

Due to different linguistic and cultural backgrounds of English users, English as a lingua franca used at sea exhibits significant variations influenced by various mother tongues and different levels of English proficiency, thus making the communication among them extremely challenging [8]. The world merchant fleet is manned with seafarers from various nations and the majority of merchant vessels are manned with multinational and multilingual crews [10].

In China, there are 55 minority ethnic groups with diverse cultures [11] which may affect English communication in the same way as the dominant Han Chinese culture would. Chinese seafarers receive different levels of maritime English education in different maritime education and training institutes across the nation. The diversities of Chinese seafarers in terms of cultures and English proficiency may impair effective communication onboard. With a fast wage increase for shore workers, seafaring is no longer attractive to young people, especially those from coastal areas where the income level is relatively higher compared to that in inland areas. With an increasing number of maritime cadets are sourced from the western and other remote parts of China, Chinese seafarers must have both Chinese and foreign cultural awareness. Nearly three quarters of seafarers working on multicultural vessels agreed that cultural differences among crew have an impact on the level of communication onboard [12]. More than 30% of seafarers believed that cultural barriers frequently affect effective communication onboard [13]. Cultural barriers have become one of the main obstacles in maritime communication that can lead to misunderstanding, communication failures, distrust and even conflicts. In China, cultural awareness training has been neglected in maritime education and training [13].

Besides demonstrated English and cultural knowledge, the effectiveness of communication can be influenced by other factors, such as the environment, the attributes of interlocutors and the relationships among interlocutors [14]. Seafarers are exposed to great risks and stresses attributable to their high-pressure work involved and a harsh work environment onboard, which would impair the effective communication at sea. The hierarchical structure onboard can also be a barrier to upward communication [15,16]. The highly hierarchical nature of Chinese societies [17] could to some extent affect the effective communication for Chinese seafarers. For example, some seafarers might be reluctant to report a minor malfunction to the captain due to power distance.

Psychosocial stresses caused by isolation, loneliness and fatigue are common for seafarers [18]. Communication effectiveness plays a dominant role in dealing with psychosocial stress encountered in a multicultural environment [19]. As a social interaction, communication can also alleviate one's loneliness and isolation [20]. In return, the

sense of loneliness and isolation among seafarers can be aggravated without social interaction onboard [21]. The aggravated psychosocial stress because of isolation, loneliness and fatigue can interfere with one's thinking and speaking.

Wang and Gu [13] find that maritime communication in English can be affected by psychological factors and maritime cadets must be trained to be open-minded and confident in using English. From a psycholinguistic perspective, some Chinese students, as foreign language learners, are shy and reluctant to speak English or ask questions since they are afraid of making mistakes and losing face [22,23]. The sensitivity to one's face is influenced by the Chinese value and culture under a highly hierarchical and collectivistic structure [17]. In practice, You [24] finds that there are limited interactions in English between maritime English teachers and students as well as among students themselves even though they are encouraged to do so. Without sufficient practice of English in their daily life, some Chinese maritime cadets are known as 'dumb English' learners [24].

The English communication ability of Chinese seafarers is greatly affected by the MEET system in China. For both maritime English teachers and students, passing the exams has been the top priority in maritime English teaching and learning [24]. The exam-oriented MEET neglects the practical use of English and cannot effectively improve Chinese maritime cadets' English communicative ability [25,26]. Instead of testing English communication ability, maritime English examination questions normally focus on testing maritime subject knowledge in English [26]. There are limited open-ended questions in the maritime English examination since students are only expected to complete multiple-choice questions in exams. However, multiple-choice questions may be suitable for testing English grammar but not appropriate for communicative tests which focus on the 'use' rather than the 'usage' of a language [27].

Similarly, the contents of maritime English textbooks are subject-knowledge-based and exam-oriented [28]. Maritime English teachers tend to spend significant amount of time explaining, in Chinese, the maritime knowledge in textbooks, leaving little time for language practice activities. Even though maritime English teachers try to carry out language practice activities, only a small number of students passively respond to the teachers' initiatives of interactive activities and students prefer to ask questions in Chinese from teachers after class rather than in class [24]. The limited interactions can also be attributable to large-size classes [29,30]. It is common for maritime English teachers to face over 50 maritime cadets in one classroom in China. As such, interactions in English among maritime English teachers and students in class are greatly limited.

3. Research method

In order to provide empirical evidence on maritime English education in China in terms of the outcomes of maritime English education, the factors contributing to the outcomes and recommendations for improvement, a mixed-methods approach including both quantitative and qualitative methods was applied to this research. The research instruments included an online questionnaire survey and a mix of semi-structured face-to-face and telephone interviews. A comparison of viewpoints between maritime English teachers and seafarers was made to identify similarities and differences between the two groups. A total of 235 Chinese seafarers participated in the questionnaire survey, and 25 maritime English teachers and 12 Chinese seafarers participated in the interviews. Confidentiality and anonymity were maintained throughout the data collection process.

A recruitment advertisement for the online questionnaire survey was posted on the public areas of some major websites targeting Chinese seafarers and regularly reposted to gather sufficient data. The questionnaire was made available online for around 8 months. The 25 teachers were selected from the total 50 registered maritime higher education and training institutes in China. The 50 institutes were first

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/5118123>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/5118123>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)