Language, Regional Expertise, and Culture: Language Table Sessions

Maneuver Center of Excellence

Directorate of Training and Doctrine

Approved by:

Deputy Director

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# Executive Summary

**Background and Purpose**

The language table is a part of the Language, Regional Expertise, and Culture (LREC) program, which is a DoD driven initiative. The program develops students, cadre, and leaders with the cross-cultural competencies to effectively conduct and lead Infantry, Armor, and Cavalry unit missions within a Joint Interagency Intergovernmental Multinational environment . The purpose of this evaluation to determine the benefits of the language table as perceived by the participants and to increase Soldier participation.

**Methodology**

Focus groups were conducted over the course of three weeks with four different language tables, which included Spanish, Italian, Arabic, and Russian. After each language table session, the evaluator held a focus group and recorded participant feedback. A total of 10 volunteer respondents were asked nine questions. Participants’ responses were collated and grouped by theme to produce the most common responses to the questions.

**Results**

**The evaluation questions were:**

**Evaluation Question 1: What motivated the participants to participate in the program?** Soldiers attended language sessions to practice their conversation skills, build relationships with native speakers, and enhance cultural knowledge.

**Evaluation Question 2: What would the participants change about the program?**  Hold language tables in a larger, separate area rather than in a public open space (e.g., MCoE food court).

**Evaluation Question 3: How are Soldiers applying information from the language tables to their job?**  Soldiers were not using their language skills in current assignments, however several Soldiers are actively seeking positions where they could use their skills.

**Evaluation Question 4: How could the language tables be marketed at the Maneuver Center of Excellence?** Leverage social media to promote the table sessions, get information about this program to the units on Fort Benning so information can be disseminated to Soldiers, have a more active marketing campaign, and make the tables mandatory for second language proficient Soldiers.

**Recommendations**

Develop newsletters with program highlights, schedule of the language tables, and a spotlight story to relay table specific information and events to potential participants. Use social media to post pictures, event announcements, other resources for second language

learners, and build “friend” lists to increase visibility.

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# 1.0 Introduction

##  History and Purpose

The Language, Regional Expertise, and Culture (LREC) program is a DoD driven initiative, formerly known as the Language and Regional Expertise Planning (LREP) program that develops students, cadre, and leaders with the cross-cultural competencies to effectively conduct and lead Infantry, Armor, and Cavalry unit missions across the full range of military operations within a Joint Interagency Intergovernmental Multinational (JIIM) environment . Each branch of the military is tasked to develop an internal LREC program to support “U.S. personnel working alongside multinational partners and among local populations .”

The language table is an initiative within the LREC program. The lead for the LREC had a database of multi-language proficient Soldiers based on those who took the Defense Language Proficiency Test (DLPT). Those Soldiers received e-mails from the LREC team inviting them to attend the language table sessions specific to their language proficiency. However, this system was not effective in reaching all Soldiers who speak other languages.

##  Purpose of Evaluation

The purpose of this evaluation was two-fold: determine the benefits of the language table as perceived by the participants and how to improve Soldier participation. Level I of the Kirkpatrick training evaluation model was used to identify the perceived benefits of the program. To capture Level I reaction data and develop recommendations to improve participation in the language table sessions, focus groups were conducted after four language table sessions.

The four main evaluation questions were: what motivated the participants to participate in the program; what would the participants change about the program; how are Soldiers applying information from the language tables to their job; and how could the language

tables be marketed at the Maneuver Center of Excellence (MCoE)?

# 2.0 Evaluation Protocol

## 2.1 Evaluation Overview

Focus groups were conducted over the course of three weeks with four different language tables, which included Spanish, Italian, Arabic, and Russian. Although only 10 Soldiers participated in the four focus group sessions in different locations and on different days, data saturation was reached because participants were providing duplicate responses. Only Soldiers were included in the focus group sessions because the other participants were members of the LREC team or contractors. After each language table session, the evaluator held a focus group and recorded each session. Participants’ responses were collated and grouped by theme to produce the most common responses to the questions.

## 2.2 Evaluation Design

The evaluation design was qualitative and a focus group was conducted after each language table session. Respondents were asked approximately nine questions and participation in the focus group was voluntary.

## 2.3 Data Collection Instrument

A focus group interview with the participants was the only data collection instrument used in the evaluation. The questions were developed based on the initial feedback from the stakeholders and the evaluation questions. The questions were piloted during two language table sessions. The evaluator conducted the focus groups, transcribed the recorded sessions, analyzed the data, and made corrections to the questions as necessary. Observation and focus group sessions were then scheduled with four additional language table sessions. The focus group interview consisted of nine questions and every participant was given the opportunity to answer prior to moving on to the next question. The focus group questions are listed in Appendix A.

# 3.0 Results

Most Soldiers did not know about the overall LREC program. Only Soldiers who worked with the program as a facilitator or in an office near the LREC team knew about LREC.

Language table participants included facilitators, individuals who worked with or near the LREC initiative team, and Soldiers. Nineteen people attended the four observed sessions. Contractors, session facilitators, LREC team members, or individuals who left the sessions early were excluded from the focus group discussion. Three Soldiers served as session facilitators and two others worked in a nearby office. The remaining Soldiers attended the sessions because they received an e-mail invitation or a colleague invited them to attend. Ten Soldiers were included in the focus group sessions. The participants in the focus groups included five Captains, four Noncommissioned Officers (NCOs), and one Special Forces Soldier.

**Evaluation Question 1: What motivated the participants to participate in the program?**

The most common reason Soldiers attended the language tables was to practice a second language. Several participants agreed that a second language is a perishable skill and practice is necessary to maintain or achieve fluency. One Captain commented*, “For me it’s like if you don’t use it, you’ll lose it kind of thing. So this has been helping me to improve my skills and keep them from atrophying by not using the language.”* Additional motivating factors were to build relationships with native speakers and enhance cultural knowledge.

Native speakers attended because they felt it was their duty to help other Army Soldiers learn a language and to share their cultures with others. Soldiers also saw a similarity between the bonding process of learning a language and Army schools. An Airborne Ranger stated, *“Whenever you do something that is difficult, it’s going to draw a bond between you. That’s why we send Soldiers through Airborne school, that’s why we send Soldiers through Ranger school because when you do something difficult it builds camaraderie.”*

Attendance at these sessions was low; no more than four Soldiers attended any given session. Reasons for low participation were: Soldiers did not want to give up their lunch hour to attend a session; not many people outside of McGinnis-Wickham Hall knew about the sessions; some session locations moved to different locations from meeting to meeting; and food was not allowed in some of the session locations, such as the library.

**Evaluation Question 2: What would the participants change about the program?**

The change most participants suggested was to move the forum location. A past language table took place at an Italian restaurant to give participants a sense and taste of the authentic culture; the remaining sessions were at the Donovan Research Library. Three of

the language tables regularly meet at the food court in McGinnis-Wickham Hall. Soldiers did not like this location because there was a lot of activity, not enough space for larger groups, and numerous distractions. Another Captain stated the language table had shifted locations several times, which could be a contributing factor to lower attendance for that specific table.

**Evaluation Question 3: How are Soldiers applying information from the language tables to their job?**

None of the Soldiers used their second language skills in their current duty position. However, most said they wanted to learn and maintain second language proficiency to one day use it in their job. One Staff Sergeant said he was taking a language position in a foreign country in the near future.

**Evaluation Question 4: How could the language tables be marketed at the Maneuver Center of Excellence?**

Participants were asked how they would spread the word if they were in charge of advertising for the language table program. Suggestions included: leverage social media to promote the table sessions, get information about this program to the units on Fort Benning so they can disseminate it to Soldiers, have a more active marketing campaign, and make the tables mandatory for second language proficient Soldiers.

The two broader questions in this evaluation included what benefits come from attending the language tables and how can participation be increased in the sessions.

Perceived benefits of attending the language tables included:

* Exposure to other cultures and insight into how to learn about a new culture when deployed
* Interaction with visiting international military members
* Opportunity to enhance their social relationships (e.g., with spouses, friends, fellow Soldiers, etc.)
* Connection with other Army Soldiers from different countries
* Building camaraderie among Soldiers

Suggestions for increasing participation at the language table sessions included:

* Hold the tables at different times in the day because some Soldiers do not want to lose their lunch hour
* Offer food or hold the sessions at authentic restaurants that serve cultural food based on each language table
* Hold the sessions weekly rather than monthly
* Give the units more information about the sessions so they can disseminate the information to potential participants

**4.0 Discussion**

Second language learners needed consistent reinforcement of the language to maintain and increase proficiency. Monthly meetings may not be sufficient to support such reinforcement. If a Soldier missed one session, a two–month gap could be a detrimental lapse in practice time and possibly discourage an individual from further pursuit of the skill . Soldiers interviewed for this study repeatedly mentioned “if you don’t use, you’ll lose it” in relation to language ability.

The current locations of the sessions were not always conducive to practicing a second language. The noisy distractions and feelings of being watched by outsiders during the sessions were reasons for limited participation at the sessions in the food court. Locations also shifted from one location to another from session to session. An important element of learning a second language includes hearing the inflections and syllable emphasis on words. A noisy location makes it difficult, especially for beginners, to hear these variances. An area that is quiet and private may alleviate the uncontrollable variables present in a public location.

The long term goals for the LREC program included respect for other cultures, and enhancing relationships while working with JIIM partners. Information from this study highlighted another outcome that may add value to the military and improving Soldier-to-Soldier relationships. Learning a second language alongside others facilitates bonding not just among Soldiers from different cultural backgrounds but also among Soldiers from the same culture. This was not an intended outcome of the program, but Soldiers see language learning as similar to the various Army training and team-building initiatives because of the mental rigor of the process. Second language learning can be leveraged in team building and cohesion exercises to build rapport and understanding among members.

The most common response to how the language tables can be marketed at the MCoE was to leverage social media. Social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Tumblr, Youtube, etc.) is a powerful marketing tool at little or no cost to the organization. There are three primary reasons to use social media as a marketing tool: “to increase product awareness, persuade people to purchase a product, and to remind people the product exists” . Leveraging existing social media outlets may increase awareness to the target population and influence Soldiers to attend language table sessions.

**5.0 Limitations**

There were several limitations in this study. The sample was a convenience sample with data collected from those who attended the language tables during the pre-selected data collection period. Since the total sample size was 10 individuals, this study does not reach parametric numbers and is therefore not generalizable to a population.

At three of the four sessions attended, Soldiers mentioned there were usually more attendees, but for various reasons very few attended the sessions included in this study (e.g., location change, lunch hour is not an optimal time). This was another constraint on the sample size.

The perspective of the focus group interviewees was strictly from a Soldier perspective. The evaluation questions were specific to the Soldier and their Army mission. Contractors, civilians, and spouses were excluded from the focus group sessions.

**6.0 Recommendations**

A single designated area should be dedicated to holding the language tables. All language table sessions could be conducted in one secluded, quiet area where participants would not be distracted by noise or be uncomfortable with other people who are not part of the group looking on.

Information about the program, its benefits, and schedules should be provided to unit leadership and other organizations on Fort Benning. All participants stated the leadership outside of the MCoE was unaware of the LREC program including the language tables. Providing information to units and its leadership could potentially increase participation and unit support for the program. A newsletter was developed for the LREC team (Appendices B-C).

Social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram) should be leveraged. Many Army units have gravitated toward social media and created Facebook and Twitter pages for their units (among other forms of social media). The LREC team should actively engage social media to build follower lists, disseminate program information, and increase the number of ‘friends’ or ‘followers.’

Spouses and other dependents should be invited to participate in the language tables as well because the program is open to families, DoD employees, and contractors. Announcements about the events should be made through MWR newsletters or emails.

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Language Table Focus Group Questions

Briefing: “*Good afternoon and thank you for allowing us to come and ask you questions about the language table session. My name is \_\_\_\_\_ and I work for the Program Evaluation Office in the Directorate of Training and Sustainment at the Maneuver Center of Excellence. I am going to ask you a few questions about your motivation to attend the language table sessions, the benefit you see in these sessions, and your suggestions or recommendations for increasing participation at these sessions. Please feel free to answer or pass on any questions. We intend to use this data to find out how the sessions benefit native speakers and second language learners and how we can tell more people about these sessions.”*

1. Have you ever heard of the Language, Regional Expertise, and Culture (LREC) program before today’s language table? If so, how did you hear about it?
2. Approximately how many language tables (in total for any language) have you attended?
3. Do you ever meet with other members (native speakers) outside of the lunch table sessions to practice the language?
4. Why did you attend today’s language table?
5. How can you apply the knowledge you learn at these tables to your Army mission?
6. Would you add, change, or eliminate anything from the language table session?
7. If you were the advertising executive for the language table, how would you “spread the word” about the program?
8. Do you agree or disagree that exposure to other cultures/languages facilitates bonding among Soldiers?
9. Does anyone have any additional comments or suggestions regarding the language table program?



