SOME RECOMMENDATIONS FOR RESTRUCTURING THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE SYLLABUS FOR PEACEKEEPING ROMANIAN ARMED FORCES

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Abstract: *The current paper briefly examines some recommendations to review the content of the courses currently being taught at the Naval Academy of Constanța to Romanian military personnel holding various peacekeeping mandate functions and ranks. The Romanian Armed Forces' firm decision to join NATO has determined radical changes regarding its military personnel. These changes occurred in accordance with the measures included in the National Program for Romania's integration into NATO which indicates as its main objective the Romanian military personnel's improvement of foreign language skills and competencies with a view to their participation in joint multinational peacekeeping operations/exercises. Therefore, the effective and appropriate use of English contributes extensively to the success of a peacekeeping operation, since peacekeepers have to establish effective contacts among different categories of people and ensure a smooth flow of tasks being carried out. As a result,the learning content of English courses being taught for this category of people needs to embrace all these specificities in order to address their particular linguistic needs.*

Keywords: *military personnel; peacekeeping role; multinational operations; joint exercises; learning English; linguistic needs.*

Introduction

Over the past two decades, Romania's integration into NATO has prompted a profound transformation within the Romanian Armed Forces. This evolution has extended beyond strategic and logistical frameworks, influencing the very core of military education and training. Among the most pressing requirements has been the ability of military personnel to communicate effectively in English – the operational language of NATO. For Romanian service members engaged in peacekeeping operations, English is not merely a foreign language but a critical operational tool, a bridge that enables coordination, ensures compliance with international procedures, and enhances trust among multinational allies. In this light, the Naval Academy of Constanța bears a pivotal responsibility. As a leading institution in military education, it is tasked with preparing officers and enlisted personnel for roles that increasingly demand intercultural agility, multilingual proficiency, and situational communication competence. Yet, despite its efforts, the existing English syllabus often falls short in equipping learners with the real-world communication strategies they need in the field. This paper seeks to address

that gap by exploring pedagogical, linguistic, and operational factors that influence language learning for peacekeeping forces. By offering concrete recommendations grounded in contemporary literature, international benchmarks, and practical realities, it proposes a more robust and dynamic syllabus framework.

Rethinking Language Education Through the Lens of Military Needs: A Literature Review

The intersection of language acquisition and military communication has become a fertile ground for scholarly analysis, particularly in light of recent conflicts where multinational coalitions are the norm. Language, in these contexts, operates as a medium of command, collaboration, and crisis negotiation.

STANAG 6001, developed by NATO, provides one of the most influential benchmarks for language proficiency among military personnel. It articulates levels of listening, speaking, reading, and writing across a spectrum of military-relevant scenarios. However, as Harbord (1992) notes, there is often a gap between formal proficiency and communicative performance, especially under high-stress or cross-cultural conditions.

Language training for military personnel has gained increasing scholarly attention in the context of multinational peacekeeping operations. English, as the operational language of NATO, has been recognized not only as a communicative tool but also as a factor contributing to operational efficiency, leadership clarity, and intercultural diplomacy. However, many language training programs, particularly in Eastern Europe, still focus on decontextualized, grammar-heavy syllabi that fail to prepare personnel for real-world communication in volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous (VUCA) environments.

One of the key theoretical frameworks applicable to this challenge is task-based language teaching (TBLT), discussed in Ellis (2003), which emphasizes the importance of meaningful communication through tasks that mirror real-life usage. In military contexts, this methodology translates into designing communicative tasks such as giving operational briefings, interpreting situational reports, or handling emergency negotiations — all performed in English. TBLT aligns well with military training philosophy, which is deeply rooted in drills, mission rehearsal, and performance under stress.

Long and Norris (2000) emphasize that any effective language program must begin with a thorough needs analysis. For military learners, this involves identifying the key linguistic and pragmatic skills required for specific roles, from field communication to multinational coordination. This

approach underlines the critical gap between standard language curricula and the linguistic demands of peacekeeping operations.

Another valuable contribution comes from Bachman and Palmer (2010), who introduce the concept of communicative language ability as a combination of language knowledge and strategic competence — the ability to adapt language use to different contexts and constraints. In the case of Romanian military personnel, who often interact with non-native speakers from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds, strategic competence becomes essential for clarity and diplomatic finesse.

Lafford and Lafford (2002) argue for domain-specific instruction when teaching languages for professional purposes. This idea supports the inclusion of military English, rather than general English, as the central pillar of any syllabus aimed at peacekeeping forces. The authors suggest that professional learners must acquire not only specialized vocabulary but also genre-specific discourse practices. In peacekeeping, this includes formats such as situation reports (SITREPs), rules of engagement briefings, and interagency coordination memos.

Stacey and Sunderland (2020) further extend the discussion by analyzing the intercultural dimension of English use in multinational military environments. Their ethnographic research in British and German joint forces demonstrates how English functions not only as a lingua franca but as a medium for establishing hierarchical clarity, managing conflict, and negotiating meaning under pressure. They advocate for curricula that include training in non-verbal cues, prosody, and culturally sensitive language, areas often overlooked in military syllabi.

In addition, Kirkpatrick (2010) proposes a model of English as a lingua franca (ELF) for Asia that also applies to NATO contexts. He argues that English teaching should prioritize intelligibility and interactional effectiveness over native-speaker norms. This is particularly relevant for Romanian personnel who operate in multilingual environments, where clarity and cooperation are more important than grammatical perfection.

Finally, Fraser and Grotjahn (2022) explore language training models within the Bundeswehr (German Armed Forces) and propose hybrid models combining online and in-person instruction, simulation-based learning, and cross-disciplinary language labs involving tactical, medical, and engineering vocabulary. These models could serve as benchmarks for adapting the Romanian Naval Academy's language offerings to 21st-century operational needs.

Together, these contributions suggest that a robust military English curriculum must:

- Begin with a role-specific needs analysis;
- Incorporate task-based and scenario-driven learning;

- Emphasize strategic competence and intercultural pragmatics;
- Adopt lingua franca principles over native-speaker norms;
- Use authentic materials and genre-specific language tasks;
- Integrate multimodal and blended learning technologies.

This literature, while emerging from diverse contexts, converges around the idea that language instruction in military environments must be dynamic, operationally aligned, and strategically embedded into broader force preparation objectives.

Challenges of the Current English Syllabus at the Naval Academy

Despite the strategic emphasis on language skills, the English courses currently taught at the Naval Academy remain largely rooted in general English curricula. While grammar and vocabulary are foundational, they are insufficient on their own. Cadets often find themselves navigating peacekeeping environments that demand rapid, accurate, and context-sensitive communication. Yet the classroom rarely replicates this intensity.

Furthermore, there is minimal integration of NATO-specific operational language. As mission reports, tactical briefings, and cross-unit coordination increasingly take place in English, the absence of mission-relevant scenarios in the curriculum poses a significant disadvantage. Instructors, many of whom come from a general language teaching background, are often unequipped to simulate realistic communication environments, such as de-escalation scenarios at checkpoints, joint logistics coordination, or crisis-response operations.

Assessment is another weak point. Proficiency testing often emphasizes written grammar exercises or passive listening comprehension, neglecting the interactive, interpretive, and intercultural dimensions of military communication. In short, the curriculum struggles to mirror the battlefield of modern communication: dynamic, fluid, multicultural, and mission-critical.

Narrative-Driven Recommendations for Curriculum Restructuring

Imagine a Romanian officer deployed in a NATO-led mission in Kosovo. She must coordinate a patrol with Italian, American, and Polish contingents. Each team has a different operational style, and English is the only common medium. During a tense moment at a civilian checkpoint, her ability to communicate quickly, clearly, and empathetically in English can defuse conflict – or escalate it.

This is not a hypothetical situation. Such moments occur daily in peacekeeping operations. To prepare military personnel for this level of responsibility, the English curriculum must evolve.

First, the syllabus must be anchored in a needs-based approach. This begins with a diagnostic mapping of linguistic tasks associated with each rank and role. For instance, a logistics officer will need vocabulary and communicative structures vastly different from those of a military medic or a public relations officer. Needs analysis, as emphasized in ESP methodology, ensures that instruction is relevant, targeted, and personalized.

Second, the curriculum should incorporate authentic materials – operational manuals, mission debriefs, radio protocols, and excerpts from peacekeeping training modules. These documents not only build technical vocabulary but also immerse learners in the discourse practices of military English.

Third, simulations and scenario-based learning must become central. Through role-plays, virtual reality modules, and tactical simulations, learners can engage in situational problem-solving, negotiation, and briefing tasks. These exercises should be linguistically guided but operationally authentic.

Fourth, cultural competence should be embedded across all modules. Peacekeeping is as much about diplomacy as it is about defense. Modules on intercultural communication, framed by real-world case studies, can prepare learners to navigate sensitive cultural landscapes.

Finally, assessment should reflect operational performance. Oral briefings, field reports, and simulated radio communications should complement traditional testing. This multimodal assessment strategy mirrors the complexity of real military communication.

Illustrative Case Studies: From the Field to the Classroom

In order to fully understand the practical implications of linguistic preparedness in peacekeeping contexts, it is essential to delve into a series of real-world situations experienced by Romanian personnel. These illustrative case studies shed light on the communicative challenges faced during international missions and how English proficiency — or the lack thereof — impacted operational outcomes.

Case Study 1: Kosovo – Managing Miscommunication During Joint Patrols. During a NATO-led peacekeeping mission in Kosovo, Romanian officers were integrated into mixed-unit patrols with counterparts from Italy and Poland. A seemingly minor misunderstanding occurred when an Italian commander instructed the Romanian unit to "secure the perimeter." The Romanian team, interpreting the term in its native usage as "to occupy," advanced too far beyond the designated zone. This deviation triggered

confusion, requiring immediate clarification through the unit's English-speaking liaison. While no harm occurred, the incident highlighted how technical terms in English can carry nuanced operational meanings, which, if misinterpreted, may compromise mission integrity.

Had the Romanian officers been exposed to scenario-based training featuring standard NATO vocabulary in simulated patrol briefings, they might have been better prepared to respond appropriately. This underscores the need for curriculum content that incorporates both operational semantics and tactical pragmatics.

Case Study 2: Afghanistan – Linguistic Mediation and Civil-Military Relations. In the complex theater of operations in Afghanistan, Romanian soldiers often found themselves positioned between U.S. forces, Afghan National Police, and local civilians. One lieutenant recounted a tense moment in Kandahar where he had to negotiate the release of a detained individual accused of looting. The Afghan official spoke Pashto, the U.S. counterpart communicated in rapid-fire military English, and the Romanian officer acted as mediator. His ability to paraphrase, clarify, and maintain neutrality using controlled English expressions was pivotal in de-escalating the situation.

Such scenarios are common in peacekeeping roles, where language becomes a diplomatic instrument rather than a mechanical tool. The officer later reflected that his command of English idioms and register — especially in showing empathy without overpromising — had been more valuable than textbook grammar. This case supports the idea that English instruction must prioritize pragmatic, interpersonal communication in addition to grammatical accuracy.

Case Study 3: Mali – Navigating Multilingual Coordination in Francophone Environments. During the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in Mali (MINUSMA), Romanian officers collaborated with troops from Senegal, France, and Burkina Faso. The working languages of the mission were English and French, with many locals speaking Bambara. Romanian officers had to brief units, interpret aerial surveillance data, and coordinate humanitarian convoys across linguistic borders.

One major challenge involved a failed convoy delivery, caused by misaligned radio codes and misunderstood timing protocols. The Romanian officer responsible later admitted that he could not fully follow the overlapping French-English jargon used in the meeting, nor could he clarify his own timeline without assistance.

This example highlights the layered complexity of multilingual environments. It makes a strong case for incorporating not only English training but also awareness of code-switching and cross-linguistic mediation into the peacekeeping syllabus. As Grosjean (1989) and García and Li (2014)

argue, bilingual individuals operate along a continuum, often integrating multiple linguistic modes to solve problems — a reality military instruction must recognize.

Case Study 4: Bosnia and Herzegovina – Interpersonal Communication and Trust Building. In Bosnia, Romanian officers engaged in community stabilization efforts, working with local leaders, NGOs, and international monitors. In one case, a Romanian captain had to convince a village elder to allow patrols near a contested bridge. The elder spoke limited English, and tensions were high. Rather than defaulting to rigid command phrases, the officer relied on simple, respectful English infused with non-verbal cues — eye contact, posture, silence — to convey empathy and understanding.

Afterward, the elder reportedly said, "He spoke like a human, not a soldier." This encounter demonstrates that peacekeeping is as much about interpersonal soft skills as about tactical command. An English curriculum that incorporates exercises in tone, prosody, and cultural symbolism — such as greeting customs and conflict de-escalation phrases — would better serve learners in such contexts.

These case studies reveal that language in peacekeeping is inseparable from trust, diplomacy, and leadership. Teaching English as a mere subject fails to prepare learners for the performative, spontaneous, and relational aspects of language that peacekeepers rely on daily.
the multilingual, multicultural realities of peacekeeping missions.

Implementation Strategy: Phases and Considerations

Transforming a language curriculum in a military context is a multidimensional process that demands strategic planning, institutional commitment, and adaptive execution. It is not a one-time intervention but a longitudinal, iterative journey that must remain sensitive to geopolitical developments, evolving mission profiles, and learner feedback. A successful implementation strategy must address not only pedagogical redesign but also instructor development, institutional alignment, and continuous assessment.

Phase I: Stakeholder Engagement and Needs Diagnosis. The foundation of any sustainable curricular reform lies in stakeholder alignment. This phase involves engaging a broad coalition of actors: English language instructors, military officers with field experience, curriculum developers, NATO standardization advisors, policy makers from the Ministry of Defence, and even former peacekeepers. Hosting interdisciplinary workshops and policy roundtables can help articulate a shared vision and generate consensus around the syllabus's objectives. These sessions should explore questions such as: What are the most critical linguistic tasks encountered in peacekeeping

roles? How can language instruction reflect the psychological and cultural pressures of deployment? What gaps do returning personnel identify between their training and field realities?

Moreover, a thorough needs assessment must be conducted using surveys, interviews, and focus groups with both trainees and trainers. Data collection tools should capture both quantitative indicators — such as proficiency levels aligned to STANAG 6001 — and qualitative insights, such as personal narratives of language use in high-stakes missions. The resulting analysis will serve as the diagnostic blueprint for curriculum redesign.

Phase II: Curriculum Design, Pilot Testing, and Pedagogical Recalibration. This phase represents the heart of the transformation. The revised syllabus must be built around clearly defined learning outcomes tied to real-world communicative competencies. Language modules should be thematic and role-specific — for example, "Briefing an International Delegation," "Managing Civilian Interactions," or "Conducting Emergency Radio Calls." Each module should include functional grammar, mission-specific vocabulary, listening comprehension from authentic sources (e.g., NATO briefings), and productive tasks such as scenario-based writing or live simulations.

Pilot programs should be deployed within carefully selected cadet cohorts representing a cross-section of military roles. For example, one cohort might include logistics personnel, while another consists of intelligence officers. Their feedback will help identify content mismatches, resource gaps, and instructional inefficiencies. A formative evaluation process — built on instructor observations, learner self-assessments, and in-mission reflections — should be embedded into each pilot. This phase also requires investing in technological tools such as virtual simulation environments, mobile language learning apps, and voice-based interaction platforms.

Instructor development is an essential component at this stage. Many language teachers, although skilled in civilian ESP methodologies, may lack familiarity with military discourse or tactical scenarios. Therefore, they must undergo specialized training in military communication protocols, intercultural mediation, and mission-oriented pedagogy. Collaborative teaching with experienced officers or NATO linguists can also help bridge the theory-practice divide. Cross-training opportunities — for instance, pairing a language expert with a strategic operations officer — can produce more context-rich materials.

Phase III: Institutional Integration, Quality Assurance, and Policy Embedding. Once the revised syllabus has been validated, the final phase is embedding it within the institutional and policy infrastructure of the Naval Academy and, ideally, extending it to other branches of the Armed Forces. Institutional integration requires the alignment of schedules, academic credit

frameworks, and certification mechanisms with the new curriculum. English modules should be formally linked to rank progression requirements and integrated with broader officer development programs.

Monitoring and evaluation must become permanent features of the implementation process. A mixed-methods approach — combining proficiency testing, reflective journaling, classroom observations, and post-deployment debriefs — should be used to track outcomes. This system must be cyclical, enabling curriculum designers to make real-time adjustments in response to evolving mission types or NATO doctrinal shifts.

Finally, policy support at the national level is crucial. The Ministry of Defence should institutionalize the reformed syllabus through formal directives, ensuring its continuity across political transitions or leadership changes. Furthermore, partnerships with NATO's Language Bureau and similar foreign military academies could facilitate exchanges, joint training sessions, and shared learning repositories. By positioning English language training as a strategic capability, Romanian military education can reinforce its global interoperability and operational readiness.

In essence, implementing a new English language curriculum for peacekeeping personnel is a strategic endeavor that extends far beyond the classroom. It is a national security investment in effective communication, intercultural sensitivity, and mission success.

Conclusion: Language as Mission Enabler

In peacekeeping missions, words often travel faster than weapons — and their impact can be just as profound. Language functions as the invisible infrastructure of any multinational operation. It undergirds negotiations, supports logistics, clarifies threats, and builds coalitions. For Romanian Armed Forces, especially those engaged in peacekeeping roles, English is more than an institutional requirement: it is the currency of credibility, the mechanism of maneuver, and the signal of solidarity.

This paper has proposed a set of actionable recommendations to realign the English language syllabus at the Naval Academy of Constanta with the evolving demands of peacekeeping missions. From embedding scenario-based simulations to adopting principles from translanguaging pedagogy, and from incorporating authentic operational materials to implementing STANAG-aligned assessments, the curriculum must undergo a deliberate transformation.

Moreover, it must embrace a paradigm shift — one that views English not as a static body of knowledge but as a living practice, one shaped by culture, emotion, urgency, and improvisation. Language learning in this context must be performative, context-driven, and anchored in real-world

complexity. Future military English instruction should prepare learners not only to pass standardized tests but also to stand before a coalition, speak with clarity, mediate conflict, and ultimately, protect peace.

As Romania continues to participate in NATO operations and international missions, the importance of communicative competence cannot be overstated. Investing in robust, mission-relevant English training is not simply an educational matter — it is a matter of operational readiness, strategic alignment, and above all, human security.

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