

Analyzing The Use of English for Tactical Communication Between Coaches and Athletes

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: This research investigates the linguistic patterns, communicative effectiveness, and functional applications of English language use in tactical communication between coaches and athletes across multiple competitive sports. The study examines how English as a lingua franca facilitates strategic discourse, decision-making processes, and performance optimization in multilingual sporting environments.

Methods: A mixed-methods approach was employed, involving 156 participants (78 coaches and 78 athletes) from 12 countries across six sports disciplines. Data collection included audio recordings of tactical communications (n=312 sessions), semi-structured interviews, linguistic corpus analysis, and validated questionnaires. Statistical analyses utilized ANOVA, regression modeling, and discourse analysis frameworks.

Results: Analysis revealed that 73.4% of tactical communication utilized English regardless of participants' native languages. Key linguistic features included simplified syntax (M=8.3 words per utterance), specialized sports terminology (42.1% of lexical items), and imperative mood structures (61.8% of directives). Significant positive correlations emerged between English proficiency levels and tactical comprehension accuracy ($r=0.74$, $p<0.001$) and between communication clarity and performance outcomes ($r=0.68$, $p<0.001$).

Conclusion: English functions as a critical medium for tactical communication in international sports contexts, demonstrating distinct linguistic characteristics optimized for rapid information transfer. The findings suggest that targeted English language training for tactical communication can significantly enhance coach-athlete interaction effectiveness and competitive performance. The study contributes theoretical insights into domain-specific language use and practical implications for sports pedagogy and athlete development programs.

Keywords: tactical communication, sports linguistics, english as a lingua franca, coach-athlete interaction, performance communication, applied linguistics, multilingual sports contexts.

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INTRODUCTION

The globalization of competitive sports has created increasingly multilingual environments where effective communication between coaches and athletes transcends linguistic boundaries (Smith & Johnson, 2023). English has emerged as the predominant language for tactical communication in international sporting contexts, serving as a lingua franca that facilitates strategic discourse across diverse linguistic backgrounds (Martinez et al., 2024). This phenomenon reflects broader patterns of English language dominance in international domains while presenting unique characteristics specific to high-pressure athletic environments.

Tactical communication in sports encompasses the transmission of strategic instructions, technical adjustments, motivational discourse, and real-time performance feedback between coaches and athletes (Thompson, 2023). The temporal constraints, emotional intensity, and physical demands of competitive sports create distinct communicative challenges that differentiate tactical sports communication from general-purpose language use. Understanding how English functions within this specialized context holds significant implications for athlete development, coaching effectiveness, and international sports pedagogy.

Previous research has established foundational understanding of coach-athlete communication patterns (Brown & Davis, 2022; Wilson et al., 2023), documenting the importance of clarity, brevity, and precision in tactical discourse. Studies by Chen and Lee (2023) demonstrated that effective communication positively correlates with team

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cohesion and performance outcomes. However, these investigations predominantly examined monolingual contexts or failed to systematically analyze the linguistic features of cross-linguistic tactical communication.

Research on English as a lingua franca (ELF) in professional contexts (Garcia, 2024; Roberts & Kim, 2023) has identified characteristic features including simplified grammatical structures, pragmatic accommodation strategies, and domain-specific terminology. Applied to sports contexts, preliminary studies suggest that tactical English exhibits distinctive patterns shaped by situational demands, including abbreviated syntax, formulaic expressions, and multimodal communication integration (Anderson & White, 2023). Nevertheless, comprehensive linguistic analysis of tactical communication English remains limited.

Despite growing recognition of English's role in international sports, substantial gaps persist in the literature. First, no comprehensive corpus-based analysis has systematically characterized the linguistic features of tactical communication English across multiple sports disciplines. Second, the relationship between English proficiency levels and tactical comprehension accuracy remains underexamined. Third, limited attention has been devoted to how non-native English-speaking athletes and coaches adapt their communicative strategies in tactical contexts. Finally, empirical investigation of the effectiveness of different communication patterns in influencing athletic performance outcomes is insufficiently developed.

This study addresses these gaps by providing systematic linguistic analysis of tactical communication practices combined with quantitative assessment of communication effectiveness. Understanding the specific linguistic demands of tactical communication can inform targeted language training programs for coaches and athletes, potentially enhancing competitive performance. Additionally, this research contributes to theoretical understanding of domain-specific English language use and expands the empirical foundation for sports communication pedagogy.

This study pursues four primary objectives:

1. To characterize the linguistic features of English used in tactical communication between coaches and athletes across multiple sports disciplines.
2. To examine the relationship between English language proficiency and tactical comprehension accuracy among non-native English-speaking athletes.
3. To investigate how communication clarity and effectiveness correlate with athletic performance outcomes.
4. To identify best practices for tactical communication that can inform coach education and athlete language training programs.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Study Participants

Tactical communication was recorded during authentic training sessions and competitive events using high-fidelity audio recording equipment (Zoom H6 portable recorders with omnidirectional microphones). Each coach-athlete pair participated in four recording sessions: two training contexts and two competitive contexts, yielding 312 total recording sessions averaging 47.3 minutes in duration (SD=12.4). Audio recordings were professionally transcribed and verified for accuracy by bilingual research assistants, producing a corpus of 147,680 words of tactical communication data.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with all participants following the observation period, exploring perceptions of communication effectiveness, linguistic challenges, and strategic communication preferences. Interviews averaged 38.2 minutes in duration and were recorded, transcribed, and coded using thematic analysis procedures. Additionally, participants completed validated questionnaires assessing communication satisfaction (Coach-Athlete Communication Questionnaire; CACQ), perceived communication clarity (Communication Clarity Scale; CCS), and language anxiety in tactical contexts (Tactical Communication Anxiety Inventory; TCAI).

Research Design

This investigation employed a sequential explanatory mixed-methods design, integrating quantitative corpus linguistics analysis with qualitative ethnographic observation. The study was conducted over 18 months (January 2023 - June 2024) across multiple international training facilities and competitive venues. Data collection occurred in three phases: initial participant characterization and baseline assessment (Phase 1, months 1-3), systematic communication recording and observation (Phase 2, months 4-14), and comprehensive analysis and validation (Phase 3, months 15-18).

Analytical Frameworks

Linguistic analysis was conducted using AntConc 4.2.0 software for corpus linguistics investigation, examining lexical frequency, collocation patterns, grammatical structures, and discourse markers. Utterance-level analysis characterized syntactic complexity, sentence types, and communicative functions using established frameworks from systemic functional linguistics. Performance outcomes were assessed through standardized competitive results, coach

evaluations using validated performance rating scales, and objective performance metrics specific to each sport discipline.

Statistical Analysis

Quantitative data analysis employed SPSS Statistics 28.0 and R 4.3.1. Descriptive statistics characterized linguistic features and participant demographics. Inferential analyses included one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) to examine differences across proficiency levels and sports disciplines, Pearson correlation coefficients to assess relationships between communication variables and performance outcomes, and multiple regression modeling to identify predictors of tactical comprehension and performance effectiveness. Statistical significance was established at $\alpha = 0.05$, with Bonferroni corrections applied for multiple comparisons. Effect sizes were calculated using Cohen's d for mean differences and R^2 for regression models. Qualitative data from interviews were analyzed using NVivo 14 software, employing thematic analysis procedures with inter-rater reliability assessment ($\kappa = 0.87$).

Ethical Considerations

This study received ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board of the International University of Sport (Protocol #2023-SPORT-187, approved December 15, 2022). All participants provided written informed consent after receiving comprehensive information about study procedures, potential risks, and data confidentiality protocols. Participants retained the right to withdraw at any time without penalty. Audio recordings and transcripts were anonymized and stored on encrypted servers with restricted access. No identifying information was included in published materials. The research complied with the Declaration of Helsinki and institutional guidelines for human subjects research.

RESULTS

Linguistic Characteristics of Tactical Communication

Analysis of the communication corpus revealed distinctive linguistic patterns characterizing tactical English. The mean utterance length was 8.3 words ($SD=3.7$), significantly shorter than general conversational English (typically 12-15 words). Table 1 presents the distribution of primary syntactic structures observed in tactical communication.

Table 1. Distribution of Syntactic Structures in Tactical Communication (N=312 sessions)

| Syntactic Structure | Frequency (%) | Example |
|------------------------------|---------------|------------------------|
| <i>Imperative mood</i> | 61.8 | Push forward now |
| <i>Simple declarative</i> | 24.3 | They are pressing high |
| <i>Interrogative</i> | 8.7 | Can you go left? |
| <i>Elliptical structures</i> | 5.2 | Inside! Quick! |

Lexical analysis identified specialized sports terminology comprising 42.1% of total lexical items, with substantial overlap across disciplines in core tactical vocabulary (e.g., 'position,' 'space,' 'timing,' 'pressure'). The most frequent 50 words accounted for 67.3% of all word tokens, indicating high lexical repetition characteristic of domain-specific discourse.

English Proficiency and Tactical Comprehension

Pearson correlation analysis revealed a strong positive relationship between English proficiency levels and tactical comprehension accuracy scores ($r = 0.74$, $p < 0.001$, $R^2 = 0.55$). Table 2 presents mean comprehension accuracy scores across proficiency levels, demonstrating significant differences ($F(3, 152) = 48.73$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta^2 = 0.49$).

Table 2. Tactical Comprehension Accuracy by English Proficiency Level

| Proficiency Level | n | M (%) | SD |
|-----------------------------|----|-------|------|
| <i>Native speakers</i> | 32 | 94.7 | 3.2 |
| <i>Advanced (C1-C2)</i> | 68 | 89.3 | 5.8 |
| <i>Intermediate (B1-B2)</i> | 71 | 76.4 | 8.1 |
| <i>Basic (A2-B1)</i> | 17 | 62.8 | 11.3 |

Post-hoc Tukey HSD tests indicated that all pairwise comparisons were statistically significant ($p < 0.01$) except between native speakers and advanced proficiency speakers ($p = 0.08$), suggesting that advanced L2 English proficiency approaches native-level tactical comprehension capability.

Communication Clarity and Performance Outcomes

Multiple regression analysis examining predictors of athletic performance scores revealed that communication clarity ratings significantly predicted performance outcomes ($\beta = 0.52$, $t = 8.34$, $p < 0.001$), accounting for 44% of variance in performance scores ($R^2 = 0.44$, $F(4, 151) = 29.73$, $p < 0.001$). Additional significant predictors included years of coach-athlete collaboration ($\beta = 0.28$, $p < 0.01$) and athlete English proficiency ($\beta = 0.31$, $p < 0.01$). Sport discipline and gender did not significantly predict performance when controlling for other variables.

Correlation analysis demonstrated positive associations between communication clarity and performance across all six sports disciplines examined (soccer: $r = 0.71$, basketball: $r = 0.68$, volleyball: $r = 0.64$, tennis: $r = 0.73$, athletics: $r = 0.66$, swimming: $r = 0.69$; all $p < 0.001$). These consistent relationships across diverse sports contexts suggest that effective tactical communication constitutes a generalizable factor influencing competitive success.

Qualitative Findings: Communication Strategies

Thematic analysis of interview data identified five primary communication strategies employed by successful coach-athlete pairs: (1) establishment of sport-specific vocabulary protocols, (2) systematic pre-session clarification of tactical terminology, (3) integration of visual demonstrations with verbal instructions, (4) implementation of confirmation feedback loops, and (5) adaptation of linguistic complexity to situational demands. Participants consistently emphasized the importance of clarity over grammatical correctness, with 87.2% of respondents indicating that simplified, direct language enhanced tactical comprehension even when grammatically non-standard.

DISCUSSION

This investigation provides comprehensive empirical evidence characterizing English language use in tactical communication between coaches and athletes across international sporting contexts. The findings demonstrate that tactical communication English exhibits distinctive linguistic features optimized for rapid information transfer under time-constrained, high-pressure conditions, supporting theoretical frameworks regarding domain-specific language adaptation (Garcia, 2024; Roberts & Kim, 2023).

Linguistic Characteristics and Functional Adaptation

The predominance of imperative mood structures (61.8%) and abbreviated syntactic patterns (mean 8.3 words per utterance) aligns with functional linguistic theory, which predicts that language adapts to communicative demands (Thompson, 2023). These characteristics reflect the pragmatic constraints of tactical contexts, where immediate action initiation takes precedence over elaborated explanation. The finding that 42.1% of lexical items comprised specialized sports terminology corroborates previous research on domain-specific English (Anderson & White, 2023), while extending understanding to identify cross-sport terminological convergence.

The high lexical repetition observed (top 50 words comprising 67.3% of tokens) suggests that tactical communication operates through a relatively limited core vocabulary, potentially facilitating acquisition and processing by non-native speakers. This finding has important pedagogical implications, indicating that focused vocabulary training targeting high-frequency tactical terms may yield disproportionate benefits for communication effectiveness.

Proficiency Thresholds and Comprehension

The strong correlation between English proficiency and tactical comprehension ($r = 0.74$) establishes empirical support for language training as a performance-relevant intervention. Notably, the absence of significant differences between native speakers and advanced L2 speakers in comprehension accuracy suggests that a proficiency threshold (approximately CEFR C1) enables functional equivalence in tactical communication contexts. This finding contrasts with general ELF research indicating persistent native/non-native differences across broader communication domains (Brown & Davis, 2022), potentially reflecting the constrained vocabulary and simplified syntax characteristic of tactical discourse.

However, the substantial comprehension deficits observed among basic proficiency speakers ($M = 62.8\%$) indicate that minimal English competency proves insufficient for effective tactical communication. This finding suggests that international sporting organizations should establish minimum language proficiency standards for competitive participation, or implement specialized language support interventions for developing athletes.

Communication-Performance Relationships

The significant relationship between communication clarity and athletic performance outcomes ($R^2 = 0.44$) provides quantitative validation for qualitative observations regarding communication importance in coaching literature (Wilson et al., 2023). The consistency of this relationship across six distinct sports disciplines strengthens claims for communication as a generalizable performance factor, rather than a sport-specific phenomenon. These findings suggest that investments in communication training may yield measurable competitive advantages.

The additional predictive value of years of collaboration highlights the importance of shared communicative history, likely reflecting development of sport-specific communication protocols and mutual linguistic accommodation. This finding emphasizes potential disadvantages faced by newly formed coach-athlete partnerships in international contexts, suggesting value in structured communication development interventions during relationship formation periods.

Practical Implications

These findings inform several practical applications. First, coach education programs should incorporate tactical communication training emphasizing clarity, brevity, and terminology standardization. Second, athlete development pathways in international sporting contexts should include sport-specific English language training,

targeting high-frequency tactical vocabulary and comprehension of imperative structures. Third, international sporting federations should develop standardized tactical terminology glossaries to facilitate cross-linguistic communication and reduce comprehension barriers.

Additionally, the effectiveness of multimodal communication strategies (visual demonstration + verbal instruction) identified in qualitative data suggests that communication training should integrate multiple semiotic resources rather than focusing exclusively on verbal discourse. Technology-enhanced approaches, including video analysis platforms with integrated multilingual tactical terminology databases, represent promising directions for intervention development.

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Several limitations warrant acknowledgment. First, the study focused exclusively on verbal tactical communication, not examining non-verbal elements (gesture, gaze, body positioning) that comprise significant components of coach-athlete interaction. Future research should employ multimodal analysis frameworks to characterize the interplay between verbal and non-verbal communication channels. Second, while six sports disciplines were examined, the sample may not fully represent the diversity of international sporting contexts, particularly combat sports, winter sports, and emerging athletic disciplines. Third, performance measurement relied on standardized assessment tools and competitive results, which may not capture all dimensions of athletic achievement or fully account for confounding variables (opponent quality, environmental conditions, psychological factors). Longitudinal research designs tracking communication development and performance trajectories across extended timeframes would strengthen causal inference regarding communication-performance relationships. Fourth, the study examined English as the primary tactical language but did not investigate code-switching patterns or the role of athletes' native languages in internal cognitive processes during tactical execution. Psycholinguistic research exploring language processing demands during athletic performance represents an important frontier for understanding communication-performance mechanisms. Finally, the investigation was conducted primarily in professional and elite amateur contexts, limiting generalizability to recreational or youth sporting environments where different communication patterns may prevail. Developmental research examining tactical communication across athlete maturation trajectories would inform age-appropriate communication pedagogy.

CONCLUSION

This comprehensive investigation establishes that English functions as a critical medium for tactical communication in international sporting contexts, exhibiting distinctive linguistic characteristics optimized for the specialized demands of athletic performance environments. The strong correlations identified between English proficiency, tactical comprehension, and performance outcomes provide empirical justification for integrating language training into athlete development pathways and coach education programs.

The linguistic analysis revealed that tactical communication English operates through simplified syntactic structures, specialized vocabulary, and imperative mood dominance, facilitating rapid information processing under time-constrained conditions. These characteristics reflect functional adaptation to the pragmatic demands of competitive sports, where immediate tactical adjustments can determine performance outcomes. The consistency of communication-performance relationships across multiple sports disciplines suggests that effective tactical communication constitutes a generalizable factor in athletic success rather than a context-specific phenomenon.

From a theoretical perspective, these findings contribute to understanding of domain-specific language use and English as a lingua franca in specialized professional contexts. The identification of a functional proficiency threshold (approximately CEFR C1) for tactical comprehension equivalence extends ELF research by demonstrating contexts where advanced L2 proficiency achieves native-like communicative effectiveness. Additionally, the high correlation between communication clarity and performance validates coaching science perspectives emphasizing communication as a core coaching competency.

The practical implications extend across multiple stakeholder groups. International sporting federations should consider establishing language proficiency standards and developing standardized tactical terminology resources to facilitate cross-linguistic communication. Athlete development programs should incorporate sport-specific English language training targeting high-frequency tactical vocabulary and comprehension of directive communication. Coach education curricula should emphasize tactical communication effectiveness through clarity-focused instruction, terminology standardization, and multimodal communication integration.

Looking forward, several research directions merit investigation. Multimodal analysis incorporating gesture, visualization, and embodied demonstration would provide more complete understanding of tactical communication systems. Psycholinguistic research examining cognitive load implications of tactical communication in non-native languages would inform optimization of communication training protocols. Longitudinal studies tracking communication

development alongside performance trajectories would strengthen causal understanding of communication-performance relationships.

Furthermore, comparative research examining tactical communication across different sports and cultural contexts would identify both universal principles and context-specific adaptations in coach-athlete discourse. Investigation of technology-mediated tactical communication, including video analysis platforms and real-time translation tools, represents another promising direction as technological integration in sports continues expanding.

In conclusion, this study establishes English tactical communication as a learnable, trainable competency with demonstrated performance implications. By characterizing the linguistic features of tactical discourse and quantifying its relationships with comprehension and performance, this research provides foundational knowledge for developing evidence-based interventions to enhance coach-athlete communication effectiveness. As international sport continues globalizing, with increasingly multilingual competitive environments, understanding and optimizing tactical communication practices will remain essential for maximizing athletic achievement and coaching effectiveness..

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CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

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