

## Lecturers' Challenges and Strategies in Teaching Maritime English Online to Students with Low English Proficiency

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DOI: 10.18326/rgt.v15i2.222-244

### Submission Track:

Received: 01-06-2022

Final Revision: 16-10-2022

Available Online: 01-12-2022

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### Abstract

This study aimed to investigate the problems faced by ESP lecturers when teaching low English proficiency students during online Maritime English lessons and their strategies in dealing with the problems. A questionnaire with 6 open-ended questions was distributed to 9 Maritime English lecturers from 6 different Maritime Polytechnics in Indonesia. A follow-up interview was conducted with 4 lecturers to obtain more detailed information regarding their online teaching practices, especially the difficulties and the strategies to mitigate them. The findings of this study revealed three main problems faced by the lecturers. Firstly, students were reluctant to interact and participate in class activities. Secondly, students showed low motivation and interest in learning English. Thirdly, the lecturers needed extra time to explain the teaching materials. To overcome the problems, the lecturers used various texts, pictures, videos, or online platforms to expose students to maritime vocabulary. They also grouped the lower proficiency students with the higher proficiency students in a collaborative activity, designed class activities based on students' learning styles, and employed various scaffolding techniques.

**Keywords:** English for Specific Purposes (ESP) teaching, low English proficiency, Maritime English, online learning.

## INTRODUCTION

Teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP) has become a great challenge for many English lecturers. Different from general English courses, ESP teaching involves a more specific register in which the course is aimed to assist students to master English and use the language in a specific environment e.g., English in Banking, English in Medicine, English in Aviation, etc. (Mauludin, 2021). In ESP teaching, classroom instructions and activities are designed based on the communication needs of students in a specific context. Students are expected to have higher motivation when joining an ESP course since the course is relevant to their needs. However, reality sometimes does not meet expectations. There are various problems identified during ESP teaching practices that may hinder the effectiveness of the course. Some of the major issues are the ESP curriculum which is too general and does not cover students' specific needs (Poedjiastutie & Oliver, 2017), lecturers' limited pedagogical and content knowledge (Pazoki & Alemi, 2019; Poedjiastutie & Oliver, 2017), and irrelevant and unauthentic materials (Lee, 2016). The quality of the students' input also complicates the situation in which many students with low English proficiency consider ESP courses too difficult for them, and thus feel demotivated and sometimes frustrated when joining the course (Belyaeva, 2015). The importance of General English proficiency in supporting ESP learning has been highlighted by Martinovic and Poljakovic (in Pazoki & Alemi, 2019). They found that students' low general English proficiency affects students' motivation in learning ESP and inhibits their active participation in the class activities.

Students' low general English proficiency has caused a lot of problems in ESP teaching. Many ESP courses have shifted from specialized language instruction toward the development of general English knowledge (Belyaeva, 2015). The lower-level students perceive specialized courses with highly technical vocabulary and the discourse are too difficult for them. In other words, they are not ready to join ESP courses due to their low general English proficiency. As a result, the lecturers often revert to the materials of basic English and cannot fully cover the ESP materials (Poedjiastutie, 2017). This situation can hamper the effectiveness of ESP teaching and in the end, can fail the learning objectives.

Maritime English (ME) with its distinctive vocabulary and specialized expressions is a branch of ESP that is used widely in the Maritime industry. It covers a wide scope, ranging from the language of highly technical written genres to simplified and standardized spoken contexts. In written Maritime English, various technical words and phrases related to the nautical and marine engineering fields are commonly used. For example, when describing the different parts of vessels, the movements of vessels, the repair and maintenance of engines, etc. In spoken Maritime English, the range of lexical choices is more limited. The language is simplified since it usually deals with the safety and security of the ship's operation. The spoken messages are primarily used in the "here and now" context. The use of imperative and performative in the present situation is dominant (Ahmmed et al., 2020; Franceschi, 2014).

The globalization era has narrowed the barrier across nations, and international shipping has become very common. Nowadays, there are many crews that come from different countries working together on a vessel. When working under pressure, the crews often simplify or even change the common language to fulfil their duties (Demydenko, 2012). Communication breakdown might happen because of difficulties in understanding each other intentions. The failure in communication due to the low English proficiency of seafarers has been considered one of the main factors contributing to maritime accidents (James et al., 2018). Thus, Maritime English proficiency to an agreed level is essential to ensure the safety of the ship's operation (Shi & Fan, 2021). Maritime English teaching then becomes significant to equip seafarers with skills to communicate effectively with people of different nationalities who speak different languages. As mandated by the International Maritime Organization, seafarers of all ranks must be able to conduct clear and understandable communications using English, both in written and oral form (Zhang & Cole, 2018). Maritime Education and Training institutions then play a very significant role in ensuring that students can master the necessary knowledge and skills when working on board the ships (Hrnić, 2021).

Maritime English is one of the primary subjects taught in Maritime education and training institutions. In Indonesia, there are several Maritime

Polytechnics that provide maritime education and training for students who want to pursue a career as seafarers. All of the polytechnics employ a boarding school system that requires the students to stay in a dormitory during their studies. The students have to follow the simulation of living onboard a ship by following certain procedures and schedules. They have to obey the rules set by institutions that regulate their uniform, their interaction with other students and lecturers, their daily activities (including classroom study time, physical training time, mealtime, etc.), and many more. When the COVID-19 pandemic struck, many educational institutions had to switch from face-to-face learning to emergency remote learning (Choi & Chung, 2021). The maritime polytechnics had to send the students back home and continued the process of study in the online learning environment. For English lecturers, this situation has brought a greater challenge (Batu et al., 2021).

The challenges of online language teaching and learning during the COVID-19 pandemic have drawn the interest of numerous scholars in many parts of the world. In the Arabic setting, Hamad et al. (2021) involved 43 English instructors to complete a questionnaire aiming to explore 5 aspects of online language teaching, including the quality of teaching, students' interaction, learning outcomes, instructors' planning, and correction load, and macro and micro-skills. Their study revealed several major problems during online language teaching, including limited student-teacher interaction, difficulties in monitoring students' class participation and performance, and difficulties in assessing micro and macro skills. Online language teaching had also given "more burden" to the teachers since they had to spend more time and energy planning a lesson and preparing teaching materials (Hamad et al., 2021).

Gao and Zhang (2020) conducted a qualitative study to investigate the lecturers' perception of online language teaching in a Chinese university by interviewing three EFL lecturers. The lecturers perceived that their teaching plans were disrupted due to COVID-19 Pandemic and they were demanded to improve their information and communication technology (ICT) literacy to survive. Gao and Zhang's (2020) study also indicated the importance to understand students' learning needs, improve lecturers' proficiency in

conducting online teaching, and integrate traditional classroom teaching methods with online teaching practices.

Nugroho et al. (2021) conducted a similar study in the Indonesian context. They involved 27 Indonesian EFL lecturers in writing a self-reflection and joining a semi-structured interview. The study showed that many lecturers were not familiar with digital platforms used in online learning. They were unable to provide quick and direct feedback to students that have caused a lack of students' motivation and engagement during online class activities (Nugroho et al., 2021).

In the Korean context, Choi and Chung (2021) involved 7 EFL instructors in an in-depth interview to explore the challenges and strategies of online language teaching and learning in an English language program in South Korea. They reported problems with interaction and collaborative activities as the major challenges faced by the instructors. As remedies, the instructors used several strategies, such as encouraging the students to turn on the camera and asking them to use non-verbal communication cues such as thumbs up. They also instructed students to collaborate in writing a summary of their group work using Google Docs, etc (Choi & Chung, 2021).

In Vietnam, Hung (2021) explored the difficulties of online language teaching as well as its advantages. Involving 15 English lecturers, he conducted a study at the Center for Foreign Languages, Can Tho University in Vietnam. His study revealed 5 major difficulties faced by the lecturers, including students' and lecturers' access to technology, maintaining students' motivation and engagement, assessing students' progress, lecturers' lack of digital pedagogical competence, and increased workload and stress. However, the lecturers also admitted that online language teaching could bring advantages, including flexibility and improving autonomy, motivation, self-determination, and self-regulation among lecturers and students (Hung, 2021).

Many studies have explored the challenges of online language teaching. However, studies regarding Maritime English teaching are still rare and studies focusing on low-English proficiency students in Maritime Polytechnics are not yet available. Low English proficiency students in this research refer to students who have a low level of General English. Students'

general English level that affects their ESP learning has been discussed by Poedjiastutie and Oliver (2017). However, their discussion only covered students at an Indonesian university. This study aims to provide a more specific context by exploring the problems of ESP teaching in Maritime Polytechnics by involving the lecturers' perspectives. There are two research questions guiding the current study: 1) What are the problems faced by the English lecturers when teaching Maritime English online to students with Low English Proficiency? 2) What strategies are used by the English lecturers to overcome the problems?

## **RESEARCH METHOD**

This research employed a qualitative descriptive method. One fundamental characteristic of this research is the naturalistic data taken under real-world conditions (Creswell, 2012; Yin, 2011). Compared to other types of qualitative research, the qualitative descriptive method is more descriptive rather than interpretive in focus. In qualitative descriptive research, data were collected and analyzed qualitatively by identifying themes or patterns (Nassaji, 2015). In this research, the authors attempt to describe a phenomenon by understanding the lecturers' opinions and perspectives regarding their teaching experience.

### **Research participants**

To select the research participants, the authors used the purposive sampling technique. The selection of the participants was based on the consideration that they could provide the authors with the "best" information (Kumar, 2011). Problems with low proficiency students in Maritime Polytechnics have been discussed with some of the lecturers during informal discussions. Following up the discussions, the authors involved nine Maritime English lecturers who teach in seven maritime polytechnics under the Ministry of Transportation in Indonesia for the Applied Bachelor program. Their total teaching experience ranges from 4 years to 18 years. Four of them joined a follow-up interview after completing the questionnaire. The participants, their teaching experience, and their campus locations are shown in Table 1.

**Table 1.**  
The research participants

No	Name	Gender	Teaching experience	Campus Location	Remarks
1.	SK	Female	6 years	Jakarta	Joined the follow-up interview
2.	AH	Female	4 years	Semarang	Joined the follow-up interview
3.	NR	Female	18 years	Barombong	Joined the follow-up interview
4.	DA	Female	4 years	Banten	Joined the follow-up interview
5.	TR	Female	17 years	Jakarta	-
6.	FT	Female	5 years	Semarang	-
7.	SL	Female	10 years	Makassar	-
8.	HN	Female	8 years	Aceh	-
9.	SM	Female	10 years	Banten	-

### Data collection

The authors prepared a questionnaire using Google Forms, which consisted of six open-ended questions. The open-ended questionnaire was aimed to enable the participants to share their experience on their own terms within the format that facilitates the process of data analysis (Seixas et al., 2018). The questionnaire was used as a self-reflection for the lecturers to explore the difficulties they faced when teaching Maritime English online, especially to students with low English proficiency, and their strategies to counter the problems.

The questions in the questionnaire were as follows:

1. What do you think about the English proficiency level of your students?
1. What preparation do you make before teaching?
2. How do you conduct online Maritime English teaching? (synchronous/asynchronous, the duration of teaching, the delivery of the materials)
3. What teaching media do you use? To what extent the teaching media help you in teaching?
4. What difficulties do you face during online teaching? (Especially when dealing with the low English proficiency students)
5. What strategies do you use to handle the low English proficiency students?

At the end of the questionnaire, the lecturers were requested to join a follow-up interview. The interview was aimed to obtain more detailed and comprehensive information regarding the participants' online teaching experience. Four lecturers agreed to join the interview, which was conducted using the zoom meeting application. The interview was semi-structured and lasted for about 15 – 20 minutes. The interviews were recorded and transcribed.

### **Data analysis**

In conducting the data analysis, the authors first downloaded the questionnaire results from Google Forms and transcribed the interview. The content Analysis (CA) protocol was used as a strategy for analyzing data (Leung & Chung, 2019). First, the authors read the questionnaire responses and the interview transcripts several times. In this step, small chunks or phrases with meaning were generated. After that, labels or codes were given to each chunk of data. The coded chunks were compared and contrasted against each other, and similar chunks were grouped to form conceptual categories. The categories were then compared to the related theories about the phenomenon. Finally, the authors summarize the findings and their implications on online ESP teaching practices.

## **RESULTS & DISCUSSION**

In conducting online Maritime English teaching, the lecturers combined synchronous and asynchronous learning. They used various online learning platforms, such as Zoom, Google Class Room, Edlink, Quizizz, as well as the Learning Management System developed by the institution. They also used YouTube to find relevant teaching materials and a WhatsApp group to liaise with their students.

According to the lecturers, students' English proficiency level is varied, ranging from elementary to low-intermediate. As some of the lecturers mentioned in the questionnaire:

*English language proficiency of our students is varied, depending on the program. Students of the regular program are quite good, but those of other programs have a very low English proficiency (NR).*

*In general, English proficiency level of our students is low-intermediate (TR).*

*In my opinion, the English proficiency level of our students varies. Some students are pretty good, but many others are still struggling with basic English (DA).*

From the questionnaire, it can be concluded that the lecturers have to deal with students who have different levels of English proficiency. However, most of the students are in low proficiency levels.

### **The problems faced by the English lecturers when teaching Maritime English online to students with Low English Proficiency**

The difference in students' ability has caused difficulty for the lecturers when conducting the teaching practices, especially when they have to deal with low English proficiency students. There are 3 (three) primary problems identified.

a. Students' lack of interaction and participation.

Students' lack of interaction and participation becomes the main issue reported by the lecturers. During synchronous learning using Zoom, students with low English proficiency often turned off their cameras. They tried to avoid direct interaction with the lecturers and were reluctant to involve in the online class activities.

As said by one of the lecturers:

*Students with low proficiency were usually rather difficult to communicate with. They were reluctant to participate in teaching and learning activities. They just keep quiet and rarely speak up. They did not submit their assignments on time, and sometimes, did not submit the assignments at all (HN).*

Another lecturer described her experience when asking questions to students.

*One of the constraints of online learning was in the class discussion process. When I asked students: do you have any*

*questions regarding the materials today? They just kept silent and did not say a thing. However, when I gave them questions, they could not answer them correctly (DA).*

Some students also used poor internet connections as an excuse for not being fully able to participate in the class. This problem was mentioned by TR.

*Students with low English proficiency were usually passive and tend to be difficult to collaborate in the learning process. Some of them said that they had a poor internet connection (TR).*

This problem caused difficulty for the lecturers to monitor students' attendance and performance, especially when students turned off their cameras during the video conferencing sessions. Do the students sit in front of their computers and give full attention to the lecturers? or do they scroll their Instagram and check their social media?

This problem was mentioned by AH and DA during the interview.

*It was difficult for me to ensure whether all of the students really follow the lesson well (AH).*

*It was hard to make the class interactive. Students sometimes did not understand the materials, but they did not want to ask questions. Many were not serious when studying online because they felt that the lecturers could not supervise them directly (DA).*

Regarding students' assignments, the lecturers reported plagiarism as the main issue. When students were given an assignment, some of them would wait for their friends to finish the assignment, copied it, and claimed it as their work. Realizing this, one of the lecturers (DA) said that she asked the students to hand-write their assignments instead of typing them with the hope that even though the student copied their friends' answers, at least they still could learn something. However, some

students also submitted the “wrong” tasks. DA said that perhaps the students thought that she would not check all of their work, so they did not give their best effort in doing the assignments.

*I found it difficult when it comes to giving students assignments. Perhaps some of them think that I will not check all of their work. They did not do the assignment properly. They just copied their friends' works or they submitted unrelated documents (DA).*

Students' lack of interaction and participation has made it difficult for the lecturers to monitor students' real performance. The lecturers could not explore students' abilities and monitor their progress.

This finding supports the study conducted by Habil and Lifa (2020), who investigated classroom management problems. They found that students' behavioral problems (for example students do not follow instructions and refuse to cooperate in any way) have become one of the greatest challenges for the lecturers in managing their class.

b. Students' low motivation and interest in learning English.

The lecturers also reported that the low proficiency students had low motivation and interest in learning English. English is probably not their favorite subject. This problem was told by NR who has been teaching in Maritime education institutions for 18 years.

*Most of my students have low English proficiency. As we know that in our country, maritime colleges become the second option. High school graduates who are brighter and have better academic achievement usually choose more reputable universities to continue their education. If I ask my students, do you like studying English? I believe that 70% of them will answer 'no'. If my students are sitting in front of me right now, it is not because they are willing, but because they have to (NR).*

Another lecturer also mentioned the problems when dealing with low-motivated students:

*It is hard for me when I have to teach a class in which the students have different English proficiency levels. The students with a higher proficiency level usually do not experience significant difficulties. However, the low English proficiency students need extra effort to keep up with their friends. But many of them have low motivation for learning. When the students encounter difficulties, they tend to give up easily (AH).*

Many studies have highlighted the importance of motivation in foreign language learning (Bower, 2019; Thuan, 2021). There are several characteristics of motivated learners. They have a positive task orientation, ego-involvement, need for achievement, high aspirations, goal orientation, perseverance, and tolerance of ambiguity (Mohammed, 2020). However, the low proficiency students lack those characteristics which hinder them from achieving their best performance.

c. Need more time to explain the teaching materials.

When explaining the teaching materials to the low proficiency students, the lecturers needed extra time. They had to prepare their lessons well to make the teaching and learning activities as effective as possible. As two of the respondents mentioned in the interview:

*Teaching students with low English proficiency is full of challenges. We need more time to explain the materials to make them understand (NR).*

*When I explain the teaching materials, the students with higher proficiency usually can understand the materials easily. However, I need to repeat the explanation several times for students with lower proficiency levels. In an online class, it is more difficult because I cannot make sure they listen to my explanation (DA).*

This problem has caused a dilemma for the lecturers who have to keep up with the lesson plans. If they slow the lesson to adjust the speed of the low proficiency students, the targeted materials might not be achieved at the end of the semester. However, if they go at a normal speed, the low proficiency students might not be able to catch all the materials.

Several scholars have explored lecturers' difficulties in conducting online language learning. A study conducted by Aziz et al. (2021) showed that lecturers struggled with the changing curriculum, lesson preparations, giving feedback, and online marking assessments. The finding of this study indicated that time spent for preparing the lessons, giving feedback, and grading the students may also be a source of stress for the lecturers.

### **The strategies used by the English lecturers to overcome the problems**

The challenges faced by the lecturers have encouraged them to find solutions to overcome the problems. Some lecturers employ similar strategies, but they also have more specific strategies to be implemented in their classes. The strategies described by the lecturers are summarized as follows:

- a. Using various texts, pictures, videos, or online platforms to expose students to the maritime vocabulary.

Maritime English has a very specific and technical vocabulary which might be too advanced for the students with low English proficiency. To improve students' English proficiency, the lecturers often focused on improving students' vocabulary. As mentioned by AH during the interview:

*My strategy is to focus on vocabulary because I think vocabulary is the basis of learning English. If students have already mastered adequate vocabulary, it will be easier for me to teach grammar. I must give students exposure to the vocabulary. I used various texts and videos which are related to maritime. The students need to*

*read or watch the video many times to familiarize themselves with the vocabulary (AH).*

The current study supports the studies regarding the importance of vocabulary in language teaching and learning. Vocabulary is considered a core feature of language proficiency. Language learners need to understand at least 98% of the words to be able to comprehend a message without assistance (Bai, 2018; Bergström et al., 2021).

To expose students to maritime vocabulary, there were various strategies used by the lecturers. Some lecturers used YouTube videos to introduce students to maritime context and vocabulary. In the digital era, the use of YouTube has become popular among language lecturers. There are many studies regarding the use of YouTube. Most scholars reported the platform's effectiveness due to its accessibility and authenticity (Simbolon & Yusnita, 2020).

Besides YouTube, some of the lecturers also used online quiz platforms such as Quizizz and game-based learning platforms such as Kahoot. This research supports the findings of Sartini's study (2020). She found that the use of Kahoot! as an interactive online learning platform is proven effective to improve students' vocabulary mastery of Maritime English. Besides that, it can improve students' motivation and interest in learning English and encourage students' interaction and participation.

- b. Considering the learning style of students in designing the teaching and learning activities.

The learning style is one of the important aspects that influence the students' learning process. Every person has different preferences on how he/she receives information. How an individual acquires, retains, and retrieves information is a learning style (Alhourani, 2021). When designing teaching and learning activities, lecturers are often not aware that students may have different learning styles. However, one of the lecturers mentioned that she tried to understand the characteristic of her students when designing classroom activities.

*I understand that my students may have different learning styles that make them have different preferences in the class activities. For example, when I say 'starboard is the right side of a vessel', auditory students will understand immediately. However, visual students need pictures to help them understand the same things. So, when we introduce vocabulary to students, we have to utilize various teaching aids. Using pictures and videos will help a lot (NR).*

The issue of students' learning style, which affects their language learning, has drawn the interest of a number of scholars. They highlighted the significance of understanding students' learning styles that can help the lecturers design more effective instruction and more engaging class activities (Balci, 2017; Payaprom & Payaprom, 2020; Salam et al., 2020).

- c. Grouping lower proficiency students with higher proficiency students in a collaborative activity.

Students with low English proficiency often have affective barriers during the learning process. They often feel anxious and try to avoid interaction with the lecturers during class activities. When given a difficult task, they tend to give up easily. This problem was mentioned by AH during the interview.

*In my opinion, students with low proficiency have low resilience. When they face difficulty, they quickly say, "I cannot do this". If only they give more effort and push themselves to the limit, I believe they can accomplish the target (AH).*

Students with low English proficiency often realize that they have a very limited vocabulary and grammar. They also find it difficult to pronounce many words in English. Thus, they tend to keep silent and become passive in class. Group activity can become one of the solutions to reduce students' anxiety and boost their confidence. Many scholars have revealed the benefits of group work for students. Group work can create

a more relaxed learning atmosphere and thus reduce students' anxiety. Collaborative learning can make students feel more secure and decrease their concerns about negative performance evaluation (M. C. Liu et al., 2018).

One of the lecturers shared her experience regarding grouping students.

*I implement collaborative learning in my class. I group the low proficiency students with the high proficiency students so they can collaborate and help each other. In a class discussion, a group that only consists of low proficiency students tends to be passive. On the other hand, a group that consists of high proficiency students tends to dominate (NR).*

In grouping the students, NR mixed the low proficiency students with the high proficiency students with the purpose that they can help each other. This is in line with studies conducted by Kadir and Salija (2018) and Niu et al. (2018). They found that heterogenous grouping by combining students' abilities has a better impact than homogenous grouping. In collaborative learning, students with low proficiency levels can get benefit from heterogeneous grouping. They can receive help from their friends and learn more things. In the end, it can improve their self-confidence and reduce their anxiety.

d. Providing appropriate scaffolding for the students.

Lecturer's scaffolding is very important in language learning, especially for low proficiency students. The students need lecturers' assistance to help them learn new skills or concepts and accomplish their learning objectives (Mahan, 2022).

Some lecturers shared their experience of giving scaffolding to their students.

*To help students understand the materials, I simplify the vocabulary based on the students' ability. For example, I give the basic vocabulary first. After they master the vocabulary, I move to*

*the next level. I group the vocabulary based on the difficulty level and the frequency used in the maritime field (AH).*

*I use repetition as the strategy to teach students with low proficiency. The theory says that students need to be exposed to new vocabulary 7 to 12 times before they can save them in their memory. I usually give various activities and tasks to students to give them exposure. I also use pictures and videos to help students understand the materials (NR).*

There are a number of studies regarding scaffolding in language learning. Simplifying the language and using visuals help students to understand the teaching materials. The findings of this study support the studies conducted by Li and Zhang (2022), Liu et al. (2022), and Yildiz and Celik (2020). They agreed that scaffolding is a beneficial tool that encourages students' interaction and participation in the language classroom. The lecturers can select and implement the most appropriate scaffolding techniques based on the student's needs and characteristics.

## **CONCLUSION**

Teaching students with low-English proficiency is very challenging for lecturers, especially during ESP teaching. Special attention must be given to ensure that all students can fulfil the learning objectives. This study has revealed three main problems faced by the lecturers when teaching Maritime English online to students with low English proficiency: students' lack of interaction and participation, students' low motivation and interest in learning English, and extra time needed by the lecturers to explain the teaching materials.

This study brings several pedagogical implications to Maritime English teaching. Firstly, lecturers need to be creative to explore the most suitable techniques and strategies implemented in their classroom. The lecturers can use various texts, pictures, videos, or online platforms to expose students to maritime vocabulary. Secondly, the lecturers need to consider students' learning styles and preferences in designing classroom activities. Students

may have different characteristics and it is important that the lecturers can design the most appropriate activities that can accommodate all students. Thirdly, the lecturers can employ various scaffolding techniques to assist students' learning. For instance, they can group lower proficiency students with higher proficiency students in a collaborative activity as one of the strategies to improve students' motivation and reduce their anxiety. This study also highlights the importance of lecturers' technological and pedagogical knowledge and skills in supporting their teaching practices.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

The researchers would like to extend gratitude and appreciation to the lecturers who have been willing to share their experience in teaching Maritime English online as research participants.

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