

Chapter X

A Non–Language Learning Courseware and its Challenges

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyses the challenges in adapting a non-language learning courseware (NLLC) for a military learning environment. The National Defense University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur (NDUM) was the subject for observations and an informal survey. The findings of this chapter argue that there are technical, theoretical, and pedagogical challenges that need to be overcome when using an NLLC in language classrooms. With the rise of information and communication technology (ICT) and the Internet, tertiary military institutions are pressured to implement e-learning technologies in their learning environments. However, not many institutions have the capacity to do so. The author argues that the adoption of an NLLC for an institution that has resources constraints can help determine the potential of using e-learning technologies to help students acquire the target language better.

INTRODUCTION

Military institutions are considered to be among the oldest institutions in the world. Since the time of Plato, the institutions have often been called the ‘guardians’,¹ and the public respected them as such (Stiehm, 2002, p. 1). Given their special role and prestige, most governments need to ensure that their military institutions are ready to defend the country, and such readiness depends critically on comprehensive learning. Continuously

improving learning programs for the military has, therefore, become one of the most important aims of governments. This is reflected in the large military budgets that have emerged in the post-WWII world. Depending on the national defense strategies and foreign policies of a country, its needs and aspirations will be reflected in the learning programs of its military institutions. These learning programs range from academic to military curriculum and from professional to language courses.

The question addressed in this chapter is on the challenges of adapting a non-language learning courseware (NLLC) for cadets in a military learning environment. One of the current methods of facing the challenges of change and globalization is by adopting information and communication technology (ICT) in the learning programs of military institutions. With the growing awareness of the potential of information technology (IT) and the role of knowledge workers in developing a knowledge economy, e-learning technologies have become a national issue for many countries. Implementing new technologies in the working and learning environment could prepare future generations for the new culture of global networks and economies. Countries are expected to enhance their educational system because only through education can the future of a nation be secured. In addition, education has historically played a major role in preparing military institutions for war, and in providing states and alliances with an instrument of strategic power (Holder & Murray, 1998, p. 81).

The purposes of the chapter are twofold:

1. To identify the challenges in adapting an NLLC for cadets at the National Defense University Malaysia, Kuala Lumpur (NDUM); and
2. To analyze the implications of adapting an NLLC at the NDUM.

THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE CHAPTER

It is argued that cadets at tertiary military institutions must acquire a second language in order to effectively function after graduation and being commissioned. For example, taking into account the current issues at the Middle East, graduates of the United States Military Academy, New York (West Point) should master Arabic or the Persian/Dari language as their second or third

language. This chapter identifies the language acquisition challenges from the point of view of the Malaysian military institution. As an ex-colony in a middle-ranking power region, cadets at the NDUM may not need to acquire European or Middle Eastern languages. Malaysia does not envisage playing an independent role in policing the region or becoming a major global player in security matters. Nonetheless, three factors have made it crucial for the NDUM graduates to master the English language. Firstly, even the relatively modest domestic and border concerns expressed by Malaysia's defense strategy require a modern and competent military. The ability of cadets to use the English language competently will ensure that misunderstanding can be avoided during the joint operations with armed forces from other countries. Secondly, active participation in United Nation Peacekeeping Operations also demands that military officers be fluent in the English language. Thirdly, the English language is an international language. The future career development of the NDUM graduates depends on their English language proficiency: external training or formal academic opportunities in English-speaking countries. Consequently the NDUM must equip its cadets with, among other knowledge and skills, the appropriate level of language competency and proficiency.

THE METHODOLOGY

The main quantitative data of this chapter were collected at the NDUM. Formerly known as the Military Academy of Malaysia (MAM), the upgrade to a university status in November 2006 increases the pressure to also improve the learning environment at the NDUM. This chapter focuses on the question of language learning. The only language taught at the NDUM is English. The current method of teaching the target language is through face-to-face (F2F) sessions; indeed this is the only way cadets learn their proficiency and specific English language skills.

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