

# Why do Some People Say the English Language is Hard to Learn, and Maritime English is Hard to Master?

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**Abstract:** Lot of people seem to think that English language is difficult to learn. They talk about that; tweet about that; blog about that. Every thought seems to be an accepted fact. But is it true? And if it is, why that? In my paper I try to find the proper answers to these key-questions, and in the same time to tackle the definition of the **Teacher in role** from Wikipedia: “If the role of a teacher is to teach, the role of a student must be to learn. However, it has been agreed that learning is not only an exercise in reading and reciting facts, but in gaining a deeper insight of events and situations. [...], a teacher does not only teach and learn the “**what**” but also the “**why**” and “**how**”.

**Keywords:** Learning English, Teacher in role, Understanding Maritime English, pedagogical approach

## 1. Introduction

*“Every teacher needs to improve, not because they are not good enough, but because they can be even better.”* (William Dylan)

Every teacher wants to get better. I use Dylan William’s quotation [1] because I agree with those that think it strikes a truth that all teachers must embrace. I used it to begin my Maritime English seminars on “becoming a better teacher”. We all know and understand the pivotal impact of teacher quality for our students, and, surely, we all want to be better. There really is no bigger prize: better teachers improve the life chances of students. Our students could have the opportunity for a better paying job, but they need to improve their English before they can apply. Or, they want to join a foreign shipping company, but their Maritime English is not good enough yet. One example from Romania: they have already taken General English classes for four years in high school. They have studied Maritime English at the university for another four years. They know

general English grammar and can write, but they need to learn how to *speak* General English and Maritime English. And they need to improve their spoken general English and maritime English very quickly, because they need a job after graduation!

Taking into account these aspects, it should be our personal focus as committed professionals. It should be the core purpose of school leaders to develop great teachers. The government should relentlessly focus its resources and efforts into improving our current stock of teachers, supporting them to be better.

Of course, many teachers are not improving. The reality is that the impact of teacher experience on student outcomes actually plateaus after a few years. Therefore waiting to get better simply from the benefit of experience throughout your career won’t happen. We may want to get better, but are we actually going about it in the right way? We must ask ourselves an awkward and challenging question. Perhaps a pretty uncomfortable question: *Have we plateaued as a teacher?*

After the whirlwind of feedback and the perilously steep learning curves of our first years as teachers the impact of experience dulls. Is the comfort derived

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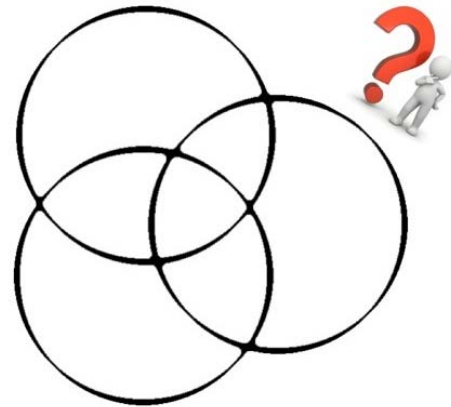
from developing good habits of behavior management and easing our attendant stresses a bad thing? No. Should we be flagellating ourselves with the birch over our failure to become an expert in only a few years? Of course not! Should we be looking in the mirror and looking for new answers how to *better improve*? I would say: Yes!

## 2. The Problem With Continuous Professional Development

As the line goes, no man is an island. No teacher can improve in splendid isolation. The problem with continuous professional development is that the continuous bit is too often missing... Time and money are scarce resources in our current climate. This may all sound bleak, but the heartening truth is that teachers can lead a transformation themselves. Let's not fool ourselves, it will take effort and a boatload of "deliberate practice"... But teachers can get better and do it for themselves. At our last memorable IMEC 25 in Istanbul we discussed *marinisation* of the Maritime English Teacher. That is the way!

As we are waiting for some course that will deliver pedagogical manna from heaven, we too often look in the wrong place for answers. We can too easily waste time focusing upon the latest tools and new resources and not on our *core practice* that makes the difference. We are working in different projects, we are trying to improve our students' assessment, or we are working on finding solutions in the thematic field of human communication... It is perhaps only natural. Shiny new tools promise us so much, yet their promise too often translates into a crumble reality. Spending time making resources, like making lovely new displays, feels very much like hard work, and often is time-consuming, but the actual impact on learning can certainly not worth the time. We need to focus upon the **80/20 rule** known as the Pareto principle<sup>1</sup> (the Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto who observed in 1906 that 80% of the land in Italy was owned by 20% of the population) [2].

We must identify the vital core aspects of our pedagogy that will have the greatest impact for our learners. We must deliberately practice those 20% of teaching strategies that have 80% of the impact on learning. **What are your strategies?** Note them down on this diagram and focus in your "*deliberate practice*" on these and these alone [3].



I have been thinking about the teacher practice as I see it:

### (1) Effective explanations during classes

(Example of Topics: *Movements of the vessel:*

**Rolling:** *The side-to-side (athwartship) motion of a ship along the vertical line is known as rolling;*

**Pitching:** *The up and down motion of a ship forward and aft is known as pitching.*

Even if you have pictures to show, don't forget that the moment you explain these, some of your students have never been on board vessel, and they immediately will ask you: *How is that?*

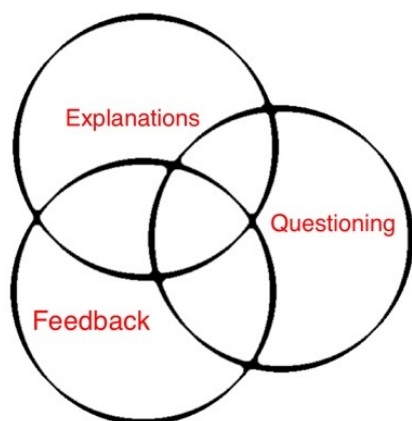
Forget about: "*I am your teacher of Maritime English! We have our lessons about activities described by using the Maritime Technical English terminology. I give you the definition and translation of them. Don't ask me particular explanations about e.g., the ship's movements. These are topics of Ship's Handling discipline!*" Yes, that's right, but you, the teacher of Maritime English should be prepared to help the student understand: use videos, or even a gesture to help his/her imagination in the very moment they have heard the new word. I agree with

the fact that we are not “multi-purposes” teachers, but we need a little knowledge concentration about what we are teaching!),

## (2) Questioning

### (3) Feedback (both *oral feedback* and *written feedback*)

I am fully aware my choices may seem rather lacking in glamour and sparkle! There is no branded, bespoke package for teacher explanations. We do them habitually, intuitively and daily, often without even thinking, so automatic are they to our practice. But, like all habits, we need to unpick and analyze if we are to really make sustained improvements. We need to heed Dylan William’s advice. *Instead we must hone, craft and perfect our core practice.* Thinking of Pareto’s Principle, here is my law of the vital few, but these are *my* strategies—I have chosen them for this paper after several analyses of the existing ones: look for yours!



## 3. The Answer is ‘Deliberate Practice’

A rather gritty and sobering truth about being an expert teacher, or an expert at anything for matter, is that it takes a tremendous amount of hard work. Thousands of hours of hard work, probably unsurprisingly, is the answer. Yet, what happens with teachers who have taught for many years and who have stubbornly plateaued regardless of the time invested? The issue is that we often undertake the wrong sort of practice and our “hard work” lacks direction. Every teacher undertakes *repeated practice*,

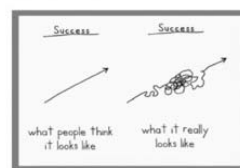
but simply doing something over does not confer expertise—in fact, simply repeating practice can harden bad habits. Teachers need to undertake a specific type of practice: “*deliberate practice*”.

So what is it? To use a simple analogy, if you think about a top golfer, they practice specific shots, with a coach giving immediate feedback, typically including a series of corrective tweaks. “*The feedback is king.* The reflection and tweaks are essential. In many ways, we need to revert to our state—constantly reflecting upon our practice with the alert mindset of the novice. Perhaps we cannot source a top golf coach, but we can find a ‘**critical friend**’” in a colleague; we can blog and find an audience there; we can work with our subject leaders, a colleague etc. To improve we must undertake what can be a frustrating process with grit and resilience. Here is a simple step by step guide to the “*deliberate practice*” method [4]:

- (1) Identify a skill. Plot out the time and the space to hone (e.g., a specific class on a weekly basis);
- (2) Refine your focus with a *critical friend*;
- (3) Record and reflect more systematically (e.g., notebook, blog, etc.);
- (4) Find regular feedback (e.g., critical friend, audience of blog etc.);
- (5) Repeat...And repeat (nothing is easy!)

## 4. What are the Barriers to Improvement?

### Barriers?



Of course, such a process that demands monotony and discipline is hard to sustain. Such barriers are represented in the above image. Firstly, there are the

**emotional barriers.** Exposing ourselves to failure can be a chastening business. We need to focus on the goal and be committed to getting better and being prepared to fail. Often, we will need support: inspiring leaders in our domain, appreciative students, a strong department team—not too much to ask! Secondly, we instinctively **view success falsely as a linear process** the fixed idea of the genius not encountering failure is rooted in our psyche. We must be prepared for the messy process of concerted practice in a classroom. Of course, **time** is a crucial barrier. We must be committed to giving over extra time to hone our practice. We should look to find marginal gains in terms of time with aspects of our practice, like written feedback. Finally, we must **recognize our bad habits**—like the smoking granny! Then we need to work on improving our habits.

We can all improve upon our habits. We can allocate weekly times and places to share, research and reward ourselves. We are programmed to follow little cues when forming new habits. We need to find time by reducing our workload in other ways, such as honing our written feedback. Find pockets of time that you can practice and plan. Ideally, this is done with a “critical friend” [5], a like-minded colleague, perhaps; an inspiring leader in our domain; a subject leader? By committing ourselves to others and publicly announcing our plans we are much likely to see it through. Too often the new habit, such as executing a new teaching strategy, will simply not pay off quickly or easily. This is where our mettle is tested. We must ride through this hump in the road and focus on the small bright spots of success that can lead the way to being a consistently better teacher.

## 5. Reflect to Improve

“*Greatness isn’t born. It’s grown.*” [6] Perhaps you could become a brilliant teacher by undertaking such “*deliberate practice*”, and *doing it for yourself*. In the words of William Faulkner:

**“Don’t bother just to be better than your**

**contemporaries or predecessors. Try to be better than yourself.”**

If the role of a teacher is to teach, the role of a student must be to learn. However, it has been agreed that learning is not only an exercise in reading and reciting facts, but in gaining a deeper insight of events and situations. A teacher does not only teach and learn the “*what*” but also the “*why*” and “*how*”...

Being a leader is one of many roles a teacher plays.

A teacher’s role involves more than simply standing in front of a classroom and lecturing. In fact, even though a teacher spends the majority of the day in the classroom, the actual teaching component is only part of the job. An effective teacher understands that teaching involves wearing multiple hats to ensure that the school day runs smoothly and all students receive a quality education [7]

### (1) Planning

At the planning stage, teachers play multiple roles. They are learners, constantly taking classes and attending professional development sessions to learn the latest best practices and strategies for effective teaching. Many teachers regularly collaborate with one another to gain new ideas for teaching, planning grade-level instruction and combining subjects to enhance the learning experience. They analyze test results and other data to help determine the course of their instruction and make changes in their classrooms. Teachers also design lesson plans to teach the standards and provide engaging activities, while taking into account each student's interests and instructional needs.

### (2) Instruction

Instead of just lecturing in the classroom, teachers are facilitators of learning, providing students with the information and tools they need to master a subject. At times, teachers act like tutors, working with small groups of students or individual students within the classroom or after class. Teachers also play the role of evaluators, constantly assessing students' abilities through formal and informal assessments, providing

suggestions for improvement and assigning grades.

**(3) Student interaction**

Perhaps the most important roles teachers fill involve interacting with students. Teachers must be leaders in the classroom and in the school, earning the respect of students and setting a positive example. At the same time, teachers must show care and concern for students. A teacher has the power to build up or tear down a student's self-esteem and make a student's day or ruin it in an instant. When interacting with students, a teacher must fill the role of a counsellor, a surrogate parent, and someone who has the best interests of every child at heart.

**6. Why is English hard to learn?**

Listen and think about...(<https://www.youtube.com/watch?V=5kyixpcyive>)

In addition to ...

*We'll begin with a box, and the plural is boxes,  
 But the plural of ox becomes oxen, not oxes.  
 One fowl is a goose, but two are called geese,  
 Yet the plural of moose should never be meese.  
 You may find a lone mouse or a nest full of mice,  
 Yet the plural of house is houses, not hice.  
 If the plural of man is always called men,  
 Why shouldn't the plural of pan be called pen?  
 If I speak of my foot and show you my feet,  
 And I give you a boot, would a pair be called beet?  
 If one is a tooth and a whole set are teeth,  
 Why shouldn't the plural of booth be called beeth?  
 Then one may be that, and three would be those,  
 Yet hat in the plural would never be hose,  
 And the plural of cat is cats, not cose.  
 We speak of a brother and also of brethren,  
 But though we say mother, we never say methren.  
 Then the masculine pronouns are he, his and him,  
 But imagine the feminine: she, shis and shim!  
 Let's face it - English is a crazy language.  
 There is no egg in eggplant nor ham in hamburger;  
 Neither apple nor pine in pineapple.*

*English muffins weren't invented in England.*

*We take English for granted, but if we explore its paradoxes, we find that quicksand can work slowly, boxing rings are square, and a guinea pig is neither from Guinea nor is it a pig.*

*And why is it that writers write but fingers don't fing, grocers don't groce and hammers don't ham?*

*Doesn't it seem crazy that you can make amends but not one amend. If you have a bunch of odds and ends and get rid of all but one of them, what do you call it?*

*If teachers taught, why didn't preachers praught? If a vegetarian eats vegetables, what does a humanitarian eat?*

**6.1 We Have the Same Word, but Different Meaning**

Keep in mind that some key words or terms may have different meanings across disciplines and may be used as different parts of speech in different contexts (i.e., noun vs. Verbs):

Word	Meaning/Use
Table	Lunch table (Social language) Periodic Table of Elements (Science) Table of Contents (ELA) Multiplication tables (Math) To table (delay) the discussion (Social Studies)
Plot	Plot of a story (ELA) Plot of land (Geography) Plot ordered pairs on a graph (Math) To plot a government coup (History)
Branch	Branch of government (Social Studies) Branch of a river (Geography) To branch out (Idiom)
Foot	Your foot (Health) One foot in length (Math) Foot in your mouth (Idiom) Foot of the mountain (Geography) To foot the bill (Idiom)

**6.2 As for the Cognates...They are all Here!**

There is a great tool you can use to bolster English language for students. This is the use of cognates—words that have a similar spelling and meaning in both languages. More than a one third of English words from Latin, French or Greek have a Romanian-language cognate! These often include technical or content-specific words that can help

students make a connection between both languages, such as the following:

- Institution – *instituție*
- Dinosaur – *dinozaur*
- Catastrophe – *catastrofă*
- Biology – *biologie*
- Equilateral triangle – *triunghi echilateral*
- Ceramic – *ceramică*
- Artist – *artist*

Once students know how that a connection exists, they will start noticing more words that are related and they will be able to apply their own existing background knowledge about those words to the vocabulary they encounter.

#### 6.4 Why English Pronunciation is so Hard?

There are some reasons to think before you speak...

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?V=mow7cdpk44w>.

#### 6.5 The Best Way to Learn English

Two skill areas must be emphasized if you want to learn to speak English fluently. The first is memory (which is involved in both vocabulary and syntax) and the second are the proprioceptive responses (which are involved in both pronunciation and syntax). You may be able to learn simple vocabulary-related memory skills with equal effectiveness by using either verbal or visual training methods. That is, you may be able to learn pure memory skills equally well with either spoken drills or written exercises. However, it is impossible for you to retrain your individual perception sense without hearing your own voice at full speaking volume. Thus, it is a waste of your time to do written assignments for the purpose of learning spoken English.

### 7. Why is Maritime English hard to Master?

When marination of teachers is complete, then effective communication on board vessel is the key to

successful operations![8] (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?V=hsteo41mw10>)

Shipping has never been more international. Maritime English is the language by which crew communicate with each other, irrespective of their role.

Clear, precise English is therefore vital for:

A. Health, safety, and security on-board, across all operations below and above deck in order to ensure the well-being of all those on the ship.

B. Communication with shore side authorities such as vessel traffic services, port authorities, cargo, customs, and other personnel.

C. Handling emergency situations where clear communication must be used not only on board, but also between search and rescue personnel and in possible ship to aircraft interchanges, and often between different nationalities in very challenging circumstances.

D. Customer service on Cruise and Passenger carrying ships, maintaining excellent standards of customer service and customer experience and to ensuring their health and safety while on board.

Many students studying a foreign language have very strange ideas of what will help them to improve. We have met students who think that by filling vocabulary books they will be able to speak better General English/Maritime English; many students presented with a text will actually want to go through word-by-word and will not see the point of, for example reading for gist, or scanning for particular information.

One of the tasks of the language teacher is to help the student to study more efficiently and more enjoyable. A small but important part of the teaching time should be spent making students aware of why certain things will help them, and why others will not. The more students understand about the process of learning the foreign language, the more they will be able to take responsibility for their own learning.

The aim of the IMO Standard Marine

Communication Phrases (SMCP) is to get around the problem of language barriers at sea and avoid those misunderstandings which can cause accidents. The key to improve verbal communication is the recruitment of seafarers who have an understanding of English language: in education, in effective communication, and in the correct use of the English language in the maritime environment.

## **8. Conclusion and Recommendations**

*“Why has it taken you so long to learn to speak English fluently?”* Grammar-based English language instruction teaches as though spoken English is primarily a function of memory. Consequently, grammar-based English lessons emphasize non-verbal (written) studies of grammar, writing, reading, and listening. All of these activities may increase recall memory for written examinations, but they have little benefit in teaching our students to speak fluent English. The only way students can effectively learn spoken English is by using Spoken English as the method of instruction. All of your students’ study (including English grammar) should be done by speaking English at full voice volume for the entire study period.

## **9. Speaking Rules our students need to know!**<sup>[9]</sup>

### *9.1 Don't Study Grammar Too Much*

This rule might sound strange to many ESL students, but it is one of the most important rules. If you want to pass examinations, then study grammar. However, if you want to become fluent in English, then you should try to learn English without studying the grammar.

Studying grammar will only slow you down and confuse you. You will think about the rules when creating sentences instead of naturally saying a sentence like a native. Remember that only a small fraction of English speakers know more than 20% of all the grammar rules.

Do you want to be able to recite the definition of a causative verb, or do you want to be able to speak English fluently?

### *9.2 Learn and Study Phrases*

Many students learn vocabulary and try to put many words together to create a proper sentence. It amazes me how many words some of my students know, but they cannot create a proper sentence. The reason is because they didn’t study phrases. When children learn a language, they learn both words and phrases together. Likewise, you need to study and learn phrases.

### *9.3 Don't Translate!*

When you want to create an English sentence, do not translate the words from your Mother tongue. The order of words is probably completely different and you will be both slow and incorrect by doing this. Instead, learn phrases and sentences so you don’t have to think about the words you are saying. It should be automatic.

Another problem with translating is that you will be trying to incorporate grammar rules that you have learned. Translating and thinking about the grammar to create English sentences is incorrect and should be avoided.

### *9.4 Reading and Listening is NOT Enough, Practice Speaking What You Hear!*

Reading, listening, and speaking are the most important aspects of any language. The same is true for English. However, speaking is the only requirement to be fluent. It is normal for babies and children to learn speaking first, become fluent, then start reading, then writing. So the natural order is listening, speaking, reading, and then writing.

#### **(1) First problem**

Isn’t it strange that schools across the world teach reading first, then writing, then listening, and finally speaking? Although it is different, the main reason is

because when you learn a second language, you need to read material to understand and learn it. So even though the natural order is listening, speaking, reading, then writing, the order for ESL students is reading, listening, speaking, and then writing.

## (2) Second problem

The reason many people can read and listen is because that's all they practice. But in order to speak English fluently, you need to practice speaking. Don't stop at the listening portion, and when you study, don't just listen. Speak out loud the material you are listening to and practice what you hear. Practice speaking out loud until your mouth and brain can do it without any effort. By doing so, you will be able to speak English fluently.

## 10. Submerge Yourself

Being able to speak a language is not related to how smart you are. Anyone can learn how to speak any language. This is a proven fact by everyone in the world. Everyone can speak at least one language. Whether you are intelligent, or lacking some brain power, you are able to speak one language. This was achieved by being around that language at all times. In your country, you hear and speak your language constantly. You will notice that many people who are good English speakers are the ones who studied in an English speaking school. They can speak English not because they went to an English speaking school, but because they had an environment where they can be around English speaking people constantly.

There are also some people who study abroad and learn very little. That is because they went to an English speaking school, but found friends from their own country and didn't practice English.

You don't have to go anywhere to become a fluent English speaker. You only need to surround yourself with English. You can do this by making rules with

your existing friends that you will only speak English. You can also carry around an ipod and constantly listen to English sentences. As you can see, you can achieve results by changing what your surroundings are. Submerge yourself in English and you will learn several times faster.

There are also certain difficulties encountered by students in the process of learning Maritime English. In this paper I tried to give some suggestions of what Maritime English teachers could do to facilitate students and improve their speaking, listening, writing and vocabulary memorizing skills. But as the saying goes, "*You can lead a horse to water, but you cannot make him drink.*"

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