

COVID-19 Lessons Learnt: Prospective of the CZ UoD Language Centre (Summary)

The Czech University of Defense Language Centre represents an organization, which is primarily responsible for:

- Testing of language competences, incl. STANAG 6001 testing for the entire Czech MoD/Armed Forces;
- Language training for cadets and other students of the University of Defence within different degree programs (BSc., MSc., Ph.D.);
- Language training for MoD/Czech Armed Forces personnel within various language courses.

Before 2020, information technology was used just marginally in the Language Centre operation, mainly in the area of e-learning support (LMS Moodle based own language e-learning platform) and testing (Electronic Testing Information System).

The first wave of Covid-19 pandemic in winter/spring 2020 in the Czech Republic was connected with strict nation-wide lockdown, freezing most of economic, cultural and educational activities in the country, incl. the military. Therefore, all language courses were suspended and language testing interrupted.

In the subsequent waves, Language Centre efforts concentrated on maintaining at least a part of language courses running in on-line form (MS Teams based). Similarly, in the area of testing, the aim was to form conditions for testing continuity even in case of worsening pandemic situation. In other words, solutions were searched to prevent any further interruptions in STANAG 6001 testing and at the same time gradually eliminate the “testing debt” representing app. 700 candidates who could not be tested in the period of the first wave lockdown.

Approach of the Language Centre to cope with the pandemic restrictions can be divided into three main categories – general, testing-related and teaching-related.

General measures implemented were the following:

- Changes in communication with students and candidates (on-line form; need for very clear and simplified verbal communication supported with written instructions).
- Necessity to use adequate HW and SW (+ Internet connection).
- Introduction of all personnel to handling with MS Teams as the basic tool and further tools and applications (differing attitudes and abilities of teachers as well as students; gradual improvements resulting from experience and support by first organized and subsequently informal sharing of best practices).
- Introduction of a brief instructing of (future) students to MS Teams and on-line studying specifics (manual + on-line tutorial).
- Administrative consequences (unusual circumstances, different attitudes by different commanders/components of the military/MoD)

Measures in (on-line) teaching languages:

- Limitation of the size of class (max. 6 per group, usually dividing one regular class to two subgroups for on-line form).
- Changed scope of compulsory lessons (reduction of the scope of mandatory on-line teaching and offer of more voluntary individual and/or collective on-line consultations).

- Adapting to a different nature of interaction within the class (e.g. lower flexibility for role-plays – problem of limited emotions sharing in on-line environment).
- Changed structure of the lessons (focus on speaking and listening while writing concentrated to homework, partial elimination of regular weekly progress testing).
- Necessity to adapt to the tempo/abilities of students to handle on-line education (problem with lower level courses and lower ranks, differing levels of equipment, connection and environment for studying on-line).

Measures in language testing

- Introduction of the so-called hybrid model of testing, combining computer-based testing for the listening, reading and writing skills and videoconference testing for the speaking skill.
- Minimization of contacts among candidates, testers and administrators, mainly:
 - o forming two separate shifts of testers,
 - o testing by small groups of candidates – max 9 in one location,
 - o simultaneous testing of several groups in several locations,
 - o tests regularity monitored continuously by combining supervision by administrators , NetSupportSchool software and video recording of the VTC speaking testing by two independent cameras in each testing room.

By implementing the measures outlined above, the Language Centre was able to guarantee continuity of its services even under relatively strict pandemic measures. Numerous lessons learnt resulted from this period; following are the most important ones:

- On-line language teaching is possible and can represent effective option (measured by graduates' success, which didn't fall significantly compared to pre-pandemic data).
- Regular presence form of language training has been enriched (on-line/interactive tools make learning more attractive, primarily for the young generation of UoD cadets).
- On line education means higher demands on teachers preparation and performance (mainly planning, classroom management, awareness of more difficult concentration of students' attention).
- Not only teacher but also students must be prepared for on-line education (technology, organization – superiors, environment).
- On-line or blended learning means greater autonomy and responsibility of students (can be advantage as well as disadvantage).
- Hybrid testing model provides more flexibility, does not decrease success rate but generally, is not preferred by candidates and testers.