MARITIME ENGLISH AS A MEANS OF COMMUNICATION AT SEA

Lavinia NĂDRAG, Professor, PhD, "Ovidius" University of Constanţa

Abstract: The studies carried out by the author over a twenty year period have shown the main features of this particular type of communication (at sea), in a Romanian-English language context, and how it can be improved through practice in English classes.
This research has had the aim to identify the context and, therefore, the necessity of teaching/learning and using English as an international maritime language. The literature and our own inquiries testify that, nowadays, the role of English in maritime contexts is tantamount, as it is used by seafarers in daily activities, in sending and receiving orders onboard ships, between ship and on-land stations, between ships and helicopters, and in specific conditions: navigation on seas and oceans or in shallow waters, difficult weather conditions, to preserve military traditions, and to send extremely valuable verbal and nonverbal messages, sometimes redundant, but crucial to the safety at sea.
The paper draws on Prof. Tatiana Slama-Cazacu's "Contextual-Dynamic Theory" (1999:221-241) applied to the study of maritime communication. We used questionnaires and dialogues in experimental situations, which have revealed the most important characteristics of dialogues in maritime context, the factors which can have an impact on the process of coding and decoding information via dialogue, in maritime context, as well as suggested ways for improving the process of learning and teaching maritime English.

Keywords: maritime communication, psycholinguistic approach, teaching

Introduction

The process of communication has been a permanent subject of study and many sciences have been attempting to improve it. Several definitions have been provided by specialists from very different areas of study. Each definition focuses on certain elements and factors and it is usually accompanied by models (Shannon and Weaver, 1949; Lasswell, 1948; Newcomb, 1953; Gerbner, 1956; Jakobson, 1960, etc.).

Thus, communication is the 'social interaction through messages *conversations, negotiations (Fiske, 1990: 2), or 'the martial art of communication: graceful, enjoyable and very effective' (O'Connor, Seymour 1990: 41), etc. However, when talking about communication, we should keep in mind the process of sending and receiving information through the form of messages, considering both the verbal and nonverbal components of communication (see Nădrag, 2008).*

1. Psycholinguistics and communication

Romanian psycholinguistics (see Slama-Cazacu, 1964) defined communication as a psychological process involving the following elements: the language or code, the role of language (to organize, plan and coordinate work, to stimulate and synchronize movements), the process of sending and receiving messages in certain physiological and psychological conditions, the role of context), the influence of work on the selection of a way of communication i.e. a channel for message distribution, the articulated and non-articulated

BDD-V526 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 14:36:16 UTC)

speech, the acoustical and visual signs used to convey useful, and sometimes vital information, etc.

Psycholinguistics, as an interdisciplinary study, has been paying close attention to the complex phenomenon of human communication: the relationship between partners, the verbal and nonverbal components of the code, the social circumstances, the organization of the sign system, of the message and the context in which messages are conveyed, the human beings as partners and their psychological traits, etc.

According to T. Slama-Cazacu (1999), language must be analyzed especially in *dialogues* (which are taking place in social-historic contexts). A dialogue is a form of communication signalled by the real and active presence of at least two partners who have the role of emitter and receiver, and who, through their speech, make the amount of information to progress. A dialogue also involves certain rules: adaptation to the partner and the known common context, the intention to communicate, listening to the receiver's reply, inhibition of the own reply, controlling emotions, promptness of reply, short-term memory, etc. (Slama-Cazacu, 1982: 218).

By studying communication as a real process, with changes in messages as a result of the communication situation, psycholinguistics implies a complex study of messages not only as results of a linguistic code but also as a result of mimics, gestures, other nonverbal elements of communication, and different situations which accompany speech and dialogue. The dynamic-contextual methodology conceived by T. Slama-Cazacu (1999) and used by some other Romanian and foreign linguists and psycholinguists relies on the collection of data in their dynamic process and development.

Romanian psycholinguistics has also studied and defined the notions of context, "contextual levels", the influence of the social context, the "limits" of this influence (see T. Slama-Cazacu, 1978, 1987). The research on communication must always take into account the "contextual levels", the "explicit context" (linguistic or verbal and extralinguistic) and the "implicit context" (i.e. the linguistic system of the emitter, known by the receiver and the situational context, the socio-historic context). The social context implies the relationship between emitter and receiver, the individual's linguistic system, the influence of the message on the psycho-social components of the partners, the social community, the socio-historic moment and the society in general.

Romanian psycholinguists have also focused their attention on the visual, acoustic and kinesthetic means of communication that are commonly used along with the verbal message. Their role is to complete or substitute the verbal elements of communication. In 1976, T. Slama-Cazacu introduced the term "mixed syntax", i.e. the inclusion of nonverbal elements among verbal elements in the same syntactic unit. Verbal elements interweave with kinesthetic, articulatory and facial expressions which are purposefully used with gestures and which form the complex, integral act of communication. Gestures, mimics, gaze, and even the objects used as communication markers, the actions with objects, posture, distance are very useful during working activities. When there is noise, gestures may become the only means of communication. Noise, darkness, reduced visibility influence the choice of signal systems and communication network. Under certain circumstances, especially vital ones, "necessary" redundant elements are being used. Some elements are repeated, communication is completed, gestures and intonation become extremely useful.

BDD-V526 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 14:36:16 UTC)

In short, psycholinguistics studies "the changes in message during the concrete act of communication due to the relationships established between emitter and receiver, along with their psychological mobility, mutual influence, the impact of the general context in which they are placed, etc. (Slama-Cazacu, 1968: 42-43).

2. Maritime communication

English is the official maritime language adopted by the International Maritime Organization (IMO). The use of correct and effective verbal and nonverbal components of communication by seafarers may be, in many cases, a vital issue. Due to disturbances (noise, fog) which may occur at sea in the process of conveying messages, the need for secret keeping (in the Navy) and the necessity of preserving traditions, sailors use both verbal and nonverbal components of communication, all of them being regulated nationally and internationally. Messages are typically doubled or tripled to secure their correct encoding, decoding and interpretation.

Communication in the Navy and the Merchant Marine has certain particulars as a result of the complex situations which may arise in military and civilian seamen's activities, both on land and at sea. Day-to-day activities, but also the occasional ones require the compliance with well established rules, learning standard orders, and their safe formulation and transmission along with some other information verbally and through "signs" and "signals" used with the intention of communication: semaphores, the salute between ships, the military uniform, acoustic, optic, radio telegraphic, and radio means.

Present marine communications requirements are established under the SOLAS (Safety of Life at Sea) Convention (see Manolache, 2000, 113-114; 2004). The amendments to this convention-treaty incorporate the newest advances in technology, both terrestrial and through satellites. Ships traveling on oceans are required to carry communication equipment depending on their area of operation. Systems operate in a) the very high frequency (VHF) bands, and satellite systems (channel 16 is the distress and calling channel, monitored by local coastal rescue centers, also used to disseminate local and coastal weather forecast and navigational warnings); b) medium frequency (MF) bands (on ships operating 20-100 nautical miles offshore to broadcast meteorological, weather, safety and urgent and navigation warning information in textual format to mariners at sea – NAVTEX); c) high frequency (HF) bands (to disseminate high seas warning, meteorological, weather, safety and navigational information using voice single side-band, radio facsimile, and simplex teletype over radio – SITOR). Satellite communications are mainly conducted through INMARSAT-A (an analog system which provides voice, telex, low/high speed data, broadcast/group calling and vessel tracking), INMARSAT-B, INMARSAT-C, INMARSAT SafetyNet, INMARSAT-M. Under the SOLAS regulations, it is required that ships have GMDSS (Global Maritime Distress and Safety System) equipment.

When at sea, many other factors must be taken into account: the code used, the physical channel through which messages are transmitted, congestion, interference, the receiver, etc. Despite all the measures taken by the countries which own merchant fleets, difficulties are still encountered because of the incorrect use of VHF procedures, busy frequencies, problems in encoding and decoding messages, etc.

The main types of maritime communication are:

BDD-V526 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 14:36:16 UTC)

- **Communication between ships**

Communication between ships is required by the following groups of factors: types of information (e.g. hazard, fire, collision, etc.) the need to identify each vessel, asking for a pilot to come aboard (the ship's master requires the presence of an authorized person, "the pilot", to lead the ship to the berth), transmission of warnings under very different and complex circumstances (when there are fog banks, unidentified floating objects, mines, oil spills, fishing boats in the area, search and rescue operations, military operations, pipelines, when water is shallow or when there are wrecks, rocks, bridges which will not open and impede navigation), granting assistance when a ship is sinking, damaged, on fire, running aground, running into collision, etc., and the ship requires a rescue boat, helicopter, medical and fire-fighting assistance, tugboat or ice boat (see Manolache, 1999).

- **Communication onboard ships**

Communication aboard a ship is performed through an internal telephone system or by sending commands through a speaking tube/voice pipe (Beziris *et al.*, 1985: 522), through face-to-face communication in the mother tongue or in English (most of the time) when crews are multinational or multilingual. Orders (Popa, 1992) for the engine room are transmitted from the bridge through the ship's telegraph or an amplification system. For clear, fast, effective and unambiguous communication, several conditions must be met. The master's orders – most of the time, the message sender – depend largely on the degree of crew's training (officers, NCOs, sailors) who receive the messages, and orders and carry them out on time and in an efficient way. Specific to the Navy is the dialogue needed in the transmission and performance of orders.

- **Communication used for other purposes**

Another type of communication, on all seas and oceans of the world and in all foreign ports, occurs in English: NATO military drills, including those on the Black Sea, and in international waters, in navigation e.g. a "pilot" is required to come on board to lead the ship to berth; passage through straits and channels supervised by certain coastal stations; towing; medical inspection and control of the vessel on entering a foreign port; signing contracts with agents from different countries for loading, unloading; receiving and distributing cargo; purchase of food and technical supplies; technical assistance request in certain cases; repairs; resolving disputes relating to collisions, the quality of goods, the conditions under which cargo was delivered.

3. A psycholinguistic approach to maritime communication based on T. Slama-Cazacu's 'dynamic-contextual' concept and methodology

The study of communication as a real process, with message changes as a result of adaptation to the communication situation (T. Slama-Cazacu's theory), is a psycholinguistic approach and involves a complex study of messages, not only as achievements of the language/code, but also including situational elements, mimics, gestures accompanying oral speech and dialogue. The methodological principles envisaged by T. Slama-Cazacu (1961, 1999) to select linguistic facts and thus to create a corpus and then interpret and use it as a whole is referred to as "Dynamic-Contextual Methodology". This consists of collecting real

BDD-V526 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 14:36:16 UTC)

facts from actual reality, in their dynamics, i.e. during communication, in their development, and in their real contexts in which they arise (see also Nădrag, 1999).

Methods and results

The research methods (Questionnaire and Experiment) and the process of data collection and interpretation are based on the principles of the psycholinguistic methodology envisaged by Tatiana Slama-Cazacu (1968: 107-131). The subjects were students of "Mircea cel Bătrân" Naval Academy in Constanta. They had studied in Romanian, during the navigation and seamanship classes, but also during the English language classes, the rules that need to be observed in maritime dialogues in order to increase communication efficiency.

Questionnaire

A questionnaire, applied to students, in the Romanian language, by the same professor – the author - highlighted the students' motivation and their need for learning both the English language in general and maritime English (terms referring to military and merchant ships, military technique, navigation equipment, orders, shipping, underwater weapons, artillery and missiles, radio-electronics, mechanical shipping.

Simulated dialogues (experiment) – simulated dialogues between students – cadets, in English, recorded on a cassette and in direct protocols. The data collected covered four themes. The experiment was conducted under the same conditions for each pair of students. The elements that the author considered were: how students focused or not on the same topic, turn taking, inhibition of verbal response, the situational context, the nonverbal components of communication (gestures, mimicry, gaze direction, smile), lexical, morphological and phonological features, the dynamic features of the dialogue, the syntactic link between the lines – "dialogical syntax" (Slama-Cazacu, 1982).

All dialogues began by using *general opening formula* and ended by using *special formulas for radio communications* (*over*; *over and out*) or *politeness phrases* when dialogues "took place" on land (in repair yards or agencies dealing with supply). Dialogues on issues of supply and repairs allow a greater use of politeness formulas, especially in responses.

In radio transmissions, the presence of greeting formulas is mandatory, as it is required by maritime radio communication rules. Politeness formulas are designed to show the identity of the participants in the dialogue, and to lead to the general understanding of the message and context.

As a result, students focused on the suggested topics by responding to verbal requests, and always inhibiting their verbal response until the partner had completed his reply. Dialogues recorded during the experiment prove compliance with the rules of dialogue: turn taking, balanced replies, information exchange, a linguistic-contextual syntactic link between replies.

A look at the dialogues noted down in protocols highlighted: the theme, purpose (shown immediately after the introductory formula), the logical sequence of the lines, means of supporting arguments and conversation. Each dialogue serves cooperation, planning and coordination. Dialogues are based on mutual interest, knowledge of general English and knowledge of maritime English. The pauses that occurred in dialogues were imposed by the

BDD-V526 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 14:36:16 UTC)

students' desire to produce correct sentences in English (as the experimenter found out from the subjects).

The analysis of verbal fluency in the experimentally induced dialogues revealed a small number of pauses and incorrect phrases. Variation in the pauses and hesitations quantity is determined by the extent of the dialogue produced, by the maritime phrases used, the fluency of thoughts and the speaking level of each interlocutor. Comprehension was facilitated by practice during the English classes, by the exercises done in language laboratories, the small number (12-15) of students in a group, increased supervision of students' participation in the English lessons.

The tenses used by the students meet the requirements of the Standard Marine Vocabulary (1985). The dialogues produced reveal some other aspects. The students know how to build questions, to express demands, satisfaction, to communicate information, particularly through the use of standard formulas. At the lexical level, one can notice the use of maritime terms usually as standard formulas, and words from the active English language vocabulary. The ratio between the two categories of words varies depending on the issues under discussion: if the dialogue is taking place on land, then the students can display greater knowledge of English.

4. Teacher's role

However, the studies that we have been carrying out show the "never ending role" of the teacher. He/She must take into account a lot of factors which may have an impact on teaching/learning English. From the whole range of sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic variables which influence the process of teaching/learning a foreign language, maybe age is an extremely important factor. It is closely related to motivation, abilities and the methods of teaching/learning a foreign language.

The teacher provides stimulus and opportunities for the student to experience the language, but the learning occurs inside of the student. The teacher does not have direct control over this. Consequently, the more the student feels that the material presented is of relevance to him/her, the more he/she will internalize and the faster he/she will learn it. The teacher must coordinate classroom activities so that they form a smooth progression leading towards greater **communicative abilities** (see C.M. Stănişoară, 2003).

In many activities, the teacher will perform the regular role of language instructor. He/She will present new language, exercise direct control over the learner's performance, evaluate and correct it, etc. While an activity is in progress, the teacher may be a consultant or an advisor. He/She may move around the class to check for the strengths and weaknesses of the students. The teacher can also be a participant in an activity, introducing challenges. It may be necessary to move into one method or another slowly because the students are probably not used to all types of activities. It would probably be wise to begin with activities that make relatively light demands on the students linguistically and from there move step by step to more complicated/demanding work. This will help build the students' self confidence. With a lot of encouragement and support from the teacher, creativity usually increases dramatically in the classroom.

The teacher should be a psychological support for shy or slow students. Extra assistance and easier roles can be given to these students in the initial stages so that they have more time

BDD-V526 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 14:36:16 UTC)

to build their self confidence. The teacher must be understanding, patient, tolerant, gently critical, very encouraging and helpful. Teachers must create a classroom atmosphere where the students feel comfortable experimenting with the language. Students should not feel intimidated or afraid to make a mistake.

5. Conclusions

In our opinion, the study of maritime communication, from a psycholinguistic perspective, can contribute to establishing its main features and the factors that influence the process of information coding and decoding in maritime context. From this point of view one can draw the following conclusions:

- the need for dialogue among students (seamen and cadets) "at sea" in various situations (departure, landing, etc.) reinforces the essential function of the language, we would say vital, namely communication;
- a successful dialogue is influenced by the correct use of standard maritime vocabulary, the importance of the task, the way the student adapts to the partner and to the communication context;
- the respondent must pay attention to the verbal and nonverbal elements of the maritime code and the situational context;
- the dialogue in these specific conditions is not "free". Dialogues at sea involve the use of standard maritime phrases, specific to maritime communication;
- turn taking is determined by the need to observe the discipline imposed by the "Standard Marine Vocabulary", and quite often messages must be repeated to show that they have been understood well;
- sometimes verbal elements are accompanied by nonverbal, redundant but necessary elements;

In conclusion, it is the teacher who utilizes the strengths of the students while giving them the feeling that they are responsible human beings by having them help in classroom tasks, in preparation of materials and in conducting of certain activities in class. On the other hand, it is obvious that the acquisition of communicative ability by the learners is a gradual process. It depends not only on educational organization, and the teacher's professional training, but on various other factors as well, including the learner's age, nationality, motivation, etc. Communicative competence includes not only the mastery of grammar and vocabulary, but also the rules of speaking, i.e. what topics are appropriate to particular speech events, how to hesitate, how to interrupt, what to say in a particular context.

Bibliography

Beziris, A. *et al.* (1985). *Dicţionar Maritim Englez – Român*. Bucureşti, Ed. Tehnică.
Fiske, J. (2006). *Introduction to Communication Studies*, Padstow, Cornwall, TJ International Ltd.
Manolache, P. (1999). *Maritime English*, Constanta, MTC.
Manolache, P. (2000). *Maritime English*, Constanta, Ex Ponto.

BDD-V526 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 14:36:16 UTC)

Manolache, P. (2004). *Advanced Communication in English*. *Study Guide for Romanian Seafarers*, Constanta, CERONAV.
Nădrag, L. (1999). *Comunicarea maritimă în limba engleză, din perspectivă psiholingvistică*. Constanta, Ed. Europolis.
Nădrag, L. (2008). *A Psycholinguistic Approach to Communication in English Language Teaching*. In vol. "Knowledge based organization", The 14th International Scientific Conference, Sibiu, 27-29 Nov. 2008, pp. 148-155.
O'Connor, J., J. Seymour 1990. *Introducing Neuro-Linguistic Programming - Psychological Skills for Understanding and Influencing People*, Mandala.
Popa, I.C. (1992). *Expresii marinăreş*ti *în limbile engleză şi română*, Bucureşti, Ed. Militară.
Slama-Cazacu, T. (1961). *Dialogul la copii*, Bucureşti, Ed. Academiei.
Slama-Cazacu, T. (1964). *Comunicarea în procesul muncii.* Bucureşti, Ed. Ştiinţifică.
Slama-Cazacu, T. (1968). *Introducere în Psiholingvistică*. Bucureşti, Ed. Ştiinţifică.
Slama-Cazacu, T. (1976). *Nonverbal components in message sequence: "Mixed sintax",* In W. McCormack, S. A. Wurm (Eds.). Language and man. Anthropological issues. The Hague-Paris, Mouton Publishers, pp.217-227.
Slama-Cazacu, T. (1978). *Psycholinguistique.* In Grand Larousse de la Langue Francaise, vol.7, Paris, Larousse, pp. 4749-4755.
Slama-Cazacu, T. (1982). "Structura Dialogului: Despre "Sintaxa Dialogată", I Şi II", *Studii şi Cercetări Lingvistice*, 33, 3-4, 211-224, 301-320.
Slama-Cazacu, T. (1987). *Nonverbal components of communication and the field of applied psycholinguistics.* In Abstracts Kassel, p. 99.
Slama-Cazacu, T. (1999), *Psiholingvistica - O ştiinţă a comunicării*. Bucureşti, Ed. ALL.
Standard Marine Navigational Vocabulary. (1985), London, IMO.
Stănişoară, C. M. (2003). *Interactive English Language Training Course for Students and Not Only. Bucureşti*, Ed. Aramis.

BDD-V526 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.75 (2026-11-06 14:36:16 UTC)