



# Multilingual crews on Norwegian fishing vessels: Implications for communication and safety on board



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## ABSTRACT

In the last few decades, use of foreign labor in the Norwegian fishing fleet has increased. As fishing is a high-risk occupation, this article investigates a prevalent question regarding how the increased share of foreigners affects communication and safety on Norwegian fishing vessels. The article shows that multilingual crews and varying language proficiencies are not perceived by the fisheries actors themselves as risk factors in terms of safety in everyday operations. Fishing experience, hybrid language and body language compensate for language challenges and contribute to fishers' feeling of safety.

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## 1. Introduction

Just before midnight on November 11, 2008, while fishing in the Barents Sea 310 NM north of mainland Norway, a fire started in the engine room of the longliner *Frøyanes Senior*. Considering the gale-strength storm combined with the loss of propulsion and electricity, the situation seemed dramatic. However, it was quickly handled by the crew. Due to risk that the fire could flare up again, the crew prepared for the worse and put on lifesaving suits in case a fast evacuation would become necessary. Things went well “first and foremost due to good seamanship..., but also because the fire extinguishing equipment worked as it should”, said Geir Rune Aarsheim on behalf of the shipping company *Ervik Havfiske*. The vessel was towed by another longliner to the mainland, and the crew of fifteen arrived safely in port two days later. “Everything was fine aboard. The crew was exhausted, but happy to make it to shore. Four of them left for their home on the west coast; the rest, mainly Russians, will stay in Havøysund, [Norway], for now”, said Aarsheim [1,2].

This dramatic occurrence in the Barents Sea makes visible an important aspect related to developments in the Norwegian fisheries, namely the increased use of foreign crew. In recent years, the use of foreigners on Norwegian fishing vessels has been a debated topic. Concerns are that foreign workers may have limited knowledge about their labor rights, but also that they may lack

knowledge about Norwegian health and safety systems [3]. Hence, there are concerns that the use of foreign crew may have implications for safety aboard Norwegian fishing vessels. In particular, language barriers have been named as an element that may negatively affect safety and work environment aboard [4].

Globally, fishing is described as a high-risk occupation due to harsh working conditions and a high number of fatalities and injuries [5–10]. In the Norwegian context, whereas the number of fatalities is highest in the coastal fleet, reported accidents are highest in the deep-sea fleet. Underreporting of non-fatal accidents is, however, believed to be common [10]. Even though fatalities and reported accident rates have declined over the last twenty years, fishing is statistically the most dangerous occupation in Norway as reflected by man-years [8–10].

The overarching objective of this article is to investigate how an increased share of foreign crew affects communication and safety on board Norwegian fishing vessels. The questions addressed are as follows: how does a multilingual setting affect communication and safety aboard? How and in what ways are language and communication experienced as safety risks? How are challenges in terms of language solved in everyday practice? And finally, what may be the implications of the present practices?

### 1.1. Increased share of foreign workers

There has been a rise in the share of foreign fishers in the Norwegian fishing fleet in the last decades, but due to a lack of mandatory registration, the number and nationality of these workers are largely unknown. In 2012, the Norwegian Ministry of Fisheries and Coastal Affairs (MFCA) estimated that about 500

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foreign workers were employed in the Norwegian fishing fleet. A recent study, however, estimates the number to be at least 900, probably higher [11]. In comparison, about 10,000 full-time fishermen are registered in Norway.

The main reason for employment of foreign workers is low recruitment of Norwegians. The lack of local recruits is due to the depopulation of coastal communities [12,13], but low recruitment has also been linked to the overall low unemployment rate in Norway [14]. Rationalization of the sector, mainly through restructuring policies, has also been argued to affect the supply of local recruits. The combination of fewer fishers and a depopulation of coastal communities have removed important venues for socializing youth into the fisheries. Hence, fewer local youth are exposed to the fishing occupation [15]. Low recruitment to the fleet may also be ascribed to structural factors, such as the development of the welfare state and increased labour and educational opportunities, meaning youth have several occupational options available [16]. In addition, the fleet has struggled for decades with poor fleet profitability, low wage-paying ability and low rate of fleet renewal. These factors arguably leave fishing a less attractive occupation than some of its competition for labour among other maritime industries [15,17]. A recent study also shows that foreign workers are recruited because of economic reasons, related to lower wages, but also for their qualifications and good work ethic [11].

## 1.2. Formal regulations concerning employment of foreign workers

Formal regulations influence employment of foreign workers in the Norwegian fishing fleet. Initially, regulations for vessels operating in Norwegian territorial waters required the operator and at least half of the crew to be Norwegian citizens. However, due to Norway's commitment to free movement of labour in the European Economic Area, the law was amended and a requirement of residency was introduced in 2006. Thus, since 2006, the vessel master and at least half of the crew have to be residents of a coastal municipality or a neighbouring municipality [18]. The definition of a coastal municipality is a municipality that borders with the open sea or a fjord. As of January 1, 2010, 350 of 430 municipalities are coastal or neighbouring municipalities. Since only half of the crew is required to be residents of coastal municipalities, residents of non-coastal municipalities may also be hired as crew. This rule also applies to foreign crew with addresses abroad, regardless of nationality. In essence, the entire crew could be foreign citizens.

With regards to formal qualifications, demands for obligatory safety training for all fishers who are going to work on Norwegian vessels is regulated by the International Convention on Training, Certification and Watch Keeping for Fishing Vessel Personnel (STCW-F). In addition, as part of qualifications and certificates for seafarers,<sup>1</sup> a standard working language on board is required. The regulation states that seafarers should be able to communicate with each other on the ship's working language regarding basic safety and understand safety information through text, symbols and alarms. The working language for a given vessel is to be decided by the ship-owner. In addition, seafarers who come into contact with pilots or land-based authorities should be able to communicate in English or whichever language the pilots or authorities use. This regulation clearly highlights the importance of language in relation to safety.

## 1.3. Language, communication and safety

Communication has been pointed out as one of the core skills necessary to ensure effective and safe production and performance in high-risk industries [19]. A previous study mapping parameters critical to safety in the Norwegian fishing fleet identified the lack of a common work language as a potential safety risk [20]. The results were based on a survey where fishermen rated common working language to be very important for safety. Studies from other Norwegian maritime industries have yielded similar findings. For instance, a study of freight vessels showed that seafarers consider working conditions to be less safe when fewer Norwegians are on board. This is related to both local knowledge and language aspects [21]. A study of chemical tankers with multilingual crews found that language confusion could cause incidents [22]. Similarly, in the offshore fleet, multilingual crews were seen as a safety risk causing communication problems, which were further exacerbated in combination with inexperience [23]. Another factor that comes into play in multilingual or multicultural crews is that of leadership and the relationships between skipper and crew. A shipping study reported incidents where Norwegian officers raised questions about safety but foreign crew and officers voiced their criticism to a lesser degree and appeared to be loyal to the prevailing conditions and leadership [24].

## 2. Material and methods

The material presented in this article is based mainly on in-depth ethnographic interviews, but also relies on secondary literature related to safety and a selection of accident reports. The qualitative approach of interviews was considered suitable for exploring experiences and attitudes related to work, language, communication and safety. An interview guide was developed and used to ensure that certain topics were covered in each interview. Nevertheless, open-ended questions allowed informants to elaborate on topics they found especially important and relevant. The interview guide covered different aspects related to four main topics: (1) formal rules and regulations; (2) language and communication; (3) training; and (4) psychosocial working environment. To explore aspects related to risk and safety, informants were asked questions such as "How is on-the-job training done?" and "From your point of view, is lack of a common work language experienced as or considered a safety risk?" Questions about accidents or near-accidents and misunderstandings related to language or communication were also asked, as well as which solutions have helped to deal with language problems.

A total of 64 informants were interviewed. Fishermen, skippers and ship-owners who have experience with multilingual crews were prioritized in this sample. Furthermore, representatives from the Norwegian Fishermen's Association, the Norwegian Coastal Fishermen's Association, the Norwegian Seamen's Federation and the Norwegian Maritime Authority were interviewed to include the perspectives of organizations and authorities.

Informants were selected by "snowball sampling". Snowball sampling is widely used in qualitative studies of social networks where the aim is to locate a specific type of informants who are in possession of a certain type of information [25]. In snowball sampling, key informants are used to locate other informants. The approach thus gives access to the networks that comprise the environment one aims to study [26].

Some interviews were conducted by phone, but most interviews were conducted in person. Two geographical areas were chosen for the personal interviews, namely Båtsfjord in Northern-Norway and the Ålesund/Vågsøy/Selje area on the west coast. Both are important areas to the Norwegian fishing industry and

<sup>1</sup> Regulations concerning qualifications and certificates of personnel on Norwegian ships, fishing vessels and mobile offshore units (<http://lovdata.no/for/sf/nh/xh-20111222-1523.html>).

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