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## TSJ LANGUAGE TRAINING

# Chatter that matters

## Language skills boost cultural understanding

By TIM MAHON

Visiting the Defense Language Institute in Monterey, Calif., last year, chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff Adm. Mike Mullen told students that their courses in Iraqi and Afghan languages “are as important as any undertaking that we have in the United States military right now.”

The Iraq and Afghanistan wars have highlighted the importance of language skills. As a result, new types of computer- and Internet-based training aids have been developed to try to provide coalition troops with a rapid basic knowledge of the language they’ll encounter when deployed. More recently, it’s also become apparent that there’s a need to teach English to local commanders as they develop their armies in close coordination with English-speaking allied nations.

The issue also extends beyond being proficient in a local language. Commanders of the NATO-led International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) operating in Afghanistan say that language opens an important window of understanding into a country’s culture that is a critical component of winning the hearts and minds of the local population in the operational area.

“That is a sentiment with which I can wholeheartedly agree. If we don’t have the ability to talk understandably and in local context in a specific language, we are not



ALELO INC.

Alelo’s software incorporates language learning into cultural awareness training in an interactive environment.

only deaf but blind also,” said British staff officer Maj. Pauric Newland, a subject matter expert for cultural and language training at the Department of Education and Training Services (Army), or DETS(A), at Upavon in England.

DETS(A) works with the U.K. Defence School of Languages at Beaconsfield to provide courses devised and specified by DETS(A) that range from a few days to 18 months, Newland said. The longer courses are oriented toward personnel who need a high degree of proficiency in a specific language to carry out their missions.

“At the lower levels of training, for courses lasting days rather than weeks or months, we use predominantly military instructors. At the higher levels, in which we are trying to instill much higher levels of proficiency, we use civil contractors. For Dari and Pashto, for example, we use instructors from the Afghan diasporas in the United Kingdom,” Newland said.

One problem with the system, however, is that someone can spend a lot of time and resources being taught Dari, for example, but then spend as little as six months on a tour of duty in a country where that language is useful.

“We pour a lot of investment into training [these people], and we need to find a better way of getting the most value out of that in theater,” Newland said.

Another issue is clarity. The most deadly air-to-air collision in history, in which 349 people were killed over Charkhi-Dadri in India, was attributed in part to the poor quality of spoken English and comprehension on the part of the pilots of the Kazakh airline aircraft involved. The concern for military language training developers is to ensure that pronunciation is sufficiently clear in an environment in which stress and fatigue may be additional factors.

Another language training problem is known as skill fade, where the ability to

communicate is reduced if the language is not practiced on a daily basis. “We see the skill fade factor as quite high,” Newland said. Refresher training is therefore as important as initial skills development.

### COMMUNICATION COSTS

But clarity, retention and specialization come at a cost. Infrastructure costs of a well-resourced language training center, capable of instruction in multiple languages to an acceptable level of proficiency, put such centers outside the reach of many nations. These countries tend to turn to contractors that can modify the broad-based commercial language teaching content to specific military requirements. The Norwegian Ministry of Defence Department of Personnel and Development, for example, has used British-based Communicaid to provide spoken English training for Norwegian military personnel.

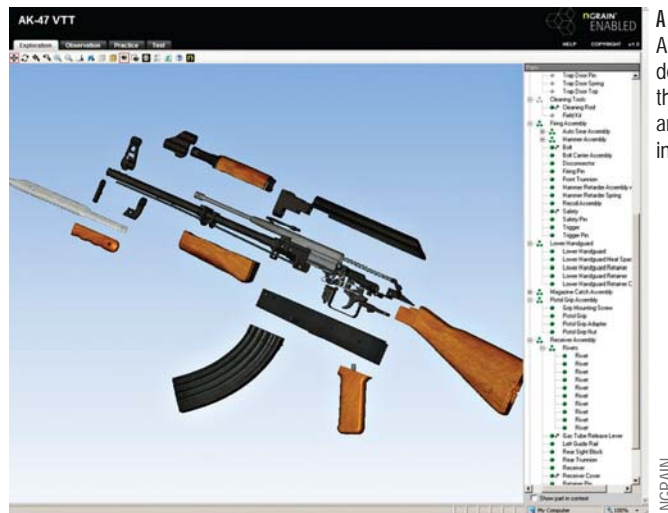
Companies such as Berlitz —which has been in the language market for more than 130 years — Communicaid and Alelo Inc. provide modular electronic language training resources for individuals, corporations and government departments. Berlitz says that it has found that individual, self-paced instruction courses are most conducive to syntax and vocabulary retention.

The U.K.’s DETS(A) foreign language training is based on a mix of computer-based, self-paced learning and classroom instruction. The courses are mostly developed by the military, though some of the longer courses may be contracted out to the language training industry. “We try to work [the development issues] in-house as much as possible, since we believe only we know exactly what it is we want,” Newland said.

Los Angeles-based Alelo includes cultural awareness as a part of the language training mix. The company has developed a Tactical Language & Culture Training System that uses existing and emerging technologies. Founded in 2005 by president Lewis Johnson, Alelo has its origins in a U.S. Defense Advanced Research Project Agency (DARPA)-sponsored research program undertaken at the University of Southern California two years earlier.

“DARPA wanted us to look at developing a method to provide predeployment training for troops in language and cultural skills relevant to their likely missions. Existing training regimes did not provide the appropriate skills in a reasonable timeframe; most units could not afford to place candidates in a six-monthlong language course. In many cases, the available time for troops to develop basic skills was no more than 40 hours over the predeployment training period,” Johnson said.

DARPA’s recognition that cultural awareness was a key component of language training was critical, according to Johnson.



A Virtual Task Trainer for the AK47 assault rifle was developed by NGRAIN for the Afghan National Army and includes instructions in Pashto and Dari.

“This is all about how to deal with a likely situation the individual will face in theater, so it’s directly mission-related. In fact, we think there are three legs to this stool — language, culture and mission,” he said.

Alelo incorporates traditional language learning content into cultural awareness components in an interactive computer-based training environment. Typically, vocabulary and grammatical components are integrated with a synthetic visual representation pertinent to the subject matter. A scenario teaching how to converse in Pashto about food and hospitality, for example, is accompanied by a representation showing students how to signify they have finished their meal — body language that is different in the Afghan culture from any previous experience the student is likely to have been exposed to.

The company achieves this mix of teaching constructs by building its own technologies on top of commercial off-the-shelf (COTS) components such as 3-D video game engines.

“We have developed our own dialogue and social modeling technologies, for which we have patents pending, and have overlaid our own unique speech models on COTS tool kits,” Johnson said, adding that the company continues to use available technologies and develop its own.

The concept of providing language and cultural training in a focused, mission-specific manner speaks to the increasing requirements from armed forces for training that can be directly related to the type of mission that soldiers will be expected to perform. In Afghanistan, for example, where “protecting the Afghan people” is a key component of counterinsurgency strategy, the ability to insert cultural awareness and increase the rapport between soldier and local inhabitant is important.

“The British Army has a very good vision of how language and culture can be brought together to serve the individual war fighter in providing rapid but long-lasting skills installation,” Johnson said.

NGRAIN, based in Vancouver, has been in contact with the Afghan National Army (ANA) to address some of the challenges emanating from the fact that illiteracy in the country runs at 83 percent.

“We have provided the ANA with a Virtual Task Trainer [VTT] for the AK47 assault rifle, which shows students in a visual context with local language voiceover — both Pashto and Dari — how to strip and reassemble the weapon, how to maintain and clean it, as well as how to operate it effectively,” said Troy Welch, director, U.S. defense for NGRAIN. The VTT is provided on a computer disk and is presented in storyboard format with an appropriate voiceover. It is being used to train ANA trainers, who will then pass on their knowledge to troops in classroom-based instruction.

“This is ‘factory to foxhole’ training we can deliver direct to the trainers very rapidly with no intermediary activity. We are getting very clear indications that the young people — who learn visually anyway — are reacting very well to this mode of skills installation,” Welch said.

As more nations join ISAF, English-language training becomes more important. NATO standards are being introduced to address this. The NATO Standardization Agreement sets curricular standards for language proficiency that outside contractors are adopting when they deliver content to a military customer.

Six months ago, Gen. Khudadad Agah, commander of the Afghan National Police training center in Kabul, spoke virtually no English. After a visit to police training facilities in the United Kingdom — in which language training was just one of his many activities — the general gave a presentation in English to journalists in Kabul in December.

“We need to do much more training in English if we are to make certain we can work with the international advisers and with other national police forces. This will be a major step forward for us,” Agah said.