

Review research paper

**SPECIFICS OF TEACHING FOREIGN LANGUAGES
FOR THE MILITARY: ANALYSIS WITHIN THE ARMED
FORCES ACADEMY IN SLOVAKIA**

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Abstract. *Language skills have always represented an integral part of the key military competencies. In order to modernize and enhance the foreign language education of future officers, a research project has been carried out and selected aspects of this project have been shared in this paper. It is based on the theoretical and empirical knowledge of foreign language education at the Armed Forces Academy of gen. M. R. Štefánik in Slovakia and the transition from on-site learning to e-learning with particular focus on multimodality in foreign language education.*

Key words: *foreign language education; military language; English for military purposes; specifics of English for the military*

1. INTRODUCTION

Communication competences of officers and other military personnel are vital tools for enabling the efficient communication flow within the military for the performance of their tasks. One of the pillars of their communication competences is the required level of foreign language skills. The defense of a country depends largely on their ability to identify and analyze foreign communication. Thus, army linguists have always been holding an important role within the departments of defense.

Military pedagogy, including the foreign language education within the military, is a very specific scientific field, with very unique, distinct and isolated specifics. The army is a social system with its own norms, rituals, symbols and, not least, language. Due to the very fact, that soldiers are drilled to behave, act and communicate in a certain, strictly prescribed way and also the fact that they are trained to think differently, the educators within the militaries have to deal with numerous methodological implications. In this paper the focus lies on the particularities of foreign language education of the cadets of the Armed Forces Academy of general M. R. Štefánik¹ (hereinafter referred to as AFA) in

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¹ The Armed Forces Academy of gen. M. R. Štefánik is the only military university-type institution in Slovakia. It provides university and lifelong education and training to (future) officers of the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic. For more information visit: www.aos.sk

Liptovský Mikuláš, Slovakia. More importantly, since English is considered the international language of the military, this paper deals especially with the English language for military purposes.

Inspired by the recent developments in IT, digital technologies, language teaching studies and also by the impacts of covid-19 on education, foreign language teachers have been seeking ways to adapt and improve the teaching methods, tools and approaches. Foreign language teachers at the AFA have been working to help the teaching process back to its feet after it was disrupted due to the lockdowns imposed over the past two years and they have been doing so by making the most of technological resources. Within the scientific project *Analysis of the foreign language education for the enhancement of language teaching at the Armed Forces Academy of gen. M. R. Štefánik in Liptovský Mikuláš* the teachers have focused on assessment of the current state of the foreign language education (predominantly on English) and on the choice of innovative teaching and testing methods using e-learning tools, multimodal tools and authentic sources from the internet.

2. CONTEXT-RELEVANT OVERVIEW

Although the communication and languages within the military are an intriguing, unique and rich source for research, not much has been done in the field of linguistic research. From the very few available linguistic researches Francesco Gratton's case study *Military English versus general English. A case study of an English proficiency test in the Italian Military*, 2009 and Josef Ernst's *Multilingualism as an Intercultural phenomenon in the framework of peace support operations*, 2019 can be mentioned. Arguably, there have been some partial or interdisciplinary research activities, such as in the field of sociolinguistics (e.g. *Language Matters in the Military* by A. van Dijk, J.M.M.L. Soeters in *Armed forces and conflict resolution. Sociological perspectives*, 2008, by G. Caforio, G. Kummel, B. Purkayastha; *Handbook of the Sociology of the Military*, 2018, by G. Caforio, M. Nuciari), text analysis (*Semantic Analysis of Military Relevant Texts for Intelligence Purposes*, 2011, by S. Noubours, M. Hecking - a report) or didactics and communication (*Educational Challenges Regarding Military Action*, 2010, by H. Annen and W. Royl) however, no significant linguistic research of military language has quite understandably been carried out nor publicized. This research gap should be attributed to the fact that communication within the military is characterized by a certain level of classification. In addition to that, it is also important to state, that military linguists or language teachers within the military are predominantly tasked with activities other than linguistic research, more specifically with tasks related to practical use of enhancing the levels of foreign language skills of the soldiers, translation and interpreting or cryptology. Any hypothetical linguistic research within the military would most likely never be published (or has never been published).

Regarding the globalization, digitalization and the increasing importance of foreign language skills of soldiers, several articles on the role of communication and foreign languages skills in military leadership and ICT in military education have been published in the recent years. One of the few researchers studying and writing on communication and military-related topics is Cori Dauber. There have also been very inspiring projects carried out within some of the partner - military institutions of AFA, such as *Digitalisiertes Sprachwesen im Bundesheer* (Digitalized Languages in Austrian Armed Forces) and *Digitale*

Ausbildungsakademie (Digital Training Academy) at the Bundeswehr Command and Staff College in Hamburg, Germany. Military language matters of NATO member countries are covered by the NATO Standardization Office, which provides the Official NATO Terminology Database.² When discussing the language matters of NATO member states' armies, it is to be clarified, that the way one should communicate within the military is constantly being re-considered, modified, debated, and dictated by the individual armed forces and the NATO (Slater, 2015).

As already mentioned, in contrast to other technical or specialized languages, military languages are not typically being researched much by linguists and as a result, there is a lack of teaching material and apparent scarcity of specialized literature. When designing the project and the analysis, Zoltán Dörnyei's *Research Methods in Applied Linguistics* (2007) and *Data Collection Research Methods in Applied Linguistics* (2020) by Heath Rose, Jim McKinley and Jessica Briggs Baffoe-Djan have been the theoretical starting point for the methodological approach. In addition to that, *Kvalitatívni výzkum* 2016 (transl. Qualitative research) by Jan Hendl has been a good source for the outline of the qualitative research within the project.

3. SPECIFICS OF ENGLISH FOR MILITARY PURPOSES

3.1. Communication within the military

The first and foremost fact that needs to be established is the polysemy of the expression *military communication* or *communication in the military*. Generally, it includes all verbal and non-verbal exchange of information within the military (including civil - military contacts). However, in context of specialized military language the term *military communications* (MILCOM) is used to describe the systems and platforms of different modes of transmitting information, often from units in contact with enemy and also typically to exercise command. This includes cryptography, military radio systems, network-centric warfare and other systems. Professional soldiers and educators are well aware of the polysemous character of the expression, yet civilians are most likely ignorant to it. In addition to that, the term (*official*) *military language* is being used interchangeably with *communication in / within the military* or *military communication* in context of sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic or didactic research within the military.

When defining and describing the communication within the military, we must not neglect the sociolinguistic dimension. The military can be perceived as a social group with its own language, the knowledge of which, in fact, serves as the threshold for participation in the group. To qualify for access into this social group, one must understand the language. The common language within this group is vital due to numerous reasons. When examining this issue from the sociological perspective, one of the crucial ones is the team spirit. According to Dauber "...this creation of what is virtually another language not only builds a wall between the insider and the outsider but simultaneously reinforces the connection between those who are masters of the form. The ability to control and manipulate an insider linguistic form

² For more information see <https://nso.nato.int/nso/home>.

identifies one as a member of the institution, forging an automatic link between people who have the same ability, while reinforcing the distinction between these insiders and outsiders.³

From the pragmalinguistic and lexical perspective, communication within the military can be defined as a set of sub-categories of several communication situations, which occur in various environments, according to the respective structure of the military institution and furthermore, according to the degree of hierarchy. To illustrate this, the following table represents the diversity of environments, while each of them forms a unique domain with its own terminology, jargon, eventually slang, conventions etc. and a different degree of formality. Each of the domains consists of a variety of other sub-categories (units, facilities), which again represent unique communication situations. The organizational structure of every army is extensive, every level, branch or unit of the army represents a separate social, specialized and language group. “Indeed, military service has its own jargon, acronyms, phrases. Not only do different services use different terms; sometimes the same word can mean different things to different services.”⁴

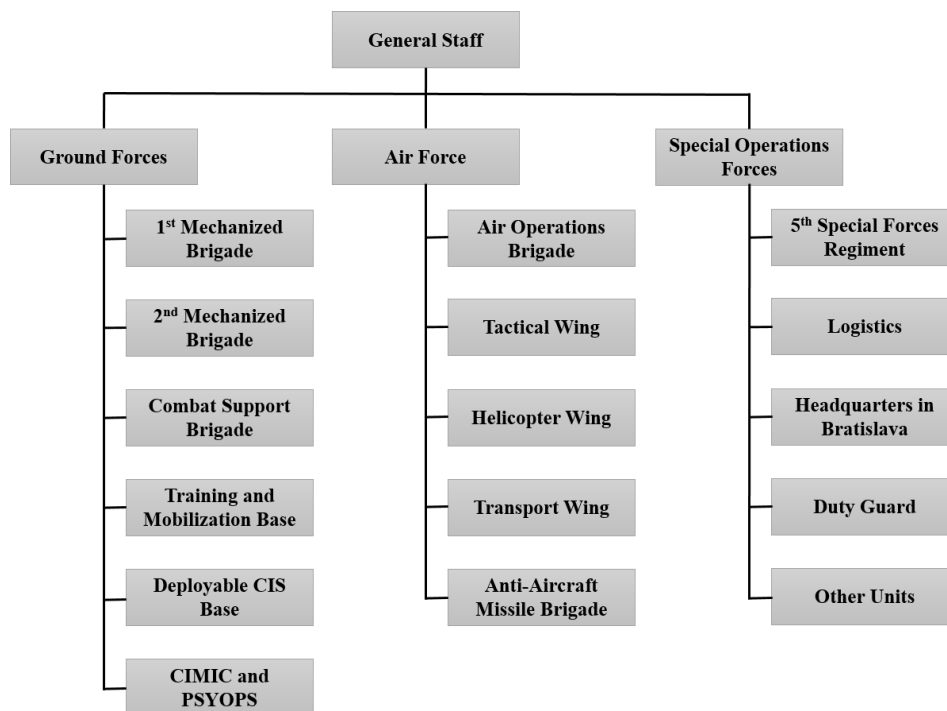


Fig. 1 Organization chart of the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic

³ Dauber, C. available at <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/language-military-official-terminology> [1.5.2022]

⁴ Dauber C. available at <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/language-military-official-terminology> [1.5.2022]

There is no scientific consensus on the definition of military language, its characteristics, nor the theoretic framework of a military language. Based on long and proven experience with communication with professional soldiers, systematic observation and analysis within the research, it can be concluded, that the military language is the exchange of information within a military and between a military and its communication partners. It comprises verbal, as well as non-verbal communication. In fact, hardly any other specialized language attaches more importance to non-verbal communication than the military language. Military language is extremely complex and diverse, since it ranges from very formal and strictly prescribed forms of language that are clear and concise (such as NATO alphabet, radio communication, English for the Air Force, drill commands etc.), to euphemistic, ambiguous or even manipulative language in the media or politics. The following graphic representation shows the military language in hyperonymic relation to its sub-categories.

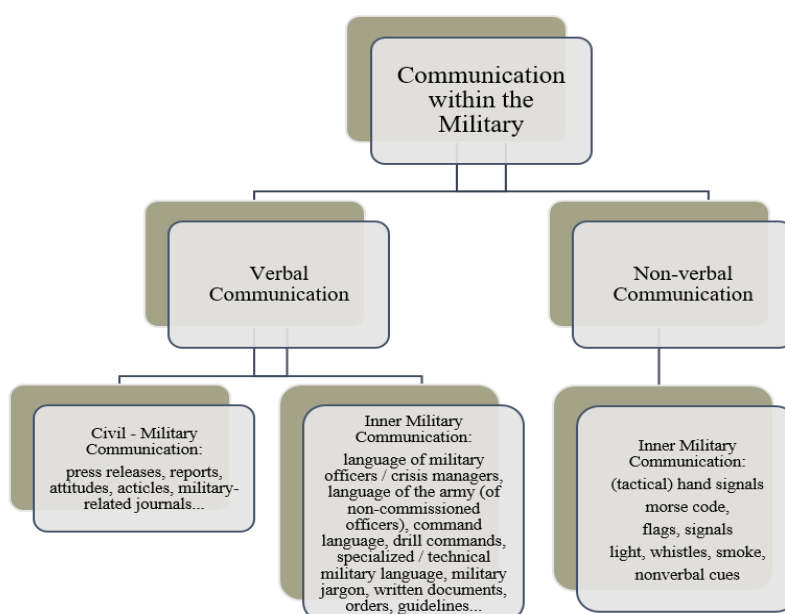


Fig. 2 Communication within the military

Due to its complexity and dynamic character, the characteristic features of the military language are very diverse, in fact, even conflicting. Dauber defines three basic characteristics of military language: “Official military language has at least three characteristics that are revealed through linguistic analysis. It tends to be a sanitized form of language; it emphasizes the expertise of those who use it; and it contains a specific notion of hierarchy.”⁵ When examining the military language as a whole, the following characteristics can be identified:

⁵ Dauber C. available at <https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/language-military-official-terminology> [1.5.2022]

- clarity / precision - most commonly attributed to specialized languages (Roelcke, 2010); after all, not for nothing is the collocation *with military precision* used when talking about exactness
- comprehensibility - an absolute imperative within the military; it assumes not only the knowledge of specialized terminology, but also the pragmatic and paralinguistic aspects
- language / linguistic economy - Roelcke (2002) defines this as the information transfer in a way that facilitates efficient communication with the lowest communication effort possible
- anonymity - an important feature of all specialized languages; use of passive voice
- hierarchy - a constitutive element of all military and paramilitary organizations (Rogg, 2005)
- dynamics - neologisms and other changes due to geopolitical events, foreign affairs, military conflicts and other communication contacts
- usage-relatedness - language matters within the military are military-related and focus on practice and on particular job-related functions
- usage of euphemisms - especially in civil-military communication; names of weapons, ships, bombs; language in the media
- internal symbolic logic - participants of communication within the military have developed understanding for the inner-military jargon, slang, nuances, patterns and peculiarities of the military language
- directive speech act - especially in command language and drill; the speaker exercises a speech act to evoke an action

3.2. Specifics of teaching (military) English at the AFA

The specific features of the military language and the nature of communication within the military have a great influence on the language teaching / learning process at the AFA. The rather formal classroom atmosphere has a particularly negative impact on improving (military) English. Cadets are hesitant to work in pairs, they do not actively engage in discussions, role plays and conversations, they are typically not spontaneous nor creative. They are hesitant to discuss hypothetical or abstract topics (necessary for the command of 2nd, 3rd and mixed conditionals, unreal past etc.). One of the most important factors affecting the teaching / learning process is the rank (e.g. in case of an inhomogeneous group, the lower-rank soldiers manifest unwillingness to cooperate; high-ranking commissioned officers tend to disrupt the classes with frequent questions or remarks). Other factors include the study program / specialization, (future) posting, eventual future deployment in a foreign country, circumstances of the language classes (previous classes, e.g. if a physical training class precedes the language class, cadets tend to be physically exhausted and do not engage actively in the process, thus passive learning activities are recommended), etc. Most of the conventional language teaching methods are not suitable for the military environment, thus a personalized approach is necessary.

Incorporating collocations into the teaching / learning process has proved efficient due to several reasons. Firstly, it can be assumed, that collocations are an integral part of specialized / technical language (Cedillo, 2004). Secondly, the process of learning

collocations resembles the drill-style process of learning how to communicate within the military in general. The so-called *previously rehearsed patterns of action* (Mälkki, K., Mälkki J. 2013) are an integral part of every soldier's training and education. Thirdly, morpho-syntactic particularities of the military language require that they be taken into account when teaching / learning a foreign language for military purposes. The fourth reason is the presumption that mastering a foreign language for military purposes necessarily requires mastering the phraseology and idiomatics. To sum it up, professional soldiers require various levels of English language competence, various specializations, for various purposes. The choice of methods in military English education has to be individualized, has to reflect the specifics of military language and it has to be dynamic with regard to geopolitics, NATO, national interests and the requirements of the Ministry of Defence of the Slovak Republic. The learning / teaching process has to concentrate predominantly on language in context rather than on grammar.

4. METHODOLOGY

4.1. Project objectives

In order to analyze, modernize and enhance the current state of foreign language education at the AFA, there has been a project *Analysis of the language education for the enhancement of language teaching at the Armed Forces Academy of gen. M. R. Štefánik in Liptovský Mikuláš* carried out in 2020 - 2021. The main focus lies on the English language, as it is one of the official languages of NATO and also the lingua franca of the military, additionally German and Russian languages have been included, since they are taught at the AFA as the second foreign language. It should be considered a pilot project, since it is the first ever to deal with foreign languages within the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic. The main aim has been to enhance the English language skills of AFA cadets and more particularly to enhance the level of their military English exam at the end of their military English study period.⁶ The overall aim of the project reflects the current global trends in foreign language education, military training and education and language policy⁷.

Other objectives of the project include the exchange of experience with selected foreign civilian and military institutions, comparison of foreign language education methods with selected institutions, proposals for new didactic approaches, analysis and selection of new innovative methods and tools focusing on multimodal learning / teaching and testing and corresponding study / teaching / testing material. A practical outcome of this project is the newly-built language laboratory at the AFA for educational purposes, but also for the promotion of self-study activities of cadets, professional soldiers and teaching staff of the AFA.

⁶ Throughout 5 terms cadets study military English (it includes grammar, functions of the language, topics from civilian life as well as specialized military terminology). At the end of the 5th term cadets are tested in 4 skills (speaking, writing, listening and comprehension, reading and comprehension) by the military language exam - STANAG 6001. For more information see https://www.natoblc.org/en/products/stanag-60011142_stanag-6001/

⁷ Language policy meaning the language policy of NATO and EU, i. e. English as lingua franca in the military and in addition to that the need for another foreign language command.

4.2. Participants and the context

The project involves 437 AFA cadets, thereof 336 cadets of the 1st degree of study (bachelor degree), 101 cadets of 2nd degree of study (master degree). The cadets study in the following study programs:

- Security and State Defense
- Electronic Weapons Systems
- Military Communications and Information Systems
- Weapons Systems, Weapons and Components

The cadets' English language proficiency ranged from pre-intermediate to advanced.

4.3. Design and procedure

To analyze the complex system of foreign language education at the AFA and propose a new modernized concept with focus on multimodality and ICT, the mixed-methods approach was considered the most appropriate. This is due to the fact that quantitative methods as such provide answers to factual data regarding the achieved levels, statistical statements on language level enhancement, exam success rates, comparison of success rates among various study groups etc. However, complex solutions to the research tasks required defining and understanding the reasons of the quantitative research outcomes and the consequent course of action. Apart from the qualitative methods, there have been quantitative evaluation methods used within this research, which involved data regarding the entrance exams, specialized military placement tests, and STANAG 6001 tests. However, these results are not the subject of this paper.

The data collection activities within the qualitative research were carried out throughout the first year of the project, i. e. in 2020. The interviews and classroom observation were carried out partially during on-site classes, as well as during distance learning (via MS TEAMS) due to lockdowns imposed in Slovakia in 2020.

4.4. Data collection tools and procedures

The methods relevant for the research include:

- structured interview - an efficient method for collecting data on the interviewer's main interests. This method was especially used for answering the questions about cadets' studying habits.
- informal interviewing - since structured interviews resulted in some unexpected outcomes, informal interviewing provided individualized, in-depth insights from the cadets' perspective.
- narrative interviewing - according to Hendl (2016) there are important subjective notions that can be uncovered purely by means of narration. From the experience of teaching foreign languages to cadets it can be stated, that the maximum amount of information whilst conveying the content most relevant for the subjects of the research can be acquired from this type of research method.
- problem-centered interview - in form of debriefing after selected events, such as mid-term exams, end-term exams, other testing methods. This method was also used to pinpoint the key challenges of foreign language education of AFA cadets, e.g. improving the speaking skills, boosting confidence while speaking English, challenges

of learning specialized military terminology, eventual deployments abroad or participation in international activities requiring special language training etc.

- focus group discussion - this type of communication within the AFA helps overcome psychical and communication barriers that typically result from the drill-style military communication, which cadets start learning from the first day they join the army.
- classroom observation - to answer the research questions, this method proved as very efficient in providing authentic information and findings. Since all communication flows within the military are very exceptional, classroom was selected as the best and most relevant environment for the research.

The selected research methods reflect the exceptional character of the military education environment and focus on the psycholinguistic dimension. The research questions in qualitative methods have revolved around these topics:

What are the most effective methods in foreign language education at the AFA?

What are the most significant obstacles in foreign language teaching / learning at the AFA?

How can we boost self-study?

Why does a specific percentage of cadets fail to meet the language proficiency requirements?

How shall the curricula be modernized or transformed?

Do the cadets' language proficiency levels acquired at the AFA meet the requirements of the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic?

5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

5.1. Analysis results

The analysis of the current state of foreign language education at the AFA was carried out throughout the first year of the research activities, i. e. in 2020. That year was marked with the outbreak of the covid-pandemic, consequently numerous constraints occurred. In spite of the unfavorable conditions of the research, useful and challenging findings have been revealed.

The results of the analysis of the current state of the foreign language education at the AFA are far-reaching and range from the quantitative assessment of the entry level of English skills to military-related aspects, English language level at the end of cadets' study at the AFA and the attained level of STANAG 6001 exam. However, this chapter deals with the newly-emerged role of ICT in foreign language teaching and learning within the AFA.⁸

The benefits of ICT integration in foreign language education have been known and have been examined within the linguistic and pedagogic fields for a while now. One of them might not be as common within ESL as it is within the foreign language for military

⁸ The term „newly emerged role“ is used here because prior to the project and prior to the covid-pandemic the foreign language classes at the AFA were taught traditionally by means of place-based classroom methods, mostly in form of an interactive lecture, eventually a problem-solving lecture and chalk-and-talk lecture. The classes involved face-to-face interaction, speaking activities, using textbooks, frontal teaching methods, pair work and group work. Methods using ICT were used just occasionally to support the training of cadets' presenting and (de)briefing skills. Complementary to that, cadets could attend conversation classes.

purposes realm, and that is the lack of authentic teaching / learning sources. In general, every specialized language has far more limited resources in comparison to general language, and this is also the case with military English. Hardly any other specialized language has such unique, particular and isolated features, roles, rules, terminology, subgenres (such as military jargon, slang, language of military officers...), environment and sources.

The use of ICT tools promoted the following phenomena examined in the research:

- In their free time 100% of cadets use digital mobile devices for (self-) study of English language (this applies also to German and Russian language)
- Blogs and vlogs - like with almost all young people nowadays, blogs and vlogs are especially popular with AFA cadets. This topic is used in classes to train a selected topic, e.g. environmental issues, current events or to train a concrete grammar phenomenon, e.g. reported speech - cadets report what they had read / heard from their favorite blogger / vlogger.)
- Films and series - war films and military-related series are a valuable source of authentic military language in its natural environment and the added value is the enjoyment factor (cadets clearly enjoy studying military vocabulary via film or series far more than studying a military textbook).
- Gamification - over 90% of cadets reported playing or having played war / military PC games. This activity boosts the specialized military-related vocabulary, specific areas of grammar, e.g. the imperative, phrasal verbs etc., it represents a change in routine and motivates to improve.
- The so-called New Normal - practices in foreign language teaching / learning that had to be adopted due to the covid-epidemic and the subsequent transition from on-site learning to e-learning. The New Normal within AFA included:
 - integrating MS TEAMS and MOODLE in language classes, i. e. virtual classes
 - integrating online internet platforms and apps (Duolingo, Busuu, Mooveez have been chosen and proved useful and efficient)
 - integrating youtube channels presenting foreign language - related topics (Learn English with Papa Teach me⁹, Easy German¹⁰, Learn English with TV Series¹¹, RealLife English¹², Outside Chronicles¹³ - for teaching map reading and terrain features vocabulary etc.)

The effects of ICT integration and the consequent promotion of multimodality in the foreign language classes of AFA cadets as observed throughout the research:

- authenticity of the language and resources:
 - access to the so-called real world events (e.g. Sensations English¹⁴, Vlogger Academy¹⁵, Real English with Real Teachers¹⁶ etc.)

⁹ <https://www.youtube.com/c/papateachme>

¹⁰ <https://www.youtube.com/c/EasyGerman>

¹¹ <https://www.youtube.com/c/LearnEnglishWithTVSeries>

¹² <https://www.youtube.com/c/RealLifeEnglish1>

¹³ <https://www.youtube.com/c/OutsideChronicles>

¹⁴ <https://sensationsenglish.com/>

¹⁵ <https://vloggeracademy.readytorun.online/>

¹⁶ <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCddhCpo99TYiSiRhmzVVSEg>

- better dynamics of the learning / teaching process,
- enhancement of the students' and teachers' creativity,
- introduction of novelty in the classroom,
- increased focus,
- increased motivation,
- promotion of „out of the box thinking“,
- enhancing the teaching / learning process by integrating external military lecturers via videochat, videoconference etc.
- most importantly the significantly increased ability to learn when multiple areas of the brain are engaged by a task in comparison with learning through one sensory mode only

The cancellation of on-site language classes has eventually taken its toll in form of worsened communication skills of the students. Reading, listening and writing skills have not been affected significantly since these activities can easily be carried out online, unlike speaking, which requires a personalized approach, facial expressions, gestures, body language (especially important for military briefings and presentations) and many other elements of communication processes whose proper value cannot be replaced via virtual classes.

5.2. Language Laboratory

The Language Laboratory is a complex solution for the modernization processes of foreign language education of AFA cadets. It consists of a computer classroom equipped with modern All-in-One computers, headphones, microphones with the capacity for 15 cadets and a study room equipped with a library, TV, sound system, digital camcorder, DVD-player, CD-player and printer. The aim of the Language Laboratory has been emphasized with the urgency of digitalization of teaching / learning foreign languages.

Communication in the military environment is typically hierarchical, to a certain degree automatized and prescribed, and accordingly, the military environment is very unsuitable for any linguistic research. Modern technologies facilitate the attempts to carry out research of military languages and communication: „Certainly, technology has greatly added to the potential value of observations in applied linguistics research. Being able to observe video recordings of linguistic behavior multiple times, or sharing a recording so multiple researchers can observe it, helps us to increase the reliability of the data collection method.” (Rose, McKinley, Briggs Baffoe-Djan, 2020, 109)

The finishing touches on the laboratory were put towards the end of 2021. It was built to promote scientific research activities and enhance the foreign language education at the AFA. Activities that have been initiated or are yet to be initiated in the near future include:

- corpus linguistics
- self-study
- creating and editing our own authentic military-related video lessons
- participation in online international lectures / conferences (yet to be initiated)
- virtual reality in English classes (yet to be initiated)
- classroom research based on video and audio recordings and subsequent language analysis (yet to be initiated)

6. CONCLUSION

The success of e-learning, ICT and multimodality within foreign language acquisition lies very much in the fact, that all of the related approaches, methods, platforms fit perfectly to the differing needs of the users, they allow to be tailored to the specifics of the circumstances. However, the fundamental precondition for success is the availability of the necessary devices and equipment along with the ICT competence of both students and teachers. The rapid development of ICT also suggests the need for further and continuing training in the field of IT.

Cadets and professional soldiers of the Armed Forces of the Slovak Republic have been involved in international communication situations, therefore it is vital to pay particular attention to their foreign language skills. Due to globalization and digitalization trends the authorities involved in their education system must continually be forward-thinking, innovative and responsible. This includes DTC, ICT, and the New Normal, which are basic assumptions underlying the ever-changing foreign language education environment of the military. This paper serves to substantiate the importance of English language skills of professional soldiers of the Armed Forces of Slovak Republic and the specifics of English language for military purposes. The research of English for military purposes should serve as a starting point of implementing a linguistic scientific body of thought within the military.

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