



# NCOs Pivotal in Boosting U.S. Military's Language Skills

By Clifford Kyle Jones

One of the world's premier foreign language schools has a six-year plan to boost the quality of its graduates' communication skills, and the military's noncommissioned officers will play a key role in getting them there.

The Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center intends to boost its standards by requiring about 25 percent more proficiency from its graduates. A key part of that mission — called the “2-plus plan” — is an increase in the use of immersion training.

The school, in Monterey, California, uses two types of immersion, and is exploring other methods to enhance its linguistic training. Most students go through an immersion facility operated by DLIFLC just off-campus, and just fewer than 20 percent of basic language students take a four-week trip outside the continental United States as part of their education.

“What we have found through statistics is that after doing an immersion, students come back more confident, more capable in their listening, certainly more

capable in their speaking,” said Army Col. David K. Chapman, the institute's commandant. “And on standardized tests, they improve, generally about 20 to 25 percent. They have better scores once they return.”

Those reasons alone would be enough for Chapman to implement the plan to increase the number of students who are able to participate in OCONUS immersions to about 50 percent in six years' time. But he sees other positive outcomes from the OCONUS immersion, as well — albeit effects that are more difficult to quantify.

“What we can't measure is the career impact,” Chapman said. “How willing is someone to re-enlist because they got that opportunity? How much more excited about their jobs are they? But I can tell you with nonempirical data, they're super excited about it. They all come back and they rave about the immersion program. Not just the language, but the culture as well.”

The institute's command sergeant major, Command Sgt. Maj. Matildo Coppi, said NCOs who work in linguistics, both at the institute and in the field, were among

the driving forces behind the push toward increasing immersion training.

“They saw that there was a gap that needed to be filled,” he said. “We huddled with our chief of staff, and it was briefed up to the commandant. He really put that objective out there: to increase our immersion footprint.”

Coppi also says NCOs will be critical to helping the



Students in the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center’s Arabic program take part in a cultural exercise. (Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones / NCO Journal)

institute achieve its 2-plus plan. Students at the institute take the Defense Language Proficiency Test as a condition of their graduation. It tests listening and reading skills in a foreign language, grading each ability on a scale of 0 to 5, with 0 being no proficiency and 5 denoting a native speaker with an intimate familiarity with the culture. The institute requires a score of “L2, R2” from its graduates, meaning a limited working proficiency in both listening and reading the target language.

The goal to require “L2+, R2+” scores of its graduates translates to about a 25 percent improvement in students’ listening and reading skills, and “is getting closer to that native or heritage speaker type of arena,” Coppi said.

A score of “L3, R3” might indicate a heritage speaker, meaning someone whose parents spoke the language natively and was raised to speak it and could be described as an expert in the language, Coppi said.

In six years, graduates “are going to be force multipliers, enablers, for those combatant commanders or regionally aligned forces commanders, so they can have not a competent linguist, but more of an expert linguist,” Coppi said.

At every level, Coppi and Chapman said, an NCO is helping to lead the student along the path.

During a typical OCONUS immersion, an NCO is

in charge of students before and during the trip. He or she would double-check documents and make sure that everyone gets to the airport on time before the trip, then ensure that students get to their classes on time once they arrive. An immersion consists of four to five hours a day of instruction at a partnered institution of higher education in the country being visited and a number of

organized field trips and other activities designed to expose students to the culture of a country.

Sgt. Renee Green has been in charge of two groups of students visiting South Korea, the first in 2013 and another early this year. She didn’t have the opportunity to participate in an OCONUS immersion as a student at the institute, but after she graduated, she was stationed in South Korea, so she was able to see how valuable it was to live in a country where her target language was spoken.

“My language improved, because I was using it and I had to use it. And that’s the benefit” of immersion, Green said. “The students have to ask questions. People there don’t know what they know”

In a classroom setting, instructors have a pretty good idea of where students are with vocabulary and grammar and tailor conversation and instruction to that level, she said. But when the students visit another country, they are forced into conversations and topics outside of what they’ve learned in class.

“They just talk, and you have to figure it out,” Green said. “That’s the benefit I got when I was stationed there” and what she sees in the group’s she has led.

As the groups’ NCO, she was also charged with facilitating immersion. As a fluent speaker, all of her interactions with the students were conducted in Korean while they visited Seoul. And during downtime, she sometimes helped students find a cultural experience to develop their language skills and cultural awareness.

“When I went two years ago, some of the students were a little more introverted and not as open to just going exploring,” Green said. “Being that I had lived in [Seoul] before, I have a pretty good idea of the city. I asked them what they liked to do and found events that matched their interests, so that way, when they’re there, they’re immersing themselves.”

For instance, if the students enjoyed baseball, she might encourage them to attend a South Korean baseball game. She tried to avoid allowing them to fall into the stereotypical Seoul activities of nightclubs and high-end





Persian Farsi students and faculty at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center prepare traditional Persian meals as part of their cultural learning. (Photo courtesy of DLIFLC)

shopping that the city itself seems to promote.

“That’s what I think the goal of the DLI immersion is — finding the history behind everything and seeing the real culture, not just the culture they’re promoting,” she said.

During her two visits as an NCO, Green has visited the demilitarized zone between South and North Korea; reached the top of the Seoul Tower, a communication and observation tower at Seoul’s highest point; attended the National Theater of Korea, the South Korean version of Broadway; traveled to a traditional village for the day; learned Korean calligraphy; taken a tour of a tunnel dug by North Koreans in an attempt to reach Seoul; and learned how to make kimchee — “that was pretty cool.”

She said her favorite event, though, is watching the students when they first arrive at Seoul National University and immerse themselves in the college experience.

“The first thing they do is they all buy sweatshirts,” she said.

Students visit four-year universities, but the institute has been accredited since 2002 by the Accrediting Commission for Community and Junior Colleges of the Western Association of Schools and Colleges and has granted more than 11,500 Associate of Art degrees in foreign language.

Eileen Mehmedali, assistant director of the institute’s Immersion Language Office, helps coordinate both the OCONUS immersions and the immersion scenarios all students undergo as part of their training in Monterey. Her office works closely with the NCOs in both settings, receiving daily updates from the NCO in charge during OCONUS trips and relying on NCOs at the immer-

sion center to counsel students and be in charge during overnight immersions and ensure the target language is spoken at all times.

Every student in his or her first semester participates in a one-day immersion that lasts from morning to evening. Many students in their second or third semesters participate in an overnight immersion that lasts two days. Mehmedali said the mornings generally consist of structured activities that are task-based and job-related. Those activities might involve role-playing — for instance, operating a checkpoint in Afghanistan or a taking part in a peace-keeping mission in another part of the world. As the day progresses, the job-based activities taper off and cultural exercises come to the fore. Students might participate in a simulated Iraqi wedding, play traditional Korean games or cook a traditional meal from the culture they’re studying. Students staying overnight might also watch movies or other videos that they write reports on and present about the next day.

Coppi notes that NCOs can be particularly helpful in improving the local immersion experience.

“From a noncommissioned officer perspective, we’re amping up our efforts out at the local immersion so that we can mimic and mirror those things that service members experience abroad,” he said.

And Mehmedali said those efforts are beneficial.

“It’s very difficult to replicate the culture here, but we try our best,” she said. “And the possibilities are endless, even on the isolation immersion side. If you put your mind to it, if you have committed and enthusiastic personnel and instructors, then anything is possible. Obviously, I would love to send every student on an OCO-

NUS immersion, but that's not possible, it's not practical, that's not the reality we're living right now. We will be growing, which is encouraging. But in the meantime, this is a goldmine — the isolation side of the immersion facility — that we've just scratched the surface of. There's so much more that we can do and develop.”

In addition to the on-site immersion center and the OCONUS immersions, DLIFLC is exploring options for a third type of immersion experience for its students — one that takes place in a U.S. city with a large concentration of native speakers of the target language. Safety is a paramount concern in any OCONUS immersion, Mehmedali said, so some target languages are difficult to coordinate immersions for because of instability or diplomatic relationships. Also, as the political situation has changed in some countries, the institute has had to discontinue its immersions there, as recently occurred in Egypt. However, the institute has piloted immersion programs in the Iraqi and Levantine dialects of Arabic at San Diego State University, and it has begun exploring a similar program with the Persian language Farsi at the University of California, Los Angeles.

The expanded immersion programs, both OCONUS and stateside, are just more evidence that the importance of linguistic skills to the Army shows no signs of abating.

“Language and culture matter,” Coppi said. “The business that we're in requires us to go abroad. It's an away game, whether it's a humanitarian act, to prevent something from happening, or to shape conditions.”

He says that when he considers the Army's Operating Concept, “Win in a Complex World,” he sees direct correlations to the training conducted at DLIFLC.

The first paragraph of the TRADOC pamphlet reads, “The Army Operating Concept (AOC) describes how future Army forces will prevent conflict, shape security environments, and win wars while operating as part of our Joint Force and working with multiple partners.”



A professor speaks to students participating in an overnight immersion at the Defense Language Institute Foreign Language Center's immersion facility. (Photo by Clifford Kyle Jones / NCO Journal)

Coppi said, “As I look at ‘prevent,’ ‘shape’ and ‘win,’ I could easily attach language and culture to all three of those tenets.”

U.S. Army Recruiting Command would appear to agree. During a recent visit to the institute, the commanding general of USAREC, Maj. Gen. Jeffrey Snow, said, “It's nice to come here and see the investment we are making in young men and women and the growing appreciation that we really need to cultivate language capability in our Army.

“We are absolutely committed to ensuring that quality applicants are coming to the Army,” which includes linguists, he said.

Chapman, who speaks Serbian, Russian, Greek and is about to do an immersion program in French, argues that for the U.S. military to understand the world in which it's operating, its officers and NCOs must develop their language skills.

“To speak someone's language is to know them. You can be a U.S. military member assigned to Germany and you can drink the beer and eat the bratwurst and do all those things that you think make German culture, but until you're speaking in their language and talking to them about their problems and their views on American policies or whatever the discussion is, you're not really getting it.”

The need among the NCO Corps may be even greater, Chapman said.

“It opens so many doors from an NCO perspective. A lot of officers across the world will have a level of English that allows them to communicate some. It's

not such the case with NCOs,” he said. “A lot of our partners’ NCO corps aren’t nearly as developed. And frankly, they don’t put the responsibilities on their NCOs that we do on ours. And so being able to speak their language is very important, particularly with coalition operations, coalition training, it’s all just really critical.”

The DLIFLC’s enrollment reflects that importance: 97 percent of the institute’s students are enlisted. That’s a statistic Coppi knows is important.

“The noncommissioned officers are the glue, that backbone,” he said, “so the more who are out there who know about language and culture or who have walked through the halls, the better off the Army is.” ■



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