

HOW MUCH ENGLISH GRAMMAR IS NEEDED IN THE SHIP'S ENGINE ROOM

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Abstract. At the Faculty of Maritime Studies in Split, marine engineers have the opportunity to attend an ESP (English for Specific Purposes) course as part of the Special Education Program for Seafarers, which is a prerequisite for their career advancement. A series of surveys were carried out to detect their needs, expectations and the ways they perceive ESP teachers, courses and themselves as English language users. The responses referring to teachers were always clear and consistent – they are expected to understand essential ship engine systems and processes, concepts and contexts, etc. to produce a good learning platform. On the other hand, the responses that were supposed to help teachers to strike a balance in the ESP concept (that includes both general and vocational English) were somewhat ambiguous. Most of the respondents think that their overall command of the English language is “good” or “very good”, while their command of grammar is “good” or at least “sufficient”. Nevertheless, 94% admit that, in their case, learning grammar is “very important” or “necessary”. In the most recent survey, featuring another type of questionnaire, where the respondents were asked to break down the 50-hour ESP course into units, they allocated only 12.44 class hours for grammar (less than 25% of the course time). Further research will, hopefully, help ESP teachers to strike a reasonable balance between grammar, general English and vocational content.

Keywords: English for specific purposes; grammar; marine engineers; survey

Introduction

The ESP (English for Specific Purposes) course for marine engineers is part of the Special Education Program for Seafarers that is provided at the Faculty of Maritime Studies in Split, Croatia. These marine engineers signed on after leaving secondary schools and the program is a prerequisite for their career advancement, i.e. for becoming chief engineers after serving some time as second engineer officers on ships powered by the main propulsion machinery of 3,000 kW or more.¹ The curriculum was designed and the program was launched in 2011 by Croatia's Ministry of the Sea, Transport and Infrastructure, with the assistance of the representatives of maritime colleges, maritime secondary schools, Seafarers' Union

of Croatia, seafarers' employment brokers and seafarers' associations. The program has been successfully carried out, without major changes, at four universities – Dubrovnik, Split, Zadar and Rijeka.

The curriculum for marine engineers involves 795 in-class hours, of which 50 are allocated to Maritime English (ME). The syllabus outlines various topics, which roughly fall into two categories: profession (e.g. internal and external combustion engines) and grammar (e.g. passive voice). The distribution of in-class hours to cover a particular topic is not specified; the teacher is also free to alter the course syllabus up to 20%, depending on the group and other factors, but the official amendments to the syllabus/curriculum are not encouraged. They can be done, but the process of approval at various levels is very complex and slow.

In addition to the fairly rigid syllabus and limited course time, there were a number of challenges and dilemmas arising from the very start, mostly regarding the trainees' true needs. Here the experience came in very handy as the same ME program is delivered to undergraduate students of marine engineering in the 1st and 2nd semesters: it was not too difficult to adjust by compressing the already familiar content into the new framework. Also, the abundant research in the area of ESP over the past decades, including studies in the very area of maritime shipping, together with IMO Model Course 3.17, have provided a number of answers and valuable guidelines. Finally, in order to customise and improve the approach, performance and outcome, a series of anonymous surveys have been conducted among the trainees.

1. Surveys results – what is now clear

Anonymous surveys have been periodically performed at the Faculty of Maritime Studies in Split since 2015. The seafaring marine engineers attending the Maritime English course have been asked to present their views on the importance of English in their trade, to self-evaluate their command of English and ability to communicate, to express their needs, expectations and the ways they perceive ESP teachers, courses and themselves as users of the English language on board ships.

Their responses correspond to ESP principles to a large extent: the ME course for seafaring marine engineers should follow a learner-centred approach designed to meet learners' specific needs and should be related in content to their particular occupation.² The available course time is not an issue. 87% of the respondents feel that it is not necessary to increase or reduce the course time format. They suggest that “How” and “What” is more important than “How Much”. This is entirely in line with the basic principles of ESP researchers: to be successful within a limited period of time, a teacher must be a good time manager and leader. S/he should be creative, resourceful and flexible. S/he should have good cross-communication, interpersonal and decision-making skills. In addition, s/he should be able to establish micro real-life situations, an English-speaking environment and a specific atmosphere of friendliness and positive emotions, to make the compressed timetable bearable³.

If both teachers and students are motivated, as they are in our case, then the interaction between the two “sides” is likely to differ from the one occurring in the general English class. In these specific ESP classes designed for seafaring marine engineers, the education inevitably becomes a two-way street: the teacher becomes more like a language adviser and consultant, having equal status with the learners, who are experts in the subject matter.

In 2017, surveys were conducted at the Faculty of Maritime Studies in Split (Croatia) and at Gdynia Maritime Training Centre (Poland), aiming to explore the possibility of finding the middle ground where general English could serve as the platform for building the specific key language competences for the marine engineers. One of the questions aimed to ascertain the role of the ESP teacher and the application of Maritime English as ESP with respect to specific terminology, general English and basic grammar. When asked what should an ESP teacher focus on, given the fact that s/he is not a marine engineer, 84 trainees from the University of Split responded as shown in Fig. 1.

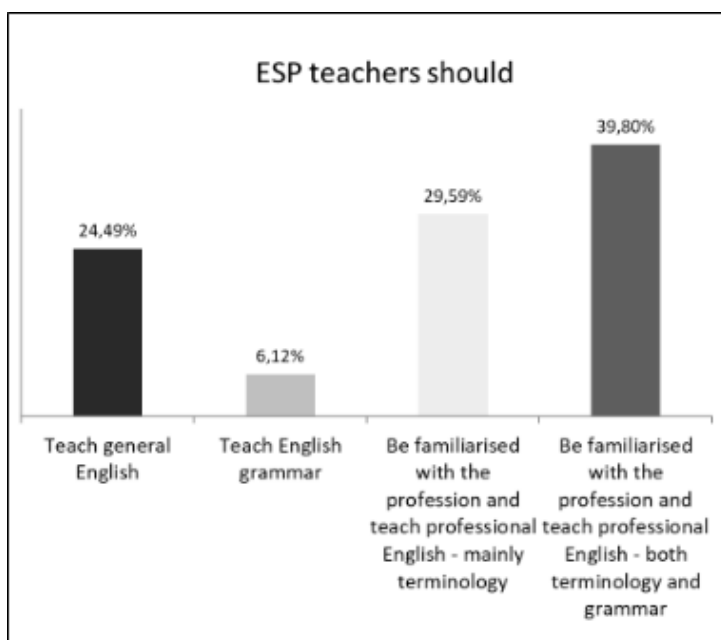


Figure 1. What should an ESP teacher focus on, as viewed by the seafarers

Source: The author.

Similar results were produced by 69 Polish seafaring marine engineers. In addition to quantitative data, the research also included brief interviews aimed at gathering

additional qualitative information on the seafarers' views and expectations. Before and after classes, or during breaks, the respondents were individually asked to say what "to be familiar" might imply. This triggered a variety of positive reactions as the trainees felt they were actively included in the process and that their contribution could make a difference for their group, for the groups to come, and for the undergraduate students of marine engineering. Their comments led to the conclusion that "familiarity" with their profession and specialist terminology might imply the basic understanding of engine systems and processes, including engine components, material properties, compression vs spark ignition, turbo-charging, scavenging, cooling and lubricating systems, watch-keeping and signing-on procedures, in addition to the essential requirements of STCW, ISPS Code, SOLAS, MARPOL and other relevant conventions⁴.

The message was clear: a teacher claiming to be an ESP teacher should not hide under the safe umbrella of General English. A good ESP teacher is familiar with the specific subject matter and is willing to learn from students.⁵ On a number of occasions, the ESP trainees expressed readiness to explain to their ESP teachers any aspect of marine engineering during classes and after the course. In other words, they did not need another "ex cathedra" boss, they needed a partner.

At the same time, the survey also revealed that ESP and general English were not at war. The respondents in both institutions recognised the importance of grammar and general English, as the infrastructure on which the ESP superstructure is built.

When asked about their overall command of English, 84 respondents attending the Special Education Program for Seafarers at the Faculty of Maritime Studies in Split assessed that their overall command of English was: excellent (5%), very good (41%), good (47%), sufficient (6%) or insufficient (1%). When asked about their command of English grammar, they responded as following: excellent (1%), very good (19%), good (53%), sufficient (26%) or insufficient (1%). The results were in line with the results presented in Fig. 1, where only 6% of the respondents believed that Maritime English teachers should teach grammar, while 24.5% believed they should teach general English. So far, this seemed to be a solid groundwork for ESP superstructure. After a few "innocent" questions (age, ship type...), the respondents were asked about grammar again. This time, it was not about teaching, but about learning. Fig. 2 shows the views of the seafaring marine engineers with regard to learning grammar:

Despite the aforementioned seafarers' awareness of the importance of grammar and general English, the produced results were fairly unexpected. Was their self-assessment wrong? Were they lying, trying to be nice? Or... was this just an adult approach to lifelong learning concept and their wish to constantly improve language skills?

As they explained many times after these surveys, a good command of English is an absolute must in maritime shipping. Insufficient language skills may result in serious misunderstanding and errors, which, in turn, may cause machinery malfunction and

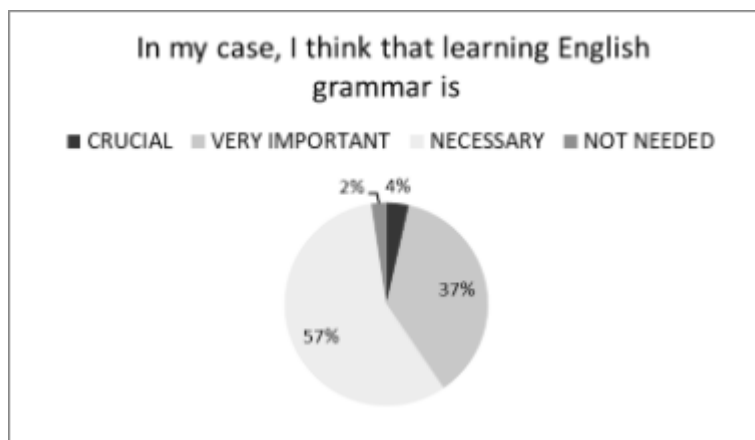


Figure 2. Seafarers' views on their need to learn English grammar
Source: The author.

breakdown, delays, accidents, or threats to safety, health and life. For example, there is a ship waiting for a pump failure to be fixed to leave port. An engineer in charge, unsure of which Present Tense to use, may say "I repair the pump" (which does not imply anything), "I am repairing the pump" (which means the ship cannot leave port), "I have repaired the pump" (which means the ship can leave port), or "I have been repairing the pump" (which means the ship cannot leave port). Therefore, insufficient command of basic English can cause serious trouble. General English and ESP should function in a complementary way. Methodology and teaching tools are less important – motivation, flexibility and individual approach to specific needs are essential.

These empirical findings, gathered through unofficial conversations at the margins of the ESP course, match the research findings published in a number of studies. For example, Vidak and Didović Baranac (2012) state that, in ESP, there is an emphasis on vocabulary with a focus on the frequency and application of situational principles and that the specific vocabulary, sentence patterns or verb forms cannot be taught in isolation from the real job situation. However, Maritime English as ESP uses "the same tenses and sentence structures as the general English" but in different ways and rates. For instance, in ME as a branch of ESP, it is common to use passive constructions in correspondence, reports, instructions, description of procedures and operations, because in most cases the focus is on action. As Vidak and Didović Baranac (2012) perceive, frequently used linguistic items also include verb phrases and verb-noun collocations, long compounds, participles and modal verbs. A simulated or a real-life damage report produced by a student may serve as a general check on aspects such as punctuation, vocabulary use, articles, tenses, etc. A realistic context becomes a place that general English, grammar and ESP share naturally.

2. Course hours breakdown

In 2019, another type of questionnaire was launched in order to obtain a clearer idea of what the trainees needed and expected. A total of 5 surveys were conducted between 2019-2021, involving 68 respondents.⁶ They were given a table with a list of 25 topics covered by the Maritime English course, followed by a few empty lines where they could insert their suggestions if any. They were asked to break down the 50-hour course by allocating the time to each item/unit, according to their preferences. This approach has finally resulted in a framework (and potential syllabus) that can be easily customised with regard to what the seafarers know and think they know, what they need and think they need, what they require now and what will be required in the future, given the frequent economic and social changes and rapid technological developments in the world of shipping.

The produced results suggest that the seafaring marine engineers would require 12.44 class hours for grammar (24.9% of the course time). Specifically, as Table 1 shows.

Table 1. Allocation of ME course hours to grammar items, as viewed by the seafarers

Grammar Item	Hours
Sentence structure. Compounds. Articles.	3.19
Tenses (active). Complex sentences: relative, time and cause-reason phrases...	4.68
Tenses (passive).	2.26
Modal verbs. Phrasal verbs.	2.31
TOTAL hours almost exclusively focusing on grammar (n=68)	12.44 = 24.88%

Source: The author.

According to the results produced by both the surveys and students' tests, the key grammar items to be focused on include the ones that do not exist or are rarely used in Croatian, the mother tongue of the seafarers. Other grammar items, such as gerund, punctuation, numbers, pronunciation, capital letters, comparison of adjectives, contractions, irregular plural... can be easily explained / practiced simultaneously with specific terminology and other features incorporated in this specific ESP course.

Short initial tests should help to narrow down the priorities. For example, the last surveyed group (April 2023) included 12 trainees who took a basic English grammar test consisting of 20 short multiple-choice questions. "Basic English grammar" means that there were no questions involving items such as 2nd and 3rd conditionals, sequence of tenses, and the like. 20 questions x 12 trainees = 240 possible points. The group scored 154 points (64%). The best trainee scored 17/20 points (85%), while the worst result was 04/20 (20%). Obviously, this group required more than 12.44 class hours dedicated to grammar. The ESP teacher had to schedule extra classes for several trainees whose performance on the test was poor.

3. Survey results – what remains unclear

The question of striking the balance between general English (including grammar) and ESP items remains. It is likely that this question will remain until the world stops changing and the student groups become homogeneous. Yes, ESP students may be homogenous in terms of their profession and goals, but a group may as well exhibit significant inhomogeneity in terms of the age, maturity, personality, attitude, social background, motivation, expectations and English entry level.

A 48-year-old 3rd engineer officer who has spent all his career in traditional diesel engine rooms, weary and tired of life but fluent in English, sits next to a young ambitious member of the smartphone generation, who is familiar with state-of-the-art marine technologies but finds it difficult to understand the difference between “it’s” and “its”. A recently divorced man seems to be lost, hiding behind a happy family man employed on an LNG carrier who sits very comfortably in the front row, ready to endure anything, just to pass exams and start earning more. An arrogant underpaid cargo officer uses every opportunity to exhibit contempt for shippers, teachers and authorities in general, wondering what a seawoman to his left is doing there. An A2 English user joining a foreign ship after years served on all-Croatian crew vessels sits next to a C1 user,⁷ and so on. Therefore, the number of hours dedicated to grammar items, the dosage rate and the way grammar is inserted in specific vocational contexts, and the way each individual trainee is approached require a careful consideration. Each group represents a specific challenge and each time the application of ESP should be well balanced. However, we all know that this is easier said than done.

It also remains unclear how the course that requires a 100% attendance can meet the needs of students who, for example, are well familiar with terminology (all manuals, layouts and other documents are in English), but are unable to use the tenses correctly, and at the same time, the needs of proficient general English users who enter the international environment for the first time, due to downsizing of the Croatian shipping fleet, and need to acquire loads of maritime and engineering terminology. Should a teacher divide a group in sub-groups and carry out two different tasks simultaneously? This is also easier said than done, but it is feasible. As it has been already pointed out, an English teacher in Croatia is entitled to deviate from the syllabus along the course up to 20%, depending on the group and other factors. Still, if this is not feasible for some reason, or if some of the trainees object, should a teacher provide extra, i.e. unpaid hours to those with specific needs?

Perhaps the least painful solution would be to extend the course by, say, 6 hours, and to create an officially approved floating syllabus, where the content of extra hours will be left to the discretion of both teachers and trainees.

Conclusion

At the Faculty of Maritime Studies in Split, seafaring marine engineers have the opportunity to attend the course in Maritime English, i.e. ESP (English for

Specific Purposes) for marine engineers, as part of the Special Education Program for Seafarers, which is a prerequisite for their career advancement. From 2015 to 2022, a series of surveys were carried out to detect their needs, expectations and the ways they perceive ESP teachers, courses and themselves as English language users. The responses referring to teachers were always clear and consistent – in order to produce a good learning platform, ESP teachers are expected to understand essential ship engine systems and processes, concepts and contexts, to be familiar with the seafaring environment, daily tasks of marine engineers, safety and protection standards, international standards and conventions... or at least to show a genuine interest in these matters and willingness to learn. A teacher becomes a peer and a partner, in addition to a course designer, materials provider, researcher and evaluator.

The responses were also in line with the concepts of English for Specific Purposes (ESP) as a tool complying with STCW and other standards, designed for the development of the seafaring marine engineers' specific language skills that will assist them in their professional environment.

On the other hand, the responses that were supposed to help teachers to strike a balance in the ESP concept (that includes both general and vocational English) were somewhat ambiguous. Most of the respondents think that their overall command of the English language is “good” or “very good”, while their command of grammar is “good” or at least “sufficient”. Nevertheless, 94% admit that, in their case, learning grammar is “very important” or “necessary”. In the most recent survey, featuring another type of questionnaire, where the respondents were asked to break down the 50-hour ESP course into units, they allocated only 12.44 class hours for grammar (less than 25% of the course time).

The surveys also confirmed that each group should be approached individually due to the significant inhomogeneity in terms of the age, maturity, personality, attitude, social background, motivation, expectations and English entry level of the trainees. If the group is small enough, each trainee should be approached individually. For instance, this happened in April 2023, when a small group of 12 trainees took a basic English grammar test and scored very disparate results, ranging from 20% to 85%. The ESP teacher had to adjust to the under average results by allocating more time for grammar and by scheduling extra classes for several trainees whose performance on the test was poor.

According to the results produced by both by the surveys and students' tests, the key grammar items to be focused on include the sentence structure, passive voice, compounds, phrasal verbs, articles and correct use of tenses, i.e. the items that do not exist or are rarely used in Croatian, the mother tongue of the seafarers. Short initial tests should help to narrow down the priorities and the task of ESP teachers is to strike a reasonable balance between grammar items, general English and vocational content.

Naturally, there is no distinctive separation line between Maritime English for marine engineers, as a branch of ESP, and the so-called general English, because this is the same language. This means that many grammar items can be easily explained / practiced simultaneously with specific terminology and other features incorporated in this particular course. A realistic context becomes a place that general English, grammar and ESP share naturally.

NOTES

1. STANDARD OF COMPETENCE. Web site. Section A-III/2 Mandatory minimum requirements for certification of chief engineer officers and second engineer officers on ships powered by main propulsion machinery of 3,000 kW propulsion power or more. Available from: https://www.imorules.com/STCWCODE_A_III_2.html. [viewed 2023-04-21].
2. See elaborate definitions, features and roles of ESP, teachers and students in (Cigan 2012).
3. In addition to P. Robinson (Robinson 1991) and T. Dudley-Evans and M. J. St. John (Dudley-Evans & John 1998), this chapter contains references to (Hutchinson & Waters 1987; Strevens 1988) and (Zhang 2007), as cited in (Sierocka 2014, pp. 3 – 17; Ahmed 2014).
4. See more about the seafarers' views on Maritime English teachers and programs in (Skračić 2018, pp. 329 – 333). Similar qualitative and quantitative information was obtained in the survey carried out by Vodopija (Vodopija 2017).
5. There may be dilemmas and controversies regarding the content, tools and performance of ESP process, but one thing is sure: to a certain extent, a good ESP teacher is familiar with the specific subject matter, or at least shows genuine interest in it. See more about the responsibility of teachers and students in (Fiorito 2005).
6. The previous experience proved that 3-4 surveys (involving approx. 50 respondents) were enough to produce credible information. The subsequent surveys produced only slight variations in results.
7. Common Reference Levels from A1 to C2, as defined by the Council of Europe: Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, p. 24.
8. INTERNATIONAL MARITIME ORGANIZATION, 2000. *Model Course 3.17 in Maritime English*. London. ISBN 92-801-5096-0. Available from: https://www.imorules.com/STCWCODE_A_III_2.html. [viewed 2023-04-26].
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