


Chapter 14

Improving Maritime English Oral Communication Skills in an Online Environment: Engaging Students as Teams

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ABSTRACT

Online education has been an option until the first half of the year 2020. After the outbreak of COVID-19, online learning has gradually become a must for education. In this period, institutions have had to transform and adopt not only their teaching approach and content, but also their technology. Maritime education and training inevitably has followed the same pattern. As English is the operational language of the sea, teaching maritime English has had its share from this transformation. This study focuses on improving maritime students' job-related communication skills in an online environment with online role-playing. The study firstly reviews general requirements and setbacks involved in online teaching and language requirements at sea. The focus of the study is on online oral communication role-playing to perform ship-based external communication. The study concludes by pinpointing minimum requirements for conducting such training, lessons learned from the sessions, as well as knowledge and experience achieved by the students.

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INTRODUCTION

This study introduces a practical method for improving the profession-oriented language skills of maritime students in the online medium by making use of actual trials. The method, through example of the online role-playing communication session, attempts to propose a convenient way for instructors of Maritime English for adapting their in-class communication sessions to the online environment.

Language teaching has been one of the areas offering online learning to respective target groups over the past decades. Looking from this perspective, online language learning/teaching has been a matter of preference both for learners and institutions. However, starting from March 2020 when the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 as a pandemic of international concern (Cucinotta & Vanelli, 2020), online teaching has gradually become the only option for most of the education institutions and learners. This unexpected and fast-growing condition compelled higher education institutions to shut down their campuses, transform their teaching systems, improve and upgrade their digital online platforms and naturally rush their instructors to cope with the on-going transformation. Students, on the other hand, who have been left with no other choice but to enroll in the distance programs, have experienced their own difficulties. They have had to overcome difficulties such as lack of familiarity with the distance education system, obtaining necessary computer-based equipment and peripherals as well as providing and maintaining continuous online access.

Like the others, maritime training and education institutes and maritime students have followed the same course of action. Their knowledge and profession-based theoretical courses have posed fewer difficulties. However practical simulator trainings as well as skill-acquiring courses have required more efforts for seamless continuation of the education. As seafaring involves both international and multinational interaction, maritime students are required to acquire sufficient communication skills in English at minimum standards set by IMO (International Maritime Organization). The main target of Maritime English courses is set to enable future seafarers to achieve those standards and skills. This chapter focuses on improving oral communication skills of maritime students in an online environment by engaging them in a life-like scenario. The research question of the study is: How communication skills of maritime students can be improved by online role-playing sessions? The study firstly visits Maritime English as ESP (English for Specific Purposes) course and discusses different aspects of ESP courses. After explaining the specifics, importance, and regulatory aspects of Maritime English, the study progresses with examining the online teaching environment. Following quality assurance requirements of the online teaching medium, the final part gives details of actual online communication sessions conducted by engaging students as teams in each scenario. This study, to keep the intended focus, refrains from sinking deeply into theoretical approaches to and discussions on online teaching. It merely reviews what needs to be provided to achieve the goal in the online environment with the existing digital media in hand. The main concern of the study is to suggest a practical method for improving profession-oriented language skills in the online medium. The method suggested within the study is the explanation of actual online role-playing sessions realized in the second half of the year 2020. The sessions seek collaborative engagement (Redmond et al., 2018) of students as they were assigned to prepare the communication scenarios from beginning to end and to perform the role-playing part in the online classes in teams of two. The findings presented in the conclusion section are obtained from those consecutive sessions and the recommendations were derived from the lessons learned during the conduct of sessions.

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