

Maritime Communication: The Problem of Cross Cultural and Multilingual Crews

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ABSTRACT

An individual's cultural background can affect his communicative skills as well as his learning potential and capabilities.

A study by the Seafarers International Research Center at Cardiff University in 2001 have found that The main problem identified by seafarers working with multinational crews related to communication and particularly to the social aspects of communication. On the other hand, Crew members are the most important element to the safe and efficient working of ships Therefore, the importance of establishing a common language on board ships has to be recognized. However, much of this new emphasis in education is focused only on the vocabulary and grammar of a language. It fails to perform other important aspects of communication, such as the context of an utterance, the speed of delivery and nuances of body language as well as common rules of proximity.

As crew members of one ship can belong to various nationalities, they are bound to face certain difficulties in communication, in an environment where misconstruing a meaning can lead to accidents in the performance of various tasks on board ships. However, receiving a comprehensive education and training in cross cultural differences can help crew members reach a common ground of understanding, thus ensuring safer and effective ships. Addressing the problems of communication between multilingual and multicultural ship crew members, and studying the problems that may arise due to cross cultural differences are important aspects for consideration in any education programmes.

Maritime instructors and other related organizations can obviously assist in this education and training process, since they deal with seafarers from various cultures.

Multicultural education can play an important role in promoting better communication for crew belong to various cultures and nationalities.

Resolving this problem can be accomplished by encouraging Administrations to enforce regulations of the related conventions and codes and by ensuring that companies familiarize their crew with traditions of various nationalities, thus paving the way for better understanding and cooperation among them. Likewise, maritime instructors should possess sufficient knowledge on cultural differences.

1. Introduction

Communication has existed with the existence of mankind, perhaps even before that. Human beings depend on some form of communication in order to conduct their daily transactions, or every day routines. Merchant ships throughout the world have been known to employ multinational crews ever since the second half of the 20th Century. Thus a ships crew world include seafarers from various nationalities and cultures. Sometimes the officers would be from the shipowners country, junior officers from a third world country and ratings from another third world country. Of the 1.2 million seafarers in the world possibly about two-thirds of the world merchant fleet have adopted multinational crews. One in ten ships operates with crews composed of five or more nationalities (Erol, K., T. Lane, and H. Sampson 2001)

On board ships misunderstandings occur when there is a failure in communication between seamen of different nationalities, when intentions, attitudes and actions can be misconstrued. Such misunderstandings can also arise between crew members of the same nationality but from different places, ages and disciplines.

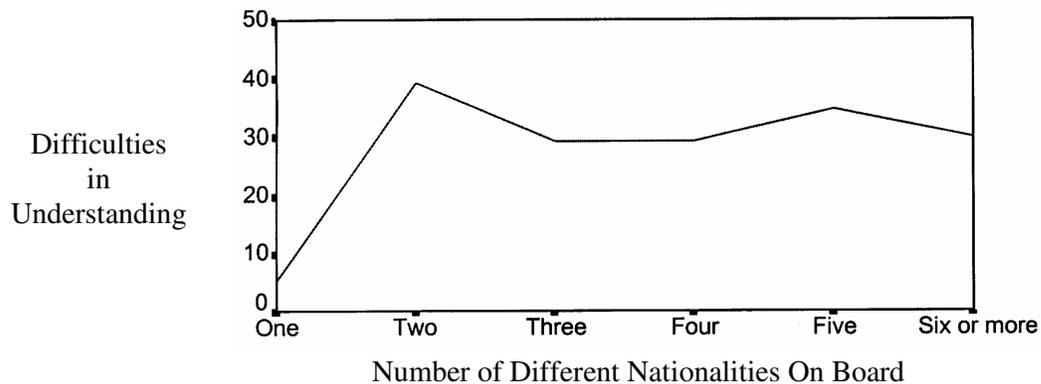


Figure 1: Difficulties in crew understanding

This paper discusses the various problems faced by seafarers when communicating with other members of their crew. The proper use of English or any other common language used in the maritime context will not be discussed. However, focus will be given to other aspects of communication which are usually ignored. This paper offers the requires knowledge for multinational crew ships, and may serve as a useful basis for the formulation of relevant training programs.

2. The Message Analysis

When two people communicate usually one is a sender of a message and the other is a receiver. When the sender sends his message for the receiver he receives feedback. The feedback might be non verbal communication. Thus the listener also sends a message back to the speaker whether he speaks or not. When people come from different cultural backgrounds, the message as well as the feedback are often affected by cultural barriers thus hindering the understanding of those messages conveyed.

The impact of a message on the receiver derives from the words used, (grammar and pronunciations), which amount to 7% of the message, and from how the words are used, (speech delivery) which amounts to 38% and 55% on other non-verbal forms of expression, (body language). (See Figure 2)

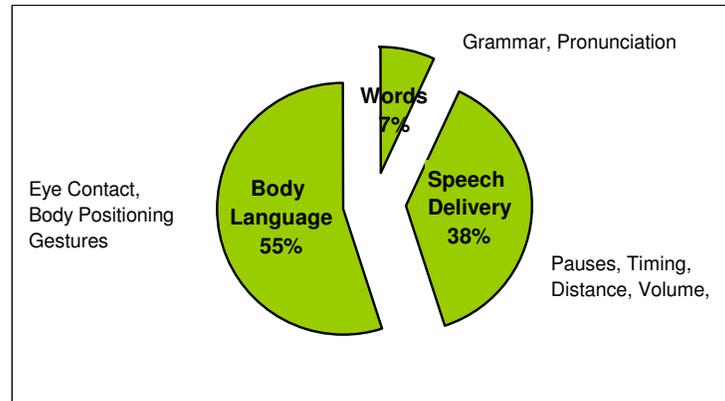


Figure 2: Analysis of impact of the message on the receiver

3. Cultural Barriers

Speech delivery and body gestures are the metamessage of the words being spoken. This metamessage gives the words their full meaning by providing a context. In a learning process not only are the words of the learned, but also the metamessage. Often it is these nuances and metamessages that are the barriers to communication across cultures (Dzigan, J 1998). When the cultural background of seafarers are different the nuances and metamessages are also different. Consequently, communication barriers will exist between the seafarers and would affect the efficiency and safety on board ships.

3.1 Collective and Individualistic Cultures

A group's view of society whether it is individualistic or collective can affect communication as well. Individualistic cultures tend to emphasize the success of the individual. People from this background are outspoken and tend to impose on others.

Western Europe exemplifies individualistic cultures. Collective cultures, on the other hand, see group goals as most important. People from collective cultures tend to be less outspoken, and are less likely to impose on others. Asia, Africa, Latin America and the Arab world exemplify collective societies. This has implications on board ships of multi-nationality crews (Hovemyr, A. 2001)

3.2 The Speed and Rhythm of Communication

Another aspect of variety between languages of different cultures is the speed and rhythm of an utterance. In some cultures language is spoken rapidly. Crews from such cultures can adapt to each others rapid speech. They can interrupt each other or finish each others sentences. The problem arises, however, when some crew members come from cultures of a slower pace of speech. A fast speaker might think the slow paced one is unresponsive or even slow witted, while the slow speaker might think that the fast one is domineering and not interested in what others have to say. The information conveyed about each person is not intentional, and quite separate from the words that are spoken.

This rhythm of the language will have an effect not only in the work environment on board ships, but also in the maritime student/instructor environment. Instructors who speak too fast can fail to give students from slower paced language groups time to understand the lessons. For example, an instructor will ask a question then answer himself after a short pause, thinking that the students can not grasp the lesson. While the students feels that the instructor does not wish him to answer the question since he does not allow him enough time to respond. On the contrary a slow paced instructor may make the fast paced student feel bored. Again we find that the information communicated between student and instructor has nothing to do with the actual spoken words (Badawi, E. 2002).

3.3 Tone of Voice

Tone and pitch are other nuances of the language that are acquired during the language acquisition process. Confusion can result when there is interaction between an individual from a soft spoken evenly modulated tonal culture and a crew from a background with wide ranges of tones. The even toned individual when listening to the widely modulated crew may view them as emotionally out of control, while the crew may view him as impassive and overbearing. Evidence of such cross cultural communication problems can be found in many of the negotiation sessions of international conferences (Porter, K. 1999).

3.4 Volume of Voice

The volume of voice in another communication variant. For example, South East Asia crews use a lower volume in their speech, while some European Mediterranean and Arab countries may raise their voices when emphasizing certain points in their messages, or when talking to someone at some distance. Thus an Asian crew can perceive someone from a loud volume culture to be angry, while the lower volume Asians may be perceived as timid and non-assertive. Moreover, giving orders by raising the voice can make the crew lose face, thus creating a tense atmosphere on boardships (Badawi, E. 2002).

3.5 Pausing in Speech

Crew members who speak without pauses can be seen as not allowing the listener enough time to respond, and may be regarded as disrespectful.

Conversely, if too much of a pause is given the speaker can be seen as having nothing to say. Thus different cultures have different lengths of time for pauses. Some cultures may have several minutes, others a fraction of a second, and still others no pause at all, and it might even be considered appropriate to finish another person's sentence. However, a pause can demonstrate in many nations that what is being said by one person is given careful consideration by his listener (Dzigan, J 1998).

3.6 Gestures and Eye Contact

Eye contact can play a positive role in some cultures conveying honesty and openness, in other cultures it can have negative implications conveying intrusiveness and impoliteness.

Physical gestures can have great significance for people working on board ships. A study of on board communication of multilingual and multicultural crews discovered that differences in gestures can create communication problems. As an example we will consider the way different cultures use gestures to convey yes or no. To say yes Americans and Egyptians move their heads up and down, while Indians and Pakistanis move their heads slowly right to left horizontally. To say no Americans move their heads from left to right, Egyptians move their heads from right to left and click their tongues. Saudi Arabia citizens tip their head backwards and click their tongues (Porter, K. 1999)

3.7 Organization of Information

European nations among other cultures organize and present information by first presenting a topic then following it up with examples. Some Asian nations, however, present examples first then build up to the main topics. Thus European nations let others know immediately what they want to say, and they may perceive the Asians as not getting to the point when they use their more circular logic.

3.8 Direct and Indirect Communication

Certainly, absolutely, positively, get to the point are the common words used by direct communication people. People with indirect styles are seen by direct communicators as beating around the bush or evasive. With regard to the indirect speaker, the direct speaker appears to be know it all, and insensitive to the world around them.

3.9 Dialect Varieties

One language can have a number of dialects, thus people of the same country can misunderstand each other if they do not speak the same dialect. Similarly a foreign language can be spoken with various dialects imposed on it.

4. Suggested Solutions

A persons view of the world is affected by a rather complicated matrix that includes factors such as personal backgrounds, experiences, personal values, gender and ethnic group. Thus one event will be viewed differently according to a persons cultural matrix. Crew members are not aware of the existence of such a cultural matrix since it is a normal part of their communicative abilities and make up. Stereotyping can further complicate such a situation, as it is too sensitive a topic to discuss with people from other cultures who sometimes may be the perpetrators of such stereotyping.

People working in the maritime industry can contribute to solving cross cultural communication problems among crew members.

4.1 The Role of Senior Officers on Board Ship

The issue of hierarchy is significant for seafarers as they are educated in schools within a hierarchy and when they work on ships again they find a rigid hierarchy. They react to authority in the ships environment the same way they have learned in their native culture. Senior officers need to be able to consider these cultural differences in order to gain the maximum cooperation of the crew. They may have to vary their management style according to those they manage. It would be useful for senior officers to summarize job discussions to keep their orders in very brief sentences, thus ensuring that the crew hear one another correctly. Moreover, sometimes safety demands that certain important orders should be repeated word for word to eliminate any possible misunderstanding.

4.2 Maritime Instructors

Maritime instructors must be patient and observant and allow more time for a response from students and must not interrupt them when they are speaking and treat them with respect. They should realize that differences in communication styles must be dealt with using great flexibility and understanding. Instructors urge that anti-discrimination policies should be adopted in the class room, and that the circulation of material reinforcing national stereotypes should be avoided

4.3 Shipping Companies

Many companies had originally introduced mixed nationality crews to cut costs and stay competitive, such strategies had unexpected benefits, particularly in relation to teamwork. Employers were generally found to be pleasantly surprised by the performance of multi national crews and compared these favorably with their previous experiences of single nationality complements. However, there were sometimes problems where there were only two or three nationalities on board. In such circumstances crews seemed to be divided more strongly on the lines of nationality and sometimes occupational hierarchies were re-aligned on board to coincide with nationality rather than rank (Erol, K., T. Lane, and H. Sampson 2001).

Companies when employing crews on board their ships should take into consideration their cultural backgrounds and aim in selecting nationalities that can effectively cooperate with other in the work environment.

4.4 Administrations

The Standard of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping of Seafarers (STCW 95) convention, has stated that the administration should bear in mind the significance of communication and language skills in maintaining safety of life and property at sea and in preventing marine pollution. Given the international character of the maritime industry, the reliance on voice communications from ship to ship and ship to shore, the increasing of multinational crews, and the concern that crew members should be able to communicate with passengers in an emergency, adoption of a common language for maritime communications would promote safe practice by reducing the risk of human error in communicating essential information.

In may 1997 the International Maritime Organization (IMO) released the Standard Marine Communication Phrases which regulate communication at sea. These phrases are that important that it should to learn and train, Administrations and related companies need to regulate and insure that their seafarers have complete knowledge of the phrases

5. Conclusion

Communication is a message that is used all the time in organization. The difficulty is that, this message used without too much thought, to describe very different issues. The problem lies in the fact that people usually interpret communication in the context of their own culture. Most of them are not able to stand back from their conversations with people from other cultures

In critical situation communications could become a decisive factor in saving human life. In a case of emergency, communication problems between crew members can make the situation worse. And these problems are really typical in multi-national crews, where the mother tongue differs from the maritime command language English. Due to misunderstandings and ambiguity less critical situations have already turned to tragic catastrophes.

The multicultural character of crews causes additional communication problems and challenges. Not only the communication in a common language demanded by the International Safety Management (ISM) Code but also the interpretation of verbal commands and their responses are often very different. Some of the reasons for this dilemma can be explained with varying levels of knowledge, cultural differences as well as the relations between rules and hierarchical structures.

Accelerated by new aspects of the internationalization of seafaring, new demands arose for better training and education on board as well as ashore. So far, new methods for training and education of multicultural communication have been introduced to various industries but are still rarely to find in the maritime industry. It is hoped that with the improving multilingual communication education and training standards, crew will be unambiguous and uniting internationally in achieving a common performance standard.

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