The Role of English Language in the Career of a Malaysian Armed Force Officer

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Abstract
The Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF), are entrusted with the responsibility of national security and also to project a positive image of Malaysia in the international arena as the officers are entrusted in peace-keeping and relief operations from various other countries. In the current globalisation era, the MAF also puts in emphasis on the K-Force and significant importance in constantly engaging its officers to upgrade themselves especially those related to equipping themselves with the necessary knowledge and expertise required to meet the demand for better services to the country and the people. The paper looks at the role of the English language in relation to the career of the three Services (Army, Navy and Air Force). The purpose of the study is to identify the communicative skills needed by these officers to fulfil the requirements of both the samples that are the Staff College and the Defence College. The total number of samples used was 138 students. This qualitative finding consisting of a questionnaire and ethnographic study which was conducted for one year shows that the MAF places importance that all four language skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing are important elements to the career of the MAF officers. Furthermore, there were some differences on the command of the language based on the different Services.

Keywords: Malaysian Armed Forces, Second Language Acquisition, Language Needs, Career Development

Introduction
It is a well-known fact that almost every institution and organisation in the world has been impacted by globalisation, which brings with it several phenomena, such as increased competition and incessant efforts to increase the effectiveness and efficiency of products and services. These have in turn created a number of forces that have come to be labelled as the K-factors (where K stands for knowledge-based), and include phenomena such as the K-Revolution, the K-Economy, and the subject of this study, the K-Force (ADFJ: 9). And since these forces are dependent on effective communication and demand the use of a common language, English, the undisputed lingua franca of international communication for business and technology, has fitted comfortably into this role.

The Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF), comprising the Army, the Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN) and the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF), are no exception to this trend, and are thus constantly engaging in efforts to upgrade themselves in all aspects, especially those related to equipping themselves with the necessary knowledge and expertise required to meet the demand for better services to the country and the people. Their efforts to increase efficiency and efficacy are built on the twin concepts of Revolution in Military Affairs (RMA) and the K-Force, and realised through the concept of the MAF as a learning organisation (MINDEF: 2005).

The RMA has contributed significantly to the advancement of military doctrine and the modernisation of the MAF, and led to a paradigm shift for the need of advanced
technological hardware. It gives emphasis to quick reaction, knowledge of the warfare zone and pin-point accuracy of weapons. According to the explanation given by the Australian Defence Studies Centre in the Australian Defence Force Journal, ADFJ (No. 44, Sept – Oct 2000: 1)

‘a military revolution typically occurs when the application of the new technologies into a significant number of military systems combines with innovative operational concept and organisational adaptation in a way that dramatically increases military effectiveness and fundamentally alters the character and conduct of military operations’.

A crucial issue here is that in order to fully utilise the potential of the RMA, it is necessary to have a sound understanding of military literature, which is mainly in English.

The K-Force stands for the creation of a knowledge-enabled Armed Force, where its soldiers and officers have relevant knowledge and ICT skills, and are receptive to technological and global changes (ADFJ: 9). Like for the RMA, in order for them to be so enabled, they should have a good command of the English language.

**Purpose of the Study**

This study emphasises the role the English language as well as its importance to officers studying at the Staff and Defence Colleges. It also looks into the communicative skills needed by these officers to fulfil the requirements of both these Colleges.

**Objective of the Study**

The three main objectives of the research are:

a) To identify the features of the existing curriculum at the Staff and Defence Colleges

b) To identify the role played by the English language in the career of an MAF officer

c) To incorporate necessary features/skills into the English language curriculum to enable greater development of MAF officers.

**Research Question**

By incorporating ethnographic features into this questionnaire-based study, the researcher hopes to answer the following research questions:

a) What role does the English Language play in the career of an MAF Officer?
b) How is the MAF coping with the language needs of the K-Force and the RMA?
c) What emphasis is being given to the speaking and reading skills in both the Staff and Defence Colleges?

**Theoretical Framework**

As MAF officers have to use English for their work purposes and also to attend courses which are conducted in English both locally and abroad, the officers need to know not only everyday social English but also academic English. This is because they have to write academic papers covering intelligence reports on the various countries that they are assigned to work at, and also for their thesis papers while attending their course at MAFSC and MAFDC.

The theoretical basis for this research stems from two approaches, that is, Cummin’s definition of Cognitive Academic Language Proficiency (CALP) in the planning design of functions, form and fluency, and Bachman and Palmer’s definition of...
areas of language knowledge (Cummins, 1989; Bachman and Palmer, 1991). At the same time, learners should also have what Cummins terms as Basic Interpersonal Communication Skills (BICS) which leaves them fluent in everyday language, but with critical gaps in academic language.

For the purposes of this study, the researcher chose to adopt as a theoretical base, firstly, the Bachman (1990:1991) and Bachman and Palmer (Brindley, 1995) frameworks of CLA. Whilst the study drew on other theories, it was felt that the Bachman/Palmer framework would be suitable as the theoretical basis for the project since it was rich enough to conceptualise the issues involved in second language performance situations.

Bachman and Palmer have developed a comprehensive and evolving framework of second language ability which provides a map rather than a prescription of language ability. It is a rich view of language which allows for a focus on both language use and the language user. Both sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic issues are addressed.

![Diagram of Language Knowledge](image)

**Figure 1. Areas of Language Knowledge (Bachman and Palmer, 1995)**

Another model that is relevant to this study is that based on the formula for designing instruction by Susana Dutro and Carrol Moran (2002) which emphasises functions, forms and fluency. They draw parallels with Cummins approach to academic language and the three design features essential to their approach. The following graphics (see Figure 2) are helpful to operationalise Cummins definition of CALP in a planning design of functions, forms and fluency.
Methodology

This section describes the methodological framework adopted in this study. It discusses the sources of information for arriving at the needs of Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) officers, the criteria for the selection of the sample, the methods and tools employed for data collection and the data analysis process used.

This study briefly describes the role of the English language as well as its importance to the MAF officers. To get a good sample of respondents from this category
(officers), two MAF institutions of higher learning were chosen, namely the Malaysian Armed Forces Defence College (MAFDC) and the Malaysian Armed Forces Staff College (MAFSC), also called the Defence College and Staff College, respectively. The officers were from all the three services, that is, the Army, the Royal Malaysian Navy (RMN) and the Royal Malaysian Air Force (RMAF) who were attending the one-year course at these colleges. The study also looks into the communicative skills and sub-skills needed by these officers to fulfil the requirements of both the Colleges. As stated by Cohen & Manion (2000), there is no single blueprint for planning research; research design is governed by the notion of ‘fitness for purpose’. Therefore, the purpose of the research determines the methodology and the design of the research.

Most of the information necessary for establishing the English language needs of the MAFSC and MAFDC officers was derived from the following four sources, namely:

- a) the student officers of the MAFSC and MAFDC
- b) the staff of the MAFSC and MAFDC
- c) the lecturers of UM and UKM
- d) the researcher himself as a participant–observer

Van Lier (1988) advocates gathering information on second-language research using “different kinds of data, different methods, and a variety of research tools” which he generally terms as ‘triangulation’. In this study, the method to obtain data to answer the research questions concurs with Denzin’s (cited in Cohen & Manion, 2000:113) concept of ‘theoretical triangulation’, which he claims, “draws upon alternative or competing theories in preference to utilizing one viewpoint only”. This approach in analysing needs would help to offset any discrepancies or errors that may arise from any one of the four sources. It is the intention of the researcher to compare and contrast the views of all the participants involved in the training of the MAF officers as a means of teasing out material differences between their perceptions of the ultimate goals of training and the means used or required in achieving these targets, and arriving at some degree of objectivity in the definition of objectives.

Research Design

The study is both qualitative and quantitative in nature as the MAF is a unique organisation and has many characteristics that are different from other organisations in the civilian world. Thus, by incorporating ethnographic elements into a quantitative needs analysis, it was hoped that the study would be able to capture more aspects that were relevant to the English language needs of MAF officers.

The data was obtained via four methods, namely: questionnaires (students of MAFSC and MAFDC, interviews, participant observation, and document study. However for this paper, only the questionnaire method will be discussed thoroughly.

The sample consisted of 150 officers who were students at the two MAF Institutions, namely the MAFDC and the MAFSC. A pilot study was carried out using students and some lecturers. The data getting procedure from the sample is outlined in Table 1 below.
The role of English language in the career of a Malaysian

Table 1
Research Design

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants/Methods</th>
<th>Questionnaire</th>
<th>Interview</th>
<th>Document Study</th>
<th>Observations</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MAFDC Students</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAFSC Students</td>
<td>110</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAFDC Lecturers</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAFSC</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>University Lecturers</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>150</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The questionnaire was only given to the local course participants from the MAF, the Royal Malaysian Police Force (RMPF) and the Malaysian Civil Service (MCS), consisting of 110 students at the MAFSC and 40 students the MAFDC, respectively. Thus, a sample of 150 students representing the Army, the RMN, the RMAF, the RMPF and the MCS was obtained based on the number of local participants in the course.

As the researcher has been an MAF officer for 31 years, he became a participant-observer (privileged observer) in both the institutions under study. In addition, he became a key informant in certain situations due to his experience in the various Services of the MAF, namely, the Army, the RMN and the RMAF. The researcher also had easy access to the officers because of his position (as Lieutenant-Colonel), and he was able to get pertinent information from them. Analysis in ethnographic research consists of synthesising the information from observations, interviews and other data sources. It relies heavily on description; even when statistics are used, they tend to be descriptive rather than inferential.

Literature Review

This study reviews the literature which has largely guided the researcher into the needs of Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF) officers and to develop a curriculum for the MAF. The perceived language needs of a group of people are related to evolving concepts about what language as a construct is, as well as to current notions of what language learning involves. Hence, the first section discusses the distinction between language acquisition and language learning. Under this section, Stephen Krashen’s (1981) theory of second language acquisition (SLA) is explored, together with other views on the subject. The section also looks at task-based language teaching, largely based on the work of Rod Ellis (2005). A review of theories about and more specifically the view of language as an integral part of the social process and economic functions that underpin this needs analysis (NA) is also discussed.

The next section presents a thorough discussion on needs analysis/assessment in relation to its definition, significance and assessment tools used. This is then related to ethnographic research as ethnography is the art and science of describing a group or
culture, and the Armed Forces is a sub-culture of society that is unique in its own sense. The final section of this review will focus on English for Specific Purposes (ESP) and its relation to curriculum design in the Armed Forces, with emphasis being given to military English.

Language Acquisition and Language Learning

Language acquisition is one of the central topics in cognitive science: practically every theory of cognition has tried to explain it. Probably no other topic has aroused such controversy. Possessing a language is a quintessentially human trait. Language is the main vehicle by which we know about other people’s thoughts, and the two (language and thought) must be intimately related. Every time we speak we are revealing something about language, so the facts of language structure are easy to come by.

Language acquisition is not only inherently interesting; studying it is one way to look for concrete answers to questions that permeate cognitive science. Some aspects of SLA are similar to first language acquisition; the learner has already acquired learning techniques and can reflect on how to learn best. However, learning languages depends on the personality, age, intelligence and active learning strategies of the learner. There is also a difference between language acquisition and language learning.

The concept of language learning is linked to the traditional approach to the study of languages and is till today generally practiced in high schools worldwide (Ellis, 2002). Attention is focused on the language in its written form and the objective is for the student to understand the structure and rules of the language through the application of intellect and logical deductive reasoning. The form is of greater importance than communication. Teaching and learning are technical and governed by a formal instructional plan with a predetermined syllabus. One studies the theory in the absence of the practical. One values the correct and represses the incorrect. There is little room for spontaneity. The teacher is an authoritative figure and the participation of the student is predominantly passive.

Task-Based Language Teaching

Task-based teaching was made famous by Rod Ellis (2005) when he presented a paper at Pusan, Korea, on the 10 Principles of Instructed Learning. Prior to this, various other names have been used, such as project-based, content-based, theme-based and text-based syllabuses (Nunan, 2006).

Since then, the concept of ‘task’ has become an important element in syllabus design, classroom teaching and learner assessment and it has influenced educational policy-making in both ESL and EFL settings. Tasks have been defined in various ways. Nunan (2004) draws a basic distinction between real-world or target tasks, and pedagogical tasks. Target tasks, as the name implies, refer to uses of language in the world beyond the classroom. Pedagogical tasks are those that occur in the classroom.

Ellis (2003:16) defines task in the following way.

‘A task is a work plan that requires learners to process language pragmatically in order to achieve an outcome that can be evaluated in terms of whether the correct or appropriate propositional content has been conveyed. To this end, it requires them to give primary attention to meaning and make use of their own linguistic resources, although the design of the task may predispose them to choose particular forms. A task is intended to result in language use that bears resemblance, direct or indirect, to the way language is used in the real world. Like other language activities, a task can
engage productive and receptive, and oral or written skills and also various cognitive processes’.

**Needs Analysis/ Needs Assessment**

Needs assessments are generally carried out to provide a quality service that would satisfy the customers. Needs assessments have been used in various settings such as government, health care and business (Stewart and Cuffman, 1998). Needs assessment, from the learner’s perspective, is an important part of an instructional programme.

According to Stewart and Cuffman (1998: 15), needs assessment is “any systematic approach to setting priorities for future action.” Rouda and Kusy (1995: 10) define needs assessment as “any systematic exploration of the way things are and the way they should be.” The word ‘systematic’, found in both definitions, indicates that in collecting data for assessment, an orderly method should be used: one should not depend on one’s intuition to make a decision. In this regard, Weddell and Van Duzer (1997) suggest several highly systematic methods which can be used to collect the data for needs assessment. These include survey questionnaires, open-ended interviews, informal observations and class discussions.

**Esp and Curriculum Design**

ESP is an enterprise involving education, training and practice, and draws upon three major realms of knowledge: language, pedagogy and the students’/participants’ specialist areas of interest (Wiersma, 2000).

The military as an organisation uses many words and terminology which are peculiar to it. This is especially so when it comes to the language of the Air Force and the Navy. This fact is further highlighted as many of the terms are universally used, and become a common platform for joint exercises carried out with neighboring countries, for example, between Malaysia and Thailand. The mode of communication in these instances is English. Furthermore, as Malaysia is a member of the FPDA, joint exercises are all carried out completely in English as the other participating countries are England, Australia, New Zealand and Singapore, where English is either the native language (for the first three) or second language (Singapore).

Dudley Evans and St. John (1998) identify five key roles for the ESP practitioner:

- teacher
- course designer and materials provider
- collaborator
- researcher
- evaluator

**Findings**

This section presents and discusses the findings from the various sources of information, especially, that retrieved from the questionnaire. It will begin by describing the background of the respondents with regard to aspects such as the size of the sample studied, their representation in the various Services of the Malaysian Armed Forces (MAF), their mother tongue and the medium of instruction in schools. It will then proceed to explain the role of English language in the career of the MAF officers in order to show the importance of the English language in their daily work routine.

Before the findings are discussed, it is appropriate that some background information be given about the sample studied, the representation of officers from the three Services that constitute the MAF, the mother-tongue used by the officers, and their
medium of instruction in school. The demographic information about the sample is shown in Table 2 and Table 3 shows the representation of the Services.

**Table 2**
The Sample of Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Institution</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MAFDC</td>
<td>38</td>
<td>27.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MAFSC</td>
<td>100</td>
<td>72.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>138</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 3**
Representatives of the Various Services

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Services</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Army</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>63.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMN</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMAF</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>18.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RMPF</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PTD</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>138</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 4**
Medium of Instruction in School

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Medium</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>23.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Malaysia</td>
<td>106</td>
<td>76.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>138</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 4 shows the frequency of distribution for the medium of instruction. Of the sample of 138 students, 32 (23.2%) students had the English language as the medium of instruction in school, while the rest (106 representing 76.8%) studied in Bahasa Malaysia (BM).
As is known, there are three main races in Malaysia, namely, the Malays, the Chinese and the Indians, who speak the various Malay, Chinese and Indian languages/dialects. The vast majority (94%) selected Malay as their mother tongue while a few, that is, 1.4% and 2.2%, stated that their mother tongue was Chinese and Tamil, respectively. A very small number (3, comprising 2.2%) declared that their mother tongue was English. They most probably belong to the ‘others’, a small group which consists of the Christians and natives from Sabah and Sarawak. All this data is shown in Table 5.

**Role of English Language in the career of a MAF Officer**

With reference to the first research question, that is, the role of the English language in the career of the respondents, it was found that the Armed Forces used a lot of English as the language is used universally in the military fraternity; it is the lingua franca in joint military exercises, United Nations (UN) peace-keeping activities, air traffic control and naval communication among ships.

For this reason, the capability of the MAF officers to conduct joint operations in English with Armed Forces personnel from neighbouring countries was studied. The results of the questionnaire are presented in Table 6.

**Table 5**
Mother Tongue of Respondents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Language</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>English</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Malay</td>
<td>130</td>
<td>94.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chinese</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tamil</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>138</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 6**
Conducting Joint Operations in English with Armed Forces Personnel from Neighbouring Countries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Difficulty</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Can cope but with</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fairly capable</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>29.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Capable</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>44.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very capable</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>21.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>138</td>
<td>100.0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
It can be seen that roughly 65% of the officers are in the category of capable and very capable. These are probably those who had exposure to the English language due to their work commitments, going for overseas courses and using English in their social life.

Figure 3 reveals the respondents’ opinions regarding the usefulness of English in helping the MAF meet the needs of the RMA with regard to Research and Development (R&D).

Figure 3. Usefulness of English for Research and Development

Emphasis given to the Language Skills

The third research question is: What emphasis is being given to the speaking and reading skills in the overall curriculum of both the Staff and Defence Colleges? The students at both the colleges follow a one-year programme that include courses which are conducted at and by their individual Colleges as well as in collaboration with UM and UKM, respectively. They have to use all the four language skills while undergoing their courses at the College and the various institutions of higher learning. Thus, the importance of these two language skills is discussed in this paper.

Speaking

Table 7 demonstrates the findings regarding the officers’ perceptions of their proficiency in speaking in English.
Table 7  
Proficiency in Speaking in English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Proficiency</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Not good at all</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not very good</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>49.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Good</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>39.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Very good</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>99.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

According to the table, only one (0.7%) respondent believed that he/she was not good at all in speaking in English. Another two respondents (1.4%) claimed they were not very good. The majority, or almost half of them, that is 49.3% (n=68) believed they had average proficiency, while 39.9% (n=55) considered they were good. Indeed, there were even a few (8% or 11) who thought they were very good in speaking. One respondent (0.7%) did not reply to this query.

Reading  
Table 8 demonstrates the results of how often the respondents read the course handouts in English.

Table 8  
Reading Course Handouts in English

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Use</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Never</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seldom</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sometimes</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>8.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Quite often</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>39.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Always</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>49.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>137</td>
<td>99.3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As shown, only one (0.7%) respondent stated that he/she never read course handouts in English, while just two (1.4%) claimed they seldom did so. Another 8% (n=11) respondents chose sometimes. Almost 40% (55) and 50% reported they did so quite often or always. One respondent (0.7%) did not respond to this query.
Conclusion

This section is devoted to the discussion and interpretation of the major findings reported in the findings above. It will, first of all, describe the role of the English language in the career of a MAF officer, and discuss how the MAF is coping with the needs of the K-Force and the RMA. The study will then focus on the emphasis given to the four language skills in the overall curricula of the Malaysian Armed Forces Staff College (MAFSC or Staff College) and the Malaysian Armed Forces Defence College (MAFDC or Defence College).

The conclusions arrived at represent a profile of the English language needs of the MAF officers as revealed in this investigation of the perspectives of these personnel attending the MAFSC and MAFDC courses. Whereas the reports on the findings given in the two preceding chapters focus separately on the data obtained through each of the investigative tools, the summary and conclusions given here synthesise the findings obtained from all four research instruments according to each of the research questions stated earlier in this study.

Based on these conclusions, the researcher has made some recommendations to upgrade the English language competence of the officers. The researcher also presents the English curriculum that will be suitable to the needs of the officers to enhance their performance during the course as well as in their working environment after the course.

Role of the English Language in the Career of an MAF Officer

Referring to the information obtained in this study, 23% of the officers had the English Language as their medium of instruction in schools, whilst 77% had Bahasa Malaysia (BM). Furthermore, based on the information related to the mother tongue of the respondents in Table 4, it can be seen that BM dominates with 94.2% (English is 2.2%, Chinese, 1.4% and Tamil, 2.2%). From these data, it can be concluded that BM is the dominant language of the respondents, especially at home and in the society at large. However, the medium of instruction in both the MAFSC and MAFDC is the English language.

Due to the nature of work which involves duties both in the Military Unit as well as outside, English plays an important role in this institution. Although initially an officer may be using more BM in the working environment which may suffice for the day-to-day administration, he needs English for many other purposes. For instance, the English language becomes indispensable when an officer has to deal with other government agencies, the private sector, foreign embassies and foreign military organisations.

Another important area where MAF officers need English is when the language becomes the lingua franca during joint operations with neighbouring countries such as Thailand, the Philippines, Indonesia and Singapore, each of which have their own national languages. This was shown in the data when 44% of the respondents answered that they were capable and 22% answered that they were very capable in conducting joint operations with neighbouring countries. Only 4% stated that they could cope but with difficulties whilst 30% stated that they were fairly capable.

With the rise of ICT and globalisation, English is the main language used by the military to keep in touch with Defence Technology and Defence Science. More bilateral and multilateral relations are established with foreign military organisations and all these are done through the medium of English.

Since the medium of instruction for both the military colleges (MAFSC and MAFDC) is English, it is evident that a good command of the language will be a catalyst in the successful completion of the course. Another important role played by MAF officers is taking part in the United Nations (UN) peace-keeping missions in foreign countries such
as Iraq, Lebanon, Indonesia and Somalia, where the lingua franca is English as it is the common and universal language of all the Armed Forces personnel from the various countries. Although our medium of instruction in schools is BM, English is important as a second language as stated by Raja Nazrin (The Star, 18 August, 2009) in the International Conference on Education in Kuala Lumpur:

‘The English language is one of the key aspects of the education system needing special attention to meet the demands of a knowledge and innovation-based economy. The other three are curriculum, the assessment system and teaching methods. English is of paramount importance in the 21st century workplace. It is the lingua franca of the knowledge and innovation economy, and those proficient in the language will enjoy many advantages in the global workplace’.

The job of an MAF officer requires him to have good communication skills, especially in English. As he rises up the organisational ladder, he has to write reports and papers in English, conduct briefings in English, read articles in English and also socialise and conduct negotiations in English. Furthermore, he will be sent for courses overseas where the medium of instruction is English. This underlines the importance of English to an MAF officer. This was highlighted by the students of both the Colleges when they said that a lack of proficiency in English language skills diminished their chances for:

a) Promotion  
b) Overseas Posting  
c) Holding Command and Staff Appointments  
d) Taking part in the United Nations Peacekeeping Force  
e) Attending courses abroad

Social and Institutional Support for Learning English

Although BM is the national language of the nation and the main medium of instruction, English is still important because it is used extensively in many countries and is the language of business, information and communication technology (ICT), science and technology and, lastly, the Armed Forces of the world. This was highlighted by the Deputy Prime Minister when delivering his opening remarks at the 17th Conference of Commonwealth Education Ministers at the Kuala Lumpur Convention Centre (The Star, 17 June, 2009). He said:

‘The Government recognises the need to improve students’ command of English to ensure they can compete globally. Students must be proficient in the language and have other skills to interact with the global community and tap into knowledge. Equity of access must be demonstrated in the provision of the knowledge and skills that will facilitate this access’.

It is evident that the government has realised the importance of English in participating and competing in the global market, and achieving the tenets of Vision 2020 whereby Malaysia will be a progressive and industrialised country. The military, too, has realised this, and in order to keep up with the ever-changing superior technology used in military arsenal and hardware and to be in unison with national aspirations, the MAF has to give priority to upgrading the level of English amongst its ranks and officers.
Coping With the Needs of the K-Force and RMA

Knowledge management is rapidly becoming the hot buzz phrase in the new millennium. It emphasises tangible benefits that can be gained by treating people, their knowledge, information and the organisation as parts of one holistic entity. In essence, the most important aspect in this concept is knowledge and how it interacts with available information to achieve effective performance. To survive in this era of information, organisations need to obtain knowledge at a faster rate and be at par with the degree of change in the environment. The MAF has taken cognizance of this fact by creating the K-Force, which is a knowledge-based force where English plays an important part.

The development of a multi-role function soldier for the future would enhance the Army’s image of becoming a complex and professional organisation. The futuristic environment will require “a Jack of multi-trades and master of all”, to quote General Tan Sri Md. Hashim (2004:19). The working environment will also require highly skilled professional soldiers and individuals who are willing to accept responsibility and accountability and be able to interact with their superiors and subordinates professionally, both in local situations and with foreign forces. This can only be done if our officers have a good command of the English language.

Recommendations

The recommendations given are based on the feedback by the students and the DS of the Staff and Defence Colleges. The data suggests that formal English teaching alone would not fulfil the need to upgrade the officers’ proficiency in English. A systematic approach that involves the commitment of all the participants in the education and training of an MAF officer is needed. The following recommendations include all members of the system:

a) As it has been firmly established in this study that English plays a vital role for the officers, all the 4 language skills, namely, listening, speaking, reading and writing, should be equally emphasised.

b) The English Language should be emphasised from the day an officer joins Cadet training as it will help in the long term development and career of an officer.

c) With respect to this, the Army should take the cue from the Navy and the Air Force, where at least 75% of its courses for officers should be in English and at least 50% of its courses for Other Ranks (OR) should also be in English.

d) Oral skills in English should be given more emphasis to accommodate the nature of the job of an MAF Officer through everyday social communication. Young Officers (YOs) should be encouraged to do extensive reading to inculcate the reading habit.

e) A two-week general English course should be organised for all MAF officers immediately prior to the Staff College Course. This course has to be intensive and emphasise the basics of grammar, note taking, summary writing, and paragraph writing. It should also concentrate on report writing and IT skills.

f) At the end of this programme, a forty-hour English language course should be incorporated into the main course during the first month of the Staff College Course. This English language module should be used to teach speed reading, communication and thinking skills (CATS), and how to write an academic research paper.

g) The Defence College English Course, too, should be carried out during the first month of their programme, and cover a duration of forty hours. The concentration should be on all the four skills; however, the texts here should be at a higher level covering various topics such as International Relations, Politics, Economics, Strategic Studies and International Law.
h) Last but not least, a positive attitude should be cultivated among the MAF staff towards learning the English language; there should be no fear of the multilingual world, leading to a ‘conspiracy of deafness’ towards the language. The MAF, especially, cannot distance itself from using English as it is embarking on a modernisation plan with its acquisition of state-of-the-art equipment and arsenal from abroad where the manuals are all in English. Furthermore, it is involved in joint operations with the militaries of other countries. Thus, the restructuring of the Army has to be in line with the concept of future soldiers for future battlefields which consist of a network of systems designed to function as a single integrated system. This leads to the concept of the K-Force, where soldiers will be dependent on information and operating systems (which are all in English) to successfully carry out joint operations.

References


