

Creating Culturally Astute Leaders:

Joint and Combined Fires University Providing Innovative Cultural Education

by Sharon McBride, Editor-in-Chief, Fires

This article, from the September-October 2010 issue of Fires, is reprinted with permission.

Despite growing awareness among Army leaders to include foreign cultural education as a part of training and operational planning, the roles that culture and religion play in successful missions and deployments are often overlooked. Battlefield lessons learned have confirmed that language skills and understanding of foreign cultures are crucial for success in full-spectrum operations. Often, cultural understanding is necessary both to defeat adversaries and to work successfully with allies. The Army Culture and Foreign Language Strategy, released in 2009, highlighted operational experiences in Somalia, the Balkans, Afghanistan and Iraq with having critical gaps in the Army capability to influence and operate effectively within different cultures for extended periods of time.

In an effort to develop adaptive, agile and culturally astute leaders with the right blend of culture and foreign language capabilities, the Fires Center of Excellence's (FCoE) Joint and Combined Fires University (JCFU) is leading the way with its implementation of a Cultural and Foreign Language Program (CFLP). Dr. Mahir Ibrahimov, who is fluent in five languages and versed in many cultures, was hired as the first TRADOC Cultural and Foreign Language Advisor, and is the head of the CFLP here at Fort Sill, Oklahoma.

Changing our current teaching paradigms required new ideas and the ability to go beyond providing Soldiers and leaders a rudimentary foundation in foreign culture and language familiarization. Traditionally, cultural

training tended to be overly simplistic and lacked a context for cultural understanding, Ibrahimov explained. The curriculum developed by CFLP helps Soldiers and leaders develop critical thinking skills needed to understand how culture might influence the outcome of an operation. Ibrahimov has created a holistic approach to cultural training that is now being looked at closely by TRADOC for other installations to emulate. According to him, becoming aware of cultural dynamics is a difficult task because culture is based on experiences, values, behaviors, beliefs and norms.

In many cases, Soldiers may experience a foreign culture for the first time during a deployment, and as a result may inadvertently be disrespectful.

For example, in Iraq, the left hand is not used for contact with others, eating or ges-



tures; it is considered unclean. When talking with an Iraqi, especially during key leader engagements, close personal interaction is customary and distance is considered rude. Try all food and drink offered, and it's important to appear relaxed and friendly; social interaction is critical in building trust. Cultural awareness training would help overcome the 'culture

shock,' and give Soldiers the ability to adjust to an indigenous culture as quickly as possible to get the mission done. It should also build on the foundation of an individual's existing leader attributes which in turn reinforces the core leader competencies of leading others, developing oneself and achieving results. Cross-cultural training should focus, in particular on character, presence and intellect. (See figure 1.1 Cultural Awareness Objectives.)

Figure 1.1 Cultural Awareness Objectives

Learning Objective 1 (Character): Demonstrate interaction and cross-cultural communications skills in order to effectively engage and understand people and their environment.

Demonstrate a level of cultural awareness that includes a positive openness to other people, an understanding of prevailing values, beliefs, behaviors and customs, and a desire to learn more about cultures and language. This includes an introduction to a language that supports current military operations with the intent to promote additional study through self-development at the institution, at home station or at an academic university.

Learning Objective 2 (Presence): Demonstrate communication, influence and negotiation skills essential for leaders to effectively operate in a JIIM environment.

Leverage the knowledge gained by challenging students to employ skills to deal with ambiguous and complex situations, to regulate one's own behavior and to use the interpersonal abilities to deal with people from one's own or other cultures. This includes an understanding and ability to engage other joint and allied military personnel, and host country indigenous leaders with a moderate level of confidence.

Learning Objective 3 (Intellect): Demonstrate a familiarization in a geographic region of current operational significance.

Leverage critical thinking and cognitive skills through organizing information that supports cultural self-awareness. Depending on level of leader development professional military education, expand cross-cultural competence skills by gaining an awareness or understanding of a geographic area that highlights the implications of a region's economic, religious, legal, governmental, political and infrastructural features, and of sensitivities regarding gender, race, ethnicity, local observances and local perception of the U.S. and its allies.

Apply relevant planning to considerations, terms, factors, concepts and geographic information to mission planning and in the conduct of operations. This includes leveraging other TRADOC and DOD schools, partnerships with universities and academia, gaming technology and opportunities that stress students' ability to concisely and persuasively speak and write, to engage in discussions, and employ cognitive reasoning and thinking skills.

Some programs define cultural immersion as simply 'being there,' asserting that physically being in another country is an immersion in itself and that knowledge of another culture and language will follow naturally. "That isn't always the case," Ibrahimov said. When developing a comprehensive program, Ibrahimov determined that three cultural competency levels (cultural awareness, understanding and expertise) must be included. These competency levels are now included in all courses taught by the JCFU, the FCoE Noncommissioned Officers Academy and in other leadership courses attended by officers and warrant officers to overcome cultural ignorance. (See figure 1.2 Cultural Competency Levels.)

Figure 1.2 Cultural Competency Levels

Cultural expertise

Advanced level of cross-cultural competence in a specific geographic area. Generally entails some degree of proficiency in a language; skills that enable effective cross-cultural persuasion, negotiation, conflict resolution, influence or leadership; and an understanding of the most salient historic and present-day regional structural and cultural factors of a specific geographic area.

Cultural understanding

Well developed cross-cultural competence in a specific region. Able to anticipate the implications of culture and apply relevant terms, factors, concepts and regional information to tasks and missions. Familiar with a specific region's economic, religious, legal, governmental, political and infrastructural features, and aware of regional sensitivities regarding gender, race, ethnicity, local observances and local perception of the U.S. and its allies.

Cultural awareness

Minimal level of regional competence necessary to perform assigned tasks in a specific geographic area; able to describe key culture terms, factors and concepts. Basic understanding of how foreign culture might affect the planning and conduct of operations.

The Basic Officer Leader Course (BOLC), the NCO Warrior Leader Course, the NCO Advanced Leader Course, the Captains Career Course, the Warrant Officer Basic Course, the Warrant Officer Advanced Course, and the NCO Senior Leader Course have all been revised to contain specific approaches appropriate to each level in order for leaders to attain specific knowledge on culture and foreign language expectations. It is important to note, as designed the training places more emphasis on attaining cultural knowledge (big C), with some emphasis on learning foreign languages (little L).

"Our Soldiers and leaders really need to understand the cultural nuances of other countries," Ibrahimov said. "The decisions our younger Soldiers

and leaders are making often have strategic importance.” Cultural knowledge and understanding can open eyes so Soldiers can be more effective when dealing with a local populace. Having a rudimentary knowledge of a native language can be helpful in a variety of situations, he added.

Partnerships and Cooperation

Ibrahimov also designed the CFLP program to have ongoing partnerships and cooperation with local universities and other military institutions. Cameron University, Oklahoma University and Oklahoma State University faculties conduct regular seminars for Fires professionals on topics of operational importance.

Past topics have included: *Central Asia: Modernity and Geopolitics in the Stans, The Cultural and Linguistic Patterns in the Middle East and Projections for Iraq, Who Will Lead? The United States, the European Union, China, and the Global Diffusion of Power, The Strategic Logic of Suicide Terrorism, U.S. Strategic Options in Afghanistan, Iran and U.S. Strategy, Russia: A Declining Superpower Reclaiming its Throne?* Future strategic topics are related to Russia, Iran and the Middle East.

“These seminars have led to an increased understanding by our students of cultural aspects and geopolitical trends, their impacts on the contemporary operational environment,” said Ibrahimov. “We are working on attracting more academic support to enhance ongoing education and training so they can be better prepared to operate in the joint, interagency, intergovernmental and multinational environments that they might be deployed in the future.”

Partnerships to enhance training have also been formed with TRADOC Culture Center and U.S. Army Intelligence Center of Excellence both located at Fort Huachuca, Arizona; the Marine Corps University at Quantico, Virginia; the Defense Language Institute (DLI) Foreign Language Center at the Presidio in Monterey, California, and the East and South Asia Center for Strategic Studies at the National Defense University.

Ibrahimov himself also regularly conducts seminars with students attending the Fires Support Coordinator Course, Warrant Officer Instructional Branch, Field Artillery and Air Defense Artillery Captains Career Course. He also conducts specific or generalized pre-deployment training upon request. He has also been

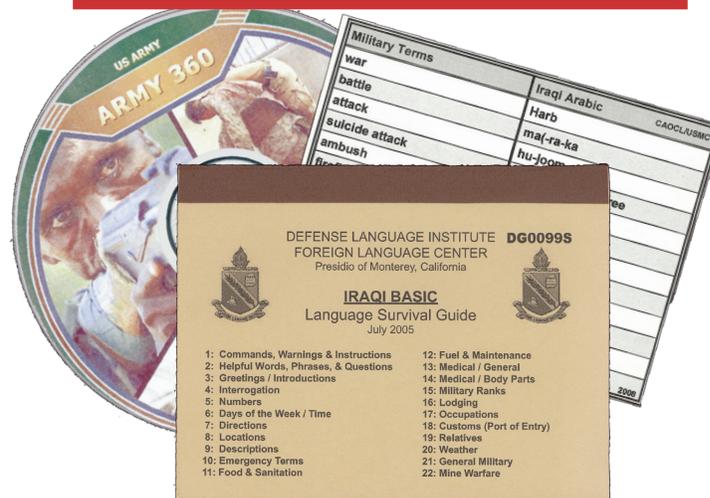
conducting train-the-trainer sessions for small group leaders, new cultural awareness instructors and new TRADOC cultural advisors. He has also made arrangements for allied international students and FCoE liaison officers to conduct regular briefs on their respective countries for additional knowledge.

Cultural Simulation

Items in FCoE Cultural and Foreign Language Program’s arsenal include a ‘Cultural Awareness and Language Training Package,’ which is a portable training option for Soldiers that includes several foreign language CDs, a cultural awareness scenario-based game called “Army 360,” language flash cards and field-expedient smart books allocated from the Defense Language Institute for troops’ use. (See figure 1.3 Cultural Awareness and Language Training Package.)

Figure 1.3 Cultural Awareness and Language Training Package

- ◆ Iraqi Basic Language Survival Guide
- ◆ Tactical Dari Language and Culture
- ◆ Multi-Platform Tactical Language Kit–Dari
- ◆ Pashto Headstart & LSK
- ◆ Tactical Pashto: Language and Culture
- ◆ Multi-Platform Tactical Language Kit Iraqi Arabic
- ◆ Pocket cards—for use in the field
- ◆ Army 360
- ◆ DLI Foreign Language Center (Presidio of Monterey)
- ◆ Flipbook on Iraqi Basic–Language Survival Guide
- ◆ Flipbook on Korean Basic–Language Survival Guide



“Army 360” is a virtual simulation application that enables students to immerse themselves in true-to-life scenarios in order to broaden their experience in dealing with other cultures. They get to practice intuitive decision making abilities in a mock environment before facing the real-life culture dilemmas.



Ibrahimov also established a Culture and Foreign Language Resource Center in the Morris Swett Technical library, where students have access to computers for self-paced training, various cultural awareness books and numerous other applicable digital (to include Rosetta Stone) and traditional learning resources. These resources are available to captains, BOLC B attendees, NCOES and warrant officer students to prepare cultural research papers which are now a mandatory requirement in each of their respective training. BOLC B students are now eligible to receive certificates after completing four to eight hours of language training. The FCoE CFLP identified five operationally important languages for training: Dari, Pashto (Afghanistan), Iraqi Arabic, Korean, and Russian. Not sure where to start? A comprehensive reading list is also available at the resource center that includes books on areas that are currently strategically/operationally important to Army operations.

A dedicated FCoE CFLP resource page is also available by logging onto FKN. The site contains an abundance of cultural awareness and foreign language knowledge, information on past seminars, information on the program, media coverage of the events, foreign languages guides, links to DLI, Foreign Language Center resources, as well as the CIA Fact Book. The list and site are constantly being updated and upgraded.

The FCoE CFLP has also just launched an all-volunteer language and cultural awareness orientation class/pilot program that started in July. It's a 12-week language course that is conducted by a native Arabic speaker. "Sometimes troops have more success learning a foreign language by listening and practicing with a person rather than just listening to a CD," Ibrahimov said. The first session was attended by 46 volunteer students from FA/ADA CCC and WOES. FCoE CFLP is currently in the process of

identifying a Dari or Pashto instructor (Afghanistan) to launch a similar 12-week program in the future.

Join the Army, See the World

Deployments are not going to be stopping any time soon. According to DA Pam 525-3-0, The Army Capstone Concept Operational Adaptability–Operation under Conditions of Uncertainty and Complexity in an Era of Persistent Conflict, the Army is going to continue to send large numbers of Soldiers into a region about which they have little knowledge and almost no cultural connection. We then ask them to interact safely and efficiently with military and civilian natives.

These interactions require varying levels of linguistic, cultural, and interpersonal backgrounds. Providing Soldiers with these backgrounds is critical. The FCoE CFLP is on target in providing an avenue of learning for leaders and Soldiers to achieve at least an elemental language proficiency (Level 0+/1) prior to deployment. (See figure 1.4 Speaking Language Proficiency Levels.) FCoE CFLP hopes that by providing evolutionary training, it will make all Fires professionals successful—no matter what corner of the globe they happen to deploy. For more information on the FCoE CFLP, log onto FKN at <https://www.us.army.mil/suite/doc/21617522>.

Figure 1.4 Speaking Language Proficiency Levels

- ◆ Speaking 0: No proficiency
- ◆ Speaking 0+: Memorized proficiency
- ◆ Speaking 1: Elementary proficiency
- ◆ Speaking 1+: Elementary proficiency, plus
- ◆ Speaking 2/2+: Limited working proficiency
- ◆ Speaking 3/3+: General professional proficiency
- ◆ Speaking 4/4+: Advanced professional proficiency
- ◆ Speaking 5: Functionally native proficiency



Dr. Mahir Ibrahimov talks with children in a local village during a mission to open two water treatment plants in Balad, Iraq. (Photo courtesy of 28th Public Affairs Detachment)