

# Strategies for Enhancing Seafarers' English Communication Skills Based on ELF Theory

Juan Liu

Hainan Vocational University of Science and Technology, Haikou, Hainan, 571126

**Abstract:** By analyzing and researching strategies for enhancing seafarers' English communication skills based on ELF theory, this study explores practical methods and measures, providing evidence and promoting their application. This paper analyzes the concept and implications of ELF theory, clarifies its role in enhancing seafarers' English communication skills, proposes application methods and approaches, and further promotes the widespread use of ELF theory in this field. It aims to elevate the international language communication abilities of Chinese seafarers, holding significant importance for maritime operations and navigation safety.

**Keywords:** ELF theory; seafarer English; communication skills

**DOI:**10.12417/3029-2344.25.07.002

Chinese seafarers face the challenge of generally low English communication proficiency during long-distance voyages, which not only affects their overall professional image but also hampers China's progress toward becoming a maritime powerhouse. Particularly in the globalized environment, maritime shipping serves as a vital link connecting nations, playing a significant role in cultural exchange and economic development. Coupled with the burgeoning growth of international trade, multinational operations have become routine for seafarers. Without strong English communication skills, interaction with seafarers from other nations becomes difficult, leading to information gaps and various complications. To ensure accurate, efficient task execution and voyage safety in complex maritime environments, scientifically sound methods must be employed to enhance seafarers' English communication abilities.

## 1. Overview of ELF Theory

ELF theory, fully termed “English as a Lingua Franca,” translates to “English as a Common Language.” It refers to a contact language, meaning that when communication partners have different first languages, they choose English as the medium of communication within a multilingual context<sup>[1]</sup>. The English referred to here is not limited to native English speakers but also encompasses non-native English speakers. This includes native English speakers (such as British English and American English), peripheral English speakers (such as Canadian English, Indian English, and Singaporean English) who use English as an official language or second foreign language, and extended-circle English speakers for whom English is a purely foreign language relative to their native tongue. Chinese seafarers fall under the category of peripheral English learners. Historically, training focused primarily on native varieties, neglecting the characteristics of peripheral and extended varieties. However, with accelerating globalization, the importance of non-native varieties must be recognized, necessitating multifaceted learning<sup>[2]</sup>. Considering that seafarers encounter individuals of diverse nationalities during long-distance voyages and face multilingual communication scenarios, it is crucial to achieve precise comprehension and flexible application of both native English and non-native English.

## 2. The Role of ELF Theory in Enhancing Seafarers' English Communication Skills

### 2.1 Transforming Traditional English Learning Paradigms

English instruction in China has long treated English as a foreign language distinct from the native tongue. Based on this concept, teaching employs second language acquisition theory, requiring learners to master theoretical knowledge such as pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar of English as a native language—whether American or British English. The original intent was to reduce barriers to communication between learners and native English speakers, enabling both parties to express their thoughts clearly<sup>[3]</sup>. With evolving times, non-native English speakers are increasingly involved in deep-sea navigation. This necessitates learners also studying and understanding

non-native English speakers, simultaneously enhancing both theoretical knowledge and linguistic communication skills. During this process, ELF theory can be applied to help learners correctly recognize English variants and non-standard uses of pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar, while respecting diverse language expressions driven by communication objectives. In their daily work, seafarers interact with individuals of diverse nationalities speaking various languages. Influenced by the fluidity of communication partners and the cross-cultural nature of interactions, seafarers require a more efficient and accessible method of intercultural communication<sup>[4]</sup>. This implies that seafarers need not expend significant time and effort studying the linguistic systems and pragmatic features of every country's language. Instead, they should focus on learning English as a universal language tailored to specific target groups. ELF teaching theory emphasizes the comprehensibility of English as a Lingua Franca, making it well-suited to seafarers' work environments and learning needs.

## **2.2 Transforming the Fundamental Purpose and Learning Methods of Seafarers' English Communication**

In reality, most seafarers engaged in ocean voyages possess relatively low English proficiency. Traditional learning approaches that hold native English speakers as the benchmark often yield suboptimal results and may even backfire, gradually eroding learners' confidence and fostering “language inferiority.” Over time, this can lead to a loss of courage to speak English. ELF theory emphasizes complete equality in communication between native and non-native English speakers, eliminating the need for learners to feel inferior due to accent issues when speaking English<sup>[5]</sup>. This is because ELF theory prioritizes the “understandability” of English, not demanding learners speak fluent and perfect British or American English. This significantly reduces learners' psychological burden and academic pressure while providing strong motivation, encouraging them to actively speak English and engage with both native and non-native speakers. Thus, the application of ELF theory in enhancing seafarers' English communication skills emphasizes creating a more flexible and adaptive learning environment. It shifts learners' traditional mindset away from focusing solely on “learning theoretical knowledge like vocabulary and grammar,” instead prioritizing the development of strategic abilities, listening adaptability, and cross-cultural pragmatic skills. This enables seafarers to efficiently comprehend instructions and requests from diverse cultural backgrounds in their work environment and provide reasonable and accurate responses<sup>[6]</sup>.

## **2.3 Transforming Cross-Cultural Communication Patterns**

Influenced by traditional notions, seafarers have developed an entrenched mindset that “native English speakers hold linguistic authority,” easily forming “small cliques” that foster characteristics such as “centralization and inequality” within communication power structures. Under the intimidation of linguistic authority, non-native English speakers may develop language inferiority complexes. The emergence and application of ELF theory has transformed this situation, dismantling the linguistic authority held by native English speakers and enabling genuine equality in language usage rights for all participants in communication and exchange. For instance, seafarers from China and India, speaking English with accents reflecting their respective national linguistic characteristics, possess equal value in communication and interaction<sup>[7]</sup>. In this environment, non-native English speakers significantly enhance their confidence in communicating in English. Beyond diminishing the linguistic authority of native English speakers, applying ELF theory to improve seafarers' English communication skills also addresses the “one-way output” issue inherent in traditional models. Previously, seafarers focused primarily on native English speakers as their target audience, aiming to achieve fluent and accurate personal expression through learning activities. From this perspective, the traditional model emphasizes one-way language output, whereas the ELF model prioritizes the intelligibility of English communication and interaction. To fully grasp the intent behind linguistic expressions, both parties involved in communication engage in two-way interaction to clarify their demands and viewpoints. This continuous, bidirectional process of linguistic communication and confirmation helps mitigate information barriers during maritime operations, reduces communication costs, and positively impacts maritime safety.

### **3.Strategies for Enhancing Seafarers' English Communication Skills Based on ELF Theory**

#### **3.1 Changing Seafarers' Attitude Toward Learning English**

Previously, seafarers widely perceived English communication during ocean voyages and maritime operations as a significant challenge. They believed that effective collaboration with crew members of other nationalities required strong English communication skills, insisting that spoken English must be “grammatically perfect and pronounced with standard pronunciation.” Failure to meet these standards was often attributed to inadequate English proficiency [8]. However, considering the nature of seafarers' work, high-level English mastery is not essential. The primary requirement is ensuring mutual understanding of the meaning and intent conveyed through language. Issues like accents, or minor flaws in grammar and sentence structure during English communication do not impair the effectiveness of language expression. Against this backdrop, seafarers should also shift their entrenched mindset toward English learning. They should move away from the previous obsession with perfect expression and instead prioritize achieving linguistic intelligibility as the primary standard. By applying ELF theory to their English learning activities, they can free themselves from mental barriers and gain the courage to speak and practice boldly<sup>[9]</sup>. For instance, when reporting on task execution, a seafarer might intend to say “I'm heading for the berth” but, momentarily flustered, substitutes it with “I'm going to the berth.” While the meaning remains understandable, hesitation at critical junctures is counterproductive in a high-efficiency work environment. This illustrates that in many maritime scenarios, the essence of seafarers' English communication lies not in flawless speech or demonstrating advanced language skills, but in conveying meaning to colleagues and superiors as quickly as possible. Even imperfect English achieves its purpose when information is complete and clear. This philosophy aligns with the ELF (English as a Lingua Franca) principle, which emphasizes that “the fluency of communication and the completeness of information far outweigh the elegance of individual vocabulary or grammar.” For seafarers, “getting the message out clearly” is the essential tool for English communication. By shedding psychological barriers and speaking boldly, they can progressively enhance their English communication skills through interaction, ultimately achieving the desired results.

#### **3.2 Optimizing the Learning and Mastery of Core Vocabulary in Maritime-Related English as a Lingua Franca**

Given that ELF theory emphasizes the intelligibility of English communication, seafarers enhancing their English communication skills based on this theory will also appropriately modify their existing learning methods. By adjusting pronunciation, simplifying grammar, and substituting vocabulary, they can efficiently achieve their intended goals <sup>[10]</sup>. Under ELF theory, English communication does not demand perfection or standardization in theoretical knowledge like vocabulary, grammar, or sentence structures. Thus, when expressing ideas in English, seafarers may employ more direct and simpler vocabulary, grammar, and sentence patterns. They can also substitute obscure written terms with commonly used basic colloquial vocabulary from daily life. For instance, when conveying the message “Abnormally elevated fuel oil viscosity may cause refinery unit operational failures” in daily work, the phrase “Abnormally elevated fuel oil viscosity may cause refinery unit operational failures.” is overly complex and prone to ambiguity. However, using “The fuel oil is too thick. It is not normal. Maybe the purifier will have problem.” conveys the message more clearly and ensures understanding. This simple shift in language achieves a more effective outcome, demonstrating the significant role of ELF principles in maritime English communication. Seafarers can thus collaborate efficiently with minimal communication overhead during interactions <sup>[11]</sup>. Beyond adapting expressions based on ELF principles, seafarers should also master core maritime English vocabulary to facilitate flexible communication in daily operations. Terms like Portside (left side), Starboard (right side), Forward (bow), and Aft (stern) enable precise positioning within the vessel's structure during English exchanges, allowing for more accurate command execution <sup>[12]</sup>. For instance, when issuing commands, the captain can employ these specialized terms indicating structural orientation: “Check the cargo on the portside.” This

provides crew members with a clearer direction when executing the captain's instructions.

### 3.3 Cultivating Cross-Cultural Communication Competence in English Interaction

Every nation possesses distinct social and cultural environments, resulting in variations in linguistic expression and communication styles <sup>[13]</sup>. Seafarers must be mindful of this when engaging in cross-cultural communication, striving to understand the other party's cultural communication style while anticipating the intended meaning and purpose behind their language. A prime example is the tendency for Westerners to communicate more directly, whereas Chinese individuals often adopt a more indirect approach. Cross-cultural communication among seafarers is also influenced by these factors. Failure to recognize differences in communication styles can easily lead to misunderstandings and subsequent conflicts<sup>[14]</sup>. In such situations, applying ELF theory to address linguistic challenges in cross-cultural communication can significantly improve outcomes. For instance, if a chief officer inspecting cargo securing notices issues and states, "The cargo was secured incorrectly. It's incredibly foolish to make such a mistake." This direct language may cause misunderstanding among the crew members responsible for the task. However, using a more neutral expression like "Overall it's good, but I have concerns about how the goods are bundled. Let's discuss ways to improve it together." acknowledges the work's effectiveness while pointing out specific issues. This approach is less likely to provoke conflict and is more suitable for intercultural English communication scenarios involving different cultural backgrounds. This approach is particularly effective in dialogues between Western and Chinese seafarers. It respects foreign cultural and linguistic communication styles while accommodating the circumstances of Chinese seafarers, fully demonstrating the advantages of communication-focused intercultural interaction <sup>[15]</sup>. This also reflects the characteristics of task-focused communication and safety in seafarers' English communication within the application scenarios of ELF theory. It enables the accurate and clear identification of issues without personal bias, while maintaining respect among team members and patience during cross-cultural communication.

### 4. Conclusion

Compared to the traditional educational model of learning English as a foreign language, ELF theory is more suitable for maritime English learning scenarios. By adopting ELF theory to acquire English knowledge, seafarers can shift away from the conventional approach of benchmarking against native English speakers. Instead, they can focus more time and effort on achieving greater fluency, clarity, and simplicity in English communication, thereby maximizing learning outcomes with minimal effort. This approach not only meets the need to enhance English communication skills but also improves interaction with seafarers from other nations, achieving dual benefits. Given ELF theory's significant role in boosting seafarers' English proficiency, research in this area must be intensified. Practical methods and measures should be explored for application and promotion, helping seafarers overcome language barriers and collectively improve the generally weak English communication skills among China's seafaring community. This will accelerate the development of cross-linguistic and cross-cultural communication abilities. This approach facilitates the rapid professional growth of individual seafarers while simultaneously transforming the international image of China's seafaring community. This fundamental rationale underpins the imperative for intensive research in this domain, representing a critical pathway for relevant industries to pursue sustainable development in the new era.

### References:

- [1] Xie Han,Wang Yiming.Teaching Application of ELF Theory Incorporating Ideological and Political Elements in “ English Speaking ” Courses under the Belt and Road Initiative[J].Journal of Ningbo Institute of Technology,2024,36(1):80-85.
- [2] Qiu Yinjia.Reflections on Reforming Public English Teaching in Applied Universities under the Context of

ELF(English as a Lingua Franca)[J].Overseas English(Part I),2022(10):138-140.

[3] Yin Xianfang,Yin Chunjie.Research on Cultivating English Communication Competence for International Trade Talents in the Context of English as a Lingua Franca(ELF):A Case Study of Shandong Foreign Trade Vocational College[J].Overseas English,2021,(17):277-278.

[4] Wang Nan.Exploratory Practices in Cultivating Cross-Cultural Communication Competence in Vocational English Instruction under ELF Context[J].Campus English,2021,(05):82-83.

[5] Liu Jiaqi,Cao Liang.Strategies for Enhancing Seafarers'English Communication Competence Based on ELF Theory[J].Journal of Wuhan Shipbuilding Vocational and Technical College,2021,20(3):109-112.

[6] Liu Huiying.A Study on Interventional Evaluative Discourse in ELF Communication from a Socio-Cognitive Perspective:Taking Peer-Review Discourse in “ Transoceanic Interaction ” as an Example[J].Foreign Language World,2018(4):85-93.

[7] Huang Chaonan.Principles of ELF Language Teaching and Reform of English Pronunciation Instruction in Higher Education Institutions[J].Overseas English(Lower Edition),2018(10):69-70.

[8] Zhu Shijie.A Brief Analysis of English as a Global Language(ELF)and the Development of Pragmatic Communication Competence[J].Overseas English,2017,(06):75-77.

[9] Zhao Fang.Research on Cultivating Cross-Cultural Communication Competence for Non-English Majors in the ELF Context[J].Journal of Shanxi Institute of Economics and Management,2017,25(4):113-116.

[10] Xu Liang,Dang Wenxia.Exploring Cross-Cultural Communication Competence Development in English Teaching from an ELF Perspective[J].Educational Materials,2017,(23):215-217.

[11] Liu Yanli,Wang Xinran.Research on ELF-Based English Communication Competency Development Programs for College Students[J].Drama Home,2017(18):173-174.

[12] Wang Jianghan,Qian Lixin.The Pragmatic Shift in English Teaching Under the Context of ELF Dynamic Communicative Resources[J].Journal of Tongling University,2017,16(1):106-109.

[13] Zhang Yaojian.Cultivating University Students'Pragmatic Competence in English Teaching Under the ELF Context[J].Education and Teaching Forum,2016(21):120-121.

[14] Zhan Yanping.Task-Driven Teaching of Tourism English in Higher Vocational Education from an ELF Perspective[D].Zhejiang:Zhejiang Normal University,2016.

[15] Ran Yongping,Yang Qing.New Perspectives on the Concept of Pragmatic Competence in the Context of English as an International Lingua Franca[J].Foreign Language World,2015(5):10-17.