The Language GAME

A new look at language training

by Hamid Lellou

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Foreign language skills have become an operational necessity in all branches of the military. In response to this need for communications and cultural training, tactical language programs of instruction have been developed for the Marine Corps in several languages including Arabic, French, Spanish, Pashto, and Dari. These programs of instruction have been developed by applying the *Systems Approaches for Training Manual* (*SAT Manual*) (Marine Corps Combat Development Command, Quantico, June 2004) which recommends a process that analyzes, designs, develops, implements, and evaluates the instruction. Although there are numerous methods and software packages available for learning foreign languages, the difficulty and rate at which Marines are able to learn and retain a foreign language indicates that this is a discipline that has not reached its full potential. One of the obstacles lies in eliminating the barriers frequently encountered with adult learning. While extensive studies have been done on the best methods for teaching foreign languages to civilians, a standardized approach for teaching foreign languages to those in uniform has yet to be adopted. This article will introduce a new concept to teaching foreign languages to military personnel that leverages their backgrounds, skills, and behaviors. The Language Group-Applied Mentored Experience (Language GAME) uses core aspects of military culture to cultivate a secure learning environment, spur competition, and make each individual believe in his ability to speak the target language. Military personnel learn how to perform maneuvers not by listening, but by practicing. Therefore, this article will demonstrate how a conversational style of instruction creates real-life situations where practical grammar and vocabulary are continuously introduced and practiced. Readers will discover how this approach enables students to go beyond survival and familiarization levels in a short time. This method has been practiced over a number of years at Marine Corps bases throughout the United States and repeatedly tested in both French and Arabic with positive results. By using the Language GAME approach, there is great potential to sustainably advance foreign language proficiency among those in uniform, that, in turn enhances their ability to effectively and successfully carry out the mission.

A New Perspective

Typically, language courses follow one of the many well-known adult learning methods. The Language GAME does not challenge any of the existing methods or approaches to teaching foreign languages to professional adults, rather it focuses on achieving successful language acquisition by thoughtfully and carefully applying concepts in combination with the *SAT Manual*. You may ask, "Why hasn't this been done before? Languages have been taught for centuries!" I would answer that sometimes challenges require a different perspective.

Prior to entering a career in linguistics education, I spent 15 years as an ecotourism business owner and guide in the Sahel region of Africa, where I provided cultural, linguistic, and geographical tours for diplomats, scientists, military personnel, and nonprofit leaders. Despite fierce competition in the region, my business was successful because I took the "one-size-fits-all" approach out of tourism and replaced it with specialized tours to fit the needs, personalities, and interests of each client. The Language GAME was developed with the same theory in mind by, on a macro level, developing specialized classes that fit the needs of the military, its training style, and culture; while on a micro level, tailoring each class to the personality, rank, and background of the students. This approach to teaching language, or rather of coaching Marines in learning foreign languages, took over 6 years and 4,000 hours of trials to develop, and is continuously being improved.

Marines are adult learners; however, they are slightly different from other professional adult learners. Indeed, the Marine Corps has developed its own standardized manual, the *SAT Manual*, to train and educate its Marines, but the dilemma was to find common ground between teaching adult learners and military learners. The Language GAME can be seen as that interface which bridges adult learners' theories and uniformed learners' theory.

What Makes the Language GAME Different?

If asked, "Would you prefer to learn and have fun, or to learn and feel pain?" obviously we all would prefer to learn and enjoy the time spent doing it. Marines are atypical learners. While the majority of their instruction is standardized, they enjoy games. As you can see in Figure 1, the Language GAME concept is made up of combined approaches, tricks, tactics, and strategies. The best way to look at it is to imagine

a football team preparing for competition. In our case, the instructor is the coach and the students are the players. As we all know, coaches may advise, teach, mentor, critique, and demonstrate some techniques, but they never play the game, while the players (or students in our case) perform drills, practice, improve their skills, adjust, and exercise their speaking through interactive participation and continuously speaking the language. The instructor tailors his delivery according to the individual learning style and personality of the class. This approach uses core aspects of the students' culture to cultivate a secure learning environment, spur competition, break down the barriers to language learning, and build confidence.[1]

The following are a few aspects of the Language GAME methodology:

Use of students' backgrounds. The *SAT Manual* procedure requires a target population development. However, no matter how well front-end analyses are developed, the genuine target population development actually takes place inside the classroom. Instructors are always amazed at how their students, although thought to be similar, are actually diverse. The Language GAME approach advocates that students should be labeled "multidimensional." Individuals process information differently in the brain. These differences pose a challenge for teachers, requiring that they present ideas and information in ways allowing for different kinds of processing, and figuring out what will allow certain students to process information most effectively.[2] In addition, all students come to class with their own experiences and knowledge. The instructor utilizes students' skills to empower each of them, and ensures taught vocabulary is relevant to real-life situations, which in turn triggers additional student interest.

Task-based activities. You do not become a football player by only watching or reading about the game. Learning language is an activity in itself that requires practice, therefore the only way to acquire the skill is to speak. This is the time where Marines can use all their skills and where the instructor evaluates their performance. The learning taking
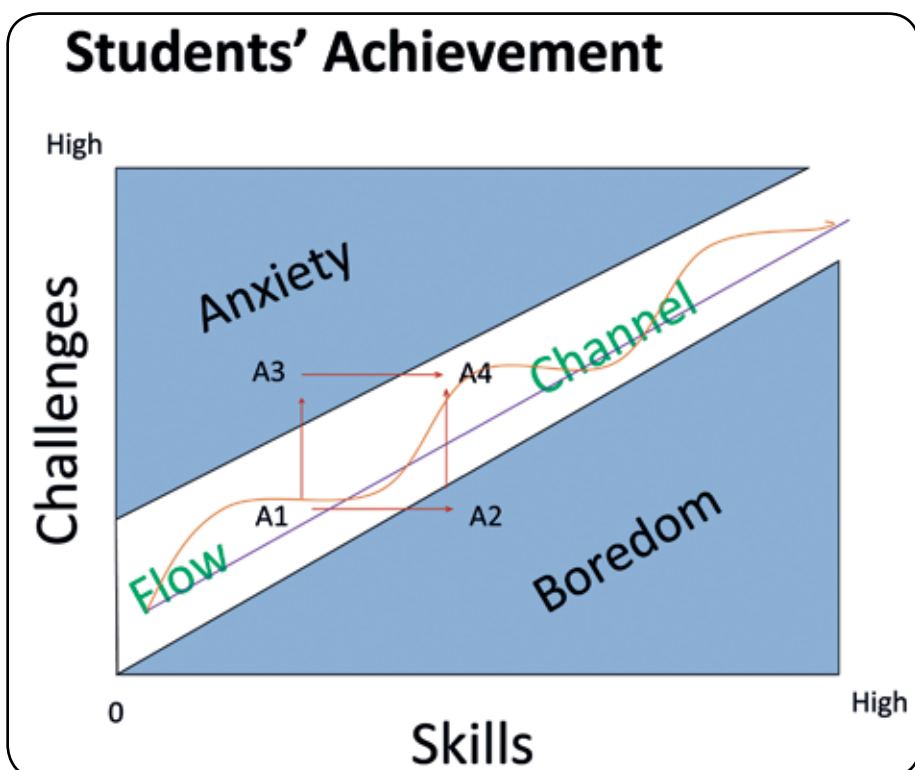

Figure 1. The Language GAME concept.

Figure 2. Students' achievement. *(Figure by Mr. Mihaly Cskszentmihalyi.)*

place occurs in three ways: coach to student, student to coach, and student to student. Choosing the right activities is critical, and the activity must have an expected outcome, fit the level of student knowledge, and be relevant to adults (not childish).

Continuous but weighed challenge. The ideal situation is to keep students in the flow channel (see Figure 2).[3] If activities or exercises are too challenging, students become frustrated. On the other hand, if activities are too easy and redundant, students become bored and uninterested. The challenge for the instructor is to keep all students inside the flow channel, given the fact that they necessarily have different levels of expertise or skills. An activity one student may find boring, another may find challenging. By reading student cues, the instructor can determine when to simplify or intensify the activity.

Conversational building blocks. One of the hardest elements of the Language GAME for instructors is to avoid overlapping information; however, this is essential for students to acquire and retain linguistic information. Rather than rote memorization, students engage with guest "speakers," thereby forcing improvisation in conversation and focusing on relevant vocabulary and grammar, creating a conversation building block approach. For learning to occur, facts, concepts, and ideas must be stored, connected to other facts and ideas, and built upon.[4] If students can understand the information, it means that they've gotten to the level of analyzing it. According to Bloom's Taxonomy, before mastering the material, students first recall it; then are able to explain it; then use it in different context, and manipulate and massage it; are aware of the accuracy of their information; and finally can be creative when using that information.[5]

Student performance. Most Marines first come to the class skeptical, then overwhelmed, then amazed at how dots are being connected, and finally pleased by how much and how well they can learn in a short period of time. Their vocabulary is still limited, but they can speak enough to get around. Speaking skill proficiency is the main objective, but, unlike the

SAT Manual, the Language GAME concept suggests that oral testing is the best-fitted evaluation to assess a Marine's speaking and listening skills. Multiple choice, true/false, matching, short answer, and essay tests can be used in different activities to prepare students for the final exam.

Transition from Instruction to Practice

One of the most original aspects of the Language GAME is how much the instructor is gradually disengaged from the instruction delivery. The philosophy behind the Language GAME concept is to give students as much comprehensible and valuable inputs or data as possible and let them process it and reproduce it in meaningful information, which will allow them to communicate between themselves. The instructor will progressively withdraw from the scene and provide advice and support to his students when needed. The instructor will most likely let his

students interact between themselves and correct each other once they get to a certain level of mastery. In other words, the instructor introduces meaningful data, the students process it, the instructor chooses the right activity and brainstorms with students, and the students are individually tasked. While students are performing a task, the instructor scaffolds and encourages students to help each other. The scaffolding may be formative or summative; the instructor will decide about the strategy to take according to the instant mood of the activity. Expert or advanced students will be encouraged to lead the group or help enhance the activity.

The Psychology of Getting Beyond "I Can't"

As previously indicated, students bring skills and prior knowledge to class, but they also bring emotions, fear, and skepticism as well. These symptoms are either visible or covert, but most of

A Marine's language skills are used to strengthen his abilities as an instructor. (Defense Department Photo 121010-M-IJ457-113a.jpg.)

the time prevent adult students from learning a foreign language.[6] Indeed, Marines primarily come to class very skeptical for many different reasons. Perhaps they've had unsuccessful experiences learning a second language in the past, such as in high school or college, or maybe they do not see the worth of learning another language since English is widely spoken and understood. Through the Language GAME, the instructor can identify potential emotional filters that may prevent Marines from learning, and leverage what at first was thought to be its obstacle. Because students are immediately engaged and highly encouraged to use the target language, they can actually see how easy it is to learn and/or acquire other languages, and finally realize that fear dissipating.

Conclusion

The Language GAME is a student- and knowledge-centered curriculum built on the way our minds develop and process information and how we use multiple intelligences. Topics are structured and curricula are thoughtfully developed and implemented to allow students to consider the way they think and facilitate knowledge transfer. Our students learn languages through understanding of the conceptual map that organizes categories of information, and shows the relationships among concepts (as opposed to disconnected islands of facts or rote memorization). Like participating in a game, students conceptualize their next move based on the knowledge and lessons learned from their previous lessons. Students test their concepts and then move on—back and forth, sideways, spiraling, scrambling—in an organized chaos that propels them to the next level, thus concepts build on facts, and concepts build on concepts. Students learn effectively because the learning is meaningful to them, and relies on building simple associations and connections between ideas.

Notes

1. Lellou, Hamid, Prosol, concept for the Language GAME.

2. *The Learning Classroom* was developed by Kim Austin and Linda Darling-Hammond with contributions from Daniel Schwartz and Roy Pea, Stanford University School of Education, session 3, p. 53, available at www.learner.org/resources/series172.html, accessed 6 May 2012.

3. Schell, Jesse, *The Art of Game Design*, Morgan Publisher, Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburg, PA, p. 119.

4. *The Learning Classroom.*

5. "Bloom's Taxonomy of Learning Domains," available at www.odu.edu/educ/roverbau/Bloom/blooms_taxonomy.htm, accessed on 13 June 2012.

6. A summary of Stephen Kreshen's "Principles and Practice in Second Language Acquisition" is available at www.languageimpact.com/articles/rw/krashenbk.htm, by Reid Wilson, accessed 29 May 2012.

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