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**DEALING WITH MILITARY TOPICS IN ENGLISH:
COMPLEMENTARY TEXTUAL INPUT TO FACILITATE
THE ACQUISITION OF MILITARY TERMINOLOGY**

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Abstract:

This paper intends to present an alternative approach to contextualizing new military lexical content that could enhance vocabulary retention and productive retrieval by boosting motivation through an affective response from the learners. It refers to including adapted textual/video/audio input that contextualizes our learners' *L1 professional linguistic reality* right from the very presentation stage of the lesson. That is, in addition to using authentic/semi-authentic materials depicting the L2 reality (e.g. the British and the American armed forces), one can deliberately use adapted input in English, describing the learners' professional reality *as a means of introducing target vocabulary*. The affective reaction prompted in the learners by the tangible outcome of being able to use military terminology when discussing one's professional reality is a strong motivational factor and conduces to more efficient long-term lexical retention.

Key words: contextualizing military terminology, boosting learner motivation

1. Introduction: The importance of teaching English in the military system

The process of teaching and learning English in the military system (in military high schools, academies and language centers) is articulated on the premise that English is *the language of global defense*. One of the key concepts for NATO is interoperability defined as “the ability to operate in synergy in the execution of assigned tasks”. Besides the obvious need for aligning and synchronizing their technology and procedures, NATO countries have also had to take into consideration another vital aspect: *communication*. The 28 NATO member countries and more NATO partner countries, each with their individual culture and language, have had to establish and use working communication channels in order to perform together successfully. For instance, over the years, the two Standing NATO Maritime Groups have carried out numerous missions and operations such as anti-piracy or maritime interdiction operations, in which multinational NATO maritime forces have operated together and used military terminology in English in order to communicate either onboard warships or in ship-to-ship, ship-to-aircraft or ship-to-shore situations. It is also the working language for all written communication within NATO since all procedures, professional correspondence, handbooks, technical documentation, etc are written in English and feature an impressive quantity of military terms and concepts that need to be mastered if the allies are to cooperate safely and efficiently. Cooperation at a multinational level can only be achieved if the condition of a shared means of communication is met because language is not only a conveyer of meaning but it is also the

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repository for a community's cultural beliefs, assumptions and shared values. Accordingly, all NATO members share the same values and express them in a single language: English.

2. Specific aspects of teaching ESP

ESP (English for Specific Purposes) has been a significant component of ELT ever since the end of the 1960s with a tremendous amount of dedicated published research available both in print and online.

Obviously, over the years, there have been put forth numerous definitions of ESP, however, one of the best and most frequently cited definitions was penned by Tom Hutchinson and Alan Waters in their 1987 work. They defined ESP as „an approach to language teaching in which all decisions as to content and method are based on the learner's reason for learning”[5]. In other words, ESP teaching is *learner- and learning-centered* as it is considered paramount to meet the learners' needs in specific communicative contexts. Therefore, the method(s) employed to teach ESP should reflect the different ways in which learners acquire language, the learning strategies and skills that they use, their own learning schemata, interests and motivation. In 1992 Martin Ian also stressed the importance of the learner's purpose, which he defined as „a combination of pre-determined or pre-selected goals and ongoing intentionality and motivation” [6].

Since ESP courses are geared towards meeting the learners' particular communicative needs (i.e. specific lexical content and operational language use) they are bound to rely heavily on teacher-developed materials. These are usually based on authentic (adapted or not) input (books, articles, forms, charts, pictures, diagrams, videos, realia) in order to match the communicative context in which the learners will have to function.

In fact, ESP researches have repeatedly stressed the importance of tailoring ESP course materials to meet the academic or occupational profile of the students. ESP practitioners have also been advised to modify ready-made textbooks because, according to Chen, “adapted materials are more suitable to ESP learners than textbooks since no textbooks could fully satisfy the particular needs of any ESP learners.” [3:40] Moreover, Chen recommends “in-house materials” [3] as being much more valid and useful in comparison to ready-made published textbooks because they are reflective of the unique indigenous teaching contexts.

Teacher-developed materials are indeed essential components of the learning and teaching process since they contextualize the target ESP lexical content by defining, describing and detailing with the help of textual, audio, visual and video input. In addition, they are an accurate, vivid and updated model of language use and finally, they provide ample opportunities for language practice and production. Their specific, learner-oriented nature only acts as a booster for student motivation and provides a bridge between the classroom and the future occupational communicative setting.

3. Teaching and learning ESP vocabulary

Vocabulary acquisition is one of the main objectives of foreign language teaching and learning as communication will never take place without words. This becomes even more poignant in an ESP context such as that of military students and personnel since the success of their acquisition of specialized lexical content is validated by practical use in real-life situations.

In his seminal work *Learning Vocabulary in Another Language*, 2001, Paul Nation described the three stages of the vocabulary acquisition process: “noticing, retrieval and generative (creative) use”. [7] According to Nation, the first phase in the process of

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acquiring a word is becoming aware of its existence and usefulness as a language item, in other words, *noticing* it. Once learners become aware of the existence of a lexical item they can proceed to decontextualizing it either by defining it or negotiating its meaning from the context.

The next phase in the process of vocabulary acquisition is *retrieval*. Basically, what it means is that learners should be provided with multiple opportunities to retrieve the target vocabulary from memory and practice using it. It is the first step taken to ensure that that *new vocabulary is retained in the long-term memory*. One can easily see that Paul Nation's *retrieval phase* can be linked to *the practice stage* of any language lesson. *Receptive retrieval* can be facilitated through a variety of tasks focusing on the contextual use of the target lexical items (e.g. matching, labeling, gap-fills of any kind, filling-in such as a tree-chart illustrating the components of a naval gun, word associations/combinations, multiple-choice tasks, playing games such as hangman, taboo, bingo, pictionary, etc.). Other tasks leading to vocabulary reinforcement include reordering jumbled sentences, or taking notes from a listening text. *Productive retrieval* is achieved by assigning practice tasks in which students need to activate the target vocabulary productively. For instance, they can retell or summarize the texts they have read, participate in information gap activities such as jigsaw readings or listenings, do communicative crosswords and other activities that give learners the opportunity to develop their communicative competence through negotiation of meaning as they share information

The final and most important stage of the vocabulary acquisition process, as presented by Paul Nation, is *the generative (creative) use of vocabulary*. It is at this particular stage that teachers, according to Born-Leichleitner "shift the focus of attention from the language system onto the 'special' act of communication as well as onto the learner." [1: 68] In our case, the ultimate purpose of all the vocabulary teaching activities and materials is to help learners *make the transition from receptive vocabulary knowledge to productive vocabulary use*, in other words, to *turn our learners into active users of specialized vocabulary* [2:134]. In order to do so, the language tasks that are assigned in this phase of the learning process will help the students activate the retained lexical content orally or in writing, in real-life communicative contexts. More precisely, in the case of our military learners, they can be asked to participate in a variety of oral communication tasks such as role-plays, simulations, military briefings and other types impromptu speeches. Moreover, written assignments in the form of reports, memoranda, etc. can be assigned so that students retrieve the acquired vocabulary and use it productively. It is essential that such tasks illustrate the professional reality in which learners will eventually use the acquired terminology in order to boost motivation and ensure long-term retention.

Discussing the factors that influence vocabulary retention, Scott Thornbury lists several principles that need to be observed in order to commit lexical material to long-term memory. According to Thornbury, it is essential to provide students with multiple opportunities, "at least seven times", [11] to encounter the target vocabulary and, even more so, to assign students communicative tasks so that they can receive extensive practice with the retrieved vocabulary

Multiple exposures to and multiple retrievals of the target vocabulary can be achieved by providing students with not one but several topically-connected inputs (e.g. a text on the various types of warships, a diagram of the types of warships, a video of a particular warship, etc.) coming in a variety of formats (textual, audio, video, illustrative, etc.) so that the lexical content is met and dealt with on numerous occasions. In addition to exposing students to a variety of input formats, it is useful to involve them in activities that practice all the four language skills, a fact pointed out by Nation and Waring, who stated

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that learners need to encounter the word multiple times in authentic speaking, reading, and writing contexts at their appropriate level. [7]

Thornbury goes on and argues that *allowing learners to filter information through their personal lens* is yet another beneficial factor in vocabulary acquisition. It can be materialized in tasks that require students to take a personal stand, to clarify values, to express opinions, etc.

Moreover, *attention arousal* correlates positively with improved recall, that is, according to Thornbury, “words that trigger a strong emotional response, for example, are more easily recalled than ones that don’t.” [11] This factor in conjunction with the *affective depth* [11] of learning constitutes an instrumental duo for lexical retention and productive retrieval.

4. Providing additional contexts for the learning and practice of the ESP target vocabulary – L1 reflective materials

Contextualization is one of the most important factors that influence vocabulary retention.

In this respect, it is worth mentioning one of Paul Nation’s *four strands* of learning as discussed in his chapter “Vocabulary” included in David Nunan’s *Practical English Language Teaching*, published in 2003. This strand is entitled “learning from meaning-focused input” [9] wherein vocabulary learning occurs via reading and listening. In this strand, learners gain knowledge of unknown vocabulary through context clues and background knowledge. Even if the focus is on comprehension (oral and written) lexical acquisition takes place inductively. Nation insists that this kind of learning needs to be present from the early stages of the language learning process by providing learners with simple written and spoken texts.

In fact, over the years, researchers in ELT have repeatedly pointed out the inextricable connection between reading and learning vocabulary. Ruth Gairns and Stuart Redman, for instance, state that “written texts are often one of the main sources through which language learners meet new vocabulary, so it is only logical that they should be used extensively in classroom teaching. They have the great advantage of contextualizing new language items for the learner, and an interesting text also serves to make the language more memorable.” [4]

Considering our learners’ profile, that is, an entry level of intermediate general English knowledge, it might prove helpful to keep in mind Norbert Schmitt’s argument that “written discourse (...) tends to use a wide variety of vocabulary, making it a better source for acquiring a broader range of words.” [10] In the same study entitled *Vocabulary in Language Teaching* (2000), Schmitt mentions the concept of *narrow reading* [10] which is, basically, reading numerous authentic texts on the same topic, a concept highly applicable to our ESP context in which reading texts are predominantly content-based. Reading within one broad topical area implies the repetition of topic-specific vocabulary, which, on the one hand, makes the reading process itself easier and, on the other hand, gives the learner the opportunity to acquire this recurring vocabulary.

In order to improve our learners’ efficiency in acquiring and utilizing specialized vocabulary we have decided to provide them with supplementary materials based on the learners’ own professional context. Thus, in addition to using authentic materials in English discussing British or American military matters, we have created a set of teaching materials that use Romanian military reality as a starting point. We have included herein (see Annex 1) a sample of the developed materials in order to illustrate how we have put into practice the principles listed above.

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5. Conclusion

Based on the introduction of these new teaching materials we provided to our learners, our belief is that they will readily relate to these on two levels:

1) on the personal level (through the lens of the personal schemata, by activating their own values and aspirations, objectives, etc.);

2) on a professional level (the learners already possess some general professional knowledge in L1 and can activate it textually or visually in order to comprehend and retain new specialized lexical items in English).

Regardless the level of implication, we conclude that we have met our goal that is to facilitate the learners the acquisition of military terminology. We also hope that our suggestions might inspire other ESP practitioners from the military field.

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Annex 1 – Sample Teaching Materials

I. Pre-reading activities.

1. Work in groups and write the dates when the following military events take place. Who are the patron saints of the forces below?

1. The Armed Forces Day _____
2. The Land Forces Day _____
3. The Air Forces Day _____

2. Match the following activities phrases to the pictures below. Write the correct letter A-L under each picture.

- A. the naval forces and guests carry out demonstrative exercises at sea, in the air and on land
- B. the most distinguished guest is rendered the honor by the honor guard
- C. the forces involved parade past the Fleet Command
- D. the national flag is hoisted, the national anthem is played by the military band and sung by the honor guard
- E. three military platoons march through the city while holding torches
- F. the most distinguished guest delivers a speech
- G. the honor guard marches out on the seafront, parading past the official tribune in front of the Fleet Command
- H. traditional seamanship games take place in front of the Fleet Command
- I. the ensign is hoisted and the full-dress is put up on board the participating ships
- J. a ships' parade takes place at the end of the exercises
- K. God Neptune and his nymphs arrive by boat
- L. the military band marches out while playing

	
1)	2)
	
3)	4)
	
5)	6)

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 <p>7)</p>	 <p>8)</p>
 <p>9)</p>	 <p>10)</p>
 <p>11)</p>	 <p>12)</p>

II. Reading activities.

1. Read the text about the Navy Day and put the activities A-L above in chronological order.

The Navy Day is celebrated every year on the 15th of August because this is the time when Christian Romanians commemorate the passing of Virgin Mary, the protector and patron saint of all seafarers.

On *The Navy Day*, around 9 am, people gather in front of the Fleet Command and they wait for the ceremony to start. The guests arrive and occupy their seats at the official tribune. The most distinguished guest (it could be the president, the minister of the MoD or a secretary of state) arrives. He is rendered the honor by the honor guard. Then, the national flag is hoisted and the national anthem is played by the military band and sung by the honor guard. Meanwhile, aboard the ships, the ensign is hoisted and the full-dress is put up. After the most important guest delivers a speech there is a religious service. After that, God Neptune and his nymphs arrive by boat in order to participate in the event.

During the first part of *The Navy Day* the military ships, the divers, the helicopters and the marines are involved in several military exercises to demonstrate their technical capabilities and skills as well as their training level. In fact, all the branches of service are invited to participate in these exercises. At the end of the exercises, a ships' parade takes place with all the ships passing past the Fleet Command. The rest of the forces involved in the event do the same. In addition, the honor guard marches out on the seafront, parading past the official tribune in front of the Fleet Command. While marching they sing a traditional Navy march entitled "The Sailors".

The afternoon is reserved for the seamanship games. These are traditional games, which test the sailors' physical strength, balance and concentration. After a short demonstration, the civilians are invited to participate in these very funny games.

In the evening, there are live music shows and spectacular fireworks. At the end of the day, the military band marches out while playing. After 10 pm, three military platoons march through the city while holding torches, thus, marking the end of the ceremonies.

The Navy Day was first celebrated in Constanta in 1902. In 2008 it became a national holiday and since then all the working people have a free day on the 15th of August. The importance of *The Navy Day* has increased year after year and today we consider it to be a national celebration.

III. Post-reading activities

1. Imagine you were one of the spectators of The Navy Day. Write a letter to your friend describing the events the day. Write 200