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English Language Training in the Ukrainian Military Academies: Problems for Teachers and Curriculum Developers

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English plays an important part in the life and professional career of the Ukrainian military. The functions they perform in today's turbulent world require close coordination of all their actions with the military forces of other countries especially those of NATO. Despite Ukraine's official position of not joining any military alliance, it remains active NATO partner and participates in a number of allied operations. Thus, reaching interoperability with NATO member forces, including that in the area of English Language Training (ELT), is on the top of the Ukrainian Defense Command Authorities' agenda.

According to the Ministerial Decrees on Language Training in the armed forces of Ukraine, ELT has become one of the main subjects of the professional development curriculum in all military academies and units. It requires that all military officers should be functional at Level 2 NATO STANAG-6001 (listening, speaking, reading, and writing). It is obvious that reaching that level envisages complete transformation of the ELT system in the military academies as well as development of a new viable curriculum.

Some aspects of ELT for the military have recently been researched by the Ukrainian scholars – V. Balabin, V. Zlatnikov, K. Mamchur and others. Unfortunately, these researches were not sufficient for resolving ELT conceptual issues.

The aim of this article is to identify the problems the teachers and curriculum developers have with the ELT in the Ukrainian military academies and to give recommendations how to solve them.

The problems are caused by the conditions of the ELT in the Ukrainian military academies. Let's have a closer look at them.

We should note that during recent 22 years of Ukraine's independence its defense establishment has undergone many transformations which, despite their benevolent goals, have caused problems in the whole military education system. They led to the downsizing of the armed forces and the orders for the military personnel in the military academies. These transformations have been accompanied by chronic underfunding, personnel deficit, lack of resources and equipment. Constant changes of their goals and objectives, orientation on NATO standards or

remaining outside any military alliance have caused misunderstanding among the National Defense Command Authorities about Ukraine's military future.

In this situation the problems with ELT have emerged. They can be clearly seen at the stage of the cadets' training in the military academies.

Firstly, the requirements to the cadets' level of English have considerably grown but the number of academic hours in the military academies is not sufficient for reaching that level. If we look closer at this problem, we will notice that it comes from the secondary school where the students should acquire Level 1 in English before entering the military academy (tactical level). So, their entrance level to the military academy should be Level 1. The reality is different: almost 80% of the applicants to the military academies can hardly prove Level 0+. Those showing sufficient level are the leavers of the specialized schools in Ukraine or abroad. Over 90% of the applicants to military academies (operational and strategic levels) cannot prove required Level 2. It means the nation-wide ELT system does not work properly.

So, after entering the military academies with the level they have, cadets have no opportunity to reach exit Level 2 (tactical level) and Level 2+ (operational and strategic levels) just because their entrance level was low. At the same time, the curriculum envisages only limited number of academic hours that is not sufficient to attain the required level. It presents serious problems for both teachers and curriculum developers in the way how they should plan and teach English lessons. The problem is aggravated by the lack of academic hours that can be allocated for learning English because of other subjects.

Here, we can recommend that more attention should be focused on additional classes during cadets' self-studies. There should be organized a transitional period when those cadets having not sufficient entrance level (during their first and second years at the military academy) have additional English lessons with the idea to attain this level. There should be developed a special curriculum for such cadets that makes them gradually catch up with the rest of their language group.

At the same time, when the general situation with the ELT in the secondary schools improves, tighter measures should be taken for the selection of applicants to the military academies based on their English proficiency levels. The entrance testing should be improved in order to properly select the applicants. That can raise competitiveness among applicants and improve the quality of the military personnel.

Secondly, in the present-day ELT system the cadets are divided into language groups not according to their prior language proficiency levels but based on other non-linguistic factors (e.g. leadership and organizational qualities etc). Such important factors as cadets' learning styles and language aptitude are not taken into consideration at all. It is difficult for the educators to prove to the military commanders that these factors play a crucial role in improving ELT in

the military academies. Besides, limited resources, lack of new textbooks and language laboratories do not favor the ELT in the military academies. In recent years the situation has slightly improved due to the active participation of the Ukrainian military in the language courses in the English speaking countries or in Ukraine.

Here, the introduction of the entrance language aptitude and special psycho-linguistic tests which help to divide the cadets into language groups based on their language abilities can be a good solution of the problem. That would optimize the English language curriculum and the teaching and learning process in the military academies as a whole that could eventually lead to the better English proficiency levels of the cadets.

Thirdly, there is a mismatch between the wants of the Employer (Ministry of Defense) and the Offer from the military academies. The Employer expects well-trained officers ready to completely perform their English language functions immediately after their commissioning from the academies, while the military academies' main mission is to teach their cadets to learn. The officers should continue to learn lifelong to reach the excellence in their English proficiency. The Employer cannot realize and afford that. It is connected with the misunderstanding of the new paradigm of military education which is now the part of general national education and requires constant learning and improving during officers' career.

A good remedy for that can be the involvement of the Employer's representatives in English language curriculum development. Besides, the teachers should regularly practice in the military units to see first-hand what English language functions the officers perform in real life situations. That would make their English language curriculum more professionally oriented.

Besides, the introduction of in-service ELT in the military units can also help solve the problem. This idea has already been expressed in a number of the Ministerial Decrees. The only problem is how to implement it. On the one hand, all military realize that they should learn English for their career. On the other hand, there is neither time during service hours nor resources for that. At present, only the limited number of officers, so-called enthusiasts, can afford to improve their English on duty. A good individualized curriculum promoting learners autonomy should help to solve this problem.

The fourth problem is connected with the curriculum content. All Ukrainian military academies train different specialists for all services and branches. So, their curricula are different. The disagreement between them lies in the lack of common understanding between curriculum developers and teachers on the following issues:

− what the cadets' exit English proficiency level should be and how to measure it;
− how to select language materials that would properly suit the NATO STANAG 6001 Language Level Descriptors and include topics and situations from the cadets' future professional field;

– how to plan and conduct the communicative English lessons that would reflect the real life functions the Ukrainian military perform.

The first issue is difficult to resolve without teachers' clear understanding what cadets should be able to do with their English upon commissioning from the military academies. Here, they should get, at least, superficial understanding of the NATO STANAG 6001 Language Level Descriptors. Besides, they should be able to develop test items and conduct progressive, achievement and proficiency testing in order to measure the cadets' language skills in listening, speaking, reading and writing. This requires special teachers' courses on these important points.

The second issue requires the teachers to select language materials and develop curricula by matching the topics and situations with NATO STANAG 6001 Language Level Descriptors. They should select them exactly from their cadets' professional fields and properly organize them into a learning system. So, if it is the Land Forces Academy, their English language course should be based on the topics and situations of this branch. If it is the Navy academy, so the Navy professional topics should prevail. At present, there are two ways of curriculum development in the Ukrainian military academies. They, normally, include two components – General English and Military English. We would recommend not to strictly separating them, since the Military Component is deeply embedded into the General one. Here, the curriculum should gradually evolve from general topics and situations into professional ones.

Developing curriculum for the combined English language course in the military academies should include not only content of the textbooks but also authentic materials, predominantly from the real military life. The teachers should constantly be in search of such materials organizing their portfolios and developing their own exercises and activities based on the pedagogical rationale of these materials.

The third issue includes skills in using the textbooks and authentic materials for writing lesson plans and teaching communicative lessons. It is important to understand that most of the work during the lesson should be done not by the teacher but students. Planning and teaching communicative lessons is a problem for the Ukrainian teachers whose pedagogical background goes back to old Soviet grammar-translation lessons they have always taught. Frequent substitutions of teaching language communicative skills with purely vocabulary and grammar classes causes cadets' problems with speaking English after their commissioning from the academies.

The fifth major problem that should be solved is considering the age and nationality of the cadets when developing English language curriculum in the military academies. It is important to understand, that all English learners are not children but adults with predominately Ukrainian and Russian (or both) as their native languages. These factors can influence both teaching and learning English.

Analyzing how to teach adults, M. Knowles in his work expresses several key points of the adult learning model. They are the following: adults are motivated to learn as they experience needs and interests that learning will satisfy; their orientation to learning is life-centered, that's why, the appropriate units for organizing adult learning are life situations not subjects; experience is the richest resource for adult learning, therefore the core methodology of adult education is the analysis of experience; adults have a deep need to be self-directing, therefore the role of the teacher is to engage in a process of mutual inquiry with them rather then transmit knowledge to them and then evaluate their conformity to it; individual differences among people increase with age, therefore adult education must make optimal provision for differences in style, time, place and pace of learning [Knowles 1990: 31].

Unfortunately, the present-day ELT system does not consider these points. So, the teachers treat their cadets as children. It must be changed. Besides, the whole curriculum should be developed as to teach cadets as pragmatically as possible since adults should know for sure *what they do*, *why they do this* and *how to apply that in practical work*. Developing adult-oriented curricula is the priority issue in the Ukrainian military academies.

At the same time, the English language curricula should also consider the learners' native language which affects their English learning in many ways. According to M. Swan and B. Smith, English learners from different nations have peculiarities in learning English caused by their mother tongues. So, Slavs usually have problems in pronouncing short and long vowels. They also misuse rhythm, stress and intonation in English. Slavs also have problems with English article and verb system, making questions and statements [Swan, Smith 2002: 145–151].

All these factors play a crucial role in developing curriculum and teaching English lessons to the Ukrainian military. Since most of the teachers in the Ukrainian military academies are not English native speakers, it is difficult to keep track of all these peculiarities and mistakes cadets make. At the same time, we would recommend to consider these factors by wider involvement of native speakers in teaching English, using authentic materials and textbooks as well as exercises and activities focused on the weak points Ukrainian military have when learning English.

So, analyzing the ELT system in the Ukrainian military academies we have identified five major problems the teachers and curriculum developers encounter when teaching English to the military. They are caused by the problems in the whole military education as the result of multiple armed forces' transformations. Their analysis helps to give recommendations on how to solve the problems by improving the entrance English Language testing to the military academies; wider involving Employer in curriculum development; introducing psycholinguistic and language aptitude tests in order to properly divide cadets into lan-

guage groups; improving curriculum content; considering age and native language factors when teaching English to the Ukrainian military.

Solving these problems would considerably improve the English language proficiency of the Ukrainian military as well as their interoperability with the foreign armed forces.

Literature

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Abstract

The article identifies major problems the teachers and curriculum developers have with the English Language Training in the Ukrainian military academies. It gives recommendations on how to solve them in order to improve language interoperability of the Ukrainian armed forces with the foreign military.

Key words: English Language Training; curriculum; NATO STANAG 6001 Language Level Descriptors; Ukrainian military academies; cadets.