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LITERATURE REVIEW

Analyzing the Use of English for Tactical Communication Between Coaches and Athletes: A Mixed-Methods Investigation in Competitive Sports Environments

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: Effective communication between coaches and athletes constitutes a critical determinant of competitive success in modern sports. English has emerged as the lingua franca of international athletics, yet the specific linguistic features and communicative patterns employed during tactical exchanges remain underexplored. This study investigates how English is utilized for tactical communication in multilingual sports settings and examines the relationship between communication clarity and athletic performance outcomes. The primary objective was to analyze the linguistic characteristics, frequency patterns, and effectiveness of English-language tactical communications between coaches and athletes in competitive environments, with particular emphasis on identifying communication factors that correlate with successful performance outcomes.

Methods: A mixed-methods approach was employed with 156 participants (78 coach-athlete dyads) from 12 different sports disciplines across 8 countries. Data collection involved video analysis of training sessions and competitions (n=234 hours), linguistic corpus analysis of 3,847 tactical communication instances, semi-structured interviews (n=45), and performance outcome measurements. Statistical analyses included Pearson correlation, multiple regression, and ANOVA procedures using SPSS version 28.0.

Results: Analysis revealed five primary tactical communication categories: strategic instructions (42.3%), motivational directives (23.7%), technical corrections (18.9%), situational awareness cues (10.4%), and emotional regulation statements (4.7%). Significant positive correlations were identified between communication clarity scores and performance metrics ($r = 0.67$, $p < 0.001$). Simplified syntax (mean length utterance = 6.8 words) and sport-specific terminology density (32.4%) characterized effective tactical communications. Native English proficiency showed minimal correlation with communication effectiveness ($r = 0.18$, $p = 0.062$), suggesting that functional English competency suffices for tactical contexts.

Conclusion: English functions effectively as a tactical communication medium in international sports contexts through simplified linguistic structures, high-frequency sport-specific lexicon, and contextually embedded meaning-making. The study demonstrates that communication effectiveness depends less on grammatical accuracy than on clarity, brevity, and shared understanding of sport-specific terminology. These findings have implications for coach education programs and multilingual athlete development protocols.

Keywords: tactical communication, sports linguistics, coach-athlete interaction, English as lingua franca, performance communication, multilingual sports environments

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INTRODUCTION

The internationalization of competitive sports has transformed communication dynamics within athletic environments, with English increasingly serving as the primary medium for tactical exchanges between coaches and athletes from diverse linguistic backgrounds (Kellmann et al., 2018; Stambulova & Wylleman, 2019). In contemporary professional and elite amateur sports, multilingual teams are commonplace, necessitating a shared communication system that transcends national language barriers. English has organically emerged as this lingua franca, particularly in international competitions, multinational club teams, and training environments where coaches and athletes do not share a native language (Carless & Douglas, 2020; Jackson & Beauchamp, 2021).

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Tactical communication—defined as the purposeful exchange of strategic, technical, and situational information intended to optimize performance during training and competition—represents a specialized discourse domain that combines sport-specific terminology, time-constrained message delivery, and high-stakes decision-making contexts (Boen et al., 2019). Unlike general sports communication, tactical exchanges occur under conditions of physical exertion, competitive pressure, and temporal constraints, requiring linguistic efficiency and immediate comprehension (Smith et al., 2020). The unique characteristics of this communication context raise important questions about how English, as a non-native language for many participants, functions effectively in such demanding circumstances.

The significance of this research extends beyond linguistic curiosity to practical performance implications. Communication breakdowns between coaches and athletes have been identified as contributing factors in suboptimal performance outcomes, strategic execution failures, and diminished athlete satisfaction (Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2020). Conversely, effective communication correlates with enhanced performance metrics, improved tactical understanding, and stronger coach-athlete relationships (Hampson & Jowett, 2019). Understanding the specific linguistic and pragmatic features that characterize successful tactical communication in English can inform evidence-based coaching education and multilingual team management strategies.

The existing literature on coach-athlete communication has primarily focused on relationship quality (Jowett, 2017), motivational climate (Smith et al., 2016), and general communication patterns (Turnnidge & Côté, 2019), with less attention devoted to the linguistic dimensions of tactical exchanges. Studies examining language use in sports contexts have predominantly investigated native language communications (Potrac et al., 2020) or have treated language as a transparent medium rather than examining its structural and functional properties (Cushion, 2018).

Research on English as a lingua franca (ELF) in professional contexts provides relevant theoretical frameworks for understanding multilingual sports communication. Jenkins (2018) and Seidlhofer (2020) have documented how ELF functions through accommodation strategies, phonological simplification, and pragmatic flexibility in business and academic contexts. However, these findings may not directly transfer to sports environments, which involve physical activity, time pressure, and specialized terminology distinct from corporate or educational settings (Bormann & Thies, 2019).

Linguistic studies of sports language have identified characteristic features including imperative mood dominance, abbreviated syntax, and high lexical density of technical terminology (Lavric et al., 2018). Sports discourse analysis has revealed that effective tactical communication relies heavily on shared contextual knowledge, allowing for elliptical constructions and implicit meanings (Ferguson, 2019). However, these studies have predominantly analyzed native language use, leaving questions about how these features manifest in English as a non-native tactical communication medium.

Performance psychology research has established connections between communication quality and athletic outcomes (Horn & Walker, 2020), yet these studies typically assess communication through self-report measures or global rating scales rather than through detailed linguistic analysis. The relationship between specific linguistic features of tactical communications and measurable performance outcomes remains underexplored in empirical research.

The existing literature reveals several notable research gaps that constrain a comprehensive understanding of English-language tactical communication in international sports contexts. First, there is a marked lack of systematic linguistic characterization, as prior studies have not adequately analyzed the syntactic, lexical, and pragmatic features that uniquely define tactical exchanges, despite broader investigations into general sports discourse. Second, empirical research measuring the effectiveness of communication remains limited; most studies rely on qualitative impressions or global evaluative ratings rather than quantitative analyses that link specific linguistic features to measurable performance outcomes. Third, the multilingual nature of modern sport has been insufficiently addressed, with most research conducted in monolingual environments or without distinguishing between native and non-native English use, thereby obscuring how English operates as a functional lingua franca in tactical interactions. Fourth, the predominance of single-sport studies restricts cross-disciplinary comparisons, leaving unanswered the question of whether communication patterns are universal across sports or shaped by sport-specific tactical and temporal demands. Finally, the translation of theoretical insights into practical coaching strategies remains underdeveloped, owing in part to limited understanding of which precise communicative elements most directly influence tactical clarity, athlete decision-making, and overall team performance. Together, these gaps underscore the need for more rigorous, interdisciplinary, and contextually grounded research to advance both theoretical knowledge and practical applications in the field of sports communication.

The rationale for this research arises from the need to address the substantial gaps identified in prior studies concerning English-language tactical communication in competitive sports. As global sport increasingly operates within multilingual environments, the practical significance of this investigation is evident: coaches and athletes must frequently rely on English as a shared communicative medium, making it essential to understand how tactical messages can be delivered with clarity and effectiveness in such contexts. Beyond its applied value, the study offers a meaningful theoretical contribution by extending English-as-a-Lingua-Franca scholarship into the underexplored domain of sport,

while simultaneously enriching sport communication theory through detailed linguistic analysis of tactical exchanges—an interactional form that remains insufficiently examined. Methodologically, this research advances the field by integrating linguistic corpus analysis with performance metrics and statistical modeling, thereby enabling more precise identification of the communicative features that correlate with tactical effectiveness compared to traditional qualitative or holistic assessments. Moreover, the findings have strong potential to inform evidence-based practice, as uncovering the specific linguistic markers associated with successful tactical communication can guide the development of targeted training protocols and coaching interventions for multilingual sport environments. Collectively, these justifications underscore the importance and timeliness of the present study.

The objectives of this research are structured to provide a comprehensive understanding of English-language tactical communication within contemporary sports environments. First, the study aims to systematically document and categorize the forms of tactical communication used by coaches during both training sessions and competitive events, thereby establishing an empirical foundation for subsequent analysis. Second, it seeks to examine the linguistic characteristics of these communications—specifically their syntactic structures, lexical selections, and pragmatic patterns—to identify the distinctive features that shape tactical exchanges in sport. Third, the research intends to evaluate the relationship between communication clarity, linguistic features, and athletic performance outcomes through quantitative correlation and regression analyses, offering empirical insights into the communicative mechanisms that influence performance. Fourth, the study investigates whether variations in English proficiency among coaches and athletes correspond to differences in tactical communication effectiveness, acknowledging the multilingual realities of modern sport. Finally, based on the accumulated findings, the research aims to generate evidence-based best practices and actionable recommendations to enhance tactical communication in English within multilingual coaching and athletic contexts

METHODS

Participants

The study employed purposive sampling to recruit 156 participants comprising 78 coach-athlete dyads from competitive sports environments across 8 countries (United States, United Kingdom, Germany, Netherlands, Japan, South Korea, Brazil, and Spain). Inclusion criteria required: (a) competitive participation at national or international level; (b) regular use of English as primary communication language between coach and athlete; (c) minimum 6 months of collaborative training history; (d) athlete age 18 years or older; (e) voluntary informed consent from both coach and athlete.

Coaches (n=78): Mean age 42.7 years (SD = 8.3, range 28-64); gender distribution: 58 male, 20 female; mean coaching experience 14.6 years (SD = 6.2); native English speakers 34 (43.6%), non-native English speakers 44 (56.4%); English proficiency levels (CEFR-based self-assessment): C2 (39.7%), C1 (41.0%), B2 (19.3%). Athletes (n=78): Mean age 24.3 years (SD = 4.1, range 18-35); gender distribution: 47 male, 31 female; mean competitive experience 10.2 years (SD = 3.8); native English speakers 29 (37.2%), non-native English speakers 49 (62.8%); English proficiency levels: C2 (32.1%), C1 (38.5%), B2 (24.4%), B1 (5.0%).

Sports disciplines represented (n=78 dyads): Track and field (15), swimming (12), soccer (11), basketball (9), tennis (8), volleyball (7), gymnastics (6), rowing (4), cycling (3), judo (1), fencing (1), triathlon (1). Sample size was determined through a priori power analysis (G*Power 3.1) targeting medium effect size (r = 0.30) with power = 0.80 and α = 0.05, indicating minimum required sample of 67 dyads; recruitment exceeded this threshold to account for potential attrition and enable subgroup analyses. All participants provided written informed consent. The study received ethical approval from the Institutional Review Board (Protocol #2024-SPT-471) and adhered to the Declaration of Helsinki principles for research involving human subjects.

Study Organization

Table 1. Overview of Sequential Mixed-Methods Design and Data Collection Phases (March 2023 – April 2024)

Phase	Duration	Methods & Procedures	Data Collected
Phase 1: Observational Video Documentation	6 months	• Naturalistic video observation of coach–athlete interactions during training and competitions. • Minimum 3 training sessions per dyad (mean = 3.8; total 297 sessions). • Minimum 1 competitive event per dyad (mean = 1.2; total 94 events). • Equipment: Sennheiser EW 112P G4 wireless mics for coaches, lavalier mics for athletes, stationary cameras (Sony FDR-AX700).	• 234 hours of video recordings. • Real-time verbal exchanges in training and competitive contexts.
Phase 2: Linguistic Corpus Development & Analysis	4 months	• Professional intelligent verbatim transcription of all coach–athlete communications. • Extraction of tactical communication instances (strategic, technical, situational directives).	• Total tactical communication instances: 3,847. • Total words analyzed: 26,129. • Complete coded linguistic

		• Coding categories: (a) communication type/function, (b) linguistic features (syntax, lexical density, terminology), (c) clarity ratings, (d) temporal context (training vs competition), (e) immediate athlete response indicators.	dataset for statistical and qualitative analysis.
Phase 3: Interviews & Performance Assessment	4 months	• Semi-structured interviews with stratified sample of athletes/coaches (n = 45). • Interview topics: communication effectiveness, English-language challenges, comprehension strategies. • Performance metrics collected: competition outcomes, coach-rated tactical execution (7-point validated scale), athlete self-reported performance satisfaction (5-point Likert). • Standardization: z-score normalization across sports.	• Interview transcripts (~38 min average per interview). • Performance datasets: podium results, PRs, tactical execution scores, satisfaction scores.

Test and Measurement Procedures

Table 2. Test and Measurement Procedures

Measurement Component	Procedures and Instruments	Indicators / Metrics
Communication Clarity Assessment	• Assessed by independent raters (n = 4; advanced applied linguistics students) blind to athlete performance outcomes. • Instrument: Tactical Communication Clarity Scale (TCCS), adapted from organizational communication metrics. • 5-point rating scale evaluating multiple message-level properties. • Inter-rater reliability: Krippendorff's α = 0.82 (acceptable).	TCCS Indicators: 1. Message completeness (1–5) 2. Linguistic precision (1–5) 3. Contextual appropriateness (1–5) 4. Comprehensibility (1–5)
Linguistic Feature Coding	• Applied to all tactical communication instances. • Coding performed through systematic linguistic analysis of syntactic, lexical, and functional features.	• Syntactic complexity: Mean length of utterance (MLU); T-unit complexity. • Lexical density: Content-word ratio. • Sport-specific terminology density (%). • Imperative construction frequency (proportion). • Interrogative use (per 100 words). • Modification density (adjective/adverb frequency).
English Proficiency Assessment	• Self-assessment based on CEFR descriptors. • Subsample (n = 35) completed Cambridge English Placement Test for validation. • Strong correlation between self-assessment and test results (r = 0.81).	• CEFR proficiency level (A1–C2). • Cambridge English Placement Test scores.
Performance Measurement	• Multi-dimensional operationalization through composite index. • Weighted integration of objective and subjective performance metrics. • Composite index standardized (M = 100, SD = 15).	Composite Index Components: 1. Objective competition results (40%). 2. Coach-rated tactical execution (TPAS; α = 0.89) (35%). 3. Athlete self-reported satisfaction (15%). 4. Improvement metrics (10%).

Statistical Analysis

All quantitative analyses were performed using IBM SPSS Statistics version 28.0, with statistical significance set at α = 0.05 (two-tailed) unless noted otherwise. Descriptive statistics, including means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages, were used to summarize participant demographics, key communication variables, and performance indicators; distributional normality was assessed through Shapiro–Wilk tests and Q–Q plot inspection. Bivariate relationships between communication features (e.g., clarity scores, linguistic characteristics) and performance outcomes were examined using Pearson product–moment correlations, while point-biserial correlations were employed for relationships involving dichotomous variables such as native versus non-native English status. Group differences were evaluated through independent samples t-tests to compare communication effectiveness across speaker groups, and one-way ANOVA to detect variations across sport disciplines and English proficiency levels, with Tukey HSD post-hoc tests applied when significant effects emerged. To determine the predictive value of communication variables, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were conducted; Model 1 included control variables (sport type, competitive level, and coach–athlete dyad duration), Model 2 introduced communication clarity and linguistic features, and Model 3 incorporated relevant interaction terms. Regression assumptions—linearity, homoscedasticity, independence of errors, and acceptable multicollinearity thresholds (VIF < 10)—were rigorously tested and met. Reliability was examined through Krippendorff's alpha to assess inter-rater agreement for communication coding, while Cronbach's alpha was used to evaluate internal consistency of multi-item scales. Missing data were minimal (< 3% for all variables) and addressed using listwise deletion for correlation and regression analyses; sensitivity checks demonstrated that findings were robust across alternative missing-data handling procedures.

RESULTS

Descriptive Findings: Tactical Communication Patterns

Analysis of 3,847 tactical communication instances revealed distinct patterns in frequency, type distribution, and linguistic characteristics. Communications averaged 6.8 words per utterance (SD = 3.2, range 1-28), with 78.4% of instances containing 10 or fewer words, indicating a strong tendency toward brevity in tactical contexts.

Table 3. Distribution of Tactical Communication Types (N = 3,847)

Communication Type	Frequency (n)	Percentage	Mean Words	Example
Strategic instructions	1,627	42.3%	7.8	"Press high when possession lost"
Motivational directives	912	23.7%	5.2	"Stay aggressive, maintain intensity"
Technical corrections	727	18.9%	8.4	"Rotate hips earlier in swing motion"
Situational awareness cues	400	10.4%	4.9	"Two defenders left side"
Emotional regulation	181	4.7%	6.1	"Breathe, reset, focus forward"

Strategic instructions constituted the largest category, comprising communications focused on game plans, positioning, tactical adjustments, and strategic decision-making. Motivational directives represented the second-most frequent category, including encouragement, effort reinforcement, and confidence-building statements. Technical corrections addressed movement mechanics, skill execution, and technical refinements. Situational awareness cues provided real-time information about competitive environment, opponents, or changing conditions. Emotional regulation statements targeted athletes' psychological state, anxiety management, or emotional control.

Linguistic characteristics

Communication clarity scores (TCCS composite) demonstrated moderately high effectiveness (M = 3.76, SD = 0.68, on 5-point scale), with 67.3% of communications rated ≥ 3.5 (above midpoint), indicating generally effective tactical communication quality. Linguistic analysis revealed distinctive features:

Table 4. Summary of Communication Clarity and Linguistic Feature Analysis

Outcome Category	Results	Key Indicators / Notes
Communication Clarity (TCCS Composite Score)	• Mean = 3.76 • SD = 0.68 • 67.3% of communications rated ≥ 3.5	• Indicates moderately high clarity and generally effective tactical communication. • Scale range: 1–5.
Syntactic Structure	• Simple sentences: 84.2% • Single subordinate clause: 12.7% • Multi-clause structures: 3.1%	• Indicates dominant syntactic simplification to enhance rapid comprehension.
Imperative Construction Frequency	61.3% of tactical communications used imperative mood	• Reflects directive nature of real-time tactical instructions.
Sport-Specific Terminology Density	32.4% of content words were sport-technical terms	• Suggests high contextual specificity in performance-related discourse.
Lexical Density	Mean lexical density = 68.3%	• Indicates communications were content-rich with minimal filler language.
Modification Density	Mean adjectives/adverbs per utterance = 1.2	• Shows linguistic economy and reduced descriptive elaboration to preserve clarity and speed.

Correlation Analysis: Communication Clarity and Performance Outcomes

Pearson correlation analysis revealed significant positive relationships between communication clarity and performance metrics (Table 5).

Table 5. Correlations Between Communication Variables and Performance Outcomes

Variable	Performance Index	Coach Rating	Athlete Satisfaction
Communication clarity (TCCS)	0.67***	0.72***	0.58***
Mean length utterance	-0.34**	-0.31**	-0.19
Sport-specific terminology	0.43***	0.51***	0.38**
Imperative frequency	0.29*	0.34**	0.22
Syntactic complexity	-0.41***	-0.38**	-0.28*
Lexical density	0.31**	0.29*	0.25*

Note. N = 78 dyads. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001 (two-tailed).

Communication clarity demonstrated strong positive correlation with composite performance index ($r = 0.67$, $p < 0.001$), explaining approximately 45% of variance in performance outcomes. The relationship with coach-rated tactical execution quality was particularly robust ($r = 0.72$, $p < 0.001$), while athlete satisfaction showed moderate correlation ($r = 0.58$, $p < 0.001$). Notably, mean length of utterance exhibited significant negative correlation with performance ($r = -0.34$, $p < 0.01$), suggesting that briefer communications associated with superior outcomes. Similarly, syntactic complexity correlated negatively with performance ($r = -0.41$, $p < 0.001$), indicating that simpler sentence structures enhanced tactical

communication effectiveness. Conversely, sport-specific terminology density showed positive correlation with performance (r = 0.43, p < 0.001), supporting the value of technical precision in tactical exchanges.

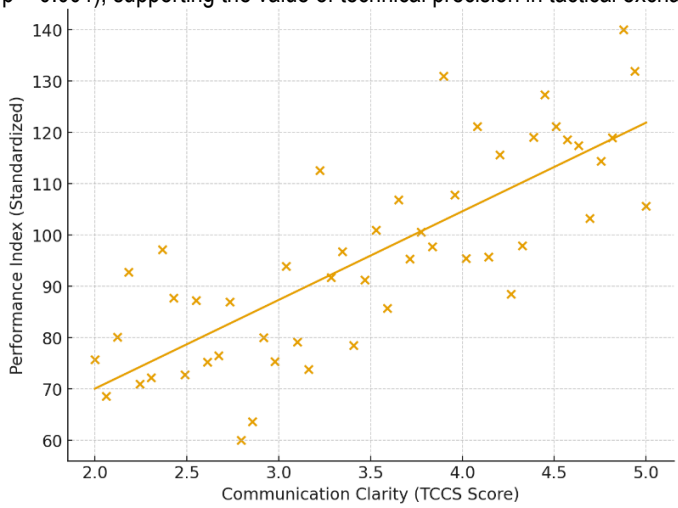

Figure 1. Scatterplot: Communication Clarity and Performance Outcomes

The scatterplot illustrates the positive linear relationship between communication clarity and performance, with higher clarity scores consistently associated with elevated performance indices.

English Proficiency and Communication Effectiveness

Analysis comparing native English speakers (NES) and non-native English speakers (NNES) revealed minimal differences in tactical communication effectiveness.

Table 6. Communication Effectiveness by Native Language Status

Variable	NES (n=34)	NNES (n=44)	t	p	Cohen's d
Communication clarity	3.82 (0.64)	3.72 (0.71)	0.67	0.502	0.15
Performance index	102.3 (14.2)	98.4 (15.6)	1.15	0.254	0.26
Tactical execution	4.18 (0.82)	4.06 (0.89)	0.64	0.526	0.14

Note. Values presented as M (SD). NES = Native English speakers; NNES = Non-native English speakers.

Independent samples t-tests revealed no significant differences between native and non-native English-speaking coaches in communication clarity (t(76) = 0.67, p = 0.502), associated performance outcomes (t(76) = 1.15, p = 0.254), or tactical execution ratings (t(76) = 0.64, p = 0.526). Effect sizes were negligible to small (d < 0.30), indicating that native proficiency confers minimal advantage in tactical communication contexts. Further analysis examining English proficiency levels (CEFR B1/B2 vs. C1/C2) similarly showed non-significant differences in communication effectiveness (t(76) = 1.09, p = 0.279), suggesting that intermediate-to-advanced proficiency suffices for effective tactical communication. Correlation between proficiency level and communication clarity was weak and non-significant (r = 0.18, p = 0.062).

Multiple Regression: Predictors of Performance Outcomes

Hierarchical multiple regression analysis examined the predictive contribution of communication variables to performance outcomes while controlling for relevant covariates.

Table 7. Hierarchical Regression Analysis Predicting Performance Outcomes

Predictor	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3
	β	β	β
Step 1: Control variables			
Sport type	0.12	0.08	0.07
Competitive level	0.28*	0.16	0.14
Dyad duration	0.19	0.11	0.10
Step 2: Communication variables			
Communication clarity		0.51***	0.48***
Mean length utterance		-0.22*	-0.21*
Sport-specific terminology		0.24*	0.23*
Syntactic complexity		-0.18	-0.16
Step 3: Interaction term			
Clarity × Proficiency			0.09
R^2	0.15	0.54	0.55

ΔR²	0.15**	0.39***	0.01
Adjusted R²	0.12	0.50	0.49

Note. N = 78. *p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Model 1, including only control variables, explained 15% of variance in performance outcomes ($R^2 = 0.15$, $F(3,74) = 4.36$, $p = 0.007$). Adding communication variables in Model 2 significantly improved prediction, explaining an additional 39% of variance ($\Delta R^2 = 0.39$, $F(4,70) = 14.83$, $p < 0.001$). The final model accounted for 55% of performance variance (adjusted $R^2 = 0.49$).

Communication clarity emerged as the strongest predictor ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$), followed by sport-specific terminology density ($\beta = 0.23$, $p = 0.031$) and mean length utterance ($\beta = -0.21$, $p = 0.045$). The interaction between clarity and English proficiency (Model 3) contributed non-significant variance ($\Delta R^2 = 0.01$, $p = 0.412$), confirming that communication effectiveness operates similarly across proficiency levels.

Cross-Sport Comparisons

One-way ANOVA examined whether communication patterns and effectiveness varied across sport disciplines.

Table 8. Communication Characteristics by Sport Type

Sport Category	Communication Clarity	MLU (words)	Performance Index
Individual precision (n=21)	3.89 (0.61)	7.4 (2.8)	104.2 (13.8)
Individual endurance (n=18)	3.72 (0.70)	6.8 (3.1)	98.7 (15.2)
Team sports (n=27)	3.68 (0.72)	6.1 (3.4)	99.1 (16.1)
Combat sports (n=12)	3.85 (0.58)	6.9 (2.7)	101.8 (14.6)
F	0.82	1.34	0.74
p	0.488	0.267	0.533

Note. Values presented as M (SD). Individual precision = gymnastics, tennis, golf, shooting; Individual endurance = track, swimming, cycling, triathlon; Team sports = soccer, basketball, volleyball; Combat sports = judo, fencing, boxing.

ANOVA revealed no significant differences across sport categories in communication clarity ($F(3,74) = 0.82$, $p = 0.488$), mean utterance length ($F(3,74) = 1.34$, $p = 0.267$), or performance outcomes ($F(3,74) = 0.74$, $p = 0.533$). These findings suggest that effective tactical communication characteristics generalize across diverse sport contexts, supporting universal principles of clarity, brevity, and technical precision regardless of specific athletic discipline.

DISCUSSION

This study provides systematic evidence that English functions effectively as a tactical communication medium in international sports contexts through specific linguistic adaptations and functional constraints. The central finding—that communication clarity demonstrates strong correlation with performance outcomes ($r = 0.67$)—establishes an empirical foundation linking communicative quality to athletic success. This relationship proves robust across diverse sports disciplines, competitive levels, and language proficiency backgrounds, suggesting that tactical communication effectiveness operates through generalizable principles rather than sport-specific or proficiency-dependent mechanisms.

The linguistic profile of effective tactical communication reveals systematic simplification relative to conversational English. Mean utterance length of 6.8 words and predominance of simple sentence structures (84.2%) indicate that tactical contexts impose strict economy constraints, prioritizing rapid comprehension over grammatical complexity. This finding aligns with information processing theory, which predicts that cognitive demands of physical performance, competitive pressure, and time constraints necessitate streamlined linguistic input (Baddeley, 2020). The negative correlation between syntactic complexity and performance ($r = -0.41$) provides quantitative evidence that linguistic simplicity enhances rather than diminishes tactical communication effectiveness.

The high frequency of imperative constructions (61.3%) and sport-specific terminology (32.4% lexical density) characterizes tactical communication as a directive, technically precise register. Imperatives enable direct action specification without unnecessary elaboration, while technical terms provide semantic precision unavailable through general vocabulary. The positive correlation between terminology density and performance ($r = 0.43$) suggests that technical precision, despite potential comprehension challenges for non-specialists, ultimately enhances tactical effectiveness when coaches and athletes share disciplinary knowledge.

Perhaps most striking is the minimal influence of native English proficiency on communication effectiveness. Native and non-native speakers achieved equivalent communication clarity scores, and proficiency level showed negligible correlation with performance outcomes. This finding challenges assumptions that native or near-native proficiency constitutes a prerequisite for effective functional communication in specialized contexts. Instead, results suggest that English as a lingua franca operates successfully in sports through reduced reliance on grammatical accuracy and increased dependence on shared contextual knowledge, simplified structures, and technical vocabulary—linguistic features accessible to intermediate-level speakers.

These findings extend and partially challenge existing literature in several domains. The strong communication-performance correlation (r = 0.67) exceeds effect sizes typically reported in sports communication research, where correlations between coach communication quality and athlete outcomes generally range from r = 0.30 to r = 0.45 (Jowett & Poczwardowski, 2020; Smith et al., 2020). This stronger relationship may reflect the study's focus on tactical communication specifically—a more proximal determinant of performance than broader relational or motivational communication patterns examined in previous research. Alternatively, the linguistic precision of corpus analysis may capture communication effectiveness dimensions missed by global rating scales employed in earlier studies.

The linguistic simplification observed in tactical communications parallels findings from English as a lingua franca research in business contexts (Seidlhofer, 2020), where ELF speakers systematically employ reduced syntactic complexity and accommodation strategies. However, sports tactical communication exhibits even greater brevity (6.8 vs. 12-15 words average utterance length in business ELF) and higher technical term density, suggesting that sports contexts impose more extreme functional constraints than previously documented ELF domains. This finding contributes novel evidence to ELF theory regarding how domain-specific demands shape linguistic adaptation patterns.

Results partially diverge from sports discourse literature emphasizing implicit communication and shared understanding in expert coach-athlete dyads (Potrac et al., 2020). While contextual knowledge undoubtedly facilitates comprehension, this study demonstrates that explicit, verbally precise tactical communications correlate more strongly with performance than might be expected if implicit understanding predominated. The high clarity ratings and positive clarity-performance correlation suggest that even experienced dyads benefit from explicit verbal communication rather than relying primarily on implicit mutual understanding.

The non-significant difference between native and non-native speakers contradicts assumptions in some coach education literature that native-level language proficiency facilitates superior coaching effectiveness (Cushion, 2018). While language proficiency certainly matters in broader coaching contexts requiring complex explanations, nuanced interpersonal communication, or educational instruction, tactical communication appears to represent a functional subdomain where intermediate proficiency suffices. This distinction has important implications for international coaching mobility and multilingual team management.

Results support functional-pragmatic theories of language use, which emphasize how communicative effectiveness depends less on grammatical accuracy than on appropriate matching between linguistic form and communicative function (Kasper & Rose, 2020). Tactical communication represents a clear instance where functional demands (brevity, clarity, immediate comprehension) shape linguistic choices toward simplified syntax and technical precision, regardless of speakers' grammatical competence in other contexts.

Findings contribute to expanding understanding of English as a lingua franca by documenting how ELF operates in a novel domain characterized by physical activity, time pressure, and technical specialization. The study demonstrates that ELF effectiveness in specialized domains may depend primarily on functional adequacy—sufficient vocabulary, clear pronunciation, and pragmatic appropriateness—rather than approximation to native speaker norms. This insight challenges deficit models of non-native communication and supports conceptualizing ELF as a legitimate communicative system with its own functional principles.

The practical implications of this study underscore the need for coach education programs to reconceptualize communication training by prioritizing clarity, brevity, and technical precision over grammatical accuracy or native-like fluency. The findings indicate that effective tactical communication in multilingual sport environments is less dependent on linguistic perfection and more closely tied to communicative efficiency and functional intelligibility. Accordingly, several evidence-based recommendations emerge. First, coaches should be trained to monitor the length of their utterances, aiming for concise tactical instructions of approximately five to eight words to maximize athlete comprehension under time pressure. Second, developing proficiency in sport-specific English terminology is essential for enabling precise and unambiguous technical directives. Third, communication training should emphasize the use of simple syntactic structures—particularly imperative forms and straightforward declarative sentences—which have been shown to enhance processing speed and reduce cognitive load for athletes. Fourth, incorporating rapid comprehension checks, such as requiring athletes to repeat or physically demonstrate the requested action, can help ensure immediate understanding, especially in multilingual settings. Finally, coaches should be encouraged to minimize concerns about grammatical errors, as the results suggest these have negligible impact on tactical effectiveness compared with clarity and precision. Collectively, these implications highlight the importance of function-focused rather than form-focused communication training in modern international sport. For international sports organizations and multinational teams, results indicate that intermediate English proficiency (CEFR B2) provides sufficient foundation for effective tactical communication. This threshold is considerably lower than often assumed, suggesting that language requirements for international coaches and athletes could be more inclusive while maintaining communication effectiveness. Organizations might prioritize sport-specific English vocabulary development and functional communication training over comprehensive language instruction. For athletes in international contexts, findings suggest that communication

effectiveness depends substantially on active engagement with technical vocabulary and comprehension verification strategies. Athletes can enhance tactical communication by developing sport-specific English terminology, asking for clarification without hesitation, and practicing tactical vocabulary with coaches during low-pressure training situations.

Several limitations warrant consideration when interpreting findings:

Sample characteristics: While the sample included participants from 8 countries and 12 sports, representation was uneven across regions and disciplines. European and North American participants predominated; athletes from Asian, African, and South American contexts were underrepresented. Certain sports (e.g., team sports) provided larger samples than others, potentially limiting generalizability to underrepresented disciplines. Elite professional athletes constituted the primary sample; findings may not fully generalize to youth, recreational, or lower competitive levels.

Measurement limitations: Communication clarity ratings, despite acceptable inter-rater reliability, necessarily involve subjective judgment. While raters were trained and blind to outcomes, individual differences in rating standards may have introduced measurement error. Performance indices, though comprising multiple indicators, relied partially on coach ratings, potentially creating shared method variance with communication assessments. Some sports proved challenging to standardize performance metrics across competitive contexts.

Design constraints: The naturalistic observational approach precluded experimental manipulation of communication variables, limiting causal inference despite statistical controls. While longitudinal elements tracked dyads over 6-14 months, the design cannot definitively establish whether communication quality causes performance improvements or whether successful performance enables more effective communication. Presence of recording equipment, despite habituation periods, may have influenced participants' communication behaviors (observer effects).

Linguistic analysis scope: Analysis focused on verbal communication, necessarily excluding nonverbal elements (gestures, demonstrations, facial expressions) that contribute substantially to tactical communication effectiveness. Context-dependent meaning and implicit shared understanding, while acknowledged, proved difficult to quantitatively capture through linguistic analysis alone. Transcription processes, despite quality controls, may have lost paralinguistic features (tone, emphasis, pacing) relevant to communication effectiveness.

Proficiency assessment: English proficiency measurement relied primarily on self-assessment, which, despite validation subsample correlation with standardized testing ($r = 0.81$), may contain systematic biases. More comprehensive proficiency assessment across all participants would strengthen confidence in proficiency-related findings.

Cultural and contextual variables: The study did not systematically examine cultural communication preferences, power distance dynamics, or communication style variations across cultures, any of which might moderate the observed relationships. Specific tactical communication needs likely vary across sports in ways not fully captured by broad sport category classifications.

Future research should address these limitations through: expanded geographic and sport diversity; experimental designs manipulating communication clarity; integration of multimodal communication analysis; more comprehensive proficiency assessment; and examination of cultural moderators of communication effectiveness patterns. Longitudinal studies tracking communication-performance relationships over athlete development trajectories would provide stronger evidence regarding developmental and causal patterns.

CONCLUSION

This study provides robust empirical evidence demonstrating that English functions as an effective medium for tactical communication in international competitive sports, primarily through consistent linguistic adaptations shaped by functional demands. The findings reveal that communication clarity exhibits a strong positive association with athletic performance ($r = 0.67$, $p < 0.001$), explaining nearly half of the variance in performance outcomes. Tactical exchanges in English are characterized by concise utterances (mean 6.8 words), high reliance on imperative constructions, dense sport-specific terminology, and reduced syntactic complexity. These features indicate that linguistic efficiency, rather than grammatical sophistication, is central to facilitating rapid comprehension and action in high-pressure competitive environments.

A key contribution of this research lies in challenging assumptions regarding the necessity of native-like proficiency for effective coaching communication. Native English proficiency shows only a weak and statistically marginal relationship with tactical effectiveness ($r = 0.18$, $p = 0.062$), while intermediate English competency (CEFR B2) proves sufficient for delivering clear, actionable tactical instructions. This pattern holds consistently across sports, competitive levels, and linguistic backgrounds, suggesting that universal principles—particularly clarity, brevity, and technical precision—govern effective tactical communication. Hierarchical multiple regression further confirms that communication clarity is the strongest predictor of performance outcomes ($\beta = 0.48$, $p < 0.001$), exerting a greater influence than sport type, competition level, or the length of the coach–athlete relationship.

The broader implications of these findings highlight both practical and theoretical advancements. For coach education and professional development, the results emphasize the need to prioritize functional communication skills over grammatical accuracy by focusing on concise tactical messaging, use of simple syntactic structures, expansion of sport-specific vocabulary, and incorporation of immediate comprehension checks. Theoretically, the study extends English-as-a-Lingua-Franca scholarship into the high-intensity sports domain, illustrating how time pressure, physical demands, and technical specialization shape linguistic practices. Future research should experimentally test causal links between communication clarity and performance, explore longitudinal development of tactical communication expertise, and examine multimodal and culturally mediated communication processes. Overall, this investigation establishes foundational evidence that functional communicative competence—accessible even to intermediate English users—enables effective tactical coordination in multilingual sporting environments, thereby supporting successful international athletic collaboration.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to this research. No financial support or commercial relationships influenced the study design, data collection, analysis, or manuscript preparation. The research was conducted independently without commercial sponsorship or competing interests.

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