

Reducing intercultural communication barriers between seafarers with different cultural backgrounds

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Abstract

Safe operation of vessels depends on effective and efficient maritime communication, which requires seafarers to communicate linguistically, cross-culturally, and interpersonally. This study investigated cross-cultural communication barriers and factors involved in maritime communication. Chinese and foreign seafarers, pilots, shore staffs, “seafarer” students and maritime educators were invited to participate in the study. Both quantitative and qualitative research approaches were used. The results showed that linguistic competence, cross-cultural competence, interpersonal relationship competence, and psychological quality, were all indispensable and worked together to contribute to the success of maritime communication. These findings can shed light on maritime education and training. In order to make seafarers cross-culturally more competent, the cultural aspects should be incorporated into the maritime English teaching curriculum.

Keywords: cross-cultural communication, communication barriers, cross-cultural competence, interpersonal relationship, maritime communication

1 Introduction

Maritime communication competence includes linguistic competence and cross-cultural competence. However, in maritime English teaching, the cross-cultural aspects are not given adequate attention. Usually it is the language per se that is

taught, while the cultural aspects of communication are seldom touched upon. The present English teaching curriculum for non-native speakers is inadequate to meet the needs of the globalized shipping industry. The Maritime English teaching process should be optimized to make students linguistically and cross-culturally more competent. This paper focuses particularly on cultural barriers and factors involved in maritime communication that could inform teaching practices.

2 Theoretical background

2.1 Cross-cultural communication and cross-cultural barriers in the maritime context

Kramsch [1] states that cross-cultural communication refers to the meeting of two cultures or two languages across the political boundaries of nation. Any interaction between people with different cultural identities is cross-cultural communication. Communicative competence is seen in terms of cross-cultural understanding, intercultural and critical communicative competence[2]. Devito [3] maintains that nonverbal messages and their meaning, such as the appropriate use of time and space, touch, eye contact, eye avoidance, facial expressions, body language, body distance, paralanguage and silence, etc. all contribute to successful communication.

With their varied cultural backgrounds, “ships’ crews have never been so nationally, culturally, or linguistically diverse”[4]. Although in maritime communication, to a large extent, technical terms are used, it is cross-cultural communication in the maritime context and very often involves at least two cultures. In previous studies on maritime communication, the focus was mostly on the training of linguistic competence and the importance of English[5]. Attention was paid to the formation of cross-cultural competence[6], cultural differences[7], and multilingual crews[4]. However, few studies have been conducted on cross-cultural communication barriers and cultural factors.

According to Jandt [8], cross-cultural communication barriers involve anxiety, assuming similarity instead of difference, ethnocentrism, stereotypes and prejudice, nonverbal misinterpretations and language. In the maritime context, communication barriers may lead to disastrous consequences.

2.2 Teaching of target language and target culture

Language and culture are two aspects of an entity and are interdependent. As “second language learning is often second culture learning”[9], the cultural aspects must not be neglected in teaching. Since the goal of language teaching is to help language learners communicate accurately and appropriately in the target language, both linguistic forms and the context in which communication takes place should be taught. In maritime education, besides teaching the language itself, language teachers should also acquaint students with the target culture.

This will help to reduce cross-cultural communication barriers, and make them communicate competently both linguistically and cross-culturally.

3 Current study

3.1 Methodology

3.1.1 Research design

The questionnaire designed for the current study covered participants' personal information, and surveyed cross-cultural barriers and factors involved in maritime communication, and suggestions for maritime education. The aim was to address the following three research questions:

1. What cross-cultural communication barriers exist in maritime communication?
2. What cultural factors are involved in maritime communication?
3. What is their significance for maritime English curriculum development?

The questionnaire had 18 multiple-choice statements, eleven of which had a choice for open-ended answers in case some factors had been left out. Four statements were on cross-cultural communication barriers and the occurrence of misunderstanding and conflicts caused by the barriers. Five statements were on participants' views on cultural factors. There were three questions for narrative answers:

1. In your communication with seafarers from other countries, what kind of barriers have you encountered?
2. As far as communication is concerned, what do you suggest should be included in the curriculum for pre-service training for seafarers apart from language?
3. What do you think could be done to improve communication at sea apart from English language teaching to marine navigation and engineering students?

These questions aimed to obtain from experienced seafarers suggestions on maritime education and training. There were two versions of the questionnaire, one in English and the other in Chinese. The statements and questions for both versions were identical.

3.1.2 Methods

The survey was conducted in China and Australia from November 2004 to March 2005. Sampling was targeted at seafarers with experience of being multi-national crewmembers, and staff interacting with foreign ships' crews. Electronic and hard copies of the questionnaire were distributed to those available, and responses were received in the same way. In total 112 responses were received. For the narrative answers, five categories of barriers to communication were determined. These were labelled as language barriers, cultural barriers,

psychological barriers, personality and interpersonal relationships. The labelled categories of qualitative data were added to SPSS database as variables. Each mention in the narrative of a item from a particular category was labelled as stated. Both the quantitative and qualitative data were analysed using SPSS 12.0.1 for windows to obtain frequency distributions. The open-ended responses were absent from the database as relatively few specified responses were obtained. They were included in the findings of the research paper.

3.2 Participants

In totally 112 people participated in the study. More than half were seafarers, most of whom were ships' officers. The others were pilots, shore staffs, maritime educators, teachers at Dalian Maritime University and Australian Maritime College (AMC), who were also ships' officers, and "seafarer" students registered at AMC for the advanced diploma of ships' Masters. The shore staffs were mostly Chinese marine surveyors. A large proportion of participants (63.4%) had been a multinational crewmember. The participants were from nine nations, mostly from China and Australia. More than half (56.3%) had more than five years' at-sea service and 58.9% of them been in higher education.

3.3 Findings

3.3.1 Cultural barriers in the maritime context

The results of the study indicated that cross-cultural communication barriers do exist in maritime communication, and that they lead to communication failure. As Table 1 shows, the majority of respondents believed that language barriers occurred either most frequently, frequently or sometimes. This indicates that language barriers constitute the biggest obstacle in maritime communication. With regard to cultural barriers only 4.5% thought these occurred most frequently, while a large percentage believed they occurred either frequently or sometimes. Personality also plays its part in communication, as 6.3% thought personality problems arose most frequently, 16.1% thought it arose frequently and 35.7% thought it arose sometimes. Interpersonal relations problems showed similar frequencies to personality, although less saw it as most frequent and more saw it as rare. Opinions differed greatly as to psychological barriers, as 8.9% thought it frequently caused communication failure and 25% thought this happened sometimes, while 41.1% thought this rarely happened. A relatively small proportion (11.6%) believed other factors like age differences, cultural differences and unclear speech resulted in communication failure.

Table 1: Barriers Causing Communication Failure

	NS	MF	F	S	R	N	T (%)
Language barriers	6.3	26.8	33.0	23.2	10.7		100
Culture barriers	14.3	4.5	26.8	33.0	18.8	2.7	100
Psychological barriers	19.6	2.7	8.9	25.0	41.1	2.7	100
Personality	17.0	6.3	16.1	35.7	18.8	6.3	100
Interpersonal relations	19.6	.9	17.9	33.0	25.9	2.7	100
Other factors	68.8	.9	2.7	8.0	7.1	12.5	100

NS = Not Stated MF = Most Frequently F = Frequently S = Sometimes R = Rarely
N = Never T = Total

These communication barriers can lead to the cross-cultural conflicts and misunderstanding which occur at work, when exchanging ideas, in both everyday life and during emergencies. Cultural barriers leading to misunderstanding include not knowing other nations' customs and habits, ways of thinking, ways of expressing ideas, rules of behaviour, social values and body language. Speed of speaking English, cultural differences in showing agreement, loss of face concern, not understanding crewmembers' cultural, historical and social background cause misunderstanding as well.

A high percentage (58%) of the participants responded to the question: What kind of communication barriers have you encountered in your communication with seafarers from other countries? The vast majority (91%) reported having had language barriers, 23% cultural barriers, and 9.5% other barriers. As to cultural barriers, the most frequently mentioned were lack of knowledge of social customs of other nations, cultural differences and cultural preferences, disrespect of officers for ratings, reluctance to admit incomprehension of a message, which caused great difficulty in radio communication. Next was lack of consideration for the other communicator such as speaking fast and using difficult words. Misunderstanding of body language was also a barrier causing conflicts.

In conclusion, the findings indicate that in maritime communication, apart from language barriers, cultural barriers constitute the biggest obstacle. They result in distrust, conflicts, misunderstanding and even communication failures. In addition, great differences in opinion existed between Australian seafarers and pilots and Chinese seafarers. The former were more concerned about cultural barriers while the latter were more concerned about language barriers. The cause would be worth studying in the future.

3.3.2 Cultural factors involved in maritime communication

When asked about their opinions on important cultural factors in maritime communication, an overwhelming majority of the respondents agreed that verbal communication was important (see Table 2). More than half agreed that cultural knowledge, appropriate ways of using English and nonverbal communication were important. Only 3.6% believed that factors like use of hand signals were important.

Table 2: Opinions on Important Factors in Maritime Communication

	NS	SA	A	U	D	SD	T (%)
Verbal communication	1.8	53.6	42.0	2.7			100
Nonverbal communication such as facial expressions, body language and gestures, etc	12.5	21.4	36.6	22.3	5.4	1.8	100
Knowledge of each other's customs, habits, social values, ways of thinking, etc.	11.6	11.6	44.6	29.5	1.8	.9	100
Appropriate ways of using English	13.4	15.2	42.9	22.3	5.4	.9	100
Others	83.9	3.6		3.6	1.8	7.1	100

NS= Not Stated SA = Strongly Agree A = Agree U = Uncertain D = Disagree
SD = Strongly Disagree T = Total

Table 3 shows respondents' opinions on necessary cultural knowledge. Most respondents agreed that knowledge of other nations' rules of behaviour, ways of thinking, religions, cuisine culture and eating habits were necessary for multinational crewmembers to live and work harmoniously. Accepting other people's cultures, having empathy and sanitary practice were also necessary. Knowledge of other nations' native languages and dressing habits were regarded as less important.

Table 3: Opinions on Cultural Knowledge

	NS	SA	A	U	D	SD	T (%)
Some of their native language	9.8	18.8	30.4	16.1	18.8	6.3	100
Their religion	9.8	17.0	47.3	20.5	5.4		100
Their ways of thinking	8.9	17.9	51.8	18.8	2.7		100
Their dressing habits	12.5	8.0	30.4	24.1	15.2	9.8	100
Their cuisine culture and eating habits	11.6	11.6	50.0	20.5	4.5	1.8	100
Their rules of behaviour	8.0	26.8	53.6	10.7	.9		100
Others	70.5	5.4	2.7	10.7	1.8	8.9	100

NS= Not Stated SA = Strongly Agree A = Agree U = Uncertain D = Disagree
SD = Strongly Disagree T = Total

Table 4 gives respondents' opinions on attitudes in communication. Most of them believed that for multinational crewmembers to work and live harmoniously, mutual respect for each other's religions, customs and opinions, and appreciation for each other's work achievements were important. They also believed that multinational crewmembers must mind their wording and be tactful when pointing out a mistake at work.

Most respondents considered it important for seafarers with different cultural backgrounds to have cultural awareness and knowledge of cross-cultural relations. In conclusion, cultural knowledge of other nations, understanding of body language, cultural awareness, knowledge of cross-cultural relations, right attitudes toward other cultures and peoples are all important factors involved in maritime communication, and need attention.

Table 4: Opinions on attitudes in Maritime Communication

	NS	SA	A	U	D	SD	T (%)
respect each other's religion	7.1	49.1	40.2	3.6			100
respect each other's opinions	8.0	33.9	48.2	8.9	.9		100
respect each other's customs	10.7	42.0	41.1	5.4	.9	10.7	100
appreciate each other's work achievements	10.7	29.5	46.4	13.4	10.7	29.5	100
mind their wording and be tactful when pointing out a mistake at work	11.6	31.3	46.4	8.0	2.7		100
others	67.9	5.4	6.3	9.8	.9	9.8	100

NS= Not Stated SA = Strongly Agree A = Agree U = Uncertain D = Disagree
SD = Strongly Disagree T = Total

3.3.3 Participants' suggestions

For seafarers' pre-service training and maritime education, the participants offered valuable suggestions. It was suggested that students and seafarers have cross-cultural competence, including cultural adaptability, patience and tolerance, good manners and social etiquette, sincerity and affinity, respect and mutual understanding, and the ability to analyse and handle interpersonal relationship. It was also suggested that the following aspects be introduced: cultural differences, world religions, international tension, conflict resolution, nonverbal communication such as standard hand signals for port use, understanding body language and their different use in different cultures, different communication modes, and general understanding of officer/rating relationships in different cultures. It was also recommended that attention be paid to cultural differences when forming multinational crews. Cultural differences between multinational crewmembers should not be too great. Within crewmembers, there should not be a dominant nationality, in order to avoid clashes. In addition, it must be noted that Chinese marine surveyors all suggested offering psychological training to students, especially training them to be open-minded and confident.

3.4 Limitations of the study

The study had its limitations. Due to time constraints and distance from the possible participants, no pilot survey was carried out. The survey took place only in China and Australia, so the opinions received did not include those from other parts of the world. Additionally, the scope of the respondents' ethnic backgrounds was very limited. If the research had been conducted otherwise, by observing real at-sea communication, or by interviews, more data might have been obtained. Further study is therefore needed to follow up this research.

4 Recommendations

In accordance with the research findings, in maritime English teaching equal importance should be attached to different aspects of maritime communication.

More attention should be given to cultural aspects. To make students and seafarers cross-culturally more competent and to reduce cross-cultural communication barriers, the research suggests that maritime education and training should include culture teaching and training in the curriculum. Such courses as cross-cultural communication, interpersonal relationship, and cross-cultural conflict resolution should be offered to students. Students should have cultural training and psychological training to make them cross-culturally more competent, psychologically stronger and more adaptable to different cultures. In addition, auxiliary means of communication should be employed to assist in communication. Standard sign language for maritime communication should be framed, decreed and enforced by the International Maritime Organization.

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Acknowledgements

I should like to thank Mr Michael Julian, who helped distribute the questionnaire to harbours in Australia, which contributed greatly to the study; Mr Ulf Schriever for inviting colleagues and students at Australian Maritime College to participate in the study. The assistance of my colleagues and alumni in China is also appreciated. My final thanks go to Prof. Don Webb at Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology, Australia, who offered suggestions to improve the paper.