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Стаття надійшла до редакції 07.05.2025 р.
Стаття прийнята до друку 20.05.2025 р.

УДК 378.811(111).004
DOI: 10.36550/2415-7988-2025-1-219-207-212

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ШТУЧНИЙ ІНТЕЛЕКТ ЯК ПАРТНЕР У РОЛЬОВІЙ ГРІ У ВИКЛАДАННІ АНГЛІЙСЬКОЇ МОВИ ЗА ПРОФЕСІЙНИМ СПРЯМУВАННЯМ

У даному дослідженні розглядається використання рольових ігор на основі штучного інтелекту (ШІ) у викладанні морської англійської мови для курсантів другого курсу інженерного факультету Національного університету «Одеська морська академія». Дослідження мало ціллю знайти засоби подолання обмежень традиційного рольового моделювання. Однією з поширених проблем є недостатній рівень володіння англійською мовою у партнера по рольовій грі, що може призводити до нереалістичних результатів рольових ігор і знижувати їхню освітню цінність.

Протягом п'яти тижнів участь у дослідженні взяли 24 курсанти. Метою було оцінити рівень залучення, емоційну реакцію та розвиток мовленнєвих навичок курсантів через імітацію професійних ситуацій морського спілкування за допомогою ШІ. Зворотний зв'язок збирався за допомогою анкетування, напівструктурованих інтерв'ю та спостереження на заняттях, а дані аналізувалися тематичним аналізом із використанням якісних методів.

Результати показали позитивний вплив ШІ на мовленнєву впевненість, емоційну стійкість та розвиток комунікативної компетентності. 78% студентів повідомили про менший страх спілкування англійською, а 71% відзначили зниження тривожності під час взаємодії із ШІ порівняно зі спілкуванням з іншим учасником. Студенти високо оцінили негайний і м'який зворотний зв'язок від ШІ, можливість відпрацювання навичок та індивідуалізовані виправлення, особливо у вживанні технічної морської лексики та стандартних фраз морського спілкування (SMCP). Безпечне навчальне середовище під час занять із ШІ дозволяло курсантам відпрацьовувати критично важливі сценарії реального спілкування, такі, як надзвичайні ситуації, інспекції портових органів та обговорення управління екіпажем, без страху осуду з боку однолітків або інструктора.

Однак, 45% студентів надаи перевагу поєднанню ШІ з рольовими іграми за участю людей, наголошуючи на незамінній цінності реального людського спілкування. 30% учасників звернули увагу на технічні недоліки, такі, як неправильне розпізнавання акцентів або надто загальні відповіді від ШІ. За результатами спостережень, взаємодія з ШІ сприяла довшим мовленнєвим висловлюванням, активному використанню лексики, більшій мовленнєвій свободі та готовності ризикувати у висловлюваннях через зниження стресу.

Дослідження наголошує, що рольові ігри з ШІ є малостресовим, мотивуючим, та ефективним інструментом розвитку комунікативної компетентності у спеціалізованій англійській мові, зокрема в морській англійській. Водночас підкреслюється важливість поєднання використання ШІ з живим людським спілкуванням і доцільність подальших досліджень довгострокового впливу на мовну компетентність студентів, а також удосконалення здатності ШІ враховувати культурні особливості, емоційний інтелект і невербальні комунікаційні сигнали, що є критично важливими для реальних морських операцій.

Ключові слова: *морська англійська мова, рольові ігри за участю ШІ, комунікативна компетентність, стандартні фрази морського спілкування (SMCP), зниження тривожності у спілкуванні, критично важливі комунікативні ситуації.*

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ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE AS A ROLE-PLAY PARTNER IN TEACHING ENGLISH FOR SPECIFIC PURPOSES

The present study explores the use of AI-powered role-plays in teaching Maritime English for second-year engineering cadets at the National University «Odesa Maritime Academy». The research is aimed to provide a solution to certain limitations of traditional role-playing. One of the common challenges is insufficient English proficiency of a human peer in a role-play, which can lead to unrealistic role-play outcomes and decrease its educational value.

Conducted over a five-week period with 24 participants, the research aimed to assess learners' engagement, emotional response, and language development through AI-driven simulations of professional maritime communication scenarios. The participants' feedback was collected via questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observation, and analyzed with the help of a thematic analysis using qualitative methods.

The results showed a considerable positive impact of AI on learners' speaking confidence, emotional resilience, and communicative competence. 78% of students reported feeling less afraid to speak English, and 71% noticed reduced anxiety when interacting with AI compared to peers. Learners appreciated AI's immediate, gentle feedback, access to repeated practice opportunities, and personalized correction, especially in using technical maritime vocabulary and Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP). A safe learning environment during AI sessions gave the learners an opportunity to practice high-stakes real-like communication scenarios, such as emergencies, port authority inspections, and crew management discussions, without the pressure of peer or role-play instructor judgment.

However, 45% of students expressed a wish to blend AI sessions with traditional peer role-plays, noting the irreplaceable value of real human communication. About 30% highlighted occasional technical issues, such as AI misinterpreting accents or providing general answers. According to the results of classroom observations, AI interaction fostered longer speech turns, active vocabulary use, greater fluency and more risk-taking behavior in speaking tasks due to stress reduction.

The study points out that AI-facilitated role-playing offers a low-stress, motivating, personalized, and effective tool for developing communicative competence in English for Specific Purposes, namely Maritime English. However, it emphasizes the importance of blending AI use with human interaction and appeals for the future research on long-term effects on learners' language proficiency, and improvement of AI's capacity to account for cultural nuances, emotional intelligence, and non-verbal communication cues that are crucial for real-world maritime operations.

***Key words**: Maritime English, AI-facilitated role-plays, communicative competence, Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP), language anxiety reduction, high-stakes communicative situations.*

Problem statement and relevance. English proficiency is not just a communicative tool for a mariner; it is a gateway to their safety and career growth. Seafarers operate at high stakes, and the application of interactive activities considerably fosters the acquisition of technical vocabulary and keeps students motivated while learning. However, mastering vocabulary implies not only memorization but using it in real-world shipboard interactions. Many students at maritime institutions struggle with practical application of the maritime vocabulary in professional contexts. Key challenges involve anxiety, fear of making mistakes, and a lack of realistic practice opportunities within job-specific settings.

Role-playing is an effective method with a proven effectiveness with regard to professional vocabulary application in realistic contexts and communicative practice, that authentically reflects onboard communication, such as interacting with fellow crew members, ship authorities, or port officials. [1; 2] Students assume workplace roles, which helps them understand how English is used in their professional settings. These activities are essential for practicing specialized terminology, Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP), and interaction patterns common to the maritime domain.

However, one of the most common challenges in traditional role-playing is that students may have insufficient command of English required to fully engage in realistic, job-specific communication. This situation is particularly actual in Maritime English, where specialized vocabulary and Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP) are vital for effective communication and safe work at sea. If students lack the proficiency to understand or produce required terms accurately, the role-play may become a confusing practice and fail to simulate the precise communication needed in real maritime situations.

Theoretical analysis of recent researches and publications. The use of role-plays in teaching English for Specific Purposes (ESP), particularly in the context of maritime English, has been explored by numerous researchers. [2; 3] This pedagogical tool has proven its effectiveness in language acquisition, communicative competence development, and student engagement. In maritime contexts, role-playing is of particularly high importance, since the issue of safety is critical at sea. So, an opportunity to immerse into real-world maritime scenarios helps learners practice clear and accurate communication in English, crucial in the maritime domain. Role-play scenarios enable students to use the language in job-specific circumstances involving negotiating with port authorities, responding to an emergency, or discussing operational matters with colleagues.

Such rehearsal in simulated role-plays can prepare students to handle real-world challenges with more confidence, both in terms of the language and behavior. By replicating the tasks on giving instructions, requesting information, reporting deficiencies, etc., learners consolidate the knowledge of professional vocabulary and structures required for successful communication at sea.

Researchers point out the particular effectiveness of role-plays in developing communicative fluency

and improving listening skills of learners. Along with the communicative competence, students practice appropriate register and use communication patterns specific to maritime communication. [4; 5] Furthermore, swapping roles in a role-play, repetition, and variation of similar tasks in different contexts reinforces learners' command of the language [6].

Seafarers work in stressful environments often requiring quick and precise actions. A significant advantage of role-playing is that it provides profession-specific settings including emergency scenarios, in a low-risk environment, greatly reducing anxiety on learners' way to English proficiency through mistakes and victories. A wide range of experts agree that learning is most effective when it takes place in a safe environment, free from fear of negative consequences and mistakes [5; 6].

Role-plays demonstrate an active learning approach that encourages learners to think critically and interact with other participants. This active learning approach proves to be effective in developing problem-solving skills which contribute to competencies that elevate a seafarer's performance. Sense of purpose in language learning is vital for maintaining learners' motivation. Studies find that learners are more likely to stay engaged when they can see the relevance of their studies to real-world situations [4].

The Purpose of the article. This article explores the application of artificial intelligence (AI) as a solution to the challenges associated with traditional role-playing in maritime English instruction. The study demonstrates how the integration of AI into role-playing activities can foster students' ability to perform job-specific interaction in realistic engineering scenarios. It focuses on the use of AI as an expert role-play partner capable of providing immediate feedback on linguistic accuracy and the appropriateness of specialized vocabulary and structures. This article has the purpose to show the effectiveness of AI-integrated roleplaying in improving learners' fluency, strengthening their motivation and advancing their language proficiency within professional settings.

Presentation of the main material of the research

Limitations of traditional role-playing in Maritime English Instruction

While being widely acknowledged as an effective method for teaching English for Specific Purposes, particularly in the maritime context, role-plays with human peers have certain limitations that can reduce role-playing effectiveness in developing language skills required for real-like maritime communication.

Lack of Proficiency and miscommunication

Lack of proficiency is especially noticeable among beginners and pre-intermediate students. It can result in language errors, mispronunciation of maritime terminology, or failure to apply SMCP correctly. Additionally, students may experience difficulties with representing the scenario of a role-play. These deficiencies can lead to unrealistic role-play outcomes and, thus, limit the authenticity of the role-play and decrease its educational value.

In maritime settings, communication breakdown or miscommunication can compromise operational safety and lead to serious accidents, highlighting the importance of using precise language and standardized communication phrases in maritime communications. Furthermore, a lack of immediate corrective feedback in traditional role-playing prevents students from realizing their mistakes in the moment. Consequently, errors may go unnoticed and reinforced over time.

Dependence on Teacher-Facilitated Feedback

Traditional role-plays have no other alternative than to rely on the teacher-facilitated feedback. The instructor's role in providing corrections and guidance to the students is often critical. However, human factor related to perception or interpretation**,** may not always be immediately relevant or comprehensive. This can create a sense of insecurity among students and their fear of making mistakes in front of the group. Such valuable elements of a learning process, as peer feedback and independent self-assessment can also be infringed by the teacher-centric feedback approach. Finally, in large groups, instructors may be physically restricted in the ability to give individual feedback to all students during a role-play. All this leads to the lack of personalized support essential for the improvement of learners' language proficiency in specific areas of maritime communication.

Inflexibility of Time and Space

Traditional role-plays require certain time and sufficient space, especially with multiple participants, while at the same time limiting opportunities to practice scenarios that require mobility or the use of technology. The latter becomes a real problem for students who are engaged in online learning. As a result, many mariners are deprived of the opportunity to practice maritime English in real-like scenarios through role-plays, which leaves a gap in key communicative skills.

Limited opportunity for repetition and mastery

It's a well-known fact that effective mastery of vocabulary or grammar often requires multiple exposures to a single communicative function. Traditional classroom-based role-plays are usually constrained by time, giving students one or two chances to role-play a scenario. Re-practicing or immediate correction of mistakes made in the course of initial attempts is often impossible, which impairs the learning outcomes. In numerous real maritime settings, automaticity is the key to successful performance; therefore, insufficient repetition prevents students from developing required fluency and confidence for real-world communication.

Lack of objective evaluation criteria

The evaluation of performance in traditional roleplaying tends to be subjective, for it relies mostly on the instructor's perception of fluency, accuracy, and appropriateness. Human factors, such as prioritizing certain vocabulary over structure, or valuing active participation over correctness, can negatively impact the objectivity and transparency of students' progress assessment. As a result, students may receive inconsistent feedback which creates confusion and undermines students' ability to target specific skills during practice.

The Role of AI in Enhancing Role-playing Exercises

AI in teaching ESP is a relatively new but promising method, particularly in specialized spheres. AI's application ranges from automated assessment to personalized learning roadmaps, as well as complex conversation simulations. The experts exploring AI application in teaching, emphasize how effective AI is in creating individualized learning experiences by adapting content and feedback to the learner's needs. [1]

In maritime English, AI can be used to simulate realistic communication with an expert-level interlocutor, offering more flexibility and precision than traditional classroom methods.

The analysis of the existing commercial AI-powered systems has proven the potential of the application of AI in role-playing for language learning. These cases provide valuable insights into how AI can be used in teaching ESP, particularly Maritime English. For example, a widely used language-learning platform Rosetta Stone integrates AI-driven speech recognition technology. The system offers real-time feedback on pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary. It can adapt content to the learner's language level and provide personalized feedback.

The integration of AI into role-plays suggests a promising solution to the challenges stemming from traditional role-playing. AI as a role-play partner can simulate realistic dialogue and provide immediate feedback, aligning with various settings and different levels of proficiency. Beginners can practice simpler dialogues, while more advanced students could be engaged in more complex communications. Such approach lets avoid overwhelming, though preserves a challenging character of the practice.

AI can correct learners' mistakes and suggest alternative phrases. Also, it can model the correct use of Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP), giving learners an opportunity to practice SMCP appropriately. The immediate feedback addresses the learner's mistakes on the spot. Besides, such role-plays still create safe and controlled environment for professional interaction, ensuring comfortable learning. In emergency scenarios, alongside with the provision of a feedback on the linguistic accuracy, AI can assess the obedience to a certain procedure and protocol by its human role-play partner. This ensures that students have an opportunity to verify their knowledge and practice managing high-stakes situations using clear, concise, and accurate language.

An AI-powered partner can simulate a wide variety of roles and communication styles, helping students prepare for communication with international crew members or port authorities. It is acquiring greater significance in the globalized maritime industry, where crewmembers often come from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Besides, AI's ability to simulate various communication scenarios makes it possible to engage learners with a diverse set of situations they may encounter in their careers, broadening their learning experience. For example, a student might practice communication during a collision situation, handling both technical issues and emotional crew responses. It's not an easy task to design such complex, multi-faceted scenarios manually. In addition, AI can easily cycle through many different scenarios without time or resources constraints in contrast with instructor-facilitated role-plays.

Thus, by providing real-time feedback, simulating a variety of roles and communication styles, and offering a wide range of multi-faceted learning scenarios, AI can better equip learners for the challenges they will encounter in professional communications.

In maritime English, virtual role-plays suggest realistic yet controlled settings, which is particularly important for practicing high-stakes professional communication in low-pressure environment. Repeated exposure to language skills without real-world consequences of mistakes creates an effective learning cycle that makes the learning journey safer and language proficiency easier to achieve.

Prompts for AI to ensure educational and efficient role-plays

An appropriate prompting to guide AI during its interactions with a learner is crucial. The following are examples of possible prompts that can be used in AI-powered role-plays:

Scenario 1: Emergency Situation Communication

Prompt for AI: «You are the captain of a ship in distress. The student is a crew member reporting a fire on board. Guide the student through the emergency procedure using Standard Marine Communication Phrases. Ensure clarity in the message, and correct any misused phrases.»

Scenario 2: Communication with Port Authorities

Prompt for AI: «The student is contacting port authorities to request docking instructions. Provide the student with the necessary questions to ask, and correct any errors in phrasing or tone, ensuring professionalism in the conversation.»

Scenario 3: Weather Report Dialogue

Prompt for AI: «The student is reporting a severe weather condition. Ensure that the student uses the correct vocabulary and structures when providing a weather report, and offers suggestions for improvement if the communication is unclear.»

Scenario 4: *Bunkering operations communication*

Prompt for AI: «Act as a Second Engineer supervising a bunkering operation. The student, acting as a motorman, reports on taking ullages. Guide the student to use proper bunkering terminology, ensure the use of standard safety communication procedures, and correct any unclear or incorrect phrasing.»

Scenario 5: *Medical Assistance Request*

Prompt for AI: «The student needs to request medical assistance via radio for an injured crew member. You are the Chief Officer who helps the student to formulate the message using Standard Marine Communication Phrases, ensuring correct transmission of key information (injury type, condition, location), and correct any language or procedural mistakes.»

Research description and outcomes

This study explored the application of AI as an expert role-play partner in ESP classroom. A qualitative approach was used to evaluate learners' engagement and language development. 24 second-

year engineering cadets (age 18-20) of the National university "Odesa Maritime Academy" took part in this experiment. The study lasted 5 weeks.

The methods of data collection involved questionnaires, semi-structured interviews, and classroom observations. The data were received from 2 questionnaires with open questions (after week 2 and 5), semi-structured interviews with 10 random students, and classroom observation carried out by the instructor during role-playing.

After completing the AI-driven role-play sessions, participants were asked to complete a semi-structured, open-ended questionnaire designed to assess the learners' experiences. The questionnaire consisted of eight questions focusing on the participants' emotional response, perception of language improvement, user experience and motivation, and future recommendations.

Alongside with collecting the feedback with the help of the questionnaires, 8 randomly chosen students were interviewed verbally after roleplaying sessions to provide deeper insights into the individual experiences of learners during the AI-facilitated role-plays.

The results obtained from the responses during these interviews were as follows:

- *Skepticism and gradual appreciation*: three students mentioned their initial skepticism about AI, but their attitude gradually shifted to appreciation after engaging in role-plays with AI.
- *Preference for blended model*: consistent with the questionnaire results, all students noted their preference for blending AI with human-participated role-plays. While they recognize the clear benefits of AI-involved practice, they mentioned that it still felt impersonal compared to authentic human communication.
- *English proficiency improvement*: seven students noticed improvements in the practical application of maritime vocabulary and phraseology, particularly SMCP. They pointed out greater confidence in speaking about emergency situations.
- *Suggestions on improvement of AI-powered role-plays*: aggregated recommendations included developing more complex scenarios that account for multiple participants from different cultural backgrounds.

Data were analyzed using a thematic analysis that allowed to identify common patterns, insights, and areas for improvement coming from the participants' feedback. Recurring themes were grouped manually in broader categories.

The questionnaire included the following open-ended questions:

1. How did you feel when communicating with AI compared to speaking with peers?
2. Which situation is more stressful for you: role-playing with AI or with a peer?
3. What language skills (vocabulary, grammar, fluency, etc.) do you think improved most during AI-facilitated role-plays? Why?
4. How did you find AI's corrections? Please, give examples, if possible.
5. What did you enjoy most about role-playing with AI?
6. What was challenging when interacting with AI? How did you cope with those challenges?
7. Would you like to continue using AI for English learning? Why or why not?
8. What recommendations would you give for making role-plays with AI more effective?

Thematic analysis of the questionnaires defined the following:

- 78% of the participants pointed out feeling less afraid to speak English after AI-facilitated role-plays.
- 71% of the students reported reduced anxiety during the interaction with AI.
- 68% of the students appreciated the immediate and useful feedback, «gentle correction».
- At the same time 45% of the students noted that they would like more human interaction, considering the latter 'irreplaceable'.
- Finally, 30% of the students reported having technical difficulties with AI, when it occasionally failed to understand their input or gave an irrelevant response.

Classroom observation demonstrated a high engagement level of the students during their interaction with AI. The students showed longer turns in speaking compared to peer role-plays. Besides, the students were open to AI corrections and accepted its feedback in part of lexical analysis and contextual appropriateness without embarrassment. During AI-sessions, the learners showed less signs of anxiety (hesitation, avoidance) than in traditional role-playing.

AI-facilitated role-playing in teaching Maritime English positively impacts students' emotional engagement and their self-confidence in speaking English. The low-stress environment for practicing high-stakes communications create favorable conditions for improving students' communicative competence in relation to profession-specific contexts. However, preferred combining AI practice with traditional human interactions.

This study has certain limitations: a small focus group (24 learners), short duration (5 weeks), lack of external language testing proving the reliability of self-reported data.

Conclusion and further research. The results of the current study on the integration of AI as an expert role-play partner in teaching maritime English demonstrated the considerable potential of this approach for practical implementation of specialized vocabulary in realistic maritime scenarios. The findings of this research indicate that students engaged in AI-based role-playing demonstrated notable improvements in speaking confidence, and language fluency during interaction with AI. Furthermore, they showed the ability to correctly use Standard Marine Communication Phrases (SMCP) in simulated maritime scenarios.

The participants mentioned a safe, low-stress atmosphere during AI sessions, which let them communicate without fear of judgement from peers or instructors. This holistic approach resulted in students' greater fluency and accuracy in part of SMCP during interaction with AI. Additionally, the students noted that real-time feedback from the AI partner was

helpful and relevant, especially in the use of technical maritime language, which is often a challenge in traditional classroom settings.

The AI's ability to adapt to each student's proficiency level provided a personalized learning approach, ensuring that each learner was appropriately challenged, engaged and motivated throughout the process.

AI-assisted role-plays demonstrate strong potential for Maritime English training, particularly in building students' confidence and reducing their fear of communication. Through a personalized, real-time feedback and realistic communication scenarios, AI creates a safer, engaging and adaptive environment for improving students' communicative competencies necessary to ensure more effective responses in real-life maritime situations.

However, alongside with these promising results, our study also highlighted areas for further research. One of them was suggested by the participants of the experiment: an opportunity of blended model of AI-led role-play exercises and human peer communication.

Further research should measure long-term effects on actual language proficiency. Another aspect that needs further investigation is the improvement of AI's conversational capabilities to simulate more complex, multifaceted scenarios reflecting cultural nuances**,** regional language variations**,** and non-verbal cues. These elements play an important role in effective interaction and can offer even more realistic simulations of real-world maritime communication challenges.

Additionally, further research should explore the integration of AI-driven role-playing with other digital technologies such as augmented reality (AR) or virtual reality (VR)**.** These technologies could provide a deeper immersion into maritime scenarios, enhancing the authenticity and depth of role-plays.

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ВІДОМОСТІ ПРО АВТОРА

МОЛОДЦОВА Валерія – кандидат педагогічних наук, доцент, доцент кафедри англійської мови в морській інженерії Національного університету «Одеська Морська Академія».

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Стаття надійшла до редакції 09.05.2025 р.
Стаття прийнята до друку 22.05.2025 р.