



# Indonesian Seafarers' Intercultural Communication Challenges With Multinational Crews

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**Abstract:** The current study investigated the intercultural communication challenges among Indonesian seafarers with foreign crews at international shipping companies. Data collection was conducted through a mixed-questionnaire method, with each questionnaire consisting of 10 items distributed in Google Forms to 171 respondents. The findings revealed that the language barrier was a significant issue among Indonesian seafarers to communicate and socialize with onboard multinational crews, which was mainly overcome through body language. Indonesian seafarers' acceptance of onboard diversity rendered them to be more sociable, which was identified as a positive attitude. However, it cannot be denied that the fact of low communicative competence has impacted social life interactions and work for some seafarers. Resultantly, pertinent Indonesian maritime education and training institutions should adequately prepare seafarers and cadets with relevant work skills and English linguistic competence. This research aims to shed new light on the development of maritime and seafarers' research.

**Keywords:** Intercultural Communication, Indonesian Seafarers, Diversity, Interaction, Language Barrier.

## Article History:

Received: 26-09-2022

Accepted: 09-12-2022

Publication: 08-03-2023

## Cite this article as:

Riyanto, B., Nurmala, E., Agustina, I., & Maidari, S., R. (2022). Indonesian Seafarers' Intercultural Communication Challenges With Multinational Crews. *Journal of Intercultural Communication*, 23(1), 76-81.  
[doi.org/10.36923/jicc.v23i1.92](https://doi.org/10.36923/jicc.v23i1.92)

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## 1. Introduction

Seafaring is a career with multicultural and language circumstances, which mainly occurs on a ship with individuals possessing different cultures, languages, customs, values, religions, and ethnicities. Seafarers perform various positions with respective workloads, responsibilities, and duties, such as officers, engineers, ratings, oilers, and chiefs, on passenger ships, including cruise ships. Life at sea is regarded as a career with significant challenges, namely uncondusive weather, massive storms, lethal accidents, separation from families, solitude, limited recreational activities, and lack of sleep, which would produce huge stressful conditions (Youssuf, 2015). As such, seafarers are not only required to be equipped with excellent and practical seamanship, such as navigation, stability, machinery, loading and unloading, and developing passage plans but also attain a sufficient ability to communicate in English to convey information at the workplace effectively. Effective communication would create high trust levels between colleagues and peers, which would result in mutual understanding, contentment, and safety (Galesic & Coslovich, 2019).

Good communication comprises clear and precise interaction between individuals, wherein a common language is a communication facilitator, especially English, the major maritime language (Horck, 2006). English competence is integral to all work aspects on board, such as radio communication, understanding work directives, and reporting and responding to emergencies. Nevertheless, effective onboard communication has become more challenging when seafarers come from multicultural backgrounds and multilingual backgrounds (Trenkner, 2009). With onboard communication via the English maritime terminology stipulated by Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP), English skills are vital to comprehend, communicating, and interact with multinational crews effectively. Generally, non-native English-speaking seafarers with limited linguistic competence in English encounter significant communication and interaction hurdles, which might engender higher hesitation and reticence levels in different interaction situations. (Chirea and Visan, 2011) Discovered that certain crews with limited linguistics skills occasionally avoided conversing or joking, which would lead to social isolation and exacerbation among seafarers with mental health issues, such as depression, when other crews became more intimate with one another in their social lives (Al-Sumait, Tryzna, Alkazemi, & Boone, 2022). Hence, this study sought to investigate the intercultural communication challenges encountered by Indonesian seafarers at international shipping companies.

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## 2. Literature Review

The intercultural communication issue is a primary topic in the era of rapid globalization and information technology development. Intercultural communication is introduced as the process of communication and interaction among individuals with different cultures, languages, values, norms, customs, and attitudes (Stewart, 1974). Learning and understanding intercultural communication could assist in avoiding communication misunderstandings emanating from differences in various cultures and languages (Piller, 2012). Moreover, intercultural communication involves individuals residing in diverse circumstances or interacting through social media who experience several chief challenges, including language barriers, unfamiliar customs and practices, and cultural variations in verbal and nonverbal communication, to achieve successful communication. Thus, the language barrier is identified as a major contributing factor to communication failure, which also occurs among individuals sharing the same language due to dissimilarities in accents, idiomatic expressions, and experiential equivalence (Jones & Quach, 2007). For example, Americans and Australians employ different vocabularies to explicate an item with different colloquialisms. In addition, an Australian might not comprehend a Scottish's utterances despite the communication being established in an identical language (Jandt, 2001).

The shipping or maritime industry contributes massively to human life across the globe by transporting life necessities from various locations via sea routes. Contemporarily, as Southeast Asian crews are dominant in operating merchant ships (Progoulaki & Roe, 2011), wherein most crews are non-native English speakers, significant obstacles in communication understanding are engendered (Jensen & Oldenburg, 2020). Similarly, the MARCOM project revealed that globalization caused 80% of the crew composition on global merchant ships to become multilingual and multi-ethnic (MARCOM, 1998), which indicated that cultural differences, such as different linguistic emphases and meanings for the same phrases and communication methods, would highly generate conflicts and accidents. Furthermore, a majority of seafarers consented that the language barrier was the major source of interaction and communication failure (Mellbey, & Carter, 2017; Ziarati et al., 2011). Communication would be more effective and comprehensible among seafarers sharing similar cultures compared to their counterparts with distinctive cultural backgrounds. For instance, Indonesian and Malaysian who are culturally and linguistically similar relatively, or individuals from the same ethnicity, such as Chinese, would possess numerous cultural, belief, and custom similarities, although residing in different countries. Therefore, communicative competence is critical to communication success among multinational seafarers (Hymes, 1972b; Nshom, Sadaf, & Khalimzoda, 2022).

Effective communication is important to safe navigation and seafarers' well-being, such as an increased sense of belonging and interpersonal relationship strengthening (Fan, 2017). Accordingly, English is a common language on board to bridge various life aspects, with adequate linguistic competence producing effective communication during job performance while reducing the solitude level on board through social interactions with other crews. Sampson and Ellis (2019) reported that 20% of seafarers perceived high solitude and isolation degrees on board. Specifically, Jensen and Oldenburg (2020) discovered numerous seafarers' negative psychological conditions, such as emotional exhaustion, burnout, increasing anxiety, depression, and discrimination, which could be owing to the presence of a domineering captain or hierarchical conflicts. Moreover, Schröder-Hinrichs (2010) demonstrated that 80% of accidents on board were due to human error, while another one-third were due to communication failure. To resolve the issues, the maritime communication terminology was developed by the SMCP organized by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) to ensure more precise and accurate communication without complex grammatical rules in elevating communication understanding on board (Pejaković, 2015).

Communication and socialization on board are contingent on external factors, apart from the importance of the SMCP terminology. Although linguistic competence is the foundation for understanding the SMCP terminology or daily social interactions, body language is also pivotal to communication among non-native English-speaking seafarers. Particularly, gestures would be frequently utilized when encountering significant challenges in producing proper English words. Nonetheless, body language might occasionally create misunderstanding when each country possesses its respective cultures and customs in response to body language. For example, in the United States of America, a smile refers to showing gratitude and greeting other individuals, while in Japan, a smile implies feelings of embarrassment, shame, and other unpleasant sentiments (Özüorçun, 2013). Meanwhile, in the United States, eye contact in a conversation serves as an indicator of honesty, attentiveness, and interest, while in other societies, such as Hispanic Asian, Middle-eastern, and native americans, believe gazing down another individual's eye contact is exhibiting respect in a conversation or communication (Adetunji & Sze, 2012).

## 3. Methodology

The present study was conducted in descriptive analysis by distributing a mixed questionnaire in Google Forms to 171 seafarers between June 30, 2022, and July 19, 2022. The recruited seafarers were employed at foreign shipping companies and on international voyages. This study aimed to investigate seafarers' experiences in onboard intercultural communication related to personal job duties and daily social interactions. The

questionnaire encompassed open-ended and closed-ended questions to garner more detailed information related to seafarers' feelings, opinions, and attitudes regarding work communication and social interaction on board. Foddy (1993) asserted that open-ended questions would enable respondents to express personal views without being persuaded by the researcher, compared to close-ended questions with predefined answers, which limited respondents' perspectives. Moreover, open-ended questions could avoid bias from suggested responses while exploring respondents' spontaneous opinions. Nevertheless, open-ended questions might reduce response numbers when respondents were reluctant to provide detailed personal views (Reja et al., 2003). The questionnaire consisted of 10 items, with all responses collected from open-ended questions coded into relevant categories. According to Krosnick (2018), a coding scheme would be pertinent to effective analysis when different responses from open questions were coded into similar groups or categories. All collected data were analyzed through the Statistical Packages for Social Science (SPSS) software.

#### 4. Findings

The findings discovered that more than 50% of respondents perceived the language barrier as the major cause of work and social interaction and communication difficulties with multinational onboard workers (see Table 1). Simultaneously, disparities in cultures and accents and communication misunderstanding were also contributing elements to communication ineffectiveness, although the impacts were minimal, as depicted in Table 1. Furthermore, the comparison results between Indonesian seafarers' positive and negative responses in terms of interaction and communication on board (see Table 2) demonstrated that respondents were highly accepting of cultural diversity on board without feeling nervous and uncomfortable (67%). The positive response was exhibited through frequent communication, which excluded the isolation feeling and facilitated mutual interactions (87%). By focusing on personal linguistic competence, Indonesian seafarers considered personal English skills were sufficient to avoid misunderstanding (57%) compared to their counterparts who perceived otherwise (42%), although the percentage difference was insignificant. In relevance to linguistic skills, most Indonesian seafarers communicated via body language when lacking adequate English vocabulary knowledge (73.7%).

**Table 1:** Onboard Interaction or Communication Difficulties

| Question  | Response                       | Frequency  | Percentage   |
|---|--------------------------------|------------|--------------|
| What are the encountered interaction difficulties with other crews who possess different cultures and languages on board? | Language Barrier               | 102        | 59.6         |
|   | Different Accent               | 9          | 5.3          |
|   | Cultural Barrier               | 14         | 8.2          |
|   | Communication Misunderstanding | 7          | 4.1          |
|   | No Problem                     | 39         | 22.8         |
|   | <b>Total</b>                   | <b>171</b> | <b>100.0</b> |

**Table 2:** Indonesian Seafarers' Perceptions of Onboard Interaction and Communication

| Questions   | Yes       |            | No        |            |
|---|-----------|------------|-----------|------------|
|   | Frequency | Percentage | Frequency | Percentage |
| Do you feel nervous and not comfortable when interacting with individuals from different countries on board?                                      | 56        | 32.7       | 115       | 67.3       |
| Are you a quiet individual on board because you are afraid of producing communication and interaction mistakes?                                   | 22        | 12.9       | 149       | 87.1       |
| Do you perceive your English skill to ably avoid communication and interaction misunderstanding on board?   | 98        | 57.3       | 73        | 42.7       |
| Do you commonly communicate nonverbally to convey the message, such as gestures and eye contact, when you are clueless about the vocabulary?      | 126       | 73.7       | 45        | 26.3       |
| Does intercultural communication frequently distract your work when you communicate with the crews or passengers?                                 | 49        | 28.7       | 122       | 71.3       |
| Have you been offended by foreign workers who communicate in a "rough/rude tone," although the manner is ubiquitous for them?                     | 55        | 32.2       | 116       | 67.8       |
| Do you think that each crew prefers to spend time with their respective group/ethnicity/nationality without interacting with other foreign crews? | 69        | 40.4       | 102       | 59.6       |

|   |     |      |    |      |
|---|-----|------|----|------|
| Were you inculcated with cultural diversity information in your institution during your preparation to be a seafarer? | 123 | 71.9 | 48 | 28.1 |
|---|-----|------|----|------|

Intercultural communication did not influence most seafarers (71.3%) when communicating with other crews or passengers (when servicing a passenger ship, such as a cruise ship). Culturally, 67% of the respondents had never been offended, irritated, outraged, or received other types of unpleasant feelings by the voice and tonality of other multinational crews, especially when raising voices in delivering working instructions. The voice pitch difference across various nationalities is fundamental to cultural understanding. Bannet (1998) explicated the concept by employing a short example phrase, such as “come in,” in a medium pitch drop to manifest the normal interaction, while an abrupt pitch drop might indicate vexation, frustration, anxiety, or impatience. Conversely, when the voice is elongated, assumptions are created about friendliness and relaxation. If native speakers speak in a loud, recurrent, and flat tone, the voice might suggest discourtesy. According to the current respondents’ experiences, grouping with the same ethnicity existed among seafarers (40.4%), although the percentage was lower than their counterparts who preferred mingling with multinational crews (59.6%). Several seafarers were inclined to spend recess with similar groups, owing to high linguistic and cultural similarities, which would create a more comfortable circumstance for conversations and personal opinion sharing. Specifically, approximately 72% of seafarers acquired significant knowledge related to cultural differences before sailing.

Introducing cross-cultural understanding among seafarers is essential before sailing, as the process would sufficiently prepare the sailors to acknowledge dissimilarities in various languages, cultures, customs, and behaviors of other seafarers. Concurrently, culture shock could be prevented upon commencing seafaring life on board. Most respondents perceived language and cultural awareness were the most vital aspects of maritime education and training (89%), while only several respondents considered the awareness insignificant (11%). As such, sociocultural learning could assist in harmonizing the work environment, with several categories identified to be equipped by seafarers (see Table 3). Nonetheless, the results demonstrated insignificant differences between five sociocultural understanding categories, which suggested that all categories could be integrated to facilitate work, and social interactions on board.

**Table 3:** Reasons to Study Multicultural Understanding

| Question   | Yes              |            | No                |            |
|--|------------------|------------|-------------------|------------|
|  | Frequency        | Percentage | Frequency         | Percentage |
| Do you perceive that cross-cultural learning is important for seafarers? | 152              | 89.0       | 19                | 11.0       |
| <b>Aim</b>   | <b>Frequency</b> |            | <b>Percentage</b> |            |
| To avoid misunderstanding at work  | 21               |            | 12.3              |            |
| To acknowledge cultural diversity  | 59               |            | 34.5              |            |
| To increase tolerance and respect  | 15               |            | 8.7               |            |
| To avoid culture shock   | 35               |            | 20.5              |            |
| To facilitate interaction  | 41               |            | 24.0              |            |
| <b>Total</b>   | <b>171</b>       |            | <b>100.0</b>      |            |

## 5. Discussion

The study findings postulated that Indonesian seafarers were positively predisposed to cultural diversity on board, in which intercultural communication challenges would not significantly and negatively impact personal job duties and social life at sea. Particularly, Indonesian seafarers were communicative and sociable, although the language barrier was the major communication hurdle discovered from the study results. Generally, Indonesian are amiable and welcome diversity, as contributed by the presence of different tribes, cultures, customs, and religions in the country. The ability to embrace differences allows Indonesian seafarers to perceive less solitude from family separation, therefore reducing work stress and loneliness. In addition, personality is posited to assist in overcoming challenges in different circumstances with various languages, cultures, and behaviors. Certain individuals could not effortlessly socialize and communicate with other individuals without being uncomfortable and anxious. Conversely, other individuals enjoy crowds, acquainting unfamiliar peers, and acquiring additional knowledge through frequent social interactions, which creates a pleasant and comfortable situation to mitigate feelings of loneliness, social isolation, depression, and anxiety due to huge workloads. Resultantly, potential mental health issues could be prevented.

Approximately 30% (56 out of 171) of the respondents conveyed personal worry and discomfort to socializing on board, with 22 respondents preferring less interaction owing to the language barrier. A majority of seafarers who commonly employed body language also stated that limited linguistic competence was the main contributing factor. Furthermore, the findings revealed approximately 28% of the respondents were distracted by intercultural communication during work duties. Simultaneously, the exclusion sign based on

cultural membership during social interaction was evident, wherein 50% of the seafarers noticed certain peers limited personal interactions with counterparts from the same ethnicity or nationality. Thus, the findings propounded the formation of a restricted social circle among several crews on board, which excluded other ethnicities or nationalities. Nonetheless, the negative discovery could serve as an indicator to the Indonesian maritime education and training institutions to ensure seafarer candidates are well equipped with diverse linguistic and cultural knowledge. Further research is crucial to discovering a broader insight into intercultural communication to invite larger numbers of seafarers from other nationalities, particularly non-native English speakers.

## 6. Conclusion

As a universal language, communication ability in English is highly demanding for seafarers. The purpose of having communication skills is not only to facilitate work but also to maintain seafarers' social life on board with multinational crews. Understanding the culture of other crew's nationalities is another important part of this profession to avoid conflict and increase tolerance and respect among the crew. Regarding life at sea, this study concluded that most Indonesian seafarers possessed minimal intercultural communication difficulties with multinational crew members on board, although personal English competence did not achieve an advanced level. Specifically, the seafarers commonly employed body language to cope with the language barrier. Nevertheless, body language would occasionally be ineffective without possessing sufficient knowledge regarding the gesture's meaning, which might engender communication and interaction misunderstanding when certain gestures convey different meanings in specific nations. Therefore, a deep understanding and adequate acquisition of seamanship knowledge, particularly maritime English, could be accomplished by incorporating cross-cultural learning before commencing a sea voyage. Meanwhile, the current study demonstrated the potential value of maintaining positive seafarers' psychology and behaviors for personal well-being. Nonetheless, the study was limited in terms of surveying a small sample recruited from certain nationalities within a short period. Hence, further research is recommended to explicate intercultural communication among multinational seafarers from a broader perspective.

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