

A Case for Domain-Specific Research into Seafarers' Use of English as a Lingua Franca

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Abstract— Due to ships' crews and offshore personnel being multicultural and multilingual, more than one variety of English is used in communication in ship-to-ship, ship-to-shore and on-board domains. Among these speakers of many Englishes, English is being used as a lingua franca. The use of English as a Lingua Franca (ELF) in this domain is characterized by features of the many varieties of English spoken by the interlocutors as well as characteristics of the native languages of the speakers engaged in ELF. Therefore, the incorporation of both World Englishes (WE) and ELF knowledge into the pedagogy of Maritime English (ME) is crucial. Prior to this inclusion, however, more domain-specific research should be conducted into the use of ELF in maritime contexts in order to understand the manner in which ELF interactions take place among seafarers.

Keywords— English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), World Englishes (WE), Maritime English (ME), domain-specific research

I. INTRODUCTION

In a study conducted into causes for miscommunication between ships and Japanese Vessel Traffic Service (VTS) officers it was found that poor communication between ships and VTS officers in Japan result not necessarily due to a lack of proficiency in the English language but as a result of varying accents spoken by seafarers who communicate with the VTS officers. In addition, contrary to the belief that native speaker's English is 'authentic' and thus easier to understand compared to non-native speakers who speak with accents, many of the informants of the study had rated English spoken by Korean, Indonesian and Thai seafarers as being clearer than English spoken by British seafarers [1].

These findings emphasize two points. Firstly, in the maritime industry in particular, more than one variety of English is spoken and, secondly, native-speaker English is not always more comprehensible than English spoken by non-native speakers. Therefore, these survey results mark the point where Maritime English, World Englishes and English as a Lingua Franca meet.

While theories pertaining to WE highlight and call for the acknowledgment of the diverse "nativized" varieties of English that have emerged due to exposure of the language to varying cultural and linguistic contexts, ELF refers to instances when English is used as the common language for interactions between people from diverse first language (L1) backgrounds. Both these perspectives then are applicable to contexts in which ME is used, since the usage of ME is characterized both by the presence of more than one variety of English and the usage of English as a lingua franca, i.e., a common language used between seafarers whose native languages are different. However, the pedagogy of ME is yet to fully embrace the fact of the usage of Englishes on board ship and the consequent use of ELF among seafarers.

This paper endeavours to highlight that ME pedagogy should be looked at from the perspective of ELF and then revised. Prior to this revision, however, in order to fully understand the manner in which ELF interactions take place among seafarers in ship-to-ship, ship-to-shore and on-board contexts, domain-specific research should be conducted into the use of English as a lingua franca in the maritime industry.

The first section of this paper engages in a description of the concepts of World Englishes and English as a Lingua Franca. Then, the evolution of Maritime English as English for Specific Purposes is discussed. Subsequently, the *Model Course 3.17: Maritime English* (2015) will be analysed from a World Englishes perspective. Lastly, suggestions will be made regarding factors that can play a significant role in research that will be conducted in the future into English as a Lingua Franca in the maritime industry.

II. 'WORLD ENGLISHES' AND 'ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA'

Within the term 'World Englishes' is the acknowledgement of the fact that there is not just one but many forms of English that are being used all over the world. This term can be used as an "umbrella term" which covers "all varieties of English worldwide and the different approaches used to describe and analyze them." World Englishes also "refers to the so-called new Englishes in Africa, Asia and the Caribbean" [2, p.139]. Speakers of English as a second or foreign language flavour the language with features of their own native tongue. This has caused the emergence of many Englishes, such as American English, Indian English and Sri Lankan English. In addition to highlighting the plurality of the English language, World Englishes assert that each of these varieties of English should be considered as being on par with the other. This claim has resulted in the attempt to blur the distinction between 'native' and 'non-native' speakers and suggests that each variety of English deserves equal status.

The multitude of Englishes that exists today is an end result of the unprecedented spread of English worldwide. Kachru [3] describes the three phases in which this dispersion of the language is considered to have taken place. The first phase occurred between 1535 and 1707 and was restricted to the British Isles. The next phase was brought about by the movement of English speaking people to different parts of the world like North America, Australia, Canada and New Zealand. The final phase brought the English language into contact with South and South-East Asia, the Philippines and South, East, and West Africa.

The third phase saw the English language being introduced to non-English speaking communities. English, therefore, came into contact with other major languages

which were neither genetically nor culturally related to the English language. In addition, the pedagogy of English took place in these regions with almost no input from native speakers of English. As a result, the language went through a process of acculturation and was influenced by the cultures and languages of the new users of the language [3]. This resulted in the emergence of many Englishes which did not abide by the rules of native speaker English.

Although each of these diverse types of English merits acceptance and recognition, due to theoretical, acquisition and pedagogical factors (among others), the study of the language gives prominence to English spoken by native speakers. The proficiency level of the “native speaker,” for instance, acts as the standard that should be achieved by “non-native” speakers of English. Despite criticisms levelled against this dichotomy between “native” and “non-native” speakers, when it comes to acquiring the English language, what both the teacher and student of English as second/foreign language aspire to is “native-like competence” [3, p. 141]. This lopsided framework is further strengthened due to the pedagogy of the English language not being revised, especially in the context of English for Specific Purposes, to meet the new challenges posed by the existence of many Englishes as opposed to one [3]. Since ME is a branch of ESP, the above-mentioned accusations can be considered true (in some instances) of the pedagogy of ME as well.

English as a Lingua Franca (ELF), on the other hand, is defined as “a ‘contact language’ between persons who share neither a common native tongue nor a common (national) culture, and for whom English is the chosen foreign language of communication” [4, p.211]. However, the words ‘lingua franca’ in the term ‘ELF’ do not refer to a monolithic language. Instead, ELF researchers believe that “anyone participating in international communication needs to be familiar with and have in their linguistic repertoire for use, as and when appropriate, certain forms (phonological, lexicogrammatically, etc.) that are widely used and widely intelligible across groups of English speakers from different first language backgrounds” [2, p.161]. Such a collection of features shared by varieties of English will be useful in the maritime industry where people from different cultural and linguistic backgrounds come into contact.

Research conducted into the use of ELF include the Lingua Franca Core (LFC) and Vienna-Oxford International Corpus of English (VOICE). The LFC is a culmination of Jennifer Jenkins’s research conducted to “assess which phonological features are – and which are not – essential for intelligible pronunciation when English is spoken in lingua franca contexts” [5, p. 16]. For the formation of the LFC, field observations and recordings of interactions between non-native speakers of varying national and linguistic backgrounds were analyzed. What were identified as ‘errors’ which led to miscommunication between the speakers were identified as belonging to the LFC. What would be considered as ‘errors’ by native speakers but still would not interfere with mutual intelligibility were considered to be “non-core” and therefore not an issue where mutual comprehensibility in ELF interactions was concerned [5, p.16]. Therefore, the LFC contains ‘errors’ students should be taught to avoid, and syllabi should propose to be taught to students, if ELF interactions are to be meaningful and successful.

The VOICE is a corpus of ELF interactions based on which further research can be conducted. Some of the findings yielded by examinations into ELF data provided by this corpus point to several features of ELF communication; features that would typically be considered ‘errors’ by English language teachers but which do not necessarily trigger communication break-down between the speakers [5]. Therefore, both the LFC and the VOICE pave the way for a redefinition of what accurate pronunciation and grammar is in the modern world where English is widely being used as a lingua franca even in “influential networks” such as “global business, politics, science, technology and media discourse” [5, p.211].

Despite WEs and ELF being two different perspectives from which the use of English language is analyzed, they share a common ground in that both are “engaged in the same shared Endeavor to understand and confront the sociolinguistic challenges of a rapidly changing world” [6, p. 243]. As a result, ELF merits acceptance as being a part of the wider WE research community [6].

Although ELF interactions are very much part of today’s world where people from different language backgrounds interact through various media, the conceptualization of ELF at present is characterized by “an inverse relationship” that exists between “perceived significance and relevance of English in the world at large” and “linguistic description focusing on the core native speaker countries” [5, p. 213]. This observation is true, to a certain degree, of the pedagogy of ME as a branch of English for Specific Purposes (ESP).

III. MARITIME ENGLISH AS ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

ME is described as the device of communication that is used within the international shipping community. It contributes to the safety of navigation and facilitates seaborne business [7]. Today, ME is taught in Maritime Education and Training (MET) institutes as English for Specific Purposes or English for Special Purposes (ESP). ESP has been described as the teaching and learning of language skills needed by language learners in their professional careers [8]. Since ME is used by seafarers in a professional context, the teaching-learning process of ME is considered as an ESP.

After the United States Department of Transportation (USDOT) and the United States Coast Guard (USCG) conducted examinations into the role of the human element in maritime disasters, amendments were made to the Seafarers’ Training, Certification and Watch-Keeping (STCW) Convention in 1995 and 2010, stressing the benefits of using a common working language on board [9]. Evidence showed that over 80% of all maritime accidents were the result of human error. The term ‘human error’ includes lack of “competence in English” [9, p. 216]. The STCW Code now mentions that the “adoption of a common language for maritime communications would promote safe practice by reducing the risk of human error in communicating essential information.” It also states that, “although not universal, by common practice, English is rapidly becoming the standard language of communication for maritime safety purposes” [10, pp. 265-66].

In Chapter 5, Regulation 14 of the Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) states that “on all ships, to ensure effective crew performance in safety matters, a working language shall be established and recorded in the

ship's logbook." The company to which the ship belongs, or the ship's captain, is bestowed with the power of determining what the appropriate working language should be. Every crew member of that ship should be able to understand, give orders and instructions and report back in that language which is decided as the working language on a particular ship. If the working language is not an official language of the ship's flag state, "all plans and lists" should be available in the working language [11, p. 465].

Where ship-to-ship and ship-to-shore communication is concerned, the SOLAS states that "English shall be used on the bridge as the working language for bridge-to-bridge and bridge-to-shore safety communication as well as for communications on board between the pilot and bridge watch-keeping personnel." The same sentence goes on to say that this should not be the case if "those involved in the communication speak a common language other than English" [11, p. 465]. This makes evident the fact that, with regards to ship-to-ship, ship-to-shore and onboard communication, although a working language on board a ship is of utmost importance, it does not have to be, and always cannot be, English.

This fact notwithstanding, in 1973, the Maritime Safety Community concluded that where language difficulties arise in seafaring, "a common language should be used for navigational purposes" and that this "language should be English" [12, p.iii]. Since then, attempts have been made to form a standardized language which could be used on board. The Standard Marine Navigational Vocabulary (SMNV) and its sequel, the Standard Maritime Communication Phrases (SMCP) along with the research project named Sea speak are examples of endeavours made to address the issues of communication in the maritime industry [13].

The stress laid on seafarers' ME proficiency caused the instruction of this subject to receive much attention. The International Maritime Organization (IMO) Model Course 3.17 (*Model Course 3.17: Maritime English*) is an elaboration and standardization of the ME curriculum and is designed to meet the requirements of the STCW 1978 as amended in 1995 and 2010 [14, p. 112].

IV. MODEL COURSE 3.17: MARITIME ENGLISH

The *Model Course 3.17: Maritime English* does take into account the fact that students of any maritime subject come from diverse "educational systems and cultural backgrounds" which has resulted in the need for the identification and definition of basic entry requirements in terms which are "universally acceptable" [15, p.1] That these model courses have been prepared keeping in mind the cultural diversity that characterizes the student population of maritime subjects is laudable. But the belief that diversity of this nature could be addressed and neutralized by using 'universally applicable terms' is problematic, especially in the context of teaching ME. Such notions, in the long run, make the pedagogy of the subject fall into the trap of advocating a monolithic language as a solution to communication issues faced by multinational and multilingual crew members on board ship.

The entry levels for the Specialized Maritime English (SME) courses described in the Model Course require students to have "at least a lower intermediate level of English." In other words, for these students to be considered 'suitable' to follow these courses, they should at least be able

to "understand native speaker English talking at a measured pace with some rephrasing and repetition" [15, p. 24]. The courses in question are the SME courses for

1. officers in charge of a navigational watch on ships of 500 gross tonnage or more
2. officers in charge of an engineering watch in a manned engine-room or designated duty engineers in a periodically unmanned engine room
3. Electro-Technical Officers (ETO)
4. GMDSS Radio Operators

Similarly, the 'Intermediate' and 'Advanced' proficiency levels described in the Model Course involve the 'native speaker factor.' The former level of proficiency includes students who are "able to understand the essence of native speaker's English but may misunderstand detail." The latter refers to students who possess "near native-speaker proficiency in all aspects of communication" [pp. 24-5].

Should an MET institute follow the entry levels set down in the Model Course, the decision taken regarding whether a student is eligible to follow a ME course or not would be influenced by the extent of her/his ability to comprehend native speaker English. But in a context like the maritime industry, where speakers do not always have to converse with native speakers of English in ship-to-ship, ship-to-shore and onboard domains, the entry levels pivoting on 'native speaker English' does not make sense.

Although, with regards to ME entry levels, the Model Course seemed to promote native speaker English, it also does establish the fact that

so many varieties of English are spoken worldwide that there is no single model of pronunciation and it is certainly not necessary to aspire to speak 'Queen's English.' There are more people now speaking in English as their second language than there are native speakers. We also have to remember that there are a range of 'Englishes' i.e., accepted variations of English with particular accents and linguistic styles, e.g. Indian English, Sri Lankan English, Malaysian English, Australian English; this is a very pertinent discussion area in EFL in this era of global communications [p. 143].

Despite the emphasis laid on World Englishes, the model course still seems to be caught in the native/non-native speaker dichotomy. In the Instructor Manual, the section that focuses on pronunciation advises teachers of ME to "minimize [students'] first language interference with English" [p. 143]. The phrase "first language interference" alone is suggestive of a variety of English that is not desirable and therefore should not be allowed to 'interfere' with a more desirable variety of English, i.e., Standard English. Once again, the Model Course seems to have steered away from the fact that both seafarers and teachers of ME are multilingual and multicultural and therefore will be at a loss about the type of English that should be aspired to and the variety that should be considered as 'interfering.'

While the emphasis made in the Model Course on limiting first language interference seemingly advocates the teaching of native-speaker English pronunciation, the section titled 'Teaching Listening' focuses on students' ability to comprehend non-native speakers of English. This section calls for the preparation of students "for the international

world of seafaring” which requires them to be able to comprehend “non-native speakers of English from many countries.” In order to address this issue, it has been suggested that students be exposed to a variety of accents and be given practice in “recognizing and producing the common characteristics of informal speech” in order for them to understand and be understood by seafarers from different countries [p. 151].

V. MARITIME ENGLISH AS A LINGUA FRANCA

The encouragement made in the Model Course for seafarers to have a repertoire of common features of the varieties of the English language invites theory pertaining to ELF into the ME teaching-learning process. Unlike accent neutralization and the development of a common language that have been suggested as solutions to the issues of pronunciation and miscommunication in the maritime industry ([16], [17]), ELF does not refer to English as a single language. Instead, ELF researchers believe that those who participate in international communication should be familiar with certain phonological and lexicogrammatically structures of English which are used and understood by English speakers for whom English is not the first language. Seafarers too should ideally possess knowledge of such structures that would help them communicate with their colleagues in ELF interactions.

In Sampson and Zhao's study [13] which proposes that a ‘bottom-up’ approach to teaching ME is more favourable than a ‘top-down’ approach, many characteristics of ELF interactions that take place on board ship are highlighted. It has been found how, in maritime contexts where many Englishes are spoken, the several varieties of English merge and “common words and expressions enter into the “discourse of stable and long-established crews” [p. 40]. Indian and Bangladeshi officers, and Filipino ratings have been observed sharing a number of expressions that they had borrowed from each other. Speech patterns frequently used by Hindi speakers were then picked up by the Filipino ratings. Phrases used by Hindi speakers had been translated into Tagalog by the Filipino crew and used in communication. In addition, the Hindi word for ‘small’ and ‘less’ is the same, causing the Hindi speakers to use the English word ‘less’ to express both meanings. The Filipino seafarers had followed suit [13]. Therefore, not only is maritime ELF characterized by features of English spoken by non-natives, they are also inclusive of features of first languages spoken by the ELF speakers.

This new ‘variety’ is referred to as a pidgin language, “a language which develops when groups of people who speak different languages try to communicate with one another on a regular basis” [13, p. 40-41]. These features peculiar to maritime contexts point to the fact that, as opposed to using the LFC to achieve mutual intelligibility among seafarers and to aid ME instructors to approach English pronunciation teaching in a more systematic manner, research can be conducted into the nature of ELF interactions in the domain of the maritime industry.

The significance of incorporating ELF research findings into ME pedagogy has been highlighted by Choi and Park [18]. The writers suggest the usage of the LFC in ME teaching and then emphasize that, prior to including ELF in the ME classroom, several issues should be solved. These questions are regarding

~ the “critical phonological factors” that would “enhance intelligibility in a global context”

~ the number of accents that are “tolerable in general”

~ how speakers can be assisted to make themselves be understood despite their accents

~ how this can be achieved through classroom activities or self-study [p. 47]

The above are questions that a ME instructor has to grapple with while deciding what the “common characteristics of informal speech” mentioned in the Model Course are. Conducting domain-specific research would help solve these issues.

Domain-specific research is essential also because the already existing LFC findings will not necessarily represent the features of ELF interactions in the maritime context. Arguably, neither the LFC nor the VOICE would be able to provide an accurate insight into ELF in maritime communication. This is because the LFC was constructed based on data which was collected from speakers from a wide range of L1s in classroom contexts and social settings. Similarly, the data compiled in the VOICE is inclusive of instances of the use of ELF by speakers who represent a variety of first language backgrounds, in a range of settings and domains. Therefore, it could be argued that both the LFC and the VOICE cannot be considered as being reflective of the features of ELF in the shipping industry. Attention has to be paid specifically to ELF used in the maritime domain, where the vocabulary, for instance, would be very different from that used in a classroom setting.

Neither the data analyzed in order to construct the LFC nor the data of ELF compiled in the VOICE seem to include native speakers engaged in ELF communication. Indeed, since ELF interactions take place between non-native speakers of English, it could be argued that research into ELF need not focus on native speakers of English. But, the majority of ELF researchers believe that native speakers too should be included in ELF research since they too participate in intercultural communication [2]. This is true of the maritime industry too since the seafaring community is comprised of both native and non-native speakers of English. Therefore, arguably, domain-specific research conducted into maritime ELF scenarios should include native speakers of English as well, if knowledge of ELF is to be successfully incorporated into the ME teaching-learning process.

VI. CONCLUSION

In the maritime industry, due to ship's crews and offshore personnel hailing from various linguistic and cultural backgrounds, more than one variety of English is used. Among these speakers of many Englishes, English is being used as a link language/ lingua franca. Research conducted into ELF interactions of seafarers point to the fact that the use of ELF in this context is coloured by features of the several varieties of English being used as well as borrowings from the native languages of the speakers engaged in ELF. Although the pedagogy of English should take into consideration WEs and ELF theory and research findings, this is not the case at present, since the descriptions of the basic entry levels and some of the advice given to ME

instructors in the Instructor Manual of the Maritime English Model Course seem to be trapped in the 'native/non-native' speaker dichotomy. The incorporation of both WEs and ELF knowledge into the pedagogy of ME is crucial.

This is not to further a notion that proposals have not been made and research has not been conducted so far into the ELF interactions between seafarers. Research has found out that ELF interactions in the maritime domain is similar to a pidgin language. This language makes communication a possibility between speakers who use various Englishes. In addition, seafarers' ELF interactions can be colored with translations from the native languages of the interlocutors. If so, exploration into ELF in maritime contexts cannot be based solely on the LFC or the VOICE or any such ELF research studies which have been conducted with no specific focus on the maritime domain. Therefore, it can be argued that future research conducted into maritime ELF scenarios should be domain-specific, thus highlighting the features peculiar to the use of English as a lingua franca in the maritime industry.

Furthermore, although most ELF researches discount the native speaker, research conducted into ME as ELF should involve native speakers of English. This is because the maritime community comprises both native and non-native speakers of English. It could be argued that if the former group is left out, the entirety of the seafarers' population will not be represented in research conducted into maritime English as a Lingua Franca.

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