

The Enlightenment of the Foreign Language Competency Cultivation at West Point to the Reform of Foreign Language Curriculum in China's Military Academies

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Abstract. Foreign language capabilities facilitate combat effectiveness. United States Military Academy at West Point is relatively experienced in cultivating the foreign language capabilities of the cadets since they believe US army is globally committed. The paper first makes a general introduction of the mission, the Overarching Academic Goal and the academic program, then details on the curriculum system of foreign languages and the student learning outcomes and summarizes the salient features of its cultivating of foreign language capabilities in five sections. In order to enlighten the foreign language course reform in China's military academies, five suggestions are drawn in the aspects of the scope of foreign languages, the class size, cultural education, military and political attainment and interdisciplinary integration.

Keywords: United States Military Academy at West Point; Foreign Language Capabilities; Foreign Language Course Reform.

1. Introduction

Foreign language competency is an important part of national defense capability and military strength. With the acceleration of internationalization, all military powers have listed "language security" as a key factor affecting national interests. The US military's global strategy for the 21st century has elevated its foreign language capabilities to an unprecedented height into the category of "core combat skills" [1]. As one of the four world-class military schools [2], West Point has made a relatively ideal overall design in the cultivation of talents' foreign language competency, which provides a good reference for the teaching reform of our military foreign language curriculum.

2. Overview of West Point

We can learn from the official website of the West Point Military Academy that its mission is to "educate, train and motivate cadets, so that every graduate will become a military leader with good character, adhering to the responsibility, honor and national motto, and become an excellent army officer with excellent ability and serving the country". There are four main types of courses in student training, including character, academic, physical and military [3].

The overall goal of the academic curriculum is for graduates to integrate knowledge and skills from different disciplines to anticipate and appropriately address opportunities and challenges in a changing world. Specifically, the first is being able to communicate effectively with all the audience, the second is critical and innovative thinking, the third is being capable and willing to sustainable learning, the fourth is to make decisions to realize and use ethical concepts, the fifth is using science, technology, engineering, mathematical concepts and steps to solve complex problems, the sixth is to use the concept of humanities and social science understanding analysis of human state, and the seventh is the integration and application through in-depth study a subject and the knowledge and methodology. Academic courses hope to cultivate leaders who can control the modern battlefield, be equipped with critical thinking and rapid innovation, and make informed decisions in the face of future challenges [3].

There are 15 departments at West Point, including English and philosophy, mathematics, physics, chemistry, foreign language, geography, history and other basic science, and behavioral science and

leadership, civil and mechanical engineering, electrical engineering and computer science, social science, law, systems engineering, as well as national defense and strategic research, human kinematics two practice teaching department. The university offers 36 majors and 19 minors. In addition to completing major-related courses, students also take interdisciplinary core courses, including science, technology, engineering, mathematics and other science and engineering courses, as well as social science and humanities courses. West Point has a small class system with an average size of 15-18 students and a teacher to student ratio of 1:7[3].

3. Cultivation of Foreign language competency at West Point

The foreign language understanding and expression ability at West Point is to understand a national thinking and values, the mission of the foreign language department is “through the professor of the world language, culture and regional knowledge, let every good character leader can survive and develop in the complex international security environment, in the service country at the same time, ready to serve the world.” [3] Through foreign language education, students not only can master foreign language skills, but also can acquire the cultural background and regional knowledge of the language speaking country or region, so as to prepare for their survival around the world after graduation. Next, it introduces the setting of foreign language course and the learning effect of students, and summarizes the characteristics of the training of foreign language competency at West Point.

3.1. Foreign language course setting

The Foreign Language Department of West Point offers eight language courses to choose from: Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish and Persian. Most students should start learning foreign languages in the third academic year, or in the fourth year, if conditions permit. All students have to choose one of the eight languages for at least two semesters. Students can choose one of the seven languages other than Persian as a major, or any two of the seven languages other than Persian or Persian as a bilingual major [4].

The foreign language courses mainly cultivate students’ ability to learn the language, so that students can reach the initial proficiency level of learning the language, and lay a solid foundation for them to further learn the language in the future. Majors are required to be proficient in using foreign languages and to have a full understanding of the cultural and regional dynamics of the country where the language is used. These abilities gained by learning a foreign language are very valuable assets for future US Army officers who may be sent across the globe. Advanced level learning in all languages includes courses related to literature, civilization, military reading, media, etc.

West Point provides an opportunity for cadets to experience immersive learning experiences abroad, with an average of 150 cadets going to 33 different military and civilian academies in 20 different countries for immersive learning each year. Junior students or students in the first semester of their senior year can apply to a language teacher during the fall semester. Students can also participate in a three-week “Personal Academic Advanced Development” program in the summer, and can apply what they have learned in the classroom abroad, and get credits. For example, students learning Chinese have the opportunity to visit Taiwan, China, Singapore or Chinese mainland for academic exchange and study [4].

3.2. Learning effectiveness of students

For students majoring in foreign languages, their learning results are mainly described from four aspects: language skills, cultural ability, regional dynamics and critical thinking.

Language skills: Foreign language majors master foreign language skills, which are embodied in their ability to understand and analyze language-based cultural related products, read critically, analyze foreign language books, and communicate effectively in ways that foreign language culture is appropriate.

Cultural ability: foreign language major professional students have cultural ability to effectively interact with the target language group, embodied in the ability to describe and explain the target language area of the main characters and key events, recently the region of major cultural development, from the perspective of the regional history analysis of contemporary problems, explain the limitations of the existing conceptual framework in cultural research.

Regional dynamics: Foreign language majors understand the regional dynamics of the language target country, can describe the armed forces in the target language area, state the attitudes and beliefs of the people of the language target country about American culture or policies, summarize the American policies of the region, and identify and explain the sources of conflicts between cultures.

Critical thinking: Foreign language majors can combine critical thinking skills during research, analysis and communication to different audiences; combine foreign language learning with other humanities and social science disciplines, transfer language ability and cross-cultural ability to study and participate in other language communities, realize the inherent challenges of translation and literary analysis, and successfully meet the challenges of living in another culture [4].

3.3. Characteristics of Foreign language competency cultivation

Foreign language competency mainly includes three elements: Language Proficiency, Regional Expertise and Cultural Capabilities. Foreign language proficiency refers to the proficiency of application skills such as listening, speaking, reading, and writing; regional knowledge refers to the understanding and mastery of the history, politics, culture, language, religion, society, economy, and geography of a specific country or region; cultural competence includes diplomatic mentality, cultural learning, cultural reasoning, and intercultural interaction [5]. From the setting of foreign language course and the requirements for students' learning effectiveness, it can be found that West Point has the following four characteristics in the cultivation of students' foreign language competency.

3.3.1 Provide multilingual foreign language courses

The eight major courses of foreign language at West Point include Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Persian and other minor courses, covering the main key languages of the world today, enough to cope with the world's major languages and cultural areas. These foreign language courses are offered to all undergraduate students of the university, with each student learning at least one of the foreign languages for two semesters. If you take foreign language as your major, you can also choose a bilingual major. The multilingual foreign language courses have strong foreign language skills, which gives the graduates of West Point a strong competitiveness in foreign languages.

3.3.2 Implement small-class teaching

The ratio of teachers and cadets at West Point is as high as 1:7, and the average class size is only more than ten, which is very helpful for language learning, because learning a foreign language must go through a lot of training, especially at the beginning of training in class, so that the learning effect can be effectively guaranteed. Small-class teaching can help teachers pay more attention to the learning characteristics and learning status of each student, and teach them in accordance with their aptitude. The small class size makes each student spend more time to participate in class activities, which can provide them with more opportunities to think and express.

3.3.3 Provide immersive learning opportunities abroad

West point cadets every fall semester can apply to foreign immersive learning and experience, an average of 150 students to 20 different countries more than 30 different flexibly for three weeks of learning, complete the corresponding tasks, may visit important military, political, historical or social significance, communicate with flexibly representative, etc. Real language environment for the cultivation of foreign language competency is very important, this not only allows students to have the opportunity to use the classroom language skills and knowledge in real life, but also help them to be immersed in the language culture, experience and understand the way of thinking, communication,

customs, social behavior, etc., which can greatly improve students' cross-cultural communication ability and foreign language competency.

3.3.4 Attach importance to the deep learning of culture and history

The foreign language competency of West Point cadets not only includes language skills, but also cultural ability and regional dynamic knowledge. This is because West Point attaches importance to the influence of culture and history on contemporary problems, and hopes that students can analyze the current world problems from a historical perspective, so it pays attention to students' deep learning of foreign language culture and history. As can be seen from the courses offered in eight languages, students can learn the development of cultural civilization in different periods of languages, have a deep understanding of the history of different regions at different stages, and learn both depth and breadth of knowledge about the main figures and key events in history. Being able to understand, understand and accept the cultural history of a language is very helpful for students to serve and develop in the language country in the future.

3.3.5 Pay attention to the cultivation of students' foreign language military and political ability

In addition to paying attention to cultivating students' language skills and cultural abilities of listening, speaking, reading and writing, it also pays attention to strengthening students' learning of military and media foreign languages. Through foreign language classes and reading military elective materials, students learn about the situation of the national troops in the language. The military elective materials include journal articles, Internet media materials, training manuals, biographies, historical materials, etc. The course content includes the mission role of the army, military training, combat operations, tactical strategies etc. Class organization discussion, will also for situational teaching, assuming an officer was sent to the language object area, the officer may encounter scenario simulation and role play, which can improve the students' foreign language level, task deployment, situation briefing, role play and scene simulation of students. Guide students to pay attention to the latest media such as Internet, TV, movies, radio, newspapers, magazines and so on, and let students track foreign language affairs and master the latest regional trends such as policies and attitudes.

4. Enlightenment to the reform of foreign language curriculum in China's army

With China's national interests in the global development and deep involvement in the global governance in the new era, China's army has more and more chances to go out, strengthen foreign cooperation and exchanges, participate in league training, carry out overseas cross-domain control to operations and the like. Military foreign language competency becomes an important component of troops effectiveness. How to better cultivate the foreign language competency of China's military cadets can be strengthened from the following four aspects:

4.1. Increasing the language choice

At present, the foreign language courses provided by our military universities take English as the main language. Many universities are the only foreign language, and a few universities offer two foreign language courses. Although English is currently the common language in the world, it is not enough to rely on this language alone. In the reform of foreign language curriculum, our army should consider increasing the number of foreign language courses, expanding the scope of language selection training, so that more people can accept the basic learning of foreign language except English, and master the basic learning methods of this language, so as to lay a certain foundation for further deepening learning in the future. In terms of languages, the languages of the countries and regions in the world and directly related to our overseas interests; the main languages of our neighboring countries and regions; the languages needed for diversified military operations to

maintain world peace, participation in international peacekeeping, joint training and league, and the key foreign languages targeting counter-terrorism [2].

4.2. Reducing the class size

According to the latest training syllabus of the Training and Management Department of the CMC, foreign language courses suggest small classes, with a class size of no more than 30 students. But such a class is still not small enough for the language class. According to the author's understanding, the number of foreign language classes in our military colleges is generally 30-40 people, a few classes can reach more than 20 people, and some classes even reach about 50 people. Such a large class size is not conducive to the foreign language learning effect of students, because some students may not have the opportunity to express in class in a semester, which increases the great difficulties to improve the students' learning enthusiasm and implement the teachers in accordance with their aptitude. If you can increase the proportion of faculty and students, and reduce the size of the class, the students invest the same time and energy, the results may double or more.

4.3. Deepening culture and education

In the foreign language teaching in military academies in China, the main focus is on the cultivation and improvement of language skills. Even if it involves culture, it is introduced in the form of cultural points according to the text background, and there is a lack of systematic and in-depth study of culture. At present, only local governments have specialized regional cultural research institutions, and the military has not established similar institutions. Culture affects all aspects of national production and living, including cultural history, local customs and customs, traditional customs, lifestyle, religious beliefs, ethics, legal system, values, aesthetic interest, spiritual totem, art etc., culture and economic, political, increasingly become an important factor of comprehensive national strength. An in-depth understanding of the cultures of key regions and major countries is very important for our military to be deeply involved in global expansion and global governance. It is more direct and effective to use the foreign language to learn the language and the corresponding culture.

4.4. Strengthening military and political training

In recent years, our military academies have added military English courses in the undergraduate education stage, which is still in the exploration and practice stage. The cultivation of military and political literacy of West Point cadets can provide some reference. First, strengthen the integration of basic military foreign language knowledge and skills and media reports. Taking current affairs news reports and various media materials as an opportunity, we can guide the students to learn basic military knowledge and cultural background, which can very well mobilize the students' self-study enthusiasm and improve their sense of achievement. The second is to create a learning atmosphere of combining learning, learning and application. For example, the scene teaching of West Point is very operational and practical, which simulates different scenes for role playing and exercises students' ability to communicate. Students can analyze and solve problems with what they have learned on different occasions. Third, under the premise of various conditions permit, provide opportunities for overseas learning experience, so that students can go out, feel the important role of military knowledge and skills in a real military language environment, and provide feedback and guidance for future learning.

4.5. Promoting discipline integration

Language does not exist in isolation, so language learning must be integrated with other disciplines to better reflect the role of language. In terms of foreign language competency alone, it is not only the language level, but also includes the regional dynamics, knowledge and cultural ability. Promoting the integration of foreign language and other disciplines will improve the comprehensive quality of students. After students' foreign language reached a certain level, increase history,

geography, politics, military and other disciplines of foreign language learning, can help students more direct and more comprehensive understanding of the language object country or region of cultural background and regional knowledge, especially more systematic learning and introduction, so to master the language use background and environment, can really improve the students' cross-cultural communication level and language practical application level.

5. Summary

This paper introduces the overview of training mission, academic courses on the basis of the overall design, the foreign language course setting and students learning results at West Point, and thus summarizes the foreign language competency training in the curriculum, class size, teaching methods, learning content and the characteristics of five aspects such as ability training, finally combining the reality of China's army, put forward the foreign language curriculum reform in language range, class size, cultural education, military and political literacy and subject integration at China's military academies.

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