

Challenges and Strategies in Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence among Indonesian Seafarers in Multinational Crews

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ARTICLE HISTORY

Receive : 17 January 2026

Accepted: 22 April 2026

Published: 15 May 2026

KEYWORDS

Intercultural communicative competence

Maritime communication

Indonesian seafarers

Cultural diversity

Thematic analysis

LICENSE

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ABSTRACT

This study shows that crew members often face difficulties when communicating with people from different cultures. The main problems are usually due to differences in language, speech patterns, and unfamiliar customs. This is most noticeable early in their careers, when they are still adjusting to a diverse environment. However, as they gain experience, they become more confident and communicate more fluently. To overcome this, they maintain an open and respectful attitude, use simple language, adapt their speech, pay attention to coworkers' behavior, build good relationships, and frequently check in to avoid misunderstandings. These steps can help reduce misunderstandings and support effective communication in maritime operations. This study reveals that ICC evolves through continuous interaction and experiential learning. The factors of attitude, knowledge, interpreting skills, relating, discovery and interaction skills, and critical cultural awareness of ICC are interrelated and critical cultural awareness reflects the highest level of competence.

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Ratu, N. N., Liando N. V. F., & Tuerah, I. J. C. (2026). Challenges and Strategies in Developing Intercultural Communicative Competence among Indonesian Seafarers in Multinational Crews. *Journal of English Culture, Language, Literature and Education*, 14(1). <https://doi.org/10.53682/h63z1083>.

INTRODUCTION

In a global industry with a multicultural environment, communication is crucial, particularly in the maritime sector. Ship crews must work closely with people from diverse cultures and languages. Due to differences in speech patterns, customs, and language skills, misunderstandings often arise. If left unaddressed, these can

disrupt teamwork, safety, and the smooth operation of the ship. Therefore, good communication is crucial, not only for interpersonal relationships but also for maintaining safe and smooth ship operations.

This is where intercultural communication skills become crucial. This is the ability to communicate effectively and appropriately with people from different cultures. This skill encompasses an open attitude, understanding other cultural customs, and the ability to adapt and understand each other during interactions. In the maritime world, with its hierarchical rules and diverse teams, these skills are crucial for building mutual understanding and cooperation among crew members.

Previous research has extensively discussed the importance of intercultural communication in a globalized world. In the maritime sector, it is also known that cultural differences influence how people communicate, make decisions, and solve problems on board ships. However, most studies focus on theory or training, with few examining the direct experiences of crew members in the field. This research differs because it focuses on the real-life experiences of Indonesian crew members working in a multinational environment. This is important because Indonesian crew members constitute a large part of the global maritime workforce and frequently interact with people from various cultures on board.

From their experiences, we can gain a more concrete picture of the daily communication challenges they face, as well as the practical ways they adapt. Therefore, the understanding of intercultural communication in this study is more relevant because it stems from direct experience, not just theory or training. The purpose of this study is to understand the challenges Indonesian seafarers face when communicating with people from different cultures and to identify the strategies they use to improve their communication skills when working with crews from various countries. This research is expected to provide theoretical benefits in the field of intercultural communication and practical benefits for improving education and training in the maritime sector.

RESEARCH METHOD

To explore how Indonesian seafarers develop intercultural communication competencies while working on multinational ship crews, this study used a qualitative descriptive method. A qualitative approach was deemed appropriate because it provided an opportunity for in-depth understanding of participants' lived experiences and communication practices in a culturally diverse maritime environment. The researcher served as the primary vehicle for data collection and analysis. Throughout the study, the researchers attempted to remain objective to avoid bias and accurately understand the participants' responses.

The respondents for this study were 15 Indonesian seafarers who had worked on international vessels. They were selected because of their experience working with crews from various countries and frequently communicating with people from different cultures. The participants also held varying positions and work experiences, providing a diverse range of perspectives.

Data was collected through semi-structured individual interviews conducted online via Zoom. The interviews were conducted in Indonesian to make the participants feel more comfortable and enable them to share more detailed accounts. Each interview lasted approximately 30–50 minutes. Before beginning, all participants had agreed to participate, and with their permission, the interviews were recorded and transcribed in full for analysis. The data collection process in this study began with developing interview questions based on the components of intercultural communication, followed by selecting participants who met the criteria. Then, the researcher conducted and recorded the interviews, transcribed the results, and prepared them for analysis.

For the analysis, six-step thematic analysis were used. First, the data was reread to ensure full understanding. Second, important sections were coded. Third, similar codes were grouped into themes. Fourth, the themes were reviewed to ensure they remained coherent and consistent. Fifth, the themes were named and explained in relation to intercultural communication. Finally, a report was compiled based on the findings in accordance with the research objectives. The credibility of the study was established through careful data transcription and repeated data review, supported by maintaining consistency in the grouping process, while objectivity was determined based on interpretation of participants' actual responses. This study provides insights into how Indonesian seafarers develop intercultural communicative competence and adapt their communication strategies in a multicultural maritime workplace.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Findings

This stage presents and discusses research obtained through interviews with fifteen Indonesian seafarers with work experience as crew members on multinational vessels. This analysis follows Byram's (1997) intercultural communicative competence (ICC) framework. For ease of understanding, the research findings are divided into three sections: (1) intercultural challenges, (2) adaptation methods and communication strategies, and (3) developing intercultural communication skills. This division helps explain how cross-cultural communication occurs in diverse maritime work environments.

Interview data indicates that intercultural communication on board ships is not easy, but rather dynamic and quite complex.

Seafarers must continually adapt their communication styles, understand each other's intentions, and learn from experience. They face not only language barriers but must also adapt to different cultural customs and expectations to ensure effective teamwork and safe ship operations.

Intercultural Challenges

Research results show that Indonesian seafarers often face various challenges when communicating with crew members from other countries. These include language differences, culturally influenced speech patterns, and different work habits. As a result, messages can be misunderstood, communication becomes less effective, and relationships between crew members can suffer.

One of the most common problems is misunderstanding due to language. Many participants stated that limited English skills, combined with differences in accent, word choice, pronunciation, and speaking speed, make messages difficult to understand. This problem is exacerbated when giving work instructions that must be clear and quickly understood. Even small differences in words or phrases can cause confusion, requiring frequent clarification and delaying work.

“Misunderstandings often occur because of language differences” (Participant 8).

This statement reflects a common concern among participants regarding the importance of language in onboard communication. The challenge lies not only in a limited vocabulary but also in the fact that English is used as the primary working language not a native language so its usage varies from person to person.

Participants also mentioned that they often struggle to understand people who speak too quickly, have unusual pronunciation, and strong accents from crew members hailing from various countries. These differences force them to think harder to grasp the meaning of the conversation, especially during busy work situations or when a quick response is needed.

“Sometimes I cannot fully understand what they say because their English is too fast or different accent” (Participant 3).

Language barriers like these not only disrupt daily communication but can also significantly impact safety, work efficiency, and cooperation on board. In maritime work, teams rely heavily on clear instructions. Misunderstandings can lead to errors, inefficiency, and even safety hazards. Therefore, these language issues must

be addressed with patience and consistent effort, regardless of the crew's linguistic background.

Beyond language, differences in communication styles across cultures often lead to misunderstandings. Each culture has its own distinct way of speaking. Some prefer direct and assertive speech, while others prefer subtle and indirect speech to maintain good relationships.

These differences can lead to misunderstandings, especially regarding tone, intent, or perceived politeness. For example, something that is actually normal might be perceived as rude by someone accustomed to more polite communication. Conversely, polite speech might be perceived as unclear or indecisive by someone accustomed to direct communication. These issues often leave seafarers new to the workplace feeling confused and uncomfortable in a culturally diverse work environment.

“Some foreigners speak very directly, so sometimes it feels a bit harsh, but that is their normal way of communication” (Participant 11).

The challenges of intercultural communication are not only about language, but also about the customs and expectations of each culture regarding how people communicate. Over time, the sailors began to understand that these differences were not personal issues, but rather due to differing cultural backgrounds.

However, in the beginning, these differences often led to misunderstandings, discomfort, or hesitation in interactions. Furthermore, cultural differences were also evident in daily work and social relationships on board. Participants noted differences in work discipline, time management, problem-solving, eating habits, smoking habits, and socializing among crew members. Although seemingly small, these factors significantly influence interpersonal relationships and the work atmosphere on board.

For example, each culture has different views on punctuality or working quickly. This can lead to different perceptions of professionalism and responsibility.

The same applies to socializing and casual interactions, which can affect how easily the crew gets to know and trust one another. If these differences are not understood and managed properly, team cohesion on board can be disrupted.

“Every nationality has different habits on board, like how they eat, work, and socialize” (Participant 5).

Cultural diversity on board is evident not only in communication styles but also in the daily customs that shape social life on the ship. Therefore, crew members must continually learn to understand and adapt to customs that differ from their own culture.

Overall, the results of this study indicate that challenges in the maritime workplace are quite complex and interrelated. The differences are not merely about language, but also cultural values, customs, and unwritten rules of conduct. All of these influence how people interpret messages, build relationships, and maintain teamwork on a ship crewed by people from various countries.

In situations like this, intercultural communication is not just about exchanging information, but also a continuous process of adapting, seeking understanding, and understanding each other's intentions. Therefore, crew members need to be sensitive, adapt their speech, and learn to understand differences to work well in diverse teams. Therefore, the ability to navigate intercultural challenges is a crucial part of maritime employability. Successful communication relies not only on linguistic ability but also on cultural awareness, emotional flexibility, and a willingness to engage with differences constructively and adaptively.

Adaptation and Communication Strategies

The research results show that Indonesian seafarers actively seek ways to overcome intercultural communication challenges on board. They don't simply accept the difficulties as they are, but strive to adapt their communication methods to accommodate the cultural differences. Many of these strategies emerge from their daily experiences working at sea, as a form of learning and adaptation to maintain successful collaboration in diverse environments.

The most important aspect of these strategies is mutual respect and openness to cultural differences. Participants emphasized that the ability to control emotions, be tolerant, and respect differences is crucial for good communication on board.

This attitude helps seafarers avoid conflict, reduce misunderstandings, and maintain a harmonious work environment, thus fostering successful collaboration.

“We need to stay calm and respect each other, even though we come from different cultures” (Participant 2).

Good intercultural communication isn't just about speaking a foreign language, but also about thinking and being prepared to deal with differences. By remaining respectful and calm, seafarers can more easily overcome cultural misunderstandings and maintain positive working relationships in diverse environments.

Another important strategy is adapting their speech to be clear and understandable. Participants reported that they often change their speech patterns when communicating with colleagues from different languages or cultures.

These adjustments include using simpler words, speaking more slowly, avoiding complex sentences, and repeating or explaining instructions when

necessary. This flexible communication style is crucial on ships, as English is the common language, but everyone's abilities vary.

“I try to use simple words and speak slowly so others can understand me better” (Participant 7).

This strategy is crucial for adapting communication in a multilingual environment. By adapting their speech to the person they're speaking to, crew members can reduce misunderstandings and ensure instructions or information are conveyed clearly, especially when performing tasks that require high precision.

Furthermore, their primary learning method is through observation. Seafarers typically learn from senior crew members or more experienced colleagues through daily activities on board. From there, they learn not only how to speak but also how to behave, communication etiquette, and how to respond to situations in different cultures.

This type of learning is crucial in the maritime world, as formal training is often limited, making hands-on experience the primary means of enhancing professional skills.

“I learn a lot by watching how experienced crew members communicate” (Participant 12).

This statement indicates that social learning influences the development of communication. They explore effective communication strategies and observe and imitate more experienced practitioners. Consequently, this gradually leads to the development of more confident and context-appropriate communication behaviors.

The next equally important step is building interpersonal relationships, which is a key strategy in facilitating cross-cultural communication. Casual social interactions, such as casual conversations, eating together, and everyday activities outside of work play a vital role in strengthening relationships among the ship's crew. These activities help foster a more friendly and trusting atmosphere, which ultimately makes communication during work smoother.

In a shipboard environment composed of diverse cultures, everyone needs to work together to build good relationships, maintain a harmonious atmosphere, and avoid conflicts among the crew. When misunderstandings arise among the crew on a ship, one common practice is to confirm or clarify information, especially in situations involving operational instructions or safety-related tasks. Participants recognize the importance of asking questions, confirming information, and repeating instructions to ensure accurate understanding.

“Whenever I am unsure, I always double-check by asking again” (Participant 4).

This approach shows that they take responsibility when communicating and are aware that misunderstandings can be risky. Therefore, they prefer to explain things clearly rather than make assumptions, to prevent mistakes from occurring while working. This is especially important in teams with members from diverse cultural backgrounds, as language differences can lead to messages being misunderstood.

In general, the research findings indicate that the methods used by Indonesian seafarers are interconnected. They adopt a proactive and open-minded attitude, adapt their communication style, learn from experience, maintain good relationships, and always ensure messages are understood correctly.

These approaches aren't used one by one, but are adapted to the situation. The bottom line is that good communication on a ship isn't just about language, but also about being able to cooperate, understand other cultures, and adapt. All of this is done continuously to ensure that work on the ship runs smoothly despite members coming from different backgrounds.

Development of Intercultural Communicative Competence

The findings indicate that intercultural communication (ICC) skills among Indonesian seafarers do not develop in a linear or straightforward manner, but emerge gradually through work experience in multicultural maritime environments. This development is influenced by work experience, interactions with crew members from diverse backgrounds, and the need to adapt to various communication styles and cultures on board. In this regard, intercultural communication (ICC) skills can be understood as abilities that continuously develop through direct experience, practice, and reflection when interacting with people from different cultures.

When starting a job or internship, many participants find it difficult to adjust. They often feel hesitant, lack confidence, and unsure when communicating with colleagues from other cultures. This occurs due to differences in language, communication styles, and lack of experience. As a result, they often use simple language, speak more carefully, and learn much by observing others. This initial period is an adjustment phase, where they are still finding the right way to communicate in a diverse work environment.

One participant described this initial experience as follows:

“At first, I was nervous when talking to foreign crew members, but over time I became more confident and used to it” (Participant 6).

This experience shows that the more often someone interacts with people from different cultures, the less nervous they feel when communicating, and the more their self-confidence grows. Over time, seafarers become more accustomed to communicating on board, so their interactions become more relaxed and flexible. This helps them participate more actively and effectively in culturally diverse teams.

Additionally, they also began to shift their perspective on cultural differences. Initially viewed as a challenge, over time, these differences came to be seen as a natural part of working in the international maritime industry. This shift in perspective made it easier for them to adapt, understand differences, and maintain smooth collaboration.

Data also shows that the more frequently they communicate with people from different cultures, the better their ability to understand and interact. They become more attuned to indirect meanings, can respond appropriately, and adapt their language to the situation.

This indicates that cross-cultural communication skills do not develop in isolation, but grow together through repeated experience. Each interaction, little by little, helps them better understand how to communicate amidst cultural differences.

In addition, these findings also indicate that more experienced sailors possess a higher level of cultural awareness. They become better able to understand and assess situations when facing cultural differences, especially in situations that require caution. Rather than immediately reacting based on their own assumptions, they prefer to observe first and consider the cultural background behind others' attitudes or speech. This demonstrates not only a greater understanding of culture but also a greater awareness and wisdom in dealing with differences.

One participant articulated this perspective as follows:

“Now I understand that every culture has its own way, so I try not to judge quickly” (Participant 10).

This statement indicates that they are beginning to adopt a more cautious and open-minded way of thinking, in which cultural differences are not automatically viewed negatively. By frequently being in culturally diverse environments, they not only learn to adapt their speech but also change their way of thinking, becoming more open-minded, better able to understand others, and more sensitive to cultural differences.

Overall, the results of this study show that Indonesian seafarers' intercultural communication (ICC) skills continue to develop through experience. These skills do not emerge immediately or in rigid stages, but through a repetitive process: experiencing new situations, adapting, reflecting on the experience, and then applying it again in subsequent communication.

Initial difficulties actually serve as important learning opportunities. Frequent interaction with people from various cultures makes them more flexible in their language and more sensitive to cultural differences. From daily experiences, they learn and adapt through each interaction. Over time, they not only become more skilled at communicating but also better understand how others behave in an international work environment. This shows that intercultural communication skills (ICC) develop with experience and work situations. In conclusion, this study supports Byram's (1997) argument that ICC is formed through direct experience, not just classroom learning. In the maritime workplace, which involves many cultures and languages, this skill is crucial. Good communication helps maintain workplace safety, teamwork, and the smooth operation of ships.

CONCLUSION

This study examines the development of intercultural communication (ICC) skills among Indonesian seafarers working on ships with crews from various countries. Using Byram's theory (1997) and qualitative methods, the research findings indicate that ICC develops continuously through direct experience in intercultural interactions within the maritime world. The findings also indicate that the development of ICC is influenced by several interrelated factors, such as intercultural communication challenges, adaptive communication strategies, and the gradual improvement of communication skills. Early in their careers, seafarers often struggle to communicate due to differences in language, speech patterns, and work habits.

To overcome this, they employ several strategies, such as remaining polite, adapting their speech patterns, learning from more experienced crew members, building good relationships with coworkers, and asking questions if anything is unclear. These strategies help them maintain effective communication and collaboration on multicultural ships. By continuously interacting with crew members from diverse cultural backgrounds, seafarers gradually become more confident, more flexible, and more sensitive to cultural differences. These findings indicate that all aspects of ICC, such as attitudes, cultural knowledge, the ability to understand and interact, and critical cultural awareness develop together and reinforce one another.

Overall, this study supports Byram's (1997) model, which posits that intercultural communication (ICC) skills are not static but continuously develop through experience, reflection, and interaction with people from different cultures, particularly in maritime work environments. In situations like this, good communication is crucial for maintaining safety, cooperation, and smooth teamwork. Practically, maritime training institutions should incorporate more material on intercultural communication into their training. This means that training should not only focus on language, but also on understanding other cultures and practicing communication situations that frequently occur in the real world. Shipping

companies are also advised to provide structured intercultural training and orientation for seafarers. Future research could be expanded by involving more nationalities and employing mixed-methods approaches to deepen understanding of ICC development in the maritime sector.

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