CONTRIBUTION OF FOREIGN LANGUAGES TO BUILDING THE PROFESSIONAL CAREER OF THE LAND FORCES ACADEMY CADETS

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ABSTRACT

The new requirements regarding the professionalization of the Romanian armed forces derived from our country's becoming a NATO and EU member state. The challenges of the 21st century battlefield demand the development not only of certain soldierly skills, but also of the abilities to properly function in a multicultural context. The cadets of the military academies are the future officers that will operate in the international theatres of operations. Being engaged in multinational formations and having to work side by side with foreign military personnel, our cadets need to have a good command of the English language, as well as to acquire and develop the intercultural skills necessary to appropriately function in a multicultural environment. Thus, a shift in the curricula of the Romanian military academies has been made, from an emphasis on the transmission of knowledge content to a focus on relating language to the target culture and developing cadets' linguistic and intercultural competences. This paper suggests some methods and techniques that have proven efficient when teaching basic military English in the Land Forces Academy.

KEYWORDS: multicultural environment, military higher education, teaching foreign languages, basic military terminology

1. Introduction

Starting as early as 1967, Robert Lado (p. 78) stated that *“a central objective in the process of teaching and learning foreign languages should be the development of the competence to use the acquired foreign language in the target cultural environment”*. However, neither the audio-lingual, nor the communicative-

pragmatic approach, which dominated the process of teaching/learning foreign languages in the 1970s and 1980s, did not address this objective, continuing to be restricted to the linguistic aspect and the speech acts, considered to be universal in using a foreign language.

In the current teaching and learning of foreign languages, the concept of

interculturality has become a dominant one, supposing a rethinking of the whole process. In the didactics of foreign languages, the concept of interculturality refers mainly to the concrete teaching and learning situation, which is defined as an encounter between the culture of origin and the target culture. The transition from the culture of origin to the target culture is often fraught with stress as it involves a split from the familiar cultural matrix regarding the identity of the individual.

This situation can be overcome through the development of the intercultural competence, which in the teaching of foreign languages can be materialized in several objectives, progressively distributed over some levels (Alexandru, 2011), such as:

- level 1 – perception of own culture, without any reflection on it, awareness of pertaining to a certain cultural environment, as well as of the cultural differences between individuals;

- level 2 – differentiation of prejudices and revision of stereotypes about oneself, which involves the affective component in the process of understanding the foreign cultural environment;

- level 3 – understanding of the behaviour specific to a foreign cultural environment, which also implies the social-pragmatic component.

As a science of the didactic profession, the goal of teaching foreign languages is to create the theoretical and practical framework necessary for the foreign language teacher in transmitting a target language and culture.

2. The Role of the English Language in Building the Officer Career

The primary goal of teaching a foreign language is to produce competent language users for extracurricular communication situations and for the situations subsequent to the period of education. Professional culture is made up of the system of knowledge, skills, abilities and capacities acquired during the period of

schooling, which are necessary for exercising a profession.

Nowadays English has become the main means of communication at an individual and organizational level, in international multicultural professional settings, as well as in academic research. It has become the lingua franca in the military.

This is the main reason why the English language training for the military has greatly gained in importance in the last two decades. This notable evolution is primarily the outcome of two elements: the military's constant changing role and the modifications in defence relations, in international security bodies, and military coalitions.

Another reason for the growing importance of the English language training is the increase in the participation of the Romanian military personnel in diverse international military actions and operations since 1995, leading to the deployment of a great number of troops and equipment that were integrated into multinational and multicultural structures.

In this context, the mission of the Land Forces Academy is to produce commissioned officers with a double civilian and military training, namely, academic education as well as military-based professional competence.

As a result, the overall goal of the new system of military education is to support future officers in the acquisition of the management and leadership skills necessary for operating in multidisciplinary teams and in multinational formations in a multilingual and multicultural environment. Reasonably, the importance of being proficient in English as a member of the military personnel is fully understood.

The need for learning English is not only a personal necessity, but also a means of individual development, academic success and timely promotion. The lack of an officer's good mastery of English can also have a negative impact on the military organization as a whole, leading to

difficulties in professional interactions in English, while a good command provides opportunities for effective participation in international military missions where they may have to exchange information at international headquarters or express opinions, uphold decisions, identify problems and propose solutions during coalition meetings.

According to Concepción Orna-Montesinos (2013, p. 99), the army can be seen described as *“a large multinational and multilingual company in which a diversity of ages, races and cultures, of motives, values and norms are involved. For the Military, at the global and at the local levels, that is, internationally as well as in nationally, the workplace appears to be not only the place for individual professional interaction, but also for institutional advancement and achievement; not only for personal promotion but, very importantly, also for showing and exerting national and international power”*.

Undoubtedly, the army as a whole can successfully cope with the challenges of the modern battlefield and state-of-the-art technology only if each and every commissioned officer has the necessary academic background, as well as the proper soldierly qualifications.

3. English Language Requirements in the Military

Linguistic and cultural interoperability is of paramount importance, being in fact a sine qua non condition to interoperability at all levels. English is the operational language of all NATO member countries and partners. With the enlargement of this political-military alliance, the armed forces of these states participate in various military operations (joint, peace-making, peace-keeping, search and rescue, medevac, humanitarian). In the document *Regional and Cultural Expertise: Building a DoD Framework to Meet National Defense Challenges*, “language skills ... are now

seen as critical operational capabilities – just as important as weapons – on the battlefield and across the entire array of Departmental missions”. (Under Secretary of Defense, 2007, p. 8)

The evaluation of English language proficiency of all military personnel is carried out in accordance with the description of the standards to be met for the 1-6 levels presented in the NATO Standardization Agreement 6001 (STANAG 6001) published in 2003. This agreement provides NATO forces with a table describing Language proficiency levels to enhance language interoperability.

The proficiency skills (BILC, 2019) are broken down into six levels coded 0 through 5. In general terms, skills may be defined as follows:

- Level 0 – No practical proficiency;
- Level 1 – Survival;
- Level 2 – Functional
(Limited working);
- Level 3 – Professional
(Minimum professional);
- Level 4 – Expert
(Full professional);
- Level 5 – Highly articulate native
(Native/bilingual).

The table of proficiency levels has been adopted by all military higher education academies in Romania in order to meet the linguistic requirements for international staff appointments.

Consequently, the syllabus for the English language training in the “Nicolae Bălcescu” Land Forces Academy of Sibiu was designed according to the STANAG 6001 descriptors for level 2.

4. Teaching Basic Military Terminology to the Land Forces Academy Cadets

Within the didactic activities of the foreign language classes, both the receptive (reading and listening) and the productive (speaking and writing) skills are developed. The importance of acquiring these skills is

outlined in two important documents regarding the linguistic achievements students are supposed to accomplish: *STANAG 6001* and *Common European Framework for Languages: Learning, teaching, assessment* (CEFR) (Council of Europe, 2002).

The STANAG 6001 language proficiency levels are recorded with a profile of 4 digits that point to the specific skills in the following order:

Skill A: Listening

Skill B: Speaking

Skill C: Reading

Skill D: Writing

Taking into consideration that our cadets have to reach Level 2 in all four language skills, in the following we present some didactic activities which facilitate the development of each of the four skills.

In order to develop the *listening* skill, we teach military students how to listen during the listening comprehension classes, making them listen for the main idea/specific details, or infer the gist of the whole listening passage. The development of listening for specific purposes naturally goes hand in hand with developing speaking since cadets must acquire the military terminology (military words and phrases, acronyms, even slang) they will certainly make use of in exercising their profession.

Due to the knowledge of the military that cadets have, academics can take advantage of the easiness with which they may recognize the specific vocabulary and exploit it in consolidating the military terminology. This is, as Manjola Likaj (2015) underlines, a fruitful way of teaching and learning the military vocabulary through cooperation: *“military students, who are professionals in the army, recognise this specific vocabulary better than the teachers. So, a good cooperation between the teacher and the ME students will result in a productive way of teaching and learning the military terminology*

which will be used in listening and other skills as well” (Likaj, 2015, p. 66).

For example, in order to improve the skill of listening, we ask students to identify the job described in the short presentation made by a female British commissioned officer and specify her role in the army. The purpose of this task is not only to listen for specific information, but also to enable them to introduce themselves when working with foreign servicemen within their international deployments.

“I’m Captain Stephanie Novak of the Royal Military Police. I’ve been in the Army for five years. My role as an officer in the Royal Military Police is to command soldiers who conduct investigations, both criminal and military conducted within the military itself.

The challenging aspect of being an officer in the Royal Military Police is to lead very motivated intelligent soldiers.

The most rewarding experience I’ve had in the army so far is going on operations in Afghanistan and getting to train the Afghan national police, in particular the female Afghan police who’d never done training before and was able to carry on that training to other women.

My main hobby is playing netball. I do it both in the military and for a civilian club. I play for the Army currently and we’re getting to go on a sports tour to Australia later this year, where we would play against the Australian Army and in a tournament against other Defence Forces” (Military Police Officer, 2019).

Another activity our cadets carry out is listening to the description of an infantry vehicle (Warrior Infantry Fighting Vehicle) and providing its specifications by writing down the missing specific information. This task increases their note-taking skill, as well as the skill of listening for details. As a follow up activity, they can also orally describe a vehicle in service in our army in order to develop the speaking skill.

“The British Army’s equivalent of the CV 90 or Puma is already in service.

The Warrior is a mechanized infantry combat vehicle designed to operate alongside helicopters and tanks in the front line of the modern battlefield. Combining the virtues of armoured personnel carrier and armoured car for the reconnaissance role it carries a crew of three plus seven infantry, and mounts the same 30 mm quick firing rod cannon as in the earlier Scimitar. A 7.62 mm chain gun is mounted coaxially. Power is provided by a 550 hp Perkins diesel engine and Detroit diesel automatic transmission, which gives the 24 and a half ton vehicle a top speed of over 50 miles per hour. However, perhaps the most important feature built into Warrior after constant problems with another earlier British Army vehicle is reliability. This is a factor which the troops who were at the sharp end particularly appreciate, alongside the knowledge that the vehicle can remain operational on the battlefield for 48 solid hours without replenishment” (FV510 Warrior Infantry Fighting Vehicle, 2008).

In order to reach Level 2 in the *speaking skill*, cadets practice daily social and routine workplace situations. Moreover, they are encouraged to deal with real-life situations and to speak about concrete topics, such as: personal background and interests, family, travel, job interviews and procedures, social events.

When they graduate, they must be able to:

- describe people, places, and events (*Describe your platoon/company commander; describe your military academy; describe the last military ceremony you attended*);

- give straightforward instructions and directions (*tell me how to get from the mess hall to the infirmary; tell me how to safely load and unload your individual weapon*);

- narrate present, past and future events (*Speak about your daily routine as a cadet; talk about the basic training you*

have had so far; talk about your military career plans);

- compare and contrast (*Compare two shooting ranges. Talk about similarities and differences. Include: location and types of exercises, or Compare two teachers/instructors/commanding officers that you admire. Talk about their similarities and differences in terms of: personality and job responsibilities*);

- ask and answer predictable questions (*You want to have dinner in the restaurant. I am the waitress/waiter and you make the order. When the food arrives, it is not what you have ordered. Solve the problem*).

In practicing this skill, we want our students to use the words and phrases correctly, insisting not only on accuracy (grammar, vocabulary, pronunciation), but on fluency as well.

As far as the development of the *reading skill* is concerned, cadets are required to skim (rapidly read for main idea/gist)/scan (quickly read for specific details), or read between the lines in order to infer or deduce from the context (find inferential information). In developing this skill, the academics’ role is to make students aware of the importance of the methods and strategies used to approach the reading passage.

An example of a level 2 reading activity, focusing on the identification of details in a text, is finding the missing details from the provided technical information on the AK 47 rifle:

“The AK 47 is a selective-fire (semi-automatic and automatic) assault rifle. It is 7.62 mm calibre. It is gas-operated and can fire 600 rounds per minute. This is the cyclic rate of fire, which is how many rounds or bullets one can fire in one minute without having to stop and reload the magazine every time it becomes empty.

Even after almost seven decades, the model and its variants remain the most popular and widely used assault rifles in the worlds because of their substantial

reliability under harsh conditions and ease of use. The AK fires the 7.62x39 mm cartridge with a muzzle velocity of 715 m/s. It weighs 4.3 kg unloaded. The standard magazine capacity is 30 rounds. As to accuracy, normal shooters are able to hit a man-sized target at 350 m” (Avtomat Kalashnikov AK-47 – Characteristics, 2019).

A challenging task for our cadets is to quickly identify the gist of the military text they read in class:

“The Corps of Engineers is unique, with all the sappers being multi-skilled soldiers, combat engineers and tradesmen working alongside all parts of the Army. In any country’s armed forces, they play a vital role in the effectiveness of the military operations.

As Troop Commanders, they will command their Troop, of approximately 30 men, in some of the most arduous and demanding conditions. Whether on operations, exercise or in barracks, they will be actively involved in their soldiers’ welfare, training and career development.

Officers are expected to master the same basic military skills and tactics as the soldiers they command in addition to their soldiering skills, they will also learn the skills pertinent to being an officer in the Corps of Engineers, which includes learning Engineer reconnaissance demolitions and bridging to name just a few” (U.S. Military Service, 2019).

We consider that authentic military texts can be a reliable source for developing real-life reading skills since our future officers will be confronted with this type of documents in their area of specialization, as well as in the multinational exercises they will take part in.

Military servicemen fulfil some of their duties by conveying messages in a written form (e-mails, memos, reports, letters etc.). Thus, academics working in the military higher education system should

pay special attention to practising and improving the writing skill, providing some layouts for the necessary writing tasks.

For example, in making the writing of memos a more interesting exercise in the English class, cadets have to address the following activity: *Write a memo to notify your subordinates about an English course. Include the following information: list of participants received by 05 May; place; date and time; purpose.*

In order to practise issuing orders, cadets can be asked to carry out this type of activity:

You are responsible for your platoon which is a disorganised group of cadets. Give an order to make them march to the mess hall in an orderly manner.

What is imperative in developing the writing skill is to design and conceive demanding, as well as pertinent tasks for their future careers. If these activities are not challenging enough, students will not actively participate in solving them.

5. Conclusions

It has always been difficult work for academics to develop the four language skills in a manner in which future officers will handle the specific job-related situations. Many of their responsibilities will be carried out through oral and written forms of communication. An important quality of an army leader is the ability to transmit information in a concise, but meaningful way, whether oral or written.

Therefore, in teaching each of the four language skills, English language academics in the military system of higher education should place constant emphasis on integrating it with the other aspects of language. This purposeful didactic mixing is essential since our cadets as future land forces officers will have to deal with job situations that require them to use at least two language skills at the same time.

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