

Steering among a Sea of Multicultural Islands

IOANA RALUCA VIȘAN

MIRCEA GEORGESCU

Mathematical Sciences and Humanities

Constanța Maritime University

104 Mircea cel Batran Street, 900663, Constanta

ROMANIA

ioanaralucavisan@yahoo.com; <http://www.cmu-edu.eu/>
mircea_georgescu@yahoo.com; <http://www.cmu-edu.eu/>

Abstract: - Effective communication skills, as well as intercultural management skills are necessary prerequisites for modern seafarers operating in a multicultural environment. That is why, one of the main challenges facing the current maritime sector lies in the cultural and linguistic diversity and in how to develop its strengths and eliminate its weaknesses. The international shipping companies are calling for objectives whose purpose is not only to ensure safety, increase security and protect the marine environment, but also to promote unity amongst seafarers and respect diversity on board merchant vessels. Since most of the world's merchant fleet is operated by multilingual crews, the demand to explore and encourage intercultural competence in seafarers has also become the present concern of several MET institutions. Focusing on a survey-based research questionnaire conducted within Constanta Maritime University, the paper aims to emphasize and analyze why it is important that our seafarers grow into onboard intercultural managers.

Key-Words: - multilingual crews, maritime English, communicative competence, safety, cultural awareness teaching

1 Introduction

A survey made on several topics presented at IMEC conferences over the last few years reveal some changes in terms of content. Although there is a high number of academic papers and workshops dealing with communication on board and English as a lingua franca of seafarers, the growing awareness of the intercultural issues' importance seems to gain prominence. Understanding the seafarer's role in intercultural communication on board has caught the attention of several researchers in the maritime English field (i.e. Lutsenko & Stok-Knol 2009; Iakovaki & Prougoulaki 2010; Okon Joe 2010; Noble, Vangehuchten & van Parys 2011; Horck 2011). Academic and training circles encourage the interest in the subject of cultural awareness in order to incorporate intercultural competences in the maritime curricula.

It is a well known fact that people may assume that their foreign friends or colleagues see the world exactly as they see it, which of course is rarely true. Within a closed and stressful environment similar to that of a ship, these assumptions can cause misunderstandings and even lead to conflicts. In this respect, cultural awareness along with a good command of English is a 'must have' for a multilingual crew. Since culture and communication

are interconnected and inseparable from each other, the focus must be on gaining intercultural communicative competence on board merchant ships. To reiterate, this aspect has remained in the forefront for understanding cross-cultural relationships among seafarers; however, being culturally aware does not necessarily mean being an expert in intercultural communication as cultural awareness involves understanding and acceptance of cultural differences, increasing tolerance and encouraging cultural diversity.

2 Intercultural Communicative Competence on Board

Having all these aspects in view, we consider that intercultural communicative competence on board represents a seafarer's set of complex abilities required to perform effectively and appropriately when interacting with other seafarers who are linguistically and culturally different. Seafarers' communication competency is a prerequisite for understanding the role that communication plays in the global maritime market.

A communication competency approach offers an excellent background for building a more advanced model during conflict episodes in the intercultural

maritime environment. Apart from cultural knowledge, language proficiency, and ethnocentrism, the role of emotions in intercultural adjustment is also of paramount importance, since the ability to regulate emotion is one of the keys to effective intercultural communication on board ship. We also consider that the role of emotion in intercultural communication episodes must be regarded as a gatekeeper ability allowing seafarers to engage in successful conflict resolution that leads to effective intercultural communication on board.

2.1 Maritime English in the multilingual setting

The ability to communicate in a common language is the most important factor determining the success of a multilingual crew, regardless of what nationalities are on board or how many. According to Chirea-Ungureanu & Visan (2011: 105) “the more seafarers can understand each other, the more likely they are to run not just an efficient and safe ship, but a happy ship on which personal and working relationships can be built up”.

In agreement with Kahveci and Samson (<http://www.itfseafarers.org>) we consider that fluency in maritime English is crucial for both maritime officers and ratings in order to safely operate multilingually crewed vessels. At IMEC22 Cole and Trenkner (2010) brought forth the idea of “raising the maritime English bar” by referring to Manila Amendments (STCW) and improving standards in Maritime English. This means that all seafarers must attempt to promote “good communication through sound promotion of intercultural skills” (Noble, Vangehuchten & Van Parys (2011: 146).

According to Okon Joe (2010: 250) the negative effect of a multi lingual crew rests in communication difficulties. Most accidents at sea are attributed to the improper use of a common language. Among the maritime accidents often cited as examples of communication barriers are ‘Sea Empress’, ‘Federal St. Clair’, etc. This situation is not expected to leave the stage of the shipping industry in the foreseeable future because the company managers will keep on employing sailors from the developing countries as they get low salaries while seafarers from the Western countries are much better paid.

2.2 Efficient communication at sea is a “must”

Competent seafarers must have a vested interest in maintaining the rules of social conduct on board as

they will become aware of the fact that the ability to pursue their own goals will depend on the freedom of their mates to follow their aims. How seafarers effectively achieve their goals is a vital part of the global maritime environment. The seafarers’ attempt to reach their effectiveness is related to their ability to improve their communication proficiency and reduce communication barriers. However, communication proves to be frequently problematical resulting in an inability to communicate. This in turn, can lead to inefficiency in terms of the seafarers’ work on board or even to serious breakdowns in safety. Research done by de la Campa Portela (2006) shows that failures in communication have serious consequences for safety at sea and are still often regarded as contributory causes of maritime accidents. Additionally, we consider that social issues are also linked to effective communication. Noble, Vangehuchten & Van Parys (2011: 132) believe that “seafarers who are not able to converse with their fellow crew members experience feelings of solitude and isolation”. The problem of communication on board can be solved by adequately using English as a common language. With regard to this, the maritime community has rightly invested in the linguistic aspects of communication by developing the IMO Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP) and by making attempts to place leadership skills and group communication (Maritime Resource Management) on the maritime curriculum, as seen in the 2010 Manila Amendments to the Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping (STCW). The IMO SMCP have been designed to facilitate safety at sea; nevertheless, research has demonstrated that this standardized language is sparingly used in practice.

3 Development of the “Intercultural Communication on Board” Course

Questions concerning how navigators should be effective in their discourse with their mates outside their boundaries lead to the development of the *intercultural communication on board* course. We strongly believe that this course will help our students function outside the script to understand the values and beliefs behind behaviour and ultimately, to make them realize how other different people think. Constanta Maritime University is open to several students’ placement programmes such as Erasmus, and Leonardo da Vinci that help our future maritime officers to find the “magic pill” for crossing cultures on their own. Several placement

report questionnaires have been conducted and analyzed at Constanta Maritime University (Chirea-Ungureanu & Visan 2011) and the results indicate that sometimes to opt for a multicultural crew is to favour the well known “technique of control, divide and rule”. In this respect, the ability to communicate in an isolated and independent environment is crucial. Apart from the several placement report questionnaires developed in our institution, we have considered of utmost importance to come up with other important key questions (see subsection 3.1. below) related to intercultural communicative competence on board, questions that are especially connected to the introduction within the maritime curricula of the course on intercultural communication on board.

3.1 A survey-based questionnaire

The general question addressed in this study is concerned with the perception of students of Constanta Maritime University regarding the introduction of the “Intercultural Communication on Board Ship” course. This study attempts to answer to the following research question: Can a course on multicultural issues increase the seafarers’ competence?

The study was conducted at the English language Department in Constanta Maritime University, Romania. The participants in the study were one hundred students who had performed their on board training in multicultural crews. First, we explained to the students the intended goal. After explaining to them the tasks they would be required to perform, we assured them that confidentiality would be maintained. Each student was then given a questionnaire consisting of ten questions. The time allotted to answers was one hour. The questions included in the questionnaire were the following: (1) What nationality did you have to work with at sea?; (2) Have you come across any communication barriers?; (3) Can these communication barriers be put down to the linguistic aspect of maritime English in particular? (Can you give examples?); (4) Apart from language barriers, have you faced any other difficulties due to cultural diversity?; (5) Did you feel in your shoes working in a multicultural environment? If not what sort of problems did you meet with?; (6) Do seafarers need to know the culture of others while working in a multicultural environment?; (7) Do you think that there should be a course on communication skills and cultural awareness within Constanta Maritime University? Why? / Why not?; (8) Do you think a course on Intercultural Communication will be useful to improve the safety and the working environment on

board? Why? / Why not?; (9) Should this course be taken by ratings as well?; (10) What relevant topics should be included in the Intercultural Communication course? The outcome of the present survey is presented below.

3.1.1 Dissemination results

This section will deal with the participant’s responses to the questionnaire (see 3.1.). From the responses to the first question we made up a list of nationalities that Romanian seafarers had to interact with.

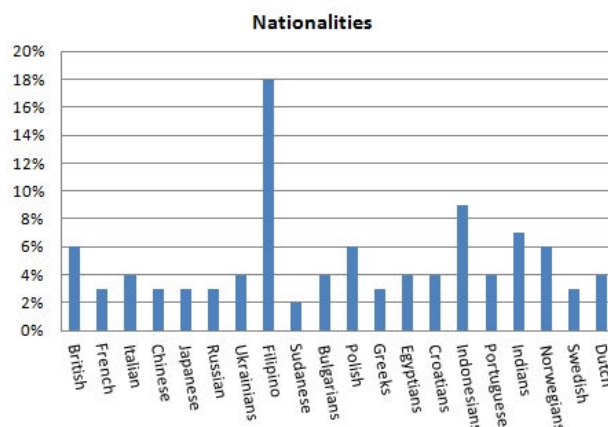


Fig.1

Therefore, as shown in Fig. 1, the proportion of the nationalities was the following: British (6%), French (3%), Italians (4%), Chinese (3%), Japanese (3%), Russian (3%), Ukrainians (4%), Filipino (18%), Sudanese (2%), Bulgarians (4%), Polish (6%), Greeks (3%), Egyptians (4%), Croatians (4%), Indonesians (9%), Portuguese (4%), Indians (7%), Norwegians (6%), Swedish (3%), Dutch (4%), etc. Answers to question number two reveal that 90% of the respondents did come across communication barriers. The next item pictures the most common linguistic barriers on board ships (see Fig. 2).

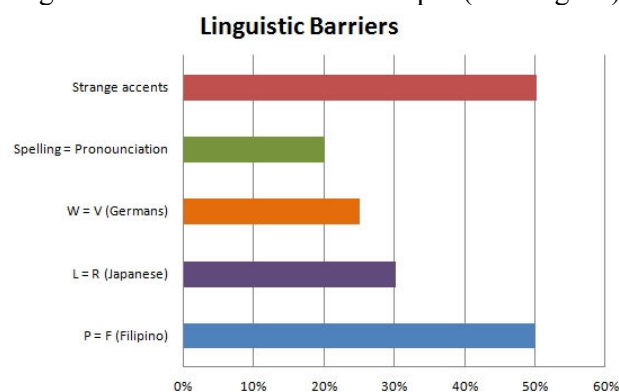


Fig.2

Thus, 50% of the respondents acknowledged linguistic barriers arising from: strange accents, improper use of multi-word lexical units, lack of a basic knowledge of English.

For example, 20% reported that when speaking English, Italian seafarers have a tendency to pronounce words and terms as they are spelled, so that ballast is /bɔlɔst/, guide is /wid/. So do Romanians. This is also true for loanwords borrowed from English as water, which is pronounced /vatɔr/ instead of /wɔtɔtə/.

On the other hand, 25% claimed that Germans pronounce English words beginning with a /w/ as /v/. This explains the mispronunciation of the English term winch as /vintʃ/. In accordance with 30% of the participants, Japanese tend to confuse /l/ and /r/ both in perception and production. This is because Japanese language does not make such a distinction (Takagi 2010: 199). Therefore, it is difficult for Japanese seafarers to identify the following minimally-paired words without context: pilot – pirate; ladder – rudder (id. ibid.). In a similar manner, terms and words such as rocket, rough, rate agreement would be perceived as lock it! laugh and late agreement. Another example is the substitution of [p] for [f] by the Filipino when pronouncing English words or terms containing /f/: fore which they pronounce /pore/, aft /apt/, funnel /punnel/, fender /pender/, fly-/ply/, fork as in fork lift would become /pork lift/ and funk hole /punk hole/. The given by the testees was 50%.

With regard to the improper usage of multi-word lexical units, a study by Visan & Georgescu (2011) suggests that collocational competence is an essential prerequisite for the overall mastery of Maritime English, perhaps one of the highest levels of linguistic proficiency that future maritime officers can attain. Answers to the fourth question show that cultural diversity can lead to a skewed perception of customs (Fig. 3).

Cultural Difficulties

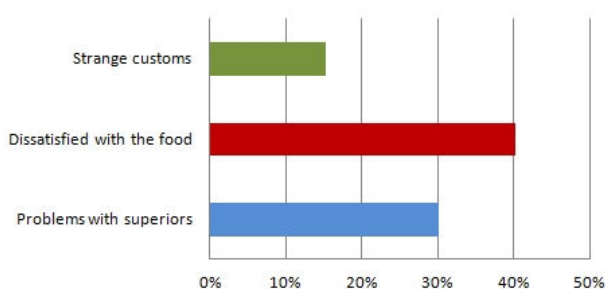


Fig.3

Strange customs have been noticed by fifteen percent (15%) of the respondents. For instance, the Sudanese males take foreigners by the hand when they feel like communicating something important which is unusual in Romania. It is said that the most important person on board is the cook. But what happens when he makes sweet meals or very spicy ones? Crew members of different nationalities will

feel very miserable that is why, 40% of the testees were dissatisfied with the food. The attitude of the master and chief engineer was thought to be bossy and arrogant by 30%.

Although Romanians are sociable and tolerant people 54% of them met with problems.

Responses to question number six reveal that 85% agreed that knowledge about other cultures is vital for their future work on board.

As for question number eight, 10% believe that the course will not be useful in improving the safety on board, on the ground that the safety regulations are strict and compulsory and everybody must comply with them.

Answers to question number nine show that 15% do not think that the course will improve in any way the relationships between ratings. Finally, a large number of students contributed to the contents of the project course (see Fig. 4).

Relevant topics for the course

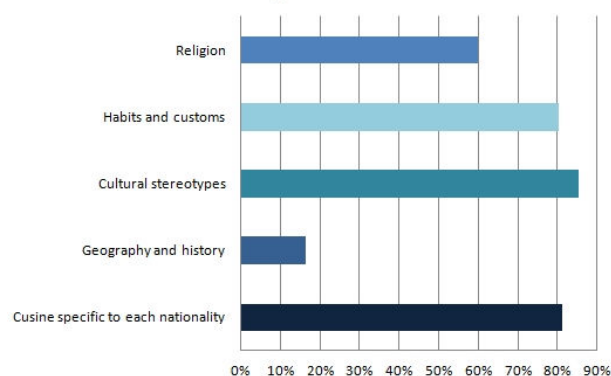


Fig.4

Thus, 60% suggested topics related to religion, while 80% favoured habits and customs, 85% requested lectures on cultural stereotypes; 16% are interested in geography and history; 81% considered that cuisine specific to each nationality should be included in the course.

3.2 Culturally responsive teaching

We consider that culturally responsive teaching is a key element with regard to embracing a diverse background of the crew members.

In full agreement with Gay (2000: 29) culturally responsive teaching implies the use of cultural knowledge, prior experiences, and performance styles of diverse nationality seafarers and makes learning more appropriate and effective. Culturally responsive teaching in the maritime field sets the following tasks prior to the compilation of the course: (a) involving maritime undergraduates who have onboard training in the construction of knowledge: questionnaires; having students work in

teams of mixed ability; providing authentic dialogues; raising students' awareness of the responsibility for their own learning; (b) Validation of information on board ship: Presentation of scenarios in front of a multicultural crew; case studies; getting a positive response from the target nationality in each scenario in regard to the authenticity of material; a final indoor review and revision in the light of the information received on board.

4 Conclusion

According to Noble, Vangehuchten & Van Parys (2011: 131) the maritime community "still harbours intercultural sceptics" however, "the majority of the stakeholders are pondering the best approaches to the subject" (id. *ibid.*). There is no doubt that effective communication at sea holds the key since it opens doors to achieving intercultural objectives as well as creating a harmonious and efficient working environment on board. The importance of the course on "Intercultural Communication On Board" reveals its vitality as part of merchant marine students' curricular content. A seafarer must be trained to demonstrate his ability to communicate effectively and to exchange information accurately. With a view to this, the maritime lecturers have to find the best way to describe how intercultural communication should be taught. The compilation of such a course is meant not only to educate students, but also strengthen their ability to study and comprehend the foreigners' heritage background. Maritime lecturers should help students understand traditional customs or events through the use of the following strategies: timelines, dioramas, story re-enactment, poster boards, pictures depicting an event, or re-write an ending to a story. Any of these interactive approaches to maritime learning about one's culture will make the lesson more interesting. The classroom activities can provide models of mutual respect across cultural, political, and religious boundaries. Therefore, it is noted that educators should not teach based on mistaken belief systems, but on student ability, needs, and cultural values that will foster a lasting educational foundation on all learners.

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