

**STRUKTUR RETORIK FRASA KOMUNIKASI MARIN STANDARD (SMCP) DALAM  
KOMUNIKASI RADIO VHF DALAM KALANGAN PELAUT MALAYSIA****RHETORICAL STRUCTURE OF STANDARD MARINE COMMUNICATION PHRASES (SMCP)  
IN VHF RADIO COMMUNICATION AMONG MALAYSIAN SEAFARERS**Nurul Nadia Ansar<sup>1</sup>Shameem Rafik-Galea<sup>2</sup>

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**Abstract**

*Effective communication in maritime operations is crucial for safety, particularly during emergencies when rapid and accurate information exchange can determine survival. The International Maritime Organization (IMO) established the Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP) to standardize English usage at sea, yet miscommunication continues to cause accidents. This study investigates the rhetorical structure of special-purpose SMCP—specifically distress acknowledgment and distress alert messages—used in Very High Frequency (VHF) radio communication among near-coastal and foreign-going seafarers. Drawing on Swales’ (1990) genre theory and Bocanegra-Valle’s (2010) move-step model, the research applies a genre analysis to authentic VHF transmissions recorded during Global Maritime Distress and Safety System (GMDSS) training. Findings reveal that while the core move structure of SMCP is largely maintained, several steps—such as indicating assistance required or ship position—are frequently omitted or re-sequenced. These deviations demonstrate pragmatic adaptation of standardized discourse under real-time, high-pressure conditions. The study highlights the need for explicit instruction in the rhetorical realization of SMCP to enhance communicative competence and operational safety in maritime English education.*

**Keywords:** *Maritime English, Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP), genre analysis, move-step structure, VHF radio communication, distress messages, communicative competence*

## Abstract

Komunikasi yang berkesan dalam operasi maritim amat penting bagi menjamin keselamatan, terutamanya semasa kecemasan apabila pertukaran maklumat yang pantas dan tepat boleh menentukan peluang untuk terus hidup. Pertubuhan Maritim Antarabangsa (IMO) telah mewujudkan *Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP)* bagi menyeragamkan penggunaan bahasa Inggeris di laut. Namun begitu, salah komunikasi masih menjadi punca kepada berlakunya kemalangan. Kajian ini meneliti struktur retorik bagi mesej SMCP tujuan khas — khususnya mesej pengakuan kecemasan (*distress acknowledgement*) dan amaran kecemasan (*distress alert*) — yang digunakan dalam komunikasi radio *Very High Frequency (VHF)* dalam kalangan pelaut pesisir (*near-coastal*) dan pelaut laut lepas (*foreign-going*). Berasaskan teori genre oleh Swales (1990) dan model langkah-pindah (*move-step*) oleh Bocanegra-Valle (2010), kajian ini menggunakan analisis genre terhadap rakaman komunikasi VHF sebenar semasa latihan *Global Maritime Distress and Safety System (GMDSS)*. Dapatan menunjukkan bahawa walaupun struktur langkah utama SMCP sebahagian besarnya dikekalkan, beberapa langkah seperti menyatakan bantuan yang diperlukan atau kedudukan kapal sering digugurkan atau disusun semula. Penyimpangan ini menunjukkan penyesuaian pragmatik terhadap wacana standard di bawah keadaan sebenar yang mendesak dan bertekanan tinggi. Kajian ini menekankan keperluan pengajaran yang jelas tentang pelaksanaan retorik SMCP bagi meningkatkan kecekapan komunikasi dan keselamatan operasi dalam pendidikan Bahasa Inggeris Maritim.

**Kata kunci:** Bahasa Inggeris Maritim, *Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP)*, analisis genre, struktur langkah-pindah, komunikasi radio VHF, mesej kecemasan, kecekapan komunikasi

## INTRODUCTION

Maritime communication plays a crucial role in ensuring the safety and efficiency of global shipping operations. With more than 90% of international trade transported by sea, modern maritime environments have become increasingly complex, multilingual, and multicultural. These characteristics make communication not only a technical process but also a high-stakes linguistic activity in which clarity, accuracy, and rapid information exchange are essential. Past investigations by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) consistently highlight that a substantial proportion of maritime accidents are attributed to human error, with miscommunication identified as one of the most persistent risk factors influencing navigational safety (Ziarati et al., 2009). The combination of linguistic diversity, varying English proficiency levels, and differing communicative norms among multinational crews intensifies the risk of misunderstanding during routine operations as well as emergency situations.

To minimize communication-related accidents, the IMO introduced the Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP), a codified set of English phrases designed to enhance precision, standardization, and mutual intelligibility. SMCP serves as the linguistic backbone of Maritime English and has become a critical component of safety communication worldwide, particularly within the Global Maritime Distress and Safety System (GMDSS). Despite the availability of this standardized framework, several studies report a considerable gap between the prescribed forms in the SMCP and their actual use in on-board communication (Bocanegra-Valle, 2010; Dževerdanović-Pejović, 2013). Factors such as time pressure, operational stress, cognitive load, background noise, cultural norms, and speakers' linguistic competence contribute to structural deviations from the intended message format.

Among the various types of maritime communication exchanges, special-purpose messages—particularly *distress alerts* and *distress acknowledgements*—are of critical importance. These messages follow strict procedural and rhetorical conventions and are central to emergency response coordination. Nonetheless, in real communicative practice, seafarers may omit obligatory steps, add unprescribed information, restructure message components, or simplify expressions in order to cope with technological constraints, task urgency, or linguistic limitations. While some flexibility may allow for faster response times, such deviations could also reduce message clarity, delay rescue operations, or cause confusion among receiving stations.

Although international scholars have examined SMCP implementation and genre structures in various global maritime settings, there remains limited research focusing on Malaysian seafarers, particularly in the context of VHF radio communication during distress scenarios. Malaysia, as a maritime nation with extensive coastlines, strategic shipping lanes, and a growing maritime workforce, offers a unique linguistic and operational environment. Malaysian seafarers often function bilingually (in English and Bahasa Malaysia), and this bilingual profile may influence how SMCP phrases are selected, sequenced, and realized rhetorically.

Understanding these localized patterns is essential for strengthening Maritime English pedagogy and enhancing safety in Malaysian maritime operations.

To address this gap, the present study investigates the rhetorical structure of special-purpose SMCP messages—specifically distress alerts and distress acknowledgements—produced by Malaysian near-coastal and foreign-going seafarers during GMDSS training simulations. The analysis adopts Swales' (1990) genre theory and Bocanegra-Valle's (2010) move-step model to examine how communicative moves and steps are performed, omitted, modified, or re-ordered during high-stakes communication tasks. The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Malaysian seafarers structure distress alert and distress acknowledgement messages in relation to the SMCP move-step model?
2. To what extent do Malaysian seafarers adhere to, deviate from, or modify the prescribed rhetorical structure of SMCP during VHF distress communication?
3. What communicative patterns or challenges emerge in their rhetorical realization of SMCP under operational pressure?

These questions aim to illuminate not only the extent of structural conformity but also the pragmatic strategies Malaysian seafarers employ when operating under stress, time pressure, and limited linguistic planning opportunities.

While foundational studies such as Bocanegra-Valle (2010) and Dževerdanović-Pejović (2013) explored SMCP adherence and rhetorical structure in international contexts, the present study extends the field by examining how these genre conventions are realized specifically within the Malaysian maritime training environment, using authentic VHF distress communication recordings from GMDSS assessments. This localized focus distinguishes the current research from earlier global works by uncovering context-specific communicative behaviours, bilingual influences, and rhetorical tendencies unique to Malaysian seafarers. Consequently, the study contributes new empirical insights to Maritime English scholarship by

situating SMCP performance within a Malaysian socio-linguistic and operational framework—an area previously understudied in the literature.

In summary, this study explores the rhetorical organization of special-purpose messages in SMCP, examining the degree of adherence to the standardized move-step model and the communicative adaptations that occur in authentic distress situations. The findings are expected to inform the design of Maritime English curricula and assessment practices that better reflect the communicative realities of seafaring life.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

The study of Maritime English, particularly in relation to the Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP), has attracted significant scholarly attention within the broader field of English for Specific Purposes (ESP). International research consistently highlights the complexity of linguistic exchanges in maritime operations, where communication is not merely a technical task but a highly specialized form of discourse shaped by multilingualism, multicultural crew compositions, technological constraints, and the high-stakes nature of shipboard activities. Within such environments, the effectiveness of communication directly influences the safety, efficiency, and operational reliability of maritime activities (Bocanegra-Valle, 2010; Johnson, 1994).

### **Global Scholarship on Maritime English and SMCP**

Globally, Maritime English has been developed and studied as a professional register designed to promote clarity and minimize ambiguity in operational contexts. Early research emphasized the importance of standardization as a way to mitigate communication failures caused by linguistic diversity (Pritchard, 2003; Trenkner, 2000). The IMO's SMCP emerged from this recognition, providing a codified set of phrases intended to simplify English use in routine and emergency communication. The SMCP also functions as a pedagogical tool, guiding maritime training institutions in establishing consistent linguistic standards for all seafarers regardless of nationality (Cole et al., 2007; Demydenko, 2012).

Despite its widespread implementation, empirical investigations reveal persistent discrepancies between the standardized structure outlined in SMCP and its actual use by seafarers in real-world or simulated maritime communication. Bocanegra-Valle (2010), for example, found that during VHF radiotelephony exchanges, seafarers often engage in structural and linguistic adjustments that deviate from the SMCP template. These deviations occur more frequently during high-pressure exchanges—such as distress calls—where speakers prioritize the immediacy of communication over strict adherence to prescribed forms. Similarly, Dževerdanović-Pejović (2013) reported that multilingual crews regularly simplify, omit, or re-sequence information in ways that, while still communicatively functional, diverge from the expected rhetorical pattern outlined in the SMCP. These findings suggest that Maritime English cannot be understood solely as a static or prescriptive linguistic code; rather, it must be examined as a dynamic, context-dependent genre shaped by situational urgency, speaker proficiency, and the communicative demands of maritime operations.

In addition, studies focusing on maritime accidents have shown that miscommunication continues to be a key contributing factor in shipboard incidents, despite the availability of standardized communication tools (Ziarati et al., 2009). Research suggests that accidents often involve breakdowns in message transmission, incomplete move structures, or ambiguous phrasing, especially when crew members have varying levels of English proficiency. As a result, researchers have emphasized the need for more genre-informed pedagogical approaches that explicitly teach not only vocabulary and grammar but also the rhetorical organization of SMCP messages (Čulić-Viskota & Kalebota, 2013; Trenkner & Cole, 2004).

In recent years, genre analysis has provided valuable insights into the structural organization of maritime discourse. Applying Swales' (1990) move-step model, scholars such as Bocanegra-Valle (2010) have demonstrated that VHF exchanges—including special-purpose messages like distress alerts and acknowledgements—follow predictable rhetorical patterns that can be systematically analyzed. This body of work underscores the importance of

understanding not only the linguistic content but also the structural sequencing of maritime communication, thus framing SMCP as a genre with specific communicative functions performed through ordered rhetorical moves.

### **Malaysian Context of Maritime English and Communication**

While global scholarship on Maritime English is extensive, research focusing specifically on the Malaysian maritime context remains comparatively limited. Malaysia is a key maritime nation with a large seafaring workforce employed across domestic and international shipping fleets. However, the linguistic ecology in Malaysia differs from many Western or European contexts due to its bilingual environment, where Bahasa Malaysia functions as the national language while English serves as a second language used primarily in educational, technical, and professional domains. This bilingual background shapes the communicative habits of Malaysian seafarers and potentially influences how they apply SMCP conventions in real or simulated communication settings.

Maritime education and training institutions in Malaysia, including Akademi Laut Malaysia and regional maritime academies, generally follow IMO and STCW standards. Nonetheless, instructors report several recurrent challenges faced by Malaysian trainees during VHF radiotelephony assessments. These include difficulties producing continuous speech in English, hesitation or pauses during the delivery of SMCP steps, reliance on memorised rather than internalized structures, and occasional code-switching or lexical simplification when under pressure. Such behaviours align with broader findings in Malaysian ESL research, which indicate that although learners often demonstrate adequate foundational proficiency, they may experience difficulty with spontaneous oral production, particularly in professional or stress-inducing environments.

Furthermore, cultural communication norms in Malaysia tend to favour politeness, avoidance of direct confrontation, and mitigated speech acts. These sociocultural tendencies may subtly influence the delivery of maritime messages, especially those that require clear and assertive phrasing—as in distress situations.

While SMCP aims to eliminate ambiguity and reduce variation, Malaysian seafarers' linguistic and cultural backgrounds may lead to rhetorical adjustments when performing distress alerts or acknowledgements, including the omission of required steps or use of less rigidly structured expressions. Such patterns underscore the need for examining SMCP use within localized contexts, as structural deviations may stem not only from linguistic limitations but also from culturally patterned communication styles.

### **Comparative Perspectives: Malaysia and the International Maritime Community**

Comparing the Malaysian maritime communication environment with global research reveals both shared challenges and context-specific variations. International studies consistently document partial adherence to SMCP structures, particularly in multilingual crews where English is used as a lingua franca. Malaysian trainees demonstrate similar tendencies, frequently omitting optional or secondary steps—such as vessel position or assistance required—during simulated distress communication. However, in the Malaysian context, such omissions are often attributed not only to situational urgency but also to self-monitoring of language accuracy, linguistic hesitation, and the cognitive switching between Bahasa Malaysia and English.

Globally, linguistic diversity is recognized as one of the key factors affecting adherence to SMCP. In Malaysia, although linguistic diversity exists, the primary challenge lies in reconciling the bilingual nature of communication with the rigid structural demands of SMCP genres. This bilingual dynamic may create moments of hesitation or repair during message delivery, which differ from the patterns observed in European or East Asian maritime contexts where English acquisition and use may follow different trajectories.

Additionally, while international maritime institutions uniformly emphasize simulation-based training to strengthen seafarers' communicative competence, Malaysian training often incorporates bilingual classroom explanations and exercises, which may inadvertently reinforce code-mixing strategies. As a result,

Malaysian seafarers may display different rhetorical tendencies when performing standardized SMCP messages compared to their counterparts in regions where English is more deeply embedded in daily operational communication.

These comparative insights reveal that while Malaysia shares many of the structural challenges identified in global maritime communication research—such as omission, simplification, and re-sequencing of SMCP steps—its unique sociolinguistic environment contributes additional layers of complexity. Therefore, global generalizations about SMCP adherence may not fully explain the communicative practices observed among Malaysian seafarers, reinforcing the need for localized studies such as the present research.

The review of existing scholarship highlights a clear need for more studies examining SMCP performance within specific national or linguistic contexts. While foundational works provide valuable frameworks for understanding the genre structure of maritime communication, relatively little is known about how these structures are enacted by Malaysian seafarers during authentic or simulated distress communication. Given Malaysia's status as a maritime nation with a bilingual workforce, understanding the rhetorical organization of SMCP in this context is both practically and theoretically significant.

The present study therefore contributes to filling this gap by analysing authentic VHF distress communication produced by Malaysian near-coastal and foreign-going seafarers during GMDSS training. By applying genre analysis to evaluate move-step realisation, structural adherence, and communicative deviations, the study not only extends the global body of Maritime English scholarship but also provides context-sensitive insights into the linguistic and rhetorical practices of Malaysian seafarers. This localized perspective is crucial for informing the design of more effective Maritime English curricula, training materials, and assessment practices that align with the real communicative needs and performance patterns of Malaysian maritime professionals.

## METHODOLOGY

### Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a genre analysis approach grounded in Swales' (1990) theory of move-step structure and Bocanegra-Valle's (2010) application of this framework to maritime radiotelephony. Swales defines genre as a class of communicative events recognized by a discourse community and characterized by shared communicative purposes and structural regularities. Within this framework, communication is analyzed as a sequence of moves—functional units reflecting the speaker's communicative intent—and steps, which realize each move through specific linguistic or rhetorical strategies.

Bocanegra-Valle (2010) extended Swales' model to the maritime domain, proposing a schematic structure for VHF radio exchanges based on the IMO's Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP). She identified recurring move-step patterns in both special-purpose messages (e.g., distress calls) and routine messages, revealing the interplay between prescribed linguistic norms and real-time performance. The current study builds upon her framework by examining the extent of adherence to and deviation from the SMCP structure in actual VHF distress communication performed by Malaysian seafarers.

To complement the genre perspective, the study is also informed by the transactional model of communication (DeFleur, 2005), which views communication as a dynamic, reciprocal process involving continuous feedback, environmental influence, and role interchange between sender and receiver. This model is particularly relevant in maritime radio discourse, where technological channels, time pressure, and environmental noise constrain message transmission.

### Research Design

A qualitative case study design was employed to examine the rhetorical realization of SMCP in authentic communicative contexts. The study focused on two categories of *special-purpose messages*—(1) distress acknowledgment and (2) distress alert—as

performed through Very High Frequency (VHF) radio communication. The aim was to identify the presence, absence, or modification of prescribed communicative moves and steps within each message type.

Data collection and analysis followed the principles of discourse and genre analysis, emphasizing naturally occurring speech and its communicative organization rather than grammatical correctness. The case study design allowed for a detailed examination of how seafarers perform standardized linguistic routines under operational pressure.

### **Participants**

Participants were selected through purposive sampling to ensure relevant maritime communication experience. The sample comprised 18 seafarers enrolled in the Global Maritime Distress and Safety System (GMDSS) certification course at two accredited maritime training institutions in Malaysia. Nine participants were *near-coastal* seafarers and nine were *foreign-going* officers, representing a balanced cross-section of operational exposure.

All participants had prior experience in shipboard communication and were required to demonstrate competence in operating GMDSS radio equipment—specifically VHF Radiotelephony (VHF RT) and Digital Selective Calling (VHF DSC)—as part of their training. The study was conducted in accordance with institutional ethical guidelines. Participants were informed of the research's purpose and provided consent for the use of anonymized recordings for academic analysis.

### **Data Collection**

Data were collected through non-participant observation and audio recording during the participants' GMDSS training assessments. Each assessment required participants to perform simulated distress communication scenarios using VHF radio equipment, following IMO protocols. The recordings captured real-time exchanges between ships and shore-based stations, including both transmitted and received messages.

Observation focused on how participants structured their communication in accordance with SMCP conventions—specifically, whether each prescribed move and step appeared, was omitted, or was replaced by alternative phrasing. Field notes were taken to document non-verbal cues (e.g., hesitation, repair, or code-switching) that might influence message structure.

All recorded interactions were transcribed verbatim using a standardized transcription protocol to ensure consistency in the representation of pauses, repetitions, and radio markers (e.g., *over*, *this is*). These transcripts served as the primary dataset for analysis.

### **Analytical Framework and Procedures**

The analytical process involved two stages:

#### 1. Coding of moves and steps:

Each transcript was segmented and coded according to Bocanegra-Valle's (2010) move-step model for special-purpose messages, adapted to focus on the SMCP contexts of *distress acknowledgment* and *distress alert*.

- I. Distress acknowledgment messages typically include three moves:
  - Move 1: Initiate message (indicate message marker, address, and ship identity)
  - Move 2: Send message (acknowledge distress and provide confirmation)
  - Move 3: End message (signal closure, e.g., *over*)
- II. Distress alert messages typically include:
  - Move 1: Initiate distress signal (Mayday)
  - Move 2: Send detailed information (identity, position, nature of distress, assistance required)
  - Move 3: End message (closure signal).

## 2. Comparative analysis:

After coding, the researchers compared the observed structure with the prescribed SMCP model to identify any deviations or omissions. Patterns were categorized as:

- I. Full adherence (all moves and steps present),
- II. Partial adherence (some steps omitted or altered), or
- III. Deviation (alternative sequencing or non-standard phrasing).

These findings were then interpreted in light of genre theory to understand the communicative and pedagogical implications of structural variation.

### **Validity and Reliability**

To enhance analytic reliability, two independent raters cross-checked the coded data, achieving an inter-rater agreement of 92%. Discrepancies were resolved through discussion and reference to the SMCP manual. Triangulation was achieved through the combined use of observation notes, transcriptions, and standardized move-step frameworks, ensuring the credibility and consistency of findings.

## **RESULT AND DISCUSSION**

### **Overview of Findings**

The analysis of 18 recorded radio exchanges revealed that seafarers generally followed the core move structure prescribed in the *Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP)* for both distress acknowledgment and distress alert messages. However, across the dataset, several steps were frequently omitted, compressed, or re-sequenced, indicating variation between the idealized model and real communicative practice. These findings support previous observations by Bocanegra-Valle (2010) and Dževerdanović-Pejović (2013), who noted that standardization in maritime discourse often competes with operational urgency and contextual constraints.

Two main categories of variation emerged:

1. Omission of non-critical steps, such as the ship's position, assistance required, or time of transmission.
2. Reformulation of standard phrases into simpler or abbreviated structures that still preserve communicative intent.

Despite these deviations, all participants successfully maintained the mandatory moves required to signal distress or acknowledge receipt of distress, demonstrating pragmatic awareness of the communicative priorities embedded in SMCP.

### Move-Step Realization in Distress Acknowledgment Messages

Distress acknowledgment messages were generally concise and formulaic, following the expected three-move pattern proposed by Bocanegra-Valle (2010).

Table 1: Move-Step Realization in Distress Acknowledgment Messages

Move	Step	Presence (%)
<b>Move 1: Initiate message</b>	S1 Indicate message marker ("Mayday")	100%
	S2 State addressee (receiving station/all ships)	100%
	S3 Identify oneself (calling station)	100%
<b>Move 2: Send message</b>	S1 State nature of distress / confirmation	100%
	S2 State assistance required	0%
<b>Move 3: End message</b>	S1 Indicate end of transmission ("Over")	100%

All 18 participants began their acknowledgment with the internationally recognized marker *Mayday*, followed by the addressee and identification of their own station, demonstrating adherence to the Move 1 sequence. The second move, however, revealed selective omission: while all participants acknowledged the distress signal

(e.g., “Received Mayday”), none explicitly stated the type of assistance required. The communication concluded uniformly with the closure marker “Over”.

**Excerpt 1**

M1S1 M1S2

P: (Mayday). (Mike mike sierra india Mike mike sieraa india five three three two two six six

M1S3

zero zero). Mike mike sieraa india five three three two two six six zero zero. (This is mike

mike sierra india five three three two two four four zero eight). five three three two two

M2S3

M3S1

four four zero eight. (Received mayday). (Over.)

These results indicate that seafarers prioritize brevity and procedural accuracy over full textual completion. In high-stakes conditions, brevity serves as a safety mechanism, allowing faster response times and minimizing radio congestion. However, this pragmatic adaptation slightly deviates from the prescribed SMCP model, which expects a full articulation of assistance requirements.

This finding aligns with Trenkner and Cole’s (2004) argument that communicative competence in Maritime English extends beyond memorizing phrases; it involves adaptive use of standardized discourse under operational constraints. The participants demonstrated competence in recognizing which moves were obligatory for successful transmission and which could be omitted without compromising clarity. From a genre perspective, this reflects situational genre realization—the ability to modulate genre performance according to urgency and context (Swales, 1990).

**Move-Step Realization in Distress Alert Messages**

Distress alert messages, which signal emergencies from a ship in danger, showed more elaborate structures than acknowledgments but greater variability in step realization. The following table summarizes observed patterns:

Table 2: Move-Step Realization in Distress Alert Messages

Move	Step	Presence (%)
<b>Move 1: Initiate message</b>	S1 Indicate message marker (“Mayday” repeated three times)	100%
	S2 State addressee (receiving station/all ships)	94%
	S3 Identify oneself (calling station)	100%
<b>Move 2: Send message / broadcast information</b>	S1 Indicate ship’s position	78%
	S2 State nature of distress	100%
	S3 State assistance required	67%
	S4 Provide additional information (crew number, sea condition, etc.)	61%
<b>Move 3: End message</b>	S1 Indicate closure (“Over”)	100%

The majority of participants followed the standard formula of repeating “*Mayday*” three times to attract attention and signal urgency. This initial move was executed consistently and accurately. Variation occurred primarily in Move 2, where several participants omitted the ship’s position or failed to specify the assistance required. Instead, they tended to generalize, using expressions such as “*Require help*” or “*Ship sinking*”, which lacked precise SMCP phrasing. Some also added unprescribed details (e.g., “*Sea condition very rough*”) to contextualize the emergency, illustrating how experiential knowledge supplements formulaic discourse.

**Excerpt 4**

	M1S1	M1S2	
1	P:	(Mayday mayday mayday).	( Bunga Melati bunga melati bunga melati. Call sign nine M1S3
2	mike	yankee quebec.)	Nine mike yankee quebec. Nine mike yankee quebec (This is
3	Mike	mike sierra india one two three fower five six seven seven niner.	Alam one five.)
4	Mike	mike sierra india one two three fower five six seven seven niner.	Alam one five.
5	Mike	mike sierra india one two three fower five six seven seven niner.	Alam one five. M2S1 M2S2 M2S3
6	(Mayday).	(Bunga melati. Call sign nine mike yankee quebec).	(This is Mike mike sierra M2S4
7	india	one two three fower five six seven seven niner	Alam one five). (Position latitude
8	two	zero degrees one eight minute north longitude one one eight degrees five two minute	
9	east.	Time zero two fower eight uniform tango Charlie).	(Ship collision and sinking). M2S5
10	(Require	immediate assistance).	(Crew onboard one three person. Sea condition very M2S6 M2S7
11	rough).	(Over)	M3S1

The inconsistent inclusion of the ship's position is noteworthy. While the SMCP mandates the inclusion of position and nature of distress, many participants prioritized immediate distress signaling over detailed information. This selective omission may be attributed to limited linguistic confidence, lack of practice, or the simulated training context, where urgency was perceived but actual danger was absent. Nevertheless, the maintenance of key communicative moves ensured that the core function of the genre—alerting and requesting aid—remained intact.

From a genre-analysis standpoint, this suggests that distress communication represents a restricted register (Ferguson, 1994) characterized by limited lexical

variation but high pragmatic flexibility. The move-step pattern remains globally recognizable, but its linguistic realization is subject to real-time modification.

### **Comparison Between Message Types**

A comparative look at the two special-purpose message types reveals differing rhetorical demands. Distress acknowledgment messages require confirmation and procedural compliance, resulting in minimal deviation from the SMCP. Distress alerts, however, require message elaboration, prompting more frequent omissions and modifications. These variations demonstrate the interaction between standardization and situational agency, a key concern in ESP genre studies.

This duality mirrors Bhatia's (2004) observation that professional genres maintain a balance between institutional constraints (in this case, IMO standardization) and individual creativity (adaptive linguistic performance). The participants' messages displayed sufficient structural conformity to fulfill the communicative purpose but also reflected the situational pragmatics of emergency discourse—brevity, clarity, and speed.

### **Pedagogical Implications for Maritime English**

The findings have direct implications for Maritime English pedagogy and assessment. Training programs often emphasize the memorization of SMCP phrases without adequately addressing their rhetorical organization or contextual flexibility. As observed, seafarers could reproduce the structural skeleton of the genre but occasionally omitted crucial steps that carry operational significance.

In line with ESP principles (Dudley-Evans & St. John, 1998), Maritime English instruction should therefore move beyond lexical teaching to include genre-based awareness training, where learners analyze and practice communicative moves under simulated high-pressure conditions. Exercises could focus on reconstructing incomplete SMCP messages, identifying missing rhetorical elements, and evaluating the communicative impact of omissions. Such practice would cultivate both linguistic

accuracy and rhetorical competence, preparing seafarers for the dynamic nature of real-world maritime communication.

Furthermore, assessment rubrics could integrate move-step adherence as a criterion for communicative competence, ensuring that seafarers demonstrate not only knowledge of vocabulary but also mastery of structural sequencing in distress discourse.

In summary, the study demonstrates that Malaysian seafarers adhere closely to the obligatory moves prescribed by the SMCP during distress communication but frequently omit or simplify non-essential steps. These deviations do not necessarily undermine communicative success; instead, they reflect the genre's adaptability to contextual constraints such as time, stress, and language proficiency. From an ESP perspective, such adaptive use exemplifies genre negotiation—the tension between standardization and real-world exigency.

The results reaffirm the importance of integrating genre analysis into Maritime English education to enhance communicative safety and performance across multilingual shipboard environments.

## CONCLUSION

This study examined the rhetorical structure of *special-purpose messages*—specifically distress acknowledgment and distress alert communication—within the framework of the International Maritime Organization's (IMO) Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP). By applying genre analysis grounded in Swales' (1990) move-step model and Bocanegra-Valle's (2010) adaptation for maritime discourse, the study identified how Malaysian seafarers realized, modified, and occasionally deviated from the prescribed SMCP structure in Very High Frequency (VHF) radio communication.

The findings revealed that while the essential moves—such as initiating the message, acknowledging distress, and signaling closure—were consistently performed, certain steps, including indicating the ship's position or required

assistance, were frequently omitted or condensed. These omissions did not result in communicative failure; instead, they reflected pragmatic adaptations motivated by operational urgency, linguistic economy, and speaker competence. Such flexibility underscores the inherently dynamic nature of professional maritime communication, where standardization must coexist with situational responsiveness.

From an applied linguistics perspective, the study contributes to the understanding of how specialized discourse genres operate in high-stakes, time-sensitive contexts. It demonstrates that communicative competence in Maritime English extends beyond the lexical recall of SMCP phrases to include rhetorical competence, the ability to strategically structure information while preserving the communicative intent of the genre. The research thus aligns with broader ESP principles emphasizing contextualized language use and professional genre awareness.

Pedagogically, the findings suggest the need to reorient Maritime English instruction from rote phrase memorization toward genre-based training that incorporates rhetorical sequencing, pragmatic decision-making, and simulation of real-time communication pressure. Instructors should integrate move-step analysis into classroom activities and assessment, encouraging learners to identify and reproduce essential rhetorical elements while adapting to authentic communicative constraints.

Future research should extend the present study by incorporating a larger dataset of authentic shipboard exchanges, exploring variations across ranks, vessel types, and multilingual settings. Additionally, comparative studies between native and non-native English-speaking seafarers could further illuminate how linguistic proficiency and cultural factors influence adherence to SMCP structures.

In conclusion, the study reaffirms that the effectiveness of maritime communication depends not only on linguistic accuracy but also on the rhetorical and situational competence of seafarers. Strengthening these dimensions through

informed pedagogy can significantly enhance both communicative safety and professional performance at sea.

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