

Common Errors among ESP Students at the Faculty of Maritime Studies in Split

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Insufficient proficiency and errors in Maritime English (ME), as a type of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), may affect the communication, safety of navigation, efficiency and daily operations in various branches of the maritime industry. This study aims to identify and analyse the typical errors made by Croatian students attending ME classes at the Faculty of Maritime Studies in Split. Various tools are used, including cognitive, observational and empirical methods (e.g. testing and in-class activities), contrastive analysis, qualitative data analysis and description, in order to clarify the results obtained. Common errors related to pronunciation, spelling, vocabulary, syntax, tenses, misuse of negation, prepositions, articles, etc. are categorised and examined. Understanding common mistakes is essential for educators to develop teaching strategies that address specific learner needs, as well as effective pedagogical approaches and tools for mitigating or eliminating the errors.

KEYWORDS

~ Maritime English
~ ESP
~ EFL
~ Croatian students
~ Common errors

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1. INTRODUCTION

Generally speaking, Croatians have a good command of English. According to Croatia Week, an online English-language magazine, Croatians are in the world's top 5 non-native English speakers: "Croatia has jumped from 11th place to 5th on 2024 edition of the EF English Proficiency Index"¹. Despite some controversies regarding the various survey samples and methodology practices, it is safe to say that, on average, "Croatians do speak excellent English" (Bradbury, 2023). The underlying reasons are manifold: the country was not behind the Iron Curtain, there has been a long tradition of learning western foreign languages at state and private schools, over the decades Croats have been able to experience interaction in English when travelling abroad or meeting foreign tourists and businessmen from all over the world, they have been exposed to English through sub-titled films, British and North American popular music, books and magazines, Croatia's colleges and universities produced thousands of seafarers... In the school year 2003/2004, a foreign language was introduced as a compulsory subject from the first grade of primary school; in most cases, English is the first foreign language; upon completion of primary school education, students have 700 hours of English language instruction behind them (Patekar, 2017, pp. 53-54).

Making mistakes is a natural part of every learning process, especially when it comes to learning a foreign language. The students at the Faculty of Maritime Studies in Split are no exception. However, English is vital in the maritime industry for safety, efficiency, and compliance, as it serves as the international language for navigation, emergencies, and daily operations. Proficiency in Maritime English, a standardised form of English, prevents misunderstandings between diverse international crews and with port authorities, which helps in preventing accidents, ensuring safe navigation, facilitating global trade, and preserving the environment. Errors may potentially have serious consequences in terms of safety and efficiency of operations. Hence, it is important that teachers identify students' common errors and mitigate/reduce them. Understanding these common mistakes is essential for educators to develop effective teaching strategies that address specific learner needs.

2. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND FINDINGS

Over the years, written tests, oral exams, students' presentations and in-class performance have been used to identify the most frequent language difficulties and recurring patterns of errors among the undergraduate students at the Faculty of Maritime Studies in Split, Croatia. The empirical, observational and cognitive methods, along with qualitative and contrastive analyses have been used to identify, understand, describe and analyse the types and frequencies of errors. The latter have been found in all language domains: phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics. For the sake of clarity, we have distributed the common mistakes into the following categories: Pronunciation / Spelling, Grammar, and Vocabulary. It can be detected that most of the errors result from ignorance of language rules, overgeneralisation of rules i.e. inconsistency in rules, loanwords in English, mother tongue interference and negative interference of the popular culture (media and entertainment). The errors made by students having dyslexia, dysgraphia, speech / oral problems or pronounced anxiety are not considered as "common" and are not included in this study.

3. COMMON ERRORS

3.1. Pronunciation and spelling

3.1.1. Digraphs and diphthongs

Understanding and differentiating between digraphs and diphthongs is an essential step in mastering English phonics. Students usually have certain difficulties in pronouncing digraphs, i.e. combinations of two letters that together produce a single sound (phoneme). There are less problems when the digraphs are composed of consonants: "cc" is pronounced /ks/ as in *accident*, "sh" is pronounced /ʃ/ as in *ship* or *shaft*, and "ch" is pronounced /tʃ/ as in *chose*. However, maritime management students often hesitate whether to pronounce *niche* as /nɪtʃ/ or /niːʃ/. Actually, both are correct, probably as a result of pronunciation inconsistency upon borrowing the word from French language. Inconsistency and uncertainty appear frequently when a word is borrowed: the Dutch word *yacht* is pronounced /jɒt/ or /jɑːt/, the Latin word *data* has three possible pronunciations: /ˈdeɪtə/, /ˈdæɪtə/, /ˈdɑːtə/, while the affix *anti-* can be pronounced as /ˈænti/ or /ˈæntaɪ/. Most of the variants stem from the differences in pronunciation between American English (AmE) and British English (BrE) and can be very confusing to the students, especially in a situation where teaching methods, materials, or concepts

¹ www.croatiaweek.com, November 19, 2024; see also: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/EF_English_Proficiency_Index

are unclear, leading to confusion, difficulty in understanding, or feeling overwhelmed. To avoid this, teachers should re-explain concepts differently, use varied tools like games, encourage questions, or provide clearer examples to help students grasp the material.² It is desirable to warn students about unexpected, strange or difficult pronunciation beforehand, using the whiteboard or inserting the pronunciation into the slides, for example: *LPG carriers transport liquefied petroleum gas: propane* ['prəʊ.peɪn] *and butane* ['bjuːteɪn]... *A reliquefaction* [rɪlɪkwɪ'fækʃn] *plant is carried and any cargo boil-off is returned to the tanks.*

On the other side, mother tongue interference undoubtedly causes the mispronunciation of the words *mechanical* or *archipelago*: /h/ instead of /k/. Difficulties also occur when it comes to English sounds not present in Croatian, such as the "th" sound (/θ/, /ð/). The voiceless /θ/ as in *think* is usually pronounced correctly, although not effortlessly, whereas the voiced /ð/ (as in *the, that*) is typically pronounced as /d/. Errors are relatively rare when digraphs are composed of vowels. Words like *door* and *room* are spontaneously pronounced in different ways, the same pronunciation /i/ is used for words like *sea, clean, east, lead*... Yet, there are no strict rules; therefore, it is not surprising that some students mispronounce *lead* as /li:d/ instead of /led/ when referring to the chemical element Pb, even when the word is placed in a clear context. While the latter is common among students of marine engineering, the wrong pronunciation of "au" is detected across all maritime student population: /au/ instead of /ɔ:/ in words like *automatic* or *nautical*. Quite curiously, their pronunciation of the words *Austria, August, caught* or *fault* is immaculate.

Vowel combinations inevitably create difficulties in pronunciation when they are diphthongs, e.g. when the aforementioned combination "ea" is not pronounced as a single sound but as a complex vowel sound that begins with one vowel sound and glides into another within the same syllable (e.g. *wear, near*). An example of a common mistake: students reading *bearing* as **beering*. English spelling is famously inconsistent, with many words pronounced differently than they are spelled, e.g. *though* (pronounced /ðəʊ/), *through* (pronounced /θru:/), *tough* (pronounced /tʌf/), *thought* (pronounced /θɔ:t/)... In French, for instance, the rule is very clear: the combination "ou" is always pronounced /u/. On the other hand, Bradbury (2017) identifies nine different ways to pronounce this syllable in English, offering wordplays like "Though I thought investing **would** be **tough**, after **thoroughly** **ploughing** **through** the **borough** ... I **rethought**." Students often pronounce more frequent words (*through, thought*) correctly, whereas when they come across the words *thorough* or *plough* (type of anchor), they tend to mispronounce them. Many of them tend to pronounce *course* (a very frequent word in Maritime English) as **curse*. Sometimes the students simply stop reading, embarrassed and waiting for assistance. Given the lack of rules, a teacher's soft approach including wordplays and recurrent short exercise may improve students' performance, boost their confidence and mitigate the problem.

3.1.2. Silent letters and homophones

Many English words contain silent letters that are not pronounced but must be spelled correctly: *knot* (silent **k**), *write* (silent **w**); *honest* (silent **h**); *forecastle* (silent **t**); *doubt* (silent **b**). Homophones are the words that may cause confusion because they sound alike but have different spellings and meanings: *there / their / they're*; *to / too / two*; *hear / here*... However, these features of English language do not seem to confuse Croatian students and their spelling and pronunciation errors are not common.

3.1.3. Spelling and capitalisation

The afore-mentioned differences in BrE and AmE pronunciation – of loanwords in particular – are often present in spelling: *harbour, manoeuvre, analyse, travelling, programme* (BrE) / *harbor, maneuver, analyse, traveling, program* (AmE). Other common spelling errors include the words necessary to explain dimensions of objects, e.g. vessels: *length* vs **lenght*, *weight* vs **weigth*, *height* vs **heigth*... where the final digraph "th / ht" varies without a rule one can rely on. Again, talking about a vessel's dimensions, one has to choose between *draught* (preferred in the UK and Commonwealth) and *draft* (preferred in the U.S.). Outside the maritime context, one of the most frequent errors is writing **witch* instead of *which*.

Capitalisation errors are mistakes in using uppercase letters, e.g. forgetting to start a sentence or proper noun (names, places, brands) with a capital. In English, nationalities, adjectives derived from countries (proper adjectives), and names of specific regions are always capitalised – regardless of where they appear in a sentence – because they are considered proper nouns or are derived from them. Many students at the Faculty of Maritime Studies in Split will typically fail to capitalise the "I" pronoun, proper adjectives or even proper nouns (e.g. *she says *i have to work harder; a *french ro-*

² See a detailed account at: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_and_British_English_pronunciation_differences

ro ship is entering the *port of Split). These errors probably stem from insufficient competence and using social media where capitalisation and interpunctuation are often irrelevant. The problem can be easily solved by explaining rules – which are very consistent in this language area – to attentive students.

In addition to hand-written tests and exercises, these students perform written tasks using Word, Excel, PowerPoint and other programmes. Some of them tend to repeat the same errors. This implies that they are not familiar with using basic software features such as the spell check, but this issue is beyond the scope of this study.

3.2. Grammar

3.2.1. Word order, sentence structure and syntax

The consequence of the collapse of the case system in English was the consolidation of word order, which replaced free word order (Halahan, 2022). While English generally follows Subject-Verb-Object (SVO) order, questions, negatives, and emphasis structures often require auxiliary verbs and inversion, which can seem inconsistent to learners. For example, this phenomenon could be found in Japanese learners because Japanese sentences generally have an SOV structure (Muliana, 2025). Just like English, Croatian is classified as an SVO (subject-verb-object sentence structure) language according to a linguistic typology (Herceg, 2019). Croatian is a synthetic language in which grammatical meaning is expressed largely through the use of inflections (changes in word form), affixes, and a complex case system. Unlike English, which relies heavily on word order and auxiliary words to convey syntactic relationships, Croatian words change their endings (inflect) to indicate gender, number, case, tense, and aspect. Croatian has a rich system of seven grammatical cases (nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, vocative, locative, and instrumental) for nouns, pronouns, and adjectives. The ending of a word changes depending on its function in the sentence. Because grammatical roles are clearly marked by inflections, word order in a sentence is much more flexible compared to analytic languages. Here is an example: *Inspekcija je pregledala brod* (SVO); *Brod je pregledala inspekcija* (OVS); *Pregledala je inspekcija brod* (VSO); *Pregledala je brod inspekcija* (VOS). All versions are correct and acceptable, the only difference being the emphasis on the subject, the object or the action itself. In English, the SVO version is the only correct and acceptable option: *The inspection (has) examined the ship*. This is why Croatian students are in some cases confused when constructing their English SVO sentences. Overly literal translation from Croatian is likely to result in unnatural or incorrect phrasing. To avoid such mistakes, students must be taught from the very beginning not to translate every word, word by word, but to express the meaning and concept immediately in a foreign language (Halahan, 2022). Although errors are common in this area (**He ashore went*), Croatian students instinctively cope with some situations. As for the syntactic structure of the English sentence, the subject and the predicate are usually obligatory. In Croatian, the absence of a semantic subject or predicate is common. However, it is likely that the students will correctly translate the phrase *Kiši* (no subject) or *Pada kiša* (inverse word order) as *It rains / It is raining*, adding the subject or changing the word order in line with English syntactic structure.

A common error is to say: **I don't know what is he doing*. The correct form for a question embedded in another clause or reported speech (indirect question) is: *I don't know what he is doing*, following the normal SVO sentence structure.

3.2.2. Tenses

In English language, progressive tenses (also called continuous tenses) show actions that are unfinished or ongoing. They are formed with a form of "be" + the present participle (-ing) of the main verb, and exist in the present (*am/is/are running*), past (*was/were running*), and future (*will be running*), plus perfect forms like present perfect progressive (*have been running*). They emphasise duration or an action in progress at a specific time, unlike simple tenses which focus on completed actions, habits or states.

When there is an equivalent progressive tense in Croatian language (e.g. in the past), students do not make mistakes: *The boat was sinking* = *Brod je tonuo*, *The boat sank* = *Brod je potonuo*. Intuitively, students will correctly say *Now I know what you mean* instead **Now I'm knowing what you are meaning*. However, sometimes students rely on textbooks or other sources which offer short explanations without nuances or exceptions, like: verbs that describe mental states / cognition (*know, believe, understand, realize, recognize, remember, forget, mind, think*), emotions / feelings (*love, like, dislike, hate, prefer, want, wish, need, feel*), senses (*see, hear, smell, taste, feel*), and possession / association (*own, possess, belong, have*) often prefer simple tenses over continuous tenses. When explaining this matter, teachers should underline that some of these verbs can be found both in progressive and simple tenses, with minor or major differences in meaning: *How do you feel? / How are you feeling; I think I will change my job / I'm thinking about changing jobs; They have two cars / They are having a good time*. It is important to remind the students to be careful when forming sentences or translating them because, for example, *I am thinking about...* is used for active, ongoing thought or consideration, while *I think...* is used for opinions, beliefs, or quick judgments. Common errors are not so frequent in this area, but they do occur: **I am remembering*

when..., **They are having a nice car*. On the other hand, it is highly unlikely that the students will say **She is understanding the problem, I am loving you* or **I'm loving it*. The latter is the iconic McDonald's tagline – it is grammatically incorrect, but it is a brand slogan and is not meant to be a proper sentence. Breaking the grammatical rules are inherent in popular songs, too. In the world of marketing and pop culture, these deviations are deliberately created to produce a marketing or aesthetic effect, causing headaches in teachers and students.

The real problems occur when using English tenses Present Simple, Present Continuous and Present Perfect Simple: the latter expresses an action or state that started in the past and is still present, or it was completed somewhere in the past, but its present effects are more relevant than the (completed) action or state: *He has worked for Chevron* means he started to work for Chevron and still works there. *They have moved* means they started to live somewhere else, which is an action completed in the past, but the real message for the postman or anyone asking is *They are no longer here*, which is the present result of the past action. This tense, linking the past and the present does not exist in Croatian language, and the errors abound: **I have worked for Chevron last year*, **I live here for ten years*. The translation in Croatian language will depend on whether the Present Perfect action or state refers to the present or to the past and its present effect: Croatian sentence will use the present form or the past form respectively. This is where students' mistakes are common.

The use of another present tense, the progressive Present Continuous, also results in frequent errors, as there is no equivalent in Croatian language (which has only one present tense): **Wärtsilä is producing excellent engines*; **LNG ships are carrying liquified natural gas*. Finally, students sometimes find it difficult to choose between the two Present Perfect variants: Simple and Continuous. Sometimes they convey the same or very similar message: *I have lived here since 2021* / *I have been living here since 2021*, but the two types may have completely different meanings:

- Present Perfect Simple: *The engineer has repaired the valve*. (= the ship can leave port)
- Present Perfect Continuous: *The engineer has been repairing the valve*. (= the ship is not ready to leave port)

In this area, grammar rules are rather clear and consistent. Hence, the task of the teacher is to explain them properly and to create enough exercise material in order to minimise errors in acquiring Maritime English (ME), as a lingua franca in international maritime affairs.

3.2.3. Subject-verb agreement

Most of the students do not make errors in matching the verb form to the subject, but a number of them produce such mistakes regularly, especially with third-person singular. **This ship carry bulk cargo*; **One of the seafarers have signed off*; **A sailor's world in the good old days were rough*. These are elementary errors that should have been eliminated or mitigated a long time ago, at the primary and secondary education level, and the undergraduate university students are asked to familiarise with these simple rules and focus on detecting the subject.

3.2.4. Simple Past, irregular verbs, and past participle

Generally speaking the errors involving irregular verbs are not frequent; students are used to refer to the list of irregular verbs, and many of the irregular verbs have been used spontaneously, after long exposure to English throughout schooling, work, popular music, and media. However, what puzzles the students is what to do with the main verb in negative or interrogative sentences – does it remain the same or return back into its infinitive form? (*I told you* / *I did tell you* / *I did not tell you* / *Did I tell you?* / *Didn't I tell you?* / *I have told you* / *I have not told you* / *Have I told you...?*) This is one of numerous uncertainties that should have been dealt with at primary and secondary school level – now, at the university, these simple rules must be explained to the students again, patiently, with a bit of humour if possible, to gain their focus and avoid backlash. This issue is related to problems with question formation and negation.

3.2.5. Incorrect question and negation formation

In Croatian, questions can be formed simply by intonation or word order changes, but English requires auxiliary verbs or question words. The appearance of the auxiliary verbs “do”, “does” and “did” and their absence in the so-called subject questions (asking who or what performs an action) may result in errors:

Correct: <i>Does she work?</i>	Incorrect: <i>Does she works?</i>
Correct: <i>Did the ship sink?</i>	Incorrect: <i>Do the ship sink?</i>
Correct: <i>Who cares?</i>	Incorrect: <i>Who does care?</i>
Correct: <i>What happened?</i>	Incorrect: <i>What did happen / happened?</i>

Many Slavic languages including Croatian allow multiple negative words, while English syntax does not allow double or more negatives within a sentence (Dankić, 2011). The translation of Croatian sentence *Ja nikada ništa nisam nikome ukrao* (four negatives) would be *I have never stolen anything from anyone*. Once the negative word “never” is introduced, all other words remain positive. Students tend to avoid errors in this area, despite the popular culture products (films and songs) where statements like **I don't know nothing* are common.

3.2.6. Run-on Sentences, Dangling Modifier, Fragmented Sentence

Run-on sentences are common errors where two or more independent clauses (complete sentences) run together without proper punctuation or conjunctions.³ Croatian sometimes uses commas where English requires conjunctions or separates ideas differently. **We argued, I quit my job* (Correct: *We argued and I quit my job*). A dangling modifier is a common error where a descriptive word or phrase is left hanging because the subject it is supposed to describe is not clearly stated or is in the wrong place: **Want to have a look?* (Correct: *Do you want to have a look?*). This is associated with another type of error: an incomplete or fragmented sentence – a clause that falls short of a complete sentence because it is missing one of three critical components: a subject, a verb, and a complete thought, e.g. **Over there* or **Looking forward to seeing you soon*. Again, the rules are not consistent: these phrases may be used in spoken English as *Over there* is a perfectly natural response to *Where is my ticket?*, and *Looking forward to seeing you soon* is frequently used, even in formal written correspondence.

3.2.7. Overuse of passive voice or incorrect passive constructions

The main problem for Croatian speakers with English passive voice is that English uses it far more often. Croatian favours the active voice and many passive phrases sound awkward and unnatural. The sentence like *These sailboats are produced in France* is likely to be translated as **Ove jedrilice su proizvedene u Francuskoj*, which actually means *These sailboats have been produced in France* or *These sailboats were produced in France*. Instead, students should use the Croatian reflexive “se” passive *Ove jedrilice se proizvode u Francuskoj* or use the active voice *Francuska proizvodi ove jedrilice*. This is particularly advisable when the agent is mentioned: in English, the introduction of the agent results in a perfectly natural sentence: *The ship was detained by Italian authorities*, while in Croatian, the translation often leads to awkward and, ultimately, incorrect phrasing: **Brod je zadržan od strane talijanskih vlasti*. The only solution is to turn the English passive voice into Croatian active voice: *Brod su zadržale talijanske vlasti*.

Another common error stems from the inappropriate choice of the tense. Croatian lacks English's complex tense sequence, leading to potential errors in English, like using present passive for past actions (negative mother tongue interference). For instance, as the past participle in an English sentence “looks” or “sounds” like past (e.g. “grounded” has a suffix “-ed”), some students tend to omit the “-ed” in order to describe the present situation: (**The ship is ground in the Suez Canal*).

3.2.8. It's vs. Its

A typical error among the EFL learners, including the students at the Faculty of Maritime Studies in Split is the misuse of “it's” and “its”. Both have the same pronunciation and the error cannot be identified in spoken English. In written English, however, it is alarmingly common. “It's” is a contraction of “it is” or “it has”, whereas “its” is a possessive pronoun, meaning “belonging to it”. It is rather easy to choose one or the other, depending on the context: *It's my book*; *It's been a long day*; *the sailboat and its sails*. Although the explanation is clear and easy to understand, students tend to confuse one for the other very frequently. Here it is worth noting that some of the texts written by English native speakers in very formal documents contain this error, which further confuses Croatian students. Examples:

*SCOT CARRIER (IMO: 9841782) is [...] sailing under the flag of United Kingdom. It's carrying capacity is 4700 t DWT, her length overall (LOA) is 89.98 meters and her width is 15.22 meters.*⁴ (the text is lacking the definite article “the” before “United Kingdom” and the possessive pronoun “its” is written incorrectly).

³ For the complete typology of English sentence structure errors, see: Chandra, D., & Wijaya, H. P. S. (2022).

⁴ MarineTraffic.com, <https://www.marinetraffic.com/en/ais/details/ships/shipid:5760951/mmsi:232018267/imo:9841782/vessel:SCOT%20CARRIER> (accessed on 02 January 2026)

Modern Downeast boats are typically designed with hulls that are semi-displacement [...], capable of developing a moderate amount of hydrodynamic lift due to it's underwater shape...⁵ (the possessive pronoun "its" is written incorrectly).

3.2.9. Use of the apostrophe

Another troublesome area is the correct use of the apostrophe. The apostrophe takes the place of missing words or letters from a longer word or phrase: *it's* = *it is* / *it has*, *don't* = *do not*, *o'clock* = *of the clock*, *rock'n'roll* = *rock and roll*, *'tween decks* = *between decks*, *fo'c's'le* = *forecastle*, etc. The apostrophe is used to show possession, marking the omission of the letter "e" from the ending "-es", known as the Saxon genitive: *island's wildlife*, *Seaman's Book*... The key rules include adding 's for singular possession, adding 's or just an apostrophe to the singular nouns ending in s (both *Elvis' songs* and *Elvis's songs* are generally accepted), adding 's to the last name in case of joint possession (*Mary and John's books*), adding 's for plural possession in case of irregular plurals (*children's books*), adding just an apostrophe for plural possession (*students' books*). In addition to forming contractions and expressing possession, an apostrophe is used to form the plural of certain letters, numbers, and symbols: *mind your p's and q's*,⁶ *she got five e's on her test*, *count all the #'s in this report*, *the word "Mississippi" has many s's*.

The apostrophe is never used for possessive pronouns (*his*, *hers*, *its*), regular noun plurals (*cats*, *ships*, *1990s*) or in the third person singular of the Present Simple (*I / you work* – *he / she / it works*, *I / you cross* – *he / she / it crosses*, *I / you carry* – *he / she / it carries*...).

This is a wide confusion area for students, especially when it comes to a combination of the apostrophe with the letter s: should they use 's, s', an s without the apostrophe, or just an apostrophe without an s? It is hard to find a student's written test, presentation or essay complying with all these rules. Common errors include **dont*, **dont'*, **seamans book*, **many port's are*, **she love's you*, **1990's* and the like. Again, spell checking applications may be of help, but one should bear in mind that these tools do not necessarily recognise all mistakes while, on the other hand, they may suggest that a word is misspelled, even though it is written correctly (e.g. *'tween decks*).

When explaining the rules, the empirical practice proves that "less is more": the time for explaining the rules should be broken into shorter units, e.g. consisting of no more than several slides, including exercise and feed-back information. Additional rules can be explained in the following sessions, one by one, to avoid clutter and temptation to overuse the apostrophe: **I'am listening*; **Croatian shipyard's are facing*...

3.2.10. Articles

The article ("a," "an," "the") plays a significant role in giving the language factuality and accuracy, which could lead to the formation of the category of certainty/indefiniteness. Naturally, people whose mother tongue features articles, e.g. French (*un*, *une*, *des*, *le*, *la*, *les*) have less problems with the proper use of articles in English, compared to people from article-less languages such as Chinese and Japanese (Salooja, 2024) who are not familiarised with this language feature. The rules for using "a," "an," and "the" depend on many factors including countability, specificity, and pronunciation, which can be hard to predict.

Croatian does not use articles so students often omit them or use them incorrectly, for example: **Titanic* instead of *the Titanic*, **Chief engineer is in engine room* instead of *The Chief engineer is in the engine room*, **car carriers have few decks* instead of *car carriers have a few decks*. According to Bradbury, some of these errors can significantly affect the meaning: "few decks" means "not many", implying scarcity or a negative sense (not enough), while "a few" means "some", "several", suggesting a sufficient or positive number (Bradbury 2023). Omitting the definite article "the" is probably one of the most common errors of the students attending ME courses at the Faculty of Maritime Studies in Split.

Here, just like almost anywhere in English grammar, exceptions to the rules make things harder: the definite article "the" is omitted from the name of the boat at its bow or transom, but it appears in phrases; it is omitted when referring to proper names (people, cities, regions, countries, islands), but it appears when referring to a collection of islands or units constituting a whole (*The United States*, *The Kornati Islands*, *The Philippines*), although this is not always the case (e.g. *Japan*). Omitting the definite article when enumerating (listing) items is common for stylistic reasons aimed at conciseness,

⁵ Midcoast Yacht & Ship Brokerage, <https://midcoastyacht.com/history-of-lobster-boat-design/> (accessed on 02 January 2026)

⁶ "Mind your p's and q's" means to be careful, mind your manners or behaviour, or pay attention to details.

especially when the items are well-defined or function as proper names, and is often done by using the article only once at the start (*she crossed the Pacific, Indian Ocean, Atlantic, Mediterranean Sea...*). Still, in formal writing, the article can be used before each of these nouns. The article may be omitted in tables and in specific constructions like news headlines, to save space or to indicate concepts rather than specific items, e.g. *Search Is Suspended for Passenger Who Went Overboard From Cruise Ship*.⁷

3.2.11. Prepositions

Croatian uses a complex case system (Nominative, Genitive, Dative, Accusative, Vocative, Locative, Instrumental) where nouns, pronouns, and adjectives change their endings to indicate roles (subject, object, possession, etc.). English retains remnants of cases in pronouns (I/me, he/him...), but the main load on the expression of case relations in English relies on syntax (Halahan, 2022). Most of the meanings conveyed by Croatian case forms are conveyed in English with the help of word order and combinations of a noun with prepositions. Prepositions in Croatian do not always correspond directly to English ones, causing confusion and misuse.

Here are some of the common errors that, according to Bradbury (2017, 2023), Croatians make when learning English: **say it on English* (correct: *say it in English*), **angry at you* / **angry on you* (correct: *angry with you*), **I will meet you on the bus station* (correct: *I will meet you at the bus station*), except if it refers to a meeting on the roof of the station. There are many other common mistakes in idiomatic expressions, due to the different way these phrases are constructed in Croatian and English, e.g. “in two days” vs. “for two days”: *I am coming to Zagreb in two days for two years* means I am arriving this Saturday and staying until 2028; *I am coming to Zagreb for two days in two years* means I will be making a short visit in 2028. Students of ME, as a type of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), at the Faculty of Maritime Studies in Split, often make these errors. The latter may lead to misunderstanding and jeopardise safety on board or in shore-based facilities.

3.2.12. Plural forms

Plural forms of English nouns are typically made by adding -s or -es: *ship* → *ships*, *box* → *boxes*. However, some nouns should always remain in the singular. The absence of clear rules leads to errors: **informations* (correct: *information*), **advices* (correct: *advice*). However, the plural of “craft” depends on the context: if “craft” refers to “skill / skilled work or hobby”, the plural is “crafts”; if the word refers to a boat or ship, the plural is “craft” without the ending -s: *hundreds of small craft*. Another example: all English learners are taught that some nouns have irregular plurals (*child* → *children*, *mouse* → *mice*, *sheep* → *sheep*, *fish* → *fish*). Still, it is not uncommon to find the plural “fishes” used in a variety of formal sources, usually in scientific or specific contexts where the plural “fishes” refers to multiple species of fish, like: *coral reefs are [...] the home to many different fishes*.⁸

Earlier, it was mentioned that the Latin word “data” may be pronounced in three ways. In addition, students often wonder whether “data” is in the singular or plural form (“datum” being the singular form of the Latin plural “data”, meaning “one piece of information” or “one numerical result”). In English, the borrowed word may be used both in the singular and plural forms: *This data shows...* / *These data show...* Again, in the absence of solid rules, exposure and exercise are the only tools that can help attentive EFL learners.

3.3. Vocabulary

Most of the mistakes related to vocabulary result from the negative mother tongue interference, specifically from the words that look similar in Croatian and English but have different meanings (the so-called “false friends”). The examples include “eventually” and “eventualno” (possibly, maybe), “reclaim” and “reklamirati” (advertise or making a claim/complaint about a product/service), “provision” and “provizija” (commission fee), “sympathy” (pity) and “simpatija” (crush, liking, affection, or fondness for someone), “with respect to” (concerning, regarding, in relation to) and “s poštovanjem” or “uz poštivanje” (“having the respect of/for”), among many others (Lewis, 2020). Due to the negative transfer from the Croatian language, students often confuse “learn” with “teach”, “borrow” with “lend” or “billion” with “trillion”. The Croatian word *bilijun* means “one thousand billions, i.e. trillion” (1,000,000,000,000), whereas the English word *billion* means “one thousand millions” (1,000,000,000). The proper translation of Croatian *bilijun* into English is *trillion*. As Lewis (2020) points out, “we

⁷ The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/international/section/world> (accessed on 03 January 2026)

⁸ Nature Foundation St. Maarten, <https://naturefoundationsxm.org/> (accessed on 03 January 2026)

can safely argue that neglecting such difference would amount to significant costs, both semantically and financially.” The Croatian technical term “silikon” and the English term “silicon” are false friends too. Croatian “silikon” means a polymer compound, whereas English “silicon” is a chemical element (Si). The right translation of “silikon” into English is “silicone”, and “silicon” should be translated into Croatian as “silicij” (Si).

Students often use the verb “have” incorrectly. Instead of **I have 22 years* one should say *I am 22 (years old)*. Instead of **In the cylinder head we have the rocker arm, valves...*, the phrase should be rearranged to sound “more English”, for example *The cylinder head contains / consists of / features the rocker arm, valves...*

Phrasal verbs pose significant challenges for learners. They are phrases consisting of a verb with a preposition or adverb or both, the meaning of which is different from the meaning of its separate parts, e.g. *call off* = *to cancel*, *carry out* = *perform / do / achieve / complete*, *put out* = *leave a port or harbour / extinguish a fire or a cigarette*. Semantically, they range from transparent (e.g. *sit down*) to highly idiomatic (e.g. *put up with* = *tolerate something difficult or annoying*), where the meaning cannot be deduced from the individual components. In maritime discourse, phrasal verbs tend to retain a higher degree of semantic transparency, functioning as precise technical terms. For example, *let go* is a fixed term meaning “to release an anchor or a mooring line”, not an idiomatic expression. *Ease off* means “reduce engine power or tension”, *put out* means “leave a port or harbour” (in addition to “extinguish”), *top up* means “replenish fluids”, e.g. “fill a container to the top level (oil, fuel, water, drink...)” and so on. Learners’ errors are less present in the language domains of speaking and writing because, if a learner is not familiar with or not sure about a particular expression, he/she can use a similar expression: *extinguish the fire* instead *put out the fire*, *perform a task* instead *carry out a task*. The real trouble lies in the domain of understanding (reading and listening), as phrasal verbs convey specific messages with high efficiency and low ambiguity, a pattern clearly observable in maritime discourse, where, according to some surveys, 91% of the seafaring population report using or hearing phrasal verbs constantly or frequently in daily interaction (Žanić, 2025).

Words with multiple meanings, known as polysemy (related meanings) or homonymy (unrelated meanings, same sound/spelling), are common in English. An example of a single word with several related meanings is “head” (body part, leader, top of something). An example of a homonym is “port” (harbour / channel in the cylinder liner / “left” in navigation, as opposed to “starboard”). Other homonyms include the words like “gear”, “bank”, “clearance”, “course”, etc. Words that sound or are spelled the same but have unrelated meanings can be confusing but are clarified by context.

English easily make compounds, e.g. “two-stroke slow-speed marine turbocharged ported engine”, which should be carefully translated, rearranging the word order when necessary. Literal translation from Croatian often leads to awkward or incorrect phrases, which may result in misunderstanding and confusion, which again may jeopardise the safety of maritime operations, human life and marine environment.

Finally, English is a highly idiomatic language, featuring thousands of phrases that carry non-literal meanings derived from culture, history, and context. These expressions are constantly used daily, in informal and professional contexts. Cultural variations, limited exposure, lack of context, and trouble understanding figurative meaning make English idioms challenging for EFL learners. The latter misuse English idioms by choosing literal interpretations or employing them out of context. *Batten down the hatches* (originally “securing ship openings for a storm”) means to “prepare for difficult, incoming situations”; *high and dry* does not mean being intoxicated with drugs and needing a drink but “left helpless, out of options, or stranded”; *something's fishy* does not refer to fish but implies that “something is suspicious, or not quite right”, *jump ship* does not mean to go overboard but to “abruptly leave a job or situation”. Explicit instruction, cultural context, background information, authentic language use, multimedia resources, and a practice context improve learners' English idiomatic expressions (AbdAlgane, 2025).

4. INHERENTLY ENGLISH LANGUAGE SOURCES OF ERRORS

In addition to ignorance of language rules, negative mother tongue interference and inadequate use of spell checking applications, the major sources of common errors among EFL learners, including ESP students at the Faculty of Maritime Studies in Split, include inconsistency of English grammar rules and numerous exceptions, negative transfer from social networks, popular culture and media, and cultural and psychological hurdles. All of them have been mentioned earlier in the study, but they require individual insights.

4.1. Inconsistent rules and practice

English is not a rule-less language, but its rules are complex, numerous and full of inconsistency and exceptions. On the one hand they make English wonderfully expressive, but on the other, they make it challenging. They have been found in all language components: phonology, morphology, syntax and semantics. Inconsistency and exceptions result in learners' hesitancy, uncertainty and mistakes. Here are some of the typical domains where errors occur.

Are the vessels carrying vehicles called *RO-RO*, *RORO*, *Ro-Ro*, *RoRo* or *ro-ro ships*? Rudolf Diesel invented the *diesel engine* – lowercase “d” is generally preferred in modern usage because it refers to a type of engine and the term is now commonly treated as a generic noun. However, *Diesel engine* (capitalised) is sometimes used in specific or formal technical literature. Should we write *azipod drive* or *Azipod drive* (Azipod being a brand name)? With reference to formal sources, it seems that anything goes. This spelling “liberty” often leads to improvisation and errors: vessels carrying liquified natural gas are *LNG ships*, not **Ing ships*.

The pronunciation inconsistency has been already pointed out earlier in this study. In Croatian or French, for example, the rules are rather consistent. In French language, “g” followed by vowels “i”, “y” or “e” is pronounced /ʒ/; if followed by “a”, “o” or “u”, the pronunciation is /g/. There is a similar rule in English, but the exceptions abound: in most cases, the combination “g” + “i”, “y” or “e” is pronounced /dʒ/ (*Gibraltar*, *gyro*, *general*, *stage*...) or even /ʒ/, as in *prestige* or *concierge*, words borrowed from French. Again, there are no reliable rules, and that is why students often pronounce the Old French word *voyage* (otherwise very frequent in ME) as /ˈwajəʒ/ instead of /ˈvɔɪdʒ/. In many cases, without solid reason or explanation, the combination is pronounced [g] (*gear*, *get*, *gill*, *gift*, *give*...). The same diphthong may be pronounced in various ways, e.g. “ea” in *wear*, *gear*, *read*, or “ou” in *though*, *through*, *tough*, *thought*... The noun *niche* can be pronounced as /niːʃ/ or /nɪtʃ/, *yacht* is pronounced /jɒt/ or /jɑːt/, the affix *anti-* can be pronounced as /ˈænti/ or /ˈæntaɪ/. Most of the variants stem from the differences in pronunciation between British English (BrE) and American English (AmE). Differences in BrE and AmE are often present in spelling of loanwords: *harbour*, *manoeuvre*, *analyse*, *travelling*, *programme* (BrE) / *harbor*, *maneuver*, *analyze*, *traveling*, *program* (AmE), sometimes even in semantics: the noun *dock* (of Dutch origin) refers to an area/body of water within a port in BrE, while in AmE it refers to a vessel's berth or berthing structure.

In standard English, in formal or journalistic writing, nouns referring to inanimate objects like *boat*, *ship*, *train* or *country* are supposed to be replaced, when needed, by the pronoun “it”. However, in traditional or informal discourse, using “she” for ships is a deeply ingrained, centuries-old maritime tradition. For example: *The new ship has been launched. She will carry general cargo. Her draught is 7.4 meters*. This practice is sometimes extended to other large, powerful, or cherished items like cars, trains, and countries (when the concept of motherhood is attached): *God Bless America, Land that I love, Stand beside her, And guide her*...⁹ The practice is sometimes extended even to airplanes or computers, especially by people who work with them closely or own them proudly (e.g. *She's a beauty!*). This usage is optional and a matter of style, often rooted in affection or a sense of personal connection. While less common, some individuals, often women, might refer to their cars or other machines with male names and use the pronoun “he”. Consequently, Croatian students may be encouraged to use “he” or “she” for inanimate objects, especially due to the fact that in their native language, all nouns (feminine, masculine or neutral) are replaced by pronouns according to their gender (“she”, “he”, “it”), and this sometimes results in incorrect usage of English pronouns. In Croatian, for instance, the ship is a masculine noun (*brod*) and students often use “he / his” instead of “she / her” or “it / its”.

Earlier in the study, it has been highlighted that English questions cannot be formed by changing the intonation; forming questions requires auxiliary verbs or question words. However, in traditional or informal discourse, some shorter questions can be formed by simply changing the intonation. The phrase *You are coming* can serve as a statement if the intonation is falling towards the end or as a question if the intonation is rising towards the end. Additionally, in casual conversation, **You coming?* can be heard (without “be” as the auxiliary verb) or even **You okay?* (without “be” as the main verb).

Indeed, inconsistency and exceptions make English wonderfully expressive. The language evolves through how people use it, making grammar descriptive (describing use) rather than purely prescriptive (dictating use). This lack of rigid logic allows for creativity and layers of meaning. True mastery often comes from extensive exposure which, for most learners, is not feasible.

4.2. Popular culture and media

Popular culture and media significantly influence EFL learners, acting as both a source of fossilized linguistic errors and a catalyst for fluency. Exposure to movies, music, and social media enhances listening comprehension, allows learners to pick up common daily phrases, and helps them understand different native accents. While popular culture serves as a critical motivational resource, it also introduces errors. Continuous exposure to social media and pop culture often causes learners to use an informal lexicon in academic settings (tests, essays, presentations, formal e-mails, etc.). Popular media

⁹ *God Bless America* is the famous patriotic song by Irving Berlin, which became a hit just before World War II.

often employs non-standard grammar for brevity or impact, which learners may overgeneralise. Examples include omission of articles (**Got new boat*), using double negatives such as **I don't know nothing* (common in pop lyrics and movies), using slang expressions like *gonna* (going to), *wanna* (want to), *big deal* (anything important or exciting), ignoring the Subject-Verb agreement (**He go home*), etc. Students' formal writing sometimes incorporates habits that are inherent in instant messaging, e.g. the abbreviations and acronyms ("lol", "IDK", "Btw"...), substituting "u" for "you", and the like.

In standard English, the first-person singular pronoun "I" must always be capitalised, regardless of its position in a sentence. A lowercase "i" for the pronoun is considered grammatically incorrect, although it is omnipresent on social network platforms and – increasingly – in students' formal writing. The latter often reveals a problem called "punctuation neglect": the casual nature of online communication leads to the omission of commas, periods, and the proper capitalisation of nouns. The overuse of auto-correction services and instant messaging platforms has been linked to a decline in learners' conscious ability to detect spelling errors. Intensive use of social media environment norms can lead to "fossilisation", where incorrect linguistic habits become permanent and difficult to unlearn.

Formal and "serious" media may also tempt learners to adopt errors and introduce them in their writing. In headlines, the articles are often omitted for brevity: *Inspectors to board cruise ship after crew death*¹⁰. Omission of articles is often combined with the present tense describing a past event: *Postcard – Titanic Hits Iceberg And Sinks 15 April 1912*¹¹. Capitalisation is common in newspaper headlines and titles of popular songs and films, but it is not logical *per se*: namely, it is not clear whether all words should be capitalised or just nouns and verbs. Should articles and linking words like "and" and "but" be capitalised? What about prepositions and adverbs – should all of them be capitalised... or just the longer ones? Inconsistency may appear on the same page of a newspaper or even within a headline or a title itself, as is the case in the above cited headline from New York Times: *Search Is Suspended for Passenger Who Went Overboard From Cruise Ship* ("for" / "From").¹²

4.3. Culture and psychological hurdles

A long and versatile exposure of Croats to English language has been underlined in the Introduction. Croatian students are exposed to English through education, work, tourism, travel, and various media. In most real-life cases, they use English with ease and confidence, focusing on message rather than mistakes. Needless to say, it is important to remember that making mistakes is an integral part of the learning process. Still, using English language inside their classroom is a known challenge for learners. Their concern about being judged by their teacher and peers often leads to anxiety, i.e. tension, uneasiness and fear of a particular situation that reveals the level of their language skills (Irene, 2023). Empirical evidence suggests that one third of the students at the Faculty of Maritime Studies in Split use English freely, approximately one third of them are reluctant but – encouraged by appropriate teaching strategies – become active over time, while the rest of the students prefer to stay quiet instead of trying and making mistakes in the language learning process – which is probably the biggest mistake they can make. The errors made in this setting, produced by the students having dyslexia, dysgraphia, speech / oral problems or pronounced anxiety, are not considered as "common" and are not discussed in this study. A personal approach can help create a safe learning environment and exchanging private information can help build trust and create interaction. Showing that it is human to make a mistake, that it is an inevitable part of the process, and admitting that even teachers and native speakers make mistakes (and providing suitable examples) can make a difference.

5. CONCLUSION

By using cognitive, observational and empirical methods (written and oral exams, presentations, essays and in-class activities), contrastive analysis, qualitative data analysis and description, this study has identified, analysed and categorised the typical errors made by Croatian students attending Maritime English classes at the Faculty of Maritime Studies in Split. Common errors appear in all linguistics branches and are related more specifically to: 1) Pronunciation (digraphs, diphthongs, sounds not present in Croatian, such as (/θ/ or /ð/), loanwords, incorrect stress and intonation patterns); 2) Spelling, capitalisation and punctuation; 3) Syntax (SVO order, indirect questions); 4) Tenses (especially the use of Present Tenses, making interrogative and negative sentences, subject-verb agreement, fragmented sentence); 5) Incorrect passive constructions; 6) Confusing "it's" with "its" and the incorrect use of the apostrophe; 7) Incorrect use of

¹⁰ <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles> (accessed on 26 January 2026)

¹¹ <https://www.ebay.com> (accessed on 26 January 2026)

¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/international/section/world> (accessed on 26 January 2026)

articles, prepositions, pronouns and plural forms; 8) Vocabulary (literal translation, false friends, phrasal verbs, polysemy, homonymy, compounds, idioms).

These errors typically stem from: 1) Ignorance of language rules that should have been mastered at primary and secondary education level; 2) Inconsistence of English grammar rules and numerous exceptions; 3) Differences between BrE and AmE at various levels, loanwords having non-standardised spelling, pronunciation or meaning; 4) Negative mother tongue interference – differences between Croatian and English grammar, especially related to vocabulary, syntax and pronunciation; 5) Negative transfer from social networks, popular culture and media; 6) Inadequate use of spell checking applications; 7) Cultural and psychological hurdles.

Insufficient proficiency and errors in ME, as a type of English for Specific Purposes (ESP), may affect the communication, safety of navigation, efficiency and daily operations in various branches of the maritime industry. It should be mentioned that correcting learners' mistakes is the most essential part of the teaching process. It makes it more productive. In our opinion, mistakes and slips are even needed for teachers because they indicate the student's advancement in second language acquisition. Moreover, they clarify the mechanisms of language functioning and acquisition. Hence, they can help strengthen English teachers' skills. Teachers can use them to diagnose students' writing problems, analyse the causes of these problems, and thus anticipate and prevent errors in the classroom by providing effective means to correct them. Teachers should re-explain concepts differently, use varied tools like games, encourage questions, or provide clearer examples to help students grasp the material. It is desirable to warn students about unexpected, strange or difficult pronunciation beforehand. If the grammar rules are rather consistent, the task of the teacher is to explain them properly and to create enough exercise material in order to minimise errors in acquiring ME, as a lingua franca in international maritime affairs. Teachers should consider the following strategies: explicitly compare English and Croatian grammatical structures to raise learners' awareness of differences and prevent negative transfer errors; design focused exercises on problematic areas such as article usage, verb tense consistency, sentence construction, and spelling; use authentic language materials and communicative activities embedding grammar and vocabulary practice in meaningful contexts; provide timely, clear, and constructive feedback on errors, encouraging self-correction and reflection to reinforce learning; use explicit instruction, cultural context, background information, authentic language use, multimedia resources, and a practice context to improve learners' English idiomatic expressions; use less grade-earning tests; instead, more exercise and softer approach may open many doors. Given the fact that errors are inevitable in the learning process, the worst possible outcome is an anxious, frustrated or an entirely shut-down learner; a personal approach can help create a safe learning environment and exchanging private information can help build trust and create interaction. A teacher's soft approach including wordplays and recurrent short exercise may improve students' performance, boost their confidence and mitigate the problem.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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