
English Language Training as a Projection of Soft Power

By

Thomas Molloy

Defense Language Institute English Language Center

Introduction

I have worked in the English language training (ELT) field for almost forty years, thirty-seven of those years with Defense Language Institute English Language Center (DLIELC). At the end of this year, I intend to retire. Before retiring I wanted to share with the Security Assistance Training Program (SATP) community my thoughts about the importance of English language training to the SATP. I would also like to emphasize the immense power of English language training to wield influence. In recognition of the predominance of the English language, desperate parents around the globe are making huge financial sacrifices to provide English language instruction for their children. Hypothetically, the demand for access to English language training gives the United States enormous leverage. Yet, in practice, English language training is a vast untapped resource. The SATP community tends to regard English language training not as a potent weapon in the soft power arsenal, but as an obstacle to be overcome on the way to follow-on training (FOT). In a word, we have something the whole world desperately craves, but we are seemingly oblivious of the leverage this gives us.

I apologize if parts of this article are polemical, but I passionately believe that the United States is missing an enormous opportunity by underutilizing English language training to project soft power and reap a bonanza of good will.

The Importance of the SATP and the Role of English Language Training in its Success

One might ask two questions to ascertain the success of the SATP. First, “Did the international military students (IMs) succeed in their technical or professional military education (PME) courses?” Second, “Did the IMs have a favorable opinion towards Americans and American institutions when they departed continental United States (CONUS)?” I think most of us would agree that the answer to the second question is more indicative of the success of the SATP. Simply stated, we would hardly judge the SATP to be successful in the case of an IM who, having graduated at the top of his professional military education class, could not wait to get back to his country to apply acquired knowledge and skills to plan the destruction of the United States.

Most of us who have had experience with the SATP are staunch believers in its efficacy. Indeed, many of us are veritable missionaries, who incessantly preach the many benefits that accrue to the United States from this inspired program. Based on our contacts with IMs, we know that most of them leave America with a favorable impression. Many of them also leave behind one or more close American friends. Periodically, when the accountants demand that we provide hard data demonstrating that the International Military Education and Training Program (IMET) component of the SATP is cost-effective, we are amazed that the benefits of the IMET program are not immediately self-evident. achieves an understanding of America and Americans? And is it not obvious that their achievement of such an understanding is generally in our own best interests? It is to my colleagues and me. So over the years when the inevitable request for “measurable” data has hit my desk, I always want to respond, “So what is to measure, already?”

The IMET program is not a philanthropic endeavor. It is a calculated, hardheaded, practical one. It is an inventive stratagem for helping to erase the stereotypical image of the “Ugly American” from the minds of the IMs. That is to say, the IMET program, while it is indeed beneficial to its recipients, is rooted in enlightened self-interest. In frequent, amicable contacts around the world with IM alumni of American military schools, I am often soothed by the realization that most of these alumni would kill Americans only with the greatest reluctance. The basic premise of the IMET program is “To know us is to love us”. The simple fact is that people who love us, or at least like us, are less likely to want to kill us than people who loathe us.

Although we can not quantify all the benefits of the IMET program, they are, nonetheless, self-evident.

In some ways, the experience of American Peace Corps volunteers is analogous to that of IMSs attending professional military education under the auspices of the IMET program. Both the American Peace Corps and the IMSs are totally immersed in the host-country environment. They come to understand the psyche and mores of their hosts. I was an American Peace Corps participant in Turkey from 1963 to 1965. Many of my fellow Americans and I came away from the experience indelibly imbued with a love of Turkish culture and have become life-long students of Turkey, its language, literature, and history. Many of us still seize every opportunity to visit Turkey. In conversing with former American Peace Corps volunteers who served in other countries and in talking with IMSs who have graduated from U.S. military schools, I find that they share similar sentiments. IMSs gain invaluable insights into America. They return to their native lands knowing that America is more than just a hodgepodge of Hollywood schlock, junk food, inane advertising, 1000 deodorant brands, and bad music. They can interpret America to their contemporaries. They are the antidote to the anti-American poison spread by toxic tabloids. The knowledge they possess about America can dispel many ugly stereotypes about Americans. They know that the virtue of American women is not quite as easy as Hollywood would lead one to believe (at least, based on my personal experience); that the typical American is not a materialistic charlatan; that American institutions really are remarkable; that democracy actually works; and that Americans love their parents, their children, and their pets. As one who, based on years of international experience, steadfastly subscribes to the basic IMET premise, I believe that only those who do not understand the IMET program doubt its benefits.

English language proficiency is a sine qua non for the success of the IMET program. Those IMSs who do not possess the required degree of English language proficiency need not apply for admission into most U.S. military schools. Moreover, the English language is the prism through which IMSs interact with their American hosts and through which they construct their hypotheses about Americans. Not only is the English language crucial to the effectiveness of the IMET program, it is a key element in globalization. Since the Second World War, English has emerged as the world's lingua franca. For all practical purposes, individuals wishing to be players on the world stage must have a mastery of the English language. International commerce, politics, and military affairs are increasingly conducted in English. Even the French are learning English. English language proficiency is crucial to scientists, businessmen, merchants, doctors, scholars, and other professionals who want to stay abreast of the latest developments in their professions. In many foreign military forces, young officers aspiring to achieve high rank must demonstrate a high level of English language proficiency. A country's capability to participate in peacekeeping missions, joint military exercises, and coalitions is directly proportional to the English language proficiency of its officer and noncommissioned officers corps.

Differing Perceptions of the Importance of English Language Training (U.S. Government vs. International Military Students)

During my thirty-seven years of tenure with DLIELC I have traveled to thirty odd countries as an English language training instructor, manager or advisor. I have conducted English language training surveys in many of those countries and briefed host-country officials on how best to organize and manage their English Language Training Programs (ELTPs). It dawned on me not long ago that, in all those years and in all those countries, not once did I have to sell an official on the importance of English language training. They all know that a countrywide lack of ELP can label their nations commercial, political, and cultural backwaters. It is axiomatic that the surest way to determine the importance of one's mission in a foreign country is the level to which one delivers the exit briefing. At the conclusion of English language training surveys, I have typically given briefings on my findings and recommendations to deputy ministers of defense, chiefs of general staffs, and service chiefs. Why was I granted access to these high-level officials? I wish I could say it was because my reputation had preceded me, but the fact is that I personified English language training, an issue of the highest national priority.

In many discussions with many IMSs over many years, I have discovered that there is frequently a disparity between our English language training expectations and those of our IMSs. We serve up English language training to our IMSs as an appetizer; they, contrarily, often view it as the main course. We insist that they need to achieve only that level of pidgin English necessary to take some scheduled follow-on training course, but many IMSs frantically aspire to master English so they can achieve their cherished life-time goals. Our IMSs want much larger portions of the “appetizer”, but we often encourage them to bolt down the “appetizer” and savor the main course. We simply need to listen to the aspirations of the IMS and, consequently, understand that many IMSs view English language training, not follow-on training, as the piece de resistance. To use another analogy, many IMSs desperately want to learn to fish and we tell them, “Shut up, you ingrate, and eat your fish”. Our IMSs realize that the professional military education course they attend will have some immediate utilitarian value, but they also realize that a mastery of the English language, rather than just the attainment of the ELP level required for follow-on training, may have a far greater impact on their future aspirations.

Here I would like to recount one example from my personal experience. I established the English language training program at the Marshall Center. During my three-year tenure (1995 through 1998) at the Marshall Center, it came as no surprise to me that the Marshall Center IMSs were eager to improve their English and clamored for more and more class hours. Apparently, the enthusiasm with which the IMSs pursued English language training was an unpleasant surprise to some of my superiors and college professors, who frequently reminded me that English language training was just a sideshow that should not detract from the more lofty goals of the Marshall Center. Neither my superiors nor the professors were malevolent people; they were highly dedicated, competent, intelligent individuals. It is just that when it came to the subject of English language training, some of them just did not understand. None of my superiors ever openly accused me of fomenting unrest among the IMSs by ballyhooing the relative importance of English language training. In fact, I never had to convince any IMS of the importance of English language training. The IMSs already knew it. One major from a former Soviet block country summed up his opinion of the relative importance of the Marshall Center curriculum vis-à-vis English language training by stating, “Democracy is important, but unless I can talk about democracy in English, I will not get a good job”. My point is not that English language training should replace the Marshall Center curriculum, but that the U.S. government consistently underestimates just how important English language training is to IMSs. Again, we serve English language training up as an appetizer; many IMSs want it as the main course.

Since ELP is an indispensable component of the SATP, one would assume that the SATP community would comprehend the enormous power of English language training to generate good will towards the United States. I have been a member of the SATP community for thirty-seven years and I can say that, with a few prominent exceptions, members of the SATP community regard English as an obstacle to be overcome on the way to follow-on training. Very few question the wisdom of the policy that precludes sending an IMS to DLIELC for English language training unless the English language training is in preparation for follow-on training. Yes, it actually requires a waiver to send an IMS to continental United States solely for an English language training course.

English Language Training as a Projection of Soft Power

In at least one taxonomy, there are three dimensions of power: economic power, military power, and soft power. It is becoming increasingly evident that the economic and military dimensions do not routinely win the good will of other nations. Many believe that projecting soft power is the means to offset the good will deficit caused by the other two dimensions. The projection of soft power gives the “Ugly American” a facelift.

Given the importance of English, logic dictates that English language training would be a centerpiece in U.S. policy for projecting soft power. The power to grant or withhold English language training gives the U.S. enormous leverage. Concisely stated, English language training

equals soft power. Perhaps, it takes a bit of a Middle Eastern rug merchant's mentality to comprehend the simplicity of this English language training equals soft power formula. The rug merchant knows that the customer wants something from him and he wants something from his customer. To the rug merchant, who understands this simple proposition, the rest is all a matter of trivial details. The successful rug merchant does not look at the sale of a rug as an obstacle to be overcome; rather, he views it as a chance to extract what he wants from his customers.

English language training is a commodity that can extract enormous quantities of good will from our customers. When we offer an IMS the treasured opportunity to become proficient in English, we are offering him the ticket to a bright future. Good will aside, how can we begin to measure the commercial ramifications of foreign officials proficient enough in English to read our books, periodicals, newspapers, websites, and catalogues; to attend our institutes of higher learning; and to collaborate with Americans on scientific, military, and economic enterprises? English language training is not only the gift that keeps on giving to the recipient; it keeps on giving to the giver. Talk about a win-win situation!

While the world is starving for ELP, the U.S., in the form of DLIELC, has the know-how to alleviate this famine. DLIELC, which has established its preeminence in the English language training world through its tried and true training system, could, given the charter and the resources, be the spearhead for launching an English language training blitzkrieg to project muscular soft power around the world. [In the event that the reader smells a rat, an attempt to feather my own nest, I would like to remind the reader that I am leaving the DLIELC nest for retirement at the end of this year].

At a time when the image of the United States is being attacked by a steady barrage of vehemently anti-American propaganda, offering the gift of ELP to current and future leaders in countries around the world would go a long way towards counteracting the damaging effects of this barrage. English language training may not be a panacea for vituperative anti-American propaganda, but it is one cost-effective, powerful remedy. It is a potent weapon in the soft power arsenal. The miraculous power of English language training to generate good will is not just an article of faith at DLIELC; it is a matter of fact. We witness the miracles every day, reveling in the abiding gratitude of our alumni.

On the DLIELC crest, appears the inscription, "Peace through understanding". Seemingly powerful words, but to those of us in the business of dispensing English language training, this motto is a tautology.

Summary

English is the world's lingua franca and ELP is a vital asset for international military, corporate, and government leaders. The U.S. government could reap an enormous harvest of good will by establishing a system for providing English language training to a world hungry for ELP.

What would the blueprint for a worldwide English language training offensive look like? Well, this is grist for a future article.

About the Author

Thomas Molloy is currently the Chief of Institutional Relations at the Defense Language Institute English Language Center in San Antonio, Texas. He joined the DLIELC faculty some thirty-seven years ago after serving for two years in the Peace Corps. He has spent eighteen years of his DLIELC service on permanent change of station tours overseas, serving in Germany, Morocco, Iran, Somalia, Turkey, and Yemen. He has also done consulting work in twenty other countries. His last two jobs were Chief of the Evaluation Division and Chief of the Programs Division.