Language and Culture Training:
SEPARATE PATHS?

Jeff R. Watson, Ph.D.

DUE TO THE "IRREGULAR" CHALLENGES of the War on Terrorism and involvement in peacekeeping, nation building, and humanitarian aid around the world, each branch of the U.S. military has created special centers to promote the study and advancement of intercultural effectiveness. Each center has developed key concepts and ideas for teaching intercultural effectiveness training. However, a gap is growing between the two primary components necessary for intercultural effectiveness—cross-cultural competence and foreign language. While language proficiency is a necessary component of intercultural effectiveness, the services consider it of secondary importance and not as crucial as cross-cultural competence. Cross-cultural competence is considered a broader, more generalizable skill set than the time-extensive, perishable skills of language proficiency. Because of this tendency, the military is prescribing and implementing virtually separate training paths for teaching language and teaching culture.

Army Definitions of Culture and Intercultural Effectiveness

The Army's Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC) Culture Center defines culture as a "dynamic social system," containing the values, beliefs, behaviors, and norms of a "specific group, organization, society or other collectivity" learned, shared, internalized, and changeable by all members of the society.[1]

The TRADOC Culture Center further promotes the development of "cultural capability" throughout the Army through an "overarching, coherent, and connected strategy" of training and education that should integrate various organizations in the Army and Department of Defense. "Cultural capability," which I have termed "intercultural effectiveness," is the end result of developing cross-cultural competence and regional competence in Army personnel. Cross-cultural competence refers to a culture-general skill set that includes awareness of one's "self" in the context of culture, an open mind towards and appreciation of diversity, and the ability to apply "culture analytical models" to any region. Regional competence refers to the culture-specific aspects of any given culture as determined by mission objectives. Language proficiency falls into the category of regional competence.

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PHOTO: Service members from the Nuristan Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT) speak to village elders about the security and overall well-being of the population in Quandalay village, in Nuristan province, Afghanistan, 7 December 2009. The PRT routinely visits local villages to build positive relationships with elders and follow up on self-help projects funded by the PRT. (U.S. Air Force, Senior Airman Ashley Hawkins)

According to the TRADOC Culture Center, cross-cultural competence represents knowledge that is more durable and more easily attainable, while language proficiency is perishable and time-intensive to attain and sustain. In addition, the TRADOC Center believes, the skill sets from language proficiency are not as easily transferable from one region to another as those of cross-cultural competence. Because of this belief, training to promote cross-cultural proficiency has a higher priority than regional competence (including language training) in the Culture Center's plan.

U.S. Marine Corps, LCPL Jeremy Harris

U.S. Marine Corps Lt. Mike Kuiper teaches English to Afghan children at the Charlie Company outpost in Helmand Province, Afghanistan, 20 October 2009.

At West Point, the newly created Center for Languages, Cultures, and Regional Studies takes a broader approach. While accepting TRADOC's fundamental definition of culture, the Center for Languages, Cultures, and Regional Studies looks at language, culture, and the knowledge of regional dynamics as vitally interrelated and equally important aspects of intercultural effectiveness. Such effectiveness requires a skill set that encompasses language study and the cultural awareness it engenders, as well as cross-cultural competence through language and other cultural training, and knowledge of regional dynamics and how such knowledge relates intrinsically to both the culture and language.[2] The center further defines cross-cultural competence as "the capacity to generate perceptions and adapt behavior to cultural context."[3] It is currently piloting a standardized test of cross-cultural competence on cadets participating in West Point's Semester Abroad Program.[4]

Marine Corps Cultural Definitions and Intercultural Effectiveness

The U.S. Marine Corps (USMC), which has published its own training book on the topic of operational culture, has also developed a practical approach to defining culture and implementing cultural training into its training infrastructures. In its discussion of culture, the USMC's Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning limits its definition of culture to just those elements that are "relevant to military missions" and those that Marines can apply to the military domain "in a way attuned to the operational needs of Marines."[5] Based on the writings of cultural anthropologist Ward Goodenough, who defines culture as a set of norms and behaviors that one can "switch into, or activate, given the group they are in for any given purpose," the Marines have adopted a concept of culture that includes only that portion that is "operationally relevant." They further support this limited view of culture with the assertion that, academically speaking, "Much that is culture is outside the concerns of a warfighter."[6]

This pragmatic view of culture dictates that the Marines further "operationalize" culture into five specific cultural domains that make up the bulk of what is "operationally relevant" for the USMC. These five domains include the physical environment, the economy, the social structure, the political structure, and belief systems.

In sum, the USMC has put forth a definition of culture that, by necessity, is limited to only those elements of culture that are easily operationalized and militarily relevant to the warfighter. Language and language training receive no mention whatsoever in the Center for Advanced Operational Culture Learning publication.

Air Force Definitions of Culture and Intercultural Effectiveness

The U.S. Air Force (USAF), under the guidance of the newly founded USAF Culture and Language Center, has chosen to define culture in the practical framework of the USAF Cross-Cultural Competence Project.[7] In succinct yet somewhat academic terms, the Air Force Culture and Language Center defines culture as "[t]he creation, maintenance and transformation across generations of semi-shared patterns of meaning, sense making, affiliation, action, and organization by groups." In broader terms, the center operationalizes culture to include "core domains" of a culture such as family and kinship, religion and spirituality, time and space, gender, politics, history, language, and economics, all mostly shared and dynamic (changing over time). The center has also adopted a multi-level concept of culture that includes a "surface" understanding of culture (i.e., outward behaviors); a "middle" understanding (i.e., the physical, social, symbolic worlds); and a "deep" understanding (i.e., beliefs, values, assumptions).

With this understanding of culture, the center then defines cross-cultural competence as "[t]he ability to quickly and accurately comprehend, then appropriately and effectively act, to achieve the desired effect in a culturally complex environment—without necessarily having prior exposure to a particular group, region, or language."[8] Because culture is considered more "quickly learned" and more "easily transferable" than language or regional knowledge, the Air Force gives culture—as a combination of general knowledge, skills, and attitudes—more priority as a training objective than language and regional knowledge. The Air Force believes all Airmen need the former and only some Airmen need the latter, which are "culture-specific." While the Air Force encourages separate training paths for culture and language, it promotes both paths as "complementary."

Should We Separate Language and Culture?

While the reasoning that gives culture priority over language is clear, it is crucial to see the broad interrelatedness of language and culture to understand the road ahead and answer the question, "Should we separate language and culture in our training programs?"

While many considerations may be promoted as the keystone of understanding culture, human communication is by far the most fundamental. Culture stems from our ability to communicate and form societies from which cultures spring. Language "expresses, embodies, and symbolizes" cultural reality.[9] Language is the cornerstone on which we form culture and the primary medium by which we learn culture and transmit it from one generation to the next.

In that regard, language is vitally and inextricably linked to every aspect of culture. Language allows a society to categorize the physical world and the world of experience.[10] Language is a fundamental element not only of individual identity and self but also of national identity.[11] Language gives structure to individual thought[12] as well as to the collaborative and collective thought processes of a society.[13]

Language and culture are inherently interrelated and interdependent. Without language, we cannot fully realize, understand, or transmit culture to future generations, and any definition of culture is incomplete without understanding the role of language in its genesis, development, and moment-by-moment expression.

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Should We Give Language Lower Priority in Culture Training?

In most branches of the military, the philosophy behind culture training programs is based on the idea of "big 'C' Culture; little 'l' language."[14] In other words, we give culture more importance in our training programs and make language a "supporting effort." This frequently leads to the development of separate training paths for each. However, given language and culture's strong interrelatedness and interdependency, the importance of knowledge of a foreign language in intercultural effectiveness should be clear. Without a strong focus on language training in our cultural training programs, our Soldiers' effectiveness in intercultural interactions will be limited.

The goal of language training is not a singular one, as some believe. One goal of language training is to achieve operational proficiency in that language; this is arguably a long-term goal. Nonetheless, an operational language proficiency will facilitate the ability to observe cultural elements more than cross-cultural competence alone, and will give the proficient user the ability to effectively interact with and within a culture. Training in the durable, transferable "cultural universals" might be enough if we only want our Soldiers to be "observers" of culture. Goodenough's definition of culture seems more appropriate, in my view, as a functional doctrine for cultural anthropologists and other social scientists who primarily observe culture for the sake of research, but do we want our Soldiers to be little more than observers of a culture? Language proficiency will provide our Soldiers the ability to go beyond simple observation and will equip them with the skills to interact with cultural players and understand operationally relevant cultural realities.

Moreover, language proficiency is not necessarily the primary goal of language training. The language learning process itself facilitates the development of character traits that promote intercultural effectiveness in *any* cultural setting. In some self-report studies, some Americans perceive language proficiency as less important than other factors in their ability "to adjust" to a new culture while working abroad.[15] Other studies, however, show that acquiring a language especially through study abroad and immersion training promotes more overall empathy for other cultures in general.[16] Furthermore, the process of language socialization that takes place in immersion settings promotes the ability to construct a new cultural identity in a foreign culture.[17] Such an ability leads to more flexibility and effectiveness in intercultural interactions.[18] Indeed, *The U.S. Army Study of the Human Dimension in the Future* (TRADOC Pamphlet 525-3-7-01, 2008) states, "Developing such an understanding [of culture] will

> *The language learning process itself facilitates… intercultural effectiveness in any cultural setting.*

U.S. Army, SFC Rodney Jackson

From left, Indian Army BG RS Yadav, Indian Army MG Anil Malik, and U.S. Army COL James Isenhower watch the flight of an unmanned aerial vehicle on a computer during a demonstration for Exercise Yudh Abhyas 2009 in Babina, India, 16 October 2009.

require an increased emphasis on language training and proficiency, the acquisition of which increases socio-cultural awareness."[19]

Thus, language study is a unique learning endeavor that can improve the intercultural Soldier's abilities in four areas: attitude, knowledge, skills, and critical cultural awareness.[20] The intercultural *attitudes* that language learning promotes are curiosity, openness, and the "willingness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own." *Knowledge* is not simply knowledge about another culture or even culture in general, but rather knowledge of how social groups and identities within a culture relate to and interact with each other. Such knowledge will allow the interculturally effective Soldier to understand motivations, social constraints, and traditions of interaction within a culture. Language learning helps develop *skills* to seek out and discover the expectations of speakers in any given interaction and to apply that knowledge to avoid misunderstandings and pursue goals with appropriate tact. Furthermore, this skill set is not necessarily region-specific. The Soldier can transfer these skills to other cultures and employ them even through an interpreter in regions where he may not possess language proficiency. Finally, the interculturally effective Soldier employs a *critical cultural awareness* of his own values and how they influence his views and interpretations of other people's values. The process of learning a language demands

an element of self-reflection and self-knowledge that such awareness brings about. Therefore, we should not categorically assign foreign language to the domain of region- or culture-specific knowledge. While language study does involve a specific language and often a specific region, many benefits gained from this pursuit are applicable in other cultural settings outside the language's region of use.

Conclusion

We must bring language training back into focus as an "equal partner" with culture training and make it a key component of our culture training initiatives. Language training currently plays a secondary role in interagency culture programs, most of which view culture as an object of study and teach easily transferrable knowledge using analytical models of cultural universals. While some of these analytical models include communicative norms, they do not stress the importance of interactional nuances of a society or the key role of language in a culture. The process of learning a foreign language uniquely facilitates the development of character traits a warfighter needs for effective intercultural interactions. Whether these interactions occur in the foreign language (by more proficient learners) or through an interpreter is of secondary importance. The attitudes, knowledge, skills, and awareness are transferrable, relevant, and applicable in culture-general contexts.

While undoubtedly necessary, cross-cultural competence training emphasizing cultural universals and militarily relevant cultural elements should not have priority over language training. Language and culture training should not follow separate paths of development. If the two endeavors are complementary, then why separate them and focus on them individually? With so many resources dedicated to developing intercultural effectiveness, why have we diminished the importance of one of the best training endeavors we have for fostering such effectiveness? Language should be viewed as inextricable from culture and given equal priority in our current culture training programs—not necessarily with the goal of producing an operational level of proficiency but because the process of learning a foreign language enables a more subjective cross-cultural sensitivity, awareness, tolerance, and understanding. ***MR***

NOTES

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