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ADVANTAGES OF LANGUAGE PROFICIENCY IN THE MILITARY ENVIRONMENT

Language is the armoury of the human mind,
it contains the trophies of its past and the weapons
of its future conquests. (Samuel Taylor Coleridge)

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***Abstract*:** *Multilingualism describes the fact of using several living languages, understanding them, and mastering their nuances. Languages apprenticeship is long, tedious, but rewarding. Worldwide, 60-75% of the population speaks at least two languages. To be monolingual is to be part of a minority. For the new generations of military leaders, speaking several languages is a huge advantage, socially, professionally and neurologically. After briefly reviewing some scientific data on the advantages of the bilingual brain, the paper discusses how bilingualism positively affects their cognitive development as future Army leaders. Indeed, the obligation to juggle between two languages, the mother tongue and the language learned, offers bilingual people better control of the executive functions of their brain. In other words, the faculties of attention, memory, reasoning developed by learning the language are reinforced. This is an advantage for the military leader, who can thus process each piece of information more quickly and adapt more effectively to the evolution of a situation in a theatre of operations, for example. Cognitive control skills, mental flexibility, the ability to perform tasks requiring change, monitoring and conflict control are thus easier for a bilingual army officer.*

Keywords: bilingual, military leadership, brain, language, cognitive development

1. Introduction

An infinite number of factors determine the way we perceive the world, and our language is one of them. Indeed, language materializes what we see, hear, think and imagine. Several studies have proven that the language we speak influences the meaning we give to things. The perception that we have of the world generates a whole series of ideas and convictions, which constitute what Lucien Goldmann calls our "vision of the world" [1].

Perception is the fundamental element of all learning, according to Henri Piéron, French philosopher and psychologist, founder of objective psychology, for whom "perception is a gnosis" [2], that is to say elementary knowledge. Similarly, Frédéric Buytendijk asserts that perception is "both knowledge and sensitivity" [3]. It therefore seems entirely logical to consider that there is no single worldview, but a multitude of visions, each shaped by language, itself conditioned by culture; or, in short, by *language-culture*.

The subject of the influence of language on our cognitive abilities is truly surprising.

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2. When our brain learns a foreign language ...

Learning your own language is already a brain challenge in itself. So, what about when you have to master a language other than your own? Does bilingualism make you smarter? Does it protect against cognitive decline? Does it offer benefits to children? The list is long, and sometimes disputed. So what is really going on in the brains of bilinguals?

When a person is in the process of learning a language, he/she uses all his/her capacity for memorization and concentration. In concrete terms, two distinct areas of his/her brain are called upon – Broca's area and Wernicke's area. The first one is identified as the language production zone, and allows expression in the foreign language. It also makes it possible to compartmentalize languages, to dissociate them. The second is identified as the comprehension zone.

Apparently, nearly half of the world's population speak at least a second language and consider themselves to be bilingual. But what does it really mean to be bilingual? Generally, a person is considered to be bilingual if they are able to communicate in two languages, both in an active form (speaking, writing) and in a passive form (listening, reading), without, however, necessarily being proficient in both languages.

There are several types of bilingualism, which largely depend on the person's age. First, there are two types of early bilingualism: simultaneous bilingualism – children who have two parents with two different mother tongues, and they learn two languages from birth; consecutive bilingualism – when the nanny taking care of a child speaks a foreign language. There are also cases of subtractive bilingualism, when learning a second language is done to the detriment of the first one. Last but not least comes the additive bilingualism, achieved through language courses, without harmful effects for the learner's first language, and this is the case of our students and, of course, ours. In each situation, people's degrees of proficiency in bilingualism are very different, since the school, and social and professional environment also influence the acquisition of a second language.

3. Language learning as an interactive, culture-carrier process

Until the middle of the 20th century, bilingualism was considered a handicap: it was responsible for confused children, for delaying cognitive development, for preventing academic success and social ascent, and many others evils.

Nowadays, search for the specificities of the bilingual brain is an attractive and media-friendly theme. Several studies claim that, on the cognitive level, bilingual people are more creative, open-minded and flexible than monolingual ones.

Linguistic competence is assessed as follows: by oral and written production, which are productive competencies, and by oral and written comprehension, which are receptive and essentially passive competencies. So, learning a language stimulates and solicits all of our listening and thinking abilities. As mentioned previously, the brain activates two main areas; each area of the brain having its function, it can happen that people understand a foreign language by involving Wernicke's area, but are unable to speak it and express themselves. They must then exercise Broca's area to produce sentences in the language studied. The best stimuli for exercising one's learning, therefore, remain the dialogue with native speakers, the role-playing and the language games. Learning then operates at full speed and the two areas are solicited simultaneously, through exchanges transiting through an *arched bundle* connecting them, which is itself composed of a large number of nerve fibres. Relying on this principle of learning the language in a living way, through scenarios and games that involve oral communication helps to get a good command of the

language, as both skills, the linguistic and the communicative one, are at the very heart of our ability to interact verbally. However, mastering a language is not just about using linguistic means; the spoken language, or the discourse, is representative for the speaker's culture of origin, it is therefore a cultural carrier. The language becomes a manifestation of a cultural identity, and all learners, through the language they speak, carry with them the visible and invisible elements of a given culture [4].

Therefore, speaking a language is also about knowing how to deal with people who speak that language; it is to understand and accept a different culture, to be open to others, to accept them with their differences, and be ready to interact. On the contrary, the non-openness, and non-acceptance of differences hinders linguistic understanding. This is where the techniques of communication and exchange are extremely important.

Moreover, succeeding in communicating also means developing a number of other skills, needed in different contexts. Thus, when faced with a statement that is difficult to understand, it is essential for the learner to know how to mobilize all their resources: to use their common sense and their knowledge of the world, or to deduce the meaning of the message.

It is also important to be able to argue and structure one's speech. When lacking in linguistic means, it can be useful to know how to replace a word or a phrase with another, how to use gestures, facial expressions and onomatopoeia, or how to reformulate a message received to check understanding. Furthermore, it is necessary to be aware of other ways of thinking, to know how to accept and respect differences, and to reject prejudices or stereotypes. The ability to combine these different skills ensures successful communication in any context.

Certainly, all of this also requires a certain capacity to take risks: the risk of facing the unknown, the risk of coming up against an attitude of refusal, or the risk of making a mistake or being misunderstood. Any conversation in a foreign language involves the use of unfamiliar words. Language learning improves tolerance for ambiguity, especially when the person speaks more than one foreign language. If one of the interlocutors spent his time interrupting the exchange to say, "Wait, I don't know that word. Let me look it up in the dictionary," it would be hard to argue. People with a high tolerance for ambiguity feel comfortable carrying on the conversation even though they don't understand all the words.

A high tolerance for ambiguity has many advantages. It helps students to limit their anxiety in the context of life in society and facilitates their future language learning experiences. Unsurprisingly, the more accustomed a person is to learning languages, the more comfortable they are with the inherent ambiguity of that learning. But that's not all. People with a high level of tolerance for ambiguity have an entrepreneurial spirit; they are more optimistic, more inclined towards innovation and risk-taking.

4. Language proficiency and military leadership

Soldiers accomplish numerous and varied missions: waging war, keeping the peace, rebuilding a country, distributing humanitarian aid, maintaining good public relations, training local police, etc. Effective leadership is essential in this context. Without strong leadership, it is unlikely that soldiers can rally around the common goal, essential to the success of military operations. At the same time, leadership is also a complex concept that involves many values. Intelligence, creativity, and the ability to multitask are all essential in leadership.

The use of armies must always be adapted to the context, to the stakes and above all to an ever-changing enemy. If we agree with

the American political scientist, Samuel P. Huntington, that future war will be between cultures, not between countries [5], the question that then arises is: what can be done to cushion this shock, and fight against a cultural egocentrism with harmful consequences, particularly in the military environment? The solution consists in both the acquisition of linguistic elements and skills, and the integration of new ways of thinking and new behaviours.

More than knowledge, now easily accessible in the digital space, army cadets need to acquire methods of reasoning, of expression – oral expression in particular, and organization; they need to learn to plan, negotiate, convince, lead a project, and think differently.

Developing their critical thinking and new ways of understanding cultures different from their own, through the analysis of cultural stereotypes, whether they concern food, physical appearance or manner of speaking finally aim to individualize cadets' training, and enrich and diversify it by multiplying the formulas taking into account the needs of each of them. We consider that this openness to another culture may take into account four parameters:

- proxemics: the use of space,
- kinesics: posture and movement,
- haptics: physical sensitivity,
- chronemics: the use of time.

A young officer aware and imbued with these cultural aspects can only constitute an intercultural facilitator, as it is in him and through him that the meeting of cultures takes place. The foreign language acquisition is likely to help cultivate critical thinking vis-à-vis others and oneself. Thus, he manages to recognize and accept cultural pluralism as a reality of society.

Because the brain has the ability to operate in different ways, it develops better skills. Studies have shown that people who speak foreign languages often exhibit more empathy and a global mind-set. Bilingual people understand things more easily, have a rich vocabulary, fluency and increased intelligence. A new set of rules, structures and words improves the quality of neural connections.

Switching from one language to another stimulates two areas of the brain - the prefrontal cortex, which is associated with decision-making, and the anterior cingulate cortex, which notably manages concentration and improves attention and working memory, qualities. A recent study shows that bilinguals have a greater probability of presence of gray matter than monolinguals in an area located in the lower parietal lobe. [6] It is also true the fact that there are differences between the brains of people who have learning facilities and those who have less. This does not mean that the latter should be discouraged from learning. Indeed, even in adults, it seems that training can produce detectable cortical changes at a macroscopic level [7], which proves that it is never too late to learn a second language.

Therefore, the more cadets learn, the more their brain focuses to understand, communicate, and find key skills to get information faster. Thus, they acquire multitasking skills and logical and rational perception. When the brain is accustomed to switching from one language to another, it becomes easier to juggle other actions at the same time with greater cognitive flexibility, which is an important leadership attribute.

Increasing perceptual sensitivity is another important advantage. Once a foreign language has been learned, it becomes easier to learn additional languages, as the techniques previously acquired can be used to further that knowledge.

5. Conclusions

It is quite often said that a person who knows at least one foreign language is richer than the others are. By definition, mastering a language is a long sequence that is best to start early and continue non-stop throughout one's life.

Our world is becoming a veritable mosaic of peoples and languages. Nowadays, the learning of foreign languages must be seen in close connection with the complex phenomenon of globalization.

Multilingualism facilitates communication and collaboration between nations, the promotion of different cultures and, of course, the development and implementation of projects with common objectives. It goes without saying that knowledge of languages is very important as it ensures successful communication at a global level, and allows military leaders to dialogue more effectively within the framework of the different politico-military structures.

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