

Efficiency and Characteristics: The Case Study of the French Course at the EdG

Jérôme COLLIN
 Chef de cours – Responsable pédagogique
 Cours de Langue française
 Ecole de guerre
 Paris (France)

The efficiency of teaching a foreign language depends on various parameters which all stem from the special characteristics of the learners.

I am going to identify the essential qualities of the students of the French Course of the Ecole de Guerre according to four main criteria; I will then draw conclusions about the learning environment and the teachers' profile.

I will distinguish their professional academic level and linguistic academic level. Likewise, regarding the linguistic background, I will distinguish the students' mother tongue and the language they want to learn.



Language student	Academic criterion	Professional level
		Level in the target language
	Linguistic criterion	Mother tongue
		Language studied

In the military field, we must ask ourselves who are the people that we are going to teach:

what is their rank?

What is their language level?

What is their mother tongue?

What language do they want to study?

In the case of the French Course of the Ecole de guerre, I will answer each one of these questions and give some insight into what they imply in terms of learning environment and teachers' profile.

The professional level of the students is extremely important when it comes to teaching a foreign

language to military officers; this is what we sometimes call “teaching the military language”

What is “military language”?

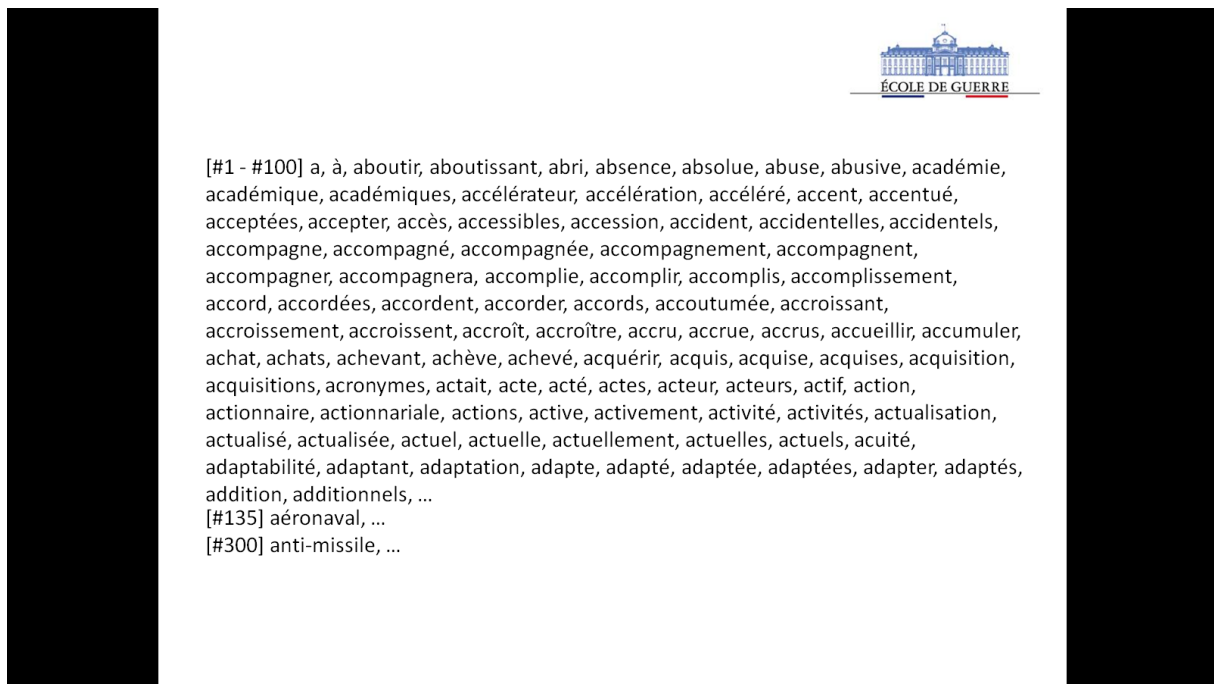
Compared to the parameters of a language, we cannot here talk of a “military pronunciation” or a “military syntax”.

The characteristics of a professional language usually lie in its vocabulary.

The “military vocabulary” does exist.

However, if you take the French White Paper on Defence, which defines the bases of the French defence policy, you will realise that it contains very little military vocabulary.

Here is the list of the first 100 words (in the alphabetical order) of the vocabulary used in the White Paper.



You will note that there is not a single military term.

The first “military” word is “aéronaval” (air and sea) 135 followed by “anti-missile” 300.

The French Course of the Ecole de guerre is destined for senior officers who will be appointed to staff or diplomatic positions.

They must learn the French language of the White Paper on Defence, which deals with military and geopolitical topics but does not use any specialised vocabulary.

Therefore, the teaching will concentrate on some particular topics rather than on specialised vocabulary.

This has consequences on how to choose the teachers.

Do we need military teachers for these courses?

In this case, we don't.

We need language teachers who can adapt to political-military topics, but they do not have to be experts; the experts are the students.



Language student	Academic criterion	Professional level
		Level in the target language
	Linguistic criterion	Mother tongue
		Language studied

Student's profile	Learning environment	Teachers' profile
Officer	Political-military topics	Emphasis on particular topics
Non-commissioned officer	Specialised military vocabulary	Military teacher

I would also like to say that, in addition to the professional level, the academic experience of the student is significant.

In the military world, the same rank and the same level of responsibility can correspond to very different academic experiences according to one's nationality and military career.

Teaching methods are not the same across the world and officers have not all had the same learning experience.

This criterion is especially complex and hard to assess, and it could prove critical to the officer, which is why it may be relevant to resort to several teachers.

During five months of intensive training programme at the Ecole de guerre, each student benefits from two pairs of teachers, which in total makes four teachers and four different teaching methods.

This system prevents mental blocks which, with one single teacher and in the case of teaching incompatibility, would hinder the learning process.

That is for the students' professional level.

Now we have to study their linguistic level.

To attend the French Course of the Ecole de guerre, the officers must have an "intermediate" or at least an "elementary" level; but some officers are already "highly proficient" in French.

It is extremely important to evaluate language skills before choosing where the training will take place.

As the level gets higher, the language becomes more than just vocabulary and syntax; it becomes a daily cultural space that enables communication between people.

This is why learning French in France is necessary.

The French Course of the Ecole de guerre, in Paris, in the Ecole Militaire, right under the Eiffel tower, performs exactly this function.

Officers need to be in full immersion in the French language and culture, where the language is inseparable from the interactions.

This has consequences on how to choose the right teachers.

Beginners obviously learn more from a teacher who has the same mother tongue; but as their level increases, it becomes essential to resort to a native teacher.



Language student	Academic criterion	Professional level
		Level in the target language
	Linguistic criterion	Mother tongue
		Language studied

Student's profile	Learning environment	Teachers' profile
Advanced level	In France	Native French teacher
Elementary level	In the home country	Local teacher

I will add that though cultural immersion is vital to master a language, we must not forget that our students have their own culture.

The French culture is very proud of itself, but the students must be given formal and informal spaces to express themselves.

They will therefore have the opportunity to present their own culture to the others, promote it and explain its characteristics.

For example, we organise for each culture a formal presentation exercise in an auditorium as well, as informal food tastings.

I am now going to talk about the students' linguistic criteria.

I will begin with the significance of the mother tongue.

The issue is simple: should we give preference to one-to-one teaching?

Or, in the case of group teaching, should we gather students from the same linguistic background, making groups of English speakers, or Spanish speakers, or Arabic speaker, etc ?

Around 40 senior officers from 30 countries attend the intensive training of the French Course of the Ecole de guerre.

This creates a great linguistic diversity.

But all officers have their own mother tongue; learning a new language can therefore be harder, so why do we maintain this diversity?

It is essential because officers are destined to work in an international and allied environment.

They will speak French with other people than just their French peers.

Linguistic diversity must be part of the learning environment in order to prepare officers to communicate in an international context.

They do not attend the course to “speak French with the French” but to communicate, even with people who use the French language only as a tool.

This is why diversity must be preserved, especially when dividing officers into groups.

As diversity may be an obstacle for teachers, we tend to choose those who have teaching experience abroad because they are more likely to pinpoint each student’s needs and to ensure that they make progress.



Language student	Academic criterion	Professional level
		Level in the target language
	Linguistic criterion	Mother tongue
		Language studied

Student's profile	Learning environment	Teachers' profile
Is learning French to communicate in an international context	Group with great linguistic diversity	Various experiences abroad
Is learning French to communicate in France	One-to-one teaching or groups of the same mother tongue	Specific experience of the same linguistic background as the students

The last criterion is the target language.

Since the beginning of this presentation, we have talked about the French language but we have not thought about how specific the French language is.

Are all languages learnt in the same way?

Does learning French entail special constraints?

Without going into details on the history of the French language, we must underline one characteristic, which is that written language is central in French.

We must remember that France is the country of dictionaries, grammar and dictations.

But as a rule, students mostly need to “speak” the language they learn. Usually we teach them first to speak, then develop their listening skills, then their reading skills and finally we may teach them how to write.

The goal of learning a language is usually to communicate orally.

Is this possible in French?

According to the history of the language, the French we speak today was “invented” between the 15th and 17th centuries, mostly by creating a specific and artificial syntax which contrasted greatly with the Latin syntax.

It got rid of declensions, set up a “word order” and a direct construction of sentences.

Grammar experts codified the French language and its spelling, and written language became the norm.

Written French is not the transcription of the spoken form, it is quite the opposite.

This is why written language is key to learn French.

The importance of French grammar is a surprise to many students as they don’t even know their own language’s grammar.

One of the two pairs of teachers dedicates a significant part of the teaching to written French because though there will be little professional need to write in French, mastering the written language is a prerequisite for learning French.

Language student	Academic criterion	Professional level
		Level in the target language
	Linguistic criterion	Mother tongue
		Language studied

Student's profile	Learning environment	Teachers' profile
Learning a language that is mostly written	Structural importance of the written language	Distinguishing writing and speaking skills
Learning a language that is mostly spoken	Pragmatic importance of the spoken language	Combining writing and speaking skills

Thanks to these remarks, we may conclude that according to the specific profile of the students of the French Course of the Ecole de guerre, the adapted learning environment is the following, and the teachers' profile is the following:

specific profile of the students of the French Course of the Ecole de guerre

Professional level	Level in the target language	Mother tongue	Language studied
Officer	Advanced level	Is learning French to communicate in an international context	Learning a language that is mostly written

adapted learning environment

Language taught	Place	Groups	Skills
Political-military topic	In France	Groups with a high linguistic diversity	Structural importance of the written language

teachers' profile

Language taught	Place	Groups	Skills
Teacher of a specific subject	Native French teacher	Various experiences abroad	Distinguishing writing and speaking skills