Applied Language Learning

Commentary

A Letter from Valley Forge and Words of the Developing World: Knowing the "Why" for Autonomous Language Learning

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Knowing the "why" has always been critical to our collective drive as an American fighting force. At the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center (DLIFLC), instructors are charged with educating a remarkably diverse population of military students from every demographic and professional background. Meanwhile, the DLIFLC language instructor population is just as diverse with civilian faculty from countless nations and military instructors from various branches of service. While having teachers explain the "why" to students in American schools is customary, it is not necessarily a common practice in other countries. This gap in expectations or pedagogical understandings is often invisible to students and teachers alike. In this article, I share my understanding of the "why" for autonomous and well-rounded language learning—an understanding which I developed over time through lessons learned as a DLIFLC student and as an Army Foreign Area Officer—and I reflect on ways to effectively communicate the "why" to our student population.

Keywords: *Autonomous Language Learning, Military Language Education, Military Pedagogy, Learner Motivation, Foreign Area Officer*

> *The genius of this nation is not in the least to be compared with that of the Prussian, Austrians, or French… You say to your soldier 'Do this and he doeth it'; but I am obliged to say [to the American soldier]: 'This is the reason why you ought to do that: and then he does it.'*
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> ~Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, Valley Forge, 1778 (Trickey, 2017)

Baron Friedrich Wilhelm von Steuben, a Prussian military officer charged with training troops of the Continental Army during the American Revolutionary War, observed a key cultural difference

between his American trainees and their European counterparts: communicating the purpose—the "why"—for every command was fundamental to their understanding and ability to perform tasks to standard. By explaining the greater purpose behind menial drills, he transformed an undisciplined and ill-equipped assembly of incompatible militiamen into a professional fighting force capable of challenging a global superpower in a matter of months (Trickey, 2017). Foreign language instructors of American military students will recognize striking parallels between the culturally nuanced didactic challenges that von Steuben faced and those they encounter in their modern classrooms. To cultivate competent military linguists with a strong propensity for autonomous language learning, instructors must consider the roots of the United States military and Friedrich von Steuben's 250-year-old insights about American trainees.

BACKGROUND

How the "Why" Supports Autonomous Learning

Knowing the "why" has always been critical to our collective drive as an American fighting force. Throughout our history, conveying purpose behind our tasks and granting autonomy at the lowest echelons have allowed us to outperform the top-down command structures and aristocratic cultures of foreign counterparts. These concepts enabled the Continental Army to quickly learn the conventional skills necessary to stand against a world superpower during the American Revolution. They empowered scattered, isolated bands of paratroopers from the 82nd and 101st Airborne Divisions to secure key objectives at Normandy in World War II. They allowed a handful of outnumbered U.S. armored cavalry troops to obliterate two enemy brigades at the Battle of 73 Easting in Operation Desert Storm. This approach of empowering subordinate decision making and decentralized execution of tasks is defined in Army command and control doctrine as "mission command" (ADP 6-0, 2019, p. 1-3). It permeates American military culture and is enabled by certain principles including mutual trust, shared understanding, commander's intent, and disciplined initiative (ADP 6-0, 2019).

Language Learning at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center

At the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center, instructors are charged with educating a remarkably diverse population of military students from every demographic and professional background: initial entry trainees from every branch of service, careerists and fleet returnees transitioning to new career fields, seasoned non-commissioned officers (NCOs) returning for a second or third language qualification, Foreign Area Officer (FAO) students of various grades, and special operations personnel preparing for unconventional missions. The personal lives and responsibilities of each student are just as diverse. Many are single service members with communal responsibilities in crowded barracks spaces and persistent service unit requirements. Others commute home each day with hours of homework remaining as they navigate their unceasing responsibilities as parents, spouses, siblings, and caregivers.

Meanwhile, the DLIFLC language instructor population is just as diverse with civilian faculty from countless nations and military instructors from various branches of service. Some were raised in the United States and learned the language they teach in a university or growing up in a bilingual household, but most faculty came to this country as adults from a wide range of nations and educational backgrounds. While having teachers explain the "why" to students in American schools is customary, it is not necessarily a common practice in other countries. This gap in expectations or pedagogical understandings is often invisible to students and teachers alike.

Challenges Facing DLIFLC Instructors

The DLIFLC instructor is given the arduous task of getting all their students to attain proficiency in a language at a fraction of the time granted to counterparts in civilian educational institutions, all while fostering a love of the target language and culture. DLIFLC's External Academic Peer Review in 2022 recommended teaching learning strategies and designing online instruction materials to impart autonomous language learning skills on our newest generation of military linguists (pp. 2, 5). Since then, faculty have pushed more low-stakes and non-graded events, self-assessments, flipped classroom practices, and peer tutoring support across the Institute's basic language courses. Additionally, DLIFLC continues to offer online resources and technology through its eLearning webpage to support military linguists in all phases of their studies and careers. Yet the return on investment in these efforts is limited to the extent that faculty convey the purpose and payoff for autonomous language learning to military students. America's service members always perform better when they know the "why."

Instructors must instill a sense of purpose in our military linguists by emphasizing the relevance of all aspects of the curriculum, especially those parts which encourage active participation, independent research, and self-study. The development of these skills is in the best interest of our students' professional growth and our national military capability. Imparting the "why" requires collaboration between civilian and military faculty because of their complementary perspectives on language learning. The civilian faculty at DLIFLC are the most influential component of the students' educational experience. Most are native speakers of the target language and spend more hours with the students than any military faculty or cadre from their respective language schools or military service units. Uniformed faculty are well suited to reinforce the "why" from a military professional lens since most are native-English speakers who learned the target language through formal education and possess experience in relevant military career fields. A theme that commonly appears in End of Course Student Questionnaires is praise for capable Military Language Instructors who convey the relevance of course content by sharing their own operational experiences and successful autonomous language learning practices. Additionally, facilitating opportunities for mature careerist and fleet returnee students to share their professional experiences with junior classmates can also create buy-in organically within the class.

Civilian and military faculty must take special care, though, to monitor and guide these discussions in a positive direction. There can be a tendency for students with some years of military experience to share sophomoric opinions about the curriculum or linguist career fields.

Often these sentiments manifest in periodic sensing sessions with the class or among students during lesson breaks throughout the day. Vigilant instructors can redirect, interject with their own experiences, and transform these counterproductive occurrences into opportunities to discuss the "why" for various aspects of the curriculum and how it relates to developing autonomous language learning skills.

A Personal Autonomous Language Learning Journey

My understanding of the "why" for autonomous and well-rounded language learning was a steady evolution over time through lessons learned as a DLIFLC graduate and Army FAO. I had the opportunity to start my FAO training pipeline in the Spanish Basic Course at DLIFLC in 2013. My class was an unexpectedly diverse mix of Army FAO students, enlisted Marine cryptologists, Navy special operators, Air Force exchange pilots, and a Navy Olmsted Scholar. There were numerous occasions when fellow officer students questioned the utility of certain aspects of the curriculum, including transcription and number drills which they considered to be of minimal relevance to their future jobs, and wished to sacrifice these lessons for additional practice with other skills. I later came to realize these views were incredibly misinformed. Hearing from civilian or military instructors about how these various skills might be applied in our future assignments, why they were important for our autonomous growth in the target language after leaving DLIFLC, or how the lessons could be applied to independently learn other less-spoken languages in our region of assignment, could have set us straight.

Less than a year after graduating from DLIFLC, I found myself using number transcription and gisting skills to record inventory data to uncover a corruption scheme involving a high-ranking partner nation officer selling equipment acquired through U.S. security cooperation programs. I remember standing in front of my Senior Defense Official/Defense Attache's desk as a FAO In-Region Trainee and having to respond with certainty when she asked if the numbers I recorded were correct, because they would have national level implications for our future security cooperation partnership with the host country. The reason why all aspects of the DLIFLC course curriculum are important became instantaneously apparent.

Subsequent assignments revealed the ways in which autonomous language learning skills enhance a military linguist's versatility, and would have helped me understand the "why" during my basic language course if presented by instructors with similar experiences. We are naturally fixated on proficiency in our control languages (CLANGs) for obvious reasons: our careers and Foreign Language Proficiency Bonus depend on it. Department of Defense Instruction (DoDI) 5160.70, Management of the Defense Language, Regional Expertise, and Culture (LREC) Program (2016), provides the policy framework for developing Strategic Language Lists which focus training resources towards widely spoken languages that are most likely to enable our military operations abroad. Yet interactions with military counterparts across many continents taught me that learning to express oneself in local dialects—even at a rudimentary level—often carries far more weight than masterful prose in the country's official language. For these lesser spoken languages, though, there is rarely a basic course available.

While assigned to the U.S. Embassy in Asuncion, Paraguay, I made the mistake of trying to perfect my Spanish at the cost of learning Guarani, Paraguay's indigenous language. Shortly after my arrival and building some initial rapport, my Paraguayan Army partners asked me when I would start learning their treasured native tongue. I would light-heartedly respond that I was still far from knowing Spanish. Sixteen months later, I left the country knowing only a handful of words in Guarani and realized I failed to capitalize on an open invitation to establish deeper ties with the local population.

Years later, when I volunteered for an overseas assignment outside of my FAO Area of Concentration (AOC) in Africa, I committed to learning the language that mattered most to the people. I flew into Lilongwe having already studied basic words and phrases in Chichewa, Malawi's most widely spoken indigenous language. For the next two years, I strove to acquire a new word or phrase every day. A mzungu—meaning "white person" or "wanderer"—expressing himself in the local dialect regularly elicited smiles and chuckles in even the most formal meetings, building rapport in a manner that humbly contrasted with the egocentric actions and communication styles of our adversaries in the region. In this case, autonomous language learning skills born from formal language training secured the most lasting and meaningful ties with the partner nation.

CONCLUSION: THEY NEED THE "WHY" TO THRIVE

Ensuring that military students develop the capacity to become autonomous language learners will enable continued growth in their control languages and benefit them in other unforeseen ways. George Friedman in his 2010 book, *The Next 100 Years: A Forecast for the 21st Century*, reminds us that our ability to anticipate the locations and forms of future conflicts is historically poor from an international security perspective. Few had the strategic foresight to predict America's full scale military operations in Korea, Vietnam, or Afghanistan just 10 to 20 years prior to those conflicts. Arming our military linguists with the will and skill to autonomously learn languages beyond their CLANG increases their survivability, adaptability, and potential to shape outcomes in the future conflicts that will unexpectedly arise in remote corners of the world.

Our American military students are guaranteed to struggle in many aspects of their language learning. Memorizing formidable vocabulary lists, applying complex foreign grammar concepts, and completing repetitious transcription exercises might seem as painstaking and nonsensical to them as the musket drills and rigid military movements of their predecessors at Valley Forge. But if we can remember to explain "why" they need these skills to succeed in their future careers, along with some personal examples drawn from our own life experiences, we will empower them to surpass expectations.

Author Note

The analysis and perspectives offered in this commentary essay are based on the professional experiences of LTC Daniel R. Seibel as a U.S. Army Foreign Area Officer and graduate of the

Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center. There are no personal or financial conflicts of interest to disclose.

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