

A Study on Writing Competence of Standardized and Non-Standardized Maritime Documents of Third Nautical Officer Students at Merchant Marine Polytechnic of North Sulawesi

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ABSTRACT

Writing competence is an essential component of written maritime communication, particularly in the preparation of operational documents such as incident reports and handover notes. This study analyzes the writing competence level of Third Nautical Officer students and identifies the challenges they face when writing maritime documents in English. This qualitative research design combines document analysis and semi-structured interviews. The data used in this study consists of thirty maritime documents produced by fifteen student officers, including fifteen incident reports and fifteen handover notes. The documents were analyzed based on a rubric aligned with the Maritime English curriculum (IMO MC 3.17) and CEFR language proficiency levels and profiles, and thematic analysis was used for interview data. The findings indicate that the majority writing competence level of participants is predominantly at the B2 (Upper-Intermediate) level, representing 67% of the total participants. Most students were able to communicate operational information and fulfill the basic communicative purpose of maritime documentation, although recurring limitations were observed in grammatical accuracy, precision of maritime terminology, and completeness of operational explanations. Students generally demonstrated stronger performance in writing handover notes than in incident reports, which require more detailed analytical reporting. There are three major challenges influencing students' writing performance: First, linguistic and maritime terminology difficulties. Second, limited understanding of maritime document conventions. Third, insufficient exposure to authentic writing practice. Therefore, this study provides valuable insights for Maritime Institutions and instructors by emphasizing the integration of authentic materials, structured writing practice, and instructional feedback in Maritime English instruction to support the development of professional writing competence in maritime education.

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INTRODUCTION

In the maritime industry, English has become the primary working language, serving not only as a medium of communication but also as a vital safety tool, directly impacting accident prevention and operational efficiency. The STCW Convention and IMO Model Course 3.17: Maritime English emphasize that students must be able to use English effectively, both orally and in writing (IMO, 2015). Maritime operational communications extend beyond verbal interactions, such as radio communications and bridge commands, to include written documentation that serves operational, administrative, and legal purposes. Written documents such as incident reports, voyage plans, logbook entries, and internal communications are critical to the ship safety management system (ISM Code) and can also serve as legal evidence (IMO, 2018). Therefore, writing skills are essential. If documentation is unclear or inaccurate, it can lead to misunderstandings, operational errors, and legal issues. Written documents such as incident reports, voyage plans, log entries, and internal correspondence play a crucial role in ship safety management systems (ISM Code) and may function as legal evidence (IMO, 2018). Therefore, writing competence is generally understood as the ability to produce written text that is coherent, accurate, and appropriate to specific communication goals and social contexts.

Within the framework of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), writing competence specifically involves the mastery of genre conventions, audience awareness, and the ability to align writing with professional and disciplinary expectations (Hyland, 2022). Maritime's writing involves the production of both standardized documents, such as incident reports that follow formal conventions, and non-standardized documents, such as handover notes used for daily operational communication. Both types of documents are essential, as they directly affect safety management, communication clarity, and operational continuity on board (IMO, 2018; Hyland, 2004). At the higher level of Maritime's education, particularly in Maritime Polytechnics, English courses are designed to prepare student officers with communication competencies aligned with workplace demands. ANT III students who will eventually become an officer of the watch must possess a high level of English proficiency (upper-intermediate to advanced). They are required to be able to draft maritime documents correctly, using the appropriate terminology, produce well-organized reports, and communicate using standard protocols such as SMCP.

However, writing in such a specialized professional context remains a significant challenge, especially for those learning English as a second language. It requires not only grammatical accuracy but also the ability to organize procedural information, apply technical terminology, follow genre conventions, and maintain a professional tone (Flower & Hayes, 1981). A common difficulty experienced by students is converting operational events into structured written documents, especially documents that have safety and legal implications, even though prospective officers have adequate oral communication skills.

Recent research on maritime English has extensively addressed language usage and its challenges in the shipping industry. Herdawan et al. (2021) found that there is a discrepancy between the actual communication needs of cadets during their shipboard training and what is taught in the classroom, particularly regarding formal communication and document writing. Meanwhile, Nurdin and Rahman (2023) focus more on oral communication rather than writing skills, English is indeed used more frequently on ships for daily operational communication. Meanwhile, Abimanto and Mahendro (2025) identified several major challenges faced by Indonesian cadets in using English for professional purposes, including limited vocabulary, first-language interference, and low self-confidence. In line with these findings, Heslop et al. (2025) reveal that maritime students also experience difficulties in writing, particularly regarding grammatical accuracy, vocabulary selection, and discourse organization. However, their study is limited to general academic writing and does not address professional maritime document genres. Despite the importance of writing competence in both standardized and non-standardized maritime documents, existing studies have not systematically examined how well student officers are able to produce such documents in accordance with professional and international standards, particularly those aligned with curriculum-based proficiency levels (International Maritime Organization, 2015). In addition, there is limited empirical evidence mapping students' writing competence based on authentic maritime documents using established frameworks such as the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2001).

This issue becomes more significant considering that Third Nautical Officer students have completed multiple stages of Maritime English training and are expected to demonstrate operational-level writing competence. The persistent weaknesses in grammatical control, use of terminology, and procedural clarity found during observations raise concerns about whether their writing competence has reached the expected level. Therefore, a gap exists between curriculum expectations, as defined by IMO standards, and the actual writing performance demonstrated in student- maritime documents. Addressing this gap, this current study aims to analyze the writing competence level of Third Nautical Officer students based on their standardized and non-standardized maritime documents using writing

assessment components aligned with the International Maritime Organization Model Course 3.17 and the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages proficiency levels, as well as to identify the challenges they face in producing such documents based on their perceptions and experiences. And this study is carried out to answer the research questions: What is the writing competence level of Third Nautical Officer students based on their standardized and non-standardized maritime documents, and what challenges do they face in writing such documents in English.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study used a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical design to analyze the writing competence level of third nautical officer students based on their standard and non-standard maritime documents. This study employs two main methods to ensure more comprehensive results. First, document analysis, which involves evaluating students' written work, such as reports or maritime assignments, to assess their writing proficiency, ranging from terminology usage and structure to the clarity of content. Second, semi-structured interviews, which involve a question-and-answer session with students using a guided questionnaire, yet remain flexible to delve deeper into their experiences, such as the challenges they face while writing. This study was conducted at the North Sulawesi Merchant Marine Polytechnic, involving ANT III students currently taking the Maritime English course. These students were selected because they are at an advanced stage and are expected to possess English proficiency at the operational level (B2-C1). This means they should be sufficiently fluent to communicate in work situations, including writing maritime documents using clear, precise, and standard-compliant language. With this approach, the researcher could assess the students' writing abilities from two perspectives simultaneously: directly through their written work and through their personal experiences during the writing process. Thus, the results not only evaluate the quality of the writing but also help understand why they still face difficulties. A criterion-based purposive sampling technique was applied, followed by random selection to enhance representativeness, resulting in a total of 15 participants (Patton, 2015; Creswell & Poth, 2017).

The study utilized two main sources of data: officer students' written maritime documents as the primary data and interview data as the secondary data. The written documents consisted of standardized documents (incident reports) and non-standardized documents (handover notes), which were selected to represent formal safety documentation and operational communication practices in maritime contexts. Data collection was conducted in two stages. First, students were assigned to produce incident reports and handover notes based on simulated operational scenarios. Second, semi structured interviews were conducted through Creswell & Poth (2017)

protocol; these interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim to ensure data accuracy.

The data analysis was conducted through several systematic stages. First, all documents and interview transcripts were organized and reviewed to achieve data familiarization. Second, students' writing is assessed using a rubric derived from the IMO Model Course 3.17 standards and aligned with CEFR levels. This rubric evaluates five key aspects: whether the assignment has been completed correctly; whether maritime terminology is used appropriately; whether the structure and flow of the writing are clear; whether grammar and sentence structure are correct; and whether the format and tone of the writing appear professional. Third, the assessment results from the rubric are then matched with the CEFR proficiency levels and profiles (B2-C1) to determine the quality of the students' writing skills. Since each student produces two types of documents, the assessment is conducted separately for each document. This allows their proficiency to be more clearly assessed for each type of writing. This study adopted a conservative approach in determining competency levels, specifically by using the lowest score from the two documents produced by the students as a representation of their overall writing ability (Bachmann & Palmer, 2010). This approach aims to ensure caution in interpreting the results and to avoid the possibility of overestimating the participants' abilities.

Next, the interview data were analyzed using thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006). This process involved several stages: an initial reading to understand the data as a whole, coding relevant sections, grouping codes into main themes, and interpreting the resulting themes. As a final step, data triangulation was conducted by comparing findings from document analysis with interview results. This step aimed to enhance the validity and reliability of the research findings, ensuring the results obtained are more comprehensive and credible.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This section presents the findings of the writing competence level and the challenges of Third Nautical Officer students in producing standardized and non-standardized maritime documents in English. The analysis is based on rubric-based analysis of students' written documents, including incident reports and handover notes, as well as thematic analysis of the interview data. The findings are organized into two main areas: (1) the students' writing competence levels mapped to the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR), and (2) the challenges they face in writing maritime documents in English.

Mapping Writing Competency Levels

Based on the patterns identified in the rubric-based analysis, the writing performances were mapped to the CEFR writing descriptors to determine the overall tendency of students' writing competence in maritime professional communication, focusing on B2 (Upper-Intermediate) and C1 (Advanced), with performances below B2 categorized accordingly. The mapping was conducted separately for standardized (incident reports) and non-standardized documents (handover notes), using linguistic features as supporting evidence rather than error-counting procedures, and the results are presented in the following sections.

Competency Levels in Standardized Documents: Incident Report

The analysis of incident reports shows that most participants were able to communicate the main event of an incident and provide basic operational details such as location, vessel information, and immediate actions taken, which are consistent with CEFR B2 descriptors describing the ability to produce clear and relatively detailed texts on work-related topics. However, several reports demonstrated limitations in explaining the sequence of events, identifying contributing factors, and presenting preventive actions, with some sections left incomplete, indicating that the reports did not always reach the level of detail and linguistic control associated with more advanced professional documentation. For example, one participant wrote, *“during the discharging of log cargo, a log being hoisted by the crane fell an struck a stanchion.”* (IR; C09), which communicates the main event but lacks a clear chronological account and contains grammatical inaccuracies such as “an” instead of “and,” indicating partial control of written accuracy. Similarly, another report stated, *“there was a traffic jam in the channel so the ship had difficulty maneuvering and caused the ship to run aground.”* (IR; C08), where the message is understandable but uses everyday language “traffic jam” instead of the more appropriate maritime term “congested channel” (IMO, 2026) and lacks a clearer explanation of causal factors. Although there were a number of limitations, most of the reports were still able to convey important information regarding the incidents that occurred. This indicates that the majority of participants have achieved a B2 level of writing proficiency. However, shortcomings were still observed, particularly in terms of the thoroughness of the analysis and the accuracy of language use. The distribution of proficiency levels identified in the incident reports is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1. Summary of Writing Competency Levels in Incident Reports

CEFR Level	Number of Participants	Description of Performance
C1	4	Reports highly structured with clearer causal explanations and more precise operational language
B2	10	Main incident explained clearly but with some grammatical inaccuracies and limited analytical detail
Below B2	1	Reports lacked several essential elements and showed limited linguistic control

As shown in Table 1, the findings indicate that the majority of participants demonstrated writing competence at the B2 level when producing standardized maritime documentation. Their reports generally conveyed the intended message, although improvements in grammatical accuracy, completeness of incident analysis, and professional precision were still needed.

Competency Levels in Non-Standardized Documents: Handover Notes

The handover notes generally showed clearer organization compared to several incident reports, mainly because many participants followed the template provided, and most notes included important operational information such as vessel status, navigation data, weather conditions, equipment status, and instructions for the next watch officer. Nevertheless, grammatical simplification and imprecise phrasing were still observed. For instance, one handover notes states, *“all equipment good condition.”* (HN; C14), which is understandable but lacks grammatical completeness and professional precision, where it would typically be expressed as *“All navigational equipment operational”* (IMO,2002). In another example, *“Weather cloudy and wind strong and vessel condition normal...”* (HN; C14), multiple operational details are combined in a single line, reducing clarity because different types of information are presented without clear separation. These findings indicate that, although the students understood the operational purpose of the documents they produced, their ability to summarize and present information concisely still varied. On the other hand, some documents reflect a high level of situational awareness as well as the ability to effectively convey operational priorities, which aligns with the competency descriptors at the C1 level of the CEFR. However, a number of inaccuracies were still found in terms of grammar and spelling consistency. The overall distribution of competency levels identified in the handover notes is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. Summary of Writing Competency Levels in Handover Notes

CEFR Level	Number of Participants	Description of Performance
C1	10	Clear operational instructions, structured format, and effective situational communication
B2	5	Information conveyed clearly but with occasional grammatical and lexical issues
Below B2	0	Limited clarity and incomplete operational information

These results show that participants tended to perform better in writing handover notes compared to incident reports. The structured nature of the handover format appeared to support clearer communication and organization of information.

Final Writing Competency Level

Since each participant produced two different types of documents, the overall tendency of writing competence was determined using a conservative scoring principle,

where the lower-performing document level was taken as the participant’s overall proficiency level to ensure a cautious and professionally grounded interpretation across contexts. This approach aligns with the principles of performance-based language assessment, which emphasizes that the evaluation of language proficiency cannot be based solely on a single well-executed task, but must reflect consistent performance across various types of tasks.

The research findings indicate that some students were able to compose handover notes in a fairly structured manner. However, these same students still demonstrated limitations when composing incident reports, such as a lack of detailed descriptions of the contributing factors and the continued presence of inaccuracies in grammatical usage. This difference highlights the greater analytical demands of incident documentation, which require more detailed explanation, causal analysis, and structured documentation than routine operational communication such as watch handover notes.

Table 3. Final Writing Competency Tendency of Participants

Final Level	Number of Participants	The percentage
C1	4	27 %
B2	10	67 %
Below B2	1	6%
Total	15	100%

The results indicate that the dominant writing competence level among the Third Nautical Officer students is B2 (Upper-Intermediate), representing 67% of the participants. At this level, students are generally able to convey operational information clearly and meet the basic communication objectives of maritime documentation. However, their writing still shows inconsistencies in grammar, and there are occasional shortcomings in the accurate use of maritime terminology and in providing more detailed operational explanations. On the other hand, a small portion of participants, approximately 27%, have achieved writing proficiency at the C1 level. This indicates a greater ability to compose more structured reports and convey operational information with a higher degree of clarity and detail. These participants showed better control of document organization and professional reporting conventions. 6% of participants are below the B2 level and still struggle to organize information, use proper grammar, and complete key sections of maritime documentation.

In general, students’ ability to draft detailed and linguistically accurate professional documents remains inconsistent. Nevertheless, most participants have acquired sufficient basic skills to write in maritime English in accordance with expected professional standards. This is particularly evident in document types that require higher analytical skills, such as incident reports. In this context, some participants still provide only general descriptions without more in-depth and detailed explanations.

Students' Writing Challenges in Maritime English

The interview data analysis in this section is presented to identify the challenges experienced by Third-Level Nautical Officer students when writing maritime documents in English. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, according to the procedures proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006). It consists of three main themes: (1) linguistic challenges and maritime terminology, (2) understanding of maritime document genres and professional conventions, and (3) learning factors and exposure to authentic writing.

Linguistic and Maritime Terminology Challenges

One of the fundamental competencies outlined in IMO Model Course 3.17 is mastery of maritime linguistics and terminology. This competency is crucial for ensuring effective communication and professional performance in the shipping industry, particularly in the preparation and writing of maritime documents. Interview data indicates that many students still experience difficulties using English language structures and specialized terminology, with maritime terminology being identified as a major challenge, as reflected in the following quote:

“Maritime vocabulary or terms in English are the main difficulty.” (C01; February 19, 2026, 2:35 PM)

“The most common difficulty encountered when writing maritime documents in English relates to maritime terminology or specialized vocabulary used in the maritime industry, such as technical terms, procedures, and equipment.” (C11; February 19, 2026, 3:37 PM)

Based on this statement, maritime-specific vocabulary is a significant linguistic barrier for students preparing professional maritime documents, as a lack of understanding of specialized terminology hinders the accurate and precise delivery of technical information. Maritime documentation requires precise and standardized terminology to describe operational procedures and situations. If this terminology is not mastered, reports may become unclear or lead to uncertainty.

Therefore, a proper understanding and use of maritime terminology is crucial for writing skills in the maritime field. A limited vocabulary can hinder one's ability to effectively convey ideas in written communication (Schmitt & Schmitt, 2020). In addition to difficulties in mastering maritime terminology, interview data also revealed that sentence structure poses another linguistic challenge for students when writing maritime documents in English. Several participants highlighted the difficulty in producing concise and professionally appropriate sentences, especially when Indonesian sentence patterns influence English writing, as reflected in the following quote:

“Sometimes I am still influenced by Indonesian sentence structures, which makes my sentences too long.” (C13; 19th Feb 2026, at 14.50 PM)

“My difficulty in writing the document is about the correct sentence structure in English when writing maritime documents.” (C04; 19th Feb 2026, at 18.18 PM)

These statements suggest that constructing appropriate sentence structures in English represents another significant challenge for students when writing maritime documents, as they often struggle to organize sentences that are grammatically correct, concise, and professionally appropriate in maritime contexts. In addition, the influence of participants’ native languages appears to contribute to the syntactic structure of their English output, as evidenced by a tendency to use longer sentences that are less communicatively efficient. This finding aligns with the second language acquisition literature, which indicates that learners often transfer linguistic patterns from their first language into the target language, thereby influencing aspects of grammar, lexicon, and syntactic structure (Mirzayev, 2024). In the context of maritime document writing, which demands a high level of clarity, precision, and linguistic economy, these sentence-construction challenges can reduce the effectiveness of written communication. This situation has the potential to disrupt the transmission of critical operational information, thereby diminishing the level of professionalism and accuracy in maritime documentation. Furthermore, most participants indicated that these difficulties were not limited to individual aspects but occurred simultaneously, including problems related to grammar, sentence structure, and the use of appropriate maritime terminology, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

“Of course, I find grammar and sentence structure are difficult, because with all types of tenses, if the formula is wrong the meaning or the time will change and will not match with what we want to express.” (C02; 19th Feb 2026, at 17.58 PM)

“In my opinion, the difficulty in writing these reports lies in determining the grammar and vocabulary to use, because the report always describes events that have already occurred.” (C06; 19th Feb 2026, at 18.37 PM)

These statements show that students often experience multiple linguistic challenges simultaneously when writing maritime documents in English, as difficulties in grammar, sentence structure, and the use of appropriate maritime terminology are closely interconnected rather than separate issues. In particular, uncertainty regarding the selection of the correct verb forms and the construction of formal sentences to describe past events can reduce the clarity and accuracy of maritime documentation. This is crucial given that maritime documentation fundamentally requires the use of precise language that adheres to professional standards. Furthermore, studies on second-language writing indicate that learners often face difficulties regarding grammatical accuracy and syntactic structure, particularly when writing formal texts that require mastery of specialized vocabulary and academic or professional registers (Klimova & Pikhart, 2021). This demonstrates the importance of developing grammatical competence and mastery of specialized terminology to enhance students’ ability to produce effective maritime documents. In fact, participants revealed several

strategies for improving their writing skills, as illustrated in the following quote:

“Looking for examples online, using an English dictionary, and discussing with friends are the strategies I use.” (C08; February 19, 2026, 5:34 PM)

These findings indicate that students employ various self-directed learning strategies to overcome grammatical challenges when writing maritime documents in English. Additionally, they actively seek out various resources and opportunities to improve their writing skills. The most commonly used strategies include reading sample maritime documents to understand appropriate structure and writing style, using dictionaries to ensure the accuracy of technical terms, practicing writing through the process of drafting and repeatedly revising reports, and discussing their work with peers to obtain constructive feedback on their writing. To strengthen their understanding of professional maritime language, some participants used online resources and specialized materials, such as the Standard Maritime Communication Phrases (SMCP) to produce accurate and professional maritime documents, consistent with research showing that successful maritime cadets develop language competence through regular practice, peer interaction, and the use of a variety of learning resources (Maru & Najooan, 2025). There are findings regarding linguistic competence, including grammar, sentence structure, and maritime terminology, which are the main challenges in writing maritime documents, even though students actively use various strategies to improve their writing skills.

Understanding of Maritime Document Genres and Professional Conventions

Another important aspect emerging from the analysis relates to participants' understanding of maritime document genres and professional conventions. Writing documents such as incident reports and handover notes requires not only linguistic competence but also familiarity with the structure, purpose, and standard format of professional maritime documentation. Documentation must follow established rules to ensure clear communication, accountability, and safety. Regulations such as the ISM Code (IMO, 2018) and the STCW Convention (IMO, 2017) emphasize the importance of proper documentation and communication in maritime operations. Interview results indicate that participants already understand how to prepare, format, and write maritime documents, as seen in the following excerpt:

“I have learnt and practiced how to write incident report and handover notes during lecturing and practical training...” (C01; 19th Feb 2026, at 14.35 PM)

“During my studies, my experience writing this document is largely gained through assignments in Maritime English class. We are taught a systematic writing structure, from ship identification to chronology of events. However, the experience is still an academic simulation based on a scenario provided by the lecturer...” (C05; 19th Feb 2026, at 17.49 PM)

These excerpts indicate that participants' initial experience in writing maritime documents is primarily developed through classroom instruction and training activities, where academic environments provide opportunities to practice organizing documents according to standard formats. Through these activities, students became more familiar with the basic structure of maritime document writing, such as incident reports and handover notes. This includes important elements such as vessel identification, chronology of events, and relevant operational details.

Several participants also stated that they gained more learning experience through simulation activities than direct exposure to real world work situations. This finding suggests that classroom learning plays an important role, but remains preparatory, or preparation, before entering a professional work context. This aligns with David A. Kolb's view of experiential learning, which emphasizes that effective learning occurs through a cycle of experience, reflection, conceptualization, and application in real-world situations. Kolb's (2014) Experiential Learning Theory, which emphasizes that professional competence develops through a combination of theory and practice.

Additionally, the interviews also revealed that some participants had already gained hands-on experience in drafting maritime documents during onboard training or while working, as evidenced by the following statement:

"While on board, I gained experience writing maritime documents such as incident reports and handover notes. This helped me understand the structure and format of documents required in the maritime industry..." (C03; February 19, 2026, 6:08 PM)

"When I joined a foreign company, they required the implementation of a Safety Management System (SMS), through incident reports and handover notes, and these documents are part of it..." (C06; February 19, 2026, 6:37 PM)

This statement indicates that participants' experience in drafting maritime documents comes not only from classroom instruction or exercises, but also from hands-on experience in the workplace. As a result, they are able to apply what they learned in class during onboard training or while on the job. Through this process, they become accustomed to preparing documents such as incident reports and handover logs—from gathering information and organizing events chronologically to using appropriate and professional language. In addition, some participants reported that document preparation is closely related to safety management procedures, such as the Safety Management System (SMS) (IMO, 2018), highlighting the importance of accurate and clear documentation in maritime operations. However, the data also reveal that documentation practices may vary depending on vessel type or company procedures, leading to differences in format and document use across vessels, as mentioned below:

"My experience in writing these two documents has been quite challenging, because all my work experience has been on local tugboats, which generally have their own methods On

local tugboats, I usually use an 'official report' format ... written in Indonesian. Writing handover notes has also been quite difficult for the same reason My experience on local vessels is different from working on foreign-going ships.” (C09; 19th Feb 2026, at 15.53 PM)

“Regarding incident reports, in our company ... we use a file called 'Berita Acara Kejadian' which includes the date, ship name, the incident, latitude and longitude, weather conditions, ship status, and actions taken For watch handovers, this is usually done verbally.” (C14; 19th Feb 2026, at 14.11 PM)

These statements indicate that documentation practices in maritime operations vary depending on the type of vessel and company procedures. Some ships use different reporting formats or adapt them to local conditions, such as official reports in maritime operations in Indonesia. Some documents, such as handover logs, are also sometimes communicated verbally during watch changes.

These findings demonstrate variations in professional practice, with report formats, language use, and operational procedures varying from one vessel to another. These differences align with the provisions of the International Safety Management Code (IMO, 2018), which requires each company to develop a Safety Management System (SMS) tailored to its individual operational characteristics and needs. Despite these variations, a recurring pattern indicates that most participants considered incident reports to be the most challenging type of maritime document to prepare. This is reflected in the following participant statements:

“I think, the incident report is more difficult to write because it must be detailed, objective, and include all important elements such as the chronology, suspected causes, and corrective actions. Every detail must be accurate so it can be used for future prevention. If the standard components are incomplete, it can have a negative impact.” (C12; 19th Feb 2026, at 15.14 PM)

“... The most difficult document to write, in my opinion, is the incident report because it must be based on facts, follow a chronological order, and include the exact time of the incident.” (C15; 19th Feb 2026, at 16.14 PM)

These statements indicate that participants viewed incident reports as the most difficult type of maritime document to prepare. This is due to the requirement to present information clearly, objectively, and chronologically, while also providing accurate and detailed technical explanations. Incident reports also include analytical aspects, such as identifying causes, impacts, and necessary corrective actions. This complexity makes them more challenging than other types of documents. These characteristics reflect professional practice in the maritime context, where incident reports serve as formal documents used for safety analysis, operational evaluation, and future preventive measures. This perception relates to participants' understanding of the structure and components of maritime documents. To further explore this issue, participants were asked to explain their understanding of the structure and purpose of different

documents, particularly incident reports and handover notes, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

“Theoretically, I understand the structure quite well. For an incident report, I know it should include background, chronology, impact, and actions taken. Likewise, handover notes focus on the ship’s operational status...” (C05; 19th Feb 2026, at 17.49 PM)

“As far as I know, the standard format and structure for preparing an incident report include: title and identification, information about the parties involved, description of the incident, and the impact caused. Meanwhile, the format for handover notes includes the date and time of the handover, general operational status, important information, unfinished tasks during the watch, and additional notes...” (C04; 19th Feb 2026, at 18.18 PM)

These excerpts indicate that participants have varying levels of understanding of the structure and essential components of maritime documents. Several participants were able to describe key elements of incident reports and operational information in handover notes, suggesting a basic conceptual understanding primarily gained through classroom instruction, training, and studying examples. However, limited exposure to authentic onboard documents may affect the depth of their practical understanding of professional reporting conventions. In the context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), writing professional documents requires not only linguistic competence but also an understanding of communicative practices within professional communities (Hyland, 2022). Building on this, the data reveal how participants differentiate between maritime documents in terms of formality, structure, and communicative purpose, as illustrated in the following excerpt:

“In terms of language use, standardized documents use clear and specific language and standard technical terminology. While non-standardized documents typically use more flexible language and often use less standardized language and imprecise sentence structure, making them less understandable to some stakeholders. Regarding the level of formality, standardized documents follow an established structure and format as part of the safety management system. Meanwhile, non-standardized documents may not be bound by strict regulations or standards...” (C04; 19th Feb 2026, at 18.18 PM)

These quotes indicate that participants were generally able to distinguish between standard and non-standard maritime documents based on linguistic aspects, structural consistency, and the level of formality used. Standard documents are understood to have a standard format, systematic structure, and the use of appropriate technical terminology. Conversely, non-standard documents tend to be more flexible, less consistently structured, and do not always adhere to accepted formal conventions. Some participants also emphasized that standard documents serve an important function as operational records and formal evidence that can be used by authorities or in safety investigations.

This understanding reflects an awareness of professional reporting conventions, where documentation is required to follow specific procedures to ensure clarity, accountability, and effective communication. In the context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), professional writing emphasizes the importance of understanding communicative purposes and the conventions applicable within the professional community (Hyland, 2022). Thus, while participants' levels of exposure to practical contexts may vary, they demonstrated a developing conceptual understanding of maritime documents.

Learning Factors and Authentic Writing Exposure

An important role in shaping students' ability to write maritime documents is the learning factor, because this competence is not only influenced by linguistic and genre knowledge but also by classroom teaching, writing practice, exposure to authentic documents, and on-board or simulated experiences. The interview data indicate that these aspects contribute to students' writing development. In the context of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), professional writing competencies develop through a language learning process supported by exposure to authentic communication practices in professional fields (Hyland, 2022).

Analysis indicates that classroom learning plays a crucial role in introducing the fundamentals of maritime document writing. This is supported by participant reports stating that learning activities in the Maritime English course include theoretical explanations, document sample analysis, and writing assignments. These activities provide participants with initial exposure to the structure, format, and conventions used in professional writing in the maritime field. It can be observed below:

"I think it's all fifty-fifty, the lecturer explains the theory, then gives examples and ends with assignments" (C02; 19th Feb 2026, at 17.58 PM)

This response indicates that classroom instruction combines theoretical explanation with practical activities such as examining document examples and completing writing assignments, allowing students to become familiar with structure and conventions while developing writing skills through guided practice. Educational research suggests that learning is more effective when conceptual knowledge is integrated with practical experience (Kolb, 2014). Similarly, another participant explained that writing practice is conducted regularly in Maritime English classes through both theoretical instruction and practical exercises, as mentioned below:

"I practice quite often in Maritime English classes. The exercises mostly consist of sample documents and writing practice, although structural theory is still taught as a foundation." (C10; 19th Feb 2026, at 14.24 PM)

These responses indicate that writing activities have been routinely integrated into Maritime English learning through exposure to sample documents and guided writing activities. Meanwhile, theoretical learning continues to play a crucial role in understanding the structural aspects of maritime document writing. From the perspective of experiential learning theory, the learning process is more optimal when conceptual understanding is supported by direct application in practice (Kolb, 2014).

However, several participants stated that theoretical explanations still predominate over writing practice. This finding indicates a need to expand opportunities for writing practice based on more realistic operational scenarios, as reflected in the following statement:

"... Honestly, the theoretical portion is still slightly more dominant. We studied vocabulary and standard formats first. Although there was direct writing practice, I feel that I need more real case examples so that the practice does not feel rigid or merely copying a template." (C05; 19th Feb 2026, at 17.49 PM)

This response suggests that classroom learning provides foundational knowledge of maritime document writing, particularly in structure, terminology, and standard formats, while students perceive a need for more practice and scenario-based exercises to apply this knowledge in realistic contexts. In English for Specific Purposes (ESP), effective instruction requires a balance between theoretical understanding and practical experience to develop both linguistic competence and contextual awareness of professional texts (Hyland, 2022). However, classroom instruction alone is insufficient to develop full professional writing competence, as authentic exposure through onboard experience and operational simulations plays a crucial role. The interview data show that writing tasks in real shipboard contexts differ from classroom practice, as they are closely linked to operational responsibilities, safety considerations, and professional accountability, as illustrated in the following statement:

"It is clearly different. When writing documents in class, there's less pressure because if there's a mistake, it can be corrected or corrected by peers and lecturers. On a ship, however, when we create a document, we have to be completely ready to be used on board or sent to the office or agency that requires it..." (C02; 19th Feb 2026, at 17.58 PM)

This statement highlights the contrast between classroom learning and real operational contexts in maritime documentation, where shipboard situations require greater accuracy and responsibility as documents may be used for operational communication or submitted to authorities. Situated learning theory suggests that professional competence develops most effectively through participation in authentic real-world activities (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Similarly, another participant noted that onboard writing requires faster decision-making and adherence to professional standards due to operational demands, as shown in the following statement:

"The differences between writing documents in class and during on board are quite noticeable. In class, the atmosphere is more relaxed and there's time to think, while on-board practice, there's time pressure, stricter professional standards, and direct guidance from senior officers." (C07; 19th Feb 2026, at 18.27 PM)

This statement demonstrates that authentic operational contexts add additional dimensions to maritime document writing, such as time pressure, demands for accuracy,

and accountability. These conditions require students to be able to apply their linguistic knowledge in professional situations that approximate the realities of work. Consistently, experiential learning theory asserts that the learning process becomes more meaningful when students are directly involved in tasks that represent the real world. This involvement enables the transformation of theoretical knowledge into practical competencies that can be effectively applied in professional contexts (Kolb, 2014). Therefore, exposure to authentic shipboard environments and simulations plays an important role in strengthening students' understanding of how maritime documents are produced and used in actual operations.

Another factor influencing students' development of maritime document writing skills relates to the expected level of English proficiency in maritime communication. The interview data reveal differing perspectives, with some participants considering the target achievable, while others viewed it as relatively high given limited learning time, as reflected in the following statements:

"A proficiency target like B2 is realistic with consistent practice..." (C10; 19th Feb 2026, at 14.24 PM)

These statements suggest that some participants perceive the expected English proficiency level as attainable with adequate instructional support and consistent practice, as effective guidance and regular practice help improve proficiency for maritime communication. In professional education, language development is facilitated by structured instruction and repeated practice, enabling learners to build competence and confidence, while research also highlights the role of sustained practice and instructional support in achieving higher proficiency (Nation, 2022). However, other participants considered the target level challenging due to limited time for language learning and the demands of technical training, as revealed in the statements below:

"This proficiency goal will be realistic only if the learning process is long-term, as the standards for communication at sea are very high. More intensive teaching methods and direct exposure to the material are necessary. However, with limited time, it is very difficult to achieve this goal through classroom instruction alone." (C15; 19 Februari 2026, at 16.14)

These responses indicate that some participants considered the targeted proficiency level difficult to achieve within the currently available learning timeframe. This was due to the limitations of classroom learning, which they felt did not provide sufficient space for optimal development of advanced language skills. Participants also emphasized the importance of increasing the intensity of instruction and expanding exposure to authentic language use in efforts to achieve higher levels of proficiency. Consistent with these findings, the literature indicates that achieving advanced language proficiency requires sustained exposure, extensive practice, and adequate learning time allocation (Nation, 2022).

Accordingly, the findings suggest that proficiency targets in maritime education should be supported by sufficient instructional time, practice opportunities, and authentic communication exposure. Furthermore, participants emphasized the importance of additional learning resources and instructional guidance to improve their

maritime document writing skills, as illustrated in the following excerpts:

“The types of support most needed include the availability of comprehensive technical guideline modules, direct mentorship from senior officers on board, and access to authentic document samples as learning references.” (C12; 19th Feb 2026, at 15.14 PM)

“In my opinion, the support students need most is the provision of more authentic maritime documents, regular and focused practical training, and detailed feedback from instructors so that errors can be promptly corrected.” (C07; 19th Feb 2026, at 18.27 PM)

These excerpts indicate that participants emphasized key forms of learning support for improving maritime document writing competence, particularly access to authentic document examples, which help them understand structure and communication in real contexts, aligning with ESP principles (Basturkmen, 2015). To apply theoretical knowledge and develop professional writing skills students must practice writing regularly.

Another theme regarding instructor feedback and professional guidance, which helped identify errors, improve writing, and ensure alignment with professional standards, is consistent with research on written corrective feedback (Ferris, 2011). Some students emphasized structured resources, such as writing guidelines and technical modules, to clarify reporting procedures and conventions.

The results indicate that writing competence is influenced by authentic materials, ongoing practice, and constructive feedback, not just classroom instruction. Exposure to authentic texts and guided practice are crucial for understanding professional communication (Hyland, 2022) within the ESP context, thus enhancing students' ability to produce clear and professional maritime documents, leading to the next section on document analysis.

Integration of Document Analysis and Interview Findings

Through triangulation, the analysis strengthened credibility by identifying convergent patterns across both data sources, revealing three key relationships: (1) linguistic difficulties and grammatical inaccuracies, (2) incomplete comprehension genres and report structures, and (3) learning exposure and variation in writing performance, thus integrating findings from document analysis and interview data when examining consistency between students' writing performance and reported challenges.

Linguistic Difficulties and Grammatical Inaccuracies in Documents

Document analysis of student reports revealed that some students had difficulty maintaining grammatical accuracy and proper sentence structure in their maritime documents. For example, one report stated, “during the loading and unloading of logs, a log lifted by a crane fell and hit a support beam (IR; C09),” where errors such as “an” instead of “and” reflect limited control over accuracy in professional contexts.

Similar patterns in other reports, where sentence structures were simplified or incomplete, indicate a developing level of linguistic control. This finding aligns with

interview data, where participants identified grammar and sentence construction as key challenges. As one participant stated, "If the formula is wrong, grammar and sentence structure become difficult, and the meaning changes (C02; February 19, 2026, 5:58 PM)."

Consolidated findings indicate that grammatical inaccuracies in documents are closely related to the grammatical challenges students experience when composing maritime reports in English. This pattern is consistent with research on second language writing, which shows that students often struggle with grammatical precision and sentence construction in specialized or professional texts that require precise communication (Klimova & Pikhart, 2021).

Genre Understanding and Incomplete Report Structures

Document analysis showed that most participants included basic operational information such as the vessel's name, time, location, and a description of the incident. The problem is that some reports are still incomplete. For example, they do not explain the cause of the incident or how to prevent it. There are also reports that simply state the ship ran aground due to heavy traffic, without providing a chronological account or further explanation. This indicates that students' understanding of how to write maritime documents still affects the completeness of the reports they produce.

Students reported that incident reports were more demanding because they required clarity and detail. As one participant noted, "The most difficult document to write was the incident report because it required clarity and detail (C01; February 19, 2026, 2:35 PM)."

This suggests that, while students understood the basic format of maritime documents, they still struggled to apply the complete investigative structure required in professional reporting. This is consistent with ESP research, which suggests that students may understand general purpose and organization but face challenges in producing more complex argumentative techniques in specialized texts (Bhatia, 2016).

Learning Exposure and Variations in Writing Performance

Document analysis revealed differences in writing performance related to the level of exposure to learning and writing practice, with variations in writing quality. Some reports are well-organized and clear, but others provide only a limited description of the situation.

Based on the interviews, participants emphasized the importance of document authenticity, which influences how they describe maritime documents and how they write them. As one participant noted,

"Examples from authentic documents and more frequent practical exercises are very helpful (C01; February 19, 2026, 2:35 PM)." Another participant added that students need "real-life document examples and real-life case-based exercises (C10; February 19, 2026, 2:24 PM)" to better understand report writing in an operational context.

Writing skills develop not only through theory but also through direct experience in the workplace. Research also shows that communication skills improve when learners use real-world materials and engage in hands-on practice (Klimova & Pikhart, 2021; Richards, 2001).

CONCLUSION

This study aims to analyze the writing competency level of Third nautical officer students in producing maritime documents and to identify the challenges they face when writing these documents in English. In accordance with the results of the study, students are able to convey important operational information and fulfill the communicative objectives of both incident reports and handover notes so that it can be concluded that in general students demonstrate writing competency at the B2 (Upper Intermediate) level. However, their skills remain limited in terms of grammar, the proper use of maritime terminology, and the completeness of their explanations. Incident reports appear to be the most challenging because they are more complex and require a more structured approach.

The three main challenges they face are language difficulties, a limited understanding of the types and rules of maritime documents, and a lack of practical writing experience. This demonstrates that writing skills in a maritime context are not solely related to linguistic aspects but also encompass an understanding of document types and how to communicate professionally according to industry standards. To improve these skills, the training process needs to be strengthened by providing more examples from real-life situations, applicable writing exercises, and providing regular and systematic feedback. This approach is expected to help participants produce clearer, more accurate documents that comply with applicable standards, which is ultimately crucial for supporting safe and effective communication in the maritime work environment. Therefore, this study contributes to the development of Maritime English pedagogy by emphasizing the importance of aligning writing instruction with real-world professional practices and international communication standards.

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