Culture shock and stress for the teacher during language lessons

GABRIELLA KOVÁCS

Miklós Zrínyi National Defence University, Budapest, Hungary

There are several factors to be taken into consideration when discussing issues concerning the teaching of military terminology in a foreign language. Each of these factors or elements are integral parts of the language teaching process. Besides the students, the intensity of the course, the course-books and other factors, the role of the teacher is also of great importance.

Having a closer look at the teacher’s personality, we can find several reasons why s/he tends to be exposed to stressful situations and how s/he copes with them.

Language teaching: The teacher

The importance of language teaching, and especially that of teaching military terminology, has been the topic of many articles and publications since Hungary joined NATO. In most cases it was mainly the language itself as teaching material in the centre of attention (i.e., what shall we teach?), and several research studies have been conducted concerning the needs of the language learner (i.e., who are we teaching?), that is to satisfy the linguistic requirements set by the latest challenges.

My belief is that special attention should be paid to language teachers because it is them who facilitate the study of military terminology to the students and whom language learners meet day by day during an intensive course; it is also the teacher who will represent the main motivation throughout the language learning process.

In the following paper I would like to present the type of stress a language teacher has to face when teaching military terminology at an intensive course where the students are Hungarian and foreign officers preparing for NATO STANAG 6001 English-language exam for three months having 26 lessons per week.

Stress

When discussing the issues of stress first of all we should precisely define what stress is all about. JÁNOS SELYE, the father of the theory of stress, defines it as follows:
‘Stress in the medical sense is the unity of deterioration processes attached to life’
and: ‘Stress is the non-specific response of the body to any use.’

SELYE, however, also calls our attention to the fact that there is no stress-free state
of mind (or there is one: in death), but we have to differentiate between stress as a
natural part of human life and harmful stress (i.e., distress) which is always present.

RICHARD LAZARUS defines stress in a slightly different way. According to his
comprehensive theory of stress it was not only the specialities of a harmful situation that he
took into consideration but also the capability of the individuals to cope with the problem.
He argues “there is stress ensuing when the peculiarities of a situation and the restraints of
the individual’s possibilities to cope with it come into interaction with each other.”

In the light of the above-mentioned facts, let us now try to find out what kind of
stressor (i.e., harmful stimulus) can affect the language teacher. The situation s/he has to
face at the very beginning of the language teaching process should not be considered as
unpleasant. Both the Hungarian and foreign officers arrive at the above-mentioned
intensive language course to learn military English for three months and at the end of
the course they should be able to pass a language exam important with regard to their
future careers, their promotion and their participation in missions. So all these language
learners are basically highly motivated.

What could be more ideal for a language
teacher than a group of language learners whose ambition is to acquire the language at
the highest level possible, even though they might have different reasons as individuals?

**The students**

It is obvious that during the language learning process an appropriate relationship is to
be established between the student and the teacher. In this context the teacher accepts
the fact that individual language learners have their own individual aims with language
learning, and the student accepts the professional knowledge, expertise, or competence.
However, it is not as apparent as it sounds.

**The teacher**

Let us now get a closer view of the personality of the language teacher.

Even though there is a bit of generalisation involved, we can define the language
teacher in most cases as a woman. This results from the fact that there are more and
more women in the teaching profession, whilst the number of male teachers tends to be
quite low. So the language teachers are mainly women graduated from the faculty of
arts of a university whose expertise is primarily strong in the fields of humanities and consequently they are civilians.

It is apparently psychically stressful for them to teach language to a very special audience, as language learners are primarily men and soldiers – members of the military.

Culture shock

When teaching civilians, the language teacher works basically in the same cultural environment as she comes from. However, among soldiers she may find the environment itself stressful, since communication is different here even in the mother tongue compared to the civilian life. There are expressions, phrases and behavioural patterns that are unusual or strange for a language teacher coming from the civilian sphere where she typically works with humanities.

What the language teacher experiences now is a kind of culture shock. ‘Culture shock refers to the anxiety and feelings (of surprise, disorientation, uncertainty, confusion, etc.) felt when people have to operate within a different and unknown cultural or social environment such as a foreign country. It grows out of the difficulties in assimilating the new culture, causing difficulty in knowing what is appropriate and what is not.’ 4 Obviously, it is not a foreign country the teacher has to work in, nevertheless it is a completely new and different environment.

Of course we can call stress ‘what we define as such and we experience the somatic-psychic state of threat as the result of negative stress. (…)’ 5 When examining the stressors influencing the language teachers, we can see that one by one they do not generate the feeling of threat, but on the whole they tend to cause considerable psychical stress.

The stressors

When summarizing the stressors affecting the language teacher, I regard the following factors as primary ones:

– The language teacher is a civilian, whereas the students are soldiers. This simple fact causes culture shock for the teacher in the military environment coming from a different cultural setting with different communication routines.
– The language teacher is a woman, whilst the students are almost exclusively men. Considering the unique curriculum, the gender differences can make the acceptance of the teacher’s expertise and competence problematic.
The language teacher has to teach military terminology in the foreign language as a civilian woman, which is psychically stressful in itself, as she lacks sufficient background knowledge of the topics at issue at least at the beginning of her career.

Group dynamics

Beyond the above described facts, the peculiarities of the language learning group mentioned earlier can also cause stress for the teacher. Learner groups are formed on the basis of the students’ language levels, i.e., the language level is the only consideration to be taken into account when deciding who is going to learn in a certain group, therefore, there have always been officers of different ranks within the same group. The presence of different ranks in a language learning group is salient since the institution where they are learning the language expects them to wear their uniforms during lessons.

All the above described circumstances may cause difficulties from several aspects. On the one hand the efficiency of learning requires sufficient group dynamics also indispensable for the group to function in an appropriate way and to acquire knowledge. There are several interaction types to be used in language lessons: pair work, group work, individual work, class mingle activities, etc. On the other hand the knowledge of language, the talent for languages, etc., are totally independent of military ranks. This is the reason why the relationships between students in a certain group is affected by the fact that an officer of higher rank may be slower in his development than an officer with a lower rank and both of them are in the same language learning group or will come to form a pair within the group during the lesson. The officer whose progress is faster can express himself more easily and thus he will be able to form his opinion faster about a certain topic. Nevertheless if the higher-ranking officer tries to maintain authority with the higher number of stars on his epaulette (e.g., when discussing a certain topic), it will affect group dynamics in a very negative way and consequently the process of language teaching as well.

The solution of the situation lies in the hands of the teacher: the one who is a woman, a civilian with a degree from the arts faculty and who is exposed to stress caused by the factors mentioned above.

When listing the stressors that affect the language teacher we must not forget about the fact that the language learning group described above is a multinational one. This multinationality is positive per se, because multiculturalism, learning about each other’s cultural differences, habits and customs can be motivational for language use.
Therefore, the artificial nature of the classroom environment vanishes, as the target language is the only means of communication in this context. Meanwhile we cannot disregard the fact that some foreign students coming to Hungary used to live in one and the same federal state in the past but when that regime fell apart, the young nation-states had military conflicts with each other. This means that the language teacher has to tackle the stressful effects of hidden hostilities too.

Workplace stress

Several models of workplace stress are known from publications on topic-related issues. BREUER ÁGNÉS has published a summary chart of workplace stressors, including a list of the following stressor groups:

- task-related stressors;
- stressors related to the work environment;
- stressors within the organisations;
- stressors outside the organisations;
- special layers.

In my opinion, several categories of these groups can be associated with the language teacher based on the facts described above. One example could be the group of ‘task-related stressors’, where the stressors associated with work-related changes are to be considered, or – in the group of ‘stressors within the organisations’ – role-conflict at the individual level, responsibility, or – at the group-level – conflicts within the group (since the teacher becomes the member of the group to some extent), or in the group of stressors affecting ‘special layers’ the impacts affecting the teacher as a woman in a unique, man-dominated environment.

Further problems may arise from the students’ psychic exhaustion during the three months of the intensive language course. This results partly from monotonity because it is rather difficult for the teacher to always come up with something new and exciting in the course of a long series of language lessons. The impact of monotonity is almost always perceptible by the end of the language course even if the groups are always taught by a team of three teachers. Psychic exhaustion can also affect students who learn with considerable motivation and enthusiasm all throughout the three months, doing all the tasks and participating in every extra occasion, such as non-compulsory classes. By the end of the course every student shows the symptoms of fatigue, behaviour changes and a significant decrease in enthusiasm.

Students’ psychic exhaustion appears as yet another stressor for the teacher even if we disregard the fact that teachers may as well experience the same effects, although...
they have a very important goal to be achieved by the end of the language course: students should deliver top performance on the day of the exam so that they can do their best and pass the language test.

**Stress management**

The stress factors listed above can provoke defence reactions in the language teacher. There are several ways of stress management, and it depends on the individual what strategies s/he is going to employ to cope with stress.

According to JÁNOS SELYE, ‘The best technique to avoid harmful stress is to choose an environment appropriate for our tastes and find a profession that we like and appreciate.’

What is the situation like when the teacher teaches in an environment favourable for her and the job is also one she enjoys? Even so, the stressors listed above will still affect her.

In cases like that defence mechanisms are used by the individuals in an attempt to cope with the unpleasant feelings caused by stress, but these mechanisms may work without the teachers being aware of them and can transform reality to a certain extent (e.g., suppression, denial, projection, rationalisation, intellectualisation, reaction formation, etc.).

Besides defence mechanisms, there are other stress management techniques employed on a conscious level.

The institution employing the individual has a crucial role in managing stress. In my opinion, the organization can help concerning several elements of employment stress. One of those elements can be the tension deriving from the difference in ranks within the same group of students. If wearing a uniform was not a requirement in the classrooms of the language lessons, the different ranks would not be so salient, and the group could function as a genuine language-learning group, not with students as officers of different ranks, but with individuals who are equal. The result would be favourable for group dynamics as well as for the resolution of possible debates.

The above detailed culture shock experienced by civilian women teachers may be the biggest burden on their shoulders, especially at the beginning of their career. Considerable help and support from the institution would be necessary to get the new environment to accept the teacher.

A kind of defence mechanism is employed when the teacher is only willing to teach English language in general and avoids opportunities of teaching military English. This technique will not help tackle the stressful situation as substituting for a colleague – and
thus having to teach military English – may be a necessity at any time. This situation might as well be avoided, but the whole mechanism would still generate further stress.

Experience has shown that managing the above described stressful situations – making the individual, the teacher accepted by the military environment – is possible through training her to have the necessary competence in teaching military terminology. And this could be the area where the institution would be able to provide the most help for its employees. Ensuring the possibility of acquiring military terminology, offering training in military-related methodology is the start for genuine stress management instead of directing the teachers to employ a defence mechanism.

Summary

In summary we can point out that a teacher with a degree from the faculty of arts, with no or very little experience in teaching military terminology in a culturally new environment is exposed to considerable psychic stress. As a result of the effects of several stressors, this stress will evolve into distress which is a harmful type of stress.

Conclusion

There are several defence mechanisms to cope with stressful situations; nevertheless in order to successfully exploit stress management techniques, help and support from the institution employing the language teacher are of primary importance.

References

8. SELYE JÁNOS: op. cit., p. 79.