



Volume XXVII 2024

ISSUE no.1

MBNA Publishing House Constanta 2024



Scientific Bulletin of Naval Academy

SBNA PAPER • **OPEN ACCESS**

Navigating Multilingual Waters: The Importance of Language Learning for Seafarers

To cite this article: Corina Sandiuc, Scientific Bulletin of Naval Academy, Vol. XXVII 2024, pg. 76 - 79.

Submitted: 26.04.2024

Revised: 21.06.2024

Accepted: 01.08.2024

Available online at www.anmb.ro

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

doi: 10.21279/1454-864X-24-I1-010

SBNA© 2024. This work is licensed under the CC BY-NC-SA 4.0 License

Navigating Multilingual Waters: The Importance of Language Learning for Seafarers

Sandiuc Corina

Mircea cel Bătrân Naval Academy, Constanta
corina.sandiuc@anmb.ro

Abstract. Seafarers can benefit considerably from learning new languages. Language competency opens up a variety of career opportunities in multinational shipping companies while improving communication and strengthening relationships with coworkers. Even basic proficiency can transform professional experiences, providing access to unexpected opportunities and enriching interactions with local communities. Although typically English is considered the international language of maritime communication, we believe that other languages relevant to the crew's composition and operational context should also be included. In the present paper, we will focus on multilingual crew training that includes French, which holds significant importance in global maritime operations since it is one of the official languages of the International Maritime Organization (IMO). Companies with multilingual crews, particularly those who also speak French, gain a competitive edge in the market, as they can communicate more efficiently with French-speaking authorities, ports, and vessels worldwide. Moreover, understanding French language and culture fosters cultural awareness among crew members, facilitating smoother interactions during international operations.

Keywords: multilingualism, language competency, French language, intercultural competency

1. Introduction

In the maritime world, English is the main international language for communication among seafarers worldwide. However, with crews comprising individuals from diverse linguistic backgrounds and vessels navigating through international waters, the ability to communicate in multiple languages could prove valuable. Multilingualism can provide many benefits, including improved cognitive function, better communication with people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, and increased job opportunities in global markets where proficiency in multiple languages is highly valued. Among the many languages spoken in the maritime world, French holds a significant place due to its widespread use in maritime regions, international organizations, and legal documentation.

2. Commitment to multilingualism in the maritime world

The International Maritime Organization (IMO) recognizes Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish as its official languages, while English, French, and Spanish are designated as its working languages. As a result of this multilingual recognition, IMO has published more than 200 titles in these languages, covering topics such as maritime safety, cargoes, facilitation for travel and transport, legal matters, marine environment protection, marine technology, navigation and rescue, training and IMO model courses, etc. Moreover, The IMO acknowledges the significance of multilingualism through its

active participation in events such as the International Annual Meeting on Language Arrangements, Documentation, and Publication (IAMLADP), where it reaffirms its commitment to ensuring effective communication across languages. This commitment highlights the significance of multilingualism in enhancing communication, understanding, trust, and inclusivity within the international community. (IMO 2019)

Another important organisation that emphasises the importance of multilingualism is The European Maritime Safety Agency (EMSA). Being an EU agency, EMSA adheres to the multilingual framework of the European Union, which ensures that its communications, documents, and services are available in all official languages of the EU member states. (EMSA 2022) This commitment to multilingualism enables EMSA to effectively communicate with stakeholders across the European Union, ensuring transparency, accessibility, and inclusivity in its activities and initiatives related to maritime safety and pollution prevention.

These examples indicate that, in addition to English, several other languages could be valuable for seafarers operating in specific regions or engaged in particular types of maritime activities. The choice of additional languages to learn depends on factors such as the regions where a seafarer operates, the nature of their maritime activities, and the specific requirements of their job or career aspirations. One may choose from: Spanish (widely spoken in maritime regions such as Spain, Latin America, and parts of the Caribbean); Portuguese (spoken in maritime regions such as Portugal, Brazil, and parts of Africa); German (spoken in maritime regions such as Germany and parts of Northern Europe); Russian (widely spoken in maritime regions such as Russia, the Baltic States, parts of Eastern Europe, and Arctic shipping routes); Mandarin Chinese (widely used in East Asia); Arabic (spoken in many countries bordering the Mediterranean Sea, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf, as well as in North Africa and the Middle East). By considering the linguistic diversity of maritime regions and the growing importance of global trade, seafarers could enhance their communication skills and broaden their professional opportunities in the dynamic maritime industry.

3. French Maritime Influence

In this paper, we wish to explore the benefits of learning additional languages for seafarers with particular focus on French language, whose importance cannot be overstated, especially for seafarers navigating through francophone regions. France has a rich maritime history, with a legacy of exploration, trade, and naval dominance. French explorers, traders, and naval officers played significant roles in shaping global maritime routes and trade networks. This historical influence has contributed to the spread of French language and culture across various maritime territories worldwide.

Nowadays, France has a robust maritime sector, including commercial shipping, fishing, naval operations, and offshore industries. It boasts an extensive coastline, comprising 66 commercial ports, stretching from the English Channel to the Mediterranean Sea, and is the only country in the world present on four oceans: the Atlantic Ocean (Guadeloupe, Guyana, Martinique, Saint-Barthélemy, Saint-Martin, Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon), the Indian Ocean (La Réunion, Mayotte, French Southern and Antarctic Lands), the Southern Ocean (through the TAAF) and the Pacific Ocean (French Polynesia, New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, La Passion-Clipperton Island). (Folliot 2022)

Given this influence, both past and present, exerted by France over the maritime world, French is not only one of the official languages of major international maritime organizations such as the International Maritime Organization (IMO), but it is also widely spoken in important maritime territories, in close connection to the francophone nations and regions, such as: Belgium, Switzerland, Canada, parts of Africa, the Caribbean, and the Indian Ocean. In these countries, French serves as a primary or secondary language in maritime activities, including port operations, navigation, and regulatory compliance, and thus is a necessary tool for seafarers, port officials, and maritime professionals operating in these jurisdictions.

For this reason, a number of French-flagged vessels, together with shipping companies and corporations headquartered in France, require or prefer candidates with proficiency in French,

especially if they operate in francophone regions. Some examples include: CMA CGM - one of the largest container shipping companies globally; Louis Dreyfus Armateurs (LDA) - a French shipping group specializing in maritime transportation and services; Bourbon Corporation - a major player in offshore oil and gas marine services, operating in numerous francophone countries; Bolloré Logistics - a global logistics company offering a wide range of shipping and freight services.

There are many other shipping companies, maritime organizations, and logistics firms conducting international trade that value French language skills, either for specific roles or due to their operations in francophone regions. This requirement would likely include seafarers working on French-owned or operated ships, as well as those employed by multinational companies.

4. Advantages of language learning - The case of French

While English serves as the primary language of communication in the maritime industry, especially for international trade and navigation, proficiency in French can still offer significant advantages for seafarers. Such language skills could represent an additional professional development tool for seafarers, improving their cognitive skills and helping them to better understand technical data, communicate with port authorities more efficiently, navigate through local regulations, and engage with crew members and coastal communities.

4.1. Cognitive benefits

Learning French, or any other language, offers specific cognitive advantages. Research shows that language learning increases mental flexibility and creativity, improves awareness of language structures, and heightens sensitivity in communication among others. (Lazaruk 2007) For maritime professionals, enhanced communication skills can lead to better adaptability and decision-making, as well as easier access to technical information. This can be achieved by learning common phrases, in the chosen languages, and by focusing on practical communication scenarios. In addition, language skills equip maritime professionals with the flexibility necessary to navigate diverse cultural and linguistic settings, facilitating smoother operations in international waters and ports. An enhanced situational awareness can also enable them to interpret and respond to verbal and written information efficiently, and to ultimately take informed decisions.

4.2. Professional development

For maritime professionals, multilingualism opens the door to career opportunities and enhances market competitiveness. In today's globalized maritime industry, competency in multiple languages, including French, is increasingly valued by employers, and can significantly enhance maritime workers' career prospects. Multilingual professionals gain a competitive edge on the labour market, being often sought after for positions requiring international collaboration. According to V.M. Dinca et al., "the mastery of many languages, including one for international communication such as French, is a decisive asset in the international competition and the globalized economies." (Dinca et al. 2018)

It goes without saying that companies with multilingual crews are better positioned to operate in diverse markets, and could enhance their competitiveness in the global marketplace by investing in multilingual crew training. Moreover, by investing in French language training and obtaining certification, maritime professionals could demonstrate their commitment to professional development and broaden their career horizons.

4.3. Intercultural competency

For good communication in the workplace to take place, intercultural competency - having the knowledge, skills, and attitudes to effectively communicate and interact with people from different cultures - is essential. (Chirea-Ungureanu 2021) This is why learning French goes beyond just mastering the language; it includes gaining insights into the rich maritime cultures and traditions of francophone regions, as well as the ability to communicate effectively across cultural boundaries, such as being able to adapt language, tone, and nonverbal cues to ensure clear and respectful

communication. Seafarers and maritime professionals who invest in this lifelong learning process develop a deeper appreciation for local customs, strengthening bonds with local communities and enhancing cross-cultural understanding, communication and interaction.

5. Conclusions

English is and will undoubtedly continue to be the lingua franca of the maritime industry. Nevertheless, given the multicultural and multilingual landscape in which this industry evolves, investing in multilingual training could offer tangible benefits for maritime companies and professionals alike. Particularly, French-speaking countries often have close economic ties and trade relationships with each other. Maritime trade between francophone nations may involve communication in French for commercial negotiations, cargo operations, and logistics coordination. Therefore, knowledge of French would facilitate smoother transactions and collaborations in the maritime industry. Additionally, language learning provides cognitive benefits including increased mental flexibility, creativity, and communication sensitivity, among others. For maritime professionals, this translates to improved adaptability, decision-making, and access to technical information. Proficiency in multiple languages also enhances career opportunities and market competitiveness in the globalized maritime industry. Multilingual crews enable companies to operate effectively in diverse markets, thereby enhancing competitiveness. What is even more, learning French involves more than language mastery; it fosters intercultural competency, facilitating effective communication and interaction across cultural boundaries within the maritime industry.

References

- [1] Chirea-Ungureanu, Carmen (2021) "What's wrong with these folks?" Developing intercultural competency as the key to "merge" different world views", Proceedings of the International Maritime Lecturers' Association. Seas of transition: setting a course for the future pp. 170-178.
- [2] Dincă, V. M., Bogdan, A., Zottu-Z, M., Floricel, T. (2018) "The economic impact of the French language", Proceedings of the International Conference on Business Excellence, 12(1), pp. 324-334.
- [3] European Maritime Safety Agency (2022) "EMSAFE: highlights in 24 EU languages". <https://www.emsa.europa.eu/publications/item/4732-emsafe-highlights-in-24-eu-languages.html>
- [4] Folliot, M. P., Petrus, A., Phinera-Horth,, M.-L. (2022) "Les outre-mer au coeur de la stratégie maritime nationale", Rapport d'information n° 546. <https://www.senat.fr/notice-rapport/2021/r21-546-notice.html>
- [5] International Maritime Organisation (2019) "Multilingualism for transparency and communication". <https://www.imo.org/en/MediaCentre/Pages/WhatsNew-1296.aspx>
- [6] Lazaruk, Wally (2007) "Linguistic, academic, and cognitive benefits of French immersion", Canadian Modern Language Review 63.5, pp. 605-627.