

Investigating Cadets' Experiences Learning English at a Banyuwangi Marine Academy in the Global Maritime Era

Muhamad Alfi Khoiruman^{1*}, Doni Hadi Irawan¹, St. Shabibatul Rohmah²

¹Akademi Kelautan Banyuwangi, Indonesia

²Universitas 17 Agustus 1945 Banyuwangi, Indonesia

ABSTRACT

In the era of global maritime communication, English plays a vital role as a working language for safety, coordination, and professional interaction within the international maritime industry. This study explores marine cadets' experiences in learning English as a General Course at a Banyuwangi Marine Academy, with particular attention to how the course supports their communicative needs in maritime contexts. Employing a qualitative research design, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and classroom observations involving selected cadets enrolled in the English General Course. The data were analyzed thematically to identify recurring patterns related to perceptions, learning challenges, and instructional practices. The findings reveal that although cadets perceive English as highly important for their future maritime careers, they consider the course insufficiently contextualized to real maritime communication demands. Key challenges include limited speaking confidence, inadequate mastery of maritime-specific terminology, and anxiety in oral communication activities. Observational data further indicate that instructional practices are predominantly teacher-centered and emphasize grammatical knowledge over communicative and experiential learning. As a result, opportunities for meaningful interaction and practical language use remain limited. This study highlights a mismatch between curriculum design and cadets' professional expectations in the context of global maritime operations. The findings suggest the need to reconceptualize English as a General Course by integrating maritime-oriented content, learner-centered pedagogy, and communicative activities that reflect authentic maritime scenarios. Such improvements are essential to enhance cadets' communicative competence and readiness for participation in the global maritime workforce.

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Introduction

The globalization of the maritime industry has made English indispensable for safe, efficient, and coordinated communication across multinational shipping operations. In maritime settings, English functions not only as an academic subject but as an operational resource used in navigation, safety routines, onboard collaboration,

and ship–shore exchanges. Research has shown that communication competence at sea is closely tied to safety performance, while studies of multilingual crews indicate that English proficiency also affects how crew members discuss problems, make suggestions, and maintain effective working relationships on board (James et al., 2018; Pauksztat, 2021; Sampson & Zhao, 2003). These findings confirm that English occupies a central place in contemporary maritime work rather than a merely supplementary one.

Accordingly, maritime education institutions are expected to teach English as a profession-specific competence rather than as decontextualized general language knowledge. A needs analysis involving Bangladeshi senior cadets and recruiting agencies identified twenty-three English skills required for onboard work, with communication efficiency emerging as the most needed competence and intermediate Maritime English proficiency commonly expected for employment. In a related line of research, a corpus-based study of authentic ship–shore communication found that routine exchanges still often deviate from standard communication protocols, suggesting that Maritime English instruction should be grounded in authentic discourse, procedural language, and real interactional demands instead of relying primarily on isolated grammatical practice (Ahmmed et al., 2020; Jurkovič, 2022).

In the Indonesian context, the problem is not simply whether English is taught, but whether what is taught corresponds to workplace realities. Dirgeyasa's (2018) study on maritime academies in Indonesia found that cadets need learning materials that integrate nautical content, language skills, and linguistic features, including topics such as ship handling, vessel traffic service, standard helm orders, parts of vessels, ropes, and applied maritime terminology. Likewise, Khosiyono et al. (2021) reported that the existing Maritime English syllabus in Indonesian maritime vocational schools adequately covered only six of the eight competencies needed for deck officer class IV, leading them to propose a redesigned syllabus containing fourteen competencies aligned with workplace demands. These studies point to a persistent mismatch between curricular provision and the communicative requirements of maritime professions (Dirgeyasa, 2018; Khosiyono et al., 2021).

Classroom-based studies in Indonesian maritime education also reveal persistent linguistic and affective barriers. Hilal (2022) found that maritime cadets experienced a moderate level of speaking anxiety, with communication apprehension emerging as the dominant factor. Similarly, Joko and Wahyuningsih (2020) identified both linguistic and nonlinguistic speaking difficulties among cadets, including limited vocabulary, inaccurate pronunciation, weak grammatical control, anxiety, low confidence, low motivation, and fear of making mistakes. A classroom-interaction study by Hilal (2022) showed that one-way interaction remained prominent in Maritime English classes, and cadets associated their passivity with limited understanding of the lesson, fear of being underestimated, negative teacher behavior, and physical as well as psychological exhaustion. These findings suggest that the effectiveness of Maritime English learning is shaped not only by content relevance but also by classroom interaction and learner affect.

Against this background, the present study explores marine cadets' experiences in learning English as a General Course at a Banyuwangi Marine Academy. It focuses

on how cadets perceive the relevance of the course, the challenges they encounter, and the extent to which current instruction supports the communicative demands of maritime work. This focus is warranted because recent scholarship has often examined curriculum design and lecturers' interpretations of maritime language frameworks, while cadets' own lived experiences in local Indonesian academy settings remain less visible. By foregrounding cadets' perspectives, the study seeks to clarify how institutional practice, classroom interaction, and professional expectations intersect in maritime English learning.

Method

This study employed a qualitative descriptive design to explore marine cadets' experiences of learning English as a General Course in the context of global maritime communication. A qualitative descriptive approach is appropriate when the purpose is to provide a rich yet low-inference account of participants' views and experiences in everyday terms rather than to generate highly abstract theory (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). Because this study sought to understand how cadets perceived the relevance, challenges, and classroom realities of English learning within a maritime academy, this design was considered suitable for capturing those experiences in a natural educational setting (Sandelowski, 2000).

The participants were marine cadets enrolled in the English General Course at a marine academy in Banyuwangi. They were selected through criterion-based purposive sampling, as this strategy is widely used in qualitative inquiry to identify information-rich cases that are directly relevant to the phenomenon under study. Cadets who had completed at least one semester of English instruction were recruited because they had sufficient exposure to the course to reflect meaningfully on its content, instructional practices, and relevance to future maritime communication needs. The study was conducted during regular academic activities so that participants' experiences could be examined within their natural learning environment (Palinkas et al., 2015).

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and non-participant classroom observations. Semi-structured interviews were chosen because they allow researchers to explore participants' thoughts, feelings, and beliefs in depth while still maintaining alignment with the focus of the study through a flexible interview guide. Following established methodological guidance, the interview protocol was developed from the research questions and relevant literature and included open-ended prompts about cadets' motivation, perceived relevance of English to maritime communication, classroom experiences, and learning challenges. Each interview lasted approximately 40–60 minutes and was audio-recorded with participants' consent (DeJonckheere & Vaughn, 2019; Kallio et al., 2016).

Classroom observations were conducted in a non-participant role to document instructional practices, interaction patterns, learner participation, and spontaneous language use during naturally occurring lessons. Observation data were recorded as detailed field notes, since observational field notes are valuable for capturing contextual details, classroom processes, and interactional dynamics that may not fully emerge through interviews alone. To improve the relevance and clarity of the instruments, the

interview guide and observation focus were reviewed by experts in English education and qualitative research prior to data collection, following the use of expert judgement as a recognized step in strengthening the content validity of semi-structured interview instruments (Mulhall, 2003; Sánchez-Guardiola Paredes et al., 2021).

The data were analyzed using thematic analysis. Interview recordings were transcribed verbatim, read repeatedly, and coded inductively to identify recurring patterns across participants' accounts. The analysis followed the phases proposed by Braun and Clarke, namely familiarization with the data, generation of initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report. Observation notes were analyzed alongside interview transcripts so that themes could be developed from both reported experiences and observed classroom practices, thereby enabling a more context-sensitive interpretation of cadets' English learning experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

To enhance the trustworthiness of the findings, the study applied method triangulation by comparing evidence from interviews and classroom observations. Triangulation is commonly used in qualitative research to strengthen interpretation through the convergence of data from multiple methods or sources. In addition, analytic decisions were documented throughout the coding and theme-development process to maintain transparency and rigor during analysis. Ethical approval was obtained from the academy before the study began. All participants were informed about the purpose and procedures of the study, gave written consent, and were assured that their identities would remain confidential through the use of pseudonyms or participant codes in transcription and reporting.

Results

This section reports the findings of the study obtained from semi-structured interviews and non-participant classroom observations conducted with marine cadets enrolled in an English General Course at a Banyuwangi Marine Academy. The results are presented thematically to capture patterns in cadets' perceptions, learning experiences, and challenges in acquiring English within the context of global maritime communication. Organizing the findings thematically allows for a comprehensive portrayal of cadets' voices while maintaining analytical coherence across data sources. To enhance transparency and readability, narrative descriptions are complemented by a summary table that synthesizes the key themes emerging from the analysis.

Cadets' Perceptions of English as a General Course

The findings reveal that cadets generally perceived English as a highly important subject, particularly in relation to their future professional roles in the global maritime industry. Most participants acknowledged that English functions as a crucial medium for international communication at sea, including ship-to-ship interaction, communication with port authorities, and the execution of safety-related procedures. However, despite recognizing its importance, cadets consistently described the English General Course as insufficiently contextualized to maritime realities.

Cadets reported that classroom instruction predominantly emphasized general linguistic components such as grammar rules, vocabulary lists, and reading comprehension exercises that were not explicitly linked to maritime operations. As a result, English was often viewed as an academic requirement rather than a practical tool for professional communication. This perception suggests a disconnect between cadets' expectations—shaped by the demands of the maritime profession—and the actual instructional focus of the General Course. Consequently, English learning was perceived as relevant in principle but limited in practical applicability.

Learning Challenges in Maritime Communication Contexts

Data from interviews and classroom observations indicate that cadets encountered multiple challenges in learning and using English effectively, especially in communicative situations that resemble real maritime contexts. One of the most prominent difficulties reported was limited speaking confidence. Many cadets expressed reluctance to speak English during class activities due to fear of making grammatical mistakes or being evaluated negatively by peers and instructors.

Another major challenge involved limited familiarity with maritime-specific terminology and communicative expressions commonly used in professional settings. Cadets noted that while they were exposed to general English vocabulary, they lacked opportunities to practice technical terms and standardized phrases relevant to maritime communication. This gap was particularly evident during speaking activities, where cadets struggled to formulate responses beyond simple sentences.

Classroom observations corroborated these self-reported challenges. During speaking or discussion tasks, cadets tended to remain passive, often switching to their first language when interacting with classmates. This reliance on the first language indicates that the instructional environment did not sufficiently support the development of functional communicative competence in English. Overall, these challenges highlight the limitations of a General Course approach in addressing the communicative demands faced by maritime cadets.

Instructional Practices and Learning Experiences

Observational findings revealed that instructional practices in the English classroom were largely teacher-centered. Lessons were mainly structured around explanations of grammatical forms and textbook-based exercises, with instructors playing a dominant role in directing classroom activities. While such practices provided clarity in terms of language structure, they offered limited opportunities for meaningful interaction and active language use.

Interactive and experiential learning activities—such as role-plays, simulations, or scenario-based tasks reflecting authentic maritime communication—were rarely observed. Cadets expressed that the absence of such activities made English learning feel detached from their professional training. Several participants emphasized that learning would be more engaging and effective if classroom activities simulated real-life maritime situations, such as onboard communication, emergency drills, or interactions with multinational crew members.

These findings suggest that current instructional practices prioritize linguistic accuracy over communicative functionality. Although grammatical competence is important, the lack of learner-centered and context-based activities may hinder cadets' ability to transfer classroom knowledge to real-world maritime communication settings.

To provide a concise overview of the main findings, Table 1 summarizes the dominant themes identified through the thematic analysis. The table reflects recurring patterns across interview data and classroom observations, highlighting the central issues shaping cadets' learning experiences.

Table 1. Summary of Cadets' Experiences in Learning English as a General Course

No.	Theme	Description
1	Perceived relevance of English	English is viewed as essential but insufficiently aligned with maritime needs
2	Learning challenges	Difficulties in speaking, limited maritime terminology, and low confidence
3	Instructional focus	Emphasis on grammar and theoretical knowledge over communicative practice
4	Classroom engagement	Limited interaction and passive learner participation
5	Expectations for improvement	Strong desire for maritime-contextual and experiential learning activities

As summarized in Table 1, cadets' experiences consistently indicate a gap between the acknowledged importance of English for global maritime communication and the instructional practices implemented in the English General Course. These findings provide empirical evidence that positioning English solely as a General Course may not sufficiently prepare cadets for the communicative demands of professional maritime contexts. The results thus underscore the need for a more context-sensitive and communicatively oriented approach to English instruction in maritime education.

Discussion

The first major issue emerging from the findings is the mismatch between cadets' communicative needs and the way English is positioned as a General Course. Maritime English is not simply an extension of general English, but a special-purpose form of language shaped by safety, operational routines, and workplace communication. James et al., (2018) argue that curriculum design, teaching, and assessment in Maritime English should be grounded in safety-to-practice demands. In a needs analysis of seafarers and recruiting agencies, Ahmmed et al. (2020) identified 23 highly required Maritime English skills and found that communication efficiency was the most needed competence for onboard work. Indonesian studies point to the same problem. Dirgeyasa (2018) found that Maritime English materials should integrate nautical content, language skills, and linguistic features, while Khosiyono et al. (2021) reported that only six of eight syllabus competencies matched workplace needs, leaving important professional competencies insufficiently addressed. These studies support the present finding that cadets may value English highly, yet still experience the course as weakly connected to authentic maritime communication.

This misalignment is important because maritime communication is not reducible to grammatical knowledge alone. It is a safety-critical practice that requires speed,

clarity, precision, and responsiveness to context. Jurkovič (2022) showed that authentic routine ship–shore communication still significantly deviates from standard communication protocols, which means learners must be prepared for real communicative variation rather than formulaic language only. Likewise, John et al. (2019) analyzed spontaneous professional discourse in full-mission simulations and demonstrated the importance of operational speech acts such as directives and commissives in maritime settings. More recently, Amundsen (2025) found a persistent tension in maritime language curricula between technical safety discourse and broader pedagogical aims, while time and standardization pressures often push teaching toward procedural and test-oriented practice. This helps explain why the cadets in the present study perceived English instruction as academically structured but professionally distant from real maritime communication.

The second major theme concerns cadets' difficulties with speaking confidence, maritime terminology, and anxiety. These findings are strongly consistent with previous research in maritime education. Fathiah et al. (2020) found that maritime cadets experienced a moderate level of speaking anxiety, with communication apprehension emerging as the dominant aspect. Similarly, Joko and Wahyuningsih (2020) reported that cadets' speaking difficulties involved both linguistic factors, such as limited vocabulary, incorrect pronunciation, and weak grammatical control, and nonlinguistic factors, including anxiety, lack of confidence, low motivation, and fear of making mistakes. This indicates that the difficulties identified in the present study should not be interpreted merely as individual learner deficiencies. Rather, they reflect a recurring pattern in maritime English education in which limited communicative exposure, insufficient technical vocabulary, and affective pressure interact to constrain oral performance.

The observational finding that instruction remained largely teacher-centered further clarifies why those linguistic and affective barriers persisted. Hilal (2022) found that maritime English classroom interaction could still be dominated by one-way patterns and that cadet passivity was associated with limited understanding of lesson materials, fear of being underestimated, negative teacher behavior, and physical as well as psychological exhaustion. In a related argument, Amundsen (2025) notes that when language is treated as a generic skill, disciplinary genres and professional communication practices are displaced by decontextualized exercises. For this reason, contextualized pedagogy becomes essential. Wu et al. (2016) found that task-based instruction in marine engineering English improved students' listening and speaking competence and was positively received by learners. Likewise, Sari and Sari (2024) reported that simulation-based Maritime English learning, specifically through toolbox meeting tasks, highlighted the need for more speaking practice and simulation exercises to improve students' fluency. Taken together, these studies suggest that maritime English instruction should move beyond explanation-centered teaching toward scenario-based, interaction-rich, and workplace-oriented learning.

Overall, the present study suggests that the problem lies not only in classroom technique but also in how English is institutionally framed. When English remains a General Course, its professional function risks becoming rhetorically acknowledged but

pedagogically marginal. The contribution of this study, therefore, lies in showing from cadets' own perspectives how curricular positioning, classroom interaction, and affective experience converge to shape readiness for maritime communication. The findings support a shift toward a more profession-oriented model in which English learning is organized around maritime scenarios, operational discourse, speaking practice, and learner participation rather than primarily around general grammar instruction. Such a shift would better align English teaching with the communicative realities of global maritime work and with the expectations cadets already hold for their future roles.

Conclusion

Based on the manuscript, this study concludes that marine cadets viewed English as an essential competence for their future participation in global maritime communication, particularly for safety, coordination, and professional interaction, yet they experienced the English General Course as insufficiently connected to authentic maritime demands. The findings showed that cadets faced recurring difficulties in speaking confidently, using maritime-specific terminology, and participating in oral communication, while classroom instruction remained largely teacher-centered and grammar-oriented. These results imply that English instruction in maritime academies should be reconceptualized beyond a general academic subject and repositioned as a context-sensitive, profession-oriented course. Integrating maritime scenarios, technical vocabulary, communicative tasks, and learner-centered pedagogy would better support cadets' communicative competence and improve their readiness for the multilingual realities of the maritime workplace.

This study, however, was limited by its qualitative focus on a single marine academy and a specific group of cadets, which means the findings cannot be generalized to all maritime education contexts. In addition, the data were drawn from interviews and classroom observations within one institutional setting, so they reflect localized experiences rather than broader national patterns. Future research is therefore recommended to involve multiple maritime academies, larger participant groups, and mixed-method or longitudinal designs to examine how contextualized English instruction affects cadets' language development over time. Further studies may also investigate the effectiveness of simulation-based learning, task-based instruction, and maritime English curriculum reform in strengthening cadets' confidence, communicative performance, and professional preparedness.

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