



Volume XXVI 2023

ISSUE no.1

MBNA Publishing House Constanta 2023



# Scientific Bulletin of Naval Academy

SBNA PAPER • **OPEN ACCESS**

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To cite this article: C. Alibec, R-A Apostol-Mateş, Scientific Bulletin of Naval Academy, Vol. XXVI 2023, pg. 95-99.

Submitted: 04.05.2023

Revised: 26.07.2023

Accepted: 26.07.2023

Available online at [www.anmb.ro](http://www.anmb.ro)

ISSN: 2392-8956; ISSN-L: 1454-864X

doi: 10.21279/1454-864X-23-I1-011

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# MULTILINGUAL CREWS AND ON BOARD COMMUNICATION CREATING CROSS - CULTURAL CONNECTIONS

**Lect. univ. dr. Camelia ALIBEC**

**Lect. univ. dr. Raluca APOSTOL-MATEȘ**

[camelia.alibec@anmb.ro](mailto:camelia.alibec@anmb.ro)

[raluca.mates@anmb.ro](mailto:raluca.mates@anmb.ro)

**Abstract.** Communication is the most important tool for social interaction and also for safety at work on board ship. Cross-cultural communication refers to the many ways the different peoples of the world communicate with each other verbally and non-verbally. Multinational crews are very common for the vessels nowadays. Indeed, the verbal communication is made in English, but the levels of speaking skill in English differ substantially from one crewmember to another. They sometimes strive to formulate ideas, to exchange information and knowledge between individuals, and between crew and management ashore. Having this setback it is outstanding how people from different cultural backgrounds having different mother languages can overcome cultural barriers well enough to be able to even use humour on board.

## 1. Introduction

People that communicate across cultures often have diverse nationalities, working styles, ages, races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, genders, etc. Through verbal and nonverbal communication, they seek to negotiate, mediate, exchange, and intermediate cultural differences.

Cross-cultural communication focus on the information sharing between individuals from various cultural backgrounds. The success or failure of the conversation is not contingent on the words being spoken. It will be seen as cross-cultural communication even if both sides are making the same attempts.

The manner in which a typical individual communicates reflects the culture to which he or she belongs. Undoubtedly, every one of us encounters a situation with a different culture when we must start a meaningful dialogue. During working hours, most people frequently find themselves in need of cross-cultural communication. It is well known that individuals from various cultures and origins make up the majority of the workplace's cultural diversity. People have varying cognitive, analytic, auditory, acceptant, and interpretive processes depending on their cultural background. As a result, phrases or gestures that are used the same way in one culture but have a different meaning to people from that same society.

Since there has been a great deal of globalization in all domains, the study of communication across various cultures is now a part of a larger global field. People from various societal, cultural, or national setups are becoming more and more accustomed to applying cross-cultural communication and foreign language education in organizations, institutions, and schools.

## 2. Multinational crews

Since the second half of the 20th century, multinational crews have been known to be employed by merchant ships all over the world. Mixed-nationality crews were initially implemented by many businesses as a cost-saving measure to maintain their competitiveness. These tactics, however, had unforeseen advantages, particularly in terms of collaboration. The performance of multi-national crews often found employers to be pleasantly surprised and contrasted these favorably to their prior experiences of single-nationality complements. However, when there were only two or three nationalities on board, there occasionally were issues. Crews seemed to be more sharply divided in these situations along nationality lines, and occupational hierarchies on board occasionally changed to align with nationality rather than rank. [4]

Companies should consider the cultural origins of the crew members they hire for their ships and seek to choose nationalities that can work well together in a team atmosphere.

Another strategy that many businesses use is to hire senior officers from the nation of the ship owner, junior officers from a third-world nation, and ratings from yet another third-world nation. About two thirds of the global merchant fleet, which employs 1.2 million seafarers, may have adopted multinational crews. Five or more different nationalities are represented on the crews of one in ten ships. [4]

Despite worries in the shipping sector about alleged linguistic and cultural barriers in crews with mixed nationalities, studies indicate that many seafarers have a clear preference for working in multinational crews. One seafarer claimed that while working on ships with global crews, he had never encountered racial prejudice. However, he had encountered regionalism while working on ships with only Filipino crews, which had left him feeling incredibly uncomfortable. [7]

A general perception of a nation's ability to adjust or 'mix' to an environment with various cultures appears to have an impact on the decision to combine seafarers of different origins as well as the option and preference of which nationalities to mix, in addition to the level of remuneration. People from the Russian Federation and the Republic of Korea are typically exclusively found in homogenous and monoglot crews, most likely because to their weak English language proficiency, according to several surveys by the Seafarers International Research Centre- SIRC (ILO Geneva 2001). Additionally, rather than navigating in big groups, Russians commonly sail in pairs and singles with other nationalities.

A recent study regarding Greek shipping companies reveals that Filipinos are most preferred and perceived as the most compatible nation to work together with the Greek seamen. While Filipino, Polish, and Indian seafarers regularly provide a significant number of crewmembers, they are more unlikely to come together as whole crews in FOC ships. [6] On the other hand, Poles, Filipinos, and Indians are believed to be sufficiently fluent in English and may thus mingle more comfortably with English-speaking senior officials of other nationalities (ILO 2001).

From our sources (students going onboard as cadets, ex-students occupying positions of officers on board ships) we may state that Romanians are also preferred to be mixed with other Eastern Europeans in order to form multinational crews, due to their proficiency in English and very good knowledge.

In the planning and/or execution of a manning strategy, the possible combinations of manning conditions typically involve a single national crew, a mix of two different nationalities (wherein the cultural differentiation of seafarers from developed and emerging nations is parallel to the hierarchical distinction among Officers and Ratings), and a multinational crew.

Miscommunications on board ships arise when there is a breakdown in communication between seafarers of various nationalities, and intent, perspectives, and behaviors might be misinterpreted. Misunderstandings amongst crew members of the same nationality but from different areas, ages, and specialties can also occur.

Despite the fact that work-related stress is investigated or addressed in the MARCOM (1999) report, the role of stress as an exacerbating element for communication, raising the likelihood of harmful misunderstandings, is overlooked. However, studies show that crew members get to know each other over time, and even if the language has been disrupted, crew members learn how to interpret each other. This shows that when people who are unfamiliar with one other talk, misunderstandings are more frequent. This might be an interesting topic for further research.

When dealing with cross-cultural connections that arise in a multi-cultural/multilingual environment like a multinational crew, there are a number of factors to take into account.

### *2.1. Collective and Individualistic Cultures*

Communication can also be impacted by a group's perspective on society, whether it is individualistic or collective. Individualistic cultures frequently place a strong emphasis on personal achievement. Persons from such backgrounds are assertive and frequently try to control others. The individualistic cultures of Western Europe are the best. On the opposing side, collective cultures prioritize achieving collective objectives. Individuals from collective cultures are usually less assertive and less prone to try to force their culture on others. The collective societies seen in Asia, Africa, Latin America, and the Arab world are good examples.

### *2.2 The Speed and Rhythm of Communication*

The speed and rhythm of an utterance are another example of cultural variation in language. Language is spoken quickly in some cultures. Crews from these cultures are able to adjust to one another's quick speech. They can finish sentences with one another or interrupt each other. However, a problem occurs when some crew members are from speech-slower cultures. While the slower speaker may believe the faster one is domineering and uninterested in what others have to say, the faster speaker may perceive the other as slow-witted or unresponsive. The speed of communication is unintentional and distinct from the spoken words and their meanings, it provides details concerning each individual.

### *2.3. Tone of Voice*

Other linguistic distinctions that are acquired through learning another language include tone and pitch. Interactions between a person from a culture where tones are smoothly modulated and quiet spoken and one from a culture where tones are varied might lead to misunderstanding. Some crew members may perceive the rise-toned person as domineering and indifferent whereas the crew member with a lower and modulated tone may be perceived as emotional, shy and easy to dominate.

### *2.4. Volume of Voice*

When speaking to someone, the voice volume differs. For instance, South East Asian crews speak at a quieter volume, whereas some Mediterranean and Arab nations may raise their voices when stressing a point in a message or when speaking to someone far away. As a result, an Asian crew would interpret someone from a loud volume culture as hostile, whereas Asians from a low volume culture might be seen as shy and passive. Additionally, yelling orders can make the crew look bad, which makes the atmosphere on board ships tense.

### *2.5. Gestures and Eye Contact*

In some cultures, eye contact can be used to express openness and sincerity, while in others, it can be used to suggest overpowering and disrespect. For instance, avoiding eye contact is an expression of deference in some parts of Asia, yet eye contact is of the utmost importance in Europe or North America. For those who work aboard ships, physical gestures can mean a lot. Hand gestures and other forms of body language may be frowned upon or, even worse, may have completely unforeseen connotations. Casual touching is common in some cultures, whereas it is frowned upon or worse in others. Communication issues may result from different gestures when unaware of their specific significance for people around.

We will utilize the yes/no motions used in several cultures as an illustration. While Indians and Pakistanis slowly turn their heads from right to left horizontally to say yes, Europeans and Egyptians move their heads up and down. Europeans and Americans turn their heads from left to right when they want to say no, while Egyptians turn their heads from right to left while clicking their tongues. People from Saudi Arabia lean back and click their tongues. [3]

### *2.6. Social communication: jokes*

It is stated that jokes are used during social interactions on ships. For a variety of reasons, telling jokes can be perilous when it comes to social interaction. Candidates of jokes may be affronted; those who make jokes may be offended if a joke fails to be understood and 'falls flat'; those receiving the joke may feel awkward if they cannot comprehend it; people may be reluctant of laughing at something they mistakenly believe to be a joke. As a result, being able to joke relies on having a reasonably comprehensive grasp of the "rules" of connecting with others as well as the capacity to put those "rules" into practice. Making jokes in a second language is challenging for certain reasons, and cultural 'intervention' adds further problems. A key component of the social life on board may be missed by crew members with poor language abilities if they steer clear of jokes entirely. Seafarers have a tendency to feel more isolated if they choose not to joke around with their fellow crew members or if they are unable to do so. The impact of social estrangement and the significance of English in reducing the feeling of loneliness among crews with mixed nationalities are issues that need to be addressed more and more in the light of diminishing the effect of social isolation on board.

There are also situations when crew on board, even though they belong to different nationalities, create cross cultural connections through jokes. A good example was provided to us by a 2nd Officer, Romanian on board a tanker under BSM. They were having Christmas dinner at the Officers' Mess. Most of the crew was present, because the officers were East-Europeans (3 Russians, 1 Ukrainian, 3 Romanians, 2 Venezuelans) and the Ratings were Filipino and Russians, therefore all of them were celebrating Christmas at the same time. Because they were many, the 3rd Officer, Venezuelan, had to sit at the table in one of its corners. One of the Romanian officers told him to move from that corner, because he will remain unmarried. The Romanians, Russians and the Ukrainian laughed at the saying. The following discussions revealed that the same saying is common to the East European area. The Venezuelans were explained the joke and its meaning. The 3rd Officer then told them that the saying was to be the truth because he had just split from his girlfriend a couple of days before. His comment, even if it was made with some regret in his voice, made all enjoy the joke more, and this time all at the table shared the humour.

### **3. The Limitations of Cross Culture**

Every culture has a unique impact on how even the smallest social, cultural, and professional acts are seen, and this effect inevitably runs through business. In certain cultures, the connection between an authority figure and a subordinate is seen as mutually beneficial. In others, the person in charge is tasked with exercising managerial authority. From this perspective, it was noted that a rating or inferior rank officer's behavior and communication with a high rank officer may differ according on their cultural backgrounds. For example, an Asian rating or 3rd/2nd mate will have a subordinate attitude to the demands of a Master or Chief and will say yes to all requests. Even some aspects of the requests may cause trouble for them, they will carry on the demand. On the other hand, a rating or an inferior rank officer from Eastern Europe or the American continent would feel free to discuss with the Master/Chief officer some variants to carry on the demand.

Another setback involves the sexual segregation and the limitations it brings to building cross-cultural connections. Even in the professional world, contact between people of the opposite sex can be difficult in societies that uphold stringent religious values. In the past 20 years, there have also been some developments in this sector due to the rise in the number of women serving as officers on ships. However uncomfortable, men had to leave apart their strict religious convictions and accept women as their equals in the maritime field. More so, women became Chief Officers or Masters, positions that are of great importance. Those managerial positions bring a lot of responsibilities towards the ship, crew and merchandise and cannot be ignored if they are filled up with female officers. From our knowledge, also, crewing firms employing female officers, make all the efforts to elude situations of incompatibility, even from religious reasons.

#### 4. Conclusion

Training for a cross-cultural environment is important so that all involved in this environment to be able to communicate effectively and to ensure that all the actions are done with the most efficiency and diligence. Cross-cultural training improves skills that lead to seafarer psychological comfort, including intercultural competence and effective interpersonal communication. [2] The majority of the shipping companies have already had some courses and programmes for their employees regarding cross-cultural issues to be viewed upon. It is of an utter importance to prepare your people to act properly in a cross-cultural environment.

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