



DISCIPLINE AND ITS SUBSEQUENT BENEFITS FOR TEACHING ENGLISH IN MILITARY INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract: *Discipline, understood as people's acceptance to abide by certain rules or code of behavior; either out of conviction, or of fear of punishment, seems to have lost the significance it had in the past in a lot of domains, starting from parenting and education and ending who knows where. On the other hand, discipline has always been considered – next to professionalism, honor, loyalty – one of the most important traits of the military environment, maybe a key factor that gives consistency and coherence to military action. Without it, how would one make sure that the decisions made at strategic level are carried out and put into practice all the way down to tactical level? Furthermore, what would lack of discipline mean – be it understood at least as self-discipline, maybe – for any professional working in any field, but all the more so for those working in the military? The article is a plea for the extremely important role that discipline plays in this specific environment, showing subsequent benefits for language learning and the English class management.*

Keywords: *discipline; military environment; adult education; English teaching; mutual respect.*

Motto: „For every person wishing to teach, there are thirty persons not wishing to be taught.”
(anonymous)¹

The idea behind this article was inspired from some discussions with fellow teachers (of foreign languages but not only) related to the differences of approach and teaching techniques that should be taken into consideration when oscillating between undergraduate students (those enrolled in the Bachelor degree programs) and the graduate students (those following the Command Master in "Carol I" National Defense University). Obviously, these differences should be based first and foremost on the previous knowledge students have or do not have regarding the respective subjects to be taught, on the goals and objectives set in the curricula and on the level each type of educational program addresses. However, a key aspect that should be taken into consideration is, in our opinion, that of discipline which graduate and post-graduate students seem to have largely internalized as compared to the lack of rules younger students

¹ <https://eltguide.wordpress.com/tag/discipline-problems/>, accessed 13.05.2017.

had previously been accustomed to in the civilian environment. Discipline has a bad name among young people generally speaking because it is associated with old and strict teachers who teach in an autocratic manner, dealing with their students with an iron hand. Also, discipline is believed to be hampering creativity and freedom of opinion that is the complete opposite of nowadays concepts of self-development.

Given all these assumptions, the aim of this article is to advocate in favor of discipline, bringing arguments related to the specificity of our field of work – the military – and to show, therefore, the aspects that the language teacher/any teacher should be aware of and put to good use to the benefit of everyone involved in the military educational environment. Also, younger readers (students or teachers) could understand from this article that discipline should by no means be associated with a rigid behavior, a stiff attitude or teacher's master-like treatment of students, but rather with a set of mutually agreed on rules, limits and guidelines that must be set from the beginning and obeyed by everybody. All these represent an opinion statement rather based on observation and experience than on facts and figures written by others.

First of all, our intention is to make it very clear that we strongly believe that the military does represent an out of ordinary if not an exceptional environment in which teaching (language teaching

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included) can be approached in a highly professional way. Teaching foreign languages in general and English in particular have specific aspects that cannot be learned at school or in teacher-training seminars outside this environment – and we are not necessarily talking about terminology, operational language, or acronyms. The simple reason standing for this is an evident combination of the following traits, always proven and manifested by the overwhelming majority of the National Defense University (NDU henceforth) students involved in studying English language, respectively: professional conduct, strong motivation, non-simulated interest, reliability, commitment, punctuality, responsibility, professionally-driven servitude and respect. Due to this, English language can be both taught and learned at indisputably high standards of efficiency and proficiency, through a very elaborated and complex process designed to address and meet all students' needs regarding this domain. Also, this completely accessible, not so sophisticated process is meant to literally assure the desired level of satisfaction and that kind of self-confidence given by the nature and multitude of the accumulated knowledge, which can be easily translated into the visible progress most students make in both vocabulary improvement and grammatical accuracy fields, not to mention the most significant one, that of being able to use functional English at all levels of interoperability.

Secondly, this opinion is not just a biased judgment, coming from an English teacher proudly working in a top educational military outlet, but a fundamental one, repeatedly demonstrated by facts and reality, based on long years of experience in this field. Those years – over sixteen in fact – had been preceded by other a few of still working in adult education, but in a civilian university. We may say, therefore that we had the chance to judge the differences between students and environments in what could be defined as a dedicated strive for improvement and a devoted struggle for perfection, forged by an active interaction with all those involved in teaching-learning process and legitimized by a continuous focus on the matter itself.

Our endeavor does not come out of blue since, nowadays, there has been identified an entire spectrum of distinctive reasons that make English such an important language, with an incontestable

role in the military. Definitely, in today's globalized world, knowing any language is a great asset and the more languages one "masters", the better chances of success he/she has in any domain, including the military one. English knowledge, though, and a certain level of proficiency are a real must for any military career trajectory, no matter the specific age, gender, rank, service, branch, civilian or military background, qualifications, active duty length of service, etc. of the military personnel. This can be translated, among others, in a more consistent and profound interest in personal development, a multi-layer professional education and training, a more eloquent written and oral communication ability, an improved level of understanding, a more convincing way of expressing opinions and a superior, dynamic way of interacting, manifesting intentions, and acting accordingly.

On the one hand, from a purely domestic, national perspective, in this line of work, an adequate level of English knowledge seems to be one of those mandatory eligibility criteria for being initially selected and finally assigned to a variety of relevant leading or executive positions – no matter the targeted specific level of military art: strategic, operational or tactical. And by this, we mean a robust and well-defined set of skills in terms of speaking, listening, reading and writing, in accordance with STANAG 6001 provisions and objectives. No matter when and how one manages to acquire these skills, at the end of the day, they are supposed to be materialized and reflected in a standardized English language competence certificate. Obviously, this assumption is made in a direct correlation with a normal military career, built and consolidated in a "by the book", step-by-step manner. Moreover – maybe unjustly so, but still true – anyone's promoting ambitions and the promotion itself can be facilitated or impeded by the above mentioned criterion, since the English knowledge competence level required is jotted down in most job descriptions.

On the other hand, from an international perspective, this is also an inevitable must for all military personnel taking part in missions and operations abroad under North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), European Union (EU), United Nations (UN) and/or Organizations for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) mandates. In addition, that is also the case for those



working in multinational headquarters as national representatives, staff personnel, embedded officers, liaison officers, action officers, planners, analysts, experts, and so on and so forth. As a consequence, it is clear that by actively working in this kind of combined/multinational environment, willy-nilly, beyond the cultural survival situations related or not to somebody's status, all military and civilian personnel are exposed, on a daily basis, to spoken and written English in terms of direct, face-to-face or indirect communication, elaboration of a multitude of specific documents (daily/weekly/monthly/quarterly/biannual assessments, reports, estimations, analyses, a variety of strategic papers and event-driven snapshots, comparing matrices, supportive notes and comments for various presentations briefings and speeches, different memoranda and agreements, subordinates' appraisals, etc.), development and execution of military orders, conceptions, plans and their annexes and appendixes, etc.

Obviously, once again, the aim of the present paper is not necessarily to emphasize the importance of the English language and to show up its omnipresence, necessity, role and impact for our modern society, in an era of globalization and global communication, but we cannot ignore this successful, unavoidable story. Therefore, first of all, we have to admit that English has been one of the two official languages of the NATO/OTAN for so many decades. Secondly, nowadays, English really looks like a trend with a global dimension just because it is an internationally expanded, recognized and agreed language, used not only in military, but also in a completely generous spectrum of domains and their subsequent specific activities. Moreover, because we have just brought into discussion the military, one of the four state's instruments of power, for the sake of inclusion and balance, also, we do have to insist on the importance and relevance of the English language for the three others - diplomatic, information, and economic ones. Furthermore, we have to admit this incontestable reality, that all around the world, English is encountered and used in so many other different realms and/or branches of activity as media, tourism, education, culture, science, movie industry, entertainment, IT products and the list could be infinitely continued because it really looks like an endless one. The last, but not the least, on

the list, is Internet and the social media, the latest and the greatest components of our modern and dynamic way of living, so dependable on high and smart technology.

Consequently, beyond being a valuable vector and vehicle of spoken and written communication, of mutual understanding, English has irreversibly become part of our life, with a self-explanatory role. Apparently, at least in military, beyond the bigger and bigger need and eagerness for interoperability and operational common language both in training/exercises and missions/operations, anybody needs to be familiar with a unique, specialized military vocabulary. This continuously updated and upgraded specialized vocabulary, which can sound like an alien language or encrypted code for an outsider who is not so accustomed with or not regularly exposed to military language style and originality, has a very clear role. That is avoiding errors, misunderstandings and misinterpretations, by implementing standard expressions, brevity and code words for the sake of simplifying an already complicated and hard to digest environment for any civilian.

On the other hand, this cannot be developed instantly, and undoubtedly its basic foundation is assured by a more common, not so specialized spoken and written day-by-day language. And since our native language is definitely not English and since there are people who have not studied English in school, we suppose that there is no question mark about the necessity and the benefit of being enrolled in some English classes/courses. Only this sort of organized and institutionalized foreign languages teaching-learning framework can assure a dynamic interaction with other students and of course with its professional core element – the English teacher – for a real and visible enhancement of English proficiency. In conjunction with this, we have to highlight that only in this educational formula can a student spend his/her time, in some adequate conditions and in some of the best circumstances of practicing and improving all the skills: speaking, listening, reading and writing. For being able to do that, beyond other mandatory ingredients of a successful "recipe" – just as it happens with all the other aspects of life to some extent – what is needed is a degree of imposed discipline and self-discipline.

Thus after a prolonged introduction, preparing



and advocating the narrative and rational of this paper, we are coming back to discipline, trying to make the case for it. In accordance with our perception, as a fundament of this endeavor, we have to put forth a sort of primary and extremely inspired way of defining and depicting the notion of discipline and its relevance for any teaching-learning mechanisms, as it was portrayed by Jim Rohn, an American entrepreneur, author, and motivational speaker: "*Discipline is the bridge between goals and accomplishments.*"² Additionally, we also can use other relevant cite of Abraham Joshua Heschel, one of the leading Jewish theologians and philosophers of the 20th century, "*Self-respect is the fruit of discipline.*"³ Going further, by paraphrasing the late and put it on the other way around, we can extend the discussion to respect itself and its alignment with discipline and strongly affirm that by respecting the others – in this case fellow students and teachers – you just prove and practice your self-discipline.

Actually, when it comes to military, without discipline at all, we can just imagine a catastrophic and grotesque picture of a so-called equivalent of the military system and, generally speaking, of the armed forces which do represent the core of values and traditions, and the quintessence of the existence of the nation itself. Without the sense of belonging to a well-defined and organized structural entity, self-described and identified by its own uniform and coat of arms, without obeying rules in a voluntary way, without sensing a high degree of responsibility, without actively being part of a clear chain of command, without self-imposing control, without practicing and respecting the power of authority, without these multitude of defining and vital pillars of the armed forces, the military as we know it today would be completely different. Without all these, we could simply imagine a bunch of heavily armed individuals, a pack of mercenaries, with a primitive way of thinking and acting, with mercantile interests, so eager to use their different types of weapons just for satisfying their own survival needs, simply driven by some pure basic instincts. And even so, this pack of so-

called fighters would certainly be involved in a myriad of violent acts of any type, performed in a chaotic way, out of different, confusing, even totally opposed, incoherent and inconsistent reasons, starting from getting and putting bread on table for their families, and ending with imposing whatever type of ideology, pledging allegiance to whomever "butcher"-style leader and killing in the name of their absurd cause just for the sake of doing that. Not to mention that even in those extreme cases a certain type of (primitive) discipline would still exist!

By using this apocalyptic image, we have just tried to say in other words that discipline is an organic part of the military, is a sort of "DNA" of military organization and has been part of its tradition, and why not even of its evolution, perpetual existence and survival. In the same way, we can assume that that beyond cohesion, morale and motivation, discipline itself does represent the real glue of a successful military organization. Definitely, it resonates and works hand in hand with playing by the rules, with esprit de corps, mutual respect, common sense, maturity, seriousness. In the specific case of military education, this also reflects an increased degree of consciousness regarding the moral boundaries and behavioral limits of any military and/or civilian personnel involved in English teaching-learning programs under NDU umbrella.

As a consequence, the reasoning behind our connection between the good results obtained by our students language-wise and the discipline they are accustomed to is quite apparent, since we do perceive discipline and the above mentioned "accompanying" package as a game changer and real multiplier of the English language teaching-learning techniques. We could even say that there is a unanimously accepted evidence in this regard, based on its instrumental role in smoothing, facilitating and improving the way of normal communication and civilized interaction between all the "actors" involved, in creating equilibrium and maintaining the balance during the teaching-learning sessions. In this context, we are referring to an appropriate, non-disturbing conduct which, down the road, is equivalent with exploiting to the maximum the time allocated to the teaching-learning process and, also, in sticking to the plan and classroom agenda for fully extended benefits.

² <https://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/j/jimrohn109882.html>, accessed 12.05.2017.

³ <http://www.goodreads.com/quotes/49576-self-respect-is-the-root-of-discipline-the-sense-of-dignity>, accessed 12.05.2017.



And by gaining this valuable efficiency, by smartly saving and exploiting this precious time for their collective and individual benefit, by avoiding any useless waste of time and energy due to some disturbing reasons or factors during classes, at the end of the course, all the students will be more than happy with the final outcome and overall efficiency of the educational process.

In these circumstances, we do believe in the vital role of discipline in assuring a decent, a more than acceptable level of coherence, consistence and continuity of the English classes. What would they be in the presence of various kinds of disturbance, annoying interruptions or noisy interference caused by an acute lack of discipline and self-discipline, and implicitly of mutual respect and self-respect? Obviously, the desired result is a more articulated and productive classroom session, with an increased level of participation, involvement and efficiency, without any kind of "smart" remarks, addressed to the teacher or other colleagues. Here we can keep in mind any series of offensive words directly addressed to someone or generally concerning some sensitive issues like gender, race, religion, sexuality, disabilities or reduced abilities to do something. On the other hand, this less than less than desirable atmosphere could be generated and manifested by some less motivated or totally "bored" students, openly displaying a lack of interest and appeal to what is going on in the classroom or over-reacting by showing an inappropriate, problematic, or even conflictual conduct. Moreover, the image can be completed by an annoying way of denying the obvious, of making diminishing or uncomfortable remarks over the content or timing of activities, over the knowledge and English proficiency of his/her colleagues, of the quality of support materials, etc.

Generally speaking, in these circumstances, the "smart guy" is a person revealing an arrogant, bossy, cocky attitude over his/her colleagues, peer students, and counterparts of discussion, attitude that could escalate anytime from some bravado irritating remarks to purely verbal aggression. Additionally, this kind of person likes to portray himself/herself as an "I-know-everything-officer", not interested at all in anything going on around him/her, as having absolutely no relevance, at least comparing with his/her unique, precious, peerless personal experience and expertise. One such

student per group and is still detrimental both for the students and for quality of the teaching-learning process itself.

Altogether, this worst-case scenario, which no school prepares you for as a teacher, must be managed in a conciliatory manner by who else than the teacher himself/herself. Thus, instead of being focused on the lesson agenda, on the quality of the knowledge conveyed to and absorbed by the students, the teacher has to manage the overall disturbance and to mitigate the possible escalating conflictual situation. So, for avoiding the position of master of disaster, the teacher does have to put himself/herself in the shoes of an ad-hoc referee, to be an impartial mediator with an unbiased, non-partisan, conciliatory approach, in order to restore and maintain order and decency in classroom. Why? Because everything could easily get out of control and those unwanted deviant symptoms could be contagious and spread out with a tsunami speed and effect.

So, the teacher will need a substantial effort to approach in a diplomatic and conciliatory way both parts, to make it clear that the classroom is not a fighting arena and cannot and should not be transformed in friend or foe battleground or engagement-type situation. It is after all vital to de-escalate the entire situation, to calm down the "perpetrator", to smoothly and peacefully reintegrate him/her. By this, nobody would be labeled as "the most wanted" and there would no room for any exclusion or isolation of the respective person, but just the premises that finally everybody is on the same page.

It must be clear, though, that only discipline itself would not solve the case by default. For being able to manage this small "turmoil" and to play this settling and managing role, beyond his/her non-disputed abilities, consolidated and long-practiced teaching techniques and methods, the teacher has to show and make it clear, from the beginning, that he/she is in charge. Moreover, it is essential to delineate a minimum set of rules and to emphasize that the only constructive challenges, intellectual and educational in nature, are accepted in the class and not the confrontational ones. On a case by case basis, any necessary verbal correction is more than welcome for getting everybody back on track, in case of any tendencies or attempts to disturb, interfere, and spoil the classes in any way.



So, besides identifying the causes, varying tasks, changing the approach, re-setting priorities and increasing motivation⁴ – first of all by reminding everyone why they are there – we must insist on the importance of setting these rules and sticking to them. Besides being a facilitator of knowledge and a mentor, a teacher still has to be a teacher, that is, a figure of authority.

This does not at all mean being rigid or bossy, the genuine old-school "tyrant" showing no flexibility and openness, but on the contrary. After all, students' respect does not come as a prerequisite from one's position in the classroom, respect has to be gained. By emotional intelligence and professional knowledge, by simultaneously being friendly and maintaining a seeable distance, by being a likeable presence in terms of inspiring both admiration and respect, and concurrently demonstrating diplomacy and patience, any teacher can be successful in something that may look sometime like an impossible mission. By this set of entwined human and professional traits, the English teacher will always be able to put the entire process back on track, and to maintain the focus on teaching-learning purposes and objectives, following the assumed planning and timeline.

Instead of conclusions, we can overtly appreciate that discipline is a really mandatory, even essential, factor on the battlefield, but also in English classes and courses, with a direct impact upon their efficiency, with some clear, direct and unquestionable effects on their overall quality and effectiveness. Just by promoting and assuring a climate of normality and decency, that combination of both mental and intellectual comfort, that sort

of motivating and appealing atmosphere, easily enjoyed and digested by everyone, could English teachers and their students meet their goals, reach the desired level of competency, fulfill the planned objectives and specific curricula. Making a long story short, based on what we portrayed above as possible scenarios generated by totally unconstructive and negative attitudes and behaviors, it is obvious that discipline is instrumental for a healthy, productive, positive, comfortable and normal teaching-learning environment.

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