The Role of Language Proficiency in Cross-cultural Competence (3C): A Fundamental Key to Intercultural Effectiveness in Military Personnel

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Due to the "irregular" challenges of the GWOT as well as our military's involvement in peacekeeping, nation-building, and humanitarian aid in more and more places around the world, much attention is being given to developing intercultural effectiveness in our military personnel. To this end, each branch of the military has created special centers to promote the study and advancement of this concept. While each center has developed focused definitions of key concepts as well as specific ideas on training applications, there seems to be a growing disconnect between the development of cross-cultural competence and language proficiency – two primary components of intercultural effectiveness (IE). While language proficiency is viewed as a necessary component of IE training, it is often considered of secondary importance and not as crucial to intercultural effectiveness as cross-cultural competence, which is comprised of a broader, more generalizable skill set than the time-extensive, perishable skill set of language proficiency. This paper will present arguments both for and against this idea and will draw conclusions as to the most beneficial perspective with which to view this issue.

Military Definitions of Culture and Intercultural Effectiveness : Army

The Army's TRADOC Culture Center (TCC) defines culture using the VBBN Culture Model as a "dynamic social system." This system is made up of **v**alues, **b**eliefs, **b**ehaviors, and **n**orms of a "specific group, organization, society or other collectivity" (TCC, 2007) and is said to be learned, shared, internalized, and changeable by all members of a society.

The TCC 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 DoD. "Cultural capability," which this paper has termed "intercultural effectiveness," is the end result of developing 1) cross-cultural competence and 2) 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, then, refers to the culture-specific aspects of any given culture as determined by mission objectives. Language proficiency falls into the latter category of regional competence.

According to the TCC, cross-cultural competence represents knowledge that is more durable and more easily attainable whereas language proficiency is perishable and time-extensive to attain and sustain. Additionally, 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 is given more priority than regional competence (including language proficiency) in the TCC's plan.

Military Definitions of Culture and Intercultural Effectiveness : Marines

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 (CAOCL) limits its definition of culture to just those elements that are "relevant to military missions" (CAOCL, 2007, p. 2) and that can be applied, therefore, to the military domain "in a way attuned to the operational needs of Marines" (CAOCL, 2007, p. 6).

Based on the writings of cultural anthropologist Ward Goodenough, in which culture is defined as a set of norms and behaviors that one can "switch into, or activate, given the group they are in for any given purpose" (Goodenough, 1971 as cf. in CAOCL, 2007, p. 7), the Marines have adopted a concept of culture, in which culture can be rendered "operationally relevant" (CAOCL White Paper, p. 7). 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" (CAOCL, 2007, p. 46).

This pragmatic view of culture dictates the Marines' further "operationalization" of culture into five specific cultural domains that make up the bulk of what can be considered "operationally relevant" for the USMC. These five domains include: 1) Physical Environment, 2) Economy, 3) Social Structure, 4) Political Structure, and 5) Belief Systems.

In sum, the USMC has put forth a definition of culture that, by necessity, is limited to only those elements of culture which are easily operationalized and which are militarily relevant to the warfighter. It is interesting to note that language and language proficiency receive no mention whatsoever in the CAOCL White Paper.

Language and Culture

Before discussing the importance of language proficiency in intercultural effectiveness, it is crucial to see the interrelatedness of language and culture in a broad sense. While many considerations

may be promoted as the keystone of understanding culture, human communication is by far the most fundamental. Culture is based on our ability to communicate and thereby form societies from which cultures spring. To elaborate, language "expresses, embodies, and symbolizes" cultural reality (Kramsch, 1998). It is the cornerstone on which culture is formed and the primary medium by which culture is transmitted 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. (Duranti, 1997; Kovecses, 2006). Language is a fundamental element not only of individual identity and self but also of national identity (Kramsch, 1998; Joseph, 2004). Language gives structure not only to individual thought (Kramsch, 1998, 2002; Aveni, 2005) but as such gives structure to the collaborative and collective thought processes of a society (Oakes, 2001; Joseph, 2004).

Inherently, language and culture are both interrelated to and interdependent on one other. Without language, culture cannot be fully realized, understood, or transmitted to future generations. Concordantly, any definition of culture is incomplete without understanding the role of language in its genesis, development, and moment-by-moment expression.

The Case for Language Proficiency

Given the strong interrelatedness and interdependency of language and culture, the importance of language proficiency in intercultural effectiveness becomes clear and can be posited in one statement: Without a strong focus on language proficiency, the effectiveness of our soldiers in intercultural interactions will be limited.

More than cross-cultural competence alone, 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 with(in) a culture. Training in the durable and transferable "cultural universals" (such as the five domains listed by the CAOCL) might be enough if we want our soldiers to be "observers" of culture. As the premise of the CAOCL's doctrine on culture, Goodenough's definition of culture seems more adequate as a functional doctrine for 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 awareness of culture and cultural differences. Language proficiency will equip our soldiers with the skills necessary to interact with cultural players and thereby come to a fuller understanding of operationally relevant cultural realities.

Additionally, the language acquisition process itself has been shown to facilitate the development of character traits that promote intercultural effectiveness in *any* cultural setting. While some studies have shown that language proficiency is less important than other factors when considering the self-reported ability of American businessmen "to adjust" to the new culture while working abroad (Hechanova, Behr, & Christiansen, 2003; as argued in Abbe, 2007), other studies show that the process of language acquisition (especially study abroad and immersion training) promotes more overall empathy towards other cultures in general (Ward & Ward, 2003) and, through the process of language socialization, promotes the ability to construct a new cultural identity within the target culture (Byram, 1995; Kramsch, 2002; Aveni, 2005). Such an ability leads to more general flexibility and more overall effectiveness in intercultural interactions (Jensen, 1995).

To summarize, language proficiency is a unique learning endeavor that promotes four primary aspects of the interculturally effective soldier: 1) attitude, 2) knowledge, 3) skills, and 4) critical cultural awareness (Alfred, Byram, & Fleming, 2003). The intercultural *attitudes* that language acquisition promotes are curiosity, openness, and the "willingness to suspend disbelief about other cultures and belief about one's own" (Alfred, Byram, & Fleming, 2003, p. 5). *Knowledge* is not simply knowledge *about* another culture or even culture in general but rather general OR specific knowledge about 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 not only the traditions of interaction within a culture but also the motivations and social constraints that govern them. Similarly, language acquisition promotes the development of a *skill set* that doesn't simply allow a soldier to analyze any culture according to learned universal models. Instead, it equips the soldier with skills to seek out and discover the expectations of speakers in any given interaction and to apply that knowledge to avoid misunderstandings and further their own goals while employing the appropriate cultural tact and speech customs. This skill set is not necessarily region-specific as it can be also employed even through an interpreter in regions where a soldier may not possess proficiency in the language. Finally, the interculturally effective soldier employs a *critical cultural awareness* in which s/he is critically aware of his/her own values and how they influence his/her views and interpretations of other people's values. The process of acquiring proficiency in a language uniquely demands an element of self-reflection and self-knowledge that brings about such awareness. Given these characteristics, language proficiency should not be categorically assigned only to the area of regional competence. While language study does involve a specific language and a focus on region-specific knowledge, many benefits gained from this pursuit are applicable in many other cultural settings outside the language's specific region or geography.

Conclusion

In conclusion, while language proficiency may be more time-extensive to attain and sustain, the process of gaining such proficiency is uniquely capable of facilitating the development of character traits needed for true effectiveness in intercultural interactions. Research has shown that such character traits are not relevant only in the region-specific context of the language learned. The attitudes, knowledge, skills, and awareness indicative of these traits are, indeed, transferrable, relevant, and applicable in culture-general contexts as well. Furthermore, while training on cross-cultural competence (culture-general "universals" and militarily relevant cultural elements) is undoubtedly useful and necessary, it should not be given more priority in the military's future training endeavors than language. Language proficiency, cross-cultural competence, and regional expertise all foster unique yet related knowledge and skill sets that are necessary for true intercultural effectiveness.

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