



GETTING ARMED WITH ENGLISH

The military drops its guard so that *Sean Patrick Marshall* can find out how they teach English for the frontline

Thursdays are busy days for Air Force Col. Steve Jones, the commandant of the Defense Language Institute English Language Center (DLIELC). In the morning, he and his staff conduct the weekly orientation for a brand new crop of incoming students entering the U.S. military's ESL school. During the afternoon, it's another graduation ceremony for another batch of outgoing graduates.

This Thursday afternoon in late September is no different. A group of 26 uniformed military personnel and two Ukrainian government civilians walk one-at-a-time across the stage in the school's auditorium to shake Col. Jones' hand as he gives them their diplomas.

Most of the graduating class are foreign military sent by their governments to learn English before they attend additional technical job training in the U.S. and potentially find themselves working alongside U.S. forces in joint operations.

"You see students and they will routinely give speeches and presentations. And I go Wow!" says Col. Jones. "What a difference from the way these guys walk in and the way they walk out."

The rest are seven U.S. Army soldiers who enlisted needing more exposure to English before shipping out to Basic Training. Many of the soldiers at DLI are from Puerto Rico,

where generations of Spanish have overwhelmed the influences of English on their lives. Others are first generation immigrants.

DLI's campus looks much like any other small college campus with its matching brick buildings surrounded by trees and well manicured bushes. The dining facility serves the same menu of lunch items and soft drinks. The library is filled with students with their noses deep in books or pressed to computer screens. And in the break areas, students and faculty hang around between classes. The big difference here is DLI is placed in the middle of the vastly sprawling Lackland Air Force Base in San Antonio, TX. And lest I for-

get, the students wear uniforms.

When asked how priorities drive DLI today, Col. Jones points to the training of Iraqis and Afghans to speak English. "The requirement, the priority, and the need is very great. Plus, the fact there is a sense of urgency because we may be under a time limit. People want results now rather than later. But, learning a language takes time."

For fiscal year 2007, DLI graduated more than 1,800 foreign students, representing 106 countries, and more than 600 U.S. Army soldiers. The hectic pace of non-stop teaching to strict standards is the only constant as a roster of students is rotated in and out every week.

To fulfill the demands of its military and governmental customers, the faculty has customized three curricula: general English, specialized English training, and instructor development.

General English, or "the American Language Course" (ALC) as it is known, accounts for the bulk of DLI's work. The designation highlights the distinctive communication challenges students will face in the U.S. "The one thing we do here is avoid British English," says Frank Lawrence, the chief of Academics Support, referring to the problems students have in the U.S. when they have been taught "proper English."

The ALC trains students in the basic language skills necessary to communicate with Americans in most situations with a concentration on speaking and listening.

The total course is divided into 34 separate learning modules, which last just a week each, containing four one-day lessons and a comprehensive review on the fifth day.

Everyone at DLI simply refers to each module as "The Book," an obvious reference to the thick tome that confronts students at the beginning of each week. In actuality, each Book is an integrated program of homework material, flash cards, interactive multi-media, CD-ROMs, quizzes, and computer adaptive and delivered testing.

Only those students whose follow-on training requires the utmost proficiency in English will need to reach Book 34.

For students going on to advanced technical training, the Institute provides technical language and terminology in 25 different fields such as avionics, mechanics, or medicine. Such training typically requires an

additional nine weeks in class.

The Institute also trains international students to become future ESL instructors, using the ALC in their own countries.

DLI even has Mobile Teaching Teams (MTT) visiting about 40 different countries a year. In many cases, MTT instructors are also instructing these "in-country" students how to become instructors and use the ALC materials themselves.

DLI instructors serve for some time overseas, either setting up MTTs or as instructors. Most overseas tours last several months at a time. When speaking with instructors, they can rattle off a list of countries where they have taught and provide an intriguing story for each. "I just came back from Afghanistan and Iraq," says Lawrence, who is also an Air Force retiree, about the latest of his seven MTTs tours. "It is an opportunity to learn different cultures, get out there, and do different things."

How does DLI teach so many ESL

students with such different backgrounds and to such different standards every year? The short answer is a curriculum based on an eclectic system.

The DLI curricula were designed to incorporate the latest, most reliable research findings, years of instructor experiences, and influences of proven teaching methods. All of this information has been harmonized into each Book by the Institute's own curriculum branch using theme-based instruction, authentic material, and relevant exercises. Many of the lessons are augmented with military images and discussion topics, while maintaining a focus on meeting objectives.

The ALC curriculum follows a sequential design presenting "enabling objectives" for every Book, which builds on previous objectives to help students finally achieve the ALC's 38 "terminal objectives." Objectives are constantly reinforced and recycled throughout each Book. Objectives cover such subject matter as language function, vocabulary, grammar, and language skills.

Faculty take great pride in the results they achieve from implementing student centered instruction. "If the instructor can put together the lesson plan in such a way that the students are able to take on traditional teacher roles in the classroom, it gives them more time to prac-

tice the language," says Karen Gamble, chief of general English Instruction. "Part of learning the language is practicing the language."

Instructors aim to achieve an 80 to 20 percent ratio of student participation to teacher involvement.

Gamble notes the student is "not only using the actual content, but can also practice negotiation skills — the function of language."

For instructors, such comprehensive curricula provide probably the best benefit. "Our teachers have the benefit of not having to do all that preparation," says Karen Sacre, chief of general English Branch. Teachers do not have to correct the tests. All of the standardized tests for proficiency and achievement are computerized. With so much of the preparation work done, instructors have better control over student training and more time to track their progress.

DLI has 173 instructors. "Our instructors come from a variety of backgrounds," says Clayton Leishman, a DLI program manager. "Many come with Masters and Doctorates in the field. Their approach is just as varied as the curriculum itself. The more ways you can approach the curriculum and the objectives, the more apt the student is to really master that material."

Students spend six hours a day in class with two hours of homework each night, and two hours of instructor-led interactive computer lab per week. During breaks, students are constantly reminded to continue speaking English. Individual supplementary training is available, if needed. "We discourage translation," says Lawrence. "It slows things down. You have to do things quickly and speak very quickly. You don't need to take the time to translate into another language and then back again so that you can communicate. We want you to be able to learn it and use it. Translation becomes a crutch otherwise." Each Book reflects that philosophy with exercises compelling students constantly to use the language with each other in ongoing dialogues and reactive exercises.

Class sizes are kept low. "We had to get a waiver from the Air Force when this building was put up," says Lawrence about the classrooms, which were constructed smaller than regulations permitted when the building was erected in 1993. "We don't want more than