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Shadows of the Past. The Challenges of Teaching Analytical Writing within the Military

Abstract

The subject matter of this article is the challenges faced by military language students, particularly in the context of analytical writing and the specifics of the military language testing system (STANAG 6001). The main research method used in this paper is a literature review and theoretical analysis in order to discuss and analyse the challenges faced by military language students in the context of analytical writing, as well as potential solutions such as Project-Based Learning (PBL). As such, it does not present original empirical research or data collection. Instead, it draws upon existing research, educational theories, and expert opinions to support its arguments and proposals. A central theme within the paper is that of "educational baggage" and the idea that language learners bring into the classroom their experiences of previous learning environments, be that schools or private courses. Finally, the article suggests that a fully integrated syllabus should be written for military English students that would incorporate all the elements of Project Based Learning and involve all teachers on a given course in a truly integrated manner.

Keywords: andragogy, pedagogy, adult learning, military English, analytical writing, STANAG 6001

Introduction

Professional teachers, with sometimes many years of experience, may well look at the classroom as their realm, their domain. In fact, what may well come to mind is Shakespeare's famous line from *As You Like It:* "All the world's a stage / And all the men and women merely players." (Shakespeare n.d.). When they enter the classroom it is as if they are donning a costume and immersing themselves in a "role". Over time they perfect this role and make it truly their own. In doing so, they step away from the world of the learner and focus their efforts on being the educator.

The demarcation of these two worlds is to some extent a rite of passage. As a young teacher, they strive to distinguish themselves as the 'professional', the one in control. The feeling of being in control is central to many jobs, and no less so in teaching. In fact, it is not only in work where a sense of control is sought. Joseph Hallinan (2014) makes the point in his article for *Psychology Today* of:

> (…) how essential a sense of control is for mind and body alike. Having a sense of control, for instance, has been consistently linked with physical health. People who feel in control of their lives report better health, fewer aches and pains, and faster recovery from illnesses than other people do. They also live longer. (Joseph Hallinan 2014)

This sense of control is just as important for the adult learner and is something that will be touched on in more detail later on in the article.

Having established the psychological need for a sense of control, that is inherent in all of us, it is important to point out that this is not the be-all and end-all of being a teacher. Although there are probably as many opinions of what the role of a teacher is, as there are teachers, a simplified description of the role of a teacher would most likely state that a teacher must be a resource, a support, a mentor, a helping hand, and a learner (*Resilient Educator* 2013). It is the last aspect, the role of a learner, that ties teachers most directly to their students and the aspect that they must try, above all, never to forget. Through Plato (428/427–348/347 BCE), we learn that Socrates (470–399 BCE) once claimed that all he knew was that he knew nothing (Plato [399–387 BCE] trans. by Benjamin Jowett [1892]). This attitude has entered into our culture as the mark of a wise person and is a concept that any true educator needs indeed to keep in mind. It is essential that we remember that "a learner is a person who is always growing in life and will never claim that they know it all. A teacher will be challenged every day with a new task that will help them grow into a better person" (*Resilient Educator* 2013).

With this in mind, teachers must approach teaching through the eyes of their students. In his book, entitled *The Modern Practice of Adult Education – From Pedagogy to Andragogy,* Malcolm S. Knowles (1980) discussed the role of the experience of the learner and how an adult learner has accumulated a vast reservoir of experience (Knowles 1980: 44). This is an important observation and influences the learning methods employed. This experience can also have a negative effect upon the learner and the learning experience as the memory of education received in childhood can affect the adult learner. In the preface to the book by Frantz Fanon ([1961] 1963) *The Wretched of the Earth*, the French philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre (1963) wrote: "We only become what we are by the radical and deep-seated refusal of that which others have made of us" (Fanon [1961] 1963: 17). Although, undoubtedly, not a direct critique of education, it does however have great significance for a person's education and, more importantly, self-development. From an early age, we are tested, assessed and categorised according to rigid standards that suit mass educational needs; yet rarely are the needs of the individual assessed.

This one-size-fits-all approach often leaves a feeling of disillusionment or even betrayal in a learner, as they transcend to the adult world of work and career. It is in this adult world that military English teachers find them. Often averse to being in the classroom again, they must be coaxed back into learning. Fortunately, as John Dewey (1916) noted: "the self is not something ready-made, but something in continuous formation through choice of action" (Dewey 1916). It is therefore the teacher's job to spark a student's sense of exploration. Install a feeling that there is no premise that cannot be questioned.

That said, previous experience does not always denote a negative effect on learning. While overtly looking at US military personnel entering civilian higher education, Kate Ford and Karen Vignare's

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(2015) observations concerning military learners give room for optimism. In their article entitled *The Evolving Military Learner Population: A Review of the Literature* they commented that:

> (…) current research suggests military learners adapt and persist in college by drawing upon deeply engrained military traits and tendencies, including self-discipline, mission-first focus, and reliance on fellow military learners. (Ford, Vignare 2015: 7)

This approach is no less relevant for in-service personnel involved in residential or online language courses. Certain traits of military life will be difficult to leave outside the classroom and can indeed be a great help in the learning process. However, the teacher must appreciate them and take them on board when dealing with students.

This myriad of attributes and contributing factors may at first seem daunting to the teacher. However, it is essential that educators take all factors into account. The title of this paper "Shadows of the Past" was indeed chosen in order to highlight the link between the different stages of our lives and how our attitude to learning can be very much influenced by our formative years. This paper aims to both: highlight the problems inherent in teaching adults in the military, specifically within the context of teaching analytical writing, as seen at Level 3 of the STANAG 6001 English Language Writing Exam (as tested in Poland by the Central Examinations Board for Foreign Languages of the Ministry of National Defence); and suggest ways to aid said teaching.

For those not accustomed with the STANAG 6001 language examination system, it is perhaps pertinent at this point to explain what exactly the exam system involves. The STANAG 6001 (Standardization Agreement 6001) is a NATO document that lays out the language requirements for military and civilian personnel participating in Nato operations and joint ventures. Although each Nato country is responsible for training and testing language proficiency they do so under the guidance and coordination of the Bureau for International Language Coordination (BILC), which is a NATO agency. STANAG 6001 delineates four testable language levels: Level One (Survival); Level Two (Functional); Level Three (Professional) and Level Four (Expert). Level Five represents a highly articulate native speaker and is not tested, whereas Level Zero represents no language ability.

The paper will be divided into three sections entitled: 1) The Formative Educational Environment, which will look at experiences during primary and secondary school and how they affect the learner; 2) Issues Affecting Adult Learners, which will look at the essential differences between Pedagogy and Andragogy; and 3) Operationalising PBL with regards to Analytical Writing, which will look at how Project Based Learning (PBL) can be used within a military learning environment. At the end of the paper, there will be a summary of the ideas presented, with any appropriate conclusions that may be drawn.

1. The Formative Educational Environment

Before beginning to delve too deeply into the subject matter of this section, it is perhaps important to point out that the focus of this section is the formative educational environment, as opposed to formative years (Li 2023) *per se*. For the purposes of this paper, the formative educational environment is taken to mean tiers 1 and 2 of a child's education, which represents primary and secondary school respectively, before they enter 3rd tier higher (university) education. This system where children's education is divided into

two distinct parts, before moving onto a voluntary higher, or tier 3, educational institution is prevalent in many countries and may be found in both the UK and Poland and so is a good benchmark for this paper. An example of this can be seen in the Bedfordshire educational system in England (Bedford School Trust), but it is present across the country. This paper will concentrate on the 2nd tier of education as this has the greatest effect on the learning of critical writing.

There are two key issues that we need to take into account when looking at how secondary education can affect later attitudes towards foreign language learning in general and analytical writing in particular. The first is the issue of gender and its effect upon academic achievement; whilst the second issue is the teaching, or lack of teaching, of critical thinking, especially with regard to writing.

Beginning with the issue of gender, it is perhaps important at this point to define what exactly is meant by the term gender. The World Health Organisation (WHO) defines gender as:

> (...) the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed. This includes norms, behaviours and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other. As a social construct, gender varies from society to society and can change over time. Gender is hierarchical and produces inequalities that intersect with other social and economic inequalities[1]. (WHO 2023)

Although, the above definition has many interconnected and complicated elements it is important to point out that gender is not the same as biological sex, as the following quote explains:

> Gender interacts with but is different from sex, which refers to the different biological and physiological characteristics of females, males and intersex persons, such as chromosomes, hormones and reproductive organs[2]. (WHO 2023)

In this paper, it is assumed that any substantial gaps between the attainment of boys and girls are put down to differences in gender, as opposed to biological sex, and it is therefore not assumed that there is a biological reason why one group out attains the other in terms of academic achievement. That said, it has long been observed that there does exist a gap in the academic achievements of boys and girls and that this gap widens as children progress through secondary education. To put it bluntly, boys tend to do less well in school than girls (Delany, Deverux 2021: 1) and this even affects the proportion of young men and women entering university, with significantly more women entering. Studies in the USA suggest that the difference in attainment for reading skills is as significant as 10 percentage points (Chudowsky and Chudowsky 2010: 6–8). This is mirrored in the UK with studies (Thompson 2020) showing a 7% gender gap between girls and boys in general. This widens to 15% with respect to results in English. Results in modern languages show a similar pattern.

When looking at graduates from upper-secondary education, Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) data (2020) confirms the pattern. General studies graduates of secondary school, who gain sufficient qualifications to enter tertiary education, are more likely to be female, with on average 54.6% of such graduates being young women. Conversely, graduates of vocational schools/courses are less likely to be women with only 45.3% being female. The OECD report (2020) summaries that:

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1 See: Gender and health [at:] https://www.who.int/health-topics/gender#tab=tab_1 [date of access: 27.04.2023].

2 *Ibidem*.

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> As with higher levels of education, there are marked gender patterns in choices of fields of study. Women are far more likely than men to study subjects relating to business, administration and law, as well as health and welfare. Men are more likely to choose engineering, manufacturing and construction or information and communication technologies (ICT), which are in great demand in labour markets in OECD countries. These differences can be attributed to traditional perceptions of gender roles and identities as well as the cultural values sometimes associated with particular fields of education[3]. (OECD 2020)

This gap in attainment does not only affect the school exam results gained, but can have a deep-seated effect on the individual male student, causing a belief that they do not have an academic or educational skill. With time boys will distance themselves from certain forms of learning and throw themselves into other pursuits, more traditionally "male". This gender gap is in fact reinforced by the lack of availability of positive role models. Data collected by the OECD (2015) shows that on average across the OECD area, less than 40 per cent of secondary teachers are male.

Moving on to the second issue, the teaching of critical thinking. Studies in both the USA (Smith 2020) and Canada (Wright 2001) point to the fact that although the teaching of critical thinking is a central aim of secondary education, it is rarely achieved. Students leave school having failed to develop an essential skill for not only work and higher education but indeed life itself! Often the focus of secondary school is on obtaining grades rather than developing broader skills which are often difficult to quantify and thus assess. This focus on quantifiable information not only means that critical thinking is not developed but even that the overall development of the child is reduced. This has led some to call for the taking up of a "whole child" approach (Flook 2019) where a broader, more holistic, approach to education is employed. Lisa Flook (2019) argues that:

> Currently, our education system often focuses on a narrow sliver of children's cognitive development with an emphasis on transmitting content knowledge, often to be memorized and repeated in the same form it was received. Lessons in math, science, and reading – and tests in those skills – dominate the curriculum. While those subjects are fundamental, learning involves far more than merely acquiring inert knowledge in algebra or chemistry. Such a narrow focus gives short shrift to the ways that children need to grow and learn in their relationships, identity, emotional understanding, and overall well-being. After all, children are multi-dimensional "whole" beings whose development is complex and rich. (Flook 2019 [n.p.])

There is therefore a growing trend to take a holistic approach to education. One where a subject is taught within the context of the "real world". This, by itself, is perhaps not a new concept, as John Dewey ([1910] 1997) wrote in the preface to his book *How We Think*:

> (…) the native and unspoiled attitude of childhood, marked by ardent curiosity, fertile imagination, and love of experimental inquiry, is near, very near, to the attitude of the scientific mind. (Dewey ([1910] 1997)

Alas, Dewey's ideas, like those of many revolutionary thinkers, were not adhered to and over one hundred years later we still have an education system where the transference of information is placed above the development of thought.

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3   See: Indicator B3. Who is expected to graduate from upper secondary education? [at:] https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/37ae863c-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/37ae863c-en [date of access: 28.04.2023].

In summary, the educational experience of the majority of children, and especially boys, creates a situation where the young adult is averse to learning and may in fact be missing key skills necessary for both work and higher education. It is these very people that teachers of English in the military find themselves dealing with in higher education establishments or military language centres.

2. Issues Affecting Adult Learners

Before we discuss the issues affecting adult learning, it is perhaps important to clarify what exactly the differences are between Pedagogy to Andragogy. In his book, *The Modern Practice of Adult Education – From Pedagogy to Andragogy,* Malcolm Knowles gave quite a rigid distinction between the education of children and adults. On pages 43–45, he illustrates in a table four key areas of difference between young and adult learners (Knowles 1980). Although too wordy to quote in full here, certain phrases from the table used to describe young learners help to illustrate its tone:

> The role of the learner is, by definition a dependent one. (…) The experience learners bring to the learning situation is of little worth. (Knowles 1980: 43–45)

In a recent online article, educationalist Cindy Nebel (2022) even comments:

> I'm really glad I wasn't teaching in the pedagogical era that Knowles is referring to. This seems like a pretty pessimistic way of looking at education and a negative way of looking at our students! (Nebel 2022 [n.p.])

In the same article, Nebel (2022) continues to give her own interpretation of the differences between pedagogy and andragogy, expanding on the key areas mentioned by Knowles to create six areas:

1. **Need to Know**
2. **Self-Concept**
3. **Role of Experience**
4. **Readiness to Learn**
5. **Orientation to Learning**
6. **Motivation to Learn**

Cindy Nebel (2022) goes on to comment that in actual fact pedagogy is coming close today to the andragogy that Knowles described in his book. That said, although we would assume that adults are self-motivated and are in the classroom of their own free will, this is not always the case:

> Adults *sometimes* are choosing to learn. This is certainly true for adults coming back to school, but I would argue that most adults are put in formal or informal learning situations that they also aren't choosing. (Nebel 2022 [n.p.])

It is this point that we must take on board when dealing with language learners in the military. Although many of the facets of andragogy are relevant, we cannot always guarantee that our students are self-motivated in the way that Knowles meant. For many military students, this is a box that has to be ticked. Whether their commanders sent them on the course, or they need STANAG 6001 qualifications for graduation or promotion, they may be more akin to child learners in terms of motivation.

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Returning to one of the key differences that Knowles (1980) distinguished, that "adult learning is task or problem-centred" (Knowles 1980); this ties in well with the idea that adult learners need to know why they are learning something. Although writing fifty years earlier, John Dewey held similar views about education in general. In a twenty-first-century interpretation of Dewey's *Experimental Learning Theory,* Robert Grady (2003) wrote that "the social environment within which education takes place is critical. The social environment affects all other aspects of the educational process" (Grady 2003 [n.p.]). It is important that the adult students feel that they have the respect of the teacher and that their input is appreciated. Dewey (1938: 59) stated that "the teacher loses the position of external boss or dictator but takes on that of a leader of group activities".

This role of facilitator, as opposed to teacher, is something that is well known within teaching and educational circles, yet often ignored. In her article discussing the differences between Task-Based Learning (TBL) and Project Based Learning (PBL), *TBL and PBL: Two Learner-Centred Approaches,* for the British Council website, Katherine Bilsborough (2023) states that:

> Many newly qualified or inexperienced teachers tend to base their lesson planning on the traditional PPP approach (Presentation, Practice, Production) because it is reliable and it is a valid framework around which to base a series of classroom activities. It is also usually the best way of covering all the lexical areas and grammar points in the course book or syllabus. All good and well. The problem is that PPP serves the teacher's needs but it is debatable whether or not it fulfils the needs of the learner. (Bilsborough (2023 [n.p.])

This tendency to fall back on the traditional 'teacher role" is not just something that affects new teachers. Experienced teachers, pressured by deadlines and schedules, can also feel that this best meets the needs of the students and the curriculum. For many, it is also a question of a lack of appropriate material or time to develop it. Project, or task-based learning takes a lot of preparation on the side of the teacher. Most importantly it takes a vision of how all the different elements tie together. Katherine Bilsborough (2023) lists four elements of Project Based Learning:

1. A central topic from which all the activities derive and which drives the project towards a final objective.
2. Access to means of investigation (the Internet has made this part of project work much easier) to collect, analyse and use information.
3. Plenty of opportunities for sharing ideas, collaborating and communicating. Interaction with other learners is fundamental to PBL.
4. A final product (often produced using new technologies available to us) in the form of posters, presentations, reports, videos, webpages, blogs and so on.

(Bilsborough 2023 [n.p.])

These four stages represent a methodical and pragmatic approach to learning that is student-focused, in that it encourages the student to discover the topic themselves rather than just relying on information provided by the teacher. This element means it is ideally suited to the military environment as described by Kate Ford and Karen Vignare (2015: 7) and discussed in the introduction of this paper.

To summarise this section, adult learners must feel, and indeed be, at the centre of the learning process if they are to truly respond to the material and advance in their learning. The onus is on the

teacher to create both the environment and the materials for the learner to explore and take charge of the learning process. All elements of language learning must be coordinated to coincide with this learning process. It is this topic of how to teach languages, and more specifically writing, which will be developed in the final section.

3. Operationalising PBL with Regard to Analytical Writing

The term analytical writing may at first glance be self-explanatory, however, it is perhaps important at this point to define what is meant by analytical writing. A University of Dublin students' writing guide defines analytical writing as such:

> Analytical writing is evaluative and critical. It seeks to go beyond the descriptive presentation of facts or details to the reader, and instead evaluates and investigates their significance. In other words, analytical writing demonstrates the "why", "how", and "so what", interpreting the significance and meaning of the "who", "what", and "where". (UCD 2023).

That said, this is a university definition which is perhaps unrealistic to expect fully within the limited scope of an English language exam. Therefore, for the final section of this paper, it is important to state that by the use of the term "analytical writing" the author has in mind the long writing tasks found within the STANAG 6001 Level 3 English writing exam. STANAG 6001, or NATO Standardization Agreement 6001, is the document signed and agreed upon by all members of the North Atlantic Treaty Organisation. The document lays out the expected abilities of foreign language users and has four basic levels: Levels 1–4 (Level 0 represents no language achievement and Level 5 represents an educated native speaker). Level 3 is, therefore, three-quarters of the way up the scale and represents significant language ability akin to that of a B2/C1 level using the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages (CEFR).

> The level 3 descriptor for writing in STANAG 6001 states that a Level 3 user:

> Can use the written language for essay-length argumentation, analysis, hypothesis, and extensive explanation, narration, and description. Can convey abstract concepts when writing about complex topics (which may include economics, culture, science, and technology) as well as his/her professional field. (BILC 2016)

Each NATO country interprets the STANAG descriptors individually and creates its own language exam and thus it is in some ways difficult to compare countries' approaches. However, for the purposes of this paper Spain has been chosen as a point of comparison. Spain represents a country with a similar population size and budgetary potential to Poland and comparisons between the two countries are often to be found in different fields of study. Although, as mentioned previously, each country is free to interpret the STANAG descriptors as they see fit there is a common trait shared between them, as the following Polish and Spanish examples indicate:

Example One

OPTION 1: In the United States alone, an estimated 26 million animals are used each year for scientific testing. Level 2 Task – Describe the different purposes of animal testing. Level 3 Task: Give your opinion on whether it is ethical and necessary to perform.

(An example of the Spanish military's bi-level Professional English Writing Exam)

Example Two

Recently there has been a lot of discussion in the media about problems with general safety (such as: crime, health hazards or accidents) that big cities have to deal with. Write a report about the situation in your country, in which you:

- describe typical safety problems and the reasons for them
- suggest what can be done to tackle these problems
- describe potential consequences if the problems are not dealt with

(An example of the Polish military's Level 3 English Writing Exam)

As can be seen from the two examples above, in the Level 3 writing task candidates must not only detail a specific problem, but go beyond this by way of a critical analysis. It is this critical analysis which proves to be most challenging for Level 3 test takers.

The population for Level 3 test-taking is primarily made up of two types of people. Firstly, there are university-age officer cadets who are at or have just graduated from one of the five military higher education institutions in Poland. As can be expected, they have had a reasonably constant experience of learning English, but they often lack the life experience and critical skills necessary for analytical writing. The second group is serving soldiers and officers who have often had a break in terms of both general education and more specifically language learning. This group often attends an intensive five-month language course prior to taking the exam.

As was discussed in Section 1, many learners have not been sufficiently trained in critical thinking and furthermore have negative impressions of the learning process due to their experiences at school. Level 3 course participants, or officer cadets, thus look at the long writing task as a burden: a negative experience that must be gone through. This feeling is not helped by the atomistic nature of teaching, where skills are often broken down and taught separately. It is not unheard of for a separate teacher to come into the room when the time comes for "writing". This is as much a result of timetabling issues and curriculum pressures as it is of an overt desire not to teach in a more consolidated way.

In section 2 it was shown that adult learners need to be at the centre of the learning process and that teachers should facilitate this process rather than rely on traditional didactic methodologies. What differentiates Project Based Learning from just "doing a project" is that the project is not something you add to the learning but is in fact the learning vehicle itself (Conca 2021).

What this means for the teaching process is that the essay must be seen as just one element in a cycle that represents a 360-degree analysis of a given issue. The student must feel that they have taken part in a journey where, along with their colleagues and the teacher, they have fully investigated an issue and provided their own analysis and critique. Most authors give seven stages to the process: generate and stimulate; define and refine; designate and collaborate; compare and share; enhance and advance;

review and revise; and produce and present (Harding da Rosa 2018). If we are to look at Level 3 writing as representing our 'produce and present' stage, then we can see that speaking, reading, and listening would fit into the previous stages of the cycle. The important thing is that writing is not taught as a disjointed skill or just as a way to practice grammar.

Taking the Polish military's Level 3 exam task, previously shown, as an example, then prior to the writing of the task a full analysis of the issue of crime and safety in big cities should have been carried out. This process would take a couple of days where level 3 speaking topics would also be used to fully develop the issue. This means that the syllabus must be written in such a way as to integrate the work of all the teachers employed on the course. The syllabus needs to be divided not only into topic-based units dealing with a specific area of life i.e. International Affairs, but also predicated on a research question. This research question should be wide enough to encompass all the needs of the unit. It would then be the goal of the students to answer this research question.

To summarize this section, analytical writing should not be taught as a separate skill, devoid of context. It should be taught as part of a research project, utilising the skills of inquiry-based learning (Ward). Level 3 courses should be designed to act as a vehicle for students. Such a vehicle should guide the students through all stages of inquiry so as to allow them to develop critical thinking within an English language environment.

4. Conclusion

This paper has illustrated that military language students, like their civilian counterparts, often come to the classroom with 'educational baggage' and as such do not adapt well to the task of analytical writing. It was shown, however, that through the use of project-based learning, the correct context can be found that would allow students to explore issues in an in-depth manner. This, in turn, would allow them to develop their critical thinking abilities and, perhaps more importantly, feel that they have truly learnt something from the activity.

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