THE IMPORTANCE OF DEVELOPING THE INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE FOR THE LAND FORCES CADETS

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ABSTRACT:
Teaching English is given priority in the military system of higher education, being in fact the central intercultural core that provides substance, consistency and strength to the intercultural dimension of the academic military education. After the accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the participation of the Romanian armed forces, particularly the Land Forces officers, in a multitude of missions abroad has created the need to form, develop and consolidate their ability to meet specific intercultural standards during academic training. In this regard, identifying and addressing issues aimed at improving the teaching of English, as well as of other foreign languages, is considered to be of paramount importance. The present study highlights the importance of linguistic interoperability in successfully accomplishing international missions and suggests several ways of improving the intercultural communication skills of cadets. At the same time, it insists on the necessity of reconsidering education from an intercultural perspective since on the modern battlefield the capacity to implement the acquired cultural knowledge will be the one that will make the difference.

KEYWORDS: intercultural communication competence, linguistic interoperability, foreign language syllabus, Land Forces cadets.

1. Introduction
Along with the deepening of the contemporary world globalization and the 11th of September 2001 events, the issue of national security cannot find viable, scientifically founded solutions without resorting to the resources provided by the research in such a complex domain, having profound impact on the human personality and on the international communities, which
is that of intercultural education and, implicitly, the competence of intercultural communication. Therefore, the intercultural dimension of military actions has to be highlighted as being a condition of major importance in achieving their efficiency, together with the intercultural competence as a factor of success in accomplishing the missions assigned to the military structures in the theatres of operations.

Due to the significant increase in the number of challenges and security threats that the states belonging to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) were confronted with, the range of military missions has extended, now including peacekeeping operations, peace support operations, as well as humanitarian aid. In this context, approaching interculturality in the higher military system of education has become an important and necessary issue. Moreover, the new challenges of the operational environment, through the multinational formations made up of members belonging to different nations, brought up in the spirit of different traditions, customs, beliefs, values, and speaking different languages demand the Land Forces officer, besides meeting the physical, psychic, intellectual, moral requirements, the intercultural requirements as well.

In addition, within these multinational work teams relationships can become tense when there are great difficulties caused by the incorrect use of the means of communication. Thus, communication is essential in any teamwork, but it becomes crucial within the international military teams [1]. We consider that the ability to communicate is one of the most pressing difficulties affecting the efficiency and efficacy of the team.

Communicating involves not only understanding and being able to use lexical and grammatical structures, but also the ability to understand attitudes, values, beliefs, norms, rituals, behaviours, points of view of one’s interlocutor [2]. Communication is the larger umbrella involving both the linguistic level and the intercultural level.

Without intercultural competence, the simplest communication (conveying a simple message) sometimes proves impossible.

2. Linguistic Interoperability – a Key Element of Intercultural Understanding

The armed forces of different countries increasingly work and train together, the official language that the different contingents use being the English language.

Along with the needs specific to each branch of the army, specialization and military mission, the military personnel have certain basic needs. Generally, the military personnel have to be able to explain the problems they are confronted with, come up with suggestions in solving problems and address superiors and subordinates in a correct manner.

The communication skills in English include conveying information within briefings and debriefings, using the radio, reading the maps, transmitting messages within meetings, as well as producing written messages (notes, memos and reports, informal and formal letters).

Standardization represents the manner in which various functions are harmoniously performed by different armies in order to improve their ability to operate together. It applies to all aspects of those functions and includes doctrine, procedures, training, logistics, as well as equipment [3]. Interoperability is almost wholly concerned with equipment, predominantly in the communications field. Interoperability is essential for the efficient transmission of information in whatever form, from one national formation to another.

Linguistic interoperability is exemplified by NATO Standardization Agreements, or STANAGs, which lay down common standards for six levels of language proficiency. STANAG 6001 is a language proficiency scale designed to allow comparisons of language ability in different countries. The scale consists of a set of descriptors with proficiency skills
broken down into six levels, coded 0 through 5 [4].

The six language levels are defined as follows: Level 0 – no practical proficiency; Level 1 – elementary; Level 2 – fair (limited working); Level 3 – good (minimum professional); Level 4 – very good (full professional); Level 5 – excellent (native/bilingual). The acquisition of English is an important component in the formation of the Land Forces Academy cadets who are required to achieve at least Level 2 STANAG 6001 in the four language skills: reading, speaking, listening, and writing. The descriptors for Level 2 STANAG 6001 correspond to the Level B 1 of the Common European Framework (CEF), as follows: [5]

– reading: can read simple, factual, straightforward, and authentic texts on familiar topics, which may include descriptions (of people, places and things/events), narrations about current, past and future events; can locate and understand the main ideas and details in written factual material and can answer questions about such texts.

– speaking: can communicate in daily social and routine workplace contexts; can state facts, compare and contrast, give simple instructions and directions, ask and answer predictable questions; can speak in a way that is appropriate to the situation, although command of the spoken language is not always firm.

– listening: can follow conversations and talks about everyday topics, including personal news, well known current events and routine job-related topics and topics in his/her professional field; can understand factual content, but not the subtleties of language surrounding the facts.

– writing: can write simple personal and routine workplace correspondence, and related documents (notes, memos, reports, informal and formal letters); can bring together sentences in the form of paragraphs, although the transition from one idea to the other may not always be clearly made.

Language competence is undeniably the key element of intercultural understanding. It is the means by which culture is formed and the primary medium by which cultural values are passed down from one generation to the other. Given the strong interrelatedness and interdependence between language and culture, we cannot but emphasize the importance of language proficiency in intercultural effectiveness.

Language proficiency will facilitate the ability not only to be aware of and observe cultural elements, but will give the proficient user the ability to effectively interact within a culture due to his/her more general flexibility and more openness to other cultures [6]. Having a good command of the means of communication provides more opportunities of interaction among soldiers within the military operations. Being of such great importance, the acquisition of language proficiency should be given priority in the training of military students.

3. Ways of Improving Intercultural Communication Skills

Intercultural communication is an implicit and necessary element of most language courses delivered in the Land Forces Academy. In most cases, it is taught not only as separate knowledge and skill, but also with the aim of promoting an appropriate attitude or awareness/openness as an integrated part of language learning. In some cases, intercultural communication is combined with translation or with intercultural knowledge dissemination. In our academy, the foreign language degree programs do not offer courses in intercultural communication as such, but lay emphasis on the integration of intercultural communication into the language acquisition programmes.

On the basis of the studies we have surveyed so far, we put forward the following suggestions as important means of improving intercultural communication skills:

➤ being aware of your own culture – you should think about the way you
communicate when you come into contact with people from a different culture, whether you are direct or indirect, whether you use nonverbal gestures rarely or frequently, or whether you seek agreement from your interlocutor when you make a statement;

- **being other-oriented** – you should be willing to listen more than you talk and watch how others communicate; you should also pay attention to the change in the interlocutor’s intonation or speaking rhythm and to the purpose it serves; you should not make assumptions based on your own cultural values, beliefs, and customs;

- **being curious in dealing with different cultures** – you should be aware that people from different cultures operate on different assumptions and values; you should seek information about your interlocutor’s culture since this is the only means of bridging the gap between people coming from different cultures;

- **tolerating ambiguity** – you should be able to handle the uncertainty and uneasiness produced by ambiguous situations and at the same time develop the ability to accept lack of clarity and to deal with and manage ambiguous situations in a positive manner;

- **being behaviourally flexible** – you should develop the ability to change and adjust your own behavior to the requirements of diverse situations;

- **being emphatic** – you should develop the ability to intuitively understand what other people think and how they feel, think and behave in certain situations;

- **getting into contact with people coming from different cultures** – you should be exposed to different cultures by travelling to other countries, by going to different kinds of restaurants or districts in your area, by joining social groups for international professionals, or even by attending plays or watching movies that are from another culture.

By following the above-mentioned guidelines, our cadets may develop and improve the intercultural communication skills. These may prove beneficial in working side-by-side with the military personnel belonging to different cultures within the military operations on the international theatres of operations.

### 4. Developing the Land Forces Cadets’ Intercultural Communication Competence through the Teaching of Foreign Languages

The new, modern fighting space determines the diversification of the experiences to which the Land Forces officer will relate and demands, along with the physical, psychic, intellectual, moral standards, the intercultural ones as well.

All of these requirements – great capacity of adapting attitude, behaviour, knowledge, ability to show openness, flexibility, positive attitude towards persons belonging to diverse cultures, capacity of reviewing own beliefs and values from the perspective of other cultures – bring up the issue of educating the military students from an intercultural perspective. To this end, the priorities, strategies, methodologies and objectives of educating the cadets must be reconsidered [7].

The foreign languages are among the disciplines that have a high intercultural potential. Teaching foreign languages provides a fruitful field for intercultural approaches, being the disciplines that determine the cadets to know and understand both their own culture, as well as the culture of different countries. The good command of a foreign language, especially the English language, is the only efficient means of promoting and developing international understanding.

Within the foreign language syllabus, forming the intercultural competence has in view the following three capacities:

- **the cognitive capacity** – acquiring the foreign language and the knowledge on that particular culture;

- **the aptitudinal/affective capacity** – forming the cadets’ capacity to be open and
flexible towards other cultures, as well as to tolerate other values, beliefs, customs, norms, rituals, taboos and time concepts that typically shape the form and content of interactions;

– the attitudinal/actional capacity – promoting respect for other cultures and the ability to intuitively identify the way the interlocutor thinks and feels and why he/she acts in a certain way.

In the foreign language classes, the cognitive capacity (to know) is generally developed through the following didactic methods and activities: exercise, conversation, pair-work, group-work, guided discussion, debate, role play, etc. The cadets should be able to use the language in real-life communication situations, and possess knowledge on the target culture.

The affective capacity (to be) is formed through several interactive strategies and activities: brainstorming, role-play, simulation, problem-solving, etc. At the end of these activities the military students should display intercultural adaptability through the manifestation of emotional, motivational, emphatic aptitudes.

The attitudinal/actional capacity (to do) is trained through certain didactic activities such as: role play, group-work, debate, project, etc. On completing these classroom tasks, military students should be able to show appropriate attitudes by coming up with for and against arguments in sustaining their own opinions, as well as by showing respect for the different social and cultural values; they should ignore the usual stereotypes related to the different nationalities, not make discriminatory judgments and be responsible for their own viewpoints and conduct.

In the Land Forces Academy, within the English language syllabus, the cognitive and affective capacities are focused on: the review of the general knowledge of English in the first semester; the acquisition of the cultural elements to be found in the English-speaking countries in the second semester; and the ability to express opinions, feelings, and emotions in writing, as well as to produce notes, memos, reports, informal and formal letters during the third semester. The attitudinal/ actional capacity is developed during the next three semesters through practical activities that concentrate on improving the four basic language skills, enhancing the cadets’ ability to deal with the specific situations they will be confronted with as future officers working in multinational formations.

5. Conclusions

The communication competence in multinational environments involves knowledge, motivation, and a capacity to efficiently interact with members belonging to different cultures. Military personnel engaged in international military operations will not be able to properly interact with members belonging to different cultures without having a good command of the official language. The linguistic interoperability is the most important condition in achieving intercultural interoperability.

At the same time we are of the opinion that the formation of intercultural communication competence is an anticipatory future-oriented activity which will prove its efficiency by being profoundly founded on the exploration of the social evolution tendencies and on new educational models of forming and preparing the future Land Forces officers for a never-ending changing context.

The intercultural military dimension is a must in determining the efficient conditions of accomplishing a whole new range of military missions which are based not only on knowing and using the actional procedures, but also on forming the military personnel from an intercultural perspective with a view to properly understanding and accepting the soldiers belonging to other cultures.

Inter(bi)culturally competent is a person who does not make assumptions based on his/her own values, beliefs, customs
in coming in contact with persons belonging to other cultures, who intuitively understands what other people think, feel and expect, why they behave the way they do, in other words a person who has understood the foreign culture in such a way that it is possible for them to anticipate behavior and reactions of persons of that different culture similarly as well as of persons of their own culture [8].

In conclusion, we believe that the military students who have acquired such knowledge and understanding will be expected to demonstrate: the capacity for effective communication in the language of their interlocutor; implementation of the knowledge of culture (values, norms, beliefs, taboos, rituals, customs) to specific intercultural situations; adaptation of their deportment in accordance with the requirements of different intercultural situations; development of critical thinking through identification of similarities and differences between cultures, traditions; reflection on the cultural factors that have an impact on their own way of behaving and that of others.

References