

# BLENDLED LEARNING FOR MARITIME ENGLISH: CHALLENGES AND INSTRUCTOR INSIGHTS

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## Abstract

Blended learning has been a common model of learning applied in education, including in maritime education. It is imperative to explore teachers' challenges in conducting blended learning to teach maritime English for the Seafarer Upgrading Program. The present study aimed to explore teachers' voices regarding the challenges they faced and strategies they used in teaching seafarer students. The study was conducted under a qualitative study. Four English instructors with at least three years of experience in teaching maritime English using blended learning were interviewed. The data were analyzed thematically. The findings have shown that the teachers identified and dealt with challenges concerning technical, teaching and learning, and environment. Some implications were addressed to foster more effective English teaching using blended learning for maritime education.

**Keywords – blended learning, maritime English, instructor challenges**

## Introduction

Maritime education has changed significantly in recent years, moving away from the traditional classroom setting and embracing a blend of online and face-to-face learning. This blended approach, which combines the best of both worlds, has been recommended by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) as a way to keep up with the rapid pace of technology. And when the COVID-19 pandemic hit, its application also became more widespread. IMO member states started issuing regulations on how maritime schools should implement them.

Recognizing the significance of this shift, the Indonesian Ministry of Transportation has taken proactive steps to provide guidance for the implementation of distance learning in the country's maritime education and training programs. The seafarer upgrading program, a non-formal maritime training program, has adopted this blended learning model. This program typically involves online theory classes through a Learning Management System (LMS) followed by in-person practical training and final exams. After nearly three years of implementation,

instructors have undoubtedly encountered various challenges in delivering blended learning, particularly in teaching maritime English.

In this study, the challenges faced by maritime English instructors and the strategies they utilized in implementing blended learning for the Seafarer Upgrading Program are investigated. The Seafarer Upgrading Program is designed to improve the skills and competencies of experienced seafarers to advance their careers. The students of this program are usually professional seafarers with near coastal voyage and unlimited sailing experiences. Understanding the challenges and strategies used by the instructors, this study is expected to provide insights that can inform the development of effective teaching practices in maritime English.

Blended learning, a pedagogical approach merging traditional classroom instruction with online elements, has shown promise in enhancing student engagement and learning outcomes (Bonk & Graham, 2006). This instructional model offers flexibility, allowing learners to access educational resources at their own pace and convenience. Research has consistently demonstrated the potential of

blended learning to improve student satisfaction, motivation, and achievement (Garrison & Anderson, 2003).

The unique characteristics of maritime education significantly influence the design and implementation of blended learning. The demanding nature of seafarer life, characterized by extended periods away from shore, irregular work schedules, and the need for specialized skills, necessitates flexible and adaptable learning solutions (Yu Haiyan, 2016; Kunieda et al., 2021). Blended learning, with its capacity to accommodate diverse learning styles and paces, holds the potential to address these challenges.

However, the integration of technology into maritime education is not without its obstacles. Infrastructure limitations, especially in terms of internet connectivity and access to appropriate devices, can hinder the effective implementation of blended learning. Furthermore, the practical nature of maritime training, which often requires hands-on experience and simulation, poses challenges in translating certain aspects of the curriculum into an online format.

In the context of Maritime English education, the integration of blended learning has been explored as a promising approach to meet the unique demands of this field. The unique characteristics of the maritime industry, such as the high demands of seafarers' lives, the need for specialized language skills, and the global nature of the profession, require flexible and adaptable learning solutions. Blended learning, with its capacity to combine face-to-face teaching with online learning, offers a potential solution to address these challenges. Research has shown that the flexibility and accessibility afforded by blended learning can be particularly beneficial for maritime English language learners, allowing them to learn at their own pace (Pejović, 2020; Lyu & Li, 2022).

While blended learning offers considerable potential to enhance maritime English teaching, its successful

implementation demands careful planning and a comprehensive understanding of the challenges involved. Teachers have reported significant difficulties in maintaining effective student engagement in an online learning environment. Balancing the demands of online and face-to-face teaching, combined with managing the technological aspects, often proves to be a complicated task (Lankapalli & Rao, 2020).

### Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative descriptive approach to investigate the challenges and strategies employed by instructors in teaching Maritime English through blended learning. Qualitative descriptive research aims to uncover and articulate the phenomena occurring within a specific context, providing a comprehensive understanding of the experiences and perspectives of the participants involved (Sandelowski, 2000).

The study collected data through interviews with Maritime English instructors at *Balai Besar Pendidikan Penyebaran dan Peningkatan Ilmu Pelayaran Jakarta* (translated into Jakarta Merchant Marine College), one of Indonesian maritime education and training institutions under *Badan Pengembangan Sumber Daya Manusia Perhubungan* (translated into Human Resource Development Center of Transportation). This institution provides an upgrading program for seafarers, a program for experienced seafarers to advance their competencies.

The participants in this study consisted of four Maritime English instructors who had participated in blended learning training workshops and seminars. These instructors were selected based on their experience, with teaching backgrounds ranging from three to nine years in English language instruction. It is worth noting that all participants have been teaching blended classes since 2020, giving valuable insights into the practical

application of blended learning in their teaching practices.

Semi-structured interviews were carried out including two open-ended questions to elicit the instructors' viewpoints on the implementation of blended learning in Maritime English education. The questions centered on what specific challenges instructors encounter when implementing blended learning in the Seafarer Upgrading Program, and what strategies instructors use to overcome these challenges.

The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed, after which thematic analysis was employed to examine the data generated. Thematic analysis is a qualitative method that categorises and reports themes (patterns) pertaining to the data. It offers a reliable method for identifying, analyzing and understanding themes which in turn provides an exhaustive exploration of the data richness and diversity (Boyatzis 1998). Thematic analysis was selected as it allows an in-depth and rich understanding of the data, enabling researchers to uncover detailed patterns, structures or even underlying meanings.

The analysis process begins with data reduction, targeting the accurate transcription of interviews to preserve a faithful representation of each participant's responses. Once the data are fully transcribed, these transcriptions are categorized thematically based on the objectives. The next is data display, where the categorized data are structured in a coherent structure using visual aids like charts or matrices to illustrate the relationships between different themes, making it easier to synthesize findings. The last stage is the data report. The identified themes are then interpreted and the findings are presented in a structured format, linking them back to the research questions and incorporating participant quotes to support the analysis. This phase is crucial for effectively communicating

the insights gained from the study and highlighting their practical implications.

## **Finding and Discussion**

### *Challenges of Blended Learning Implementation in Maritime English Lessons*

**Technical Challenges.** Technical challenges are mainly related to operational issues that affect the implementation of online learning. The most significant of these challenges include limited access to technology and device disparity among students.

*Limited Access.* Internet connectivity emerges as the most frequently cited challenge faced by instructors during online learning sessions. One instructor expressed, "Weak signals hinder learning during online sessions" (T1). Another participant elaborated, "Students are in various locations, some in areas with poor signal reception. It is difficult for them to participate in Maritime English classes" (T4). These statements reflect broader concerns about the digital divide. A study by Cullinan et al (2021) supports these findings, indicating that gaps in access to technology among students may extend the educational gap during online learning. In addition, signal disruptions can cause delays in receiving learning materials. One instructor said, "Signal disruptions cause delays in receiving materials; sometimes, when the connection is being recovered, students have already missed the lesson" (T3). The implications of limited access go beyond connectivity issues. Students in remote areas often face challenges in accessing necessary resources, such as textbooks and learning references. This lack of access can limit their ability to fully engage in the learning process, which can lead to significant inequalities in educational outcomes.

*Device Disparity.* The issue of device disparity is another technical challenge faced by instructors. Many students use different devices for online

learning, which hinders the teaching process. One teacher said, "In the online maritime English lesson, they use cell phones or laptops; sometimes the Zoom display on the cell phone is too small, so it is hard for students to follow the material" (T2). This concern is supported by Ballale (2024) found that disparities in technology access have an impact on student engagement. Such gaps may constrain students' ability to engage in the learning process fully. Device diversity also affects the quality of the learning experience. For example, students using smartphones may have difficulty with functions that are more accessible on larger screens, such as viewing presentations or participating in discussions. This gap can lead to an unequal learning experience, where some students benefit from increased interaction while others are disadvantaged. As instructors attempt to implement effective blended learning strategies, they should consider the implications of device disparity on student engagement and learning outcomes.

**Learning Challenges.** Learning challenges include issues related to student engagement, motivation, and the effectiveness of the online learning environment.

*Connectivity Interruptions.* The quality of internet connectivity significantly impacts the effectiveness of online learning, especially for practicing pronunciation. Instructors often struggle to hear students during pronunciation practice due to signal interference and therefore struggle to provide immediate corrections. One instructor observed, "The low attendance of students forces me to repeat the material for those who are behind" (T3). This issue is supported by Clarin and Baluyos (2022) found that internet connectivity problems during online learning, causing significant disruption in their educational experience. The interruptions caused by connectivity issues not only affect the flow of the lesson but also contribute to student

disengagement. When students are unable to participate fully due to technical issues, their motivation to engage in the following session may decrease. This kind of repeated disruption will result in a lack of confidence in their language skills, further contributing to the challenges faced in learning Maritime English.

*Lack of Interaction.* Online learning environments can limit opportunities for interaction between students and instructors, as well as among students themselves. This lack of interaction may contribute to decreased motivation and engagement. A study by Baker and Inventado (2014) found that students participating in online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic felt less connected to their teachers and classmates, which negatively affected their motivation. One instructor noted, "The limited interaction between teachers and students in online learning leads to a lack of motivation for students" (T1). The importance of interaction in language learning is undeniable. Effective communication and collaboration among students are essential for developing language skills, especially in specific areas such as Maritime English. When students are restricted in their learning environment, they lose the opportunity for peer feedback, collaborative problem-solving, and social interaction that is crucial for language acquisition. The absence of these interactions can lead to a reduced sense of togetherness and belonging within the learning environment.

*Decreased Student Motivation.* Several factors affect student motivation during online learning, including interest in the material and the home learning environment. Lack of motivation to access online materials uploaded to the Learning Management System (LMS) is also a challenge. A study by Duncan and Murnane (2011) found that students with high motivation and support from their home environment were more likely to

succeed in online learning. One participant stated, “Lack of motivation among students to engage with online materials is a significant barrier to effective learning” (T1). The other added, “It is difficult to keep students motivated and maintain their engagement in online learning” (T4). Motivation is a critical component in successful learning, especially in language learning. When students are not motivated to participate in an online class or engage with the material, their learning outcomes tend to suffer. Factors such as relevant content and support received from instructors and peers all play a role in shaping student motivation. Instructors should find more ways to foster intrinsic motivation by making learning relevant and meaningful to students' lives and future careers.

**Learning environments.** The learning environment plays a crucial role in shaping students' focus and engagement during online learning.

*Distractions in Home Learning Environments.* Lack of control over the learning environment at home can cause distractions that can make it challenging for students to concentrate on their studies. Research by Hwang and Chang (2011) found that students studying in noisy and crowded home environments were more easily distracted and struggled to focus on their lessons. An instructor said, “Students often find it difficult to concentrate at home due to various distractions” (T1). The impact of the home environment on learning is particularly pronounced in online learning. Students may face distractions from family members or work and other responsibilities that require their attention. This lack of dedicated study space can hinder their ability to fully engage in lessons and absorb the material being taught. Instructors should be aware of these challenges and consider strategies to support students in creating a conducive learning environment at home.

*Student Engagement and Time Commitment.* Effective time management

is essential for students to balance online learning with other responsibilities. Lack of commitment to managing study time with other activities can obstruct the teaching and learning process. One participant said, “Students often struggle to find time to fully engage with online material due to other commitments” (T3). The demands of adult learners, particularly those in seafarer upgrading programs, can constrain their ability to commit to online learning. Many students have jobs, family responsibilities and other commitments, which can lead to overlapping priorities. This situation highlights the importance of flexible learning options that accommodate students' diverse schedules and responsibilities. Instructors should consider implementing strategies that allow for asynchronous learning opportunities, which allow students to engage with the material at their own pace.

*Strategies Used in Implementing Blended Learning for Maritime English Lessons*

The blended learning approach at BP3IP consists of online sessions at the beginning and face-to-face meetings at the end. Several strategies employed by instructors can be classified into two categories: strategies for online learning and strategies for face-to-face learning.

#### **During Online Learning**

*Utilizing Accessible Online Platforms.* All respondents utilized Zoom Meetings for Maritime English lessons, as it is easy to use and accessible to most students. The instructors explained the material using PowerPoint presentations, which can also be uploaded to the LMS for independent access. One instructor said, “I upload all the materials to the LMS; students can access them there, and lessons are conducted through Zoom as scheduled” (T3). One instructor noted, “I usually use Zoom to explain the material, give exercises, and Q&A” (T4). The other added, “For online classes, I use Zoom to share videos and learning materials. Assignments are uploaded to both the

LMS and external platforms for accessibility”(T1). A study by Sari et al. (2022) supports this preference, indicating that teachers favor Zoom for its ability to monitor student attendance effectively. The platform allows teachers to interact with students in real time while providing flexibility for self-study. Silalahi et al (2022) also found that students taught with Zoom meetings showed high motivation. The use of LMS platforms, such as Moodle, also plays an important role in facilitating blended learning. It gives students the independence to access materials anytime and anywhere, thus encouraging a more flexible learning experience (Holiver et al., 2020). By combining synchronous and asynchronous learning opportunities, instructors can better accommodate the diverse needs of students.

*Engaging Teaching Materials.* All respondents recommended using interesting teaching materials to prevent boredom and motivate students to participate actively. One instructor stated, “Diverse teaching materials are needed to attract students' interest. Interactive videos relevant to the topic will engage them in learning” (T2). The other added, “ Besides videos that are relevant to their activities on the board ship, I also use interactive quizzes to make learning more interesting” (T1). This is in line with the findings from Kew et al. (2023), which indicated that YouTube is a popular online resource among students to improve communication and speaking skills. The integration of multimedia resources can enhance the learning experience and encourage greater engagement. The selection of teaching materials is crucial in maintaining students' interest and motivation. The strategic integration of videos, quizzes, and interactive components can transform the learning experience, making it more dynamic and engaging for students with diverse learning styles. This approach empowers

learners to take an active role in their educational process.

*Assigning Independent Tasks.* Teaching adult students has its own challenges regarding online class attendance. One respondent mentioned that they give assignments to those who are absent from the class to ensure that they are not left behind. “They are adult learners who have other commitments, so sometimes they cannot attend Zoom meetings. I usually give them independent assignments so that they still get the material taught” (T3). This strategy encourages students to become autonomous learners and makes them take responsibility for their learning. Independent tasks also stimulate students' self-directed learning, which is essential for adult learners like seafarer students. Exploring course materials independently fosters students to deeply connect to the learning process. This aligns with andragogy principles which recognize the unique characteristics and needs of adult learners (Rachul et al., 2020). Adult learners often have multiple responsibilities and prefer to have a degree of control over their learning process. Providing them with opportunities for self-directed learning through independent tasks caters to these needs and empowers them to take ownership of their educational journey (Shin et al., 2017).

*Monitoring Teaching Performance.* One strategy to keep students' attention is for instructors to use enthusiastic intonation and a friendly manner during online sessions. One instructor said, “To keep students engaged, the instructor should explain the material in an interesting way, using an energetic tone and clear intonation” (T4). Mahmud et al. (2023) emphasized the importance of vocal quality in online English language teaching and emphasized that engaging delivery can significantly increase student interaction and participation. The role of the instructor in an online learning environment is crucial. By creating a

positive and engaging atmosphere, instructors can foster a sense of togetherness and encourage students to participate in discussions and activities actively. This strategy not only enhances the learning experience but also helps build positive relationships between instructors and students.

### **During Face-to-Face Learning**

*Interactive Activities.* The respondents noted that face-to-face sessions should utilize interactive activities to foster relationships among students and between students and teachers. One instructor stated, "I use face-to-face sessions for role-playing activities, simulating communication that is usually performed at sea" (T3). Another participant noted, "I use face-to-face sessions to interactive activities that foster stronger connections among students and between students and myself" (T4). The other added, "Face-to-face meetings are used for discussions" (T1). Asef-Varizi (2015) highlights that face-to-face blended learning can facilitate social engagement through interactive communication. These activities not only improve language skills but also build friendships among students. The use of interactive activities during face-to-face sessions allows students to practice their language skills in a supportive environment (Asarta & Schmidt, 2015). By simulating real-life scenarios, such as communication at sea, instructors can help students develop the practical skills necessary for their future careers. This hands-on approach encourages collaboration and teamwork (Wuenssch, 2016), essential skills in the maritime industry.

*Reviewing Online Learning Material.* Due to limited interaction in online learning, face-to-face sessions can be used to review previously taught material. One instructor recommended, "Reviewing lessons is important during face-to-face meetings to ensure their understanding of the material" (T1). One instructor said, "Face-to-face sessions are

primarily used to reinforce online learning" (T2). Dedicating face-to-face time for review reinforces learning and provides a valuable opportunity for students to clarify doubts and deepen their understanding. This strategy is consistent with effective e-learning practices, emphasizing clear content delivery, coherent alignment between online and face-to-face components, and a harmonious blend of synchronous and asynchronous interactions (Rhim & Han, 2020). By reviewing key concepts and addressing misconceptions, instructors can consolidate students' knowledge, boost their confidence, and better prepare them for assessments.

*Preparing for Final Exams.* At the end of the course, face-to-face sessions can prepare students for the final exam. "Since online sessions are often interrupted by connectivity issues, I utilize the face-to-face time to go over the exam practice questions so that students have a clearer understanding of what to expect" (T2). Individual tasks that support learning objectives can improve student learning outcomes (Benson & Kolsaker, 2015). This preparation is crucial to ensure that students feel confident and prepared for the exam. The final exam preparation process is an important component of the learning experience. By providing targeted support and resources to students, instructors can help them develop effective study strategies and build confidence in their abilities. This strategy not only prepares students for success in their exams but also equips them with valuable skills for their future careers.

### **Conclusions**

Findings revealed that technical challenges, mainly related to internet connectivity and device differences, significantly hindered the effectiveness of online learning. Participants often mentioned poor internet signal as a main barrier, with many students unable to access lessons due to poor reception in

their location. This is in line with existing studies showing that gaps in technology access can compound educational inequalities. In addition, the variety of devices used by students also creates difficulties in the learning process, as smaller screens can restrict their ability to fully engage with the lesson material.

Learning challenges also clearly emerged, especially regarding student motivation and interaction. The lack of effective communication in online sessions led to a decrease in student engagement and motivation, as many participants reported feeling disconnected from their instructors and peers. This situation was compounded by external distractions from the home learning environment, which further reduced students' ability to focus on their learning. To address this challenge, instructors have implemented various strategies during online and face-to-face sessions. During online learning, the use of accessible platforms such as Zoom has been favored, allowing for real-time interaction and the ability to monitor student attendance. Engaging teaching materials, such as interactive videos and quizzes, have been recommended to maintain student interest. In addition, instructors have adopted strategies to encourage self-directed learning by providing independent tasks to students who may not be able to attend online classes.

In face-to-face sessions, role-plays and peer collaborations have been implemented to foster relationships among students, which helps strengthen the overall language practice. These sessions also involve reviewing online material and preparing students for final examinations, ensuring that they are well-equipped for their exams.

Overall, the findings highlight the importance of adaptability and creativity in teaching practices to better benefit from blended learning with Maritime English lessons. By addressing the identified challenges and employing targeted

strategies, instructors can boost student engagement as well as students' performance in this crucial subject matter. The limitation of this study lies in the small size of the sample since only four instructors are involved. It may limit the generalizability of the findings to a broader population of maritime English instructors. This study also focuses only on the instructors' perspectives without elaborating on students' points of view, which may restrict the insights into how blended learning is implemented. Additionally, this study has a limited scope in a specific context. The use of self-reported data may be subject to recall bias. For more comprehensive results, the future studies should include substantial numbers of samples, including students' perspectives and comparative studies across the different maritime education and training institutions.

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