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## Evolution of Online English Learning Courses for Military Personnel: A Comparative Analysis

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# Evolution of Online English Learning Courses for Military Personnel: A Comparative Analysis

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**Abstract.** This article undertakes a comparative analysis of the evolution of English language training in the Romanian military forces from traditional onsite courses to modern online courses that started flourishing in the academic year 2012/2013, when there were introduced four types of online modules. However, having no interactive synchronous course components at that time, the first attempts at digitalized learning without real-time interactions were somewhat ineffective and led to a lack of interest on the part of students. In an era of globalization and international cooperation, when military personnel take part in international missions and work in the NATO framework, knowledge of the English language is an essential skill. Therefore, over the years, experience has proved that there is a strong need for English competency during international missions and led to a conversion of the demanding, but sometimes monotonous, and inadaptable onsite courses into the modern synchronous online courseware (software containing educational content, instruction, and instructional strategies) that considerably attracts more attention in terms of listening and oral skills. The introduction of a synchronous component has removed online course limitations, allowing learning environments to be much more effective in addressing the learner's needs in an ever-changing global landscape. The article shows that transforming onsite courses into online courses and blending the flexibility of asynchronous learning with synchronous sessions represent a clear progression from the early online settings for language learning to the present courses.

## 1. Introduction

Online English courses became possible due to the expansion of the internet and the development of online teaching technology. If early courses were primarily text-based and integrated into existing correspondence programs of universities, with wider internet access, specialized e-learning platforms emerged, offering various educational courses, including languages.

In today's globalized world, with frequent international military collaborations, such as NATO operations and UN peace-keeping missions, it is more important than ever to have strong English communication skills. Why is English used? Since all members of the Armed Forces, both in Romania and overseas, speak English, it is regarded as the primary lingua franca.

## 2. Evolution of Military English Courses

Past educational experiences have demonstrated the necessity for an interactive online platform customized to the unique requirements of military personnel on overseas deployments. As a result, language training programs were redesigned, switching from static online modules to dynamic, interactive programs that improve speaking and listening abilities.

The online English courses for military personnel have evolved significantly in the last years. If in 2012 I was writing about the dawns of online English courses in the military system which marked a significant shift from traditional methods, today, 12 years later, I am writing about the new online English courses which, unlike the ones in the past, are designed to help officers, NCOs, enlisted, as well

as civilians in the military to learn or improve their English, having the possibility to interact with their teacher and colleagues. Therefore, if in the past there were some online modules that addressed to language courses graduates who needed to maintain/develop their language skills through individual study and less under teacher guidance, in the present there have been designed three online courses (familiarization level, intermediate level, and advanced level) which are significantly different and, above all, interactive since there has been introduced a synchronous component that helps students interact and have real-time feedback. This component also helps teachers to assess students' progress effectively throughout the course.

As over the past three years I have had the opportunity to teach as part of the familiarization educational program, in this article I am going to detail what this course was designed for and what advantages offers in comparison to the previous courses, which completely lacked the **synchronous component**, an extremely important part especially when teaching and learning a foreign language, because the teachers can gauge whether or not learners have a good grasp of the language, and they can make adjustments as needed.

Back then the online familiarization - pre-intermediate level course lasted 14 weeks and was designed to review the main topics covered in the intensive familiarization level course including a review unit and six learning units. To achieve the learning objectives of each unit, the learners would go through exercises grouped by skills: reading, grammar, listening and writing, but there was no interaction with the teacher, and thus, no real-time feedback.

### 3. Detailed Course Description

The new familiarization course consists of four modules and lasts 26 weeks. **The first module** (Getting acquainted) is made up of seven lessons in which students start by learning to greet and answer to greetings both orally and in writing, to write and say numbers from 1 to 100, the age, telephone numbers and fill in forms. Moreover, they learn how to write and talk about family members and their relationship using the verb "to be" and "to have", to say and write ordinal numbers, days, months, seasons, and dates. The lessons also focus on writing and talking about countries, nationalities, and languages, enhancing learners' cultural awareness. The module also covers professional vocabulary related to various occupations, workplace environments, and job-related activities, relevant to both in civil society and in the military. As well, the learners develop the ability to describe themselves and the physical appearance of a family member.

**The second module** (Around the house) comprises six lessons in which students learn how to write about their neighborhood mentioning places and their location, to describe their house referring to the exterior parts and the rooms, and to describe their favorite room in the house specifying the place of the furniture and the appliances, using the appropriate prepositions of place. The students also learn to write and say the time, to write and talk about their daily activities in chronological order, and to write and talk about necessity and chores. In addition to that, learners are taught how to express preferences regarding leisure time activities, articulating likes and dislikes and to write an email about their hobbies. Information about weather and seasonal activities are also covered, learners having the opportunity to describe what they usually do in winter and summer. This module also offers lessons on discussing ongoing holiday activities, helping students practice and improve their use of present continuous tense.

**Module 3** (Out and about) is made up of seven lessons which endows the students with the linguistic tools needed to inquire about and provide information on purchasing everyday items such as fruits, vegetables, items of clothing, shoes, accessories, and toiletries. It also teaches students how to make an invitation to eat out, and how to order food in a restaurant. Additionally, the lessons focus on describing a holiday destination and writing an email about plans for their next vacation. An important part of the module is dedicated to travel-related vocabulary, giving the students the opportunity to learn how to communicate effectively about transportation methods, to ask and give information about travelling by train and by plane, and to give instructions on how to buy a ticket from a vending machine. Furthermore, the module prepares students to engage in hotel dialogues, covering essential check-in and check-out procedures, making polite requests, and giving appropriate answers to questions about hotel services. Since giving and receiving directions is an indispensable skill both in everyday contexts and within

military environments, learners are taught how to ask for and give directions in general and on a military base.

Due to the fact that accurate and clear communication within the military is crucial, **the last module** (My education and training) consists in six lessons which focus on developing skills necessary for writing and speaking about various aspects of military life and preparation. Therefore, students engage in activities that help them write about military education in their country and speak about their education and the courses they attended in the military. There are also activities that help them write detailed descriptions about the structure and organization of military units within their country. Some tasks challenge them to write about their military career and past events related to their military career. The lessons extend to writing about personality traits of a military and practical writing exercises that guide students in completing their curriculum vitae. They learn how to talk about main duties and to write an email about their military daily duties and responsibilities. In order to enhance their ability to communicate effectively, there are activities that teach students how to describe military uniforms and accessories, to write about how they prepared for pre-deployment, a critical aspect of military readiness, and to give advice and make suggestions for different problematic situations during pre-deployment.

### 4. Assessment and Outcomes

Online assessment in English learning online courses plays a significant role. Thus, throughout this course the learners are given continuous feedback. The assessment offers the advantage of constant monitoring the students' progress and provides immediate feedback, this being essential in language learning, where understanding fine distinctions and correcting mistakes punctually can significantly influence learning outcomes. This kind of evaluation is called formative assessment, or Assessment for Learning (AfL), and is particularly beneficial as it helps students identify their strengths and weaknesses in real time and adjust their learning strategies accordingly.

Experts in ELT (English Language Teaching) clearly stated that giving specific and useful feedback in the form of comments rather than grades, informs learners about their gaps in their knowledge, understanding or skills, and how to close those gaps.

This course is very well-structured and each lesson is designed to be completed within one week. Students cannot go through the lessons superficially nor skip them, because there are preconditions that need to be fulfilled to access the next object. Thus, in order to gain access to the next page, they need to answer all questions of previous pages correctly, which maintains the quality and effectiveness of the training.

All the lessons contain both writing and speaking assignments. The learners are required to complete the assignments and then upload them online. They receive the feedback to their assignments within a maximum of 24 hours. This ensures that any suggestions or corrections are implemented promptly into their ongoing learning process. This way the acquisition of the language is enhanced.

Furthermore, at the end of each module there is a qualifying test that students can take only twice and they have to obtain at least 75 points out of 100 to pass the test and to be allowed to access the next module. If they are not able to pass the test, they have to meet with their teacher to be explained what they did wrong, to do some more exercises on the grammar and vocabulary issues they didn't understand and then they are given the chance to take the test again. Luckily there are not many situations in which students do not pass the test since before getting to the test, they have the opportunity to clarify what they do not understand and practice more within the <consultation classes>, which are open discussions and student-centered classes where learners can inquire and consult materials related to a specific lesson. These classes allow students to attend live sessions where they can directly interact with their teacher and it is highly recommended for those who encounter difficulties with the English grammar and vocabulary presented in the asynchronous component. This way they receive personalized guidance, so that they can successfully follow and stay engaged in an English conversation.

Besides the consultation classes, there are the virtual classrooms for each lesson, where the real-time interaction between students and teachers significantly enhances the learning experience by providing a structured, interactive environment customized to specific educational objectives. Before the beginning of each virtual classroom, learners are asked to upload a self-assessment form in which

they have to type an "x" on each line under the corresponding grade from 1 to 10 (according to which they consider appropriate for their knowledge) and then compare their self-evaluation with that made by teachers at the end of the virtual classroom. This form of self-evaluation encourages learners to take responsibility for their own learning. Learners use success criteria to identify what they have done well and what they need to focus on next. This way they can then set personal goals.

Therefore, as I mentioned earlier, it is almost impossible for the learners to fail the test after they undergo this whole learning and assessment process.

At the end of the course, participants are required to undertake a comprehensive final test, designed to assess all the linguistic competencies developed throughout the lessons in the four modules. The test takes up approximately one hour and a half to be done and measures the learners' proficiency in speaking, reading, and listening skills, in addition to testing knowledge of grammar and vocabulary.

Despite the fact that in the beginning students taking online courses could face difficulties that they might never have encountered in a traditional teaching and learning environment, once they get familiarized with the way the platform works, they get to experience the benefits of online teaching and learning environment, leading to a positive impact on their learning performance. The benefits and positive effects have been constantly and on numerous occasions validated by feedback from learners in the questionnaires filled in at the end of the course.

**Conclusion**

To sum up, this article has demonstrated the evolution of English language training within the military, emphasizing the change from traditional classroom methods to advanced online learning courses. The development of the online courses over the past decade has been guided by the acute need for effective communication in English, which serves as the lingua franca in international military operations and collaborations. The evolution of online English courses specifically designed for military personnel, incorporating interactive and synchronous elements, has substantially improved the learning experience, enabling more dynamic engagement and real-time feedback between instructors and learners.

Moreover, the success of these online English courses is obvious in the positive feedback reported by learners. As military operations continue to require high levels of cooperation across nations, the role of such targeted language training programs will remain essential in fostering effective communication, ensuring mission success, and enhancing international collaboration.

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