

ON DEFINING CRITERIA FOR EVALUATING FOREIGN LANGUAGE PROGRAM EFFECTIVENESS

“You are old, Father William,” the young man said,

“And your hair has become very white;

And yet you incessantly stand on your head –

Do you think, at your age, it is right?”

Lewis Carroll

Focusing on improving skills in operational language use

Advocating, if not incessant standing on one’s head but at least an occasional somersault every now and then for mere practice’s sake, all language training for specific purposes tends to try and provide a playground that offers predefined and data-informed chances for creativity to reach the set training objectives and cater to needs as versatile as the participants’ expertise and expected career paths. With the emphasis on effective military communicating and practical foreign language skills, the language education program in the National Defence University (NDU) aims at promoting improved professional proficiency and situational awareness. This involves fulfilling the set educational objective that asks for ensuring officers’ top-performance in all possible communicative settings requiring foreign language use while serving on duty both at home and overseas.

The purpose of this particular entry is to discuss briefly how implementing a foreign language program is currently work very much in-progress in the NDU. More specifically, this text’s scope rests on explicating criteria for evaluating foreign language program effectiveness. Thereby the ideas expressed here necessarily adopt a heavily context-dependent approach.

In addition to taking the specific teaching-studying-learning –contexts prevalent in the NDU into account, this criteria defining involves specifying from which exact perspectives program effectiveness is being viewed. These perspectives may include, for instance, the views of the education provider (the Finnish Defence Forces [FDF]), the education organizer (the NDU), the participants (cadets and officers), the language practitioners (linguists), and, most importantly, the eventual end-recipients (training and operational units, for example) of the benefits of the honed professional military communication skills.

The following describes the foreign language program implemented in the NDU and argues that defining criteria for program effectiveness presupposes accounting for at least the following three points: first, the overall training objectives of a given language program, second, the course-specific studying objectives, and third, the data extracted from participants, practitioners, and units, respectively. This is necessary in order to be able to define measuring tools, or effectiveness criteria, for the success of achieving the set training outcomes – improved productive and receptive skills in operational language use.

Implementing the foreign language program in the NDU

The foreign language program executed in the NDU comprises courses available for students enrolled in the undergraduate (Bachelor of Military Sciences, BMSc), graduate (Master of Military Sciences, MMSc) and continuing education (Senior Staff Officer Course) programs. The language course options available range from English and French, languages indispensable in international co-operation and research, to Russian and German, languages used mainly for bilateral and research purposes. Moreover, tailored task-based language consultation is available on ad hoc basis.

Training objectives: The overall training objectives of the foreign language program focus on facilitating operational language use and effective message transmission. In didactic terms, this translates into emphasizing tailored materials and independent study tasks alongside with contact session activities simulating real-life communication settings. The former tend to center on producing written briefing reports on chosen professionally motivated topics whereas the latter abound in activating argumentation and negotiation skills in the form of varied collaborative in-class activities. Substance-wise, the materials used are custom-designed for the particular course in question, selected to feature authentic, topical themes and terminology plus posted in advance online in a learning portal – which again allows for and fosters self-initiated practicing prior to and after attending contact sessions.

Evaluation tools: Since the ultimate training objective equals effective meaning transmission, in other words, the ability to get one's message across in its intended meaning, the true test for whether or not the set objective has been met, understandably, is to tap into the views of both the course participants and their training / operational units. The most salient predictor of the training having any impact whatsoever on practical performance must be when participants do meet the interoperability requirements, the minimum being STANAG6001 level 3 with the corresponding National Language Proficiency Test level 4. However, it needs to be remembered that, regardless of the Finnish pre-university education system's extraordinary dedication in promoting English studies, the participants' repertoire of and skills in other foreign languages do vary leaving room for promoting the study of, for instance, French and Russian which is being taken into account in the NDU by offering a selection of voluntary courses in both.

Outlining criteria for evaluating foreign language program effectiveness

Obviously, outlining criteria for evaluating any foreign language program effectiveness partly asks for something that by definition escapes defining. This is, when viewing the applicability of a given course from the participants' and units' viewpoints, the results are bound to vary depending on both who is asked to fill out a particular questionnaire and when. Furthermore, at times course-external factors may loom large in terms of the replies submitted. Thereby the views expressed may mirror events peripheral to the course in question but otherwise central for those submitting the replies. Having said that, it must be acknowledged that, in the spirit of phenomenology, points of view always count as such since that is what questionnaire entries by default value represent, views, that is. Altogether another issue is to transcend value-based viewpoints, such as, for example, how a given course or its materials and methods fare on a scale from 0,0 to 5,0, and instead to focus on the applicability of the training tools, methods, and materials to the actual communicative settings in which the participants end up using the practiced skills.

This criteria explicating thus presupposes sketching measures for determining to which extent a particular foreign language program approximates an indefinite number of plausible professional situations and thus meets the set requirements and expectations formulated by, in this case, the FDF, the NDU, the participants, and the units. One way of approaching this pedagogic, didactic, and linguistic conundrum is to set up a system in which the education providers', the participants, and the end-users' perspectives are

taken into account in advance and made part of both the planning and implementation phases of a given course. The following lists how this has been done since this academic year in the NDU.

In-house contribution: Carrying out a SWOT-analysis and collecting data for devising a long-term plan which covers all the undergraduate and graduate language courses in co-operation with a student who carries out parts of this project as a salaried expert.

Course evaluation: Gathering prior to, during and after language courses data concerning studying tools, methods, and materials.

Overall program evaluation: Inviting external assessments on the tools, methods, and materials used, as well as the activities carried out both in contact sessions settings and the online studying environment.

So what?

This text began with a literary excerpt alluding to the virtues of thinking outside the box, since standing on one's head, if nothing else, temporarily secures blood flow in the brain and thus fosters neurons firing. This, perhaps, is all that it takes: enduring temporary discomfort and pain to adopt new perspectives which bring about an informed change for better.

For those interested in language proficiency descriptions:

Detailed information on the National Language Proficiency Test organized by the Finnish National Board of Education available at

<http://www.opetushallitus.fi/>

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